

This is (the) U.S.: Life, Death, and Washing Machines



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Abstract: When *This Is Us* premiered in September of 2016 on NBC, it did so in a media landscape (including both networks and streaming platforms) populated by several series that heavily relied on nostalgia with dramas such as *The Americans* (FX, 2013-18), *Masters of Sex* (Showtime, 2013-16), *Halt and Catch Fire* (AMC, 2014-17), or *Aquarius* (NBC, 2015-16), By the middle of the 2010s, American TV series retromania was in full gear, and I would contend that Dan Fogelman's *This Is Us* crystallizes this retrophilia craze. The six-season long series revolves around the Pearsons, an a-typical All-American family that the viewers get to know over a time-span of 60-something years full of flashbacks and flash forwards. They are brought back and forth in an intertwined narrative that puts resilience and happiness at the core of its main storyline, following a gallery of characters that all impersonate a key characteristic of the American society. While starting with somewhat essentializing characterization, *This Is Us* mitigates these archetypes, clichés and prejudices with multi-layered storytelling and delivers a series that has met the American audiences and critiques with largely positive reviews, a consensus rare enough in American network television to be mentioned. At the crossroads of cultural and production studies, this article intends to analyze the series' content and context, as it explored complicated socio-economic and cultural issues through the evolving bonds of the Pearson family which personifies Americana and its many commodified artefacts. At a moment when America was becoming more and more politically divided, *This Is Us* created a space of dialogue and communion in which being blue or red didn't mean much as the values put forth in the series were first and foremost traditional/universal ones. The context of the series and its clear inspirations (Sense8 to name but one) will also be addressed and will attempt to emphasize the metafictional dimension of the series itself as a cultural by-product specifically designed and imagined to inspire as well as revive the one quest to which anyone can relate to: the pursuit of happiness.

Keywords: Nostalgia, Americana, resilience, metafictional dimension

Résumé : La série *This Is Us* est apparue pour la première fois sur les écrans de NBC en septembre 2016 dans un paysage médiatique (*networks* et plateformes de streaming confondus) composé de plusieurs séries s'appuyant déjà fortement sur la nostalgie comme *The Americans* (FX, 2013-18), *Masters of Sex* (Showtime, 2013-16), *Halt and Catch Fire* (AMC, 2014-17), ou encore *Aquarius* (NBC, 2015-16). Au milieu des années 2010, la rétromanie des séries télévisées américaines était à son comble. *This Is Us* de Dan Fogelman cristallise cet engouement pour la rétrophilie. La série, qui dure six saisons, s'intéresse à une famille américaine atypique que les téléspectateurs apprennent à connaître sur une période d'une soixantaine d'années, par le biais de *flash-backs* et *flash-forwards*. Les Pearson sont ainsi amenés à faire des allers-retours dans un récit qui entrelace les temporalités et place la résilience et le bonheur au cœur de son intrigue principale, en suivant une galerie de personnages symbolisant tous une caractéristique de la société américaine. Même si, au début du récit, la construction des personnages semble quelque peu essentialisante, *This Is Us* finit par nuancer ces archétypes, clichés et préjugés grâce à une narration à plusieurs niveaux. Consensus assez rare pour une production de *network* pour être mentionné, la série a rencontré un succès public et critique aux USA. Au carrefour des études culturelles et des *production studies*, cet article a pour objectif d'analyser le contenu et le contexte de la série, laquelle explore des questions socio-économiques et culturelles complexes à travers les liens évolutifs de la famille Pearson, qui personnifie l'*Americana* et ses nombreux objets de consommation. À un moment où l'Amérique était de plus en plus divisée politiquement, *This Is Us* a su créer un espace de dialogue et de communion, où être républicain ou démocrate ne signifiait pas grand-chose, les valeurs mises en avant dans la série étant, avant tout, traditionnelles/universelles. Le contexte de la série et ses inspirations évidentes (*Sense8* pour n'en citer qu'une) seront également abordés. Il s'agit là de souligner la dimension métafictionnelle de la série elle-même en tant que sous-produit culturel spécifiquement conçu et imaginé pour inspirer et faire revivre la seule quête à laquelle tout le monde peut s'identifier : la poursuite du bonheur.

Mots clés : Nostalgie, culture américaine, résilience, dimension métafictionnelle

Introduction

When *This Is Us* first aired in September of 2016 on NBC, nostalgia was already very much in the air on American television. While striking the nostalgic chord was nothing new for TV series in 2016, as exemplified by series such as *That '70s Show* (Fox, 1998-2006), the years 2010s saw quite the surge of programs that were not set far enough back in time to be considered period shows, and which deliberately appealed to nostalgic sentiments for some segments of these series' target audiences. Many have argued that the universal acclaim which Matthew Weiner's *Madmen* (AMC, 2007-15) received was one of the turning points which encouraged studios to go the nostalgic route, but the remake trend which had been set into motion in the late 2000s and early 2010s with series such as *90210*

(The CW, 2008-13), *Hawaii Five-0* (CBS, 2010-20), *Dallas* (TNT, 2012-14), *Beauty and the Beast* (The CW, 2012-16), and *MacGyver* (CBS, 2016-20) should also be taken into account.

Hence when *This Is Us* premiered, it did so in a media landscape (including both networks and streaming platforms) populated by several series that heavily relied on nostalgia, with dramas such as *The Americans* (FX, 2013-18), *Masters of Sex* (Showtime, 2013-16), *Halt and Catch Fire* (AMC, 2014-17), *Aquarius* (NBC, 2015-16), *Narcos* (Netflix, 2015-17), *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016-22), or *The Get Down* (Netflix, 2016-17). The anthology series and miniseries formats which were then at the early stages of their now thriving come backs also relied on nostalgia either on tropes or form with titles like *American Horror Story* (FX, 2011-now), *Show me a Hero* (HBO, 2015) or *American Crime Story* (FX, 2016-now). Comedy sitcoms also went in that direction with hits such as *The Goldbergs* (ABC, 2013-now) and *Fresh off the Boat* (ABC, 2015-20), and even some superhero series followed the movement with *Agent Carter* (ABC, 2015-16) and *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* (The CW, 2016-22). By the middle of the 2010s, American TV series retromania was in full gear, and I would contend that Dan Fogelman's *This Is Us* crystallizes this nostalgia craze.

The six-season long series revolves around the Pearsons, an atypical All-American family that the viewers get to know over a time span of 60-something years, full of flashbacks and flash forwards. They are brought back and forth in an intertwined narrative that puts resilience and happiness at the core of its main storyline, following a gallery of characters that impersonate specific demographics of American society. While starting with somewhat essentializing characterization, *This Is Us* mitigates these archetypes with multi-layered storytelling, and delivers a series that has met American audiences and critiques alike with largely positive reviews, a consensus rare enough in American network television to be mentioned. At the crossroads of cultural and production studies, this article intends to analyze the series' context and content, as it explores complex socio-economic and cultural issues through the evolving bonds of the Pearson family which personified Americana and its many commodified artefacts. At a moment when the United States was becoming more and more politically divided, *This Is Us* created a space of dialogue and communion in which being blue or red didn't matter as much, since the values put forth in the series were first and foremost universal, making it a cultural by-product of its time specifically designed and imagined to inspire as well as revive one of the U.S.' founding principles: the pursuit of happiness.

From its very inception, *This Is Us* sent its viewers on a path that looked into two directions, tricking them all along the pilot episode only

to reveal in the final few minutes that the two stories that they were watching unfold simultaneously were, in fact, one and the same. On the one hand, the complicated birth of triplets leading to the loss of one of the babies, and on the other, the 36th birthday of twins Kate and Kevin, and of their adopted African-American brother, Randall. The viewers are thus left, from the get go, with a mixed bag of emotions that series creator and showrunner Dan Fogelman tiptoed around for the entire run of *This Is Us*. While feeling sad about the loss of Rebecca and Jack's 3rd baby during labor, a form of relief and happiness is also given in finding out about the lives that Kate, Kevin and Randall lead 36 years later. This feeling is exemplified by Jack's life motto "there's no lemon so sour that you can't make something resembling lemonade." (S01E01, "Pilot") which was inspired by the kind words of Rebecca's obstetrician, as he tried to alleviate Jack's pain.

This literal bittersweet analogy is one that seems particularly fitting to the entire series in more ways than one. Discussing the first episode of the series' sixth and final season, Dan Fogelman noted that he tried to "figure a way to balance the darkness and the light, [...] but it's also a lot of what our core principle was, making this television show" (Andreeva, 2022). Interestingly enough, *This Is Us* is able to achieve this balance between light and dark, notably through its narrative structure that moves up and down the Pearsons' family lives at different points in time. The series relies precisely on the intrinsic ambivalence of nostalgia itself, as explained by Michael H. Jacobsen in his article entitled "In Times of Nostalgia: The Brave New World of a Grand Old Emotion":

This is also the reason why nostalgia is often characterised as a 'bittersweet' emotion, because it encapsulates and embodies the diametrical opposites of the bitter and the sweet, happiness and distress, joy and sadness, pleasure and pain, and so on. So the very idea of 'bittersweetness' thus captures the complexity and ambivalence contained within the emotion of nostalgia and points to the inextricable connection between happy and fond memories with the melancholic and disheartening realisation that a return to this past period in time – historical or personal – is in fact impossible. (Jacobsen, 2020: 18)

This return is indeed impossible for anybody reminiscing about past periods of their lives. It is however made possible by the serial format presented in *This Is Us*. The viewers follow the entanglements of these characters' experiences that are almost never triggered by the diegetic space itself (i.e. the present selves of the series' characters are not the ones provoking the flashbacks). The present-time narrative unfolds chronologically, but the many back and forth incursions into different moments in the past do not follow a similar chronological order. The flashbacks are triggered instead by how these past experiences are going to inform the

viewers about the characters' specific states of mind, traumas or realizations, thus leaving the audience to piece these snapshots together, imbuing the editing at play with a somewhat poetic dimension. In "Nostalgia Is Not What It Used to Be: Serial Nostalgia and Nostalgic Television Series," Katharina Niemeyer and Daniela Wentz argue that whenever series intend to go down the nostalgic route, they mostly deal with "the loss of identity, continuity or stability" (Niemeyer & Wentz, 2014: 131). *This Is Us*, however, approaches the three notions simultaneously and contemplates their complementarities. The series' premise focuses on the lives of siblings Kate, Kevin & Randall and the existential crisis that they all undergo as they reach closer to their 40s. Kate is single and obese, and wonders how she got to this point, Randall finds his birth father, and soap opera actor Kevin has a very public meltdown in front of an entire live audience and rolling cameras. The viewers are thrust immediately into a 3-identity-crisis storyline that will hinge on flashbacks in order to provide a sense of continuity, as the writers' room chose to balance out the initial "loss of identity" of the main protagonists with anachronic explorations of their life stories.

