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TIME/AFTER-TIME: MODES OF '80s NOSTALGIA

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Abstract:

The recent boom in representations of the 1980s is plainly evident in visual media, where television series like *The Goldbergs*, *The Americans*, and *Stranger Things* and films like *It: Chapter One*, *Everybody Wants Some!!*, and *Wonder Woman 1984* use the 1980s as both a narrative setting and a marketing device. The cultural meanings of this style of mass-memory have been categorized into a variety of “flavors” by film scholars. Texts that represent the '80s as a carefree time of affluent frivolity—one of the most common “tropes” in '80s nostalgia—indulge, for all of their upbeat zaniness, in “melancholic” or “reflective” nostalgia. Instances of “restorative” nostalgia can also be identified in representations of the '80s, most notably in the novel *Ready Player One* and its film adaptation, as well as in films like *Son of Rambow* and *Turbo Kid*. Brett Easton Ellis’s 1991 novel, *American Psycho*, along with its 2000 film adaptation, epitomizes the anti-nostalgic representation of the 1980s, as does Ellis’ more recent novel, *The Informers*, and its 2008 adaptation. Much more common in recent filmic and television representations than Ellis’ strident anti-nostalgic stance, however, is a “deconstructive” approach that acknowledges and solicits the appeal of '80s nostalgia, while also articulating a warning against the lure of this appeal. This is the dominant style of nostalgia that animates recent popular texts such as *Stranger Things*, *GLOW*, *Cobra Kai*, *The Americans*, and *Wonder Woman 1984*, and indeed, it may be a style of representation that differentiates '80s nostalgia definitively from former nostalgic cycles centered around the 1920s, '50s, '60s, and '70s.

The recent boom in representations of the 1980s is plainly evident in popular media, where television series like *The Goldbergs* (2013-present), *The Americans* (2013-2018), and *Stranger Things* (2016-present) and films like *It: Chapter One* (2017), *Everybody Wants Some!!* (2016), and *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020) use the 1980s as both a narrative setting and a marketing device. The retro-'80s revival is also manifested in the numerous “re-boots” of franchises associated with the 1980s, including *Star Wars*, *Rocky*, *Ghostbusters*, *Tron*, *The Baby-Sitters Club*, and *The Masters of the Universe*. Cultural commentators have attempted to explain this upsurge of interest in the 1980s in online articles with titles like “Why are we obsessed with the 1980s?” (Chaney),

“Why Retro 80s Nostalgia rules pop culture” (Ryan), “Why do we love the 80s so much?” (*Newsweek*), and “Why 1980s nostalgia is everlasting” (The 2000s). Such articles commonly refer to some version of “the 40-year nostalgia cycle,” a notion popularized by Adam Gopnik in 2012 that every age is nostalgic for the period four decades ago as a result of the desire of middle-aged artists and audiences to revisit their childhoods. The 2016 article points out an ostensible pattern according to which ’50s nostalgia was big in the ’70s, ’60s nostalgia prevailed in the ’80s, ’70s nostalgia sprung up in the ’90s, and now (although there is a distinct wrinkle in the pattern at this point), the retro-’80s have “emerged like clockwork, right on America’s usual nostalgia schedule” (Chaney). The 40-year cycle also includes 15-year and 20-year variants, as well as other models, but this “cyclical” theory of pop-cultural trends has the effect of emptying out the content of “nostalgic” texts to focus on the mere fact of their nostalgic value. In describing nostalgia as part of an inevitable and value-neutral “cycle,” this theory defuses any more profound cultural “work” that representations of the past might do for audiences in the present. If anything, the cycle theory itself suggests a nostalgia for a Newtonian universe where history is governed by supra-human laws and patterns. The cycle theory of nostalgia has this in common with the ubiquitous pop-historiographical phenomenon of reifying “the decade” as a historical period, which also has the effect of representing history as a modular sequence of value-neutral units. The result is that, although the proliferation of contemporary fictional representations of the 1980s has been frequently discussed, these discussions typically arrive at the reductionist conclusion that this wave is simply an expression of an impersonal trend, a kind of ripple-effect in the space-time of consumer culture.

The theory of nostalgic cycles, moreover, simplifies the meaning of nostalgia itself. If cycles of nostalgia come and go for reasons that have nothing to do with the “content” of the nostalgic representations, it follows that nostalgia itself must be a relatively harmless, ephemeral caprice, a standardized kind of “guilty pleasure” in returning to icons of childhood. Correspondingly, much of the pop-commentary about the retro-’80s trend also shares a consensus that nostalgia is “comfort food to nurse our existential crises” (*Newsweek*). Writing in 1977, Marc Le Sueur criticized this same tendency to oversimplify the nature of nostalgia when he insists that “to categorize all nostalgia as ‘escapist’ as is so commonly done, avoids the very important social effects achieved by this sensibility” (188). While nostalgia, Le Sueur concedes, can manifest itself as an escapist fantasy, it also reveals and solicits more nuanced and engaged relationships with the

past and the present. Like Le Sueur, Svetlana Boym, in 2001's *The Future of Nostalgia*, investigates the paradoxical longings and impulses that characterize nostalgia, cautioning that "Nostalgia speaks in riddles and puzzles, so one must face them in order not to become its next victim – or its next victimizer" (xvii). Their willingness to take nostalgia seriously leads both cultural critics to discriminate between different modes of nostalgic expression. The main distinction that Le Sueur and Boym identify is between what can broadly be described as personal and political modes of nostalgia. Le Sueur called the personal mode of nostalgia the "melancholic" mode, the "unprogrammable, wistful mode." "Proponents of this mode," Le Sueur writes, "intend no major criticism of society nor do they desire revolutionary action" (189). Le Sueur's "melancholic" nostalgia coincides with the mode of nostalgia that Boym calls "reflective," a mode that is "ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary" (50). "Reflective nostalgia," Boym explains, "does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home" (50), although, distinguishing her own position from Le Sueur's, she also suggests that "reflective nostalgia can present an ethical and creative challenge, not merely a pretext for midnight melancholias" (xviii). But both writers use the same term for the politicized mode of nostalgia: the "restorative mode." Nostalgia in the restorative mode, Boym writes, "characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in the anti-modern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths" (41), and Le Sueur writes that the restorative mode of nostalgia "at times plays a very aggressive role in society" (188). These two modes of nostalgia correspond roughly with Pickering and Keightley's differentiation between (again) "melancholic" and "utopian" forms of nostalgia (921), as well as with Freeman's distinction between "regressive" and "capacious" strands of nostalgia (92). Le Sueur identifies another mode of representing the past which he refers to as "anti-nostalgia," in which "the bloodstained past is studied only so that we may avoid similar mistakes." In a 2017 video essay, film critic Lindsay Ellis builds on the work of Le Sueur and Boym by proposing another category, "deconstructive nostalgia," in which nostalgic reminiscence intermingles with cultural critique of the nostalgized period. Kayleigh Donaldson (2018) suggests that it might also be helpful to consider the possibility of a "transformative" mode of nostalgia, in which nostalgic icons are revisited in ways that attempt to redeem the perceived sins of the past. Indeed, in these diverse formulations, the word "nostalgia" itself becomes redefined from a wistful longing for a vanished homeland to a "catch-all" term describing any attempt to reflect on the past. In his book about the prevalence of '50s nostalgia in the 1980s, Michael D. Dwyer challenges the

“too-simple” association between ’50s nostalgia and conservative politics with a more nuanced examination of “the ways that pop nostalgia for the Fifties was mobilized by those across the sociopolitical spectrum for diverse and sometimes competing ends” (17). Similarly, evaluating retro-’80s texts within the framework of this expanded taxonomy of nostalgic modes provides opportunities to look more closely at the ways in which nostalgic fantasies intermingle with political agendas, historical critiques, and constructions of contemporary subjectivity.

