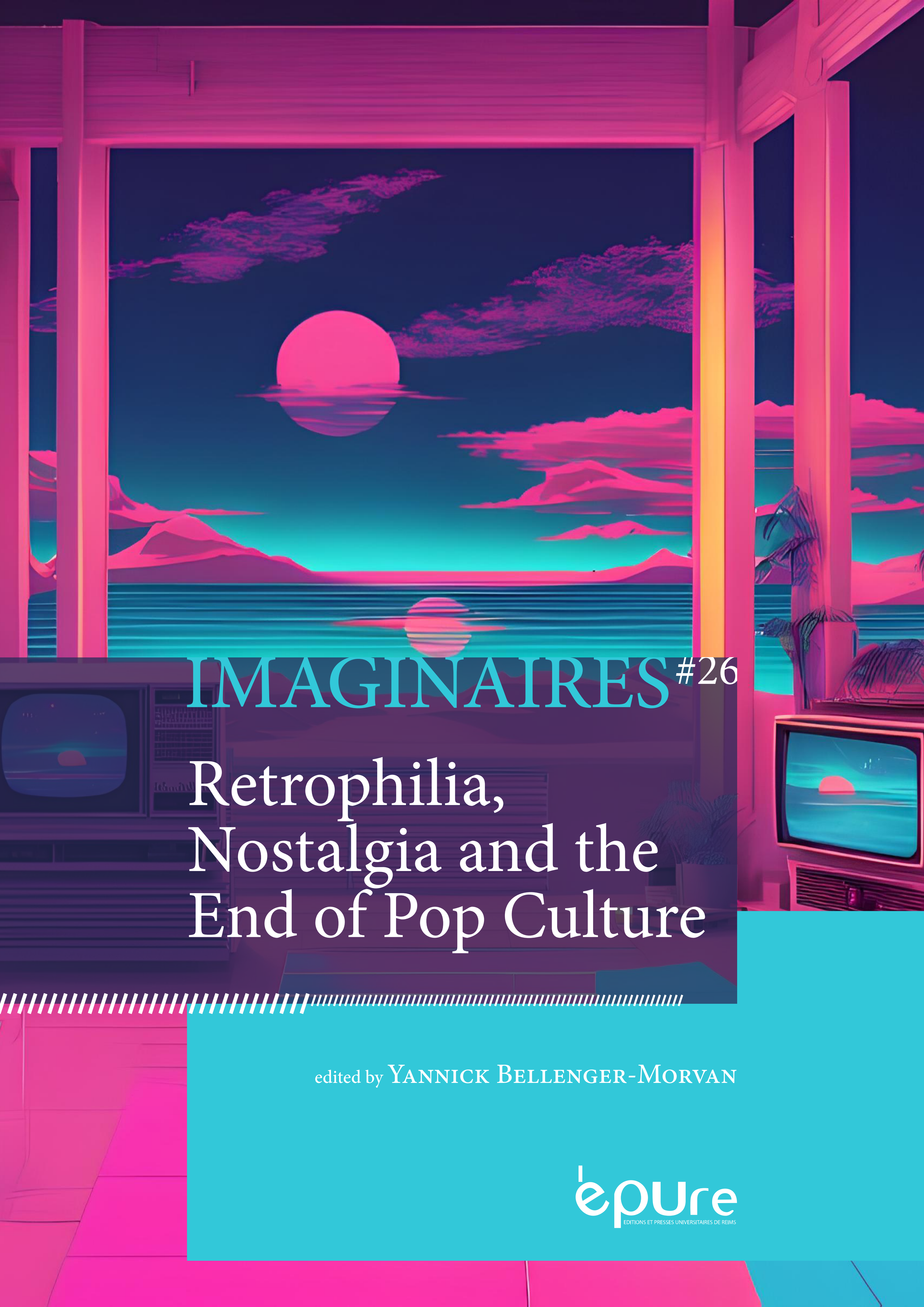

IMAGINAIRES #26

Retrophilia, Nostalgia and the End of Pop Culture

edited by YANNICK BELLENGER-MORVAN

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Introduction: is Pop Culture trapped in the Past?

Yannick Bellenger-Morvan
Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne, CIRLEP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finally, the three articles that compose the third and last chapter go beyond a post-modern approach to nostalgia and adopt a post-nostalgic or anachronistic stance towards the past. In “Anemoia and the Vaporwave Phenomenon: the ‘New’ Aesthetic of an Imagined Nostalgia”, Lucas Cantinelli focuses on the ironic dimension of the Vaporwave phenomenon, which celebrates the aesthetic of 1980s and 1990s blockbuster culture while also criticising consumer capitalism. The author also draws attention to the danger of misremembering the past or glorifying an era that never actually existed. Cantinelli takes here the example of synthwave music, which mainly appeals to reflective nostalgia but can also take on a more political dimension with, for instance, far right vaporwave or fashwave. In the following article, Mirko Milivojević looks at the phenomenon of Yugo-nostalgia in pop music, which exemplifies the way nostalgia turns back to and/or tries to revive a period of the past, in this case Yugoslavia's socialist history, seen as a time when the future was (still) hopeful. The retro-futurist trend in pop music thus seems to bridge the gap between utopian aspirations and disillusionment. Finally, Margaux Collin examines Quentin Tarantino's choice of soundtrack in *Django Unchained*, where anachronism is displayed and assumed. She demonstrates how nostalgic cinema enables those that have hitherto been the victims of history to reclaim the(ir) past. In the wake of Pam Cook's work, the three articles all come to the conclusion that nostalgia may indeed be perceived as the celebration of a golden age but that it is nonetheless an opportunity for "the critical exorcism of the past?" (Cook, 2005: 98).

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

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Gender And Nostalgia In Period Drama: *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* and *Mad Men*

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Abstract: *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017-2023) and *Mad Men* (2007-2015) share a common genre, location, and era. Both are period dramas, set in New York City, as the waning 1950s transition into the 1960s. Additionally, both television serials address changing cultural conditions, especially surrounding gender. Yet, when analyzed through the prism of nostalgia, the two programs deviate in significant ways. This essay uses Grainge's (2000) distinction between nostalgia as mood and nostalgia as aesthetic style, applying it to the two television serials. It also incorporates concepts of nostalgia as critique (Cook, 2005), as well as imagined nostalgia as the longing "for a past that has never been" (Niemeyer, 2014: 10). Following these criteria, the more somber *Mad Men* aligns with classic nostalgia as mood, expressing loss and longing for a vanished era, even as it also critiques that past. In contrast, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel's* upbeat, playful emotional approach corresponds more closely with nostalgia as aesthetic style, leaving it open to charges of a contrived, less historically serious form of storytelling. Instead, "Gender and Nostalgia in Period Drama" argues that the program creates a strategic perspective on the era by calling attention to the ways specific groups – such as would-be, female, stand-up satirists – were implausible configurations. *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* engages its selected categories of nostalgia to emphasize, for certain contemporary viewers, a place they cannot return to and a past they cannot long for save through the fictional intervention of corrective historicity.

Keywords: Nostalgia, gender, period drama, television serials, emotional tone, 1950s/1960s.

Résumé : *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017-2023) et *Mad Men* (2007-2015) ont en commun un genre, un lieu et une époque. Il s'agit dans les deux cas de séries d'époque, qui se déroulent à New York, au point de bascule entre les années 1950 et 1960. Toutes les deux traitent de transformations socio-culturelles, en particulier en matière de genre. Pourtant, quand on les analyse au prisme de la nostalgie, ces séries présentent

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d'importantes divergences. Pour analyser ce corpus, notre article s'appuie sur la distinction établie par Paul Grainge (2000) entre la nostalgie comme sentiment et la nostalgie comme esthétique. Ce travail intègre également les concepts de nostalgie comme outil critique (Cook, 2005), ainsi que la nostalgie comme vecteur du désir « d'un passé qui n'a jamais été » (Niemeyer, 2014 : 10). Selon ces critères, *Mad Men*, la plus sombre des deux, illustre la définition classique de la nostalgie entendue comme une émotion traduisant la perte et la nostalgie d'une époque disparue, même si ce passé est aussi critiqué. En revanche, la dimension sentimentale, joyeuse et ludique de *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* correspond davantage à une forme de nostalgie esthétique, ce qui lui vaut d'être accusée de construire un récit artificiel et moins fiable historiquement. À contre-courant de cette approche, notre article intitulé « *Gender and Nostalgia in Period Drama* » (« Genre et nostalgie dans les séries d'époque ») soutient au contraire que cette série offre un point de vue pertinent sur la période en attirant l'attention, justement, sur le caractère complétement invraisemblable de certains personnages, par exemple les femmes aspirant à devenir artistes de *stand-up*. *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* embrasse différentes formes de nostalgie pour mieux montrer à certains téléspectateurs contemporains un lieu où ils ne peuvent retourner et un passé auquel ils ne peuvent aspirer, sauf par le biais de l'intervention fictive d'une historicité corrective.

Mots clés : Nostalgie, genre, série d'époque, feuilleton télévisé, sentimentalité, années 1950/1960.

Introduction

A distinction is usually made between the historical film or television series and the period drama. In the former, the narrative focuses on events or people that once materially existed or continue to exist, as in the example of *The Crown* (2016-present). Of course, historical series feature fictionalized aspects, such as the portrayal of private conversations or other interpersonal exchanges for which no documented records occur, as is also the case with the literary category of historical fiction. In contrast, although period pieces might reference a known or "publicly memorialised event or figure", they are concerned with a past era in a more general sense, using fictional characters to depict what it might have felt like for a certain group of people to live in and experience a particular time and place (Drake, 2003: 187).

In these terms, both *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017-2023) and *Mad Men* (2007-2015) are period serials, portraying aspects of the transition from the 1950s to the 1960s in the United States and, more specifically, in New York. With stories beginning in 1958 and 1960, respectively, both serials also feature main characters who, at least initially, are depicted as fish out of water in these changing times. Miriam Maisel, known as Midge (Rachel Brosnahan), leads a sheltered, privileged existence on the Upper

West Side of New York City, where she lives with her husband and two children, and as neighbors to her parents, amidst their tight-knit Jewish community. Don Draper (John Hamm) enjoys a hard-won, successful career as a Madison Avenue advertising executive, a lifestyle that supports the affluent, suburban New York home he shares with his wife and two children. Through these introductory frames, both serials attempt to pinpoint the qualities of a changing era, capturing the waning 1950s and impending 1960s, with all the associations those two decades have for the programs' 21st century audiences. Prominent among the shifting cultural conditions of that impactful era are the transformations surrounding gender status and relations, emphasized by both serials.

And yet, for all their commonalities of genre, location, and era, the two serials deviate in striking ways over their comparable subject matter. Most notably, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* conveys a sense of optimistic possibility that is conspicuously restricted for *Mad Men's* principal white, male characters. Signaled by Don Draper's insistence on his 1950s business suit, white shirt, narrow tie, and ubiquitous fedora hat, we understand that he regards the unknown, encroaching social terrain of the 1960s with suspicion, if not outright hostility. Little hope of rapprochement between changing eras exists in Don's particular narrative world.[1] In contrast, Mrs. Maisel's story as a budding stand-up satirist follows Miriam's largely effective attempts to negotiate the expectations of her familiar, comfortable world with a new context that, especially at the outset, feels frightening and alien but, often, also exhilarating. In place of the disconnection and hostility depicted by *Mad Men's* lead character towards this looming new world, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* holds out the possibility of a detente, however complicated, between otherwise disparate existences, represented by Miriam's Upper West Side home life versus the seamier environs and circumstances dictated by her burgeoning stand-up career.

Their contrasting outlooks towards the same historical period are complemented by the emotional or tonal qualities each serial adopts. Antagonism and mean-spiritedness accompany a good portion of the relationships in *Mad Men*; its characters are often unkind to others, sometimes viciously so. Theirs is a narrative world in which neither brief encounters nor prolonged interactions among characters tend to end well. In comparison, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* offers a playful, upbeat, and fanciful sensibility, arguably open to charges of feel-good naivete or lack of 'realism'. While it is possible to attribute the distinct worldviews to the fact that *Mad Men* is predominantly a drama while *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* incorporates far more comedic material, I suggest the reverse: their divergent worldviews determine the degree of gravity versus lightheartedness implemented by each serial. This essay argues that the markedly antithetical worldviews embraced by the two programs can be attributed, in significant part, to the principal character's gender. And, further, that those opposing perspectives are *enabled by* each serial's varying conceptualization of nostalgia, and the differing purposes to which their respective nostalgic formulations are put.

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[1] However, it is possible to interpret *Mad Men's* series finale as Don Draper finally 'getting' the 1960s, at least in terms of commerce and consumerism, when he conceives the "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke" campaign.

The next section provides a brief excursion through contemporary thinking on the dynamics of mediated nostalgia, including Paul Grainge's partition of nostalgia as mood from nostalgia as aesthetic style. The following sections focus in greater detail on the two television serials chosen as case studies, beginning with *Mad Men* because it exemplifies the more traditional understanding of nostalgia as mood. Subsequently, I turn to *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* to outline its alternative formulation based on nostalgia as aesthetic style, combining that with Katharina Niemeyer's notion of imagined nostalgia, the latter defined as the longing for times or circumstances that never existed.

Mediated Nostalgia

Considerable work has been undertaken on the emotional complex of nostalgia, in large part due to the discipline of memory studies (Niemeyer, 2014: 3-5). Contemporary nostalgia has been defined as "homesickness" caused by either (or both) a spatial or temporal dislocation, and as "a bittersweet longing for former times and spaces" now somehow lost (Pickering and Keightley, 2006: 922; Niemeyer 1). Stuart Tannock argues that nostalgia "invokes a positively evaluated past world in response to a deficient present world" in certain aspects (1995: 454). One need not be nostalgic for the entirety of a previous era or vanished place but for some recognized, extracted portion of it. Because nostalgia involves a "positively evaluated past" in comparison to "a deficient present", it exists as "a periodizing emotion: that was then, and this is now" (Tannock: 456). Nostalgia is a periodizing emotion in the sense that it distinguishes past and present or, in spatial terms, there versus here. But it does so by performing a comparison of the two, marking the vanished as in some way better, fuller, richer than the here and now. Nostalgia as a periodizing emotion, prevalent in so many period films and television shows, functions not simply by documenting a past, that is, implementing an historical operation to greater or lesser success, but by *comparing* the differing temporal or spatial circumstances with the evaluative purpose of finding some aspect(s) wanting. The specific range of emotions associated with nostalgia become generated through this act of comparison and the subsequent identified paucity.

