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"Surreal Atlanta was one of the realest things on TV"
- Capitalist (Sur)Realism in Donald Glover's Atlanta

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Introduction

Atlanta, created by Donald Glover, aired on FX and Disney+ between 2016 and 2022. The TV series follows a series of interrelated stories. Audiences meet Earnest "Earn" Marks (Glover), a twenty-something Princeton University dropout-turned-manager to his cousin, rapper Alfred "Paper Boi" Miles (Brian Tyree Henry). The story also depicts Alfred's right-hand Darius (LaKeith Stanfield,) and Earn's on-again, off-again girlfriend and mother of their child, Vanessa (Zazie Beetz). In four seasons, and a total of 41 episodes, the drama and comedy series touches on themes of race, class, parenthood, mental health, identity, and popular culture. It is widely regarded as one of the best TV series of the 2010s,[1] and has received numerous awards and nominations, including two Golden Globe awards and two Primetime Emmy awards. However, *Atlanta* has not yet received any extensive attention in academia.

Atlanta has been described as "one of the realest things on TV" (Butler) but the series is simultaneously about a world where some things feel *unreal* – the characters are aware of it, and we as viewers can see it too. There is an ambient sense that something is not right, that aspects we encounter are abnormal. What is it that makes it so? What makes viewers describe it as simultaneously unreal and *the most real* at the same time?

In a now-deleted tweet, Glover compared *Atlanta* to the critically acclaimed TV series *The Sopranos* (creator David Chase, 1999-2007). The comparison is appropriate, not only because *Atlanta* too takes risks in its approach to narrative, while at the same time using camera work and sound in ways that are always interesting and meaningful; but the comparison is also apt because the two series *do* the same thing. *The Sopranos* had an ensemble of characters and a loose plot that stretched over the seasons, but, more importantly, the series explored all aspects of its space and time, and the characters that were placed in this space. Doing this, *The Sopranos* created a texture of a specific place, time, culture, and the experience in it. *Atlanta*, like *The Sopranos*, has a loose plot but is more focused on presenting the atmosphere of the world it is portraying. Many of the episodes of *Atlanta* do not further the plot, but instead serve to present parts of what makes up the essence of a time, place, and experience. Each episode contributes as one piece of the bigger portrait of that experience. This is not done in the form of realism, though. *Atlanta* is often simply labeled as "surreal," but "surreal" does not fully describe what the series is doing.

[1] See, for example, "The 100 Greatest TV Shows of All Time" (*Rolling Stone*, 2022), "The 25 Best Shows of the Decade" (*TV Guide*, 2019), and "The Best TV Shows of the Decade, Ranked" (*IndieWire*, 2019).

Another TV series *Atlanta* has drawn inspiration from is *Twin Peaks* (creators Mark Frost and David Lynch, 1990-91, 2017), a show that presents an uncanny experience of unreality, thereby using surrealist elements. Glover once said he wanted *Atlanta* to be "*Twin Peaks* with rappers" (Cwik). In *Twin Peaks*, however, the surreal occurrences engage and provoke the obsession of the characters who experience them, and they create a supernatural world beyond ours. This is not the case in *Atlanta*, where the surreal simply accentuates the penetrative and pervading sense that something is *wrong*. This abnormality is at times uncanny, at times absurd, but it is present in every episode, hinting at that the present society and life in it is not as it should be.

Amiri Baraka coined the term "Afro-Surreal Expressionism" when he described Henry Dumas's work as such (1988). Baraka's words about Dumas's work can be applied to *Atlanta*, too:

> Dumas's power lay in his skills at creating an entirely different world organically connected to this one. The stories are fables; a mythological presence pervades. They are morality tales, magical, resonating dream emotions and images; shifting ambiguous terror, mystery, implied revelation. But they are also stories of real life, now or whenever, constructed in weirdness and poetry in which the contemporaneity of essential themes is clear. (1)

The aesthetic this describes is now simply called Afro-Surrealism, after D Scott Miller removed "expressionism" and wrote the manifesto "Call it Afro-Surreal" in 2009. The manifesto both helped identify and catalyze a movement that is now growing. Many have identified that there is a new wave of afro-surrealist visual art, most notably film and TV, of which *Atlanta* is seen as being an important part (Bakare). The afro-surreal, rather than using surrealist techniques to get beyond reality, expresses a reality that is fundamentally surreal for marginalized people.

The surrealism allows for *Atlanta* to explore the reality of marginalized people. It exposes how the characters have to exist in and deal with the absurd fiction that is their everyday life. However, *Atlanta* is also interested in reality as such. The series explores existential questions - on the level of the characters and their identity, but also on a more metaphysical level. What is real and what feels real, and are they the same thing? One reason for this is that the series juxtaposes surrealism, dreams, postmodern forms, and existential questions with a realism that portrays the very specific time and place in which it is set. This realism is used to present the very capitalist society of a US American city, and what it is like to experience this setting, but it does not only realistically depict late capitalism and neoliberal hegemony, however. It also depicts capitalism as realism itself.

With his *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009), Mark Fisher argued that capitalism is "realism in itself" (8). Fisher saw that capitalism was no longer only presented and perceived as the most sensical economic system, but that it is now the only imaginable alternative. Fisher was influenced by Lacan's distinction between "the Real" and "reality" – with "the Real" symbolizing that which is objectively real or true, while "reality" is that which presents itself as real or true. "Reality," as Fisher sees it, is pure ideology, but it presents itself as non-ideological, which in turn allows it to suppress that which is actually real. This is exactly what capitalist realism does: as "reality" it suppresses the "the Real" to insist that capitalism is the only imaginable system. The fact that there seem to be no alternatives to capitalism conditions our thoughts and behaviors, and even how we see the world. Capitalist realism informs our experiences of work, mental health, and relationships, but it does so falsely. This, I will argue, is represented in *Atlanta*.

Through the use of surrealism, the show not only demonstrates the everyday absurdity of a racially unequal society, but also accentuates the unreal, absurd, and horrific aspects of capitalist realism by highlighting, for characters as well as viewers, that something is wrong in the world that it depicts. In the world of *Atlanta*, the relationship between real and unreal is complicated, and the series refuses to let us see its representation of the world as a simple ideological narrative. The series, with both its surreal elements and its depiction of capitalist realism, poses meaningful questions about the reality that we live in. *Atlanta*, through its surrealism, resounds with "dream emotions and images," as well as with "ambiguous terror and mystery;" but it is also, through its depiction of capitalist realism, a narrative of real life, in which the "contemporaneity of essential themes is clear." My thesis is that through the juxtaposition of capitalist realism and surrealism, *Atlanta* gestures towards and points out the violence, absurdity, and senselessness of capitalism, thereby creating an authentic depiction of life in contemporary America. Paradoxically, then, the show, in its non-realistic aspects, articulates truths that cannot be captured by a realist mode alone.

This thesis will be divided into four main chapters. In the subsequent chapter, I will lay the groundwork for this thesis' theoretical background. In subchapter 1.1, "Fordism, Neoliberalism, and Capitalist Realism," I will introduce the concept of capitalist realism in more detail and briefly explain the context and history needed to understand Fisher's theories more deeply. Subchapter 1.2, "The Surreal Aesthetic: A Theoretical Background to Historical and Contemporary Surrealism," will investigate surrealism; I will look at the historical development of the aesthetic, as well as its implications today. Here, surrealism will also be

connected to, and explored in terms of, the uncanny and the absurd, as these concepts also play an important part in the surreal aesthetic of *Atlanta*.

In each chapter of the analysis, I will point out the different ways in which *Atlanta* creates representations of capitalist realism. There are three themes affected by capitalist realism that Fisher brings up in his book which can also be seen represented in *Atlanta*; namely the way in which control and biopower functions, music as a whole and hip-hop in particular, and education, bureaucracy and mental health, which are all linked, as we will see. I will also point to how the use of the surreal aesthetic in connection to the representations of capitalist realism contribute to gesturing toward the flaws of the reality depicted. I will conduct the analysis through investigating the three main arcs of the series: those of Earn, Alfred and Vanessa. The fourth main character, Darius, will not be a part of this analysis, as this character has not been given a long narrative that spans over the course of all four seasons as the others, but rather has other functions, such as "side-kick" and comic relief. For this reason, the representation of capitalist realism cannot be seen as clearly in Darius's scenes.

The first analysis chapter, "*Atlanta* as a neoliberal coming-of-age narrative," will interrogate Earn's journey from being poor and homeless to becoming a successful manager to Paper Boi, and I will argue that, by looking at Earn's arc, we can read the series as a neoliberal coming-of-age narrative. With this narrative being punctuated by surrealism, it becomes evident that society is oppressive to both Earn and the people around him. Chapter three, "Capitalist Realism and the Rapper," will analyze the challenges Alfred faces as a rapper in a capitalist society, and how he has no other choice but to become the hyper-capitalist figure "Paper Boi" for his own survival. I will argue that through the use of surrealism, the violence inflicted upon Alfred for both his social class and his race in the capitalist society depicted is highlighted. In chapter four, "Bureaucracy and Mental Health in *Atlanta*," I will investigate Vanessa's storyline which deals with education, bureaucracy, and mental health; three main themes for Fisher's analysis of capitalist realism. I will argue that the three themes are interconnected in Vanessa's journey, and that they, juxtaposed with surrealism, invite the viewer to contemplate the flawed nature of the capitalist realist features of them.

I will end this thesis with a conclusion where I will discuss the main findings of the analysis and how they relate to my main thesis. I will also consider the limitations of this research, as well discuss potential further research on the topic. My hope is that this research will contribute to the larger field of current surrealist film and TV, that it will have an influence on academia's interest in Fisher's theories, and that it will open up for an academic discussion about *Atlanta*, a series that deserves greater attention in this field.

1. Theoretical Background: Contextualizing Capitalist Realism and Surrealism

This chapter will serve as a theoretical background for the research of this thesis. Sub-chapter 1.1. will offer a deeper explanation of capitalist realism, as well as a short background to Fisher's theory. Sub-chapter 1.2. will delve deeper into surrealism and the use of the aesthetic for this research. Here, I will also go through both the absurd and the uncanny. These two frameworks will also play an important role in relation to surrealism in this analysis. More theory will be embedded in the analysis chapters of this thesis.

1.1. Fordism, Neoliberalism and Capitalist Realism

For a full understanding of Fisher's notion of capitalist realism, it is essential that I first go through how we came to this current moment which he examines to get a deeper appreciation of his analysis. It is also of importance for this thesis that I explain and clarify some terms and their use for the purpose of this research. What will follow in this first sub-chapter is, firstly, a very brief background to and explanation of Fredric Jameson's work, which is of great importance for the understanding of Fisher's politics. Secondly, I will delve deeper into Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*, and explain the theory and its purpose and importance for this research. This will be a brief introduction to capitalist realism, and I will explain specific arguments of Fisher's further in the respective analysis chapters.

1.1.1. A Historical Background: From Fordism to the Postmodern Condition

American society (and much of the "Western" world with it) changed fundamentally from the 1960s onwards as Fordism[2] slowly developed into what we now call post-Fordism, writes Christian Marazzi in *The Violence of Financial Capitalism*, published in 2010 (29). Due to increased competition and the saturation of markets by mass consumption, profits decreased, thereby causing a crisis in the Fordist way of accumulation, forcing companies to find new strategies to survive (Marazzi 31). The response to the decreasing profits was neoliberalism: attempts to revive profit rates led to lower wages, attacks on unions, automatization of entire labor processes, "precarization" of work, and, eventually, widespread financialization, i.e. attempts to increase profits as excess of value in stocks exchange, which also forced non-financial companies to be dependent on stock exchange through having to make investments in financial products (Marazzi 31-33). With neoliberal policies in place in the USA from the 70s onward, neoliberal ideology had soon spread to all fractions of society. There are many different (though not necessarily contradictory) definitions of neoliberalism, and the term has

[2] Fordism is the industrial paradigm which allowed for the rise of mass-production and mass-consumption through standardization of products, assembly line manufacturing, and higher wages for factory workers.

been used in various ways, especially in culture studies. I here wish to formally define it for the purpose of this research with a passage by Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge from *Reading Capitalist Realism* (2014):

> Neoliberalism names those aspects of globalization that […] limit social functioning and naturalize structures of inequality. [In this system,] freedom is conceived almost entirely in market terms […]. The central features of the neoliberal state, besides privatizing wealth, deregulating markets, and reducing social spending, include preoccupation with supporting the interests of an unfettered global financial system and, […] taking advantage of crises to advance market-based, free-trade-oriented, and even financially imperialist agendas. (4-5)

Importantly, neoliberal policies allowed for capital to start moving freely across borders, and thus, capitalism became a genuinely globalized "late capitalism." The now popular term "late capitalism" comes from Ernest Mandel's book with the same name, published in 1975. Mandel's thesis is that there have been three stages of capitalism, where "late capitalism" refers to the "postindustrial," "multinational" consumer capitalism of the current moment (Jameson 35-36). Fredric Jameson saw "late capitalism" as "purer capitalism," as it had allowed for an extensive expansion of capital into never-before commodified areas (Jameson 36).

In an attempt to explain the particular cultural epoch that post-Fordism and the neoliberal tendencies and policies had led to, Jameson wrote *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1990), a seminal work that is crucial for the understanding of the concept of capitalist realism. In *Postmodernism*, Jameson historicizes the (then) present moment and analyzes how culture had undergone a change and what implications this had. He contends that postmodernism is the dominant cultural form of the time, and argues that it is historically specific and dependent on the certain configuration of capitalist economy and cultural production. Following the Frankfurt School tradition[3], Jameson points out that the distinction between the economically productive base and the culturally determined superstructure is not so clear cut. Though the idea that economy and culture had a mutual influence on each other was once a controversial one, at the time when Jameson was writing, this way of viewing the relationship between the base and superstructure had been widely accepted[4]. "Postmodernism is not the cultural dominant of a wholly new social order [...], but only the reflex and the concomitant of yet another systemic modification of capitalism itself," writes Jameson (xii).

[3] A school of thought founded at the Institute for social research at the Goethe University Frankfurt in 1923 which cojoined the Marxist tradition with psychoanalysis. The Frankfurt school is most known for its Critical Theory, an approach in sociology which aims at revealing and critiquing power structures by analyzing society and culture.

[4] This was suggested in Marx's lifetime already, but orthodox Leninist branches of Marxism held on to the simpler version of the metaphor for a longer time.

With his thesis, Jameson pointed to this feature and argued that postmodernism is the cultural symptom of the material relations of late capitalism.

With late capitalism being completely globalized, it had exploded and become part of every aspect of existence, even colonizing the mind and imagination, taking over all other forms of thinking. With this analysis, Jameson offers an explanation for this particular cultural epoch, where postmodernism dominates. The postmodern cultural production, Jameson argues, is characterized by a general depthlessness due to a lack of affect, and a seeming absence of history, causing us to forget the past and making it impossible for us to imagine anything that is different than the present (6).

1.1.2. Capitalist Realism: Capitalism and Its Cultural Logic Today

Mark Fisher's analysis of "capitalist realism" gained widespread popularity in left circles soon after his book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (*CR*) was published in 2009. In it, he brings together some main currents in contemporary critical theory, and by doing so he creates a critique of contemporary capitalism, the society it produces, and its inherent ideological contradictions. Fisher defines capitalist realism, in short, as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (*CR* 6). The concept defines the capitalism of the 1990s onward, foremost in Europe and the USA; a capitalism so neutralized, and so embedded in our prevailing political consensus that there appear to be no viable, or even imaginable, alternatives to it; it is inescapable, and at the same time seemingly impossible to criticize from within. In *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher creates an image of what it is like being engulfed by capitalism, describing the societal status quo, and the subjective consciousness of the individual under capitalism.

Fisher's work is a revision of Jameson's *Postmodernism*. The concept of capitalist realism derives inspiration from Jameson's understanding of postmodernism as the cultural symptom of the material relations of late capitalism. Fisher provides a language for what comes after Jameson's critique "at its most totalizing, suffocating, and yet unassailably correct," Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge conclude in *Reading Capitalist Realism* (2). Fisher admits that what he calls "capitalist realism" can fit within Jameson's notion of postmodernism: "It could appear that there is no need for the concept of capitalist realism at all," he writes (*CR* 7). However, according to Fisher, things have gotten worse and in this context, postmodernism is no longer suitable to describe the cultural status quo. Shonkwiler and La Berge note that Fisher's critique of postmodernism as an analytic was not based on it

being wrong, but that it no longer has the "referential capacity required for contemporary analysis" (5). What Jameson analyzed has become intensified, argues Fisher: "Some of the processes that Jameson described have become so aggravated and chronic that they have gone through a change in kind" (*CR* 7). While theorists before him had seen modernism as potentially revolutionary, Jameson argued that the modernist motifs and forms were being absorbed into popular culture and thereby commodified (*CR* 8). Fisher concludes that capitalist realism "no longer stages this kind of confrontation with modernism," and that it "takes the vanquishing of [it] for granted" (8). There are multiple reasons why Fisher sees postmodernism as being conceptually outdated; but most notably, postmodernism, according to him, could still remind us of economic otherness in the form of "really existing socialism," and, in turn, produce nostalgia for this pre-capitalism (7). The imagination necessary to think of socialism in this capacity is long gone, and capitalism has ensured its complete disappearance. Additionally, he uses the term "reflexive impotence" to describe the fact that even though people are aware of capitalism's flaws, they do not believe there is anything to do to change the status quo (*CR* 25). This is not merely a "passive observation of an already existing state of affairs," he states, but a "self-fulfilling prophecy" (25). Fisher therefore argues that the naturalization of capitalism occurs at a faster rate than under the conditions Jameson analyzed in the 1980s and 90s.