Reflective Nostalgia

Texts that represent the ’80s as a carefree time of affluent frivolity – one of the most common “tropes” in ’80s nostalgia – indulge, for all of their upbeat zaniness, in “melancholic” or “reflective” nostalgia. Like the idealized depictions of the Middle Ages in Pre-Raphaelite art, shows like *The Goldbergs* and *That 80s Show* (2002) and films like *200 Cigarettes* (1999), *Wet Hot American Summer* (2001), and *Everybody Wants Some!!* depict the ’80s as an enchanted landscape of familiar songs, catchphrases, and cultural references that suggests the uncomplicated connectedness of early childhood. In this reflective mode, the ’80s are for contemporary audiences what Jameson said the ’50s were for 1980s audiences: “the privileged lost object of desire” (19). Although the characters in these stories experience conflicts and disappointments, their stories are ultimately comic, save for the haunting sense that the world that gives them so much joy is doomed, and that their happy world is ultimately inaccessible to us.

The paradigmatic example of ’80s nostalgia in the reflective mode is certainly the long-running situation comedy, *The Goldbergs*. The introduction of the first episode defines the 1980s as the era of “E.T., Mr. T, and MTV,” establishing the ’80s as a heyday of consumer fads and fashions, while the phrase that introduces each episode, “It was 1980-something,” clarifies that the series is not set in the historical past, but rather in a nostalgic “80s-verse” that exists apart from social realities and politics, a place where references to early- and late-’80s pop-culture abound in an anachronistic swirl, but with no allusions to AIDS, economic inequality, or the Iran-Contra affair. Unlike other historical television series like *Mad Men* (2007-2015) or *The Americans*, *The Goldbergs* “does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home”; but rather opens up a wormhole into an alternative chronotope outside of any shared history. The plots of *The Goldbergs* are inspired by the home movies that writer Adam Goldberg filmed on the family camcorder back in the 1980s, and each episode begins with the image of a video tape being loaded into a VCR and

ends with clips from Goldberg's video archives. Whatever air of authenticity this conceit evokes is accompanied by a sense that video tape serves as a metaphor for selective, edited, and fictionalized memory. As a self-consciously fictionalized narrative genre, the genre of the family sit-com itself also conveys the sense that Goldberg's memory is shaped by the conventions and values of the '80s television shows that he watched as a child, suggesting a kind of Mobius relationship whereby self-consciously fictional texts become the template for "real" memories. Rather than critiquing this artificialized style of personal and cultural memory, however, *The Goldbergs* luxuriates in it. At the same time that the series depicts both the audience's and the writer's nostalgia for a "simpler" time, the plots of *The Goldbergs* typically revolve around the characters' own nostalgic longings. Sub-plots usually involve Adam's grandfather's attempts to recapture his lost youth and Adam's nostalgia for his preadolescence, while the driving characterological feature of Adam's mom, Beverly, the emotional center of *The Goldbergs*, is her unwillingness to admit that her children are growing up. Beverly's idealized memories of her children's baby days and her insistence on preserving her children in a state of sustained infantilization are typically validated by narrative events that punish the children's attempts to forge their own identities and vindicate her maternal dominance. The entire structure of *The Goldbergs* caters to an "escapist" style of nostalgia that stages a wish-fulfilling "return to the womb" fantasy, with the ahistorical uchronia of "the '80s" serving as the womb. This regressive momentum is articulated by the couplet that serves as *The Goldberg*'s theme song: "I'm twisted up inside but nonetheless I feel the urge to say / Can't see the future, but the past keeps getting clearer every day." The singer, presumably a stand-in for Goldberg as the show's narrator, explicitly casts the show's escape into the past as a solution to the distress of the present tense and the inscrutability of the future. The sustained success of *The Goldbergs* over nine seasons clearly derives from the shameless insistence with which it welcomes television audiences to indulge the "guilty pleasure" of reflective nostalgia.

This "melancholic" style of nostalgia is also epitomized by the '80s-based jukebox musicals *Rock of Ages* (2012) and *Valley Girl* (2020), both of which dramatize the sense in which the cultural memory of the 1980s often takes the form of a mixtape of familiar '80s rock and pop songs. In *Rock of Ages*, the center of nostalgic longing is the heavy metal music club, The Bourbon Room, dedicated to a style of music that, even by 1987 standards, is at least ten years past its prime, as the character played by Alec Baldwin personifies. It is also doomed, not by the Christian

protestors who want to close the club down for political reasons, but because of the more inimical influence represented by the Z Guyeez, the film's parody of the hip-hop style of music that would not only eclipse hair metal as a cultural influence, but which would also reveal by contrast the extent to which "classic rock" had become an enclave of white masculinity. The film audience is enjoined to identify with the characters who idealize the cultural world of The Bourbon Room, even as we recognize that it belongs definitively to the past. In *Valley Girl*, a framing device draws a contrast between Julie's memories of breaking spontaneously into musical dance numbers in the '80s and the much less colorful life led by her 21st-century daughter. The hint that Julie's daughter might be inspired to incorporate the life lessons her mom learned in the '80s to her own life in the present day suggests a tint of a "restorative" agenda, but the overall sense of the movie is that the '80s were a simpler time, when everyone loved the same songs, the storylines were all cliched, and the endings were always happy.