In Pam Cook's summary, a nostalgia film "conjures up a golden age", for some people if not for all, "which is both celebrated and mourned" (2005: 11). Nostalgia is the celebration of an era and a set of circumstances that once existed but, simultaneously, induces mourning due to its passing. Cook also notes that, at times, nostalgia can coalesce into a process in which the past is "exorcised to enable characters (and audience members) to come to terms with the present" (*Ibid.*: 12). This potential for critical evaluation of a period taking shape as an exorcism of the past toward the goal of disentangling from it, is stressed by others writing on nostalgia in addition to Cook (Tannock; Pickering and Keightley; Pierson 2014). It is a formulation of nostalgia that enables one "to initiate critical reconsiderations of the past, to tap into previously overlooked experiences, and to reveal the processes by which histories are constructed, engaged, and challenged" (Sprengler, 2021: 36). In this respect, the goal of critical nostalgia is to explore its corrective political potential in the present and for the future, rather than existing principally as a regressive retreat into the past.

Nostalgia is such a powerful emotional matrix that it "retains enough force" to create its feelings even among those "who have not personally experienced the past or place depicted", that is, those who did not live through the times portrayed but ache for their loss anyway (Spengler, 2009: 23; Landsberg 2003). Indeed, it remains possible for people to experience nostalgia "for real and imaginary losses", that is, for what they believe they have lost as well as for what they once actually experienced (Holdsworth, 2011: 125). Importantly, nostalgia is not a singular emotion but a "composite feeling of loss, lack and longing" at its most basic, combining these several emotions towards a regretted absence (Pickering and Keightley: 921). Even more so, what nostalgia generates is seemingly emotionally paradoxical so that, for instance, we are left feeling sadness when recalling happy times. Or, even as nostalgia signals "loss, lack and longing", it does so on the basis of strong, forged ties or bonds of affection that remain in place, through a process that layers melancholy over cherished memories (Atia and Davies, 2010: 184). Nostalgia occurs as an emotional composite or complex, then, in which the nature of its experiences can vary greatly to include longing, loss, regret, fondness, affection, tenderness, admiration, yearning, grief, wistfulness, and deep pleasure. Or in Cook's terms, it holds the capacity to engender anything from celebration and mourning to critical exorcism.

An important addition to the contemporary concept of nostalgia is contributed by Paul Grainge who distinguishes nostalgia as mood from nostalgia as mode or style (2000). In his argument, nostalgia *as mood* parallels its dominant understanding, outlined above, as an emotional complex aligned with loss, lack, and longing. In its manifestation as mood, nostalgia takes shape as "idealized remembrance" that forefronts feelings of "yearning" (Grainge: 28). In contrast, nostalgia *as mode or aesthetic style* disengages from emotions such as loss and longing. Instead, previous "periods are plundered for style", including their fashions, décor, music, and forms of technology (Grainge: 29). In this latter formulation, nostalgia can operate "quite removed from the concept of loss, as evidenced by the popularity of retro objects" (Drake: 190). Objects appropriated from the past in the manner of fashion, taste, or style take on the reverberation of being cool or retro-chic without commensurate longing for or necessarily having much knowledge about the era or context in which the object originated. This second formulation creates a form of nostalgia devoid of longing. Per Cook, nostalgia as style may be cause for celebration but it does not entail that the 'pastness' of retro objects be mourned.

Grainge's distinction between mood and style is a response to Fredric Jameson's much-heralded observations on "the nostalgia mode", as evidenced by what Jameson terms nostalgia films, such as *American Graffiti* (1973), *Chinatown* (1974), and *Body Heat* (1981) (Jameson, 1995: 20). For Jameson, these films represent a form of cultural amnesia prevalent in late modernity (his postmodernity or late capitalism) in which history appears only as commodified style, wholly lacking in critical substance. Jameson draws a distinction between *historicism* as "the random cannibalization of all styles of the past" and what he considers a more "genuine historicity" (18-19). Although set in some specified past, such as the 1950s or the 1930s, nostalgia films display only a vaguely defined relationship, if any at all, between their chosen historical period and the conditions they have led to in the contemporary moment, resulting in a superficial sense of "fashionable and glossy pastness" (Grainge: 29).

Grainge concedes that, as Jameson suggests, aesthetic nostalgia can easily become a commodified style or "consumable mode" (*Ibid.*). However, it is worth remembering that nostalgia as experienced mood can also be commodified with little difficulty, as indicated by *Mad Men's* popularity, very much including the clothing, décor, and other consumer goods, from both the 1950s and the 1960s, that the serial rendered in vogue. Grainge's concern is to preserve Jameson's stylistic nostalgia as a viable alternative, embodying a different emotional configuration and serving its own distinct cultural purposes but, nonetheless, an operative conceptualization that can be encompassed within the overall notion of nostalgia. Confirming Grainge's concern, Jameson does indeed identify the cinematic aesthetic style initiated by *American Graffiti* as "the so-called nostalgia film" (19). So-called because, for one, it is missing "the pain of a properly modernist nostalgia", that is to say, nostalgia as experienced mood, necessarily including the pain of loss, lack and longing (*Ibid*).[2]

We are presented, here, with two different formulations of nostalgia. Nostalgia as experienced mood stresses loss and longing, while nostalgia as aesthetic style represents, in Jameson's argument, historical amnesia. In the former instance, the past has come and gone. In the latter case, because of the failure to remember or recognize it, the past never existed at all. In the context of these dual formulations, *Mad Men* conforms more to the pain of a proper nostalgia, to the felt mood of loss. In contrast, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, enveloped in its upbeat playfulness, represents a nostalgia forged by aesthetic style that celebrates its depicted past but does not seem to mourn it. Does this suggest that we ought to consider *Mad Men,* lodged in somber, nostalgic moodiness, an historical endeavor of greater depth and substance? To what alternate historical ends might a serial like *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* pursue the lighter-hearted aspects of nostalgia as aesthetic style? How do the respective choices on nostalgia taken by these two period serials shape our understanding of the historical circumstances they seek to illuminate?

Period Drama as Nostalgic Mood: *Mad Men*

Mad Men has drawn the attention of a significant number of academic commentators.[3] Widely viewed as a show steeped in nostalgia, when faced with the seismic social changes wrought by the 1960s, a number of its central characters long for the privileges that seemed rightfully theirs in the 1950s, especially the benefits attached to white, heterosexual masculinity. Contemporaneous social rules work heavily in favor of the serial's middle-and-upper class white men, in an era when 'hard' living – drinking, smoking, promiscuous sex – were thought to be signs of an authentic masculine existence rather than potential health hazards as they are largely viewed now.

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[2] Part of the difficulty with Jameson's argument is that he only takes into account high art forms of modernism as operative prior to the advent of postmodernism or late capitalism, which he dates from the 1960s. The result is that the "pop history" he deplores (Jameson: 25), as reflected in the aesthetic superficiality of the nostalgia film, appears to come into existence only with the era of postmodernity. Yet, as Miriam Hansen has outlined, this ignores the considerably longer history of various forms of vernacular modernism, such as popular cinema (Hansen, 2000). Surely Hollywood films, as well as other mainstream cultural forms, were formulating traditions of popular history, deplorable or otherwise, well prior to Jameson's originating date of 1973's *American Graffiti*.

[3] A non-exhaustive list includes Baruah, 2017; Beail and Goren, 2015; Blanchet and Vaage, 2012; Booker and Batchelor, 2016; Carveth and South, 2010; Dill-Shackleford *et al.*, 2015; Dunn, Manning and Stern, 2015; Edgerton, 2011; MacDonald and Moore, 2016; Marcovitch and Batty, 2012; Martínez and Barnes, 2018; Pierson, 2014; Spigel, 2013; Stoddart, 2011; Vermeulen and Rustad, 2013.

Generally highly regarded by its commentators, *Mad Men's* success as television programming has been assessed, in part, on the degree to which it immerses itself in the pleasures of nostalgia, both mournful and celebratory, versus the extent to which it deploys critical nostalgia in order to exorcise that past. In striving toward either of these goals – immersion or critique – the show builds its narrative world on the emotional configurations of nostalgic *mood*, as outlined above, although its stylistic features, for both the 1950s and the 1960s, played a key role in the popularity of the series' look and sound.

Nostalgia as mood structures *Mad Men* in multi-faceted ways, beginning with story content that charts the transitions in American culture as it moves from the 1950s through the 1960s. Lead character Don Draper serves as the embodiment of 1950s values, lodged in his materially affluent existence afforded by the era's "social conformity, upward social mobility, and hopeful optimism" (Pierson, 2014: 144). Although showcasing futuristic Midcentury Modern design, the 1950s are primarily associated with the conservative values accompanying middle-class suburban life, nuclear families, and gender-specific professional and domestic roles. Following the deprivations of previous decades, from the Depression through the World War II years, the 1950s, in contrast, "represented the promise of progress and plenty in postwar America", accounting for the era's hopeful optimism (Cross, 2015: 105).

In terms of *Mad Men's* reliance on nostalgia as mood, Dana Polan points out that the series purposefully begins in 1960, thereby establishing the 1950s as a "structuring absence" (2013: 37). The decade that Don and other central characters represent is not actually present in chronological terms (except through occasional flashbacks), but nonetheless shapes everything that occurs in *Mad Men's* 1960s narrative time period. In locating its 1950s characters, values, and mindsets in the decade of the 1960s, *Mad Men* immediately becomes about change and loss, its very temporal makeup structured nostalgically. Nostalgia for the 1950s then becomes enacted through its principal male characters' resistance or maladaptation to the emerging new era.[4] Similarly, Pierson observes that the show is structured by nostalgia in portraying a main protagonist "who repeatedly longs for a home he never had as a child and probably will never attain as an adult" (139). Thus, Don is a 1950s male adult whose most notable psychological trait is a constant, thwarted longing for the imagined 1930s childhood he never experienced. His yearning for better childhood days mimics the nostalgic feel of the series' 1960s present-time events for the values and lifestyle of the preceding 1950s, thereby expanding the temporal and spatial sources that serve to evoke nostalgia.

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[4] Despite their inability to adjust to the 1960s, at the serial's conclusion several prominent male characters are given 'happy endings' defined, precisely, by them coming to terms with the changed circumstances of the decade: Don invents the era-defining I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke ad campaign; Pete Campbell is reunited with his wife and daughter; and Roger Sterling establishes a new, fulfilling romantic relationship and lifestyle.

If we fail to notice structuring techniques lodged in the dynamics of nostalgia, we need only attend to Don's own words in his much-cited advertising pitch for Kodak's Carousel slide projector (Season One, episode 13, "The Wheel"). He explains to the two Kodak executives and three advertising colleagues gathered in the room – but for the benefit of the 21st century audience watching the episode – that nostalgia, "the pain from an old wound", "takes us to a place where we ache to go again…a place where we know we are loved". His lulling words to the assembled men are accompanied by a succession of his own family slides in reverse temporal order, moving backward rather than forward in time: Don and Betty (January Jones) playing with their two children, Don standing next to Betty as she holds their newborn child, the couple at their wedding.

The end of his pitch is met by moved silence on the part of the Kodak executives, while one of Don's colleagues, choked with tears, hastily leaves the room. Yet the images Don uses in his pitch are not nostalgic for the characters, either the Kodak representatives or the other ad executives listening to the pitch. The look and activities portrayed in the slides would have been contemporary for the men in the conference room, although certainly sentimental in evoking family, childhood, innocence, and fun. But in its day, the slide projector itself was cutting-edge technology, far more futuristic than evocative of the past. The Carousel, with its circular tray, "was hailed as a dazzling innovation when Kodak introduced it in the early 1960s" (Rawsthorn, 2013: n.p.).

As the act of evoking the past, Don's pitch is nostalgic for the serial's *audience members*, through images casting back to the early 1960s in fashions and hair styles, in the use of a slide projector to display family photos, and because the Kodachrome slides embody a grainy quality, amateur lighting, and color saturation that looks 'past tense'. Don, principal figurehead for *Mad Men*, tells us the show is selling nostalgia, not on behalf of Kodak but to the program's viewing audience. *Mad Men* is a prototypical, even deeply saturated, exemplification of nostalgia as mood, in Grainge's description. For this reason, the series stresses realism as verisimilitude, working diligently to make the period details feel correct and convincing. To this end, *Mad Men's* sets rely heavily on interiors, over which it can control the details, while exteriors of New York City, for example, are sparse. The show's material parameters, in wardrobe, environment, and behaviors, must establish the feel of a tangible place and time we believe once actually existed, justifying that to which a number of its characters long to return.

And yet, if the 1950s symbolize a time of "social conformity, upward social mobility, and hopeful optimism", as Pierson suggests, little of that hopeful optimism surfaces in *Mad Men*. The serial conveys a general air of unhappiness, not just for its socially marginalized or excluded characters, like Peggy Olson (Elisabeth Moss), Joan Holloway (Christina Hendricks), and Salvatore Romano (Bryan Batt), whose frustrations over far-less-than-satisfactory circumstances we comprehend. An atmosphere of discontent prevails equally, and is permitted to be manifested much more openly, on the part of its principal, privileged personae, such as Don Draper, Roger Sterling (John Slattery), and Pete Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser).

Mad Men embraces a consistently sober tone, its nostalgia embedded in the context of an overall disposition of deep dissatisfaction. Remaining less clear is the source of the disaffection that haunts the serial's socially advantaged characters. Why do they fail to feel on top of the world they are largely depicted as being on top of? One possibility is in response to the impending changes of the 1960s that will diminish, although certainly not eliminate, their prerogatives. However, white, masculine discontentment is present from the show's outset, in March 1960, before most transformations attributable to the 1960s have taken effect. Another explanation would assign the tenor of disaffection to circumstances embedded in the postwar era itself; despite the apparent rewards offered to white men, the 1950s fail to fulfill in some fundamental way. If so, those deficiencies are not delineated to the same specificity as the obstacles confronted by female, gay, or racial minority characters. A third reason for the show's dysphoric sensibility could be that the privileges offered are insufficient, that the postwar male demographic, as depicted in the serial, felt it was promised or owed more.