For Fisher, capitalist realism means a crisis in the political imaginary - the concept implies resignation. In a conversation with Jeremy Gilbert in "Capitalist Realism and Neoliberal Hegemony: A Dialogue" (2013), Fisher comments on the concept's relationship to neoliberalism by stating that "capitalist realism isn't the direct endorsement of neoliberal doctrine: it's the idea that whether we like it or not, the world is governed by neoliberal ideas, and that won't change. There is no point in fighting the inevitable" (Fisher and Gilbert 90). Neoliberalism and capitalist realism are both based on a notion of "common sense." Neoliberal hegemony renders itself rational, and the alternatives foolish, while capitalist realism, on the other hand, renders alternatives simply unimaginable. Essentially, what capitalist realism entails is the idea that we live in an era of the "post-political" (*CR* 33). As a result, he concludes, "big ideological conflicts are over" (Fisher and Gilbert 90). He notes that capitalist realism is about the "depoliticization of work and, more broadly, of everyday life" (91). Given this context, it is important to consider that the concept may also be described as a set of behaviors and affects that arise from the belief that there are no alternatives to capitalism (90). This ideological formation Fisher sees as a pragmatic adjustment to a reality seemingly unchangeable (90).

Fisher argued that capitalism is "realism in itself" (*CR* 4). He was influenced by Lacan's distinction between "the Real" and "reality" – with "the Real" symbolizing that which is objectively real or true, while "reality" is that which presents itself as real or true. "Reality," as Fisher sees it, is pure ideology, but it presents itself as non-ideological, which in turn allows it to suppress that which is actually real (18). This is exactly what capitalist realism does: as "reality" it suppresses the "the Real" to insist that capitalism is the only imaginable system. Fisher also compares capitalist realism to the Freudian "reality principle" – a horizon in our consciousness fully mediated by the ideology that structures our understanding of the world (17). He quotes Alenka Zupancic to clarify how this reality principle functions: "'The 'reality principle' […] is not some kind of natural way associated with how things are… The reality principle itself is ideologically mediated; One could even claim that it constitutes the highest form of ideology, the ideology that presents itself as empirical fact [or] necessity" (Zupancic qt. in *CR* 17-18). Because capitalist realism is "realism in itself," mere moral critique of capitalism is futile (*CR* 16). Suffering is seen as an inevitable aspect of "how the world works," while hopes of eliminating this suffering are presented as naïve (16). Capitalist realism, Fisher writes, "can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that is to say, capitalism's ostensible 'realism' turns out to be nothing of the sort" (16). In Lacanian terms, reality constitutes itself through the suppression of the Real (18). Fisher explains: "The Real is an unrepresentable X, a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality" (18).

Importantly, the concept "capitalist realism" can help us talk about a late capitalism where we can better integrate into the analysis the claustrophobic feelings associated with capitalist realism and its insistence on there being no alternatives to capitalism. This expression has largely been ignored in culture studies since capitalist realism has not been utilized as an analytic tool, but it is nonetheless present in our society and culture, and in how we present these in literature, film, TV, and music.

1.2. The Surreal Aesthetic: A Theoretical Background to Historical and Contemporary Surrealism

The term "surrealism" encapsulates many meanings today. In everyday speech, "surreal" may be used to label anything out of the ordinary. In this section, I wish to explain the often-forgotten origins of surrealism, and to connect its background to the use of surrealism today. I will also make clear what I mean when I use the term in this research.

Though surrealism and the Dada movement are often seen as being "wedded," surrealism was born out of disappointment with the Dada movement (Hopkins 25). Andre Breton, the initiator of the surrealist movement, wanted, with his "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924), to "re-orientate avant-garde priorities," pointing out that Dada had become simply another art movement (Hopkins 16). Surrealism was to be a revolutionary movement and, like Dada, a critique of "self-referring autonomous art" which was "dedicated to erase distinctions between the claims of 'art' and those of 'life'" (Hopkins 17). Beyond his aversion to Dada, Breton was also inspired by Freud's idea of the unconscious, emphasizing the importance of understanding the interaction between the interior reality and the exterior one as a dialectical relationship (Hopkins 21). For Breton, our interior reality, the unconscious, and our dreams were potentially more real than the exterior reality, and, because of this, it could tell us something about our real desires (Hopkins 21). The goal was freedom of the mind in both art and life, and the creation of surrealist art was a means toward this freedom rather than an end-in-itself (Harris 385).

Surrealism placed itself in the space between culture and politics (Spiteri 111). The interest in Hegelian dialectics provided a way for the surrealists to link the interior reality to that of Marxist materialism, thereby also cementing the movement's political position (Spiteri 112). Breton's group in Paris expressed a passionate opposition to capitalism in general and to the French right-wing government specifically (Hopkins 21). For them, communism and independent art materialized the same values (Spiteri 126). These politics enabled the Paris group to attract many leftist and anti-fascist artists in the 1930s (Hopkins 22); and by the 1940s, surrealism had spread and become almost fully international, allowing new groups everywhere to adopt their politics (Hopkins 24). Politically, surrealism is often seen as a failure (Spiteri 127). From the standpoint of the present, surrealism's political stance remains secondary to the movement, as the art produced has contributed to a large extent to the Western canon. Politics was the main focus of the movement in its beginning, however, and it had a fundamental influence on the art that was produced by the artists connected to it (Spiteri 126).

International surrealism is thought to have come to an end either in 1966, with the death of Breton, or in 1969, as the Paris group dissolved (Harris 385). Soon after the war, surrealism was spoken of in historical terms, and much of its ideas were commercialized. This is thanks to a large extent to the commercial success of Salvador Dali, who made surrealist art for Disney productions and other movies, as well as for numerous advertisements (King 417-418). Despite this, however, surrealism cannot be said to ever strictly have come to an end. Groups elsewhere in fact continued to practice surrealist art and politics, some for decades longer, and new groups

even emerged during the twentieth century (Harris 386-388). One such group was the Chicago Surrealist Group which was founded by Penelope and Franklin Rosemont in 1965 (King 418). The group had a large impact in the resurgence of surrealism in the mid-60s in the USA, and in its involvement in the counterculture (King 418). Surrealism's politics were a perfect match to the counterculture's opposition to technocracy and rationalism, and it was soon adopted by the counterculture on a global scale (King 416). Member of the Chicago Surrealist Group and scholar of surrealism and black radicalism, Robin D.G. Kelley, said of surrealism's resurgence in the counterculture in the 60s:

> [A] surrealist *spirit* was soon making its presence felt just about everywhere. Distrust of authority, defiance of injustice, and passionate yearning for *Freedom Now!* were in the wind along with a large-scale resurgence of poetry – not just reading it but living it – and a firm determination to change the world and have a good time. (qt. in King 417, original emphasis)

The Chicago Surrealist Group fully embraced the radical left-wing politics of surrealism which had by the public been forgotten. They embraced "freedom" and "revolution" as mottoes and pledged solidarity with virtually all currents of sixties radicalism (King 418-419). The Chicago Surrealist Group was, and still is, the most influential and important surrealist group in the USA (King 418). In their definition of surrealism, we can trace the connection to the Freudian idea of desire which has also inspired Herbert Marcuse and Mark Fisher's later politics:

> Surrealism is the exaltation of freedom, revolt, imagination, and love... [It] is above all a revolutionary movement. Its basic aim is to lessen and eventually to completely resolve the contradictions between everyday life and our wildest dreams. By definition subversive, surrealist thought and action are intended not only to discredit and destroy the forces of repression, but also to emancipate desire and supply it with the abolition of imaginative slavery, it advances to the creation of a free society in which everyone will be a poet - a society in which everyone will be able to develop his or her potentialities fully and freely. (qtd. in Kelley 5)

Marcuse expressed his sympathies for the counterculture and their use of surrealism in "An Essay on Liberation" (1969) and other earlier texts. Oliver Marchart (2021) even argues that there is a connection between Marcuse's politics and surrealism. Marcuse's politics, according to Marchart, makes a case for the imagination's ability to overcome the reality principle by, via art or other practice, venturing "into the realm of the revolutionary surreal" and thereby expanding the horizon of what is imaginable (Marchart 131).

Though Fisher is critical of the counterculture in *Capitalist Realism*, he later came to see a potential in the movement. Inspired by Marcuse's writings which were taken up by the counterculture, Fisher started writing about what he called "Acid Communism". In a short

introduction to a project with the same name[5] (2020), Fisher points to how Marcuse understood that capital must always obstruct the false scarcity it produces, and "the collective capacity to produce, care and enjoy" (*Acid Communism* 9). This, Marcuse called "a spectre of a world which could be free" (Marcuse qtd. in *Acid Communism* 8). This specter today lives in our idea of the 60s and 70s counterculture, which is why, Fisher argues, it lives on and is often romanticized in our collective memory. He poses the question of whether the counterculture movement was perhaps not a failure of a resistance to capitalism, but rather just the beginning. What if the triumph of the neoliberalism which came by the end of the 70s was not a sign of capitalism's certain victory, but rather an indication that the threat posed by the specter was indeed serious to capitalism? If so, the ideas of the counterculture must be returned to, thought Fisher, and he proposed that this return could be located in acid communism. Acid communism was to be a force opposite of that of capitalist realism. It would be a unity of class consciousness, socialist-feminist consciousness-raising, and psychedelic consciousness: a "fusion of new social movements with a communist project, an unprecedented aestheticization of everyday life," writes Fisher (*Acid Communism* 22-23). Acid communism is psychedelic because of psychedelia's relation to consciousness; to reality and how we experience the world. By adopting a new, socialist-feminist class consciousness, we can change the categories by which we live and think. Fisher asks: "If the very fundamentals of our experience, such as our sense of space and time, can be altered, does that not mean that the categories by which we live are plastic, mutable?" (41). The rigor of our experience under capitalism which makes us believe there are no alternatives denies this mutability. We do not know what Fisher would have thought of the surrealism of today, but this connection between Fisher and counterculture, where surrealism played an important role, is interesting to keep in mind for the purpose of this research.

Film was central to the surrealist movement from the start, writes Kristoffer Noheden (191). With film, it was easy to depict the dream-like state in which the surrealists were interested, where shifts between dream and life could be more easily represented. Other visual media, such as painting, were sometimes considered too static to be able to depict this flow of images that the dream entails (King 423). For the early surrealists, film was "a state between life and dream – not a means to escape reality but to intensify it" (King 423). Though film was so important to the surrealists, it has largely been treated only marginally in surrealist studies

[5] The project was unfortunately never finished due to Fisher's untimely death in 2017. However, some of the ideas were expanded upon in his last lectures for the Visual Cultures department at Goldsmiths Collage. The lectures are collected in *Post Capitalist Desires: The Final Lectures* (ed. Matt Colquhoun, 2020).

and film studies.[6] However, there seems to be a new interest in the resurgence of Afro-surrealism, especially in film and television. As mentioned above, there is a new wave of Afro-surrealist art, especially in film and television, where *Atlanta* has played an important role.

Surrealism is often seen as a European art form, but the influence from non-European actors should not be ignored, Rochelle Spencer writes in *AfroSurrealism: The African Diaspora's Surrealist Fiction* (2019, 2). Scholars now argue that audiences ought to recognize the cultural pluralism of surrealism, insisting that it was present already from its beginnings (Spencer 1). Surrealism always critiqued power and questioned the existing ways of interpreting the world, which explains why many marginalized groups were drawn to it (Spencer 1). The term "Afro-Surrealism" was first used by Amiri Baraka in 1988 when he described Henry Durmas's work as "AfroSurreal Expressionism," pointing to his surreal style as a way of articulating a "black aesthetics" (2). In 2009, artist D. Scot Miller, through the publication of his manifesto "Call it Afro-Surreal" in the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, started a more serious Afro-surreal art movement (Spencer 5).

Spencer demonstrates Afro-surrealism's interest in psychology and how memories interact with the collective concerns of black communities (5). It is also concerned with *time*, she argues, revisiting history and attempting to engage with past, present, and future concerns of people of color; it "intellectually time travels," Spencer writes (5-6). Spencer describes the magic in Afro-surrealism as a "confusing and disruptive force" that comments on collective traumas, and she argues that this magic also marks a celebration of "black spirituality" which the movement shares with that of Animist Realism (6). Afro-surrealism, rather than using surrealist techniques to get beyond reality, expresses a reality that is fundamentally surreal for marginalized people.

Atlanta is more than Afro-surreal. While some moments in the series embody Afro-surrealism - where the surrealist aesthetic acts as a comment on present racial injustices and the absurdity of the history for people of color in the US, for example - some instances display other types of surrealism in the series. *Atlanta's* surrealism ranges from representations of surreal psychological horror and the uncanny to surreal humor in nonsensical and absurd forms. The surrealism allows for *Atlanta* to explore the reality of marginalized people. It exposes how the characters have to exist in and deal with the absurd fiction that is their everyday life, in more than one way. Through the use of surrealism, the show not only demonstrates the

[6] According to Noheden, and in my own experience, it is especially difficult to find research about surrealism in film made after the 1960s.

everyday absurdity of a racially unequal society, but also accentuates the unreal, absurd, and horrific aspects of a capitalist reality by highlighting, for characters as well as viewers, that something is wrong in the world that it depicts.

Surrealism is no longer the revolutionary art movement that it once was. Fisher argues that modernist forms can return only as frozen aesthetic choices (*CR* 8). However, *Atlanta's* surrealist aesthetic paired with a distinguished realism, I argue, is *new,* in both TV and film, and therefore highly interesting for new culture studies research. This use of surrealism, though it is not in any way revolutionary, can help us consider, and perhaps question, what is real, and what *should* be real. Currently, there is unfortunately little research on what the surrealist aesthetic is today, especially in film. Hopefully, this research can explore this new use of surrealism further and help make a small dent in the large field of contemporary surrealism.

1.2.1. Surrealism's Connection to The Absurd

Though it incorporates elements from drama- and horror genres, *Atlanta* is first and foremost a comedy series. The humor of the series varies from irony and satire to situational, character-driven, and "cringe" comedy, but a large part of the surrealism used in the show also produces humor. This comedic surrealism, I argue, is to be considered *absurd*. I will in my analysis use the word "absurd" to describe this type of surrealism, and I here wish to explain the term further.

The epithet "absurd" now has many meanings in everyday language, but the notion of absurd humor comes from the theory or philosophy of the absurd. Most texts written on the theory of the absurd tend to point out that the concept is difficult to define, and that it is *not* in fact a philosophical category. However, Michel Y. Bennett points out in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd* (2015) that while it may be difficult to define, the common notion is that "one knows absurd literature when one encounters it" (Bennett 3).

Absurd texts may be said to be literature that explores or in any way discusses various notions of "metaphysical anguish," but at the same time, they often point to a need to create meaning in life (Bennett 9). Bennett points out, though, that the absurd writers should perhaps be grouped based on aesthetic choices rather than theme since not all absurd literature adheres to this theme. Bennett finds that four common aesthetic threads can be found in absurd literature. These are (1) experimentation with language; (2) tragicomedy as genre; (3) rejection of Aristotelian plot lines; and (4) settings in "strange," "Kafkaesque," surreal, and ridiculous

situations (Bennett 19). According to Bennett, the "Theatre of the Absurd" is perhaps the "most highly crystalized expression" of this (3).

The absurd is often seen as a term derived from existentialism, particularly from author Albert Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* by Camus is perhaps the most well-known work on the philosophy of the absurd. Camus does not see humans or the world as absurd, but, to him, it is rather the union of the two that is absurd: humans live in an absurd situation, he finds (Bennett 16). Though Camus did not consider himself an existentialist, his work is often dubbed as such (Gavins 24). Existentialism as a philosophical category emerged in the 1930s and was concerned with questions of, simply put, the meaning, value, and purpose of human existence, but an existential line of thought emerged much earlier in the work of Kirkegaard, for example (Gavins 24). However, it is not agreed upon that existentialism is its own philosophy. In the anthology *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, Walter Kaufmann introduces existentialism as "not a philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy," and further adds that "it might be argued that the label 'existentialism' ought to be abandoned altogether" (Kaufmann qtd. in Bennett 2). The existential aspect of the absurd is also interesting in relation to Atlanta; through its surrealist elements, the series explores what is real and what is not, and thereby poses questions about the meaning of human existence. I will, in this thesis, relate this to the *capitalist* real, and explore the implications of this for the reality of capitalism depicted.