The Game Plan



Yet *This Is Us* was never deceitful about what it would intend to do over its six seasons' run. By the time *This Is Us* concluded in May 2022, some inconsequential blank spaces in the narrative were left, but the series' intention was clear from the beginning, and it was even explained in the series' fifth episode aptly titled "The Game Plan" (S01E05). The episode deals with death, and confirmed that Jack – Kate, Kevin and Randall's father – had indeed died at some point in the past under circumstances that will remain unknown to the viewers until the second half of the second season. By the end of "The Game Plan" (S01E05), Kevin, who has scared his two nieces talking about ghosts and death, comes into their bedroom to reassure them. In order to do so, he confesses to them that he likes to paint and shows them a painting he made after reading the play he was hired for in New York.¹

The clearly Jackson Pollock-inspired painting is then explained by Kevin in these terms:

So, I painted this because I felt like the play was about life, you know? And life is full of color. And we each get to come along and we add our own color to the painting. And even though it's not very big, the painting, you sort of have to figure that it goes on forever, in each

1. <https://images.app.goo.gl/br59fKKoHypGLdTq5>

direction. So, like, to infinity, you know? 'Cause that's kinda like life, right? And it's really crazy, if you think about it, isn't it, that a 100 years ago, some guy that I never met came to this country with a suitcase. He has a son, who has a son, who has me. So, at first, when I was painting, I was thinking, you know, maybe up here that was that guy's part of the painting, and then down here that's my part of the painting. And then I started to think, well, what if we're all in the painting everywhere? And what if we're in the painting before we're born? What if we're in it after we die? And these colors that we keep adding, what if they just keep getting added on top of one another, until eventually we're not even different colors anymore? We're just one thing. One painting. I mean, my dad is not with us anymore. He's not alive, but he's with us. He's with me every day. It all just sort of fits somehow. And even if you don't understand how yet, people will die in our lives, people that we love. In the future. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe years from now. I mean, it's kind of beautiful if you think about it, the fact that just because someone dies, just because you can't see them, or talk to them anymore, it doesn't mean they're not still in the painting. I think maybe that's the point of the whole thing. There's no dying. There's no you or me or them. It's just us. And this sloppy, wild, colorful, magical thing that has no beginning, it has no end, this right here, I think it's us. (S01E05, "The Game Plan")

If anything, the entire blueprint for the entire series was encapsulated right then and there in Kevin's monologue, added on top of a metafictional double entendre with the title that alluded to football lingo. Through his painting, Kevin tries to make sense of the sudden loss of his dad, in order to try and explain the cycle of life and death to his two young nieces. Very much like Kate and Randall, Kevin is very nostalgic about the moments he spent with his father, precisely because his father was taken away from him abruptly. Relying on the viewers' empathy and curiosity (as they don't know anything about Jack's death), the series also triggers a form of nostalgia by proxy, highlighted by the fact that they will probably never see the adult versions of Kate, Kevin and Randall share the screen with their father Jack. Yet here, Kevin makes a very conscious decision to look at the constituting events of his life as a cohesive whole, the good and the bad, without getting overshadowed by the sadness of what he lost, which mirrors how Clay Routledge describes nostalgia:

In other words, though it is not uncommon for people to express some feelings of loss or sadness when they bring to mind past experiences that they are nostalgic about, they also express a sense of happiness and appreciation for these cherished memories. The feelings of loss and sadness are outweighed by positive emotions. (Routledge, 2016: 17)

In this crucial scene, Kevin shows some reflectiveness and introspection about his journey, but even if he is able to see it, he is not yet able to integrate it fully. This monologue, however, can clearly be taken as the series' statement of purpose. Kevin's explanation is edited over a montage of his great grand-father coming into the U.S. through Ellis Island², of his father and his mother around the time they met, of him and his brother and sister as infants, of him playing at the pool with his parents, brother and sister when they were kids, but also of Kate and Randall today, all mixed together, aiming to provoke a strong emotional response with the series' audience, which *This Is Us* became quite famous for, very quickly. Countless articles were written about how Dan Fogelman and his writers' room were experts in making people cry in front of their television, with rankings of the best (and worst) tearjerker moments of the show. Fogelman often joked about how fans sent him customized tissue boxes³, and a Twitter account called "This Is Us Crying" even made a logo to feature this characteristic.⁴

The series' strong emotional response relied on how Fogelman and the writers' room became masters in navigating and implementing nostalgia at the core of *This Is Us*. In an interview with BUILD about the third season of the series, Fogelman indicated that he wanted to further explore the beginning of Jack and Rebecca's love story, and he stated that he intended for it to be "just so romantic, like an old movie" (BUILD series, 2018). This romantic approach to the past is one that is particularly consistent with nostalgia, which he infused in *This Is Us* through the constant use of flashbacks, a strategy that indubitably helped to hook the series' viewers. Not only did the audience not know what would happen next for the characters in the present timeline, but they were also left with interrogations about their past, mysteries that were hinted at intentionally, creating anticipation for revelations yet to come about past events. In his article "Remembering it well: Nostalgia, cinema, fracture," Murray Pomerance points out that "the idea of remembering well is fraught from the outset. As in remembrance, we have no measuring rod outside the remembering itself, no fully objective past. [...] The idea of capturing, of having the past again therefore has charm in itself" (Pomerance, 2021: 232). In *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*, Pam Cook adds that "empathy and identification through sharing a character's innermost thoughts is central to the way memory is used in classic cinema. The flashback offers access to a character's perception of events, and through identification it validates that perception." (Cook, 2005: 85) Herein lies the

2. The fleeting image of the great grand-father coming into the United States is the moment that will look the furthest back in time of the entire series.
3. He did so for example during the Featured Session: This Is Us Cast Panel | SXSW 2018 accessible on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bXWzseCd-o>
4. <https://x.com/thisisuscrying>

flashback effect as it irons out the tricky meanders and uncertain details of memory in order to create the impression of objective remembrance.

It could then be argued that with its consistent use of flashbacks, *This Is Us* played a memory trick on its viewers, showing them parts of the Pearsons' lives as if they had been caught on tape, accurately remembered and precisely archived to be timely accessed to enlighten the present timeline situations and states of mind of the characters. The audience is thus led to understand the protagonists' reactions, realizations and sometimes growth, without them verbalizing any of it on screen. This idealized perception of remembrance that *This Is Us* intended to put forth was, off course, very appealing. But it was also the nostalgic content itself that was highly seductive for the series' target demographic, alluding to a common imaginary filled with shared memories and recognizable experiences. Indeed, traveling back mostly in the 80s and 90s, with incursions in the 60s and 70s, the show's nostalgic exploration hit right on the identification chord for the key demographic of any successful television program, the coveted 18-49. In *Consumed Nostalgia*, Gary Cross highlights how research led to the conclusion that, unless it becomes an obsession, nostalgia should mostly be understood as a coping mechanism:

In lab studies they show how nostalgic recollections of volunteer subjects bring forth feelings of belonging, stronger ties between the present and past, and more positive assessments of their lives. These psychologists argue that though nostalgia can be obsessive, it is mostly a resource to help people cope with the stresses of life. (Cross, 2015: 232)

Given the extremely polarizing political climate of the United States when the series premiered, right at the onset of Donald Trump's election and presidency, *This is Us* was able to capitalize on the power of its flashback structure to spark positive emotions as a means to cope. But flashbacks are not merely enough to explain how the series resonated with a large audience and how it became quite the phenomenon when it was launched. Family is undoubtedly the core value around which the entire narrative revolves, but it is, first and foremost, an all-American family. As such, it is only logical that the series' episodes would also follow some seasonal tropes that American network programs usually observe. For such series, it is indeed very common to find in late October a Halloween-themed episode, followed a few weeks later by a Thanksgiving-themed episode, followed then by a Christmas episode before going on a hiatus, resuming then in late January or early February with a Super Bowl episode. *This Is Us* hit all the stops, relying on a seasonality that has now almost become a source of nostalgia, in a world populated with streaming services and original programs accessible all at once. "Super Bowl Sunday"

(S02E14) even went off its usual broadcast slot to serve as the lead-out program for Super Bowl LII on February 4, 2018, a seminal episode in which the viewers learned about the circumstances of Jack's passing.

North American culture pervades through every pore of the narrative and in it, Americana is reified in more ways than one. From the pilot to the last scene of the series, Kate, Kevin and Randall are referred to as "the Big Three," a nickname they received from both their parents before they were even born. A football reference, the "Big Three" also came with a chant that Jack taught the kids when they were very little and which accompanied the characters all along the series. Because the children were conceived during Super Bowl XIV in 1980, the Pearson family has had strong enduring traditions around the Super Bowl, and they nurtured strong links with football in general. Encouraged by his dad, Kevin went through school playing football and even pondered a potential career until an injury crushed his hopes and dreams. Jack and Rebecca are long Pittsburgh Steelers supporters, as showcased by the handmade hats and bodies to the team's colors that the newborn are wearing in their cribs at the end of the pilot episode.⁵

Football was omnipresent throughout the entire run of *This Is Us*, until its very end. In the series finale (S06E18, "Us"), Randall holds a football in his hands during the last exchange between the three siblings, and during which they also recite their Big Three chant, one last time. Standard expression used by the characters, the Big Three is also a reference to other nostalgic-inducing moments of American cultural history that don't revolve around football. While the triad of Harvard, Yale and Princeton is still at the tip of the U.S. Ivy League universities, the two other so-called big three hint at an exciting time of discovery and economic boom that is long gone: they refer on the one hand to the three main TV networks ABC, CBS and NBC (now lost in a myriad of networks, and overshadowed by streaming platforms), and on the other to the three main car manufacturers of the U.S., namely General Motors, Ford and Chrysler (which left Detroit in ruins). The "Big Three" thus alludes to staples of North American culture, reinforcing the all-American atmosphere of the series that the viewers navigate within the constraints of its diegesis, taking them through the important moments of the Pearson clan⁶, sometimes even creating traditions for the viewers. For example, each season premiere revolves around the birthday of Kate, Kevin and Randall. The series'

5. https://media.zenfs.com/en/buzzfeed_articles_778/fdea2b465a9d02aeb7714091f51f67b8

6. Career Days (S01E03) The Big Day (S01E12) I Call Marriage (S01E13) The Wedding (S02E18) The Graduates (S03E14) The Day of the Wedding (S06E13) The Night Before the Wedding (S06E14) The 20's (S02E06) The Beginning is the End is the Beginning (S03E09) The Last Seven Weeks (S03E10) The Dinner and the Date (S04E07) A Hell of a Week Part 1/2/3 (S04E11/12/13) Forty (S05E1+2) The Waiting Room (S03E15) One Small Step (S05E11) Saturday in the Park (S06E11) Family Meeting (S06E16) to name but a few.

audience was thus put in the position of a collector, archiving into memory the different snippets that they got from the Pearson puzzle, a position which, according to Gary Cross, is symptomatic of modern nostalgia: “Like much of modern consumer culture, nostalgia is about an embrace of fashion, both in the ephemera of one’s childhood and in the pursuit of the “latest thing” in memorabilia. [...] The almost inevitable result is that the central act of modern nostalgia is collecting.” (Cross, 2015: 234) The latest thing in Pearson memorabilia was the next episode, and the series’ viewers were taken up and down this particular memory lane in which they also recognized a bit of themselves.