Polan maintains that *Mad Men* taps "into a common, even stereotypical, figure of the postwar nine-to-five male as consumed by an anomie that can render him anywhere from frustrated to cantankerous to, at times, downright angry" (38). No doubt a complex genealogy exists to account for the formulaic perception of successful, 1950s, corporate men as alienated, frustrated, cantankerousness, and angry. In *Mad Men*'s case, Lynn Spigel suggests that presenting its white male characters' discontentment means that "no matter how powerful or arrogant, the ad men are easily viewed as victims of their time", creating a sensibility of "pathos in retrospect" (2013: 271). Regardless of how successful and self-satisfied Don and his colleagues grow, the pleasures they derive from their socioeconomic upwardly mobile status as white, heterosexual, masculine beneficiaries of the era's privileges become mitigated by virtue of their ultimate emotional dissatisfactions. Despite appearances to the contrary, they are portrayed as further victims of the time period, forged in the same false values that entrap their more overtly harmed contemporaries. In Spigel's compelling argument, the costs associated with excessive alcohol use, marital infidelity, paternal absenteeism, and so on, potentially outweigh the characters' socioeconomic advantages and attendant enjoyment, from the perspective of at least some audience members. Retrospectively, from the vantage point of the early 21st century, viewers are positioned to experience pathos borne of compassion for the principal male characters' plight, to the extent that they convincingly transmit existences enveloped in a vaguely defined but persistent unhappiness.

In addition to generating sympathy for its central male characters, Spigel's notion of retrospective pathos also facilitates the serial's ability to juggle two competing conceptualizations of nostalgia. The first is the traditional concept associated with feelings of sentimental loss, lack, and longing; the second is the more analytical version, critiquing the past in order to break from it. The serial conveys discomfort concerning the advantages bestowed upon its socially favored male personae, even as many of the nostalgic pleasures the serial offers up derive from the revelries empowered by their privileged existences. That is, a significant portion of the nostalgia of loss and longing offered up by the program is directly attributable to the masculine abuses of the era, for example, to the indulgences of alcohol consumption, marital infidelity, and sexual harassment. Yet, affluent, white men in contemporary storyworlds cannot be presented as wholly enjoying the disproportionate allotment of social entitlements they have accrued as the direct result of deep social inequities gained at the expense of women or racial, ethnic, and gay communities. Consequently, the program juggles two formulations of nostalgia to suggest that privileges of the past can be exorcised in the present, even as they are simultaneously indulged in, as long as the characters who benefit fail to arrive at a felt personal fulfillment. The narrative's negotiated position is to establish a pervasive atmosphere of unhappiness belonging to the era, that aligns rather than contrasts the fortuitous with communities which a 21st century audience recognizes as socially marginalized, and whose dissatisfactions contemporary viewers comprehend. Even as they indulge in the masculine pleasures gifted to them by the era, the male leads are frequently cranky and, sometimes, downright mad. An emotional quality of disaffection enables *Mad Men* to have its nostalgic mood (mournful, celebratory), and critique it too.

Period Drama as Nostalgic Style: *Mrs. Maisel*

The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel poses a different set of challenges. Why might the show intentionally pursue nostalgia as aesthetic style, an approach customarily associated with the superficialities of surface appearances, and what does it achieve in doing so?

No deep sense of loss or longing exists in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* for the 1950s and early 1960s it renders, at least not for the primary narrative and social terrain staked out – the experiences of an aspiring female stand-up satirist – although other kinds of aches and pains besides nostalgia are certainly portrayed. Instead, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* deploys the past for its aesthetic style, delighting in the pleasures of fashion, music, and other outward signs of the times, playing them for fun. The serial could well be accused of indulging in shallow nostalgia, except that *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* chooses this stylistically exteriorized route for specific purposes.

Niemeyer identifies an alternative form of temporal longing as "nostalgia for a past that has never been. Nostalgia becomes, consequentially, a way to transform the past by imagination" (10). She cites *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003) as a cinematic example; *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) would apply as well. Similarly, Elisabeth Anker describes *Hamilton* (2020), the filmed version of the theatrical musical, as investing "in a national vision where people of color are both central to the American story and equal participants in shaping the nation" (2020: 382). As a result of its aesthetic choices, such as a multiracial cast and the use of anachronistic rap, *Hamilton* "expands who gets to tell the story of America – and in what cadence" (*Ibid.*). In these instances, in order to critique a given past, one strategy adopted by certain films or televisions shows is to opt for aesthetic style over historical verisimilitude. Such a strategy is implemented in the service of developing an imagined nostalgia that, from the perspective of the contemporary moment, contours a past that never existed but feels as though it ought to have.

In *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel's* case, nostalgia as aesthetic style is not a means to deny or reject history through the process of delighting in an empty historicism and its accompanying amnesia. On the contrary, aesthetic nostalgia becomes the endeavor of remembering how specific groups – here, predominantly women – have been rejected by certain forms of history, leaving them with no place to return to and no past to long for, save the purely imaginary one of corrective historicity. *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* is not about losing something, as in the instance of *Mad Men*. Instead, it bemoans what it did not have in the first place, "a past that has never been". And it does so by inventing an imaginary past that feels as if, by rights, it should have existed, explaining why its narrative is set in the context of an historical genre, rather than a futuristic one as, for instance, in the cautionary case of *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-2024). To these ends, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* fantasizes what a female, stand-up, social satirist might have been like and what circumstances she would have faced, within the rough parameters of permissible 1950s gendered behaviors.

The serial's premise is that Miriam Weissman Maisel, twenty-six years old in 1958, stays calm, cool, and collected when confronted by 'real life' crises, such as her husband leaving her (Season One, episode 1) or her in-laws repossessing the apartment she calls home (episode 2). She observes decorum and keeps up social appearances, barring her from expressing her frustrations and rage. Miriam is too 'ladylike,' too well brought up, too upper middle class, too Upper West Side to behave outside of 1950s gendered proprieties, *except* when she is on stage. Only there, where she perceives the social rules to be different, and believes they ought to be equitably different for female as well as male comedians, does she curse, make sexually explicit comments and gestures, flash her breasts and, most of all, express how she genuinely feels in response to the events occurring in her life. As a female stand-up satirist of the 1950s, Mrs. Maisel is marvelous in dual senses of the word: wonderful as well as wondrous, fantastic and fantastical, by virtue of being both exceptional and fictional.

Herein lies the significance of Lenny Bruce's character in the narrative as a well-known historical figure. *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* recurringly portrays the once-existing Lenny Bruce (Luke Kirby) among its cast of otherwise fictional personages, albeit placing him in fictionalized circumstances. The factual Lenny Bruce (1925-1966), a controversial, ground-breaking social satirist, "hailed as one of the most important critical voices of his generation", was arrested for obscenity on multiple occasions (Kercher, 2006: 409). Overwhelmed by "debilitating legal action", Bruce declared bankruptcy in 1965 and died from a drug overdose in 1966, at the age of 40 (*Ibid.*: 390, 540).

Other factual comedians of the day are registered on televisions (Bob Newhart), listened to on records (Redd Foxx, Mort Sahl), seen performing in clubs (Red Skelton, Moms Mabley), or mentioned in conversations (Mike Nichols and Elaine May). In contrast, fictional performers are developed as characters for more substantive narrative purposes, for example, comedian Sophie Lennon (Jane Lynch) or singer Shy Baldwin (LeRoy McClain). However, Lenny Bruce is woven into the story from the show's outset, the only one to appear simultaneously as historical figure and significant narrative character, establishing a prominent presence over the course of the show's first three episodes.[5] For many comics "working in the fifties and early sixties, Bruce was the 'real deal,' the one satirist who really dared tackle the most sensitive issues extant in contemporary American life" (Kercher: 397).[6] Bruce functions as a source of comparison, allowing the program to pose the question, if a female Lenny Bruce had manifested as the 'real deal' in that era, what might she have been like? A male barometer for Miriam Maisel is more effectively enacted by a well-known historical figure rather than attempting to fashion a fictionalized male version.

Additionally, Bruce serves in the role due to the specifics of his performance style.

> Lenny Bruce by the late 1950s was an exciting, alluring presence on stage… The intensely personal, confessional approach Bruce often took onstage added significantly to his appeal. Sincere, direct, and vulnerable, Bruce won audiences over easily. (Kercher: 528-529)

A personal, sincere, direct, and vulnerable approach parallels the way we are meant to understand Miriam's technique, as she forges jokes from the events depicted as occurring in her life that are often deeply painful. Further, the frustration and rage that famously motivated Lenny Bruce's no-holds barred, controversial method duplicates the emotions and attitude that we recognize also fuel Miriam while on stage. Finally, we are meant to see resemblances in the two comedians' chosen content. Satire can be defined as humor exposing vices and follies (OED); in the case of stand-up comics, usually towards "a social purpose" (Kercher: 1). However, satire aimed at political figures, race relations, the cold war, or nuclear bombs did not lead to Bruce being regarded as outrageous or to his legal woes. It was only once satirical comedians of the 1950s and early 1960s began using "obscenities and addressed the subjects of sex and religion onstage that they encountered truly bitter and angry resistance" and earned their trademark as 'sick' comics (Kercher: 390).

The subjects Miriam tackles, like sex and the gendered inequities of marriage, along with the way she does so – in blunt, obscenity-laced terms – are far more acceptable fare for 21st century audiences. But they functioned as provocative and offensive content in the era depicted, for male comics alone, thereby providing the program with historical credibility.[7] At the same time, the content of Mrs. Maisel's humor, while continuing to resonate as important for the program's contemporary audiences, does so without creating the incendiary or shocking effects they would have done in the day, as Lenny Bruce's presence reminds us. Thus, the show's stand-up sequences do not function as distasteful or upsetting for its current potential audiences, keeping the comedy palatable for today's viewers.

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[5] Even before Mrs. Maisel bails him out at the end of episode 1, allowing the two characters an interpersonal encounter that continues into the beginning of episode 2, Lenny Bruce is seen in flashback when Miriam's then-boyfriend, Joel, takes her to see him perform, and he also appears as a shadowy presence in the back of the police car when Miriam is arrested.

[6] Echoing similar sentiments, upon seeing Lenny Bruce in a diner but not yet knowing that he and Miriam have become friends, Susie states the following: "The best comedian – I mean, the best fucking comedian in the business – is right over there."

The comparison between Bruce and Mrs. Maisel not only secures the show's premise in its first three episodes; it becomes reaffirmed in Season Four. In the season's final episode (8, "How Do You Get to Carnegie Hall?"), for instance, Lenny Bruce leads Miriam out to the stage of a now empty Carnegie Hall, where he has just finished performing to a full house. Miriam, in her professional persona as Mrs. Maisel, has turned down the opportunity to open for Tony Bennett at the Copacabana, a job Bruce went to considerable lengths to get her. Instead, she insists on remaining in her MC position at a strip club. The Lenny Bruce character is given the climactic moment of Season Four, laying out the challenges Miriam must confront in the show's fifth and final season.[8] In an impassioned manner, he accuses Miriam of hiding at the strip club, of lacking courage, of blowing her prospects because she is afraid of failure. In doing so, he both states and stands for what Miriam must become in order to succeed. All the above aspects of their performance styles work to link Lenny Bruce with Mrs. Maisel, at the same time as their respective gender distinguishes them.

Discussed earlier, nostalgia as mood leads to *Mad Men's* emphasis on realism as verisimilitude, working to create a tangible past whose period details feel correct and convincing. In contrast, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel's* nostalgia as aesthetic style results in considerable contrivance over verisimilitude. The look, sound, and feel of *Mrs. Maisel's* aesthetics frequently and deliberately entails artifice, relying on scenes that are clearly intended to come across as staged.[9] For instance, the morning following Miriam's first arrest and after bailing out Lenny Bruce, a remarkably well-dressed but out-of-place Miriam walks along a 'rough' street in the Village (Season One, episode 2). In quick succession, someone throws water out of a window almost hitting Miriam, two people dispose of a beat-up, filthy sofa, a drunk man has fallen asleep on a stoop, a disheveled young woman conducts the walk of shame, a man urinates into the street, and two women loudly argue. With the feel of a sound stage and accompanied by the upbeat Yiddish song, "Vyoch Tyoch Tyoch," performed by the Barry Sisters, the sequence intentionally looks and sounds like something excerpted from a 1950s musical.[10] Rather than threatening, the street sequence conveys a choreographed harmlessness, producing the inverse of gritty realism. Further, through its use of staged, choreographed sequences resembling classical Hollywood musicals, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* repeatedly signals its fictionality.

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[7] Kercher cites satire in the 1950s and early 1960s as "a thoroughly masculine enterprise" in which comedians were enveloped in "notions of heroic male rebellion" (3). Female satirists of the era mentioned by him are predominantly sketch comedians, like Elaine May, The Second City's Barbara Harris, and the Premise's Joan Darling (537-538).

[8] Less clear is why the show has Miriam Maisel and Lenny Bruce become sexually involved, beyond the appeal of the Bruce character as portrayed by Luke Kirby.

[9] Sprengler makes a similar observation about the purposeful artifice of sets, backdrops, cinematography, and color palette in *La La Land* (2016), an aesthetically stylized tale that could be said to both celebrate and critique contrived Hollywood notions of romance (2021: 38).

The serial establishes a non-naturalized story world, its stylized aesthetic reminding us that this is a constructed version of the late 1950s and early 1960s, an imaginary past invented to stand in for the one "that has never been". This strategy complements the way gender is portrayed as constructed in the serial, for instance, when Miriam waits until husband, Joel, falls asleep before slipping into the bathroom to roll her hair in curlers, remove her makeup, wash and moisturize her face, only to reverse the process the next morning before the alarm clock awakens him (Season One, episode 1). Rather than verisimilitude as goal, the sequence is played for comedic exaggeration in service of establishing the highly produced measures that generate femininity.[11] A comparable example is the way Susie (Alex Borstein) constitutes herself as belonging at Season Two's Catskills' summer resort by virtue of carrying a toilet plunger and, in her habitual outfit of pants, suspenders, bomber jacket, and newsboy cap, routinely being mistaken for a man.