The absurd was connected with surrealism early on. Writers of the theatre of the absurd, for example, were inspired by both Dadaism and surrealism (Bennett 13). The avant-garde had generally broken the rules of theatre and of other writing and had thereby paved the way for the writers of the absurd (Bennett 13). What the surrealists produced was in itself also said to be "especially endowed with a very high degree of immediate absurdity" (Cardullo and Knopf qtd. in Cornwell 81). With many absurdist writers also expressing ideas rejecting rationality and ideals of mainstream art, it is not difficult to see the similarities between the absurd and surrealism (Bennett 15). The notion of "black humor" also links surrealism to what would become absurdism (Cornwell 84). The expression was coined by Breton himself with the publication of his *Anthology of Black Humour* in 1940. This surrealist humor derives from a determination to refuse to take the world seriously and to treat our own existence in it as alien, writes Michael Richardson in "Black Humour" (207). The indifference and assumption of the futility of life allow surrealism to "assume a sense of ironic detachment from everyday concerns" (Richardson 210). Black humor is an essential aspect of the surrealist toolbox and few other cultural movements have made a more extensive use of humor (Richardson 207).

The absurd always contained an element of humor. According to Bennett, it is "ridiculous to say that there is not an element of the ridiculous in absurd literature" – preposterous, comical, and laughable may also describe absurd literature, Bennett states (10). Looking at Franz Kafka's writing, for example, Bennett points out that the "surreal situations" in which he puts his characters require a tragicomic response (19). In *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (2017), Nicholas Holm describes absurd humor as being based on the rejection of regimes of sense and meaning. He writes: "Absurd humour is the humour of unreality: it collects those texts that can be described in terms of nonsense, the wacky, screwball, ridiculous, silly, weird and zany" (149). This humor is that of the senseless – "that which does not adhere to the expected system of rules and logics that structure any given system" (Holm 149). This humor, then, reflects the absurdity of human existence. It arises as the common understandings of logical behavior, good sense, aesthetic form, or even narrative consistency, are breached, Holm argues (150). Cornwell also notes this incongruence as being important for the creation of the absurd comedic effect (23).

1.2.2. Surrealism and The Uncanny: The Horror-esque Surreal Aesthetic

Many of Atlanta's surreal moments are mysteriously strange and horror-like, giving an uneasiness to the scene in question. This horror-like surrealism I have chosen to call uncanny, as this is the most fitting description of the majority of these moments in the series. Below, I will explain the term further.

German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch[7] first explored the notion of the uncanny, and Freud famously later elaborated on this in his 1919 essay "The Uncanny." Freud finds that the uncanny is located in the estranging of the ordinary. He writes, "the 'uncanny' is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (1-2). He connects it to the unconscious and suggests that the uncanny is felt when the fantasies and fears we had as children appear suddenly real to our adult selves. Freud points out that you may define the uncanny as something which should have been kept hidden, but which has come forward nevertheless (13). In this sense, things familiar to us can appear uncanny when they appear in a new, estranged setting. A typical example of something that many perceive as uncanny is dolls – the doll we played with in our childhood came to life in our fantasies without causing any feelings of dread, but when a doll comes to life in a horror movie, for example, it is disconcerting to us. The uncanny effect is often produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is erased or made inconceivable (Freud 15). In addition, when we see

[7] "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen" (1906).

things that may support old and discarded beliefs, we often perceive them as uncanny, according to Freud (17). He writes: "An uncanny experience occurs either when the repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impression, or when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (17). Though Freud himself notes that this essay is not a complete and final theorization of the uncanny, he declares this to be the concluding definition (17).

Realism is a necessity for the uncanny. In a setting where ghosts, werewolves, or live dolls are presented as being part of reality, where we as readers or viewers might expect the appearance of such images, the uncanny feeling will not be produced. Freud writes: "We order our judgment to the imaginary reality imposed on us by the writer, and regard souls, spirits and spectres as though their existence had the same validity in their world as our own has in the external world. And then in this case too we are spared all trace of the uncanny" (18). However, in the case of realism, argues Freud,

> [the writer] accepts all the conditions operating to produce uncanny feelings in real life; and everything that would have an uncanny effect in reality has it in his story [...] He takes advantage, as it were, of our supposedly surmounted superstitiousness; he deceives us into thinking that he is giving us the sober truth, and then after all oversteps the bounds of possibility. (18)

The uncanny and surrealism work in many similar ways. The two aesthetics both disturb and refigure what we see and how we see it, notes Lorna Jowett and Stacey Abbott in *TV Horror: Investigating the Darker Side of the Small Screen* (2013, 3). Rudolf Kuenzli's stance that the surrealist practice is an "exploration of the camera's potential to transform the familiar world" applies to the uncanny as well (qtd. in Jowett and Abbott 3). Jowett and Abbott note that this strategy can produce horrific images, giving the example of the famous surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) and its haunting images of an eye being cut into (3). As the uncanny images are necessarily embedded in realism, they become, when juxtaposed with realism, surreal. Jowett and Abbott also note the importance of realism to frame both the uncanny and surrealism. Again, quoting Kuenzli, they state that "only through the viewer's identification with the familiar world invoked by the film can the film's sequential disruptions of that invoked familiar world have the potential to disrupt the viewer's symbolic order" (3). Here, Jowett and Abbott also get into the notion of the aesthetic experience as potentially containing qualities that can make us question reality. They quote Freeland who suggests that uncanny films "prompt a complex cognitive and emotional response of appreciation for the kind of worldview they represent," and that an uncanny film has "an aesthetic power in the way it requires us to

feel repulsion or dread, to ‘see’ and reflect about the horrors it so evocatively presents” (qtd. in Jowett and Abbott 5).

Jowett and Abbott also add that “TV horror as art” challenges the “glance theory” of TV by encouraging concentrated viewing (5). This means that a type of TV series that evokes certain types of horror aesthetics can promote a more cinematically “gazing” audience, rather than the more typical “glancing” spectatorship of TV. *Atlanta* also challenges the glance theory with its uncanny surrealism by encouraging concentrated viewing which can be compared to watching a film. The uncanny surrealism of *Atlanta* creates an unsettling feeling and provokes questions rather than answers. The aesthetic works to refigure and disturb what we see and how we see it. Through the juxtaposition of the uncanny surrealism and the realism that frames the whole narrative, *Atlanta* proves the aesthetics' power to provoke reflection.

Interestingly, Fisher also engaged with the uncanny in his 2016 book *The Weird and The Eerie*. Fisher notes that the weird and the eerie are often equated with the uncanny, that Freud used the terms interchangeably in his essay, and that the concepts share the aspect of being affects and modes, but not quite genres (*The Weird and The Eerie* 2). Another thing the concepts have in common is an interest in the strange: “that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience,” Fisher writes (1). However, one important difference between the uncanny and the weird and the eerie, according to Fisher, is *how* they engage with the strange (2). As we have seen above, the uncanny is about the strange *within* that which is familiar. “The wider predilection for the *Unheimlich*,” writes Fisher, “is commensurate with a compulsion towards a certain kind of critique, which operates by always processing the outside through the gaps and impasses of the inside” (3). The weird and the eerie engage with the strange in the opposite way, allowing us to view “the inside from the perspective of the outside” (3).

More specifically, the weird, to Fisher, is “that which does not belong,” which conjures things to the familiar that ordinarily lie beyond it (3). The weird is something that is strange and which makes it seem to us that it should not exist, which means it evokes a sensation of “wrongness,” Fisher finds (7). However, if the thing or entity indeed is present, that means there is something in the categories with which we have made sense of the world that cannot be completely valid (7). Fisher writes: “The weird thing is not wrong, after all: is it our conceptions that must be inadequate” (7).

The eerie, on the other hand, is made up of what Fisher calls “a failure of absence” or “a failure of presence” (41). In other words, an eerie sensation can be felt when there is something where there should be nothing, and where there is nothing where there should be

something (41). Present must also be a sense of alterity, a feeling that the absence or presence involves a sort of subjectivity or knowledge that lies beyond our usual experience (42). This means that the eerie fundamentally has to do with questions of agency. Questions of agency also apply to the forces that govern capitalist societies, Fisher argues (3). He writes, "capital is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity" (3). As the eerie invites us to ask questions about agency, it is about the forces that rule the world and our lives. The global capitalism that governs us is still not fully available to our experience of the world. However, the serenity or calm which is often connected to the eerie has to do with "detachment from the urgencies of the everyday," Fisher argues (5). He writes, "The perspective of the eerie can give us access to the forces which govern mundane reality but which are ordinarily obscured, just as it can give us access to spaces beyond mundane reality altogether" (5). The eerie can be an escape from the mundane and a break from the usual restrain that is reality (5). This idea brings to mind Fisher's exhort to get beyond the reality principle to be able to expose the flaws of capitalism, and it is therefore also reminiscent of the proposals in his "acid communism," which was to be a tool for this. As you will see, *Atlanta* can be said to be weird, eerie, uncanny, absurd, *and* surreal. For clarity and simplicity, I have chosen to mainly use "surrealism" to describe the aesthetic of the series, as the weird, eerie, uncanny, and absurd moments more often than not produce surrealism, or are part of an otherwise surreal frame, scene, or moment.

2. *Atlanta* as a Neoliberal Coming-of-Age Narrative

This chapter will analyze how *Atlanta* takes the form of a neoliberal coming-of-age narrative through Earn's plotline. As we meet Earn, he is poor, struggles to provide for his daughter, and feels that he has no options to improve his economic or living conditions. However, through the series, Earn learns how to navigate the neoliberal landscape of work and relationships, working through pressure from both people around him and capitalist realist society. Surrealist moments here accentuate the violence of capitalism present in young Earn's life in the early seasons.

2.1. Season One: Earn as "Technically Homeless" and Out of Options

Early in the series, we learn that Earn is "technically homeless," as he puts it ("Go for Broke" 5:23). He spends most nights at Vanessa's house since his parents refuse to let him in his childhood home. He works for a credit card company and spends his days in the airport, trying to recruit new customers. He describes his situation in "The Big Bang": "I make 5,15 plus commission. I got to pay rent tonight and my parents won't let me in the house. It's like those drug commercials, only not funny" (14:55). Earn calls himself a stereotype, referring to the stereotype of the "deadbeat dad," and jokingly says to Vanessa while they lay in bed together that he is "fine with being the stereotype:" It's working out great for me… obviously I'm in a bed and I'm technically homeless. It's pretty great" ("Go for Broke" 5:18). Earn is making an ironic remark about his rather serious situation of not having enough income to pay rent or take care of his child.

In "The Streisand Effect," Earn wants to make a bit of money quickly by pawning his phone. Darius, who is with him in the pawn shop, notices a sword for sale. He is drawn to it and looks at it with awe, as if it is an object of great importance and value. When he reaches out to touch the sword, it makes a ringing, metallic sound with a magic quality. He convinces Earn to trade his phone for the sword rather than for cash. It turns out, however, that Darius planned to do a series of trade-ups, starting with the sword, to eventually getting a dog that can produce puppies, thereby delaying the income Earn needed by several months. Earn gets angry and explains to Darius that "poor people don't have time for investments because poor people are too busy trying not to be poor" (20:24). Earn does not receive the money until the second episode of season two. The magical sword takes Earn on a journey that day that makes him realize that Darius, who is not in Earn's financial position, does not understand his desperation.

The surreal nature of the sword highlights the commodity fetishism[8] of such artifacts, while simultaneously pointing to the very real effect of its value for Earn who is desperate for money.

In "The Jacket," Earn wakes up after a night of partying and realizes that he has lost his jacket. It turns out that Earn left the jacket in the Uber sometime during the evening, and Alfred and Darius reluctantly agree to drive Earn to meet with the driver. The scene cuts to the three of them waiting in Alfred's car, questioning why it is taking so long for the driver to come out to meet them. As Earn suddenly receives a phone call, Alfred starts suspecting that there is a potential danger hiding around them. While Earn is on the phone, the camera is focused on Alfred. The sounds around him fade into the background, and, instead, bird calls and other sounds from outside the car grow more prominent, together with an eerie noise reminiscent of sounds from a horror film, indicating a lurking danger. Once Earn hangs up the phone he tells the others the good news about having just been invited to go on tour, but Alfred, consumed by the feeling that something is not right, keeps looking around concerned and finally says "Something's off" (12:54). Earn does not seem to comprehend Alfred's words. A shot of the two cousins next to each other in the car – Alfred looking very concerned, and Earn confused – creates a visual representation of the difference between them. While Earn seems clueless about what is going on, Alfred is aware of the dangers of the capitalist and racist society, allowing him to recognize the signs of potential threats. Throughout the series, we learn that Earn and Alfred, despite being cousins, have led very different lives, and that Earn has not been exposed to the same dangers Alfred has experienced.

Earn is desperate to get his jacket back and protests when Alfred wants to leave, even though the Uber driver has not shown up yet. Alfred, feeling strongly a sense of impending danger, decides to leave anyway. As he starts to drive away, undercover police cars turn their sirens on and drive toward them to block their way, confirming Alfred's premonition that a potential danger would emerge. The police make the three characters step out of the car and put their hands on it, while they interrogate them about their intentions. Earn suddenly sees the Uber driver run out from one of the houses wearing the jacket he went to retrieve. As the police notice the man, they shoot him with an absurd and excessive number of shots. The scene becomes almost comedic with this display of excessive police violence, which also creates a

[8] In *Capital*, Marx argues that the fetishism of commodities obscures the social relations behind them, i.e. what usually exists between producers' products of their labor, making the value of the commodity appear to be inhered in the object itself while the labor behind it becomes invisible. "The existence of the things *quâ* commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. […] This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities," writes Marx (83).

satirical social commentary by ridiculing the police's forcefulness in their interaction with the suspect. The next frame depicts Earn looking surprised and horrified. Alfred later expresses that he is "sorry about the jacket" and Earn answers: "It's fine… I'm not even mad about the jacket" (16:08). The absurd encounter with the police, and seeing his jacket shot to pieces, reminds Earn how dangerous it can be to exist on the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy, under the punishing structure of neoliberal capitalism, and that his quest for a better life is essentially a matter of life or death.

At the end of the episode, as we learn that Earn needed to retrieve the storage unit (where he sleeps) key from his jacket pocket, we are reminded of Earn's desperation in not being able to afford a home of his own. Reluctant to spend all his time at Vanessa's house where he cannot afford to contribute to rent, Earn has no choice but to rent a storage unit to sleep in. In the last scenes of the episode, he gives the first money he has earned as Paper Boi's manager to Vanessa and Lottie, and saves only 100 dollars for himself. He then leaves Vanessa's house and walks to his storage unit while listening to OutKast's "Elevators," a song about growing up poor in Atlanta and eventually making it in the rap scene. Paired with a shot of Earn lying in his storage unit, admiring the 100-dollar bill he kept for himself, the song mirrors his situation and foreshadows his success later in the series.

2.2. "Groomed for Capitalism" – Control and Biopower in Earn's Life

Jennifer O'Donnell has convincingly argued that in the episode "FUBU," Earn is "groomed for capitalism" through self-improvement and biopower. Foucault's analysis of biopower describes it as originating in the eighteenth century: "[T]echniques of power present at every level of the social body and utilized by every diverse institution (the family and the army, schools and the police, individual medicine and the administration of collective bodies)" (Foucault 140). These are techniques, he notes, that aim to achieve the subjugation and control of populations in numerous ways (140). Biopower, though separate from other forms of discipline for Foucault, was an "indispensable element in the development of capitalism" in the nineteenth century (140-141). He writes: "If the development of the great instruments of the state, as *institutions* of power, ensured the maintenance of production relations, the rudiments of anatomo- and bio-politics […] operated in the sphere of economic processes, their development, and the forces working to sustain them" (140, original emphasis). O'Donnell turns to Wendy Brown who expanded upon Foucault's ideas to say that neoliberal ideology can, through biopower, enter "every sphere and activity, from mothering to mating, from learning to criminality, from planning one's family to planning one's death" (Brown qtd. in

O'Donnell 310). Though not mentioned by Brown, Deleuze also revised Foucault's ideas on discipline in the essay "Postscript to Societies of Control" (1990). Fisher references Deleuze's revision as an important aspect of how capitalist realism functions. "In his crucial essay […]," Fisher writes, "Deleuze distinguishes between the disciplinary societies described by Foucault […] and the new control societies, in which all institutions are embedded in a dispersed corporation" (*CR* 22). He explains that "[t]he carceral regime of discipline [that Foucault described] is being eroded by the technologies of control, with their systems of perpetual consumption and continuous development" (23). Deleuze observed that the new control society functions by "using indefinite postponement" (*CR* 22). In this way, they operate through debt rather than discipline: "Man is no longer man enclosed, but man in debt" (Deleuze "2. Logic"). This manifests in how we are expected to take work home, in that training continues as long as working life does, and education is seen as a lifelong process (*CR* 22). The consequence of this "indefinite mode of power," according to Fisher, is that external discipline is replaced by internal self-discipline: "Control only works if you are complicit with it" (22). In this society, we are forced to discipline ourselves to become good neoliberal citizens, thereby reaching success, or just simply fitting in.

O'Donnell finds that the episode "FUBU" presents what Berlant calls "cruel optimism" in the way the brand shirt promises access to a more exclusive social space through being a gadget of self-monitoring, an optimization ritual, and a "status-defining" marker (O'Donnell 311). The "cruel optimism" of neoliberal society makes us hope we can achieve a better future through self-bettering and consumption, for example, despite the fact that this better future is often impossible to reach. O'Donnell argues that neoliberal forms of biopower can be seen in practices of self-care and self-improvement by the individual to create the best version of themselves. Echoing Fisher's statement on the internal self-discipline of capitalist realism, she points out that a good neoliberal citizen must be "a performer, critic and impresario of oneself" (Bayman qtd. in O'Donnell 310). In young Earn's excitement, and in the way he begs his mother to buy him the shirt, we can see that he expects his new shirt, despite being counterfeit FUBU, to be a marker of an improved, "cooler," and more popular self. As O'Donnell also notes, the shirt is additionally a membership marker of the black community as the brand was popular among (and made by) young black Americans in the 90s (O'Donnell 313).

