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Introduction: is Pop Culture trapped in the Past?



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In 2011, music critic Simon Reynolds's essay *Retromania* came out, the main argument of which was that “We live in a pop age gone *loco* for retro and crazy for commemoration. [...] Could it be that the greatest danger to the future of our music culture is ... its past?” (Reynolds, 2011: x). Reynolds's focus was on pop music at the turn of the new millennium, questioning the role of its producers and the tastes of its audience, stuck in a state of “hyper-stasis” (Reynolds: *ibid.*). More than one decade after Reynolds's thought-provoking analysis, one may wonder whether this assumption is still relevant today. Can it be extended to other objects of pop culture?

In a 2021 *Guardian* article, Mark Singer contended that “Covid has pushed pop culture into nostalgia. It's time for something new”. The American journalist “worried that culture was increasingly trapped in its own past, awash with reissues and remakes. In contrast to most of the 20th century, very little in the world of music or cinema felt radically new”.¹ In the Post-pandemic age, is pop culture still fixated on its (and our) past? Is this “addiction” to the past a regressive trend or, on the contrary, an opportunity to reassess modern history and re-evaluate its legacy and its representation in popular mass media? In terms of forms and formats, can something “radically new” emerge from nostalgia?

When attempting to precisely define what nostalgia is about when applied to productions of popular culture, one is confronted to as many approaches as there are scholars discussing the phenomenon: nostalgia as sentiment, nostalgia as culture, nostalgic amnesia, pseudo-nostalgia, and

1. Mark Singer, “Covid has pushed pop culture into nostalgia. It's time for something new”, *The Guardian*, 2021-01-10, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/10/covid-pop-culture-notalgia-new-crisis-recycle>, last accessed 11/08/22.

neostalgia, among many other recent concepts and neologisms. Yet, nostalgic pop culture is not specific to the new millennium. In the Reaganite era already, U.S. films and T.V. series offered fantasised recreations of the 1950s and 1960s, an idealised time when pre-Vietnam-war American moral/ity was still untarnished. In a society that is considered deficient and unstable, nostalgic pop culture may thus be a way to rewrite the past in a most positive light (Tannock, 1995), so as to assuage present-day concerns and find comfort in turning back to a seemingly less troubled period. Trying to understand today's nostalgia is all the more challenging as the latter is apparently felt and fuelled by an audience that seems to long for a time they never experienced and perhaps, even, that never was (Nimeier, 2014). The past thus recreated in films, series or music pieces is turned into a form of utopia, which first and foremost highlights the dissatisfaction the younger generations may feel about their present time. This nostalgic trend is deeply rooted in consumer society. Not only is cultural content imbued with nostalgia but the very media that transmit content are also affected. People are now crazy about listening to vinyl records and are retro-gaming fanatics. In other words, they feel nostalgic for a pre-digital age that the under-20s cannot remember. Some see in that form of consumption a case of pseudo-nostalgia, as Australian academics Tom van Laer and Davide Christian Orazi contend: "We call it pseudo-nostalgia because younger consumers of these revived products and services have never experienced the original. Generation Z will not have been there, done that. In fact, they are buying retrotastic products and services that sometimes have little relation to 1980s reality whatsoever".²

The love of the retro, or retrophilia, has thus nothing to do with the objective, scientific interest historians may find in the faithful reconstruction of an era in period films for instance. Rather, in nostalgic, retrophilic pop culture, the recreation of the past is a subjective means of conveying one given society's affects. As a result, the phenomenon is prompting scholars to question the very historicity of these objects, considered as cultural constructs. Pop culture may have gone *loco* for its own past but is it exactly what is being commemorated – in other words, what common or shared memory is evoked this way?

The first chapter of this collection of articles focuses on "serial" nostalgia. Although addressing different genres and periods, the three authors are concerned with what seriality brings to nostalgic popular fiction. In "Gender and Nostalgia in Period Drama: *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* and *Mad Men*", Deirdre Pribram compares and contrasts two series set in the

2. Tom van Laer & Davide Christian Orazi, "It's not nostalgia. *Stranger Things* is fuelling a pseudo-nostalgia of the 1980s", *The Conversation*, 2022-07-10, <https://theconversation.com/its-not-nostalgia-stranger-things-is-fuelling-a-pseudo-nostalgia-of-the-1980s-186389>, last accessed 11/08/22.