However, if Mrs. Maisel's stand-up routines are propelled by the frustrations and rage of her life experiences, if the program dwells on the many things women couldn't have or couldn't be in that era, how do we account for an amassed tonality that feels mainly upbeat and playful? While Miriam and other characters often feel frustration and rage in response to their circumstances, the show's overall sensibility does not reflect those emotions. Seemingly paradoxically, given the constraints under which women are portrayed as operating during the era, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel,* far more than *Mad Men*, expresses the "hopeful optimism" that Pierson identifies as one of the structures of feeling available in the postwar period (144). Despite the social restrictions represented, the show's atmosphere does not parallel the stereotypical representations of 1950s corporate men plagued by feelings ranging "from frustrated to cantankerous to, at times, downright angry", as cited by Polan (38). These are substituted, instead, by an air of exuberance and engagement with life that regularly enfolds central characters, such as Miriam and Susie, in the narrative world of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. Nostalgia as aesthetic style may well be deployed towards superficial ends, but it need not take effect in such limited fashion. Its attributes can also be shaped towards the ambitions of nostalgia as historical imagination. Merging nostalgia as aesthetic style with the concept of imagined nostalgia enables *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* to pursue a strategic historical goal. Eliminating the disaffections of past tense loss and longing, *while simultaneously* continuing to express yearnings for something more, offers an alternative to *Mad Men's* elegiac tenor resulting, in its place, with *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel's* sense of promise and pleasure.

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[10] An exception to *Mad Men's* verisimilitude is the rather odd song and dance number, "The Best Things in Life Are Free," given to David Morse upon the death of his character, Bert Cooper (Season Seven, episode 7). However, this is a scene hallucinated by Don Draper, while the contrived artifice of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel's* world simply 'is.' Other examples of the latter's choreographed and stylized sequences include many of the department store scenes where Miriam works and, in Season Two, considerable portions of its Paris locations and summer resort in the Catskills.

[11] And yet, no less implausible is *Mad Men's* presentation of Betty Draper as flawless 1950s homemaker or Joan Holloway standing for the era's fuller-figure ideal of female sexuality. The unwavering perfection of their self-presentation in wardrobe, hair, and makeup is made to seem largely effortless, by rendering invisible the actual time, sheer effort, and expense such incarnations would require.

Conclusion

Despite the retrospective pathos available due to the adversities of the day, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* does not invoke significant measures of cynicism, anger, or resentment as its prevailing narrative tonality. In contrast, such feelings suffuse *Mad Men*; most jarringly, when they emanate from the depicted circumstances of its key male personae. With its repeated refrains of loss and longing, *Mad Men* exemplifies nostalgia as mood, combining it with the aspiration to critique the era it simultaneously celebrates and mourns. The serial's measure of success in striking a balance between the often-competing intentions of immersion in the moodiness of nostalgia with the desire to exorcise the failings of the past remains open to interpretation. Although I perceive a discrepancy that tilts towards captivation with yesteryear's pleasures, affirmative assessments on the part of many commentators suggest that the judgment rests in the eyes of *Mad Men*'s beholders.

For its part, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel's* comedic and other exaggerations, in service of a narrative atmosphere that largely promulgates hopeful optimism, invites accusations of implausibility and wishful thinking. While many of the events in *Mad Men* conceivably could have occurred, Mrs. Maisel, as a matter of historical record, patently never existed. However, I have argued that *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* outlines the possibilities for an imaginary nostalgia that relies on aesthetic style in favor of certain aspects of historical verisimilitude. Because its past is imagined as much as remembered, the program embraces a level of contrivance normally proscribed to reflective period dramas. The entwining of nostalgia as aesthetic style with an imagined nostalgia makes possible the paradoxical realization of a recuperative yet invented history. Rather than an exercise in failed historicity, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* materializes as a narratively strategic form of period drama.

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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

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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

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[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 Island[2], 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 boxes[3], 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 flashback effect as it irons out the tricky meanders and uncertain details of memory in order to create the impression of objective remembrance.

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[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

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 clan[6], sometimes even creating traditions for the viewers. For example, each season premiere revolves around the birthday of Kate, Kevin and Randall. The series' 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.

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[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.

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-negligeable 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 reflexiveness 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 home[7] 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 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.

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[7] https://images.app.goo.gl/hddtMode6a6TNvfu5

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

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[8] https://www.instagram.com/p/Bdv7HOYhl6U/ 03/05/2023

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 jukebox 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 flashforward 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 undoubtfully 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 delt 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 synthetize 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 either[9]. 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 uncurable 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

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[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 goodbyes, 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)

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[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

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[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, nostalgiacs 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

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[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 Mémorielles, 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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Back to the Retro-Closet: Narratives of Closetedness and Coming Out in Retro Television Shows

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Abstract: This article explores the dramaturgical, aesthetic and ideological uses of the metaphor of the closet in recent retro TV shows. It aims at showing how retrospective and fictional depictions of queer lives—be they through closeted characters or through coming out narratives—serve both to anchor the diegesis in the times that the series ambition to represent and to offer a cultural renegotiation of a violently homophobic past, all the while building dramatic tension within the fictional world. It contends that although they allow for queer audiences to engage in a form of reparative nostalgia by representing their experience onscreen at last, these storylines also support an idealized vision of a contemporary post-gay, post-closet America, obscuring the ongoing attacks against LGBTQ+ people and rights in recent years.

Keywords: Nostalgia, TV Series, Homophobia, LGBTQ+ Rrepresentation, Post-Gay

Résumé : Cet article s'intéresse aux enjeux dramaturgiques, esthétiques et idéologiques de la métaphore du placard dans une sélection de séries télévisées rétro. Il entend montrer que les intrigues *queer* – qu'elles concernent des personnages placardisés ou des récits de *coming out* – servent tout à la fois à ancrer la diégèse dans l'époque que la série représente, à mettre en lumière un passé violemment homophobe, et à créer de la tension dramatique dans le monde fictionnel. Parce qu'ils représentent enfin à l'écran l'expérience des personnes *queer* ayant grandi dans la seconde moitié du xxe siècle, ces arcs narratifs permettent au public de s'adonner à une forme de nostalgie réparatrice qui vient corriger l'invisibilisation longtemps subie. L'article met néanmoins en garde contre la dé-historicisation à laquelle procèdent parfois ces intrigues, qui viennent alors soutenir une vision idéalisée d'une Amérique contemporaine post-gay et post-placard, occultant la persistance des attaques contre les personnes et les droits LGBTQ+ de ces dernières années.

Mots-clefs : nostalgie, séries télévisées, homophobie, représentation LGBTQ+, post-gay

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Introduction

> While there is ample evidence that the force of the closet is still an active part of American culture, it remains the case that all the vast changes of the past twenty or so years have chipped away at and altered the contours of the coming-out story. […] Undeniably, coming out retains a place in the lived experiences of many gay people, but there is no doubt that it has receded as "the story" in popular culture, even as it is clear it has not wholly disappeared. (Walters, 2014: 36)

Those words, written by Suzanna Danuta Walters in 2014, attest to the recession of the coming out narrative, once central to LGBTQ+ representation, at a time that some have described as "post-closet television" (Becker, 2007; Becker, 2009) that is to say, in a TV landscape which does not problematize queer identities through logics of dissimulation and disclosure anymore. This evolution is to be linked, of course, to the dramatic evolution of gay rights in the United States (Walters, 2014: 5-6; Garretson, 2018: 3-33), from the social opprobrium and consequent shame forcing queer people to hide and adopt double-lives to protect their secret, to the same-sex marriage victory of *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015, leading some commentators to somewhat hastily describe contemporary America as "post-gay" as early as 1998.[1]

Yet, a number of series broadcast in the late 2010s and early 2020s still rely on coming out narratives for their queer characters (Haensler, 2022). These include the recent wave of "retro shows" that have emerged on networks, cable, or streaming platforms in the past ten years. Those shows, which set their scene as early as the 19th century (*Dickinson*, Apple TV+, 2019-2021), but more generally in the second half of the 20th century, often include a storyline centered around the discovery of one of the characters' queerness, their navigation of the liminal space of the closet, and their subsequent coming out. This article aims to explore the role of closetedness and coming out narratives in a selection of retro TV shows whose action takes place from the 1960s to the late 1990s.

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[1] "in a post-gay world, homosexuals have won their battle for acceptance, and are now free to move beyond identity politics", in "New Way of Being", *New York Times*, June 21st, 1998.

Navigating the space of the closet in the "Kulturkampf" of the 1960s

The first season of *Masters of Sex* (Showtime, 2013-2016) sets its scene in late 1950s America. It focuses more precisely on the work and the fictionalized lives of real-life doctors William Masters (Michael Sheen) and Virginia Johnson (Lizzy Caplan), who conducted groundbreaking experiments on human sexuality at Washington University in Saint Louis, Missouri. In season one, the series also introduces its first queer storyline with the character of Barton Scully (Beau Bridges), the medical school Provost. When the character is first introduced, Scully, in his fifties, is in a heterosexual marriage with his wife Margaret (Allison Janney), with whom he has an adult daughter. Upon finding out about the controversial study that Bill Masters has started to conduct, leading him to observe couples during intercourse, Scully chastises the doctor for his impropriety and cancels the study, for fear of negative repercussions on the hospital.[2] Soon, however, Masters discovers through participants in his now bootleg study that Scully has been having regular sexual encounters with male prostitutes. He then proceeds to use this information to blackmail Barton into allowing the study back into the hospital,[3] knowing that should Scully's secret be unveiled, the Provost would be fired from Washington University.

In this first season onward, the entirety of Barton Scully's character's arc deals with the themes of closetedness, and of heterosexuality as a performance, on which both his career and his social status heavily depend. Although Scully continues to meet with men, their encounters always take place in the confines of the brothel or in a car, at night, away from prying eyes. The discussions that he and Masters share on the topic of his homosexuality—although it is never named as such in the diegesis (Scully will only call himself a homosexual in the very last season of the show)—similarly take place in dark, muffled atmospheres and are conducted with hushed tones. The choice of confined and poorly-lit spaces for the mise-en-scène evidently echo the metaphorical space of the closet, which hides its inhabitants from the condemnation of society. Because it takes place in the medical field, the series can adequately portray the pivotal moment when homosexuality came to represent both a mental illness—it was inscribed on the American Psychiatric Association's list of mental illnesses in 1952—and a moral degeneration, as documented by Jeremiah Garretson:

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[2] "Space to Race", S01E02, *Masters of Sex*, Showtime, first broadcast October 6th, 2013.

[3] "Standard Deviation", S0103, *Masters of Sex*, Showtime, first broadcast October 13th, 2013.

> As new medical notions of the homosexual as a distinct type of person started to take root in the public mind, they became connected to previous notions of homosexuality as sinful and immoral. Although many in the medical profession believed homosexuals were ill and thus in need of treatment, not sinners in need of punishment, the majority of the public came to believe that a whole class of individuals who were inherently degenerate or immoral existed (Garretson, 2018: 71).

Thus began the era of what William Eskridge calls the "Kulturkampf" of the 1950s and 1960s. Homosexuality came to be seen as a threat to the institutions of marriage, family, but also to civilization itself (Eskridge, 1999: 57-59), when it started to be associated with communism: the Red Scare and the Lavender Scare representing two sides of the same coin (Johnson, 2009). In this context, gays and lesbians became "public enemy number two", and fell prey to a campaign which aimed to identify and expel homosexuals from government and state institutions, while the general public demanded that the closet door be "thrown open" to purge society from homosexuality (Eskridge, 1999: 60-67). In *Coming Out Under Fire*, Allan Bérubé reports on the intensification of persecutions in the aftermath of World War Two, when stricter gender norms and the domestic ideal came to be enforced:

> [Gays came] under heavy attack during the postwar decade. […] When arrested in gay bar raids, most people pleaded guilty, fretful of publicly exposing their homosexuality during a trial. […] Legally barred from many forms of private and government employment, from serving their country, from expressing their opinions in newspapers and magazines, from gathering in bars and other public places as homosexuals, and from leading sexual lives, gay men and women were denied civil liberties. […] Such conditions led to stifled anger, fear, isolation, and helplessness. (Bérubé, 1990: 271)

In this context, the metaphor of the mascarade, which was prominent in the first half of the century (Chauncey, 1994: 6), gave way to that of the closet (Eskridge, 1999: 55), delineating a space where homosexuality needed to stay hidden.

In its first season and onwards, *Masters of Sex* acknowledges the violence exerted on queer people despite (or through) the closet. It shows it as a space that can be broken into, thus endangering queer people's lives when they least expect it and feel protected: in the third episode, Barton Scully is stabbed in a gay-bashing assault while he is cruising in the dead of night, in his car.[4] He is found in critical condition by Bill Masters, but refuses to be taken to a hospital, fearful that his secret will be revealed. The series also illustrates how the closet leads gays and lesbians to internalize the homophobia of the rest of society: at the end of the season, Scully, desperate to get back to a "normal life", undergoes electroshock treatment to try and "cure" his homosexuality, despite the pleadings of his wife, who upon discovering his secret and his intentions tries to discourage him to do so.[5] Finally, the show underlines the absolute lack of social and legal protection for gays and lesbians: in its last season, Masters' assistant Betty (Annaleigh Ashford) loses custody of her daughter after her partner dies in labor, since the state does not recognize her as the child's mother.[6] Although Betty had always been more openly queer than Scully, due to the fact that as a former prostitute, she was already considered deviant from the norm, the rampant homophobia of the times eventually catches up to her. The pathos that characterizes those often-heartbreaking scenes (the gay-bashing, the electroshock treatment, Betty's child being taken away) is revealing of showrunner Michelle Ashford's 21st century gaze on 1950s homophobic society: the situation of the diegesis in remote times allows her and the viewers alike to look at these mistreatments in hindsight and experience the violence of situations that, at the time, were commonly accepted in American society, much like it allows the show to address other societal issues of the time such as sexism and racism.