However, neoliberal biopower, or control, also manifests in modes of surveillance between individuals. As Earn's classmate Devin shows up in class also wearing a FUBU shirt, though slightly different from Earn's, the other children immediately insist that one of them is fake, and that they must find out which one. Earn and Devin are now rivals in the pursuit of

determining who is wearing the real FUBU shirt, O'Donnell notes (316). As a result, this investigation should reveal who is carrying the authentic marker of self-improvement and community belonging. The children's eagerness to find out who is wearing the fake shirt shows how subjects under capitalism control and surveil each other, even at a young age.

Later in the episode, though the other children have not yet managed to find out which shirt is real, older boys tease and bully Earn for his counterfeit FUBU shirt. Earn knows how dangerous the older bullies are (as is made evident in an earlier scene, where he sees one of them physically abuse a younger child on the bus): "If the older kids find me, they're gonna beat me up," young Earn remarks (15:38). O'Donnell writes that through violence, "bullying and a *winners and losers mentality* has become a means of control under neoliberal capitalism" (318, original emphasis). In the case of Earn's FUBU shirt, the bullying over the clothing label serves neoliberal capitalist interest. The brand's products would be worthless if faked shirts that cost a mere fraction of the price were acceptable. "[T]he tyrants of the industry would crumble," writes O'Donnell, and "it is therefore of value to implement a system of material competitiveness and violence to keep society purchasing more" (318).

To save himself from the violent bullies, Earn asks Alfred to help him: "I'm serious, Al. I need your help. I'm not cool like you" ("FUBU" 15:31). Alfred is presented as someone who, already at this young age, is aware of how to navigate competitive neoliberal society and exists as a contrast to the underdog image that Earn projects. Alfred also has an authority that Earn does not have, and the other kids believe him when he tells them Earn's shirt is the real one. As Earn leaves school that day, he sees Devin in the FUBU shirt being bullied by the older kids. The next day, Earn and his classmates learn that Devin had problems at home and committed suicide after being framed and bullied in school for wearing the fake shirt. O'Donnell argues that Earn has "learned more about the importance and consequences of clothing in the Black community, how surveillance operates, and how banishment is enacted" (320). This event seems to be Earn's first encounter with the brutal violence of capitalism, where success must come at the expense of others. As we will see below, it will not be his last.

In Earn's later life, this control continues to manifest in his relationships with people who are themselves affected by the internalized regimes of the capitalist realist order. It is present in his strained relationships with his parents. We see this control in "FUBU," where Earn's mother, at the beginning of the episode, "drills the get a job mantra into his developing mind," as O'Donnell notes (311), but also where, in the last scenes, she insists on Earn's self-improvement through taking piano lessons and dressing in a suit to present the best side of himself. The control from his parents continues into adulthood, as is presented in "The Big

Bang.” Here, Earn goes to visit his parents' house to ask about where Alfred lives. As Earn asks if they are going to invite him in, his dad laughs and responds that they “can’t afford to” (8:20). His parents think that Earn is there to ask for money, and even though their son is homeless and can barely earn a living, they refuse to help him or let him in his childhood home. Earn’s parents expect him to provide for himself, and their refusal to help him makes them a part of the control apparatus that grooms him for capitalism.

Alfred also takes part in this effort to control Earn. By his judgment, Earn does not have the fortitude for business and mocks him for it. This problematic behavior occurs several times throughout the series, but is perhaps most prominent when Earn first asks Alfred to make him his manager. Alfred initially declines Earn with the (false) statement that “[the word] ’manage’ comes from the word ‘man’ and… that ain’t really your lane” (“The Big Bang” 10:31). Alfred continues in a bullying manner: “I need Malcolm, you too Martin. You know what they did to him? They killed him” (10:36). Alfred’s comparison between the non-violent Martin Luther King Jr. and the more militant activist Malcolm X of the civil rights movement reflects the toughness and violence Alfred values in managers and businessmen, as opposed to the calm diplomacy that Earn exhibits. This trait does turn out to be a problem for Earn later when he is subtly bullied by other people in the business. We can see a stark example of how people take advantage of Earn’s “soft” manner during a moment in which he is treated differently by an acquaintance at the radio station. This person says the n-word in front of Earn but not to other black people, indicating a willingness to dispense with sensitivity around someone whom he perceives to be powerless. As the man walks away, he greets other black people without using the word, and as Earn asks the janitor if the man says it around him, he responds, “Yeah, right… I’d break my foot in his ass” (“The Big Bang” 15:38). Similarly, in the episode “The Club,” the club manager, Chris, takes advantage of Earn by avoiding his requests for Paper Boi’s payment. Earn spends the whole night trying to get a hold of Chris, but eventually gives up and tells Alfred, “he fucked us, man […], I just don’t scare people like you, man” (“The Club” 21:23). Earn is becoming aware of that people do not regard him with the level of esteem or prestige that others enjoy. Again, we see the difference between how Alfred and Earn handle competition in capitalism when Alfred eventually decides to abuse and rob Chris to get his money.

In two surreal encounters, Earn receives advice that will turn out to be important for him on his journey to becoming a more prosperous neoliberal citizen, successfully navigating work and relationships under capitalism. In “The Big Bang,” Earn is on the bus when a man suddenly appears in the seat in front of him out of nowhere. The man says, “Your mind’s

racing. Tell me, yo" (17:51). Earn answers: "I just keep losing," while the man starts opening a jar of Nutella (18:09). Earn continues: "I mean… are some people just supposed to lose? For balance in the universe? I mean... like, are there just some people on earth who are supposed to be here just to make it easier for the winners? Like, really?" (18:13). The stranger, who has started assembling a sandwich while Earn was talking, now says: "Resistance is a symptom of the way things are, not the way things necessarily should be. Actual victory belongs to things that simply do not see failure. Let the path push you like a broken branch in a river's current" (18:37). Earn, though not realizing it himself, expresses the idea that capitalism creates winners and losers, and that the meritocratic society is a false illusion, considering the system relies on making some people "lose." The stranger, reflecting capitalist realism, counters this sentiment, not by agreeing that society is flawed and should be changed, but by telling Earn that he, as an individual, must change the way he reacts to these flaws. Telling Earn he should not "see failure," the stranger reproduces the neoliberal sentiment that Earn can succeed if he focuses his energy on self-improvement and maximizing his own profitability, thereby blaming the individual for not trying hard enough.

Earn seems to find the man strange and responds: "Nah, nah, I'm not going out like that, but thanks for the advice" (18:56). The man appears even more strange to Earn as he holds the sandwich out to him and says "Bite this sandwich," to which Earn responds "Nah, I'm good, man" (19:06). The man then becomes aggressive, and makes an attempt to threaten Earn: "[N-word,] if you don't bite this sandwich..." (19:13). Earn here gets distracted by the sirens of a police car passing by and looks out the window for a second. When he turns back around, the man is gone, and Earn then catches a glimpse of him outside the bus, walking into the forest with a dog behind him. In this encounter with this stranger, we can see the connection to *Twin Peaks*, when we consider the surreal sequence in which the giant reaches out to Agent Cooper from another world to help him on his mission. The stranger here has a similar function for Earn in his quest to become a successful neoliberal citizen.

The attentive viewer will recognize the dog as the very same one Darius sees during his déjà vu earlier in the episode (but later in the day). Earn rejected the stranger's advice on the bus, but as he now sees the dog again, he is reminded of the strange man. He stops and says "wait," realizing that what the man said might have been important (1:40). The moment is surreal in many ways. Earn is in a situation he does not want to be in; and as he fails to de-escalate the argument Alfred is having, he realizes he has no control over his circumstances. Meanwhile, Darius is not having déjà vu as he says he is, but seems to be able to predict the future: he asks where the dog is before having seen it. Having spotted the dog, he says "that's

a trip, man," suggesting that what is happening is not real. Earn can also see the dog, however, making the reality of the situation with the stranger and the dog even more complicated. Because the man and his dog seem to have a magical, otherworldly, or surreal quality to Earn, he realizes that what the man said must be of importance. Like Agent Cooper in *Twin Peaks*, who insists that what the giant is telling him is fundamentally true and important for the investigation of the murder of Laura Palmer, Earn, though the stranger is cryptic and vague much like the giant, seems to realize that what the stranger told him will be of importance in the future.

In "Alligator Man," Alfred is under house arrest for the robbery in "The Club" and therefore asks Earn to go see their uncle Willy. Willy's partner Yvonne called Alfred, claiming that Willy kidnapped her because he thinks she stole money from him, and Earn is sent to mediate in the conflict. When Earn and Darius arrive at Willy's house, Darius insists on coming inside as "the vibes here are just so intense," foreshadowing the "intense vibes" emanating from the surreal presence of an alligator in the house ("Alligator Man" 14:40). "Don't go in there, the alligator's in there," Willy says as Earn is about to open one door in the house to look for Yvonne (16:36). Yvonne confirms that there indeed is an alligator in the room, as we get a shot of the shadow of something under the door. The alligator stays hidden from view for most of the episode. Earn is first unsure whether there actually is an alligator in the house, and viewers at this point know as much as the characters about its presence. The alligator is a looming, rather than a direct, threat, reflecting the looming threats in Earn's life. A set of questions hangs over him: will his career as Paper Boi's manager work out? Will he be able to provide for his daughter? Will he eventually get out of homelessness? Willy, on the other hand, uses the alligator to threaten the police after they arrive at the house, called by a neighbor: "If they keep on trying to act like they're gonna come in here and get me, then I'll let that alligator loose and see what they do about that" (19:14).

We learn that Earn's worries about the looming threats are more present than usual; his Uncle Willy represents something that he does not want to become. Earn is trying to make Willy comply with the police so they do not get in trouble, and an argument breaks out between them. Willy tells Earn it is not his problem and that he can just leave, but Earn tells him that Alfred sent him: "The person who owns this house said I had to make sure you were okay" (22:04). Willy smiles, making fun of Earn, and says, "Uh-huh. You scared. You got to stay on his good side now. 'Cause he's Mr. Moneybags" (22:10). Earn answers: "What I'm scared of is being you. You know, someone everybody knew was smart but ended up being a know-it-all, fuck-up jay that just let shit happen to him" (22:33). Willy is visibly hurt by this and walks

away. Later, Earn apologizes to Willy and admits to being scared that Alfred might not need him now that he is "kind of a big deal" (23:46). Willy hands Earn a gun that he says Earn will need in the music business, and then says: "And if you don't want to end up like me, get rid of that 'chip on your shoulder' shit. It's not worth the time" (24:55). Like the man on the bus in "The Big Bang," Willy is trying to tell Earn he must stop seeing himself as a victim of the unfair and evil things that happen in the world around him.

As the police are finally about to enter the house, Willy sets the alligator loose. In the slow-motion shot of the animal coming out of the house, the music is bombastic and dramatic. The people watching the alligator walk out the door, including Earn, are in awe. The now direct threat of the animal soon turns into a more comedic scene, however, as the alligator, once out of the house, turns and lies down in a bush while the dramatic music stops abruptly. The alligator is no longer a threat, but an absurd distraction while Willy escapes the police.

2.3. Earn's Internalization of Neoliberal Ideals

Towards the end of season two, Alfred is more invested in and protective of his career, and he is now afraid that Earn is not a good enough manager for Paper Boi. In "North of the Border," there is tension between Alfred and Earn as Alfred sees other managers with experience and realizes Earn's amateurish mistakes. Earn has booked Paper Boi to perform at a college "Pyjama Jam" where they will not get paid; and to save money, he has set them up to spend the night with students on campus rather than paying for a hotel. Alfred is not happy with Earn's managing decisions, but decides to trust his cousin and does the show as promised. This turns out to be a mistake, however, as Violet from the house where they are spending the night is expecting Alfred to sleep in her bed. Becoming jealous later when Alfred talks to other girls at the "Pyjama Jam," Violet starts a commotion that Tracy, who thinks he is Paper Boi's bodyguard, escalates. The group escapes the situation and ends up in a frat house. With the black characters set in the frat house decorated with Confederacy flags and guns, the situation grows more absurd. After the group is invited in, we cut to a shot of the group sitting in front of a comically large confederate flag with eight naked men standing in front of them with white hoods over their faces, reminiscent of the white hoods of the Ku Klux Klan. Darius and Tracy decide to go see the "gun room" of the house, and the situation for Alfred and Earn then becomes even more absurd as one of the students puts on the song "Laffy Taffy" by D4L and forces the naked men to dance. Through the juxtaposition between this absurd scene and the more serious next one, we are inevitably reminded of what Earn sees as the grave nature of the two characters' upcoming conversation. When Alfred and Earn are alone they laugh at the

absurd situation together, but Alfred then says “Tonight was some bullshit” (“North of the Border” 20:05), and continues “I think we need to talk about the real problem” (20:13). Earn thinks Alfred is talking about Tracy, who earlier escalated the situation at the “Pyjama Jam,” and says “Tracy’s got to go, man” (20:20). Alfred, however, laughs and says “I'm talking about your ass” (20:29). Earn is in disbelief and feels he is falsely accused of having caused the problems they encountered earlier that evening. Alfred points out that it was Earn’s bad decisions as a manager that put them in the situation they are in now. He tells Earn, “I've been talking to Clark County’s manager, man […] [about] managing me. Actually managing me, man. Shit I could be getting, shit I should be getting out here” (21:09). Alfred explains:

> Look, you family, man, and I'm trying to ride with you, but sometimes that shit ain't enough, bro. ‘Cause money is important. I see exactly what's happening out here. It's getting colder, it's getting harder to eat. I need shit, Lottie needs shit. You need shit. I got to make my next moves my best moves, man, so… something gotta shake. I don’t think you’re cut out for it (21:31)

Alfred again points out to Earn that he thinks he is not good enough at his job as a manager. For Alfred, his rap career is an opportunity to escape his social and economic condition, and he is not willing to risk losing this opportunity, even if it means having to fire his cousin.

We have seen in the first season that Earn is dependent on Alfred’s rap career for income, and as he realizes Alfred may fire him, Earn is worried for his and his daughter’s survival. When Earn and Darius are waiting for Darius’s new passport in “Crabs in a Barrel,” Earn receives a text message from Vanessa saying she is thinking about moving back to her mother’s house with Lottie. This decision is likely for economic reasons as she has been fired from her job as a teacher. Earn is devastated because he cannot provide for his daughter. Darius asks if he is doing all right and Earn responds “Definitely not” (“Crabs in a Barrel” 18:58). Earn expresses to Darius his concerns that Alfred is going to fire him as his manager and says: “I know you always at peace with everything but my whole world is falling apart” (19:15). Earn tells Darius he is learning and getting better at his job, and Darius responds “yeah, I know […] but… learning requires failure. Al just trying to make sure you ain't failing in his life. Ya’ll both black so… I mean, ya’ll both can't afford to fail” (19:55). Darius reminds Earn that Earn’s shortcomings will lead to them both failing and that, as part of a marginalized group, they risk being punished harder for their failures than others. Failing in capitalism means risking a life in danger, where capital and state will show no mercy if you cannot take care of yourself, and for marginalized groups, the punishments are all the more difficult to become free from.

At the airport, Earn realizes that he still has the gun that he put in his bag earlier in the episode and that he forgot to dispense with it. The gun would not only get him arrested, but it

would be the last mistake that would cause Alfred to fire him as his manager. Earn's panic is here made clear through the sound of the scene: as he sees the gun, the sounds around him fade, and we only hear the beeping sound from the machines faintly in the background, indicating that, for Earn, time has stopped. The camera lingers on Earn's stern face as he decides to put the gun in Clark County's bag. The sounds then return. Earn's desperate situation has made him willing to finally adapt to the competitive mentality of capitalism and make someone else take the blame for having the gun to save himself.

As Earn puts the gun in Clark County's bag, who then makes his manager take the blame, a parallel is drawn back to "FUBU," where Alfred makes everyone think the other child is wearing a fake shirt to save Earn from the bullies. In both cases, someone innocent bears the worst consequences of Earn's self-preservation. Alfred saw Earn's action and once they are on the plane, he tells Earn:

> I saw what you did… at TSA. You ain't got to say shit. Just know that's exactly what I'm talking about. [N-word] do not care about us, man. [N-word] gonna do whatever they got to do to survive, 'cause they ain't got no choice. We ain't got no choice, either. You my family, Earn. Yeah, you… you're the only one that knows what I'm about. You give a fuck. I need that. All right? (25:57)

Alfred has always known how to navigate the capitalist world that is competitive and hostile, especially to black people, as is made clear in "FUBU." Earn, though he has been groomed for capitalism throughout his life, is just starting to implement the tactics of a successful neoliberal citizen in his own life now. He has taken the advice of both the man on the bus in "The Big Bang" and his uncle Willy to no longer see himself as someone who is "supposed to lose," and is now taking action to not just "let things happen to him." Earn is instantly rewarded for finally realizing that to succeed he must walk over others. Alfred here decides to keep Earn as his manager due to the ruthless way he chose to save himself in the airport security. Earn's decision in this last episode of season two works as a start to his new life as a more successful neoliberal citizen in general, and manager in particular. He has internalized the compulsive demands of neoliberal society and can retain success in his career by neoliberal standards. In season three, it is soon made clear that Earn has fully adapted to his role as a more confident and, at times, ruthless manager to Paper Boi. In contrast to "The Club," we see Earn having no problems demanding payment and canceling a show last minute in "Sinterklaas is Coming to Town," and in "Cancer Attack," he confidently runs the whole operation around Paper Boi's show. Perhaps the most prominent presentation of Earn's change can be seen in "The Old Man and the Tree," where he takes advantage of the character Will, tricking him into hiring Earn as a manager to the artist TJ for much more money than it would normally cost.