Restorative Nostalgia

A much more explicitly restorative style of nostalgia is suggested in other representations of the 1980s, most notably in Ernest Cline's 2011 novel, *Ready Player One* (2018), and its film adaptation. Cline's novel received widespread commercial success and critical acclaim with its tale of a dystopian future where an interactive virtual reality program known as the OASIS provides a literalization of a *Goldbergs*-ian fantasy of an "escape to the '80s-verse." For cultural critic Matthew Leggatt, the narrative of *Ready Player One* epitomizes his thesis that "today's culture is being shaped by a desire to escape the past" (4). Wade, the story's protagonist, explains in a *Goldbergs*-esque voiceover at the beginning of the film that "These days, reality's a bummer. Everybody's looking for a way to escape," and the OASIS presents them with an opportunity to port themselves into a simulated universe that is organized around nostalgic recreations of the video games, films, songs, TV shows, and other '80s juvenilia that were beloved by the simulation's creator, James Halliday. Like *The Goldbergs*, the most conspicuous motif of *Ready Player One*, its narratological center, is its consistent stream of '80s-related pop culture references, but whereas *The Goldbergs* and other works of reflective nostalgia are characterized by the melancholic sensibility that the '80s exists only as a memory, *Ready Player One* is animated by the magical prospect that the '80s lives on, and that it does so in a sort of vivid, phantasmagorical way that actually trumps the present for its persuasiveness, authenticity, and impact. The

motivation that drives the narrative of *Ready Player One* is Wade's quest to "save the '80s" from the corporate predations of IOI, allowing the simulated '80s-verse to exist in perpetuity as a true home for the deracinated denizens of the twenty-first century. The key to accomplishing the quest is to internalize the lifeworld, thought processes, and media preferences of the game's dead creator, to ensure that the OASIS will stay faithful to its retro-roots. Throughout the storyline, intimate familiarity with the ephemera of '80s nerd culture is elevated as the source of all wisdom and charisma, '80s mass-culture occupies the role of scripture and world literature, and fidelity to Halliday's original vision is the measure of human decency. Spielberg's film adaptation of the book illustrates the storyline's restorative agenda with its version of the first challenge, which it depicts as an action-packed auto race to an impossible finish line. When Halliday's colleague challenges his obsession with the past by insisting that "things move forward, whether you want them to or not," Halliday muses, "Why can't we go backwards for once?" This casual thought turns out to be the key to solving the first challenge – rather than racing his *Back to the Future*-style DeLorean forward toward the finish line, Wade throws it into reverse and travels backward through a secret tunnel to crack the clue, win the race, and affirm the value of "going backwards" as an existential strategy endorsed by Halliday in his role as the "god" of the narrative. While elements of *Ready Player One*'s plotline suggest a critique of the sense in which nostalgia inevitably denatures human being's ability to address problems in the present, the story invites its audiences is to disappear into the '80s simulation with the characters in a way that ultimately celebrates the twin values of virtual reality and nostalgia that the OASIS epitomizes. Although the book's protagonists make some hastily-discussed efforts to address problems in the real world, the story's heart is obviously in the '80s simulation. The characters' philanthropic efforts are abandoned at the end of Cline's 2020 sequel, *Ready Player Two*, when Wade and his friends make the decision to abandon the earth altogether in favor of existing as digital code in a computer onboard an interstellar spaceship. In so doing, they "restore" a simulacral version of the 1980s as a permanent utopia beyond Anthropocene despair.

An interesting parallel text is *Turbo Kid* (2015), which depicts an alternate timeline where the apocalypse has already occurred in 1997, and where the protagonist achieves power and independence through the appropriation of an '80s-style science-fiction gizmo, which allows him to uncannily remake himself as the son of a hero from an '80s comic. The device is simply the most uncanny of a number of ways that Turbo Kid draws on his affinity for '80s paraphernalia as

a source of empowerment and renewal amid a fallen present. *Son of Rambow* (2007) and *Raiders! the Story of the Greatest Fan Film Ever Made* (2015) are two films that deal with “restoring” the ’80s in two different ways, and with two different outcomes. In *Son of Rambow*, an imaginative British boy finds a source of inspiration in pirated VHS copies of *First Blood* (1982), and his efforts to recreate the cartoonish thrills of Rambo’s adventures provide an outlet for his creativity and become the basis for close friendships. The movie suggests that the action-oriented, high-concept aesthetic of popular ’80s movies can serve as an enduring model for self-understanding and artistic creation. In the documentary *Raiders!*, the teenagers who attempted to film a shot-for-shot remake of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) between 1982 and 1989 are motivated by the same spirit of self-expression and guerilla filmmaking that motivated the characters in *Son of Rambow*, but their attempts to recapture that energy as adults in 2014 are undermined by in-fighting, conflicting work-schedules, long-suffering spouses, and the other postlapsarian exigencies of adulthood. The friends’ attempts to restore the past devolve into reflective, melancholic wistfulness.

Anti-nostalgia

While both reflective and restorative modes of nostalgia present idealized representations of the past, Le Sueur, discussing the films of Arthur Penn and Robert Altman, identifies a contrarian or oppositional mode of representation, anti-nostalgia, in which “the bloodstained past is studied only so that we may avoid similar mistakes” (195). The genre of ’80s anti-nostalgia might be said to date back to the 1980s themselves, pioneered by films like *They Live* (1988) and *Heathers* (1988) and novels like *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984) and *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) that savagely satirized the spiritual emptiness and moral rudderlessness of Reagan-era culture. Brett Easton Ellis’s 1985 novel (and its 1987 film adaptation) *Less Than Zero* is a seminal text in this genre, and Ellis would go on to write the definitive masterpiece of ’80s anti-nostalgia with his 1991 novel, *American Psycho*. The character of Patrick Bateman personifies a nightmare critique of the ’80s as an era of soulless atrocity wrapped in a luxurious carapace. He is a grotesque caricature of the new breed of damned souls described in another classic work of ’80s anti-nostalgia, Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*: Patrick Bateman belongs to the cohort that one of Kushner’s characters describes as “Children of the new morning, criminal minds. Selfish and greedy and loveless and blind. Reagan’s children” (77). The parallelism between Bateman’s

career in “murders and executions” and his enthusiastic raves about the music of Huey Lewis and Phil Collins suggests that the ideal consumer of ’80s culture is an inhuman sociopath, and the running gag of Bateman’s uncanny indistinguishability from his yuppie colleagues suggests that he is not a lone eccentric, but a representative figure of his age. *American Psycho* constitutes a jeremiad against every facet of ’80s culture in a spirit that forecloses any possibility of nostalgia. Mary Harron’s 2000 film adaptation of *American Psycho*, released almost a decade after the publication of the book and exactly a decade after the end of the 1980s, is able to achieve a more distanced perspective on the decade, amplifying the extent to which Patrick Bateman is a creature of his historical era, a ghost from “the bloodstained past,” presenting a cautionary tale about a figure whose humanity is hollowed out by an ambient culture of materialism and narcissism.