Considering the series’ production model, it could easily be argued that the cast of *This Is Us* (and widening the scope even further, the entire typecasting strategy of the entertainment industry) also reflects the producers’ intentions of drawing in an audience through nostalgia. The title roles of Jack and Rebecca Pearson are played by Milo Ventimiglia, known for his roles in *Gilmore Girls* (The WB, 2002-04), *Heroes* (NBC, 2006-10), and *The Whispers* (ABC, 2015) and by Mandy Moore, a pop singer who started her career in the late 90s and who released five albums between 1999 and 2009. Ventimiglia was known for his portrayal of romantic interests and virtuous superhero, while Moore had a career that never spiraled into drugs or alcohol, lending her smaller parts in several notable motion pictures. She was also a voice actress for several animation studios which led her to voice Rapunzel for Disney in multiple projects, reinforcing her image of a wholesome American sweetheart. Kate, Kevin and Randall had varying notoriety when boarding the project. Portraying Kevin Pearson, Justin Hartley was undoubtedly the one with the biggest fan-base and career, with a somewhat similar career-path to that of Milo Ventimiglia, as he played a superhero in his breaking role in *Smallville* (The CW, 2006-11) and romantic interests in *Emily Owens M.D.* (The CW, 2012-13), *Revenge* (ABC, 2013-14) and *Mistresses* (ABC, 2014-16). Sterling K. Brown was famous for his role of the “lone army husband” in *Army Wives* (Lifetime, 2007-13), but mostly for the racially super-charged part of Christopher Darden in *The People v. O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story* (FX, 2016) which was broadcast during the winter/spring of 2016. Chrissy Metz was only known from her performance in *American Horror Story: Freak Show* (FX, 2014-15), but the role was very small and viewers hadn’t really seen the actress she was. Surrounding the family nucleus of the five Pearsons came two rather well-known actors. Chris Sullivan, who portrays Toby (Kate’s romantic interest), was on people’s radar after his breakout performance in the critically acclaimed series *The Knick* (Cinemax, 2014-15). Finally, Jon Huertas as Miguel, Rebecca’s current companion and Jack’s best friend, was already a household name after his portrayal of Javier Esposito, the homicide detective working alongside Kate Beckett in *Castle* (ABC, 2009-16).

None of the actors and actresses cast in *This Is Us* are playing against the type of characters or genre that they did throughout their careers, and casting directors as well as producers counted on how people would be able to envision the dynamics at play in the series with these choices. As such, they relied on viewers' nostalgia of their previous encounter(s) with some of the cast members to spark their interest about the series, and get them involved in the narrative they would put forth in *This Is Us*. Nevertheless, because the character of Kevin is an actor in Hollywood, the series did risk itself to comment on the typecasting practice, same practice that they did observe themselves... In the series, Kevin feels imprisoned in his typecast of the goofy hunk. Self-aware that his performance in the fictional sitcom *The Manny* is limited to his good looks and badly written jokes, he spirals out of control before moving to New York to reinvent himself, and star in a more confidential auteur theater play. Kevin's career path led him back to Hollywood to star in major motion pictures, before agreeing to go back on a reboot of *The Manny* during the series' final season, as he wanted to secure some semblance of stability to participate and be in the lives of his newborn twins. While not dismissing the sitcom format, Kevin ultimately decides that show business is no longer his scene, and would instead rather focus on Big Three Homes, a construction company he launched which hires veterans. The sitcom, probably the most American of television formats, becomes this kitschy thing of the past that Kevin looks at with affection, but which doesn't fit with his ambitions anymore. Eerily enough, this assessment emerges at a time when sitcoms on American networks are on the decline, with fewer and fewer new productions of the format which seems to enter a period of temporary stasis. Kitsch is something of the past that could also induce some nostalgic recollection, something that Amy Holdsworth associates with television:

Kitsch objects are not apprehended as the souvenir proper is apprehended, that is, on the level of the individual autobiography; rather, they are apprehended on the level of collective identity. They are souvenirs of an era and not of a self. Television as a kitsch object is both. An object of mass production yet historically associated with the intimate space of the home – the object and its iconography draw upon collective identity and individual autobiography. Perhaps no longer a signifier of modernity it has become an icon of nostalgia for these symbolic associations. (Holdsworth, 2011: 124-125)

In *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*, Holdsworth does provide some illuminating elements to explain the ambivalence that Kevin feels towards the entertainment portion of his life. Television is still very much there in his everyday life as an object, but the associations it might spark would be, for him, things of the past. The very same way that upon going back to our parents' house and seeing the living room layout often organized around

the TV set would take us back to the evenings we spent with them, watching some now dated programs. While Hollywood and fame are cultural markers that belong to everyone, it seems as if most people eventually end up outgrowing the glamour and the glitz it represents to finally gaze upon these stars with affection more than admiration, much like people grow out of watching cartoons or some other program genres that no longer fit their evolving tastes. As such, the now flat screens on which viewers are directly connected to Netflix, Disney + or Amazon Prime are still very much televisions, and probably even more so than that of the past because of the archival object it has become. But it is a new form of television which, like *This Is Us*, is looking simultaneously into two directions. On it, the latest content can be accessed whenever we like, but it is also a gateway to nostalgic binge-watching, with old films, series and sitcoms that are also accessible at all times on the streaming platforms' catalogues.

Going (back?) home



This mise en abyme of the entertainment industry within the diegetic space of *This Is Us* opened the possibility for famous guest stars to appear playing themselves along the way, among which directors Ron Howard and M. Night Shyamalan and actor Sylvester Stallone. These Hollywood household names are integrated in the series' narrative to, again, serve a double purpose. First, referentiality creates commonality, strengthening the bond with the audience by delineating the contour of a shared cultural identity. Second, by selecting carefully said references, they will instigate further nostalgic recollection. Seeing M. Night Shyamalan on screen could make people think of *The Sixth Sense* (1999), seeing Ron Howard might remind people of *Happy Days* (ABC, 1974-84), *Cocoon* (1985) or *Apollo 13* (1995). To that end, Sylvester Stallone was a perfect catch for the series' casting directors. He has had a transgenerational career, and when Kate visits Kevin on the set of the film he is shooting with Stallone, she finds herself hanging out with the icon. Starstruck, she tells him how he was her father's favorite actor, and how they watched all of his films together when they were kids (S02E03, "Déjà Vu"). Thus reified as an American cultural monument, Stallone could be considered, to some extent, as Americana, bringing up to the surface fond memories of major pop culture moments that he has become inseparable from.

Blending into the show pop culture "Easter eggs" was therefore a non-negligible part of the series' stratagem to fortify its well-rounded all-American feel, while simultaneously strengthening the bonds with its community of viewers, and *This Is Us* did not shy away from it... In the fifth season finale, Jack and Rebecca are fighting because Jack recorded a

baseball game over a season finale of *Dynasty* (ABC, 1981-89), a show that Rebecca adores. A real TV-series buff, Rebecca is shown in the nineties particularly hooked to *E.R.* (NBC, 1994-2009). We can see in teenager Kate's room a big poster of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB/UPN, 1997-2003), and she tells her mom that she's going to make fun of *Dawson's Creek* (The WB, 1998-2003) at her friend's place when instead, she went and got an abortion in secret (S05E05, "A Long Road Home"). Randall is seen going to the movies during his first date, not seeing much of *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) as he spent most of the film kissing. It is mentioned on several occasions that Kevin is a huge fan of *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), and on the night that Jack died, he wasn't there because he went to the movies with his girlfriend Sophie to see *Good Will Hunting* (Gus Van Sant, 1997). During a failed Thanksgiving plan to go join Rebecca's parents, the family found itself stranded in the middle of nowhere in a cheap motel, and launched the enduring family tradition of watching *Police Academy 3: Back in Training* (Jerry Paris, 1986). While no mention of the film is ever made in the series, at the end of "Storybook Love" (S04E05), Rebecca sits at the piano and sings "Storybook Love", the original song for *The Princess Bride* (Rob Reiner, 1987). And the list goes on...

Crowding the flashbacks with pop culture references was a perfect way to normalize the life of the Pearsons. Just like everybody else, they watched TV programs that were all the rage back in the day. Just like everybody else, they saw movies that were huge box office smashes, and some others that weren't but around which they built fond memories together. Golden proximity boosts, pop culture references were there to emphasize that, indeed and to a certain extent, the Pearsons are "us". That impression is heightened by the other batch of references, those that were made in the present timeline of the series' narrative: A massive Star Wars fan, Toby follows religiously *The Mandalorian* (Disney +, 2020-now), Kevin for his part is more of a *Bridgerton* (Netflix, 2020-now) and *The Great British Bake Off* (BBC2/BBC1/Channel 4, 2010-now) kind of spectator, while Randall and his wife Beth are, on their end, all about *Watchmen* (HBO, 2019). Kevin and Beth both mention the MCU on several occasions, and Beth, in accordance to her HBO taste, also lets it be known that she has watched *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019-now). The list, again, goes on... The purpose here was not to stir further nostalgia, but rather to provide continuity and support through the ongoing and meticulous webbing of shared references that are recognizable on a global scale.

In his article "In the Engine Room of the Hyperreal: Nostalgia as Commodity Culture", Leander Reeves identifies nostalgia as a crucial component in Baudrillard's theory, and argues that:

In the final stage of simulacra that started in the '80s for all intents and purposes, Baudrillard famously suggests that only illusion now exists. That is to say, people's perception of reality is based on a simulation of something which has either stopped being or never existed in the first place. The simulacra thus precede the real, a golden age of pastiche remembering, of true Americana which promises to Make America Great Again. So, just as the films in the '80s were making sense of the present by contriving the 1950s on screen, it seems logical that in 2021, we, the voting and viewing masses, are making sense of our present by manufacturing the 1980s—a culturally dominant American 1980s, of course, on our television screens. (Reeves, 2021: 108)

In Baudrillard's perspective of simulacra and simulation, we live in a hyper-consumerist world led by immediacy and profitability that is now devoid of the possibility to live authentic experiences. That is why, according to Baudrillard, we are chasing after what we've lost, desperately seeking to fabricate something real that smells and looks and feels like the past, like the real deal, even if that authenticity is based on market research and focus groups responses (i.e. successful franchises that claim to offer ultimate authentic experiences such as Hard Rock Cafe, Olive Garden, or the French franchises Buffalo Grill or Memphis). Focusing thus on what the U.S. once was is a well-known strategy to promote the restoration of its supposedly lost greatness. Though it might start as a nostalgic discourse, what it turns into is mostly devoid of any sense of joy. Nostalgia becomes a pretext for some other political agenda which, if anything, comes with resentment and anger as it contemplates the shortcomings of others, pointing fingers towards those responsible for the country's alleged decline. But *This Is Us* manages to cancel out resentment and anger to highlight instead how culturally relevant and powerful the U.S. still is. The 70s and 80s are described as a culturally vibrant period for the U.S., but so are the late 2010s and early 2020s.