The anchoring of the plot in the 1950s and 1960s thus allows for a poignant representation of the advent of the closet and the persecutions that gays and lesbians endured at the time. It also allows the series, which is set in the medical field, to disseminate and circulate the theories and latest findings of the time on human sexuality: in its last season, Scully and Masters are lectured by a new doctor in their team on the work of Alfred Kinsey,[7] who theorized sexuality as a continuum rather than a polar opposition between two distinct and exclusive identities, homosexuality and heterosexuality (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin *et al.*,1953). Conversely, references to actual studies of the time, as well as representations of violence against gay people and their confinement to the space of the closet, serve to anchor the diegesis in the time that it seeks to portray by granting the show a dose of realism. *Masters of Sex* is no exception in representing its queer characters as victims of systemic violence forced to hide their real selves. It is indeed customary, in retro shows set in the 1960s and 1970s, to portray queer characters as closeted—one could think, for example, of the characters of Salvatore Romano (Bryan Batt), in

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[4] "Standard Deviation", S0103.

[5] "Manhigh", S01E12, *Masters of Sex,* Showtime, first broadcast December 15th, 2013.

[6] "Family Only", S04E06, *Masters of Sex,* Showtime, first broadcast October 16th, 2016.

[7] "In To Me You See", S04E07, *Masters of Sex*, Showtime, first broadcast October 23th, 2016.

Mad Men (AMC, 2007-2015), or Wendy Carr (Anna Torv) in *Mindhunter* (Netflix, 2017-2019).

Interestingly, although these shows underline the violence and subsequent paranoia that queer people might have felt at the time, they also show, through mise-en-scène and storylines, the complex "epistemology of the closet" (Sedgwick, 1990), both envisioned as a space that can be infringed upon and a space of liberty, shielded away from the heterosexual world. In *Masters of Sex*, queer characters are often the only ones privy to each other's secret, seemingly recognizing one another, all the while flying under their straight counterpart's radars. The third season, especially, illustrates the alternative, underground world of symbols and codes shared by gays and lesbians, and the complicity that emerges from the mutual recognition of somebody else's queerness. Upon meeting Barton, Betty immediately identifies him as a homosexual, in spite of his traditionally masculine presentation.[8] Later on, in a similar fashion, she bonds with a pianist with the following words:[9]

> BETTY: I'm looking for a little moral support from the only other homo at this party.
> PIANIST: How did you know I was...?
> BETTY: You've played "Don't Rain on my Parade" twice in the last hour. You might as well be wearing a flashing sign.

The dialogue highlights the existence of collective, shared "signs" that can easily be read by fellow queer people, but that the straight crowd at the party remains oblivious to. The same idea is at play in a line from Barton's new assistant and love-interest, Jonathan (Rob Benedict), who tells him[10]:

> Jonathan: You strike me as someone who might like classical music. In my experience, one classical music lover can often tell another.

The "classical music lover" is an obvious double-entendre, which allows Jonathan to subtly hint and probe at Scully's homosexuality while signaling his own: the understanding of the euphemism thus depends on whether or not Scully, as a homosexual, has the ability to decode the sign. The scene exemplifies the epistemological advantage that queer people might have over straight people in recognizing each other, based on the assumption that "it takes one to know one" (Sedgwick, 1990: 169). It reverses the image of the closet as a place of lonely imprisonment to propose a vision of the closet as a collective space, an underworld which protects its inhabitants' secret all the while allowing them to identify and support each other.

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[8] "Through a Glass, Darkly", S03E10, *Masters of Sex*, Showtime, first broadcast September 13th, 2015.
[9] "Coats or Keys", S04E04, *Masters of Sex*, Showtime, first broadcast October 2nd, 2016.
[10] "Surrogates", S03E08, *Masters of Sex*, Showtime, first broadcast August 30th, 2015.

Beyond dialogues, the idea that homosexuals were, in fact, always hiding in plain sight, is exemplified by the mise-en-scène, for instance in a scene where Betty and Barton discuss Barton's now boyfriend Jonathan in the former Provost's office.[11] If the conversation deals with a private matter, and takes place in an enclosed space evoking the walls of the closet, the office happens to have glass walls: while the two friends exchange on Scully's current love life, other characters appear in the frame, in the background, their voices sometimes heard as a faint chatter. Their presence can be meant to symbolize a form of social control and the porosity of the walls of the closet, in a way that is reminiscent of the panopticon (Foucault, 1975: 202), in a series that more generally thematizes the concept of observation (of the practice's patients), surveillance, and plays on the scopic dimension inherent to the televisual medium. The scene thus literalizes the concept of the "glass closet", as developed by Sedgwick (1990: 164), who uses the term to refer to homosexuality as an open secret, in instances when the queerness of a celebrity is commonly known or assumed without them having ever come out, or without them being in control of this supposedly private information. The scene materializes, through the layout of the room, the potential power imbalance between the inhabitant of the closet, who believes their secret is safely hidden away, and what the outside world actually perceives, rendering the walls of the closet metaphorically see-through. However, because Betty and Barton's conversation seems to go unnoticed by the people walking in and out of the frame in the background of the scene, this literal glass closet could also be interpreted as a sign that spaces of liberty still remain, in the middle of the heterosexual world, for homosexual discourses and practices. The plurality of meanings that can be derived from this mise-en-scène thus perfectly illustrates the duality of the closet space, simultaneously protecting its occupant from excessive probing, and exposing them to heterosexual investigation.

The same logic is at play in an episode of the series *Mindhunter*. While interrogating an allegedly queer serial killer, Wendy Carr, a closeted professor in psychology at the University of Boston and FBI investigator, hints at a relationship that she used to have with one of her female college professors, thus risking to out herself to her colleague, Greg (Joe Tuttle). Once they are out of the investigation room and back into the car, Greg comments:[12]

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[11] "Full Ten Count", S03E12, *Masters of Sex*, Showtime, first broadcast September 20th, 2015.
[12] "Episode 4", S02E04, *Mindhunter*, Netflix, first broadcast August 16th, 2019.

> GREG: When you talked about… the woman, that relationship, that was… *(long pause)* how do you come up with something like that? It was exactly the right story at the right moment.

The focus is initially on Wendy, in the foreground. She is trapped between the audience—who knows that she is a lesbian—and Greg, and at first it seems that he has uncovered her secret and is about to ask for confirmation, with her unable to escape. However, the end of his sentence reveals that he actually believes that she invented the story in order to coax information out of the convict. A rack focus then changes the emphasis of the scene to highlight Greg, in the background, leaving Wendy out of focus—and out of danger.

What protects Wendy, in this scene, is her traditional gender presentation: she does not correspond to stereotypical images of butch or masculine lesbians that were circulated in the media at the time (Streitmatter, 2009: 147-148; Marolleau, 2015: 61-68), and as such, Greg is unable to read her as queer, even though he has, metaphorically, set foot in her closet, symbolized here by the shared space of the car. The scene reveals the powerful role played by the presumption of heterosexuality—the idea that a person is believed to be straight in the absence of signs pointing to the contrary (Rich, 1980; Chambers, 2003: 28)—in the protection of queer secrecy and the enforcement of the closet. For Sedgwick, and after her David Halperin, the presumption of heterosexuality is precisely what maintains and endlessly reproduces the closet, rendering coming out an exercise in repetition (Sedgwick, 1990: 38; Halperin, 1995: 34). In Wendy's case, the coming out is deprived of its performative power because of the assumption, based on her look and demeanor, that she cannot be anything but straight.

Progressing into the "Gay Nineties": stepping out of the closet and into the world

In their quest for verisimilitude, and in order to stay true to the time that they seek to depict, retro TV shows set in the 1960s rarely ever present the traditional coming out narrative that we have come to associate with gay and lesbian identities. On the contrary, retro programs set in the 1980s, and *a fortiori* in the 1990s are replete with storylines of characters exploring and accepting their queer sexuality.

The context of the 1980s and 1990s, in terms of gay and lesbian rights and visibility, was widely different from that of the 1960s. The first homophile movements of the 1950s and 1960s gave way to a more assertive gay rights movement in the 1970s (Garretson, 2018: 80), heralded by the Stonewall riots, in New York. In the 1980s, the AIDS crisis pulled the gay question front and center. Although it brought about fear, suspicion, and shame, it also helped solidify the gay rights movement around the health crisis, and led to the emergence of a new, more radical activism (Marche, 2017: 30), with groups such as ACT UP or Queer Nation, who advocated, in part, for a better representation in the media (Walters, 2001: 61; Gross, 2001: 94-109). Constraints on representations progressively loosened with the end of the Hays Code, at the end of the 1960s and the repeal of the Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters in 1983 (Lobrutto, 2018). Thanks to the deregulation of the market introduced by the birth of cable channels in the 1980s, new representations of queer characters emerged both in cinema and on television, so much so that the 1990s were prophetically nicknamed "The Gay Nineties" by *Entertainment Weekly* in 1994.

It is in this general context of activist effervescence and augmented media presence that the storylines developed *a posteriori* by contemporary retro shows such as *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016-), *Everythings Sucks* (Netflix, 2018), *The Carrie Diaries* (The CW, 2013-2014), *Fresh Off the Boat* (ABC, 2015-2020) or *Little Fires Everywhere* (Hulu, 2020) should be understood. *Stranger Things* sets its scene in the early 1980s, between 1983 and 1985. In its third season, high-school student Robin (Maya Hawke) timidly comes out to her friend Steve (Joe Keery), who initially believes she is confessing her love for him. The two teenagers are sitting on the floor of a bathroom stall—once again an enclosed and intimate space that can be reminiscent of the closet—its door opening to let out Robin's secret.

> ROBIN: Do you remember what I said about Click's class? About me being jealous and, like, obsessed?
> STEVE: Yeah.
> ROBIN: It isn't because I had a crush… on you. It's because... she wouldn't stop staring at you.
> STEVE: Mrs. Click?
> ROBIN: *(she chuckles)* Tammy Thompson. I wanted her to look at me. But... she couldn't pull her eyes away from you and your stupid hair. And I didn't understand, because you would get bagel crumbs all over the floor. And you asked dumb questions. And you were a douchebag. And – And you didn't even like her and... I would go home... and just scream into my pillow.
> STEVE: But Tammy Thompson's a girl.
> ROBIN, *softly*: Steve.
> STEVE: Yeah? … Oh…
> ROBIN: Oh.
> STEVE: Holy shit.
> ROBIN: Yeah. Holy shit.[13]

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[13] "Chapter Seven: The Bite", S03E07, *Stranger Things*, Netflix, first broadcast July 4th, 2019.

Similarly to Wendy Carr in *Mindhunter*, Robin's queerness is initially protected—even though she has admitted to it in the dialogue—by her traditionally feminine gender presentation. The scene thus highlights the force of the presumption of heterosexuality, both in Steve's initial understanding that Robin was in love with him, and then in his dumbfounded interrogation, "but Tammy Thompson's a girl". It is reiterated finally in his expression of surprise, "Holy shit".

The harrowing musical motif which accompanies the scene, composed of a few chords placated in the low register, contributes to the suspense of the scene. Robin seems to fear Steve's reaction: the close-up shots show her looking away from him, and the reliance on the shot and reverse-shot symbolizes the possibility that her confession could lead to a split in the teenagers' friendship. The end of the scene however reunites the two friends in a single shot while Steve teases Robin on her poor taste in women, the melody higher and lighter than at the beginning of the scene, both suggesting his acceptance of her queerness.

Because homosexuality is still a taboo subject in the conservative era of the 1980s, the coming out narrative retains its dramaturgical force, in a context where the risk of rejection for Robin is quite real. The coming out scene is powerful in its overt acknowledgment of queerness, in a series which had previously only hinted at the queerness of characters before having them disappear (Will), or through the representation—and condemnation—of homophobic bullies (Freeman, 2019: 95). In allowing Robin, one of the main characters of the show, to come out of the closet, the series renders queerness manifest and rights the wrongs denounced by Heather Freeman, who bemoaned in 2019 that the series, in its first two seasons, "never acknowledge[d] the idea that being gay could be acceptable, much less commendable" (Freeman, 2019: 95).

While *Stranger Things* does not make the reasons why Robin might be fearful explicit, *The Carrie Diaries*, which takes place in Castlebury, Connecticut, in 1984, does so with the character of Walt (Brendan Dooling), the protagonist's best friend. When he realizes that he is gay, Walt comes out to his friends, to mixed reactions. He discusses the matter with an older gay man that he met in New York, who tells him:[14]

> BENNET: Walt, we don't live in a world where people are that accepting of us. I mean, there's pockets like New York, but then there's also places like…
> WALT: Castlebury.
> BENNET: Exactly. Where being honest often means being shunned.

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[14] "Kiss Yesterday Goodbye", S01E13, *The Carrie Diaries*, The CW, first broadcast April 8th, 2013.

In this scene, the dialogue explicitly refers to the homophobia that is still the norm in the 1980s, but also to the difference in mindset and tolerance between urban enclaves—overall more progressive—and the conservative stance of the rest of the country. As a matter of fact, most coming out narratives in retro TV shows do take place in rural areas and suburbs rather than in large cities, be it the fictional Hawkins, Indiana (*Stranger Things*), Boring, Oregon (*Everything Sucks*), or Shaker Heights, Ohio (*Little Fires Everywhere*). This double displacement—temporal, geographical—allows the series to build suspense and higher stakes around coming out scenes that it would in contemporary New York, for example. Although most of the time, coming out narratives are resolved in a happy ending and words of acceptance from friends and families alike, *The Carrie Diaries* does portray the actual danger that coming out often entailed for kids, when Walt is thrown out of his house by his parents after they find out that he is gay.[15]

Most of the coming out storylines in retro shows set in the 1980s or the 1990s involve teenagers, who are often the protagonists of the show, in narrative arcs that conflate coming of age and coming out stories. Maybe in a somewhat unconscious way, this move towards younger queer protagonists, in comparison with retro shows set in the 1960s, mirrors sociological evolutions of the time in the average age of the first coming out, which stepped back from 19-to-23 years old at the beginning of the 1980s to 14-to-15-years-old in 1999 (Walker, 2002). On a metatextual level, it also echoes actual change in media representations of the end of the 20th century, since teen dramas were among the first fictional genres to address homosexuality, although timidly, in the 1990s (*My So-Called Life,* ABC, 1994-1995; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, The WB, 1997-2003; *Dawson's Creek*, The WB, 1998-2003) (Tropiano, 2002: 211).