1960s and 1970s, which, she argues, exemplify two types of nostalgia as defined by Paul Grainge: nostalgia as mood and nostalgia as mode or style, disengaged from emotion. Emotion is what the second article, “This Is (the) U.S.: Life, Death, and Washing Machines”, is mostly dealing with. Charles Joseph demonstrates that the NBC cult series, although melodramatic in tone and relying on clichés, manages to emancipate itself from generic stereotypes and provide a multi-layered story, in which the Pearson family personifies American recent history and commodified culture. In the following article, “Back to the Retro-Closet: Narratives of Closetedness and Coming Out in Retro Television Shows”, Audrey Haensler explores Svetlana Boym’s notion of restorative nostalgia and demonstrates that retrospective T.V. shows allow for a cultural renegotiation of a violently homophobic past. All three articles analyse how retromania in pop culture prompts viewers to look at the past with a new, contemporary lens, thus helping construct new “gazes” on historical events and cultural objects.

The second chapter of this issue is most specifically dedicated to Grainge’s nostalgia as mode, understood as nostalgia for past cultural objects. It is not so much the historical period that is represented, but rather its commodified culture that is idealised. More precisely, the two articles collected here focus on pop music, on its material production and performance. Sébastien Lebray offers an in-depth analysis of Daft Punk’s seminal album *Random Access Memory* and points the anti-modernist dimension of the piece, while nonetheless highlighting the continued dialogue the band has engaged between past and present. In “As Night Turns to Mourning: YouTube’s Ahistoric Rave Archive”, Danny Cookney explores the nooks and crannies of the world wide web and demonstrates how digital platforms (such as YouTube or Discogs) can serve as repositories of pre-internet music that today’s band can search and plunder to feed their own compositions. Three contemporary examples are examined in detail, Overmono, Joy Orbison, and Burial, to delineate the contours of this pre-digital nostalgia. Both articles eventually underline the post-modern dimension of nostalgia in the way musicians rely on recycling and collage to create something new out of defunct periods of history.

Finally, the three articles that compose the third and last chapter go beyond a post-modern approach to nostalgia and adopt a post-nostalgic or anachronistic stance towards the past. In “Anemoia and the Vaporwave Phenomenon: the ‘New’ Aesthetic of an Imagined Nostalgia”, Lucas Cantinelli focuses on the ironic dimension of the Vaporwave phenomenon, which celebrates the aesthetic of 1980s and 1990s blockbuster culture while also criticising consumer capitalism. The author also draws attention to the danger of misremembering the past or glorifying an era that never actually existed. Cantinelli takes here the example of synthwave music, which mainly appeals to reflective nostalgia but can also take on a

more political dimension with, for instance, far right vaporwave or fash-wave. In the following article, Mirko Milivojević looks at the phenomenon of Yugo-nostalgia in pop music, which exemplifies the way nostalgia turns back to and/or tries to revive a period of the past, in this case Yugoslavia's socialist history, seen as a time when the future was (still) hopeful. The retro-futurist trend in pop music thus seems to bridge the gap between utopian aspirations and disillusionment. Finally, Margaux Collin examines Quentin Tarantino's choice of soundtrack in *Django Unchained*, where anachronism is displayed and assumed. She demonstrates how nostalgic cinema enables those that have hitherto been the victims of history to reclaim the(ir) past. In the wake of Pam Cook's work, the three articles all come to the conclusion that nostalgia may indeed be perceived as the celebration of a golden age but that it is nonetheless an opportunity for "the critical exorcism of the past?" (Cook, 2005: 98).

Although nostalgic pop culture toys with our longing for an idealised – if not completely imaginary – pre-digital (prelapsarian?) past, the eight contributions show that the objects it produces do not merely convey a naive message about better or happier days of yore. Popular shows such as *Mad Men*, *Masters of Sex*, or *This is Us* do not sugar-coat the realities of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Rather, they seem to identify the source(s) of inequalities and injustices (social, racial and sexual discrimination and violence for instance) to offer the possibility for correcting those wrongs, however anachronistic those solutions may seem. Nostalgic cultural objects go beyond sentimentality and allow their producers and consumers to embrace a more contemporary take on the past, thus reflecting today's cultural and ideological construction, drawing on modern fears and worries. Nostalgia is not merely a feeling, it is also a post-modern aesthetic that finds its inspiration in digital archives (YouTube for instance), flirts with aporetic anachronism (Yugo retro-futurism, Tarantino's choice of soundtracks) and recycles tropes and motifs from past creations in order to invent something new (synthwave tunes, vaporwave imagery) that transcends the dichotomy between past and present.

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