Ellis returned to the ’80s again in his 1994 novel, *The Informers*, which was adapted into a film in 2008. The narrative consists of a series of interconnected subplots involving characters lost in the moral void of 1980s Los Angeles. The characters’ malaise and ennui shade into darker, more Bateman-esque manifestations of despair, such as vampirism and child-murder. Although the film version softens the edges of Ellis’s vicious condemnation of the narrative’s ’80s milieu, dispensing with the vampires and rewriting the ending so that the kidnapped child, who is killed in the book, runs free from his would-be murderer, it uses its soundtrack, costumes, and set designs to emphasize the extent to which the story’s invective is leveled against the same cultural ’80s-verse that *Ready Player Two* apotheosized as a permanent replacement for the historical present. The opening moments of the film introduce sexy characters dressed in glamorous fashions partying to ’80s synth-pop, reproducing an ’80s music-video aesthetic that seems sexy and seductive, until a background character is abruptly run over by a car, bringing the party to a screeching halt and standing for the random death at the heart of the ’80s panorama. The killed party-goer, Bruce, is revealed to be a vacuous ’80s playboy whose own best friends agree that he had no redeeming features. He is commemorated at his funeral in a picture that shows him in a shirtless glamor pose, the best thing his mother can say about him is that he cherished his “freedom and privilege,” and her elegy concludes with a song that “meant a lot to him,” Pat Benatar’s “Shadows of the Night,” a song choice that his friends robustly mock. Whereas “Benatar” exists as one of the planets enshrined in Halliday’s OASIS as an iconic center of ’80s gravity, in *The Informers*, the music of Pat Benatar is used to represent the vacuousness of ’80s pop-culture and of the people who consume it. Ultimately, the death of Bruce is played as an anti-nostalgic reverie of the death of the

'80s themselves, a consummation devoutly to be wished. In the movie's final scene, Graham sees Christie, his sexually voracious girlfriend, trying to sunbathe on a gray and cloudy beach, her body decaying from AIDS even as she reclines in a skimpy bikini. The physical decay of her beautiful body lingers as the movie's final metaphor for the existential rot that Ellis has always associated with the lifeworld of '80s consumer culture.

Deconstructive Nostalgia

Much more common in recent filmic and television representations than Ellis's strident anti-nostalgic stance, however, is a "deconstructive" approach that acknowledges and solicits the appeal of nostalgia, while also articulating a warning against the lure of this appeal. Lindsay Ellis articulated the concept of a deconstructive mode of nostalgia in a popular 2017 video essay, explaining that this kind of nostalgic representation is "still nostalgic ... but it's also more critical of the past, rather than affirming or reconstructive." An instructive comparison in this regard is that between the thoroughly anti-nostalgic representation of Patrick Bateman and the more nuanced representation of Jordan Belfort in Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013). Although most of *The Wolf of Wall Street* takes place in the 1990s, Jordan's career follows the principles he learned in 1988 from the tutelage of Mark Hanna, the cocaine-snorting, onanistic yuppie stockbroker who initiates Jordan into the secret of Reaganomic prosperity: money, Hanna explains, is "a whazy. It's a woozie. It's fairy dust. It doesn't exist. It's never landed. It is no matter. It's not on the elemental chart. It's not fucking real." The stock market is the '80s master-metaphor for a simulacrum without an original – the fundamental hyperreal construct that underwrites the simulacral quality of '80s culture generally, from the movie-actor president, to the synthetic pop music, to Bateman's own sense that he is "simply imitating reality, a rough resemblance of a human being" (282). Jordan's success in getting rich by selling worthless stocks enables him to lead a life that is similarly devoid of any foundation in morality, humanity, or reality. As Lindsay Ellis notes, while Jordan's story clearly epitomizes a cautionary tale about the self-destructive madness of a life grounded in the simulacral worldview of '80s yuppieism, Scorsese also encourages us to admire the exuberance and luxury of Jordan's lifestyle, resulting in a fundamentally ambivalent representation of his '80s-inspired *weltanschauung*. A less sympathetic version of a similar '80s character is Max Lord, the antagonist in *Wonder Woman 1984*. Like Jordan Belfort, Max Lord also offers televised financial advice centered around the Reaganistic

idea that anyone can achieve all of their dreams if they just wish for it. While *Wonder Woman 1984* certainly invites its audiences to indulge in a reflective nostalgia for an idealized '80s world of Walkmans and shopping malls, it uses this setting to draw audiences into a story that ultimately hinges on the message that we must “renounce our wish” to believe in Max Lord’s sales pitch, as well as, by extension, the '80s values that he emblemizes. To be sure, Max Lord is a thinly veiled caricature of Donald Trump, both in his '80s persona as the author of *The Art of the Deal* and in his twenty-teens incarnation as the president vowing to restore America to its Reagan-era greatness. Popular disillusionment with Trump and his presidency certainly accounts, at least in some degree, for the increasing tendency in late-twenty-teens media for '80s nostalgia to be depicted in a critical, deconstructive light.

This movement can also be seen in the attitudinal evolution evident between the 2010 film *Super 8* and subsequent narratives about '80s teens who become embroiled in uncanny phenomena such as *It: Chapter One*, *Stranger Things*, *Summer of '84* (2018), and *American Horror Story: 1984* (2019). *Super 8*, which self-consciously patterns itself after *Stand by Me* (1986), a classic example of '80s nostalgia for the '50s, established a narrative pattern involving a group of '80s boys (typically comprised of a “bad” kid, a fat kid, a crazy kid, and a sad-eyed “main” kid) who encounter a creepy secret in their suburban neighborhood. *Super 8* technically takes place in 1979, but anachronistic references to Rubix Cubes and *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) make it clear that the story’s emotional center is a nostalgia for the 1980s. In *Super 8*, although the lives of the characters are fraught with emotional issues that suggest a critique of their era (the main character’s dad is killed in a factory accident, a possible result of deregulation, and the imprisonment by the Air Force of an alien creature suggests the militarized relationship with the natural world typical of Reagan-era environmental policies), the film’s overriding project is a romanticization of the '80s as a time of friendship, possibility, and un-self-conscious creativity. This restorative impulse is communicated most pervasively by the manner in which the film itself lovingly restages situations from '80s films like *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and *The Goonies* (1985) (and, of course, *Stand by Me*), as well as, of course, by the friendliness of the alien creature and the treacly transcendence of the movie’s climax.

The similarities between *Super 8* and more recent depictions of '80s tween-dom, however, offset a more fundamental difference in the emotional values that they associate with the '80s. Most prominently, the nascently adolescent protagonists of *Stranger Things* and *IT: Chapter One*

also discover that their suburban hometown is a site of uncanny goings-on, but there is nothing transcendent about what they discover. Both *Stranger Things* and *IT* begin with the disappearance of a young boy who turns out to have been abducted by horrific forces churning below the surface of their '80s lifeworld. The sewer system under Derry where Pennywise the Clown abducts and murders children parallels *Stranger Things*' Upside Down, the alternative dimension of death and decay that seems to lurk within the molecular structure of Hawkins, Indiana. In both cases, these interior nether-spaces both reflect the ultimate fragility and superficiality of the visible adult world of the 1980s, while also portraying that Bateman-ian inner emptiness as a mortal threat to the young people coming of age in that haunted decade. *It: Chapter One* and *Stranger Things* (as well as *Summer of '84*, which includes many of the same elements) owe at least some of their commercial success to their promise to indulge audience's '80s nostalgia, but the '80s world they depict is one in which children and childhood itself are hunted, tortured, terrorized, and traumatized. These texts might qualify as pure anti-nostalgia if it weren't for the fondness with which they depict both '80s pop culture and adolescent friendship, but these nostalgic elements serve to make the evil forces even more inimical, since they undermine the idealized landscape of personal and cultural memory that audiences were predisposed to nostalgize. With its master-metaphor of a child-murdering phantom that attacks society at 27-year intervals, the storyline of *IT* can even be read as a nightmare version of the generational "cycle of nostalgia," an expression of the premise that society is crucified to the wheel of eternal return – that we will never escape the horrific past, because we keep carrying it with us in the form of our irrational attachment to a doomed nostalgia. *The Final Girls* (2015) and *American Horror Story: 1984* also plunge teen characters into an '80s lifeworld that is constructed out of tropes from 1980s-era horror films, blurring the line between historical reality and cinematic teen-slaughter in ways that suggest that there never was such a line, and that life in the 1980s, amid all of its aerobicized opulence, was fundamentally a homicidal death-trap.