The moment of puberty, because it constitutes a time of discovery of one's sexual desires and urges, appears specifically appropriate for storylines which deal with coming to terms with one's queerness. The queer closet is often conflated, in retro TV shows, with the confined spaces which typically host games such as "7 Minutes in Heaven", in which two teenagers (usually a boy and a girl) are stuck together in a closet and left to do whatever they see fit—more often than not kissing. In *Everything Sucks*, Kate shares her first kiss with Luke during such a game,[16] and this encounter helps her come to term with her sexuality. After they have exchanged a kiss, and while they are still stuck in the closet, she states blankly: "I think I'm a lesbian". The door opens abruptly, symbolizing both the force of her

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15. "The Second Time Around", S02E08, *The Carrie Diaries*, The CW, first broadcast December 20th, 2013.
16. "Romeo and Juliet in Space", S01E04, *Everything Sucks*, Netflix, first broadcast February 16th, 2018.

realization and the risk that her confession be overheard by the other players. The same logic is at play in a scene from *Little Fires Everywhere*, when it is revealed during a similar game with other teens that Izzy (Megan Stott) and her best friend are actually romantically involved: the space of the closet, where they are trapped for a few minutes, functions as a cocoon that allows them to kiss and share an intimate bond, materialized on the screen by the use of extreme close up on their intertwined hands and faces and by the soft, warm light, and tender music that accompanies the scene.[17] This moment of comfort is however interrupted when the door of the closet suddenly swings open, revealing the two girls to the rest of their classmates. Izzy's best friend then pushes her away and accuses her of having assaulted her, before joining the other teens. Izzy is thus left standing alone in the open closet, exposed to the laughs and mockery of the group. Right before the scene, when Izzy had spun the bottle and it had landed on her female friend, both girls had seemed uneasy. One of the other kids had then exclaimed "It's the 90s, right?" as a reminder of the supposed open-mindedness of teens in the context of the "Gay Nineties". However, their reaction post-kiss, as well as the bullying that will ensue in the rest of the series, attest to the permanence of homophobic attitudes in 1990s America.

Focusing on teenage characters allows shows to target both teen audiences—which seem to be the target audience for *Fresh Off the Boat* or *Everything Sucks*, with younger protagonists around 13 or 14 years old—and young adults in the 18-39 age bracket, for shows such as *Little Fires Everywhere* or *Stranger Things*. To capture this audience, comprised of spectators born in the 1980s and 1990s, retro shows often play on a sense of nostalgia induced by a specific aesthetic and tone, rendered by the use of 1980s earworms as soundtrack (Mcclantoc, 2019: 114-115) and the reliance on objects and technologies associated with these two decades, be they "boom boxes", old Coca Cola bottles, or a wall telephone with an extended chord (Stephan, 2019: 30). In the second season of *Yellowjackets* (Showtime, 2021-), which switches between two timelines to take a look at the after-effects of a plane crash on the lives of its survivors, the 2021 version of Vanessa (Lauren Ambrose), who secretly dated a girl from her soccer team in the 1996 timeline, is represented as the owner of a vintage shop selling records, VHS tapes, and books related to queer culture, which she passes on to the younger generation that seems both ignorant and fascinated by that past, much like the viewers of the show perhaps. This reflexive storyline can be seen as representative of the ambitions of retro shows themselves, which aim at activating a sense of nostalgia in their older viewers, as well as a curiosity for remote times in its youngest.

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[17] "Picture Perfect", S01E07, *Little Fires Everywhere*, Hulu, first broadcast April 15th, 2020.

Much like vintage objects or soundtracks, the depiction of coming out in the late 20th century is also topical, in that anxieties around how it will be received might very well echo the experience of the older portion of the audience, and more specifically the queer audience, who may have experienced firsthand how it felt to discover their queerness in the context of the 1980s and 1990s. The success of retro show thus relies on a totemic nostalgia, as theorized by William Proctor (2017), that ties together the spectator's self-narrative with cultural artefacts and media products. This totemic nostalgia is specifically mobilized in intertextual references to queer cultural artefacts, memorabilia or icons who add affective value for queer audiences, nodding to the shared objects around which the community assembled. In *Everything Sucks*, the young Kate (Peyton Kennedy) is obsessed with singer-songwriter Tori Amos, who, albeit straight, was a gay icon in the 1990s. In *Little Fires Everywhere*, which sets its scene in 1998, the young Izzy is often called "Ellen", in reference to Ellen DeGeneres, who had come out of the closet only one year prior. In *Fresh Off the Boat*, finally, the first coming out scene of the young Nicole (Luna Blaise) takes place in a lesbian bar in Orlando, Florida.[18] When she initially steps into the bar, she is surprised to come across her stepmother and her clueless best friend, who ask her what she is doing here. Immediately, the patrons of the bar fall silent, and turn expectantly to Nicole, who is about to come out. Behind the bar, the barmaid gives instructions to the women in the assembly:

> BARMAID: Kristen, get that bottle of champagne. Barb, get that cot ready in the back. We've got to be prepared for this to go either way. Bev, you set?
> BEV, *standing next to the jukebox*: It's either gonna be B4 or C29.
> NICOLE: Um, I've been wanting to tell you this for a while, but I could never find the right time. But maybe there's never a right time. So… I'm gay.

While Nicole nervously awaits an answer from her stepmother, several shots show the anxious faces of the bar's customers. When Honey finally takes her step-daughter in a warm embrace, the other women erupt with joy, clapping and cheering, while the woman close to the jukebox launches "Come to my window" by openly lesbian singer Melissa Elleridge, another gay icon of the 1990s. The tune is easily recognizable for an older queer audience as one of the queer anthems of the time. The fact that the scene takes place in a bar is also a way to elicit nostalgic feelings from the audience, in a context when lesbian bars are going extinct in contemporary America.[19]

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[18] "A League of Her Own", S04E06, *Fresh Off the Boat*, ABC, first broadcast November 7th, 2017.

Restorative nostalgia, reflective nostalgia, and linear narratives

In her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart writes that “nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as felt lack” (Stewart, 1993: 23).

While nostalgia has been theorized by some scholars and commentators as potentially “solipsistic” (Freeman, 2019: 92), “harmful” (Boym, 2001: xiv), a “feedback loop” (Metzger, 2017) that offers comfort through an idealized representation of the past while obscuring important questions of exclusion, discrimination and more generally politics, I believe that these retro representations of coming out and closetedness in TV shows constitute a way to open up the past for revision and confront the country’s history of violent institutional and socially sanctioned homophobia.

These nostalgic representations hold educational value, in the sense that they allow for the transmission of a queer history usually marked by violence, repression and invisibility, while also recalling the general discourses and debates of the time around questions of homosexuality and their progression—while *Masters of Sex* presents Kinsey’s work on sexual fluidity as potentially trailblazing, but somewhat “new” and unproven, *Everything Sucks* shows the two teen characters finding the Kinsey scale test in a textbook from the school library and evaluating, based on their answers, whether or not Kate is a lesbian.[20] The fact that Kinsey’s work has apparently moved from experimental to academically acclaimed research taught in high-school in the 30-year period that separates the diegeses of the two shows speaks to the change in attitudes and knowledge around homosexuality.

Because they render queerness manifest, when it was once made invisible and hidden away, these shows could best be understood as a form of “progressive nostalgia” or “cultural reflective nostalgia” (Lizardi, 2015: 50), that allows us to acknowledge, from the present, the failings and errors of the past, all the while participating in a rewriting that makes room for queer lives, but also, on a metatextual level, for the queer storylines that were missing from television productions broadcast at the time. Indeed, from the 1960s to the 1980s at least, homosexuality was virtually absent from big and small screen alike—only visible to the eye of those who knew how to read between the lines (Russo, 1987). When homosexuality was addressed on television, it was either in talk shows that approached it as a "problem of the day" (Tropiano, 2002: 3), adopting a pathologizing approach that robbed queer people of control over their narrative, or in episodic shows (procedurals, medical shows) which featured gay or lesbian characters as "guest" characters, who came in, came out, and disappeared at the end of the episode, never to be seen again. On the contrary, contemporary retro shows often put their queer characters front and center, allowing untold stories to finally be told, freeing them of "heteronormative erasure" (Freeman, 2019: 97).

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[19] See the documentary *The Last Lesbian Bars* (Drew Denny, 2015). In 2020, there were only 15 lesbian bars left in the entire country (Kim, 2020).

[20] “What the Hell’s a Zargina?”, S01E05, *Everything Sucks*, Netflix, first broadcast February 16th, 2018.

To queer audiences specifically, these shows offer what Nishant Shahani has theorized as "queer nostalgia", that is to say "not a restorative return to a fixed past", but "the ability to forge a space of belonging in the present (…) predicated on the affective force of the past" (Shahani, 2013: 1227). Drawing on recent works on queer temporalities,[21] she establishes a difference between a heteronormative approach of nostalgia, characterized by its linearity and attachment to tradition, and an alternative, queer vision of time, characterized by its back-and-forth motion, resulting in meanderings that address the group's former exclusion from tradition all the while enabling the "reparative process of assembling collective memory as the base materials for imagining a different future" (Shahani, 2013: 1227).

The reflective approach must not, however, obscure the commercial and ideological dimensions at play in representations of closetedness and coming out in the past. In his article about *Stranger Things*, Matthias Stephan writes that retro shows:

> [a]llow for a reconsideration of the past—invoking the iconic 1980s vibe but making the racial components, and gender dynamics, more up-to-date politically. This progressive use of nostalgia can be used to brand Netflix as both appealing to our sense of self-narrative while maintaining a connection to contemporary progressive attitudes in terms of race and gender […] (Stephan, 2019: 31)

The same observation applies for the inclusion of queer storylines, now a staple of contemporary TV representation, especially on platforms such as Netflix which strive to offer inclusive and diverse narratives as part of their brand (Jenner, 2018: 161-182), an echo and continuation of the narrowcasting strategies adopted in the 1980s. Although they might provide comfort and a sense of self-narrative to a queer audience, the inclusion of coming out stories in retro shows must also be understood, first and foremost, in narratological and economic terms. The dramaturgical force of the coming out narrative, with its uncertain outcome and the tension that it builds, as well as the attraction that it is likely to exert on the audience, certainly play a role in broadcasters' choice to feature these types of storylines. They are, in fact, a prime marketing and advertising tool for Netflix, which regularly uploads clips of the "best coming out scenes" of its catalogue—among which Robin's confession in *Stranger Things*—on its Youtube channel.[22]

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[21] More specifically Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place*. Other works in queer temporality include Muñoz, 2009; Edelman, 2004; and Dinshaw, Edelman, Ferguson, et al., 2007.

According to Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, "nostalgia informs the imaginative effort to connect who we were with who we are now, and reflect on the ways we have changed" (Keightley & Pickering, 2012: 137). In other terms, representations of the past are always connected to our lived present: they tell something of the perceived evolution or regression of the American people and mindset on societal and political matters. In relegating closetedness, coming out, and more generally homophobic attitudes in the past, retro TV shows run the risk of reinforcing an idealized vision of modern-day America as post-gay, that is to say as wholeheartedly accepting of homosexuality and queerness, in the contrast that it draws between now and the time depicted in the diegesis.

The temporal and geographical displacement that the plot usually operates thus ideologically contributes to portraying coming out as a bit passé or out-of-date, in an America that has, to paraphrase Seidman, moved "beyond the closet" (Seidman, 2002). As Walters notes:

> Even the campy, closeted, and largely miserable gay characters of AMC's critical hit *Mad Men* are framed as signs of a boozy but not so gayfriendly past when men who like men were pariahs or bore the brunt of office humor. Like the casual racism of the series, homophobia is assigned a place in the past. (Walters, 2014: 38)

In their categorization of the 1960s as the era of the closet, the 1980s as slowly warming up to homosexuality and their 1990s celebration of queer culture, these shows, taken altogether, support a linear, progressive vision of history, building a contrast between the reactionary force of the past and the allegedly progressive drive of the present time, in which one could imagine that the characters or Robin, Izzy or Kate now live their adult lives as fully out to their peers.

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[22] "The Full Robin & Steve Bathroom Coming Out Scene | *Stranger Things* S3", *Still Watching Netflix*, Youtube, published July 12th, 2019. URL: https://youtu.be/HElHVsrCtlA (last accessed May 16th, 2023)

This depiction is problematic on two levels. On the one hand, it de-historicizes and naturalizes the distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality and the persecution of homosexuals, and thus fails to account for the hundreds of queer people who found pockets of freedom and ways to experience and live their homosexual lives and relationships within the institutional constraints of the time in the 1950s (Gutterman, 2020) and even prior (Chauncey, 1994; D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988). On the other hand, in its relegation of homophobia to the second half of the 20th century, it obscures the continued violences endured by queer people in modern-day America, be they institutional or social. The recent slew of attacks on transgender people, and especially on trans kids, forced to detransition at the risk of their own lives, in South Dakota or Alabama; Ron DeSantis signing SB1580, a bill that will allow healthcare providers to refuse treatment to LGBTQ+ people because of religious, moral or ethical beliefs, or the worrying rise in hate crimes against LGBTQ+ people in the past few years are all signs pointing to the fact that America has not, in fact, entered a "post-gay" era, and that homophobia is still alive and well in the country.

Conclusion

In a 1977 article dealing with the "nostalgia wave" of the end of the 1970s, Fred Davis reports on the etymology of the world nostalgia, "from the Greek *nostos*, to return home, and *algai*, a painful condition; thus, a painful yearning to return home" (Davis, 1977: 414). If this definition is fit for the melancholic relationship that ties straight audiences to depictions of the past during periods of instability or threat, such as the social unrest of the 1970s (Davis, 1977: 414), or the "post-truth" late part of the 2010s, it is certainly more complex for queer audiences, looking at retro productions, to engage in this longing for ancient times. For them, the process of idealization of the past is necessarily impeded by the knowledge that, had they been born a few decades before, they could have never enjoyed the same amount of freedom that they do today. According to Hutcheon and Valdes:

> [N]ostalgia is not something you "perceive" in an object; it is what you "feel" when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you and, often, carry considerable emotional weight. (Hutcheon & Valdes, 1998-2000: 22)

For queer audiences, it might be that this emotional weight carried by representations of queer life in the past is condemned to be bittersweet. Retro shows picturing 1960s and 1970s America, especially, acknowledge the persecutions and harm caused to homosexuals, by exposing the risks attached to stepping out of the closet, while shows set in later periods illustrate the progressive change in attitudes towards homosexuality in the 1980s and 1990s. Although these representations participate in bridging the gap between the "individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory" (Boym, 2001: xvi), thus creating a sense of community around a shared history, they also create a false narrative of a linear, progressive history that shields from view the discriminations currently encountered by sexual minorities, as well as the very real risk that some hard-earned LGBTQ+ rights be overturned or taken away from the community.[23] In this sense, they participate in a vision of America as post-gay, and belong, paradoxically, to a wider trend of "post-closet television", in which coming out is not problematized anymore, or solely when it takes place in a remote past.