I would contend that the pop culture references that are distilled all throughout the series participate, to a certain extent, to a sort of patriotic world-building which does not particularly favor the past over the present, and in doing so, offers a more optimistic perspective. The past is investigated through the lens of the present, hoping to bring some solace and relief to past personal and collective traumas. *This Is Us* does intend to play on nostalgia, but it doesn't discriminate or play down the present in order to do so, and what the series does with time, it also does with space. The settings of *This Is Us* are all related to intimacy. The Pearsons' various homes are the sets that the viewers see the most on-screen, and the rest of the scenes revolve around them, depending on the themes of each episode. Then again, common ground is sought after with middle-class types of

homes for all the Pearson siblings in present-day. Even Kevin who is on the rise to become a big movie star is never filmed in a spacious villa in L.A., but rather in transitory spaces like lofty hotel rooms or trailers. Outside of their homes, the different places that the Pearsons visit throughout the series are not particularly recognizable nor memorable: unremarkable workspaces, hospitals, very average-looking bars, a pool that looks like so many others, etc. They are perceived as unexceptional spaces mostly because the scenes are always filmed inside these spaces and never filmed in a frame wider than a full shot. Outside of the homes of which the viewers sometimes see the façades, the outside structure of the other buildings that populate the diegetic space are almost never shown on-screen, reinforcing the impression that it could be any bar, any pool, any hospital.

Even more so, *This Is Us* is not a series that resorts to spatial inserts when it sometimes travels across the continental country from one scene to the next. It is common practice, even in a series that is set in just one city, to insert aerial shots of the neighborhood or of the building in which the following scene will unfold in order to spatialize the narrative and ground it as much as possible in the viewer's preconceived knowledge of that said space. *This Is Us* seldom relies on them, never filming the cities where the Pearsons have been, and there were quite a few. Jack and Rebecca met in Pittsburgh, and Kate, Kevin and Randall all grew up there as well. After high school, Kevin moved to Los Angeles to become an actor, where he was followed a few years later by Kate. L.A. is where they both live at the beginning of the series, while Randall and Beth live in New Jersey, both commuting to work in New York. Rebecca and Miguel still live in Pittsburgh. After his breakdown, Kevin moves to his brother's house because of the play he was hired for in New York. At the beginning of season three, Randall and his family moved to Philadelphia where they grow roots, and Randall develops a political career there that becomes national. Other major cities of the U.S. are included in the series as well, over the course of significant episodes. Randall travels with William to his birth place, Memphis, where, in the final stage of his cancer, he intends to die (S01E16, "Memphis"), Toby and Kate's bachelor and bachelorette parties are held in Las Vegas (S02E16, "Vegas Baby"), New York is back in a flashback of the first time Jack and Rebecca took the kids to the Big Apple (S04E16, New York, New York, New York) and Randall retraces his dead mother's steps all the way to New Orleans (S05E06, "Birth Mother").

In these episodes, more exterior scenes are filmed to showcase these meaningful spaces that are, once again, also strong signifiers of Americana. But there is one specific yet unlocalized space in *This Is Us* that held more importance than the rest: the Pearsons' cabin. It is in "The Trip" (S01E09) that viewers first learn of the family cabin, where Kate, Kevin and Randall all go together after a big fight between Randall and his adoptive mother

Rebecca. In order to support and help Randall recover from discovering that Rebecca knew of William's existence the whole time, Kate suggests a trip to the cabin. While not able to forgive his mother entirely, this trip down memory lane that the cabin itself represents to the siblings' eyes, initiates healing for Randall. The trope of the cabin in the woods is integral to Americana, modern-day continuation of the myth of the Frontier, with small wooden houses lost in the hostile wilderness, reminiscent of the time of the first Pilgrims. That reference directly echoes the previous episode entitled "Pilgrim Rick" (S01E08) in which Jack and Rebecca started Thanksgiving traditions of their own with the kids. Lost in the middle of nowhere because of a flat tire, the family walked to the Pinewood Lodge, a small hotel not too far down the road. Jack then found a Pilgrim hat at the nearest gas station, and decided to put it on to become the comical Pilgrim Rick, transforming what seemed at first as a failed Thanksgiving into a long-lasting tradition of wearing Pilgrim Rick's hat to tell the story of Thanksgiving.

The luxury of the second home was one reserved for the wealthy elites until post World War II baby boom, with a thriving economy that saw the rise of the middle-class. Little cabins which resemble frontiersmen log houses began to appear in uninhabited spaces not too far from the ever-spreading metropolis, a sign of success that became suddenly affordable for an entire social class. In *This Is Us*, entering the family cabin is always as if the Pearsons stepped into a time capsule. The homely feeling of the holiday home away from home, which they deserted for most of their lives past their teenage years, is what triggers nostalgia and its healing effects, making them all remember what matters most. In his concluding remarks of *The Politics of Home: Belonging and Nostalgia in Western Europe and the United States*, Jan Willem Duyvendak maintains that:

Feeling at home is a sentiment that has its appropriate and even necessary place in the politico-cultural sphere. To be inclusive, this 'home' needs to be open and hybrid in its symbols – necessary to peacefully accommodate different feelings of home in the public arena. Moreover, the politico-cultural sphere needs to balance the shadow sides of exclusionary individual, private and homogeneous forms of belonging. In this sense, the household, economic and associational spheres rely on the political sphere, the only sphere that can truly be inclusive in terms of collectively and publicly feeling at home in a heterogeneous setting. Feeling at home in the nation-state, then, is the capacity to experience comfort among relative strangers. (Duyvendak, 2011: 124)

Accompanying the journey of a recomposed family (Rebecca who was previously married to Jack and who is now with Miguel) which is

also mixed with the adoption of Randall, the Pearsons are in the past as well as in the present, a constant space of negotiations and evolution. Thus the homely feeling that this fictional family might represent for viewers is one to contend with as well. The audience might not identify with all characters of the series, but its hybridity makes it much easier for the Pearsons' story to resonate with a significant portion. For *This Is Us*, the cabin became a catalyst that the viewers learned about gradually through the entire series and, as it went on, a space that would personify an entire movement. The cabin is where the Pearsons go back to. Located around Bethlehem Township (PA) by the Poconos Mountains, the cabin takes on an entire new meaning once the series' flashforwards are introduced in the second half of the second season.

Niemeyer and Wentz' remark that nostalgic television series revolved mostly around the notions of "identity, continuity or stability" (Niemeyer & Wentz, 2014: 131) needs to be put into further perspective with *This Is Us* as the series check all three notions. The triplet's identity crisis that is balanced with continuity with the ongoing flashback structure, also finds stability with the introduction of the flashforward scenes. In "Super Bowl Sunday" (S02E14) the audience sees how Jack actually died, and it is at the end of that same episode that the very first flashforward scene occurs, taking the viewers into the Pearsons' future, and in which an aging Randall goes to meet an adult Tess who is working as a social worker, taking her out to dinner. As the montage sequence, which includes the flashforward elements, concludes the episode, the camera follows the present Tess into her bedroom and stops on Kevin's Jackson Pollock-like painting from the first season, framed on the wall. In this instance, it is the nostalgia of the viewers' experience that is sought after as a form of relief and positivity in a grief-stricken episode. As such, it appears that *This Is Us* fulfils the different functions of nostalgia as identified by Tim Wildschut and Constantine Sedikides in their article "The Psychology of Nostalgia: Delineating the emotion's nature and functions":

With regard to its social function, nostalgia strengthens perceived social connectedness and social goal strivings, as well as yielding tangible interpersonal benefits in terms of increased charitable giving, interpersonal closeness, and helping. Turning to its self-oriented function, nostalgia builds, maintains, and enhances self-positivity. Specifically, it heightens the accessibility of positive attributes and boosts self-esteem. As for its existential function, nostalgia is a source of meaning in life and fosters a sense of continuity between one's past and present self. Finally, despite being a past-oriented emotion, nostalgia serves a future-oriented function, raising optimism, inspiration, and creativity. (Wildschut & Sedikides, 2020: 59)

Identity, continuity and stability are at the core of the social, self-oriented and existential functions of nostalgia delineated here, and through the introduction of the flashforward scenes the series, again, tricks its viewers. Mysterious by nature, these very few scenes instigate a movement forward that the viewers are not accustomed to, but as the series' episodes and seasons unfolded, that newly-induced movement started to make more and more sense. The second flash forward occurs at the end of the second season finale (S02E18, "The Wedding") in which we find Randall and Tess again, with Randall telling his daughter that "it is time to go and see her." At that point in the series' narrative, the viewers don't understand what Randall means and to whom this "her" refers to. This specific flashforward is the beginning of an entire future timeline that continues sporadically over the course of the series. These flashforward scenes are usually placed at the end of each mid-season episode and each season finale, except for the sixth and final season. In order to solidify the arrival of this new process in the viewers' comprehension of *This Is Us*, the first episode of the third season concludes on similar shots from the second season finale flashforward scene with Randall and Tess getting ready to go and see "her," extending it just a little in order to sediment the process into the overarching narrative of the show.

These glimpses into the future weave an intermittent storyline of the end, in which viewers see aged versions of the characters, foreshadowing the final two episodes of the entire series that are still more than four years away. It is in the fourth flashforward of the series, in the midseason episode of the third season that the viewers understand that "her" is in fact Rebecca, and in the fifth flashforward at the end of the third season finale that the reason to go and see her is confirmed: Randall and Tess meet Beth inside a big house that the viewers have never seen before, ending on Randall going to Rebecca's death bed. It is at the end of another key episode entitled "The Cabin" (S04E14) that a flashforward shows that the big house in which Rebecca is, was in fact built upon the hill next to the cabin that they all used to go to for the holidays. Much like John Winthrop's "city upon a hill", the Pearsons "perfect house" that Jack had drawn years before he passed, was now built, and as the flashforward scenes add up (S04E18: "Strangers: Part Two," S05E09: "The Ride," S06E02: "One Giant Leap"), the series' viewers understand that these were inexorably leading to the series final episodes, as they do.