Though Earn is successful and more secure in his life through the money he is now earning in season four, he is still experiencing some mental distress. In the episode "The Homeliest Little Horse," Earn tells his therapist that he is having "heart troubles" (4:00): "I have a tightness in my chest and a pain numbness going down my left arm. They say I'm healthy. They think I'm lying" (4:27). Additionally, his doctor has informed him he should get his "head checked" (4:02); their guess for what is causing this is "depression, panic attacks, anxiety, you know… a smattering," says Earn (4:49). However, Earn is not convinced that his doctor is correct, and confidently says: "[…] but anxiety about what? You know, my life is good… work is really good. I'm making more money than I've ever made (5:03). The therapist asks how "things [are] at home" (5:15), and Earn then replies "Good… Fine" with little enthusiasm (5:20). Earn informs his therapist that he has received a job offer in Los Angeles and that he is planning to move there. However, he has not yet told Vanessa or Lottie about this and the therapist suspects that this is the possible cause for Earn's stress: "Are you worried about the distance between you and Lottie if you take the job and Van doesn't want to go?" asks the therapist (5:51). The therapist seems to have been correct as Earn now takes a deep breath, grabs his chest, answers "yeah" (6:06) and then asks if he can lay down. Earn is visibly stressed and anxious about the thought of no longer being close to Vanessa and Lottie. The family has become an important aspect of relief from the pressures of a world of constant instability, argues Fisher, as the public sphere with its safety nets no longer exists (*CR* 32). Couples, he writes, have "become the exclusive source of affective consolation for each other" (33). Though Earn is now a successful manager, he is not completely happy, and he is looking to the family life that he could have with Vanessa and Lottie for relief from stress and for companionship, and affective consolation. The pressures to become a successful neoliberal citizen and businessman have eventually made Earn suffer through experiences of stress and anxiety, and the "dog-eat-dog" mentality of capitalism has made him alienated from others. In "Snipe Hunt," Earn asks Vanessa to come with him to Los Angeles. Vanessa is hesitant as she does not want to move to the other side of the country just to mother his child, but Earn declares his love for her and tells her that he wishes that they all live together in L.A: "I want us to be a family," he says (22:57). He indicates that he finds family and a romantic relationship to be the sole consolation in an otherwise difficult life: "I mean, what else are we doing this for, if not for that feeling? What else is there?" (25:55), and Vanessa ends up agreeing to go with him.

3. Capitalist Realism and the Rapper

This chapter will explore the storyline of Alfred and his career as a rapper. Alfred struggles to accept fame and the role he must perform as Paper Boi. He realizes the danger that comes with "keeping it real," and is forced to ponder who he can really trust in the exploitative music industry. Through its surrealist mode, *Atlanta* critiques the absurdity of celebrity culture, fame, the rapper persona as a commodity, and the cruelty of capitalism's coercive and competitive ethos in general, and that of the music industry in particular. The surreal elements capture hip-hop's normally obscured, darker reality and its relation to capitalist realism, and they enhance *Atlanta's* representation of it through Alfred's storyline.

To Fisher, hip-hop's relationship to late capitalist production is such that it makes capitalist realism a durable condition (*CR* 14). Many have said hip hop is realistic in mode, reflecting a brutal reality; but Fisher argues that it neither simply reflects a brutal reality, nor causes it, as some critics find, but that it rather endorses it fully and ensconces us in it (14-15). To Simon Reynolds, "real" has two meanings in hip hop: the real in the sense of the authentic, uncompromising music that "refuses to soften its message for crossover," and the reality which the music reflects as "constituted by late capitalist economic instability, institutionalized racism, and increased surveillance and harassment of youth by the police" (Reynolds qtd. in *CR* 14). Hip-hop embraces this "brutally reductive" look on reality (14), Fisher argues, by having "stripped the world of sentimental illusions" and instead seeing the world "for what it really is" (15). Fisher turns to Reynolds again who notes that "to 'get real' [in hip-hop] is to confront a state-of-nature where dog eats dog, where you're either a winner or a loser, and where most will be losers" (qtd. in *CR* 15). Importantly, Fisher posits that it was indeed the genre's performance of the uncompromising version of "real" that allowed for the absorption into the other "real," that of "late capitalist economic instability" as the authenticity of the first "real" is highly marketable (14).

Though hip-hop is now a large genre with many sub-genres, it started reaching wider audiences in the 1990s when gangster rap was the leading and most widespread of these sub-genres (Setaro). Gangster rap is characterized by lyrics that pertain to a violent life in disadvantaged neighborhoods, with lines mentioning poverty, drugs, and racial inequality (Besora). The lyrics emphasize the conditions of poor, urban Americans; but, rather than being of a political nature, the solutions to the conditions portrayed are largely individual efforts centered on eradicating violence and substance abuse. Songs give primacy to making money and climbing the social ladder through becoming a "gangster," while relegating criticisms of the system that perpetuates those conditions.

Paper Boi makes trap music, a genre that evolved out of gangster rap in Atlanta in the ‘90s. The name comes from the Atlanta slang term “trap house” which refers to a space where illegal drugs are sold and often consumed, with the name making a connection to how substance abuse is difficult to escape by referencing how people may become “trapped” by it (Besora). With its more sinister tones, faster hi-hats, and purposefully ugly aesthetic, trap can be said to be more extreme than gangster rap in its sound (Besora). Lyrically, the songs are often about money, violence, and sex, and there is more focus on the selling and consuming of drugs than in gangster rap (Besora). With its lyrics focusing more on individual success and luxury than on conditions of poverty and racial inequality, trap appears to embrace the triumphs of capitalism even more than gangster rap did. The song “Paper Boi” is about money - making it, showing it off, and spending it:

> Paper Boi, Paper Boi
> Always 'bout that paper, boy
> If you ain't on your grind
> Then you flexin', you's a hater, boy
> Paper Boi, Paper Boi
> Always gettin' paper, boy
> If ain't makin' money
> Then you ain't a money maker, boy
> Paperclip, paperclip
> Yeah I need a paperclip
> I'm stackin' up this paper, man
> And I could make that paper flip

The song is a parody of a typical trap song, exemplifying the adoration of money as such and the importance of showing that you have it for the purpose of your image. Alfred makes music and maintains his persona as Paper Boi, reinforcing the status quo of capitalism by glorifying money for its own sake. It is a paradoxical introduction to the persona that Alfred will be reluctant to embrace throughout the series, as well as an ironic reflection of Earn’s desperate need to change his financial situation in the first season.

For Alfred, becoming a rapper is “making the best out of a bad situation” (“The Streisand Effect” 15:58). He is aware that selling illegal drugs is not a sustainable way of making a living, and he knows that he must somehow try to escape his social and economic situation. To Alfred, it seems like becoming a rapper is the only viable opportunity for him to change his circumstances. He explains why he feels that he has to be a rapper to Zan in “The Streisand Effect:” “Cause I have to. I scare people at ATMs, boy, so I have to rap. I mean, that’s what rap is… making the best out of a bad situation, brother” (15:51). Though Alfred is reluctant to be famous, and though he does not identify with the violent and stereotypical rapper

image, becoming a successful rapper is for him a means for survival. Because Alfred "scares people at ATMs," he cannot take other, more regular jobs, and therefore becoming a rapper is his only alternative for making an income. This commitment of Alfred's is a surrender to capitalist realism. His dedication, and fear of failure, can be seen in his confrontation with Zan whom he thinks is trying to hurt his career, and how he emotionally responds to his inner struggles with his career in the episodes "Woods" and "New Jazz," which will be discussed below. Alfred is aware that he cannot afford to fail because he knows how dangerous it is to be both poor and black in capitalist Atlanta. Alfred's storyline is a portrayal of an archetypal narrative that has long persisted throughout history. There seems to be no other way for Alfred to escape his circumstances than to be a rapper, and in this way, Alfred embodies the capitalist realism of hip-hop.

3.1. The Rapper as a Commodity and the Absurdity of Fame

Alfred's plot begins after he has just released a mixtape. In "The Big Bang," Alfred's career as a rapper launches beyond the underground rap scene as Earn gets his song "Paper Boi" played on a commercial Atlanta radio station. As the title of this first episode suggests, the events in it are the start of something new and significant - Alfred's and Earn's new lives as a rapper and manager, respectively. However, the title "The Big Bang" also refers to the shooting that takes place in the episode. This event is significant for Alfred and the future arch of his plotline. The shooting that Alfred is involved in occurs on the same night that "Paper Boi" is played on the radio for the first time. This launches Alfred's career as a rapper and his public image as a "gangster" simultaneously. The result of this is seen in the next episode, "Streets on Lock," when Darius tells Alfred that he and Earn were on the news for the shooting, but also that the radio station has been playing his song all morning, as he picks him up from the police station. The two events are inevitably intertwined for Alfred, and it seems the song has gained additional popularity because of the shooting and Alfred's new gangster image.

This connection is exemplified in the next scene where Alfred and Darius are picking up food on their way home. The employee who brings them the food tells Alfred, "I heard about that shoot out you had on Twitter. You one of the last real rappers, man" ("Streets on Lock" 8:13). He tells Alfred that the rappers nowadays are "weak," and that "it's good to see a rapper that would just blow a [n-word] brains out on the streets, that's that nineties shit, b" (8:36). Alfred seems perplexed at this glorification of murder, but has no time to respond before the man tells them "my boy hooked you up. He made you those lemon pepper joints, but these got the sauce on them" (8:44). Alfred and Darius are amazed by this, and as they open one of

the take-out containers, a golden glow emerges from within. This surreal occurrence is reminiscent of the famous glowing contents of the briefcase in the 1994 movie *Pulp Fiction* (dir. Quentin Tarantino). Whereas in the movie, the contents of the briefcase are supposedly something as valuable as diamonds, here they are simple chicken wings. Yet, based on Alfred and Darius's reaction to the contents, they are typically inexpensive fast-food items rendered as valuable as gold. Alfred seems for a second happy to receive special treatment in the form of chicken wings, but as the man sternly looks at Alfred and says "Don't let me down, man. If you let me down, I don't know what I'll do," Alfred is made aware of how people now perceive him and what they expect of him (9:29). His first taste of fame is not what he expected it to be: though he seems excited to receive the free chicken wings, the employees only appreciate him for appearing to represent a version of a "real rapper." Though Alfred was involved in a shooting, we learn that he is not the violent person people now expect him to be. This is evident in the later episode "Go For Broke," where Alfred and Darius do business with the Migos, and Alfred is terrified of the more violent rap group who embody the twisted image of rappers that the media often portrays. As Alfred is reminded of why the man wanted to give him the extra chicken wings, they now seem strange and absurd to him. The small surreal occurrence of the glowing wings highlights the absurdity of the situation Alfred is in. He is praised and given respect for his violent behavior, creating the image of him as a gangster with which he has considerable discomfort.

Darius later in the episode tells Alfred that he and his song are now featured in various online magazines: he reads out the headline "Is Paper Boi Atlanta's Tupac?" ("Streets on Lock" 13:53). While Darius is excited about his friend's newfound success, Alfred seems reluctant. During the day in which the episode is set, Alfred realizes that his music has gained popularity because of the image of him established with the shooting the night before. However, Alfred is not comfortable with the image and hopes to distance himself from it. The absurdity of Alfred's situation, which includes his aversion to having his fame tied with the label of violent "gangster," is something he will struggle with throughout the first season.

In "Nobody Beats the Biebs," the surreal image of Justin Bieber represented as a black man creates a dynamic that draws out the different responses to black and white artists' questionable behaviors; it also highlights Alfred's frustration with the new persona he must embody to sell his music. During the episode, Alfred is reminded that he is known as "the rapper who shot someone." As he introduces himself as Paper Boi to a journalist, she says "Oh, I know who you are. You're the guy who shot someone" ("Nobody Beats the Biebs" 1:51). Alfred responds "Well, it ain't really happen like that," and tells her "you need to get to know

the real me" (1:56). She declines his suggestion for a date between the two of them with explaining she does not like "the gangster thing" (2:18), while Alfred insists "you have me all wrong" (2:23). Alfred does not like the fact that he has become famous for the shooting. Even Justin Bieber recognizes Alfred as the rapper "who blew that [n-word] brains out" (3:43).

After Bieber and Alfred start a fight during the charity basketball game, Bieber gets a chance to apologize for his behavior during a press conference. When Alfred asks the journalist from earlier if he too can get a chance to apologize for his behavior in the basketball game so people can "get to know the real [him]," she gives him cynical advice: "Play your part. People don't want Justin to be the asshole. They want you to be the asshole. You're a rapper, that's your job" (19:53). Alfred is visibly disappointed. He is jealous of Justin Bieber who can benefit from having another type of image than the one Alfred is forced to uphold, and has his first exposure to the way this system makes a mockery of his music and persona. It becomes clear to Alfred that, in order to be successful, he must perform the role that the public feeds, just as Bieber is clearly playing his role well.

The absurdity of capitalist celebrity culture is portrayed in "The Club," where Marcus Miles's invisible car is juxtaposed with Alfred's struggle with how to handle local celebrity. Alfred is making a club appearance for promotion, despite hating the club and preferring to be at home. To try to make the best of the situation, he decides to perform as his rapper persona to get more people to gather in his designated section of the club. However, once he realizes that people are in his section not because he knows them but because they all want something from him, he decides to make everyone leave again. The absurdity of being famous for Alfred is highlighted by the juxtaposition with the surreal and absurd behavior of Marcus Miles whose section is full of people, but who also brought his pet peacock and invisible car to the club. Alfred learns about the invisible car from Darius who tells him: "Marcus Miles is pretty cool. You know, he got that invisible car. […] It's like a prototype or something like that" ("The Club" 5:38). Alfred does not believe the car is real, but it later appears to the viewers as a commotion breaks out outside the club. The car speeds out of the parking lot, hitting people on the way. Miles, driving the car, is visible through its see-through walls and there is an engine sound coming from it. The car is evidently real in the world of *Atlanta*. This instance provides commentary on how celebrities create an image for themselves through meaningless and expensive commodities. However, while normally celebrities aim to stand out and create an image for themselves through visible cues for their status, this car lacks the visibility that is usually needed for this form of status-signifying to an audience. It is then the novelty of the car that impresses people around him, rather than the car itself – this novelty capitalism always

leverages to make a profit. The surreal aspect of the invisible car therefore momentarily exposes the mechanisms of how commodities are fetishized. The surreal aspects of Marcus Miles's character also highlight, for Alfred, the senseless and absurd nature of celebrity culture. He will later subscribe to this celebrity culture, but only as he fully understands that he has no choice but to do so to sell his music.

Season one of *Atlanta* is an exploration of the identity that the media forces onto Paper Boi and how Alfred responds to this context. As Fisher states, the rapper's authentic persona and music are highly marketable and what makes Alfred able to earn money through his music. Alfred slowly realizes this throughout the season, but remains reluctant to perform the stereotypical and destructive role of the rapper. However, in season two, he is confronted with the fact that his own reluctance stops him from becoming truly successful.

3.2. The Dangers of "Keeping It Real:" Alfred's Wake-Up Call

As seen above, Alfred is not interested in playing the role that the public wants him to play as a rapper. However, this drives him away from fully realizing his career. In the episode "Woods," Alfred imagines his dead mother in his house; as she scolds him for his untidy house, her presence represents a side of him that wants to achieve more, while simultaneously feeling like a failure for not pursuing his career more seriously. Alfred's refusal to submit to the demands of fame is clear immediately after, as we see him ignoring Earn's request to sign important papers.

Later in the episode, Sierra tries to convince Alfred to commit to the role he must play as a rapper and to work on his image if he wants to succeed in the business. Sierra tells Alfred "That 'dope boy from the hood' act won't last long" ("Woods" 6:36), and argues that "nobody wants somebody famous to look just like them" (6:41), to which Alfred responds: "Hey, look, no offense, but, um… I ain't into all that fake shit. I'm just trying to stay real" (10:05). Sierra laughs at this remark and the two get into an argument. According to Sierra, Alfred is delusional for thinking he can achieve fame without committing to the rapper image: "You sitting there whining, acting like you better than me cause' I'm trying to get paid. Wake the fuck up. That shit ain't real" (11:54). As Alfred meets three teenagers later, however, he is instantly punished for "keeping it real". The boys take advantage of the fact that he is walking alone and decide to rob him. Alfred has now been confronted with, on the one hand, the pressure to adapt to the role he must assume as a rapper, though it means not being true to himself, as well as the possible consequences of ignoring the apparent importance of his image as a rapper for him to be able to sell his music.