While the horror genre has been particularly conducive to deconstructing '80s nostalgia in this way, texts in other genres have also used the allure associated with the 1980s as a way of cautioning audiences against taking this allure too literally. One of the most notable such examples is the Netflix series *Cobra Kai* (2018-present), which begins by inviting audiences to revisit the beloved 1980s movie *Karate Kid* (1984), and which centers on characters, Daniel LaRusso and Johnny Lawrence, who themselves wallow in nostalgia for both their teenage exploits in the 1980s

and the cultural artifacts associated with that decade. LaRusso's nostalgia is primarily melancholic and passive, but, one night, while Lawrence is watching the '80s action movie *Iron Eagle* (1986), he is inspired to undertake the restorative project of reestablishing the Cobra Kai dojo. This decision is initially depicted as a positive move for Johnny, allowing him to recapture not only the vitality of his lost youth, but also the macho "hard body" ethos of the 1980s action genre. Before long, however, Lawrence's attempt to restore the past spirals into a series of events that causes karate fights to break out all across the valley in a pattern of increasingly destructive incidents. Like the characters in *Wonder Woman 1984*, Johnny eventually has to "renounce the wish" to reestablish Cobra Kai as he comes to recognize the destructive consequences of his nostalgic longing. In the espionage genre, *The Americans* chronicles the attempts of Russian spies living in deep cover in Reagan's America to negotiate a moral tightrope between the domestic comforts of living in an affluent '80s suburb on one hand, and, on the other, their Marxist conviction that this same society is based on economic inequality, racial injustice, and political propaganda. In the genre of psychological thriller, the interactive *Black Mirror* film *Bandersnatch* (2018) revisits the early adventure-based video games of the 1980s to tell a parable about how digital culture erodes free will and transforms human subjects into puppets whose choices are not their own. While *Bandersnatch* clearly stages a cautionary parable of contemporary online culture, it identifies the genesis of our ontological malaise in the nostalgized gaming culture of the 1980s, as epitomized by Colin's gloss on the meaning of the seminal icon of '80s gaming and popular culture, Pac Man: "Do you know what PAC stands for? P-A-C: 'program and control.' He's Program and Control Man. The whole thing's a metaphor. He thinks he's got free will, but really he's trapped in a maze, in a system. All he can do is consume, he's pursued by demons that are probably just in his own head, and even if he does manage to escape by slipping out one side of the maze, what happens? He comes right back in the other side. People think it's a happy game. It's not a happy game; it's a fucking nightmare world, and the worst thing is it's real and we live in it." The series *In the Loop*, with its landscapes of abandoned '80s-era technologies that, in a number of mysterious ways, distort the identities, relationships, and temporalities of its characters, also articulates a warning to contemporary audiences about how the eerie echo of '80s culture continues to ensnare us in its haunting convolutions.

Transformative Nostalgia

One of the earliest films to parody the 1980s, 1997's *The Wedding Singer*, portrays the 1980s in what Kayleigh Donaldson has called the "transformative" mode. Donaldson explains, "It's not enough for us to remake or revive these properties a few decades later. One cannot live on nostalgia alone, so we evolve." Audiences were attracted to *The Wedding Singer* by the prospect of seeing Adam Sandler croon his satirically inflected renditions of classic 1980s pop songs, establishing *The Wedding Singer* as the original '80s jukebox musical. The first few minutes of the film promise to fulfill the expectation that the film will indulge in the reflective nostalgia of representing the 1980s as a raucous party, as the opening credits, presented in a gleaming 1980s computer-graphics font, alternate with scenes from a 1980s wedding party, all set to Sandler singing "You Spin me Round (Like a Record)." Indeed, the entire film supplies a steady stream of '80s references, stoking a melancholic style of nostalgia for the distant past of thirteen years ago.

At the same time, however, in a surprisingly anti-nostalgic vein, *The Wedding Singer* represents the 1980s as a landscape of materialism, transactional sex, and superficiality that imperils the romantic prospects of true love. Robby and Julia are continually victimized by '80s "types" who attempt to seduce them into the yuppie values that dominate their '80s-verse. Robby's best friend Sammy, with his Tom Selleck mustache and his Thriller-era Michael Jackson coat; Julia's fiancée Glenn, with his career in junk bonds and his Don Johnson outfit; Robby's ex-fiancee Linda, with her Joan Jett hair and David Lee Roth-groupie fantasies; Julia's promiscuous co-worker, with her Like a Virgin-era Madonna look; Julia's mom, with her rich-'80s-housewife identity – all of these figures seem to be part of a conspiracy to keep Robby and Julia apart. Collectively, these characters personify the moral nihilism of a culture obsessed with appearances. Sammy even articulates his regret for patterning his personality after characters from syndicated television sit-coms. Although Robby sports a goofy '80s hairdo, he is clearly not "of" the time he lives in. He and Julia are set apart from the secondary characters, almost as if they were time-travelers from another era, which, as a pair of celebrity performers associated with the 1990s, they actually are. The result of their characterological distance from the prevailing cultural attitudes of the rest of the cast is that they are able to perceive the yuppie value system from a critical perspective. When Robby convinces himself that Julia is marrying Glenn for his money, and when Julia accuses Robby of aspiring to be a "yuppie jerk," and when Robby makes a comical effort to become a Wall Street banker, the movie takes it for granted that '80s values are inimical to Robby

and Julia's prospects for meaningful happiness. Audiences in 1997 can feel gratified that the narrow-minded snobbery of the 1980s has been transcended and rendered absurd by the passage of time. The movie's happy ending, in which Julia and Robby manage to achieve true love with the help of '80s icon Billy Idol and, presumably, make a home in the idealized '80s suburb of Ridgeville, disrupts the anti-nostalgic tone, however, implying instead that the 1980s suburb could be redeemed through Robby and Julia's post-'80s sensibility. The film blends its critique of '80s materialism with its indulgence in reflective nostalgia in the same way that Adam Sandler's vocal stylings inflect the melodies of '80s songs with an ironic, self-conscious edge. In the process, the '80s songs and styles are scrubbed of their antiquated ethical baggage and made safe for a new generation of consumers who can indulge their reflective nostalgia while also distancing themselves from the values of the nostalgized period, singing the songs of the past in a new, ironical, self-aware register.