This use of flashforward scenes could almost initiate some reflexivity for the viewers about their own experience of the narrative itself. Understanding that the series' creators intentionally forecasted the end that much in advance, three seasons before the actual series finale, could induce in the viewers a feeling of nostalgia for the present timeline which was the lifeline of *This Is Us*. It is as if a countdown had started, reminding

them that whenever these flashforwards appear on screen, the series inexorably rushes towards its end. TV series, by definition, are ongoing and are always very careful to leave their ending fully open in order to secure another season. With the flashforward scenes of *This Is Us*, the series itself refers to its finite form, leading to an end that is no mystery to the viewers. That is why there weren't that many flashforwards over the course of the series, so as to not lose the viewers' interest, finding the right balance to keep it compelling, not depressing. But if anything, the identifying of the final house upon the hill near the original cabin indicates a movement that is both going forward, and going back. Going forward in time, but going back in space since the siblings, in one of the final episodes aptly entitled "Family Meeting" (S06E16), all agree to support Kevin's decision to move into the "perfect home" in order to tend to their sick mother during her final few years. The narrative thus crystalizes its final moments in a space where the past and the future literally coexist with Jack's perfect home⁷ seen as being built right on top of the hill behind the Pearsons' family cabin.

Kevin's decision to move in with his mother and focus on his construction company is not, however, a step back but forward, as he honors his roots with resolve, overcoming his looming homesickness filled with fear and regret, and trading it for homecoming instead:

But concepts of feeling at home or homecoming as responses to homesickness are not only important to the aesthetics or characters of a televisual narrative. They also concern audiences. Watching television can induce a homely feeling. A component of serials themselves is the necessity of habitual viewing, and this seems to strengthen the feeling of longing on the part of the audience. (Niemeyer & Wentz, 2014: 132-133)

The characters appear to be on a fast-paced future trajectory that was known by the viewers from rather early on, but that could also be one of the reasons why some audience members responded almost viscerally to the series. Knowing how it ended did not prevent people from tuning in, and as *This Is Us* kept on telling the Pearsons' stories, the extended timeline that mostly kept on looking back, also relied on its future prospects. In doing so, the series kept its viewers focused on the journey rather than the destination. Just like it wasn't homesickness that motivated the series overlapping narrative that circled towards home, it wasn't homesickness that motivated the writers to revisit past decades. It's almost as if, as time went by, the present timeline of the series felt lighter, less burdened by the past as it started to look forward, as if nostalgia became more and more

7. <https://images.app.goo.gl/hddtMode6a6TNvfu5>

playful as exemplified by the pun in the episode “Four Fathers” (S06E03). What came before, Americana and all the nostalgia that comes along with it, becomes a source of inspiration, a shift that is materialized in “The Cabin” (S04E14) as Kate, Kevin and Randall unearth a time capsule they had buried near the cabin, back in 1993.

The objects of Americana-ffection

The items buried in the time capsule all relate to who Kate, Kevin and Randall were in their early teens, as well as who their parents were since they, too, buried something in the capsule. Kevin buried a photograph of him and Sophie, his childhood crush whom he married after graduating high school, divorced not long afterwards, and whom he ultimately finds his way back to by the end of the series. Kate buried a sheet of paper, now unreadable, on which she had played MASH, the popular kid’s game which intends to predict one’s future. But it is because of Randall’s item that the three of them go outside to look for the capsule, and dig it out. During the episode, and in the time-capsule fashion that the cabin represents to the siblings, they decide to complete an old puzzle that was made from a family photo of the five of them. While working through their differences, they reach the completion of the puzzle and one final piece of the puzzle is missing which makes Randall click. Stressed out by the importance of burying just one thing to sum up what his life was like, teenage Randall choked and could not decide what to bury. Kevin came to the rescue and chose for him instead, burying one piece of the puzzle, the one with most of Jack’s face. What was intended as an annoying yet “perfect” choice according to teenage Kevin turned into an incredibly meaningful gesture because of Jack’s passing. In the capsule were also Jack’s and Rebecca’s choices that the siblings mistook at first. In Rebecca’s pouch was the drawing of Jack’s perfect house on top of the hill that he had thrown away, and which Rebecca decided to safeguard, always the believer in her husband’s dreams. In Jack’s pouch was a cassette tape which the siblings first thought was a mixtape made by their mother. It was instead a recording made by Jack in which he professed his love once more for his wife and kids, the first time after four seasons that the viewers see a direct interaction between adult Kate, Kevin and Randall and their father.

These artefacts from their past incongruously come back into their lives, and by the end of the episode, Jack’s “crappy doodle” of the perfect house for him and Rebecca to grow old in suddenly materializes in the flashforward, as the viewers understand that this was, all along, the house of the flashforwards that began at the end of season two. For Gary Cross, materiality and nostalgia are two sides of the same coin since nostalgic

recollections originate from people's encounters with a wide variety of artefacts, of things:

Emotions and sensuous feelings from the past are naturally evoked by encounters with "things." In a different age these may have been religions icons, ceremonial clothing or music, or monuments. Today they are mostly consumer goods from our youth; these give us a huge variety of hooks to hang our personal emotional hats on. [...] Without stuff, there is little to talk about, respond to, or recall, at least for most of us who aren't mystics or uncommonly introspective. (Cross, 2015: 17-18)

That same intention can be deciphered through the entire series in the way that *This Is Us* also develops, and sometimes even relies on, specific objects in order to enhance its all-American contours. Whether it be knickknack personal memorabilia, toys, clothes, cars, tools, decorations, devices or appliances, *This Is Us* is very deliberate in the way that it showcases these sometimes trivial things, making them particularly meaningful in ways that would, then again, induce nostalgic recollection for the viewers. The items placed in the time capsule by the Pearsons are all very personal, but they are also very meaningful for the series' audience because of the family history that they are now fully engaged in and keenly aware of. Most adults can relate to what it feels like to look at an old photograph, or a drawing their kid made when they were little. So seeing the Pearson siblings experience this nostalgia on screen would trigger nostalgia by proxy for the viewers. They're not exactly feeling nostalgic about their own lives, but nostalgic for/with Kate, Kevin and Randall. But the small artefacts that the series production designers placed here and there in the sets of the flashbacks in order to make those scenes authentic, also served another purpose as they would take a life of their own in the viewers' minds. Upon seeing them in the background, even fleetingly, these small things created connections, nostalgic impulses which would entice audience members to go back in time of their own accord, taken to a memory in which they interacted with this or that object, thus transforming them into generational totems.

For example, Kevin and Randall are seen playing with Ninja Turtles action figures and some years later, playing on their Game Boys. Toby bonds with his son while playing with his old Star Wars collectible toys. For anybody who owned and played with those when they were kids, or parents who bought those for their kids, recognizing these toys will immediately remind them of a moment of their lives. These objects of people's affections are then transformed into repositories of memories, totems that keep these memories alive because it is when gazing upon them that they resurface. That's the reason why, when exploring attics or basements, there

will always be boxes of stuff that won't be deemed valuable to a stranger, but which will be full of the most precious things for the people who stored them, thus verifying the old saying that one man's trash is another man's treasure. These totems are the small attempts that people make in order to master time, to try and control it to the best of their abilities, too aware that time will relentlessly go by, and won't stop or slow down for anyone. These items are, in and of themselves, little time capsules, reviving memories, and in doing so, reviving the nostalgia that might come along with them. Throughout its wide array of potential things, materiality thus becomes the imperfect and somewhat ineffective counterpart to the fleeting moments of people's lives, storing emotions and experiences in the sometimes most mundane of objects, something that *This Is Us* fully integrated.

As demonstrated by Jason Mittel in *Complex TV*, pilots and first seasons of TV series function as a sort of reading grid of how the narrative will operate and which ploys it will build upon. To that end, the emphasis placed on Pearson memorabilia in both the flashbacks and the present timeline provides a non-negligible nostalgic input which, once more, adds to the all-American aura of the show. There are plenty of references and small but meaningful inclusions of objects here and there, as when Randall finds little worn-out toy soldiers on the roof of the cabin while cleaning the gutters (S01E09, "The Trip"), but *This Is Us* goes beyond to also structure some of its most important story arcs around materialistic considerations. "The Best Washing Machine in the World" (S01E07), which comes rather early on in the first season, indicates to the series' audience that what they might perceive as mere elements of the sets' background, were carefully planted there and are also integral to the stories told. Some of these objects might be more meaningful than others, and each taken separately might seem or feel insignificant, but altogether, they are intrinsic to *This Is Us* Americana.

"The Best Washing Machine in the World" episode opens on a quick montage of the Pearsons' basement on Cat Stevens' "The Wind", showing the three washing machines they owned between the kids' birth until their late teenage years. The machines themselves do not seemingly occupy any sort of center stage into the episode's narrative. But in the main flashback storyline for the episode, the latest washing machine prevents Kevin from sleeping as he decides to move into the spare room in the basement, right next to the laundry room, in order to have a space of his own, and not be in the same bedroom as Randall anymore. An extended version of the episode's opening montage on the same soundtrack concludes the episode, triggered by a pensive Rebecca who is saddened to see her boys grow apart. As she does the laundry and gazes upon what she once called "the best washing machine in the world," she is taken back to the memories she

made in that same basement with Jack, first complaining of the bad timing for their washing machine to break down with three infants upstairs, then how another one broke down and flooded the basement with foam everywhere as the kids came to help out and play with it, and finally how Jack got her “the best washing machine in the world” which would make her life a lot easier. The modernization of household appliances brought gradual comfort in all developed countries, but seeing how Jack was able to provide her with a really good washing machine also indicates that the Pearsons were climbing up the social ladder, going from lower to upper middle-class, signals that they were on their way to conform to the ideals of an objectively patriarchal American dream, yet without passing judgement.

Another beacon of material Americana takes center stage early on in the series with the Pearsons’ cars. The Pearsons’ iconic family car is a Jeep Grand Wagoneer that the viewers first see on screen in “Career Days” (S01E06) and that the family would keep for years. In flashbacks further in time, Jack owns other cars, most notably a 1967 Chevelle Super Sport. The Pearsons’ Wagoneer is around during the first season, an iconic American car from an iconic car manufacturer, but in the first season, it is the 1967 Chevrolet that bears the most significance. In “The Right Thing to Do” (S01E11) Jack and Rebecca learn that they are pregnant with triplets, putting some extra pressure on Jack to provide stability, especially when it is apparent that Rebecca’s parents do not believe in him to do so. Jack scraps wherever and whatever he can to amass enough money to buy a house that would be big enough for the five of them, selling his beloved Chevrolet in the process. It is however in the first season finale that we learn of how Jack came into contact with what would become his most prized possession. In “Moonshadow” (S01E18) a young Jack is seen fixing an elderly woman’s car which belonged to her late husband, and who ponders selling it to which Jack replies: “You watch your mouth Mrs. Peabody, this is a Super Sport. You cannot sell a 1967 Chevelle Super Sport.”