In the woods, Alfred meets a man who at first seems to be a homeless person, but who we soon recognize as a surreal representation of Alfred's thoughts and current dilemma. Alfred has, through his break as Paper Boi, a chance to escape his current circumstances. The man in the woods stands in for his awareness of this opportunity as well as his guilt for not taking it more seriously. However, Alfred wishes to avoid these thoughts and asks the man to leave him alone. He tries to ignore the man, but he follows Alfred around while he attempts to find a way out of the woods. As Alfred sees the dead deer, the man points to it and says "That's you. Deer guts. That's what I'll call you" (20:42). From there, Alfred aware of the fact that, if he continues to "keep it real," he might risk dying a revelation made clear during the robbery earlier in the episode. The dead deer and the woods, which now seem impossible to escape, symbolize the dangers associated with being a poor, black man in the US. If Alfred does not take the opportunity to leave his circumstances, a chance he has been given through his rap career, he will risk confronting the violence that capitalist society imposes on marginalized people.

As Alfred, after having walked in circles in the woods, sits down to rest, the man says to him "You better stand up and make a decision about how you getting out of here" (22:21). Alfred asks the man to leave him alone. The man asks him once more to make a decision; and. as Alfred tries to dismiss him again, the man puts a knife to his throat: "Keep standing still, you're gone, boy. You're wasting time. And the only people who got time are dead. And if you're dead, I'm gonna take them shoes and your wallet and that shirt" (22:35). Significantly, the man will not only potentially hurt Alfred, but also rob him, recalling the robbery from earlier in the episode and its attending trauma. Alfred confronts the choice between his sense of authenticity, or "keeping it real" as he calls it, and becoming the stereotypical rapper, allowing him to escape his economic and social situation. The knife threat from the homeless man indicates that Alfred can no longer ignore the fact that he has to make this choice. This is a window of opportunity for Alfred which he realizes he must make use of, or risk being trapped in a violent life.

Once Alfred meets a fan in the gas station after escaping the woods, audiences realize that he has chosen to start performing as the stereotype people want him to be. He has finally accepted the value of selling himself as the Paper Boi persona, ensuring that he can move away from the harsh realities of capitalism. Though having been very reluctant to take pictures with fans in earlier episodes, he now poses with his blackened eye and bloody mouth and encourages the fan to take multiple pictures. Alfred has finally realized that he, as a rapper, is a commodity rather than just a person; as such, he must market himself in a way that will lead to his success.

3.3. Trust, Capitalism, and the Music Industry

By the time the third season starts, a few years have passed since the last episode of season two, and Alfred's career seems to have taken off. He is living a more lavish lifestyle as an international celebrity, and seems to be on his second European tour. After having made his decision in "Woods," Alfred is more invested in, and protective of, his career. However, Alfred is aware that the music industry is a dog-eat-dog world where people will do anything to succeed; and he also experiences that, in a capitalist realist society, money affects relationships. He is worried that his friends will exploit him, as will the entirety of the music business. He is aware of, and worried that, he might lose what he worked for as Paper Boi at any moment. The representation of his anxieties is perhaps most prominent in "New Jazz."

Though Alfred and Earn are cousins, there has been a financial element to their relationship since they first started working together in the very first episode of *Atlanta*. Earn's career relies on Alfred making a profit from his music; and without Paper Boi, Earn would not be the successful manager he is now. As we saw in the second season, this creates tension in their relationship. The capitalist system requires owners of property (especially intellectual property) to accumulate as much capital and monopolize an industry as possible, and for Earn to do this as a manager it must come at the expense of his client. Earn is now part of the exploitative music industry, something which Alfred has likely detected. At the start of "New Jazz," Alfred realizes that his career and financial circumstances have affected his relationship with Darius, when he's expected to pay for Darius's "Nepalese Space Cake" and his own breakfast. Tensions rise between them, as does Alfred's fear of being taken advantage of by those around him. As the people closest to Alfred have become dependent on his income as a rapper, he feels that he has lost some control over the relationships and decisions in his own life and career. Alfred fears that he no longer has any say in who he is because he no longer has control over his finances. This mirrors the patterns that exist under capitalist realism, namely that it is impossible to locate a separation between the spaces of economic activity and that of the personal.

Alfred's fears manifest in a new way when he meets Lorraine. The first thing she says to him is "damn, your hat looks dumb" ("New Jazz" 10:33), calling back to the beginning of the episode where Darius responded oppositely to Alfred's new accessory. Lorraine asks if Alfred needs a friend, a "good one" who would not let him wear that hat (10:52). She tells him she hates rappers because she thinks they do not know themselves: "The thing about rappers though is, like, y'all don't know anything about yourselves. Like… you have no idea where your money is. […] or where your money's going (12:52). Alfred responds promptly by saying

“Well, that ain’t me, all right?” (13:12). However, when Lorraine asks him who owns the master recordings which, as she notes, is potentially the most lucrative part of his music, he is unable to answer. She laughs at him for not knowing this, and makes a remark about coming “at the perfect time,” indicating that she is there to help or save him in some way (13:55). By the end of the episode, it is clear that Lorraine is not real, but a surreal hallucination caused by the “space cake.” Much like the man in the woods, Alfred is once again confronting a manifestation of his own psyche.

The episode becomes even more surreal as Alfred and Lorraine leave the art gallery, and his anxieties seem to increase too. As they exit the gallery, it is dark out, despite it only being morning. Lorraine takes Alfred to a surreal bar decorated with psychedelic art, where one of the guests is dressed as a dog, and another is Liam Neeson, playing a skewed version of himself. As Lorraine asks Alfred, “You high yet?” (18:03), it is clear that she is a manifestation in Alfred’s mind, given that he never disclosed to her that he consumed the “space cake.” Alfred’s fears continue to grow as he realizes the bar is a club for canceled celebrities. The “Cancel Club” symbolizes Alfred's insecurities regarding his relevance. As he talks to Neeson, he realizes that his career can be taken away from him by the same public who gave it to him.

Alfred’s fears are further confirmed when Lorraine tells him, “All day I’ve been telling you what you needed to hear, not what the fuck you wanted to hear” (25:40). She confronts him by saying that if he does not have anyone around him who can tell him harsh truths, he is “white” (25:48). This is a reference to what Liam Neeson said to Alfred earlier in the episode: “I learned that the best and worst part about being white is… we don’t have to learn anything if we don’t want to” (23:31). Lorraine continues to point out Alfred’s fears about his friends taking advantage of his newfound wealth, and that his cousin has too much power over his career and his finances: “Your friends let you wear that shit hat. They don’t pay for shit. You got family handling the most important parts of your fucking finances? My [n-word], your future? All of ‘em, all of ‘em got a vested interest in you not seeing the truth. You don’t trust me? I’m all you got” (25:55). The scene takes a more extreme surreal turn as Lorraine removes Alfred’s ability to move and speak. Alfred now finds himself becoming the man he saw earlier in the episode on the street whom Darius warned him not to be like. From where he is sitting on the street, he can see himself start the journey he was just on and his own paralysis prevents him from stopping it. The image reflects Alfred’s inability to control his finances or his identity, generating more fears about his career and the decisions made on his behalf. As he wakes up in the hotel room, Alfred has realized that he must take control of his finances and his future. If he has control over his money, he has control over his life. He asks Earn who owns his

masters; and as Earn, perplexed, answers “You do” (30:06), Alfred is relieved. He now knows that he has control over his career and finances, assuring him that he has protection from exploitation.

Alfred sees the world “for what it really is,” as Fisher writes, and that is why he is terrified of losing his career. He knows that capitalism creates a circumstance of coercive relationships to the market, and one in which the dangers of exploitation are ever present. Though Alfred can see the problems with capitalism, he cannot identify them as such. He is aware of the destructive dog-eat-dog mentality of capitalism; but to him, there is no alternative. For Alfred, to “beat” capitalism means playing by its rules and winning on its terms, which inevitably means stepping on others. As there is no other way for Alfred, he must take his rap career seriously, despite his misgivings about the idea of fame and image.

In the last season of the series, Alfred is still navigating the complex world of fame, while also struggling with feeling isolated. His growing level of fame, as well as the discrepancy between the commodified persona Paper Boi and his real self, makes Alfred feel alienated from both his own identity and the people around him. His isolation only gets worse as the music industry insists on shaping him into a marketable persona that does not align with his authentic desires. As we have seen above, this struggle has followed Alfred from the start of his career, and it has been the theme of many of his plotlines throughout the seasons. The character’s arc is an exploration of the paradox that lies in the loneliness that comes with being famous, as well as the impossibility of being genuine while being a part of an industry that demands superficiality in its marketing tools.

In the episode “Andrew Wyeth. Alfred’s World,” Alfred is at his “safe farm,” which he has acquired after being chased by a ruthless gunman in the earlier episode “Crank Dat Killer.” His paranoia is displayed in the opening scene of the episode, as he practices shooting while “Mind Playing Tricks on Me” by Geto Boys plays, with the lyrics “I’m paranoid, sleepin’ with my finger on the trigger” (“Andrew Wyeth. Alfred’s World” 1:40). Alfred is alone on his farm; he cooks and watches TV, tends to his crops, and finds a tractor to repair. As Paper Boi, he is always being pushed into an increasingly commercial and marketable image, and in response to this Alfred often chooses to run away to be by himself. The earlier episodes which have centered on Alfred only, “Woods” and “New Jazz,” have led him to learn something about himself or his place in the industry alone. It seems Alfred needs to be isolated to be able to separate himself from the persona Paper Boi, and to be able to develop as a character. While he found himself isolated in “Woods” and “New Jazz” by accident, he has here made a conscious choice to be alone and by doing so, he makes an effort to protect his authenticity

from the music industry. Alfred uses isolation to be able to resist the pressure to conform to and perform for the world around him. He even ignores Earn's calls, as Earn is no longer just his cousin, but also part of the industry that Alfred is trying to avoid. However, when Alfred is alone, problems still occur: first, it was ruthless robbers in Atlanta, then it was greedy fans in Amsterdam. This time, Alfred is around as few people as possible, or people who do not recognize him as Paper Boi, and the problem is instead manifested in nature, as feral hogs pestering his crops. Clyde, the clerk at the hardware store, tells Alfred that "it's serious, […] these things ain't no bedtime story animals, […] you got to kill them before they kill you" (11:02), but Alfred laughs at this. Clyde's warning is foreshadowing the later, indeed very dangerous, interaction that Alfred will have with the hog.

Alfred's paranoia, together with the eerie feeling conveyed in the episode, presents the hog, or *something*, as a threatening presence throughout. Flickering lights, sounds of the rummaging hog outside in the night, and a shot of the shed in the dark with its door banging rhythmically create an uncanny aesthetic, which increases the feeling of the notion that there is a danger lurking. This episode is much like "Woods" and "Snipe Hunt," where nature is presented in an uncanny light, to be perceived as a threat, or at least a great, unsettling, unknown.

As is evident in the title, the episode makes a reference to the work of 20th-century American painter Andrew Wyeth, specifically his "Christina's World." Painted in 1948, the work depicts a woman lying in a field, looking up towards a distant farmhouse. The composition was inspired by Wyeth's neighbor Christina Olson (moma.org). Unable to walk, Christina still refused to use a wheelchair, and could often be seen crawling around the farm, as in the painting (moma.org). However, the title, "Christina's World," invites us to consider the inner life of the subject, and thereby regard the work as a depiction of a psychological state of mind rather than a portrait of Christina and the landscape around her (moma.org).

After having hurt his leg in the accident with the tractor, Alfred ends up laying on the ground, unable to walk, reaching towards the house, just like Christina in Wyeth's painting. However, the episode is not only inspired by Wyeth's compositions. When viewing "Christina's World" as a depiction of a woman in isolation, due to her disability and therefore *inability* to participate in society, but also due to Wyeth's choice of presenting her as being completely alone on the farm, the painting is an allegory for Alfred's journey in *Atlanta*. As a symbol of Alfred's state of mind, he finds himself, much like Christina, in an immense and alien setting. The house in the distance is a representation of what Alfred is longing for, but feels increasingly separated from. Like Christina, Alfred cannot easily return to the house due

to his injury, which mirrors how, because of the barriers and demands of the music industry, Alfred is distanced from his roots and his authentic self. Both Alfred and Christina are in settings where they are physically present, but where they are also psychologically and emotionally isolated, creating a parallel between how the two are represented as struggling to maintain their independence and identity as circumstances change.

As Alfred kills the hog that attacks him in his vulnerable state, he beats nature and the scary unknown, not by accepting fame or being guided by his past like in “Woods” and “New Jazz,” but by tackling the problem by himself. Alfred’s problems will not disappear. He is reminded of this as Earn, the embodiment of work, calls again. Alfred has realized that he cannot run away from his problems, and he decides to pick up the phone, still bloody and out of breath from fighting the hog. Even for Alfred, a world-famous rapper, work, and its psychological side effects, follow him everywhere.

4. Bureaucracy and Mental Health in *Atlanta*

Fisher analyzes some tendencies within capitalist realism by looking at mental health and bureaucracy. He argues that they are both important aspects of education, a part of our culture "which has become increasingly dominated by the imperatives of capitalist realism" (*CR* 20). The themes of education, bureaucracy, and mental health feature heavily in Vanessa's plotline. When we meet the character, she works as a middle school teacher. After being fired due to crude bureaucratic measures, Vanessa experiences an identity crisis, eventually launching her into complete mental distress in season three. The representation of bureaucracy and mental health, as informed by capitalist realism, is punctuated by instances of surrealism which highlight, and sometimes criticize, the ways in which the cultural logic creates contradictions in both work and private life. This juxtaposition of the realistic portrayal of the interconnected capitalist realist features of education, bureaucracy, and mental health and the surreal moments invites the viewer to contemplate the flawed aspects of capitalism depicted in Vanessa's storyline.

4.1. The Bureaucracy of Educational Institutions as Represented in *Atlanta*

Because of the way capitalist realism installed "business ontology" in society, it is now "simply obvious" that everything should be run as a business, even healthcare and education (*CR* 17). This "business ontology" brings with it a more aggressive use of bureaucracy, one which has been consequently installed in virtually all American educational institutions. Bureaucracy is often excoriated by neoliberal ideologies in an effort to make a case against socialism, and in a neoliberal society, bureaucracy, "a relic of an unlamented Stalinist past," is supposed to have disappeared (*CR* 19-20). However, this is not the lived experience of people in neoliberal societies. "Instead of disappearing," Fisher writes, "bureaucracy has changed its form; and this new, decentralized, form has allowed it to proliferate" (20). The new bureaucracy has been allowed to seep into all areas of work, resulting in that workers are now forced to be the evaluators of their own work (*CR* 51). In school inspections, Fisher writes, "what you will be graded on is not primarily your abilities as a teacher so much as your diligence as a bureaucrat" (52). This late capitalist bureaucracy does not indicate that capitalism does not work, argues Fisher, but it rather indicates that the way that capitalism works is very different from what capitalist realism suggests (20).

Fisher notes how teachers are now put under unbearable pressure to meet the demands of both the "post-literate" late capitalist student who can no longer focus or read for a longer period of time *and* the disciplinary requirements to pass examinations (26). In this way,

education reproduces social reality and thereby directly confronts the contradictions of the capitalist social field (26). According to Fisher, teachers must now be both "facilitator-entertainers" and "disciplinarian-authoritarians," and this demand on teachers has come at a time when disciplinary structures of various institutions are simultaneously breaking down (26). As the capitalist society demands that both parents work, teachers are forced to become "surrogate parents" who must teach the students "the most basic behavioral protocols" and offer "pastoral and emotional support for teenagers who are in some cases only minimally socialized," Fisher writes (26).

This difficult and absurd reality for teachers is represented in *Atlanta*. In "Value," Vanessa is stopped in the corridor in school by a colleague who, with an irritated look on her face, says to Vanessa: "I got Tobias right now. You want to know what this boy did?" ("Value" 19:22). We cut to a scene where the colleague is checking attendance in a classroom. When she calls Tobias's name there is no answer, and as she looks up, she sees the student sitting in the back of the classroom with white paint on his face, staring back at her with a smug smile on his lips. Vanessa is naturally confused: "Why was he in white face?" (19:40). "I don't even know," her colleague answers, "but he gon' get enough of fucking with me, I mean that" (19:42). Vanessa tries to suggest a way to handle the student and her colleague says: "Somebody needs to come get him. I can't do it, Van. I'm not going to jail today" (19:48). Although the colleague wants a parent to retrieve Tobias because his behavior is beyond the scope of her responsibility, Vanessa has relented to the fact that it is now an imperative of their job as teachers to handle such behavior. The two teachers are forced to handle the student's lack of "the most basic behavioral protocols" as "surrogate mothers."