A similar dynamic of intergenerational transcendence undergirds the 2001 film, *Rock Star*, in which another '90s icon, Mark Wahlberg, plays a hair metal singer from the 1980s. At the beginning of the film, Wahlberg's character, Chris, is introduced as a dedicated fan of the heavy metal band Steel Dragon. His enthusiasm for the music and for the band's artistry is deeply sincere and unironical. Although the band itself is a stereotype of an '80s genre that is itself highly self-stereotyping, the intensity of Chris's fandom elevates his obsession to a religious calling, illustrating the deeply personal and existential aspirations that connect him to this music. When, through the magic of Hollywood, Chris becomes the lead singer of the band he worships, the plot turns anti-nostalgic, dramatizing the shallow world of hedonistic despair that undergirds the heavy metal circuit. At the end of the movie, however, rather than either reconciling with the '80s music scene or renouncing it, Chris evolves into a '90s-style acoustic coffeehouse singer-songwriter, complete with a Kurt Cobain cardigan. The movie seems to suggest that Chris's experience in the '80s, as shallow and absurd as it appears in retrospect, was actually an important formative step in his development as an artist and a human being. Like *The Wedding Singer*, *Rock Star* suggests the possibility that the negative aspects of the '80s – particularly the materialism and superficiality of the decade – can be transcended by a new (quasi-) generation of people capable of sublimating the cultural energies of the '80s into new and more mature forms of self-expression.

Reboots of popular '80s film franchises are one of the most conspicuous forms of contemporary '80s nostalgia. The films of the third *Star Wars* trilogy - *The Force Awakens* (2015),

The Last Jedi (2017), and *The Rise of Skywalker* (2019) – self-consciously address the theme of nostalgia, engaging in an ongoing critique and enactment of nostalgic attachment. (Although the first *Star Wars* movie came out in 1977, the films became a franchise with the 1980s release of *The Empire Strikes Back*, making its franchise identity a conspicuously '80s phenomenon. The same dynamic applies to the *Rocky* franchise.) The entire “post-quel” trilogy is draped in a strong mood of reflective nostalgia, most starkly dramatized by the Imperial ruins among which the characters live and from which Rey makes a living, scavenging the ruins of the past as a survival strategy. The uncanny majesty of the crashed star destroyer in *The Force Awakens* and the rubble of the Death Star in *Rise of Skywalker* recall the aesthetic effect that classical ruins had on Romantic poets, signifying a wistful longing for a vanished age of glory. At the same time, the plot of *The Force Awakens* follows the plot of the original *Star Wars* film so closely that the films also suggest a restorative element, as if the filmmakers intend not only to reflect on the glory of the original trilogy, but also to recreate it in fine detail. Ultimately, however, both of these forms of nostalgia become absorbed into a wider conversation that the films enact about nostalgia itself. Writing about *The Force Awakens*, Jonathan Gray has observed that the film “engages with nostalgia, but it is a thoughtful engagement, not at all the ‘aw, geez, isn’t it nice to be back where we started?’ nostalgia” characteristic of the restorative mode. If the “search for Skywalker” plot in *The Force Awakens* suggests the aspiration of rediscovering the “magic” of the original trilogy, we learn in the next film that Luke Skywalker himself is resigned to an anti-nostalgic stance regarding his previous adventures. Luke is eventually persuaded to return to the fray, but the destruction of Anikin’s lightsaber, Yoda’s destruction of the Jedi Temple, and Luke’s own death at the end of *The Last Jedi* all indicate an anti-nostalgic impulse to break with the symbols of the past. Meanwhile, Rey, the main character of the “postquels,” begins the series in a state of misguided nostalgia for her vanished parents, hopelessly waiting for them to return to her. The wise alien Maz Kanata attempts to turn her away from her hopeless restorative nostalgia, telling her that “The belonging you seek is not behind you ... it is ahead.” Ultimately, Rey denies her historical/biological identity altogether, choosing to identify as a Skywalker, even though she knows she is really a Palpatine. Her dramatic act of self-identification in the last scene of *Rise of Skywalker* conveys the message that individuals are in control of how they remember the past: that we are free to pick and choose the meanings we take from the past, scavenging and reassembling spare parts as we wish. This deconstructive critique of the uses and abuses of nostalgia, moreover,

relate to an even grander way in which the third trilogy addresses the white male privilege that the original trilogy embodies. Whereas the cast of the first *Star Wars* movie was notoriously all-white, the third trilogy features a female lead and a diverse cast. *The Last Jedi*, in particular, stages an extended critique of the male-dominated spirit of individualized heroism that characterized the original trilogy; Poe and Finn's maverick adventurism – in defiance of the matriarchal leadership of the resistance – repeatedly proves self-destructive. The conversion of Finn from a stormtrooper into a good guy in the opening minutes of *The Force Awakens* signifies the advent of a new perspective through which to see the *Star Wars* universe (that of an “anonymous” bad guy, and that of a sympathetic Black character), and dialogue in *The Last Jedi* comments on the economics that allow “star war profiteers” to make money off of the conflict regardless of whether the good guys or the bad guys win, peeling back a layer of moral ambiguity that is starkly at odds with the Manichean dynamic of the original films. Even Rey's gesture of communing with a wounded snake monster seems to attempt to atone for the casual cruelty that characters in the original films showed toward alien creatures. In short, the makers of the third trilogy clearly want to cash in on nostalgia for the beloved *Star Wars* franchise, but they also acknowledge the moral failings and blind spots of those earlier films, and, by extension, of that bygone decade. The films attempt to tell stories that transform the *Star Wars* universe into a more inclusive and less dogmatic place.

Released the same year as *The Force Awakens*, *Creed*, Ryan Coogler's reboot of the *Rocky* franchise, also engages in a sustained interrogation of the value of nostalgia. Adonis Creed seeks to make himself in the mold of a father who died before he was born and whom he only knows from historical footage in YouTube videos. His stepmother warns him, in the same vein as Maz Kanata warned Rey, that he can't “go backwards” to restore his dead father's glory by becoming the World Heavyweight champion, and, like Rey, he convinces an anti-nostalgic survivor of the old films, Rocky Balboa, to become his trainer. Whereas Rey disowned her ancestral identity in favor of a self-chosen one, however, Adonis does something more subtle and more fundamentally transformative: he becomes the “living embodiment” of his father, even wearing his father's signature stars-and-stripes boxing shorts, but he achieves this restoration on his own – just for himself, building “his own legacy,” as his mother's note reminds him. Coogler achieves a similar effect with the film itself, which does not merely attempt to “restore” the glory of the past franchise, even though, as a film, it recreates many of the same cinematic “beats” established by the original *Rocky* movies (the training montage, the motivational life lessons, the dramatic final

bout), but to re-envision the *Rocky* universe from the perspective of a Black character. In the first three films, the Black characters Apollo Creed and, more problematically, Clubber Lang, had been represented as stereotypical foils for the white hero. Telling a *Rocky* story from a Black perspective allows Coogler to rework the perennial *Rocky* themes of ambition, identity, and male aggression into a new, more relevant, and more inclusive narrative, saving the franchise from its dated racial politics.