Two different elements come into play around Jack’s Chevelle, both related to nostalgia. The first has to do with how the series’ writers decided that Jack, like any well-rounded all-American boy, would love his cars. The character was first intended to ride a Camaro, but influenced by Milo Ventimiglia’s personal passion for vintage cars, it was decided that Jack would ride a 1967 Chevelle Super Sport instead. Ventimiglia owned a Chevelle and it was his car that was actually used as a prop in *This Is Us*. In the chapter entitled “Lovin’ That ’57 Chevy (or Whatever Was Your Favorite Car at Seventeen),” Gary Cross explores how (mostly) men’s fascination for cars led to an entire collector’s market of vintage and how it is deeply rooted in nostalgia itself:

He was a Ford guy, not a Chevy guy like “everyone else,” and his favorite years were 1957 and 1958, when he was a teen. The car defined him and his guy group, a “community of consumption” with or without his father. This pattern is repeated in different age groups at these car shows, echoing the annual model changes of the car industry, which produced narrow and often isolated cohorts of youthful enthusiasm and, later, middle-aged nostalgia. (Cross, 2015: 63)

In *This Is Us*, Jack is not particularly nostalgic about the '67 Chevelle and considers it more of a muscle car, but Ventimiglia explained in several interviews his interest in old American cars, going as far as personifying his possession, disclosing that the car's name was Evelyn and that “she picked it” (Stone, 2017). The series' lead also posted a picture of himself in the car on his personal Instagram account, a car that became quite popular with the *This Is Us* fanbase.⁸

The nostalgic fascination of the actor mimicked the one that the series' creator intended to play around in *This Is Us*, but the way that Jack ends up selling it in order to provide for the Pearsons' household in the making hints to another nostalgic aspect that the car represents, that of the rite of passage:

Cars liberated Americans from the constraints of home and work, even if the car was used mostly to get to and from those constraining places. The male love affair with the car is understandable, especially when it is associated with that most romantic of times, the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood in America, which all comes together in the rituals of getting one's driver's license and first car. (Cross, 2015: 75)

Selling the Chevelle for a more affordable and more practical car is indeed a rite of passage for Jack, who then fully steps into adulthood. The Pearsons' 1990 Jeep Grand Wagoner, which Jack and Rebecca purchase in the early 1990s and that the viewers see throughout the six seasons of *This Is Us*, is engraved in the series' narrative in “The Car” (S02E15). This episode comes right after the ominous one surrounding Jack's death, and focuses on how the family started to integrate the reality of his passing, showing the transition between a time when Jack was the one behind the wheel, and how Rebecca had to step up while still grieving her husband. The family car, amputated of its primary owner, becomes both a remnant of his presence, and a metaphor of how the Pearsons would go on without him, highlighting the bittersweet ambivalence of an object, neutral by

8. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bdv7HOYhl6U/> 03/05/2023

nature, that one would want to safeguard in memory of a loved one and in which both tragedy and happiness reside.

Two other objects are recipients of that same love-hate relationship in *This Is Us*, a slow-cooker and a smoker-grill. “That’ll Be the Day” (S02E13) opens on elderly couple George and Sally entering their garage filled with several items, and boxes full of things. Sally exclaims “what a mess” as they enter the room and starts throwing some of it in a bin, as the viewers understand that they put their house on sale and need to clear some space for potential buyers to be interested. George stops her, suggesting a yard sale instead, to which she replies that “nobody wants this junk.” But as he reminds her: “this junk is the stuff of our lives.” Sally uncovers an old juke-box that played an instrumental role at the beginning of their love story at the diner George once owned. It is as if this couple was taken straight out of a Norman Rockwell painting, stressing even more so the overall all-American atmosphere of the scene which ends on Sally kissing her husband, asking him harshly but comically to “throw it out.” The nice old couple disappears for the entire episode only to resurface at the very end in a montage that shows how the Pearsons’ house caught fire that night in 1998 due to a crockpot malfunction, leading to Jack’s death because of the fumes he inhaled. During the montage and in a very *This Is Us* timeline twist, George comes knocking on the door of his neighbors, and a younger Jack and pregnant Rebecca back in 1980 open the door. George tells them that they finally got an offer on the house and that they’ll be moving soon. With a box in his hands, George gives them, as a going away present, a crockpot that’s only two years old and in which “great family meals have been cooked”. Instantly, the viewers understand that it is the same slow-cooker that is the cause for the fire that is taking over the house as the montage unfolds. The sweetest gesture leading to the greatest tragedy.

Surfacing much later in season six, the smoker-grill does not lead to a comparable catastrophe, but it did create some sort of an odd Pearson family tradition of bad luck with their cooking appliances. The smoker-grill becomes a symbol of Toby and Kate’s fallout which culminates when Toby uses it for the first time. Focused on his shiny new toy, Toby lets his very young visually impaired son, Jack jr., slip from his distracted supervision, as Jack discerned that the front door was open, and decided to go to the park on his own, leading to family panic. Jack jr. is found on time because of Rebecca’s deductions, but still hurt his head, falling onto the playground. An adult Jack jr., showing his scar on his forehead in a flash-forward sequence, associates the smell of the smoker-grill to the day that marked the end of his parents’ marriage, but it did not prevent him from purchasing one. What could have been a childhood trauma for Jack jr. is not something that was unsurpassable, and his flashforward story arc is included in the series to prove that the continuing Pearson line is thriving

more than ever. A very successful singer, Jack jr.'s life is the furthest that the viewers will follow into the future of the series' timeline. Interestingly, it is not in the final season but during the fourth season of the series that the narrative goes that far ahead in time. A glimpse of Jack jr. and his little girl is included in the series' finale to emphasize on lineage, but his success story is, in the end, more of a happy prospect than an actual finality story-wise.

Cathartic nostalgia



The core design of *This Is Us* resides in the way that the viewers empathize with Rebecca, Jack, Kate, Kevin and Randall and how they all overcome the different trials that life has put on their paths. From the very opening of the show, the audience understands that various traumas have struck the Pearsons through the years, and going back and forth in time both reawakens those old wounds, making them much more vivid for the viewers, but also creates pathways through which these issues are addressed and even sometimes, resolved. Jack's sudden passing is undoubtedly one of the central traumas addressed in *This Is Us*, trying to make sense of how the ramifications of that event led to Kate's, Kevin's and Randall's identity crisis at the beginning of the series. But other issues that resonate deeply with the rest of the country are also integral to the series narrative. Divorce is addressed through the unraveling of Kate and Toby's marriage, handicap as well with Jack jr.'s visual impairment. Obesity, bulimia and anorexia are dealt with great care through Kate's story as well as that of her best friend Madison. Teen pregnancy and abortion, or the insidious cycles of addictions that several men in the Pearson family struggle with are also tackled in the show. Adoption is another topic addressed in the series, but there is one which brought about the most talking points in and about *This Is Us*: race.

Randall, being adopted in an all-white family does pose problems to Jack and Rebecca as Randall is growing up, and the viewers see the both of them struggle with Randall's blackness, not wanting him to feel different, yet not wanting to deprive him of, or deny his blackness at the same time. Because race is never openly discussed in the Pearson household, it leads Randall to bottle up a lot of pain which erupts in parts in the pilot episode of the series, once he finds his biological father. The Pearsons, as fictional entity, were already, by just existing, striking quite the emotional chord during a 2016 presidential campaign where racist rhetoric was no longer rampant and semi-hidden, but all out in the open thanks to Donald J. Trump and his supporters. Trump's election fractured the country even more, and for many viewers, *This Is Us* felt like a much-needed

relief system because it did not intend to shy away from those harder conversations, demonstrating that kindness, love and compassion were still at the heart of what the United States stand for. Racism is addressed head on mostly in the series' fifth season which coincides with the protests following George Floyd's murder which sparked the growth and better visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement. The double season five premiere episodes entitled "Forty" (S05E01 & 02) refer directly to the protests, and by the end of the second one, Randall confronts Kate directly about race and how they never ever talked about it. But now that it's taking the news by storm, she suddenly feels concerned. Through Randall's journey, racism as well as color blindness are addressed in order to lay out in the open the blueprint of what structural racism in the U.S. actually looks like and entails.

After a huge falling out, Kevin and Randall spend a good portion of the fifth season mending their relationship and "Brotherly Love" (S05E13) is probably the most racially-charged episode of the entire series. In it, Randall confronts Kevin's color blindness, resulting in a harsh yet much needed brutally honest exchange between the two brothers, with implications and results that are not that far off from the much talked about documentary *Deconstructing Karen* (Patty Ivins Specht, 2022). The interconnectedness of that very important conversation edited in the episode with flashbacks of Randall and Kevin being taken to the live taping of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* (NET/PBS, 1968-2001) when they were little, as well as the one of Randall's first visit to Kevin's apartment in Los Angeles after they had graduated from high school, showcases the complexity of being in a transracial family without minimizing, or worse, negating the growing pains that could come along with it. These complicated issues are also not one-sided in *This Is Us* as Randall himself is confronted to his own bias when with Beth they decide to become foster parents. Deja, a young girl, is brought to their home and Randall is called on his comfortable lifestyle, a luxury that many people of color don't have in the United States. Class struggle becomes an even bigger issue once Randall decides to run for the Philadelphia City Council, putting the spotlight on what local government can do to change people's lives. Randall's introspection is one that looks all the way back in order for him to be able to synthesize and make sense of what he suffered from, of what he gained, and ultimately, of who he is.

While some key past events are treated as such in the series with the first landing on the moon (S05E11 "One Small Step..."), or the Challenger Space Shuttle explosion (S06E01 "The Challenger"), it is the warring past and present of the United States that really takes the historical central stage in *This Is Us*. The trauma caused by the Vietnam and Afghanistan conflicts is woven into the series, beginning in season three. It was casually

mentioned in the first season that Jack had been to Vietnam but it was never explored. However once Kevin realizes he knows virtually nothing of his father's involvement in Vietnam, he decides to retrace some of his steps there, leading him to discover that Jack's younger brother Nicky, is, contrary to what Jack had told his family, still alive. But even decades after Vietnam, Nicky still suffers from post-traumatic stress and alcoholism. Kevin's endeavor thus triggers the Vietnam flashbacks narrative that starts with "Vietnam" (S03E04) and concludes with "Songbird Road: Part 1" (S03E11). Kevin decides to intervene and help his reluctant and grumpy old uncle to take his life back, and little by little, he succeeds, convincing him to go and attend veteran support groups. There he meets Cassidy Sharp, a veteran of the U.S. Marines who came back forever changed after her last tour in Afghanistan. Nicky and Cassidy's trauma might not stem from the same conflict, but the results seem to lead them on similar paths, and in doing so, *This Is Us* takes a long and unforgiving look into the mirror. Andrew Hoskins in his chapter entitled "Media and the Closure of the Memory Boom" insists that:

The contemporary memory boom's centrifugal force is the anchoring and atomising debate around the nature, form and status of the remembering of conflict, the 'globalising of Holocaust discourses,' the trauma of everything, and the 'right to remember'. Its driving factors include the increasing obsession with the commemoration and memorialisation of the traumas and triumphs of, particularly, twentieth-century conflicts and catastrophes. (Hoskins, 2014: 118)

It could be argued that *This Is Us* memorializes Vietnam and Afghanistan, but it does it on its own terms, personifying those events and making something out of them that stands out from the informational tone of news segments or documentaries. Thanks to its time-extended narrative structure, the series is able to explore trauma and bring some elements of resolution to it, without it feeling overarching or out of place. The trauma is there, but it's not what lingers. What remains are the ways that these characters were able to overcome them, and heal from them. Perhaps the complicated conversations, the jarring stories, the traumatic testimonies are perhaps best to have in a series like *This Is Us*. Indeed, Dan Hertz argued in his article "Trauma and Nostalgia" (1990) that nostalgia should be used as a resource to help people cope with trauma. In this show, the enduring traces of past events become nostalgic triggers which, in turn and more often than not, become cathartic. Thinking back on painful memories, on their source, is what leads to overcoming them. Hence, by *This Is Us* accounts, real tragedy occurs when one loses the ability to remember.