On this day, it is also time for employee drug tests, and Vanessa admits to the principal that she "smoked weed" after having had a night out with an old friend the day before (21:24). Vanessa decides to confess to her crime rather than attempt to leave a falsified sample. "Okay… well urine samples aren't sent off. The county can't afford quarterly drug tests for its employees, so… after the first one, they're really just to keep people on their toes," says the principal in response, admitting to the excessive surveillance of the employees at the school (21:28). She smiles understandingly and adds: "Listen, everybody smokes weed. The system isn't made for these kids to succeed and you got to shake it off somehow. I get it" (21:41). Vanessa lets out a sigh of relief. However, the principal continues: "But unfortunately, you have admitted the use of an illegal substance to a superior so… I've got to fire you. To cover my own ass as well as the school's. You understand" (21:53). Though she is aware of that Vanessa's consumption of the illegal substance does not negatively affect her merits as a

teacher, and though she admits to using the substance herself by stating that "everybody smokes weed," the principal must simply let Vanessa go because of the rigid bureaucratic rules. However, the principal must also protect herself from potential lawsuits by being able to show that she would not let anyone who uses illegal drugs to work with the children. Because of the way that neoliberalist policies have caused a large decline in unions (and other institutions that can protect workers), civil litigations have become the only way for people to handle conflict in the US. This has placed parents in the role of customers in relation to schools, causing them to have immense power over the schools and their employees. As customers, parents can sue schools, and have teachers fired if they are not happy with them, which is why the principal, in addition to following bureaucratic rules, must fire Vanessa to "cover [her] own ass as well as the school's." The principal, though she has just fired her, gives Vanessa a hug in a familiar manner, intended to console her. The principal perfectly epitomizes Fisher's notion of bureaucratic libido, a structure of disavowal of responsibility inherent to bureaucracy: "it's not me, I'm afraid, it's the regulations" (*CR* 49).

Vanessa must then continue her work day. In a shot of Vanessa at the desk in the front of the classroom where she is to teach, there is a sign in the background saying "no voices," instructing the students to be quiet; but it also points to the fact that teachers, though they are arguably the most important part of an educational institution, are voiceless. The business ontology of worker obedience and compliance has taken over society in general, and schools in particular. The absurdity of Vanessa's fate is further highlighted as she notices Tobias in the back of the classroom. Funky and humorous music plays as the camera, in three cuts, pans closer to the student's face, still in white makeup, smiling and looking straight at Vanessa mischievously. The boy creates a surreal image, highlighting both the contradictory conditions for teachers at work in the US, and exposing the absurdity of the capitalist bureaucracy which has become a goal in itself. "It does not seem fanciful to see parallels between the rising incidence of mental distress and new patterns of assessing workers' performance," writes Fisher (37-38). Losing her job as a teacher causes Vanessa to launch into a personal crisis; but considering Fisher's words, we can assume that the conditions of her work have affected her mental health for a long time.

4.2. Identity and Capitalism: Vanessa's "Identity Crisis"

In *Capitalism and Identity* (2014), Marie Moran argues that the idea of "identity," as we know it today, is inherently intertwined with the cultural political economy of capitalist societies. Importantly, Moran argues that "personal identity" only emerged with consumer society. She

writes, "the idea of personal identity, as much as the very practice of defining, building or marking one's identity, did not precede the emergence of consumption as a means of doing so, but developed alongside it" (128). Frankfurt School theorists have argued that consumer culture encourages people to determine and define their desires, interests, and identities through commodities, and thereby it integrates them within an exploitative system (Moran 129). In *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Marcuse claims that "people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment" (qtd. in Moran 133). The "mass culture," that Marcuse and the Frankfurt School theorized and criticized, warranted an immense expansion of personal consumption required by capitalism in a way that fundamentally changed people's sense of self and their relation to others (Moran 133). People were encouraged to see themselves in terms of what they consumed and to perceive a sense of personal worth from commodities, and this consumption was additionally made attractive "by promising diversity, novelty and difference, thereby enabling people to distinguish themselves from – but also associate themselves with – significant others" (Moran 133). The idea of identity as it occurred in the first half of the twentieth century "offered a useful way of asserting both similarity with and difference from others via practices of emulation and distinction in the 'mass society'," writes Moran, "effectively displacing class differences onto cultural domain" (10). The way people identified themselves through consumption was now a more significant marker of who you are than traditional class markers.

Once people were told they "have" an identity, they were motivated to try to find it. However, in a globalized, post-modern context, individuals are not free to be completely unique, but are rather invited to choose an identity from "a set of prefabricated available identities," an incentive more profitable and manageable within mass production than a unique, individual identity would be (Moran 144). Due to this, the individual can "create" an identity that does not need to be associated with location or tradition; and this form of identity construction, in turn, benefits corporations, allowing for a replicable and mass-produced set of consumer items to be sold to a *global* market (Moran 144). This wide range of choices makes "finding" or "constructing" one's identity more difficult, and there is more pressure on the individual to "make the right choice;" significantly, it is not a voluntary choice, but one we are forced to make (Moran 149). A personal identity is, according to Moran, "reconstructed as a necessary asset which needs to be worked on and marketed in order to achieve some modicum of security and respect" (151). Additionally, Moran points to how "self-branding" is presented as the only viable response to the instability of both work and life in post-Fordist societies (151).

The relation between identity and consumption complements the neoliberal market as organic and responsive to "authentic" choices made by consumers (Moran 152). "This has promoted a presentation of the free market as a deeply attractive and just system," Moran argues, "and encouraged a faith in the power of individualistic market forces to shape the good life, specifically through consumption" (152). In this sense, the idea of identity is a way to obscure social class inequalities, and an important mechanism for capitalist legitimation (152).

After having been fired, we experience Vanessa's first struggle with her identity in "Juneteenth." Vanessa brings Earn to an absurd celebration of Juneteenth, a day commemorating the ending of slavery in the US. The drinks have names like "Plantation Master Poison" ("Juneteenth" 5:43), the food is served in mini-slave ships, and the white husband of the hostess has "black people as a hobby" (15:37). Vanessa wants to attend the party to make connections that could benefit her career. She tells Earn, "Monique is really good for me. She knows people and they're all gonna be there. […] It's also good for Lottie" (2:41). "Why else do you think I'd be here," answers Earn, showing that he is also aware of the impact certain connections can have for his daughter's future (2:57). However, Earn quickly realizes that he does not like being at this party, and he starts complaining to Vanessa about the people there. She responds: "Do you think I'm happy having to prostitute myself for an opportunity?" […] "can we for once just pretend that we aren't who we are?" (10:01). Vanessa knows that she must hide her "true" identity to avoid judgment from people based on her social class. To form connections with the wealthy hostess and the influential guests of the party, Earn and Vanessa then pretend to be a perfect couple interested in things such as theatre, "Lottie's cello recitals" and "volunteering for at-risk Filipino youth" (12:16), where Earn is a "fancy ivy-league husband," rather than a rap manager (6:40). Vanessa is trying to hide parts of her identity, and invent new parts, in order to obscure her social background, all in an effort acquire wealth and make influential connections, so that she can succeed in capitalist society. Due to the juxtaposition of the realism and absurdity, the reality of social hierarchy and its violence are critiqued.

In "Helen," the identity struggle continues for Vanessa. At the "fastnacht," Vanessa's friend introduces her to people as "Lottie's mom" and "Earn's girl" ("Helen" 13:37, 13:57); and as she is asked what she does for work, she struggles to answer. "She used to be a teacher," explains her friend, demonstrating how important Vanessa's job was for her identity, and, consequently, how devastating it is for her to lose it (14:19). However, she confronts her friend: "I don't know why you have to introduce me as Lottie's mom. You know my first name. That's

not all that I'm going to be for the rest of my life" (14:46). Her friend answers, "Of course, I know that, but… you make that shit look good, like… it's different for you" (14:55). The two get into an argument about their bi-racial identities, and Vanessa finds that her friend looks down on her for having embraced her black identity more than the friend: "you literally just told me I'm gonna be a baby moma and that's okay because I chose black" (16:21). This interaction displays how Vanessa has had to struggle with identity throughout her life because of her background, and highlights how it is more difficult to navigate the question of identity for minorities in the US. The setting of the Bavarian-looking village Helen also stresses the complexities in Vanessa's identity and background.

Throughout the episode, there is an uncanny presence of masked figures. The slightly uncanny becomes more horror-esque, and eventually surreal, as the party goes out to look for Vanessa's phone that has been taken from her in a traditional scavenger hunt game. As they walk around outside, Vanessa leaves the group to relieve herself in a more private place. As she is alone in an alleyway, she hears a glass bottle moving on the asphalt. She calls out "hello?" but no one answers, and she is visibly uncomfortable in the darkness (19:01). Through the increased loudness of the cicadas in the background, the setting makes the silence and darkness starker. Vanessa continues to announce her presence and invites a response, but she receives no answer. We suddenly hear a faint laugh and noises indicating someone moving about in the background. Vanessa stops to look around for whoever is there in the darkness, and a large, masked figure rises from a dumpster behind her. The figure, a fantastical version of a horned animal, is cooly lit in the dark, its eyes gleaming and its teeth accentuated in the light. There is a high-pitched, electric noise in the background, and the sound of breathing comes from the figure. What seemed like a harmless, smiling, stuffed animal-like mask earlier in the evening, is now a disturbing, uncanny sight. Vanessa turns around and sees the figure, and, out of fear, strikes it in the face. She hears a buzzing and looks down in the dumpster where the figure is now lying to find her phone next to the great mask. The mask is bloodied, and surreally, the person who would have worn the costume, is nowhere to be seen. Vanessa's phone buzzed with a text from Earn saying "we should talk," and the two decide to end their relationship later in the episode (20:05). The break-up further contributes to Vanessa's poor mental health, and the uncanny aesthetic of the episode highlights the horror of ending a relationship. However, this uncanny surreal moment also indicates a shift in tone for Vanessa's arc, which from now on will become increasingly serious, and points to the horror of her future mental distress.

In "Champagne Papi," Vanessa is trying desperately to get a picture with the rapper and singer Drake, while at a New Year's Eve party in his Atlanta home, to post on social media.

Moran points to social media as an important factor in how people create, curate, and display identity today (146). Using the example of Facebook, which was most popular at the time of the publication of *Identity and Capitalism*, Moran describes the way in which the platform makes people define their identity online: "People choose and change the 'profile' they present as often as they like, yet at the same time build up a consistent, recognizable 'personal identity' as they emphasize a continuity of 'likes' and 'events', and a network of 'friends' on their personal 'page'" (146). Moran argues that "Facebook, and social media in general, uses the idea of identity to make people reveal their preferences in a "highly visible, personal performance project" (146). As we are all now aware, the platforms sell this information to corporations that use it to create and curate targeted ads for our social media feeds. Moran notes that Facebook encapsulates the contradictions of a "postmodern identity:" "personally 'constructed', 'changeable', and even 'multiple', it nonetheless registers the continuity of a particular self-as-actor, and facilitates processes of distinction and emulation, all the while contributing spectacularly to the corporate capitalist accumulation of wealth" (146). When this episode aired in early 2018, Instagram had taken over as the more popular social media among young Americans, and its business model emulates that of Facebook. However, on Instagram, users are invited to *create* their own identity to a much larger extent by posting their own pictures, rather than simply liking or sharing things that other people can also like and share. In this way, Instagram offers a platform where the user can form and curate an even more "unique" identity, thereby accelerating the pressure of displaying an online identity.

"I need a photo with Drake because my Instagram is weak as fuck," says Vanessa early in the episode, highlighting that her Instagram profile is an important aspect of how she displays her identity ("Champagne Papi" 2:25). She even "sells" herself; the profile can be considered "weak" depending on what pictures she posts. Because Vanessa is looking at Earn's Instagram throughout the episode, we are to assume that her desire to post a picture with Drake is based on a need to project her online identity in relation to Earn. Either she wishes to make Earn jealous, or she wants to show others that she has moved on from their breakup. Vanessa's posted pictures on social media are not isolated events; by posting pictures, she is behaving and performing in response to or in anticipation of what other users may think of her. This pattern shows that her use of social media is *more* related to identity construction than to her own pleasure or interest. However, through accidentally meeting (the *Atlanta* universe's version of) Drake's Mexican grandfather (and to the viewer, a surreal version, as Drake is not Mexican in reality), Vanessa finds out that Drake is not at the party at all. After this, she finds a room in the house where two women are allowing guests to take pictures with cardboard

cutouts of Drake for money: “we got 20 dollars per selfie, it’ll get you 10,000 followers guaranteed,” they tell Vanessa (23:32). She asks them, “You’re telling me these girls have been posting fake photos on Instagram all night?” (23:42). They answer her, “They real to everyone else,” and Vanessa walks away without a picture (23:46). What is on social media is presented to Vanessa as potentially more important than what is actually real.

Vanessa then finds one of the friends she came to the party with, and Darius, who has convinced the friend that life is a simulation. “It’s all fake,” the friend says, pointing to Darius’s simulation theory, to which Vanessa responds “you’re right, it’s all fake,” instead referring to both that she had come to the party on false pretenses, and that the pictures everyone had been posting of the rapper on Instagram were staged (25:22). Vanessa seems to have recognized the problematic implications that social media does not mirror reality but creates a new, idealized one. The episode realistically dramatizes the importance of having and curating an identity online in contemporary society, and that this identity is perhaps even more intertwined with capitalism, as it forces us to create a marketable version of ourselves online. The choices we make are now more public, and therefore more important, in that we are “marketing” ourselves to a group of people much larger than the people we actually see and interact with daily (technically the whole world). Due to the fact that we now must choose an identity, which can be unrelated to traditional bonds and which must be both unique and uncontroversial, out of all the options in the world, it is more difficult *and* important to select “the right one.” Significantly, Vanessa realizing that “it’s all fake” is the last thing we see before she shows up in season three acting like a different version of herself. This shows us that the realization has had an impact on how she views the world and her place in it. It has contributed to the creation of Vanessa’s crisis.

4.3. Season Three: Vanessa’s Mental Distress

A large portion of *Capitalist Realism* is dedicated to mental illness and its relation to capitalist realism. In the 60s and 70s, radical theorists (such as Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, and Laing, for example) argued that extreme mental conditions were not natural but should be considered political categories (*CR* 19). Fisher builds on this and argues that we must now regard more common mental illnesses as political categories as well (19). “It is their very commonness which is the issue,” Fisher notes, and adds: “in Britain, depression is now the condition that is most treated by the NHS” (19).

In line with Oliver James’s arguments in his book *The Selfish Capitalist*, Fisher points to a likely correlation between high rates of mental illness and neoliberal capitalism (*CR* 19).

As rates of mental distress are much higher in countries like the USA, Britain, and Australia than in other countries - due to their having implemented selfish capitalism, i.e. neoliberalized policies and culture, without a substantial welfare state or labor protections - James argues that this capitalism is to blame (*CR* 36). Though we can agree that mental illnesses are "neurologically instantiated," Fisher writes, we must still determine what causes these neurological problems (37). Capitalist realism treats mental illnesses as if they were only a natural fact, and indeed treating them as "individual chemico-biological" problems has benefits for capitalism (*CR* 37). Fisher writes, "first, it reinforces Capital's drive towards atomistic individualization, [and] second, it provides an enormously lucrative market in which multinational pharmaceutical companies can peddle their pharmaceuticals" (37). By making mental distress a private and individual problem, and by treating it as if it is caused only by chemical imbalance or other neurological and genetic problems, the question of whether there is a larger social systemic cause is completely ignored (*CR* 21). In this sense, mental health is "a paradigm case of how capitalist realism operates," Fisher argues (19). He writes, "[t]he 'mental health plague' in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional, and that the cost of it appearing to work is very high" (19).

In season three, it is slowly becoming evident that Vanessa is experiencing some form of mental distress through her unusual behavior. In "Sinterklaas is Coming to Town," Vanessa joins Earn, Alfred, and Darius as they are on tour in Amsterdam. After having lost a job for which she was a candidate, she decided to come to Europe to "figure it out," as she tells Darius, who picks her up from the airport ("Sinterklaas is Coming to Town" 11:19). The two set out to find Vanessa a jacket since the airline has lost her luggage, and in the vintage jacket she picks out she finds a note with an address on it. Vanessa and Darius follow the address and end up at a "death ceremony," where Vanessa connects with the calm and therapist-like death doula. She tells her that she has been experiencing panic attacks and that she is "pretty aimless right now" (21:41). The doula responds, "I think you're exactly where you're meant to be" (21:45). Vanessa smiles, and as viewers, we can detect a sign of relief in her expression. After all, Vanessa is feeling lost, but has just received a sign that she is on the right path from someone she trusts. However, the death ceremony turns out to be rather traumatic for Vanessa, as the man on the death bed is later choked to death with a plastic cover in a surreal and absurd form of euthanasia. While Vanessa and Darius are looking horrified as this happens, the other people

in the room act unphased. Significantly, after this episode is the point where Vanessa starts acting out of the ordinary.

Throughout the next episode, "The Old Man and the Tree," Vanessa is acting strange. After the group arrives at Fernando's house, Vanessa steals objects off the shelves. Earn notices and thinks she is not being herself: "She's been acting weird. I've been trying to keep an eye on her," he tells Alfred ("The Old Man and the Tree" 21:56). Later, she pushes strangers at the party into the pool while laughing to herself. Earn is worried about Vanessa's behavior and asks her about it, but she brushes it off and tells him "I'm just taking some time for myself" (26:04). In a scene in the middle of the credits, we see Vanessa sitting in a diner, ignoring calls from Earn. Vanessa then disappears, except from one text message to Earn in "Cancer Attack," and only reappears in the later episode "White Fashion." Here, Earn accidentally runs into Vanessa in a hotel lobby in London. He confronts her about having disappeared: "What the hell is wrong with you? Where have you been? […] It's been weeks… you give me a thumbs up emoji? Are you serious? […] you can't do that. Okay? You can't just disappear. Okay? We're parents. What if something had happened to you?" ("White Fashion" 16:32). The conversation is interrupted by a woman who enters the hotel lobby and accuses Vanessa of stealing. Through the mix-up (though it is later hinted that Vanessa might have stolen the wig in question after all), Earn and Vanessa receive a free night at the hotel. However, after having spent the night together, Earn wakes up to find that Vanessa has disappeared once again.