The 2016 reboot of *Ghostbusters* conducted a similar transformation of the franchise, most conspicuously with its ensemble cast of women, but also through its running theme of critiquing the sins of the collective American past. In the opening sequence, a tour guide's lecture about a supposedly haunted house makes off-hand reference to anti-immigrant sentiments (the house featured an "anti-Irish security fence") and animal cruelty (this is where PT Barnum "first had the idea to enslave elephants"), and the climax of the movie features the release of all of the ghouls that haunt New York's past, requiring the Ghostbusters to do battle with Puritan settlers, genocidal frontiersmen, fur-trappers, slave-traders, capitalist speculators, and the entire bloody under-story of American history. Throughout their sustained efforts to exorcise the sins of America's past, they also wage a simultaneous war against the misogynistic stereotypes of the present, as we see both in the characters' stories and in the meta-textual references to the backlash against the film itself. Throughout all of these challenges, the 2016 *Ghostbusters* remain committed to their calling to exorcise what the title of Abby and Erin's book calls "Ghosts from our Past: both Literally and Figuratively." The filmmakers' utopian project of busting these ghosts and transforming the *Ghostbusters* franchise animates the spirit of the whole film, resulting in a landmark example of nostalgia in the transformative mode.

Whose 1980s?

In films like *The Force Awakens*, *Creed*, and *Ghostbusters*, the transformative mode of '80s nostalgia refutes the narrative that the 1980s "belongs" to the affluent, white heterosexuals who populate the high schools, trading floors, shopping malls, and arcades of the stereotypical '80s-verse. Even deconstructive texts like *Stranger Things* and *IT: Chapter One* that critique the values of a nostalgized 1980s nevertheless tend to imagine the 1980s as a space belonging to white men. The intensity of the gamergate phenomenon, in which white male nerd culture responded with savage hostility to efforts to diversify or re-think '80s franchises, reflects the clash of the

Ready Player One-style “restorative” nostalgia with the more fluid transformative style of nostalgia. But texts that foreground the stories of non-white, non-straight, and non-male protagonists living in the 1980s have necessarily been involved in a transformative project of reshaping, complexifying, and broadening the way we think about the ’80s. *Basquiat* (1996) and *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) depict the efforts of Black characters to penetrate into the rarefied enclave of the white ’80s by mastering its esoteric symbol-system. Basquiat’s abundant creative energies endear him to Andy Warhol, and his semantic association with Warhol, the film implies, is a sufficient condition for him to be embraced by the wealthy, white art world. While Basquiat enjoys enormous success as an artist, however, he is haunted by the tendency of this superficial white society to reduce the profundity of his artistry to its own pop-cultural scale, characterizing him as “the Eddie Murphy of the art world” and throwing his masterpieces into the pop culture hopper with New Coke and “Where’s the beef?” *The Pursuit of Happyness* dramatizes a less ambiguous rags-to-riches story in which the character played by Will Smith uses his mastery of – at a critical juncture – the Rubik’s Cube to rise out of homelessness and to achieve a prosperous ’80s existence as a Wall Street stockbroker. The film *Precious* (2009), conversely, plays out a perverse mockery of the main character’s recurring reveries of becoming a celebrity in the glamorous world of ’80s red-carpet society. Rather than providing a model of success for Precious to aspire toward, her recurring fantasies of appearing in the center of a high-society photo-shoot only serve to reinforce how inaccessible that world of affluence is to her and to ironically underscore the extent of her own disenfranchisement and self-alienation. In all three of these films, the background of white Reagan-era culture serves to define the boundaries and possibilities of the lives of the Black characters, resulting in a transformative style of nostalgia in which white ’80s society is perceived from an external perspective. A similar transformative approach characterizes the television series *Everybody Hates Chris*. Although Chris Rock’s voiceover sustains the audience’s awareness that the young Chris is destined to achieve a Basquiat-style success in the world of white comedy, the show itself focuses on the life experiences of Chris’s family and friends, addressing social issues and cultural touchstones that highlight the richness and vitality of Black culture in the ’80s and providing a provocative counter-narrative to the version of the 1980s represented in *The Goldbergs* and *That 80s Show*.

For the LGBTQ+ community, however, the 1980s was something else entirely: a holocaust, an apocalypse, a rout. In eerie contrast to the idealized shopping mall ’80s lurks the

specter of the HIV/AIDS patient, refugee from a future of zoonotic infectious diseases that would come to haunt the warming globe in years to come. In *Angels in America*, Kushner depicted the dying AIDS patient as a prophetic vessel of metaphysical knowledge, a new Christ capable of arguing with angels on behalf of the human race. Subsequent works of fiction also express a tendency to evoke the tragic saintliness of people with HIV/AIDS, whose stories expose the sins of the society – not only society’s failure at managing the AIDS crisis, but also the more generalized failures of homophobia, complacency, and inequality. In *The Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), Ron Woodruff’s HIV diagnosis results in a series of experiences that serve to both humanize him and to transform him into a personified critique of an inhumane economic system. Although he does not contract AIDS himself, Ned Weeks, the main character in *The Normal Heart* (2014), becomes, in his advocacy on behalf of his dying friends and lover, a scourge to the conscience of a country that behaves as if it were intentionally complicit with the virus in the mass-murder of gay men. Adrian Lester, the protagonist of the film *1985* (2018), never tells his parents in his last visit home that he is gay and dying of AIDS, but his mere existence in their Texan household acts as a kind of rebuke to their heteronormative values. Countermanding this tendency to narrativize AIDS and the gay body as a political signifier, however, is Freddie Mercury’s climactic assertion in *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018): “I don’t have time to be anybody’s victim, AIDS poster boy or cautionary tale. No, I decide who I am. I’m going to be what I was born to be: a performer that gives the people what they want: a touch of the heavens! Freddie fucking Mercury.” The film’s ecstatic recreation of Queen’s performance at 1985’s Live Aid concert asserts Mercury’s status as a rock god rather than an AIDS victim, simultaneously acknowledging, rewriting, and transforming conventional AIDS narratives. Blanca, the main character of the FX series *Pose* (2018-2021), asserts a similar affirmation throughout the first season. Refusing to let her diagnosis define her identity, Blanca starts her own successful ballroom house and finds the inner strength to be true to her own self-transformation, to support the various transformations and becomings of her fellow ballroom dancers, and to fight for the rights, pride, and visibility of trans people.