In “Light and Shadows” (S04E10) Rebecca undergoes some tests because of a few memory lapses, and in “Clouds” (S04E15) Rebecca is officially diagnosed with a mild cognitive impairment likely due to Alzheimer’s disease. From that point onward, Rebecca begins to struggle more and more with her memory. She begins to forget what the viewers don’t, as they have explored the Pearsons’ memories through the entire series, accentuating the empathy for someone losing moments that they have enjoyed and witnessed for the better part of four full seasons. The viewers don’t want her to forget all the beautiful things they have experienced of her life, and they certainly don’t want her to forget all the sad things either⁹. And so Rebecca starts to forget some little things, the small things that she is precisely scared of forgetting. She is not scared of forgetting the big events. It’s rather the white noise in between that she is scared of seeing slip away. Alzheimer’s, in our day and age where so many of our lives are archived on photos, or small videos we take with our phones, seems almost crueler than it was in the past:

Digital memories are archived in virtual spaces as digital photographs, memorial websites, digital shrines, online museums, alumni websites, broadcasters’ online archives, fan sites, online video archives and more. Keeping track, recording, retrieving, stockpiling, archiving, backing up and saving are deferring one of our greatest fears of this century: information loss. (Garde-Hansen, 2011: 71)

As maintained by Garde-Hansen in *Media and Memory*, this fear of information loss is very similar to what a patient struck by Alzheimer’s might feel, all the while knowing that there is not much that they can do to prevent it. Rebecca starts to forget what viewers remember, acting as a catalyst of nostalgic recollection on their end, making of Alzheimer’s a most incurable nostalgic disease. Yet some exercises are used to jog Rebecca’s memory, and most notably that of music, Rebecca being a singer and musician. Music is Rebecca’s passion, and she is seen singing in many flashbacks, making good use of Mandy Moore’s talent. In “Clouds” (S04E15) Rebecca wants to spend the day not worrying about the results of her memory tests that’ll be given during an evening appointment, and asks Kevin to take her to Joni Mitchell’s old house that she and Jack failed to find years ago; course-correcting a small music-related memory that she might end up forgetting. Sandra Garrido and Jane

9. As of now, very few research papers have investigated *This Is Us*, and the ones that did focused primarily upon health issues. Dr. Beth Hoffman conducted a study about how the series has impacted its adult viewers’ perception of Alzheimer’s disease (“It Encourages Family Discussion”: A Mixed-Methods Examination of the *This Is Us* Alzheimer’s Disease & Caregiving Storyline) while three doctors from the University at Buffalo (NY) have investigated how the series depicts family communication about end-of-life situations (*This Is Us: An Analysis of Mediated Family Communication at End-of-Life*).

Davidson explain how music and memory are intrinsically linked in *Nostalgia and Memory: Historical and Psychological Perspectives*:

One of the primary ways by which music is able to take on such significance in our inner world is by the way it interacts with memory. Memories associated with important emotions tend to be more deeply embedded in our memory than other events. Emotional memories are more likely to be vividly remembered and are more likely to be recalled with the passing of time than neutral memories. Since music can be extremely emotionally evocative, key life events can be emotionally heightened by the presence of music, ensuring that memories of the event become deeply encoded. Retrieval of those memories is then enhanced by contextual effects, in which a recreation of a similar context to that in which the memories were encoded can facilitate its retrieval. Thus, re-hearing the same music associated with the event can activate intensely vivid memories of the event. Memory is therefore closely intertwined with how our musical preferences develop and the personal significance that music holds in our individual lives, and will be a key theme considered throughout this volume. (Garrido & Davidson, 3)

Music (both score and soundtrack) in *This Is Us* is paramount, and is source of both continuation and recollection. Some songs are used as foreshadowing by some characters. When Jack's old neighbor, George, sees his old jukebox in the garage, he starts to sing "That'll Be the Day," a Buddy Holly and the Three Tunes song from 1956. George sings a few verses and ends on the one that reads: "that'll be the day that I die." That song gave its title to the episode (S02E13, "That'll Be the Day") which literally shows the day that Jack will, indeed, die. Kate is also fascinated by music. She learns to play the piano with her mom and has always sung. The viewers even see her work in a record store as a teenager. Kate becomes more involved with music after Jack jr.'s birth in order to stimulate him differently because of his visual impairment, leading her to work as a music teacher for disabled kids. Jack jr. being a very successful singer in the future is thus the embodiment of both his maternal grandparents. He has his grandfather's name, and lives his grandmother's dream. In "Blue Skies" (S04E18) which takes place on the kids' first birthday, Rebecca and Jack have a hard time grieving for Kyle, the third child they lost a year before during labor. They pay a visit to Dr. K., Rebecca's obstetrician, who tells them about the song "Blue Skies" (Irving Berlin, 1926). He tells them how he would sing that song to his wife's pregnant belly, but she unfortunately had a miscarriage and lost their first child. That song then made him and his wife very sad. But one day, she got pregnant again and he surprised himself singing that same song to her pregnant belly. Twenty-five years later, he tells them how he danced with his daughter to that same song on her wedding day. A song

that made them happy, made them sad, and made them happy again. Dr. K. goes on to tell Jack and Rebecca:

The whole human experience just wrapped up in that one song. Hospitals are kind of like that. [...] These bizarre buildings where people experience some of their greatest joys and some of their most awful tragedies. All under one roof. I think the trick is not trying to keep the joys and the tragedies apart. But you kind of got to let them cozy up to one another, let them coexist. [...] And I think that if you can do that, if you can manage to forge ahead with all that joy and heartache mixed up together inside of you, never knowing which one's gonna get the upper hand. And well, life does have a way of shaking out to be more beautiful than tragic. Not as good as the lemon thing, but it's the best I can do at short notice. (*This Is Us*, S04E18, "Blue Skies")

Songs become these cultural artefacts, comparable to objects that will assume the significance and power that people will decide to impose on them, something that *This Is Us*, once again, personifies through its viewers' nostalgia. One particular song of the series' soundtrack is a perfect example of that: "To Build a Home" by The Cinematic Orchestra, released in 2007. The first time the viewers hear the entire track is at the end of "That'll Be the Day" (S02E13) as the fire starts and the Pearson's house burns down. The second time the viewers hear it again entirely is at the end of "The Cabin" (S04E14) as Randall presses play on the cassette player and the siblings hear their father's message, closing on the flashforward of the perfect home built. Finally, the viewers hear it one last time at the end of "Family Meeting" (S06E16) when Kate, Kevin, Randall and the rest of the family agree on the course of action they will take to accompany Rebecca at the house until the end. As Kate says "maybe this was the reason all along, the reason there's three of us," the track starts on a montage of about three minutes which shows a flashforward of Rebecca's final five years, ending on Kevin calling Randall, telling him to come to the house as Rebecca's death is now imminent. Within the course of *This Is Us*, the same song first signified destruction, then creation, and finally peaceful resolution and how "To Build a Home" is not a matter of place or time, but people.

The series' score was also used as a very powerful callback through Siddhartha Khosla's "Closing Theme" which has played on the end credits of each episode since the pilot. The very same tune is used by Randall on "Career Days" (S01E06) when he ridicules himself, badly playing the piano and singing out of tune a song he wrote in order to explain his then job of weather trader. In the audience, Beth and the girls are embarrassed which makes for a rather funny situation, seeing Randall, the prodigal son, fail

at something. The tune, however, comes back years later as another more poignant song entitled “Forever Now” in “Day of the Wedding” (S06E13). Rebecca, who is struggling more and more with her disease, still wants to sing a song she wrote during Kate’s second wedding. As Rebecca starts to play the piano and sings, the viewers recognize the tune of the end credits, reinterpreted one last time as the series is drawing closer to its end. Hearing this song reprising that specific melody plays on both time and space since the viewers would recognize where they heard it from for more than six years: at the end of each episode of *This Is Us*.

The writing of the series itself relied on recollection and narrative loops, callbacks to elements of the diegesis viewers had explored before. This somewhat jerky narrative is one of the trademarks of *This Is Us*. “The Pool” (S01E04) is one of the series’ very first episodes but its sequel “The Pool: Part Two” (S04E02) comes several years later. The entire time stream of the series sometimes feels like it was going on a loop, with one episode focused on each sibling but at a similar time. It was the case in “A Hell of a Week: Part One”, “Part Two” and “Part Three” (S04E11, 12 & 13) as well as with the episodes “The Guitar Man” (S06E08), “The Hill” (S06E09) and “Every Version of You” (S06E10) that all show the direct consequences of Rebecca’s speech to her three children, the last one she wants to make while she still has all of her abilities, and during which she designates Kate as the person in charge of any medical decisions (“Taboo,” S06E07). The show also makes good use of déjà vu and intradiegetic references to place the viewers on a nostalgic route. “The Stranger” (S04E01) opens the season on a literal stranger to the viewers, Jack jr. and “The Stranger: Part Two” (S04E18) ends the season on the arrival of whom was yet another stranger until her birth, Jack jr.’s daughter, Hope. The series itself becomes an artefact of spectator nostalgia, and creates pathways in people’s own experience of viewership. “The Challenger” (S06E01) opens the final season on a montage that includes inserts from the pilot episode of *This Is Us*, pushing the nostalgic button, especially since viewers knew when the sixth season began airing, that it would be the last one of the series. Dan Fogelman explained that:

It was intentional to set up the feeling of nostalgia for the audience and for all of us who have stuck with the show for six years. The idea that we’re at the beginning of completing a journey, and in this first episode back, I’m going to remind you of where this all started in the same hour of television, and we’re also going to continue the story, is more intentional in that we’re now entering the beginning of the end of our story. It was an opportunity for us, as we start the season, to remind the audience of that and put that into the context of our show and then set us forth for the final bit. (Andreeva, 2022)