The last episode of season three, "Tarrare," follows only Vanessa's storyline. The episode opens with a scene of Vanessa's friend Candice sitting in a café in Paris with two of her friends. Candice sees Vanessa purchasing something in the butcher shop next door and goes to greet her. Candice and we as the viewers are equally surprised and confused when we see Vanessa with a new haircut and speaking English with a French accent, all while at first insisting that she does not recognize her old friend Candice. Vanessa is trying to be someone other than her usual self. After finally admitting she does in fact know Candice, Vanessa takes the three women to her home in Paris, where Candice is surprised to find out that she works as a model and has a partner named Marcel. The audience sees the new Vanessa through Candice's, obviously confused, eyes. Candice's sense that something is amiss is conveyed through long, slow shots and quiet, eerie sounds, as she moves through the apartment. She tries to confront Vanessa about her behavior, but it is clear that Vanessa wants to avoid the topic.

Vanessa takes them to see Alexander Skarsgård (playing a surreal version of himself), with whom, it is implied, she has a sexual relationship. While Alexander is distracted, Vanessa

leaves illegal drugs in his hotel room and then tells the receptionist desperately to "call the police or *securité* or someone!", playing a cruel prank on him ("Tarrare" 8:40). The other women are shocked, but Vanessa assures them: "It is just our little game, you know. We do it like every week. It is so totally fine. It's like our little devil dance, you know" (9:09). Candice is confounded; she does not recognize her friend's behavior.

The group then goes to the outskirts of Paris where Vanessa is planning to pick up a package that turns out to be missing. While there, people call out "Tarrare" from windows, seemingly warning the neighborhood about Vanessa's presence. The group notices that the tires on their scooters have been sabotaged, and suddenly they are approached by a group of three men. Through tense music, it is made evident that these men are potentially dangerous. One of them calls Vanessa "Tarrare" again, which Vanessa explains to the other women means "the man who ate the baby" (11:46).[9] The men are distracted by a fight breaking out, however, and the four women get a chance to escape. This parody of an action film continues when they arrive at a museum, where Vanessa confronts Emilio, the man responsible for the missing package, by brutally abusing him with a stale baguette. Vanessa's behavior is becoming more and more strange to Candice - and to the audience.

Having retrieved the missing package from Emilio, the group then goes to a dinner party. As Vanessa starts working in the kitchen with Marcel, Candice decides to finally confront her. "You're done making me feel like I'm crazy. Okay?" says Candice, "cause today was nowhere near normal, Van" (20:24). The two get into an argument, at the end of which Canice notices that they are in fact preparing hands in the kitchen; and she realizes the package from earlier contained a hand and that Vanessa wanted it so desperately that she brutally abused a man for it. The two calm down, and Candice asks Vanessa about her old life and what her plans are. "And Lottie?" Candice asks, "Where does she fit into all this?" (24:09). "I'm going to, uh… bring her here… with me," Vanessa answers, trembling (24:22). As Candice says "uh… to eat hands?" however, Vanessa is taken aback (24:30). She looks around as if just realizing where she is and what she has been doing. Vanessa starts crying, and eventually throws plates and screams in panic. The cinematography highlights Vanessa's panic with hand-held, shaky, and fast-paced camera shots and cuts. She hyperventilates, saying, now in her normal accent, "I want to see Lottie" and "Where is Lottie?" (26:13).

[9] Tarrare (c. 1772-1798) was a French soldier and showman who became known for his great and unusual appetite. He is rumored to have resorted to cannibalism while doctors were trying to keep him on a controlled diet in an attempt to cure his condition (Bondeson 2000).

We get an explanation for Vanessa's behavior as she later, looking and sounding like her usual self, tells Candice that she has "been feeling really off for a while" (26:32). She tells her friend that it started when she had suicidal thoughts: "Couple of weeks ago I was driving in Atlanta and this dark feeling came over me. I… uh… I closed my eyes. I closed my eyes while I was driving. And then I got… got scared, so I opened my eyes, and I was in the opposite lane. And once I realized what I was doing, I just cried all the way home" (26:47). Vanessa confesses to Candice that she thought she was a terrible mom: "When I picked Lottie up from school, I just… I felt like she was looking at me like… like she knew what happened, and that she hated me for it. That I would do that to her" (27:52). She explains how she decided to leave Lottie with her mother and fly to Europe. She tells Candice that she came to Paris to try to be someone else, and we are again reminded that Vanessa's mental distress largely stems from the feeling that she lacks an identity. "I don't even know who I am," she says, crying, "You know who you are. Earn knows who he is. Lottie knows who she is. But who the fuck am I? I don't even know" (29:17).

Vanessa's storyline becomes even more surreal and inexplicable here as she says she was in Atlanta just "a couple of weeks ago" (26:47), though the various partners and careers she has in Paris make it seem like she has been there for a much longer time. In season three, Vanessa has in fact become the entity that creates the surreal moments, for the other characters and the viewers, rather than the one to whom surreal things happen. In "Tarrare" this is especially clear, as the character Candice functions as an outside perspective on Vanessa and, in turn, a viewer surrogate. We as viewers see Vanessa as Candice does; we have the same information about Vanessa's inner life, and are equally confused and shocked by her behavior as Candice is. Because of the confusion the episode creates through Vanessa's actions, the viewer is invited to contemplate what has caused the character's change. As Vanessa explains herself to Candice (and ultimately the viewer), we are able to piece together that Vanessa's mental distress arises from the pressures of capitalist society. The pain and hardship she endured showcase how capitalism affects people's inner lives. Vanessa has paid the high price of capitalist realism, forced to accede to its demands and embody its worst effects. Through the character's arc, the dysfunctional relationship between capitalist realism and the real and dangerous causes of mental distress is exposed.

As viewers, we do not get to see how Vanessa's issues are resolved, but in season four, she appears to be in better health. Though her mental state is better, however, she still struggles with navigating work and her identity. As can be seen in "Work Ethic!", Vanessa still does not have a steady job, and must take up precarious work for "a quick way to make some good

money" (5:29), mirroring Fisher's argument that in capitalist realism "you must learn to live in conditions of total instability" where you are "unable to plan for the future" (*CR* 34).

As argued in chapter two, the family is an important relief from the pressures of the world, and romantic partners are often the only source of "affective consolation" today (33). This is also true for Vanessa and Earn, as is demonstrated in "Snipe Hunt." However, Vanessa is still trying to find her own identity apart from being the mother of Earn's child. Vanessa is hesitant as Earn asks her and Lottie to move to Los Angeles with him. He asks her, "What's so great about Atlanta… that you can't leave it behind?" ("Snipe Hunt" 17:21), to which she replies: "I'm afraid that… it's about you not wanting to be alone when you go there, that you're scared of that. And I'm… not just your security blanket" (17:39). The two end up deciding to get back together after Earn pleas to Vanessa, "I want us to be a family" (22:57). Vanessa, like Earn, seems to understand that she needs Earn and Lottie for relief and consolation. Though Vanessa's and Earn's ending is a happy one, there is an uncanny aesthetic in this episode that conveys an unsettling feeling through long, quiet shots of the forest in a cool filter, as well as the surreal and uncanny presence of the "snipe," which gestures towards a possible future downfall for the two as a couple. Though Vanessa can possibly find consolation in her family life and romantic relationship, *Atlanta* has shown us that the aspects which caused her mental distress are still present in her life, since they are a part of the society in which she is forced to participate. The bittersweet ending hints at how inescapable neoliberal society's negative traits are made by capitalist realism.

Conclusion

Atlanta is a complex and intricate TV series. It is a portrait of a particular time and place, while at the same time commenting on larger and more universal topics. It has stand-alone episodes that act as short films that are able to engage with questions that the main narrative would have not lent itself to. Through never explaining jokes or references, *Atlanta* makes the viewer who understands these feel that they are part of the reality depicted. The cinematography of the series is excellent and precise, and the music choices are always intentional and interesting. *Atlanta* takes inspiration from high art as well as internet culture, and it satirizes both TV advertising and police brutality. It takes a daring and innovative approach to jokes, form, dialogue, character development, and more. Finally, the surrealism makes it stand out and contributes to its uniqueness. Looking at all of the above-mentioned factors, there is much, much more that can be said about *Atlanta* which could not fit in the scope of this Master's thesis. However, one thing always present in the series, and which therefore stood out to me when I first watched it, was the depiction of capitalist America, especially in the arcs of the main characters.

By using Fisher's framework, I could analyze how *Atlanta* realistically depicts late-stage capitalism and the capitalist realism that so intrusively affects our lives. Earn's plotline is a poignant representation of how capitalist realism ensconces us in neoliberal ideology from a young age, and of how people must adapt to this ideology to reach any level of success. At the end of Earn's narrative, it is evident that the pressures from capitalist society have made him miserable in many ways. In Alfred's story, we can see how the rapper and capitalist realism are intertwined. Growing out of a time and place where at the same time capitalist realism was becoming established, hip-hop was always connected to the capitalist realist idea that there is no alternative to how society is structured, which is evident in how hip-hop premiers responding to capitalism's injustices with a violent "hustler" mindset. This is an interesting and important aspect of culture, as hip-hop is one of the most popular genres today in the USA. What can hip-hop tell us about capitalist realism and how it affects the culture we consume? What types of capitalist realist messages are conveyed to listeners? Importantly, Alfred's arc conveys an honest image of the violence inflicted upon a black American who, due to the brutality of capitalism, has no choice but to become the rapper persona Paper Boi. Vanessa's narrative offers a presentation of how bureaucracy, education, and mental health are all informed by capitalist realism. More specifically, it is also a portrait of how capitalism makes us believe that we need an identity and an "authentic self" to feel accomplished, reach goals,

and simply fit in. This is false, and identity is more complex than what large corporations, whose aim it is to sell us things for us to convey this identity with, make us believe. Today's identity politics, where the individual is in focus more so than the collective, makes it more difficult to discuss the common, collective experience of capitalism, which makes the problems in Vanessa's life even more puzzling, alienating, and thus also difficult to combat.

The slang term "real" or "realest" comes from popular culture and hip-hop, so it is only appropriate that *Atlanta*, so influenced by both currents, is described as such. Its raw realism can be compared to that of *The Wire* (creator David Simon, 2002-2008), another series that does not shy away from depicting racism, poverty, and the violence of capitalist society. However, Fisher would argue that *The Wire* is filled with ideology and that it is rather capitalist realist in form, much like hip-hop, as discussed above. While *The Sopranos* used surrealism to explore the subconscious of a mafia boss, and *Twin Peaks* utilized it to create a postmodern supernatural fantasy of a small town, *Atlanta* took inspiration from these earlier series and created something very new to TV. *Atlanta* combined the realism of *The Wire* with surrealism not to dig deeper into the subconscious of its characters, or to create a partly supernatural world, but to get beyond the ideology usually represented with such realism.

Amiri Barakas's words which came to define Afro-surrealism can be applied to *Atlanta*, not only because the series is Afro-surreal, but also because the ideas of Afro-surrealism can be utilized to highlight and even criticize other aspects of society that are fundamentally surreal. *Atlanta*, with both its surreal elements and its depiction of capitalist realism, poses meaningful questions about the reality that we inhabit. In the world of the series, the relationship between real and unreal is complicated, and the series refuses to let us see its representation of the world as a simple ideological narrative. Through the use of surrealism, the show not only demonstrates the everyday absurdity of a racially unequal society, but also accentuates the unreal, absurd, and horrific aspects of capitalist realism by highlighting, for characters as well as viewers, that something is wrong in the world that it depicts. With this analysis, I have shown that the surrealism contributes to making the reality depicted more authentic through that it highlights that this reality, capitalist reality, is flawed, absurd, violent, and senseless. *Atlanta* can, with its surreal aspects, showcase a reality that cannot be captured through realism alone.

What about Darius? As mentioned in the introduction, he does not have the same function as the three other characters in the series. He often works as a comic relief, but he is also a figure that questions reality. Darius is outside the main plots of the other characters because he does not have his own goals: he does not work, he does not want to become a rapper, and he does not have his own interests or side characters as the others do, but seems to simply

follow Alfred along on his journey. Because of his (in relation to the others) "outsider" status, Darius's purpose is not to tell a story, but to take the viewer by the hand and guide them to questioning the reality in the series. *Atlanta* would have been surreal without Darius, but the character enhances the surrealism by playing an interesting and important part in creating a space where reality can be questioned, due to that he himself questions it. Darius thereby guides the viewer to be more skeptical of the reality that is portrayed.

In forums online, viewers have discussed what is real and not in the series, considering whether the surreal occurrences take place in the real world of *Atlanta*, or whether they take place in Earn's dreams; and perhaps Glover and his team wrote the last episode of the series, named "It Was All a Dream," as a response to this speculation. Here, Darius plays a crucial role in how the series ends. In an ambiguous, *The Sopranos*-like, ending, we never find out whether Darius is still in the floating tank, and whether he has perhaps been in there this whole time. Is this the writers' way of explaining the strange things that have happened in the world of *Atlanta*, that the whole series takes place in Darius's mind inside the tank? Maybe. Importantly though, the world depicted is highly realistic, and even if the explanation for the surrealism would lie in that the world depicted was not "reality" to begin with, it does not take away from the experience for the viewer. Namely that the world depicted looks and functions completely like our own, and that there is a pervading sense that this world, a world exactly like the one we inhabit, is flawed.

As discussed above, surrealism is no longer the revolutionary, avant-garde aesthetic or art movement it once was. Due to commercialization and integration into the canon of Western art, it is no longer as shocking as it was meant to be, and the movement's ideas are no longer as potent as they once were. I started this project with the question of whether *Atlanta*, and such art in general, could be considered as possessing any revolutionary potential – can art today *do* something to change the world? Reading *Capitalist Realism*, the answer seems to be negative: modernism no longer has any revolutionary potential, moral critique of capitalism only reinforces it, and ironic distance and monetary value strip any cultural object of its original context and meaning. Because capitalism is "realism it itself," it can essentially not be threatened by simply pointing to its flaws, it can only be threatened if its apparent realism is shown to be false. However, Fisher's later writings have a more positive tone in relation to this. In *Acid Communism*, he argued that a socialist-feminist class consciousness could be achieved through a psychedelic aestheticization of life. *Atlanta* cannot be said to be a socialist-feminist class consciousness-raising work, but it could perhaps be argued that it holds fragments of psychedelic qualities in its innovative use of surrealism.

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Appendix

Abstract

This thesis examines the TV series *Atlanta* (creator Donald Glover, 2016-2022), which many have described as both surreal and "the realest thing on TV." What makes audiences describe it as surreal and "real" simultaneously? Through investigating the arcs of the three main characters, I find that the series realistically depicts not only a capitalist US-American society and the people inhabiting this space and time, but capitalist realism: the notion that there are now no imaginable alternatives to capitalism, and that this informs our thoughts, behaviors, and even the way we live our lives. However, *Atlanta* also uses surrealism to indicate that something is not quite right in the society it is depicting so realistically. By analyzing both the content and form of the series, I conclude that *Atlanta*, through the juxtaposition of capitalist realism and the surrealist aesthetic, gestures towards the violence, absurdity, and senselessness of capitalism. *Atlanta* thereby creates an authentic representation of life in contemporary America, articulating truths with its non-realistic aspects, that cannot be captured by a realist mode only.

Zusammenfassung

Diese Arbeit untersucht die Fernsehserie *Atlanta* (Schöpfer Donald Glover, 2016–2022), die von ihrem Publikum sowohl als surreal als auch als „das Realste im Fernsehen" beschrieben wird. Was bringt den Zuschauer dazu, sie gleichzeitig als surreal und „real" zu beschreiben? Durch die Untersuchung der Handlungsstränge der drei Hauptfiguren stelle ich fest, dass die Serie nicht nur eine kapitalistische US-amerikanische Gesellschaft und die Menschen, die diesen Raum zu dieser Zeit bewohnen, realistisch darstellt, sondern auch den kapitalistischen Realismus: die Auffassung, dass es heute keine vorstellbaren Alternativen zum Kapitalismus gibt und dass dies Gedanken, Verhalten und sogar Lebensweise beeinflusst. *Atlanta* verwendet jedoch Surrealismus, um zu verdeutlichen, dass in der Gesellschaft, die so realistisch dargestellt wird, etwas nicht stimmt. Durch die Analyse von Inhalt und Form der Serie wird deutlich, dass *Atlanta* durch die Gegenüberstellung von kapitalistischem Realismus und surrealistischer Ästhetik auf die Gewalt, Absurdität und Sinnlosigkeit des Kapitalismus hinweist. Die Serie schafft so eine authentische Repräsentation des Lebens im heutigen Amerika und vermittelt Wahrheiten, die durch rein realistische Darstellungen nicht erfasst werden könnten.