The 1980s was also a time when women’s roles and identities were being actively reconfigured as the activist spirit of the ’60s and ’70s crashed on the rocks of the Republican Party’s rejection of support for the ERA in 1980 and the wider conservative “backlash” against the feminist movement. Transformative depictions of ’80s women tend to portray their efforts to

define themselves simultaneously within and against the dominant male culture of the Reagan '80s. The Netflix series *GLOW* (2017-2019) depicts what is perhaps the most sustained treatment of this theme, as the women in the series take a Reaganesquely entrepreneurial approach to claiming their own space in society by performing satirical versions of common sexist stereotypes, both adopting them and weaponizing them, living through them and mocking them at the same time, while also, behind the scenes, conspiring to exert influence on the corporate structure of their wrestling company. The fourth season of the Netflix series *The Crown* (2016-present) focuses on two '80s women, Princess Diana and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who attempt with mixed success to assert their identities within the patriarchal social structures they inhabit. In becoming engaged to the Prince of Wales, Diana becomes the personification of a fairy tale fantasy come true, but the fantasy of this role quickly runs afoul of the cruelty and tribalism of the royal family she marries into. As her marriage quickly devolves into a prison sentence, however, she finds ways of expressing her kindness and sense of compassion to an adoring public in ways that capitalize on the aspirational qualities that the culture associates with her princess role. In a parallel subplot, *The Crown* also depicts Thatcher's success in consolidating her political power by expunging herself of any vestige of kindness and compassion, out-patriarching the patriarchs in a way that suggests that adopting an "iron" frugidity is the price she is required to pay for her success. The representation of 1980s culture from the perspectives of these women stages a critique of the male-dominated power structures associated with 1980s society, even as the stories of the historical figures of Princess Diana and Margaret Thatcher reveal the extent to which women exerted an influence that helped to shape, and, in some ways, to transform that society.

Conclusion

The enigmatic cult classic *Donnie Darko* (2001) and the sci-fi sex comedy *Hot Tub Time Machine* (2015) are two very different films, but they both return to the 1980s as a site conducive to pondering the paradoxes of time and memory. Donnie rebukes the superficial lifeworld of '80s suburbia, performing an anti-nostalgic representation of the 1980s, but he also acts to transform the society, for instance by exposing the underground stash of child pornography (a detail that recalls Derry's sewers, Hawkins' Upside Down, and the basement murder room in *Summer of '84*) owned by an influential motivational speaker. This transformative act, however, is depicted as the result of the same somnambulism that characterizes the less positive acts that Donnie performs,

such as flooding the school and shooting the human Frank. All of Donnie's agency is coopted by the recursive time-sense in which he finds himself trapped, a kind of postmortem existence governed by the fact of his already-being-dead, an existential claustrophobia which, the movie implies, is the most insidious aspect of the '80s lifeworld: the foreclosure of freedom and possibility. Trapped in this '80s time-sense, Donnie can only follow the irrational compulsions that dominate his life, and, sharing Donnie's uncanny world, the audience's nostalgia for the trappings of Donnie's '80s-verse – the Smurfs, the Dukakis candidacy, and the novel *IT* – becomes subsumed by the same sense of being trapped in a closed system, a doomed loop where the past and the future are indistinguishable. *Donnie Darko* enacts a deconstructive style of nostalgia, in which nostalgia is invoked as a way of warning the audience against the seductions of nostalgia, but its nihilistic atmosphere goes so far as to break the formula: the very act of critiquing nostalgia does not escape the moribund ontology that dooms both memory and anticipation to the same deadly and nonsensical fate. *Hot Tub Time Machine*, conversely, begins in the reflective mode, with four middle-aged men wistfully nostalgizing their glory days of yesteryear; then the narrative shifts into a restorative mode as the friends seek to recreate the memories of their teenage ski vacations. The restorative impulse becomes literalized when their hot tub sends them back to 1986 to relive their teenage years. The project of restoration, however, becomes increasingly problematic, as the friends' efforts to prevent a butterfly effect by reproducing all of their original actions are upended by the comic permutations on their story that the movie dramatizes. Eventually, the characters abandon the restorative project, embracing chaos in a way that transforms the past and the future, ultimately allowing them to grow into more mature and well-adjusted human beings. Both *Donnie Darko* and *Hot Tub Time Machine* portray the '80s as a kind of primal scene in which our contemporary relationship with time, memory, and fate are recurrently enacted. If we feel ourselves to be living in a kind of historical "after-time," the '80s is the "time" that we have come after, a metonymic figure of the past as such.

This reference to times and after-times can't help evoking the 1983 Cindi Lauper ballad and haunting meditation on postmodern temporality, "Time After Time." In the first verse, the round face of an analog clock causes the singer to feel "caught up in circles," as if the present, past, and future were empty reiterations of one another, a time-sense analogous to the "cycle theory" of pop-nostalgia discussed in the introduction. As the song continues, it takes the form of a duet between the singer and time itself, as she attempts to slow down, to speed up, to forget, to

remember, to exist in time and out of time with the rhythm of her life. The singer's lived experience of time as an ambiguous and mysterious phenomenon allows her to transcend a temporality of empty circularity to achieve a healthy and sustainable relationship with the past and the future, the time and the after-time, as well as with the continuous present that they bookend and anchor. Likewise, when we replace or "fill in" the cycle theory of pop-nostalgia with a more descriptive analysis of different nostalgic modes, we are in a better position to understand the roles that representations of the past play in mass-culture and how these representations inflect our understanding of the present.

These meanings are continually diversifying, blending into one another, and engaging in dialogue with one another. Reflective, restorative, anti-nostalgic, deconstructive, and transformational modes of representation all coexist in the pop-nostalgia iconosphere, and indeed, rely on one another to define their meanings. It is also the case, of course, that the same text might suggest a "restorative" meaning to one audience and a "transformative" meaning to another, and that all of these texts can be described as mosaic assemblages comprised of all of these perspectives placed in tension with one another. Likewise, this analysis of nostalgic modalities suggests that there is no intrinsic pattern of succession evident in the ways that these different forms of nostalgia manifest themselves. Anti-nostalgic and reflective retro-visions of the 1980s appear alongside one another as early as the '80s themselves and into the present day. While cultural and political events like Gamergate and the Trump presidency have influenced the way the '80s has been perceived and represented, the idea of the '80s in the popular imagination remains complex and multiplicitous enough to defy any simple formulation.

The past is a living construct, continually being transformed and reinterpreted, and fictional texts are one of the most influential components of how the past is remembered. Recent neurological research has shown that every time the brain accesses a memory, the neurological structure that codes the memory is altered – every time we remember something, we change the memory slightly, so that each remembrance paradoxically further distances us from the "original" moment, functionally effacing that memory and making it increasingly irretrievable. A similar effect certainly characterizes the mass-memory of the past as it is mediated by pop-cultural texts. Every representation of the '80s is both a memory and a distortion, until the discourse about what the '80s "means" has less and less to do with the '80s "themselves" and increasingly becomes a study in intertextuality. Being able to distinguish among different styles of representational

nostalgias can help us become more savvy consumers and critics of the manner in which and the purposes for which “retro” texts construct visions of the past. While this discussion can be extended to an analysis of how other historical periods are represented through various nostalgic lenses, the representation of the ’80s serves as a relevant case study in this regard, since contemporary culture has been actively evoking and reassessing the question of what the ’80s represents, whether as an idealized golden age for Trumpists and gamers, an ambivalent space in which memory is haunted by monsters, or as a site of transformative potential.

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