Fogelman has always been very confident but mostly very aware of the series' nostalgic brand, one that the writers' room kept intact until the very end of the show. The series' penultimate episode, "The Train" (S06E17) uses the transportation system as the metaphor that accompanies Rebecca to her death. She lies unconscious in her bed, surrounded by the entire family taking turns to come into her room to say their last good-byes, while a young Rebecca is seen making her way up a train, meeting people in each wagon that populated her life, as well as that of the viewers. She is working her way up memory lane, not down, until reaching the front car in which she is reunited with Jack, but before reaching him, she encounters William, Randall's biological father, to whom she asks: "This is quite sad isn't it, the end?" to which he answers:

Oh, I don't know. The way I see it, if something makes you sad when it ends, it must have been pretty wonderful when it was happening. Truth be told, I've always felt it a bit lazy to just think of the world as sad, because so much of it is. Because everything ends. Everything dies. But if you step back, if you step back and look at the whole picture, if you're brave enough to allow yourself the gift of a really wide perspective, if you do that, you'll see that the end is not sad, Rebecca. It's just the start of the next incredibly beautiful thing. ("The Train", S06E17)

Here, William reassures Rebecca, as much as the writers' room is addressing the series' viewers who only have one episode left with the Pearsons. The series' finale for *This Is Us*, is, by all accounts, probably one of the most carefully thought out one in the history of American television. In "Us" (S06E18) the 'present' timeline is set in 2032 and focuses on the day of Rebecca's funeral, while the flashback narrative of the episode is centered on a normal day, which begins with Jack and Rebecca relishing in the idea of just "doing nothing." The flashback sequences of the episode thus highlight precisely one of the "small things" that Rebecca was so scared of forgetting because of her disease. Interestingly, the viewers do not hear the eulogy of the three siblings for their mother, directing instead the audience's attention on what comes after the ceremony. Randall learns that he will be a grandfather, and that Deja and her companion would like to call their baby boy William. Even though Deja never met with Randall's biological father, she explains that because she knows Randall and what he told her of William, she knows who William was. But it is in the flashback sequences that lies the heart of the finale. At some point in it, Jack has to pivot in order to teach Randall how to shave, both of whom are a little later joined by Kevin to learn as well. Downstairs, Kate is impatient and asks what they're doing because she wants to play Pin the Tail on the Donkey, a game that the two boys dismiss as "baby stuff." As he watches his two sons shave, Jack tells them:

Don't underestimate your sister gentlemen. She gets it. At a very young age, she gets it. Well, when you're young, you're always trying to be older. Then, when you get old, you're always trying to go back, be back. Try and appreciate the moments, you know? I mean, that's what we're doing, just collecting these little moments. We don't recognize them when we're in them because, well, we're too busy looking forward. But, then, we spend the rest of our lives looking back. Trying to remember them. Trying to be back inside them. It's strange the things you remember. ("Us," S06E18)

As they come back downstairs, getting ready to play Pin the Tail on the Donkey, Jack holds the box and is taken back to the moment when they stumbled upon the game with Rebecca in a toy store. Seeing on the box a young white girl, a young white boy and a young black boy playing the game was a message "of the universe" which gave them no other choice but to buy it.¹⁰

As the series' finale episode reaches its end, a final parallel montage starts mixing the present timeline with the flashback, but it also adds into it a third scene, all becoming intertwined with one another, just like Kevin's Jackson Pollock-like painting. The viewers are taken back to the front car of the train with Jack and Rebecca, witnessing the final exchange between the two before Rebecca surrenders and dies. Rebecca is sad that she won't be able to do all the things she wanted to still live with her family, but Jack reassures her: "It's hard to explain but, you'll do all those things with them." Whereas in the flashback the Pearsons are having fun making a racket all together while playing Pin the Tail on the Donkey, in the present, the entire family is gathered in the living room after the funeral, and decide to play the same game. The tradition endures as Jack's and Rebecca's legacy is kept alive by Kate's, Kevin's and Randall's actions, tying together a narrative that began for the viewers more than three years earlier. Something Fogelman and the writers' room have been planning for years:

Because our audience has been so devoted, and because, hopefully, we've smartly set up the contained areas where these future timelines live, I think you're going to have a real sense of resolution and completion for this family. It's where the mixed-up VHS tapes of this family's existence will all coalesce and speak to one another in completion. And so we have been working tirelessly to set up this rewarding final season to make all the pieces fit together. (Roots, 2021)

10. <https://images.app.goo.gl/3SPieJeyGcMFWS8W6>

The unifying function of serial nostalgia

In the fourth flashforward of the series, at the end of the midseason episode “The Beginning Is the End Is the Beginning” (S03E09), Beth’s assistant brings her the Pin the Tail on the Donkey game that was in her office,¹¹ as Beth tells her and the viewers that they are all going to see Randall’s mother and that she promised she would bring it. That small scene placed in an episode broadcast on November 27, 2018 found its meaning only on May 24, 2022 when the series finale aired. As such, the episode’s title “The Beginning Is the End Is the Beginning” resonates even stronger, reading like the essence of *This Is Us*. There’s no beginning and no end to the Pearsons, only an end to the show. Fogelman anticipated much of the series’ conclusion during the writing and filming of season three, so much so that almost all of the flashback scenes that are included in “Us” (S06E18) were filmed during season three and put under lock and key until it was time to edit the finale. In those scenes, the actors and the actress playing the younger versions of Kate, Kevin and Randall are younger than in those filmed in 2021 and 2022 and which were included in the final season. Seeing them younger thus took the viewers back in time as well, as they saw these child actors and actress grow older over the years. Fogelman intended for the finale to feel like a time capsule, a moment that they preserved until the very end for the viewers, showing how the creator of the series himself wrote out of nostalgia: “the way we shot it, it feels like found footage of a family that you really know, and there’s something very nostalgic about it. I think it’s going to be very rewarding and very fulfilling.” (Snierson, 2022).

Holding onto this final piece of the puzzle before sharing it with the series’ audience, Fogelman highlighted the archival work that was put into motion for *This Is Us*. The series then reads as the archive of a family that lived in the United States from the 1950s to the early 2030s, and of which all viewers are now custodians of. Even more so, because the viewers recognize so much of their own culture, of their own history, of their own story, of their own country, they also bear witness to this archive, testifying of its accuracy. Like all serialized narrative, the experience of the audience is very much like that of the collector, building the narrative in both space and time, materializing in these people’s lives. Could *This Is Us* then be memorabilia of its time?

Memorabilia is designed to evoke a string of memories. By collecting, we “singularize” the commodity, turning it into something unique to be admired in a world of mass production, conformity, and

11. <https://images.app.goo.gl/LSgJXr683r9RvYTM6>

utility. Nostalgic collectors are also heroic in saving those parts of the past that the rest of us deny or ignore. Modern collecting in a consumer society is a response to the alienated workplace, making skilled “work-like hobbies an appealing source of dignity.” Even if fetishistic, nostalgics seek an alternative to the soulless materialism of our time. (Cross, 2015: 237-238)

The network TV serial format has matured into a cultural artefact that inscribes itself in time, in habits, constructing a collection of episodes that all add up to create both a cohesive narrative whole but also a community of people. To that extent, *This Is Us* is more than just a collection of moments of the Pearsons’ lives, because the very act of tuning in to keep adding to the collection of the series episodic narraTVization became somewhat of an act of resistance at a time when viewers grew accustomed to streaming their programs whenever, however and wherever they wanted. *This Is Us* started to be broadcast right around an industrial shift that has changed dramatically the systems of production and circulation of network programs. It did so to such a degree that outside of premium cable TV and streaming platforms, broadcast networks and their programs are now considered a thing of the past. Throughout its first season broadcast in 2016-2017, *This Is Us* became the latest network series that was a sensation for critics and audiences alike. After *This Is Us*, no other network series was able to create a similar pop culture momentum which makes this show the last of its kind, a swan song for a golden age of American network television that now seems to be over. The homely and nostalgic feeling that the series’ diegesis features is one thing, but with the classic format of the episodic network drama now a dying breed, the show, reaching its final season in 2022, feels even more as if a page was being turned.¹²

The official promo for the series, whether on TV, on YouTube, or other social media also leaned on that homey nostalgia, sometimes looking back at the experience people had of *This Is Us* through the years, even before the final season aired. Much like the Pearsons going back to the cabin, viewers returned to the series that made them “feel like home” at a time of industrial shifts and political divisiveness and uncertainties.

Throughout its run, the series was always brutally honest with its viewers as to where the narrative was headed. There were some twists and turns along the journey, but the destination of which they were aware of from very early on remained unchanged. I would therefore contend that *This Is Us*, because of its format, of its theme, and of its broadcasting period, is a series that embodies nostalgia better than any other. In

12. <https://x.com/NBCThisIsUs/status/1455927762770964486>

The Future of Nostalgia, Svetlana Boym differentiated two types: restorative and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia “puts emphasis on nostos (returning home) and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps” (Boym 2001: 41). Reflective nostalgia “dwells in algia (aching), in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance” as well as “dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity” (Boym 2001: 41). Whereas reflective nostalgia focuses on the individual experiences and memories, restorative nostalgia tends to be more absolute and, as it is, a lot more political, seeing the past as indisputably true and seductive. *This Is Us* never wavered from its original “Game Plan,” and kept on taking its audience on a journey which did not shy away from trauma and tragedy, but which, supported by personified Americana, also presented a narrative of resilience and growth. The series showcased that the pursuit of happiness was both intro- as well as retrospective, blending restorative and reflective nostalgia into a satisfying narrative entity that encouraged its viewers to always keep seeing the glass half-full through the interconnectedness of human experience, through connective nostalgia.

An associate professor at Le Mans Université (France), **Charles Joseph** completed a Ph.D. in North American Cultural Studies. His dissertation, entitled *Being and Writing (from) Los Angeles: Wanda Coleman*, analyzes the complex and evolving relationship between the work of the African-American author and the city that has harbored her birth, life and death. He has simultaneously developed an interest in the implications and practices that the world-renowned entertainment industry based in Los Angeles has had on the city’s history and the shaping of its socio-cultural identity. He also examines how the city’s ongoing musealization has been impacting its inhabitants, in maneuver that intends to rehabilitate Los Angeles as a Western artistic capital, beyond its original status of global pop culture’s manufacturer. He has published articles in *Les Chantiers de la Création*, *ORDA*, *Conserveries Mémoires*, *ANGLES* and *Transatlantica* and contributed chapters to *Anthropology of Los Angeles* (Jenny Banh & Melissa King, 2017) or *Bury my Heart in a Free Land* (Hettie Williams, 2018).

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