In the face of repeated attacks on LGBTQ+ rights—with "Don't Say Gay" laws passed in several states across the country in an effort to curb the transmission of an LGBTQ+ history, coming out bears monumental significance—echoing its militant use and roots in the 1970s, when activists bravely came out of the closet to demand equal rights, and the recognition of their existence. In this context, it is paramount to continue telling the story of LGBTQ+ people through shows past, present and future, and prevent television from becoming a depoliticized post-closet, post-gay utopia.

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[23] I am referring here to the anxieties introduced by the recent overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, and the knock-on effect that the Supreme Court decision could have on other historical decisions such as *Obergefell v. Hodges*.

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Random Access Memories des Daft Punk : exemple d'une quête de valeur musicale non moderniste

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Abstract: With *Random Access Memories* (2013), Daft Punk question the supremacy of digital technologies and rehabilitates human performance in contemporary popular music. This approach is not so "backward-looking" as some critics, including Simon Reynolds, have denounced. Although this album's relationship to history is undeniable, it deserves to be nuanced: the study of the musical facts and the declarations of the artists and their team show that the past, on this album, does not cease to interact with the present, or even the future. While the innovative aspects of *Random Access Memories* are not related to technology, they are nonetheless a continuation of a deep spirit of "DJ culture" (Poschardt, 2002), which Daft Punk refuse to abandon to standardization as much as to a technicist headlong rush, particularly in the digital field. Through this artistic approach, Daft Punk reveal a multifactorial vision of musical value that breaks away from modernism to raise questions much more contemporary than the retro aesthetics of *Random Access Memories* would suggest.

Keywords: Modernism, Innovation, Musical Value, Ambition, DJ Culture

Résumé : Avec *Random Access Memories* (2013), les Daft Punk remettent en cause l'hégémonie des technologies numériques et réhabilitent la performance humaine dans la création musicale populaire. Ce projet n'est pas si « passéiste » qu'ont pu le dénoncer certains critiques dont Simon Reynolds. Si le rapport à l'histoire de cet album est indiscutable, il mérite d'être nuancé : l'étude des faits musicaux et des déclarations des artistes et de leur équipe montrent que le passé, sur cet album, ne cesse de dialoguer

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avec le présent, voire le futur. Si les aspects innovants de *Random Access Memories* ne sont pas de nature technologique, ils ne s'inscrivent pas moins dans la continuation d'un esprit profond de la « culture DJ » (Poschardt, 2002), que les Daft Punk refusent d'abandonner à l'uniformisation autant qu'à une fuite en avant techniciste, notamment dans le champ numérique. À travers leur démarche artistique, les Daft Punk laissent entrevoir une vision multifactorielle de la valeur musicale qui s'émancipe du modernisme pour soulever des questionnements bien plus contemporains que ne le laisse entrevoir l'esthétique rétro de *Random Access Memories.*

Mots clés : Modernisme, innovation, valeur musicale, ambition, culture DJ

Introduction

À la sortie de l'album *Random Access Memories* (*RAM*) des Daft Punk (2013), beaucoup a été dit et écrit sur son rapport au passé particulièrement marqué[2]. Le duo ayant lui-même souligné cet aspect dans sa communication, la presse et la critique s'en sont emparés, souvent pour le présenter comme un gage de qualité, parfois pour en dénoncer le caractère passéiste. Simon Reynolds, qui avait théorisé et analysé la mode « rétro » des années 2000 dans *Rétromania* (2012), qualifiera rétrospectivement *RAM* de « sommet de retour au passé » (Senff, 2018), le présentant même comme « le climax de ce sur quoi [il a] écrit »[3] (Reynolds, 2018). Sofian Fanen, auteur d'une critique particulièrement virulente dans *Libération*, lui adresse les mêmes reproches : répétant et déclinant le terme « passéiste », il accuse les Daft Punk d' « oublie[r] de questionner la célébration d'un monde disparu » et de « se contente[r] trop souvent de faire "à la façon de" » (Fanen, 2013). Pour lui, et cela résume son grief à l'encontre de *RAM*, ils feraient « comme si les années qui nous séparent de 1977 n'avaient jamais existé » (*ibid*). Ces propos révèlent un sous-texte résolument moderniste, partagé par Fanen et Reynolds et que résument bien James Parker et Nicholas Croggon :

> Dans *Rétromania* comme dans une large partie de la tradition critique, notamment les travaux précédents de Reynolds, la musique atteint son point culminant — et remplit sa fonction sociale essentielle — quand elle confronte l'auditeur au choc de la « nouveauté ». Pour Reynolds, ce sentiment de vertige doit accompagner l'expérience d'un monde sonore inouï : le frisson d'avoir assisté à la naissance du rock'n'roll, du hip-hop,

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[2] Constitué des musicien Thomas Bangalter et Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo, le duo parisien Daft Punk a commencé sa carrière en 1993 et sorti quatre albums, *Homework* (1997), *Discovery* (2001), *Human After All* (2005) et *Random Access Memories* (2013), avant de se séparer en 2021. *Random Access Memories* a connu le plus important succès, remportant notamment cinq Grammy Awards.

[3] L'original en anglais est difficilement audible (entretien à l'oral avec traduction simultanée) mais le mot « climax » est clairement identifiable. Le traducteur n'est pas identifié.

de la techno ou des raves. Ce choc, cette expérience de la nouveauté radicale, n'est pas seulement une expérience historique, mais une expérience de ce qu'est véritablement l'histoire, une expérience de l'histoire en tant que telle. Selon ses mots, c'est comme être à l'avant-poste du présent au moment où celui-ci se jette dans le futur. C'est l'expérience de ce qui donne à l'existence humaine un sens au regard de l'histoire : le progrès et le changement (2016 : §6).

Bien que *Rétromania* ait connu un grand succès et jouisse d'une certaine influence, ce parti-pris critique est contesté. Ainsi, pour Parker et Croggon, Reynolds

> scrute la nouveauté qui viendra confirmer — encore et toujours — sa vision téléologique de l'histoire. Mais ce faisant, il passe à côté de ce que la musique actuelle a de plus intéressant à offrir : le fait que beaucoup d'artistes cherchent précisément à s'affranchir de cette idée. Et qu'ils s'investissent dans une tâche diamétralement opposée sur le plan conceptuel : au lieu de faire avancer l'histoire, ils en inventent de nouvelles formes (*ibid*).

En effet, emportés par l'élan de leur conviction, Reynolds et Fanen ignorent dans leur dénonciation du « passéisme » de *RAM* les nuances apportées explicitement par les Daft Punk : « attention, on n'essaie pas de retourner dans le passé », préviennent-ils, « on essaie juste de retrouver la ligne invisible entre les classiques » (Daft Punk, 2013c : 76). Cette « ligne invisible », ils l'associent à des adjectifs comme « ambitieux » ou « libre » et à l'intention de « pousser les limites » (*ibid*). Un discours semblable est tenu dans *Le Figaro* : « nous sommes en mesure d'expérimenter de façon ambitieuse en reprenant les meilleures choses du passé pour les réinjecter dans le présent. Nous ne sommes pas passéistes, mais, en termes de contenu, la musique actuelle manque d'ambition créative » (Daft Punk, 2013b). De toute évidence, il existe pour des critiques modernistes comme Reynolds ou Fanen un hiatus insoluble entre l'emprunt de pratiques et d'esthétiques du passé et les velléités d'innovation — hiatus que les Daft Punk se prétendent, eux, capable de surmonter.

L'étude des processus compositionnels mis en œuvre dans *RAM*[4] permet de faire émerger une certaine idée de l'innovation artistique, qui remet en question ses relations avec l'historisme, la valeur musicale et l'évolution technologique[5]. Un schéma exprimera mieux qu'un long paragraphe l'interaction de ces notions dans l'intention créative de l'album :

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[4] J'ai mené cette étude dans le cadre de ma thèse de doctorat, qui contient les analyses musicologiques détaillées et les entretiens avec Thomas Bloch et Quinn évoqués dans cet article (Lebray, 2022b).

[5] Par souci de clarté, j'utilise le terme « historisme » pour désigner un rapport conciliant à l'histoire et l'emprunt d'éléments du passé chez les Daft Punk (qui réfutent le terme

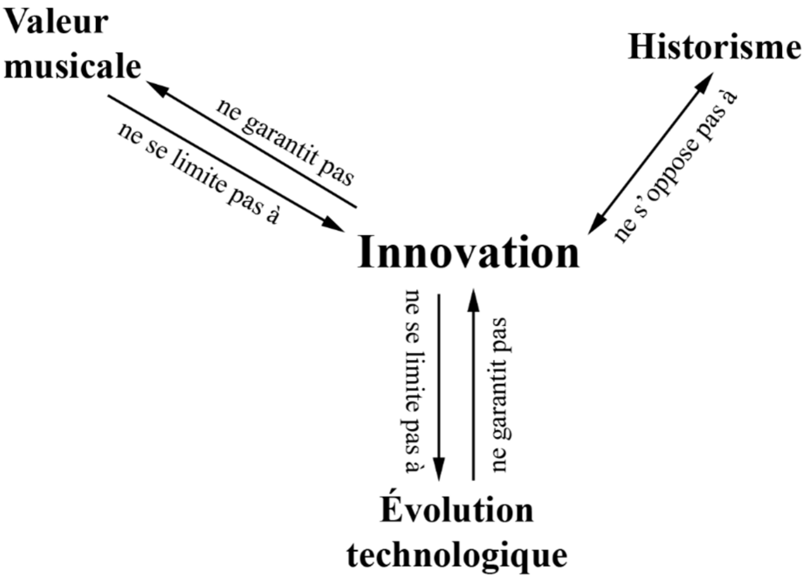

Figure 1 : Interaction entre innovation, historisme, valeur musicale et évolution technologique dans la démarche créative des Daft Punk (schéma de l'auteur)

Dans cet article, je m'appuierai sur l'exemple de *RAM* pour montrer que l'historisme n'abolit pas nécessairement l'innovation, en examinant et en nuançant le rapport au passé des Daft Punk, en analysant les aspects innovants de leur démarche, puis en questionnant leur vision de la valeur musicale.

Historisme de *Random Access Memories*

Déjà présent dans leurs albums précédents, le rapport au passé des Daft Punk se manifeste de façon particulièrement visible dans *RAM* par l'invitation de trois « collaborateurs[6] » historiques : Giorgio Moroder, Nile Rodgers et Paul Williams. De plus, le duo n'hésite pas à revendiquer les figures tutélaires de la musique populaire apparaissant sur les C.V. de ses musiciens de studio et techniciens : « l'ingénieur du son, par exemple, avait enregistré *Controversy* de Prince, entre autres » ; « un des batteurs qu'on a employés était celui de *Off The Wall* [de Michael Jackson] et du *Gimme The Night* de Georges Benson. Nous avions le guitariste de *Thriller* [de Michael Jackson], Paul Jackson Jr, en plus de Nile Rodgers », confient-ils ainsi à Philippe Manœuvre (Daft Punk, 2013c : 77). Le choix des studios

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« nostalgie »). Je préfère le terme neutre d' « évolution » technologique à celui de « progrès ».

[6] Le choix du terme « collaborateur » provient d'une série d'entretiens promotionnels que les Daft Punk ont particulièrement mis en avant. Il désigne les artistes renommés invités sur l'album, crédités sous l'appellation « *starring* » (Lachman, 2013).

d'enregistrement est également significatif : les studios Henson, Capitol, Electric Lady et Gang revendiquent sur leurs sites internet respectifs leur « héritage » et leur « histoire », et de façon corollaire la richesse de leur matériel *vintage* (ancien et réputé).

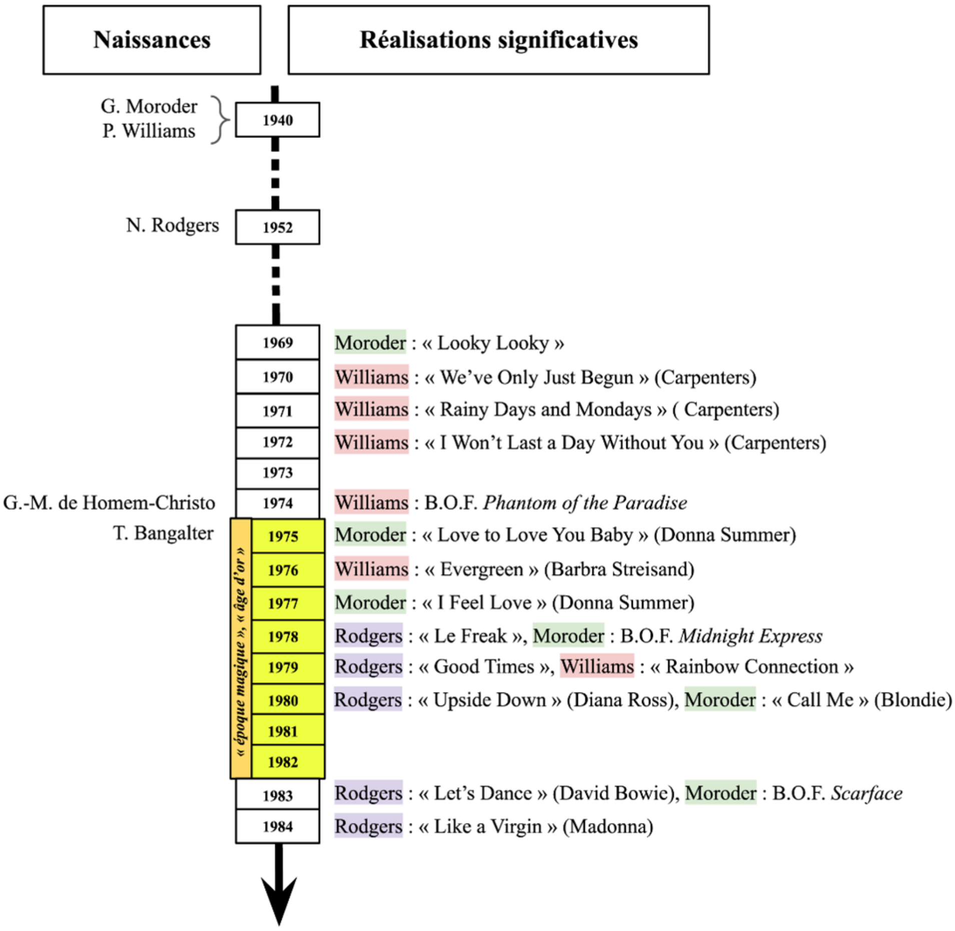
Naissances
Réalisations significatives
G. Moroder
P. Williams
1940
N. Rodgers
1952
1969
Moroder : « Looky Looky »
1970
Williams : « We've Only Just Begun » (Carpenters)
1971
Williams : « Rainy Days and Mondays » (Carpenters)
1972
Williams : « I Won't Last a Day Without You » (Carpenters)
1973
G.-M. de Homem-Christo
1974
Williams : B.O.F. Phantom of the Paradise
T. Bangalter
« époque magique », « âge d'or »
1975
Moroder : « Love to Love You Baby » (Donna Summer)
1976
Williams : « Evergreen » (Barbra Streisand)
1977
Moroder : « I Feel Love » (Donna Summer)
1978
Rodgers : « Le Freak », Moroder : B.O.F. Midnight Express
1979
Rodgers : « Good Times », Williams : « Rainbow Connection »
1980
Rodgers : « Upside Down » (Diana Ross), Moroder : « Call Me » (Blondie)
1981
1982
1983
Rodgers : « Let's Dance » (David Bowie), Moroder : B.O.F. Scarface
1984
Rodgers : « Like a Virgin » (Madonna)

Figure 2 : Réalisations significatives des collaborateurs historiques de *RAM*

Cet historisme vise une période précise que les Daft Punk appellent « époque magique », un « âge d'or du *funk* » qu'ils situent entre 1975 et 1982, « avant l'arrivée de la *new-wave* et du son numérique ». Les titres les plus marquants des collaborateurs historiques s'y trouvent concentrés : « Le Freak » et « Good Times » de Nile Rodgers avec son groupe Chic, « Love to Love You Baby » et « I Feel Love » composées par Giorgio Moroder pour Donna Summer, « Evergreen » et « Rainbow Connection » de Paul Williams (fig. 2). Les albums *Off the Wall*, *Gimme the Night* ou *Controversy* cités plus haut furent également enregistrés durant cette période, et les studios fréquentés par les Daft Punk, créés entre 1956 et 1976, y ont forgé ou entretenu leur réputation.

La période magique correspond à la prime enfance des Daft Punk (nés en 1974 et 1975), durant laquelle tous ces enregistrements inondaient les radios et télévisions. Lors de la promotion de *Discovery*, en 2001, le duo avait souligné l'importance des goûts musicaux de leur enfance, y associant à la fois la dialectique rétro/innovation et la question de la valeur de la musique (James, 2003 : 278), à l'instar des réflexions formulées par Agnès Gayraud quelques années plus tard (2018, 359-60). Reynolds, lui, perçoit l'aspiration à retrouver les émotions musicales primaires de l'enfance comme un élément constitutif de la rétromanie (2012 : 366-71). Mais le choix de se référer à cette époque n'est pas que subjectif, c'est l'aboutissement d'une analyse consciente de son rôle charnière dans l'évolution des musiques populaires. Moroder, influence commune des pionniers de la house et de la techno, a eu une importance capitale pour l'avènement des musiques électroniques (Kosmicki, 2009 : 209, 265-6, 271 ; Eshun, 2014 : 102-3), tandis que la chanson « Good Times » de Chic (le groupe de Rodgers) a été utilisée comme accompagnement de « Rapper's Delight » de Sugarhill's Gang, qui a largement contribué à populariser le hip-hop (Rodgers, 2013 : 170-3). Ces nouveaux courants musicaux marquent l'avènement de ce qu'Ulf Poschardt appelle la « culture DJ » (2002), qui coïncide avec l'aube de l'ère numérique : le premier sampleur numérique apparaît en 1979, le disque compact en 1982, le premier synthétiseur numérique grand public en 1983.

Artiste – Titre de la *French touch*	Source du sample	Année
Daft Punk, « Da Funk »	Barry White, « I'm Gonna Love You Just a Little More Baby »	1973
Daft Punk, « One More Time »	Eddie Johns, « More Spell on You »	1979
Stardust, « Music Sounds Better With You »	Chaka Khan, « Fate »	1981
Mr. Oizo, « Flat Beat »	The Fatback Band, « Put Your Love (In My Tender Care) »	1975
Cassius, « Cassius 1999 »	Donna Summer, « If It Hurts Just a Little »	1982
Modjo, « Lady (Hear Me Tonight) »	Chic, « Soup For One »	1982
Motorbass, « 1980 »	Howard Johnson, « So Fine »	1982
Air, « La Femme d'Argent »	Edwin Starr, « Runnin' »	1974

Tableau 1 : Origine des *samples* utilisés dans la *French touch*

La « période magique », au-delà de sa portée biographique pour les Daft Punk, fut donc une période d'incubation de la culture DJ qui resta imprégnée dans la mémoire de certains artistes. Ainsi, déjà dans les années 1990, les artistes de la *French touch* samplaient des enregistrements de cette époque (Lebray 2022a, 375 ; tab. 1). Une part de l'historisme des Daft Punk provient assurément de cette propension qu'a la culture DJ à honorer et à recycler la musique enregistrée du passé, qui découle directement de ses outils spécifiques, comme les platines ou le sampleur.

Pour Philippe Le Guern, « le sampleur comme technologie et le sampling comme pratique esthétique [peuvent] être envisagés, dans la mesure où ils prolongent l'art du DJ et de la platine, comme emblématiques du dépassement de la modernité » (2012 : §23). Poschardt abonde en ce sens : « grâce au *sample*, il n'était plus nécessaire de mélanger laborieusement l'histoire de la musique d'une platine à l'autre : il devenait possible de l'insérer directement et numériquement à l'endroit voulu d'un mix, d'un remix ou d'une composition originale » (2002 : 402). Ce faisant, le DJ, diffuseur devenu producteur de musique, brouille les frontières entre les rôles de curateur et de créateur, un mélange des genres que Reynolds définit précisément comme l'une des causes de la rétromanie et assimile à un « cancer » (2013 : 176-7). Or pour Poschardt,

> la connaissance de l'histoire de la musique (pop) est constitutive [du] travail [d'un DJ]. Les caisses de disques des DJ sont elles-mêmes des archives sonores stockées sur vinyle, que le DJ utilise non comme un savoir mort, mais comme la base vivante de sa production (2002 : 402) ;
> le DJ renvoie dans son travail à l'histoire de la pop. Il le fait toutefois sans réflexion théorique ou historique : il a juste entendu des vieux trucs et sait les utiliser. Une compréhension intellectuelle de cette autoreflexivité est superflue (2002 : 382-3)

Toute superflue qu'elle soit, une approche intellectuelle et consciente de l'histoire des musiques électroniques a été mise en scène par plusieurs artistes au cours des années 2010, que l'on songe à l'album *Electronica 1: The Time Machine* (2015) de Jean-Michel Jarre ou au concert conceptuel *Time Tunnel* de Jeff Mills, pionnier de la techno de Detroit. Dans un état d'esprit similaire, les Daft Punk semblent vouloir mettre en scène leur compréhension de l'histoire, perceptible dans leur campagne de promotion, qui prend des tournures tantôt historiques, (artistes, œuvres et styles), tantôt plus techniques (matériel, instruments, méthodes d'enregistrement). Ils contribuent ce faisant à un processus de légitimation et de patrimonialisation du disco — qui toutefois les dépasse largement (Poirrier 2015).

Il convient toutefois de nuancer la perception historisante de *RAM* : aussi manifeste soit-elle, on ne peut décemment y réduire l'album. Comme le soulignent Nuno Manna et Rafael Azevedo, l' « incursion dans le passé » des Daft Punk, « de nature plus complexe que celle d'un simple passéisme », « est motivée par un intérêt particulier pour l'avenir » (2021 : 133). Reynolds fait preuve de mauvaise foi à cet égard, en assurant dans le *New York Times* :

> bien que les collaborateurs de Daft Punk comprennent des musiciens de leur âge ou plus jeunes, comme Panda Bear d'Animal Collective, ce sont les partenariats établis avec des aînés comme M. Moroder et M. Rodgers qui sont les plus révélateurs de l'intention du projet (2013)[8].

Factuellement, les collaborateurs historiques sont à la fois moins nombreux (trois contre six) et moins présents sur l'album et dans les *singles* diffusés en radio que les collaborateurs contemporains, Pharrell Williams, Julian Casablancas, Panda Bear, Todd Edwards, Chilly Gonzales et DJ Falcon, tous issus de la génération des Daft Punk (nés en 1972 et 1978). Dans son article, Reynolds s'étend en longueur sur les contributions et les carrières des trois historiques, dont les noms sont mentionnés cinq à six fois chacun, tandis que seulement la moitié des contemporains sont cités une à deux fois chacun, invisibilisant *de facto* l'une des facettes de la contemporanéité de l'album.

Dans un registre plus technique, il faut nuancer l'association simplificatrice des instruments analogiques au passé et des technologies numériques au présent ou au futur : si les Daft Punk disent préférer d'anciennes machines analogiques à leurs modélisations logicielles, ils n'excluent pas pour autant les outils numériques récents sans équivalent analogique comme l'Auto-Tune, utilisé de façon détournée sur les ondes Martenot dans « Touch »[7], et des effets utilitaires qui n'influencent pas le timbre comme le *de-esser* (qui atténue les sibilances dans la voix) ou le *gate* (qui supprime les bruits parasites) (Guzauski, 2013). L'usage du logiciel audionumérique Pro Tools est même au cœur de leur processus compositionnel, basé sur la manipulation et le montage de fragments de musique enregistrée (*ibid*.). Plusieurs auteurs ont mentionné l'impact sur la créativité musicale des stations audionumériques dont « les interfaces graphiques favorisent l'anticipation par le regard » (Le Guern, 2012 : §29) et « permettent une malléabilité instantanée de la musique sur l'écran sous forme de segments mobiles, au lieu des laborieuses manipulations de bandes audio » (Prior, 2012 : §41). Selon Bangalter, une chanson comme « Touch » qui « repose entièrement sur la puissance de traitement la plus avancée des ordinateurs », « n'aurait pas pu être réalisée il y a 30 ou 40 ans » (2013b). L'équipe technique est d'ailleurs constituée de façon comparable à celle des collaborateurs : trois ingénieurs du son plus âgés, choisis pour leur expérience et leur connaissance du matériel analogique (Mick Guzauski, Bob Ludwig et Jean-Pierre Janiaud), ont travaillé avec cinq autres de la génération du duo (Peter Franco, Antoine Chabert, Florian Lagatta et Daniel Lerner) usant de technologies numériques. La conversion analogique-numérique, la gestion des fichiers numériques et la préservation des qualités sonores de l'analogique au *mastering* ont d'ailleurs constitué des problématiques centrales et très contemporaines du processus de production de cet album (Tingen, 2013 ; Guzauski, 2013 ; Chabert, 2013).

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[7] Entretien avec Thomas Bloch (non publié), 2022.

Une inventivité non-techniciste

Si les parangons du modernisme dont se réclame Reynolds ont révolutionné le langage musical, leur première génération (Schönberg, Webern…) composait pour des instruments acoustiques utilisés depuis des siècles tandis que leurs continuateurs (Boulez, Stockhausen…) se sont intéressés aux nouvelles technologies musicales du xx^e^ siècle sans pour autant exclure les instruments traditionnels. Le discours de Reynolds et Fanen, quand ils parlent de *RAM*, s'éloigne de cette conception initiale du modernisme en révélant l'illusion que toute innovation ne peut et ne doit se faire que par la technologie. Reynolds assimile la « musique orientée vers le futur » à « une musique qui sonne numérique » et la sonorité typique du logiciel Auto-Tune à « de la musique moderne » (2018). Fanen regrette quant à lui que « seules les iconiques mais rabâchées voix de robot viennent nous rappeler qu'on est bien en 2013 » en écoutant *RAM*, et que « Daft Punk explique qu'il n'a plus rien à dire avec un ordinateur » (2013). Il semble, d'après leurs propos, que le fait même de jouer d'un instrument non numérique appartienne à l'histoire : Fanen ironise sur le fait que « Nile Rodgers recommence à tricoter comme si les années qui nous séparent de 1977 n'avaient jamais existé » (*ibid.*), tandis que Reynolds parle d'un « retour à l'*ère* des musiciens qui jouent en direct » (2013, je souligne). Est-ce à dire que la guitare ou la batterie jouées par des humains n'auraient pas leur place dans la musique du futur ? Si pour les Daft Punk, il apparaît « évident » que « jouer *live* n'est pas quelque chose qui n'appartient qu'au passé » (Bangalter, 2013d), le champ lexical de Reynolds et Fanen révèle un schéma de pensée éminemment techniciste particulièrement ciblé sur les technologies numériques, sans doute accentué par le style d'origine du duo : on n'attend pas de producteurs de *house* qu'ils innovent autrement que par la surenchère technologique.

Pourtant, si leur démarche créative inclut la patrimonialisation d'un savoir-faire musical et technique, les Daft Punk n'en revendiquent pas moins une exigence d'inventivité. L'innovation se rapporte chez eux à l' « expérimentation », qui revient souvent dans leur discours et celui des membres de leur équipe (Colletti, 2014 ; Chabert, 2013) :

> Il s'agit de voir où on en est, et d'avancer dans une nouvelle direction à partir de là […]. Il y a toujours un point au-delà duquel on ne sait pas ce qu'on va trouver. C'est comme être un scientifique dans un

> laboratoire de recherche. Tu étudies, mais tu ne sais pas si au bout du compte tu trouveras quelque chose ou pas […]. C'est ainsi que nous avons passé la majeure partie du temps entre nos deux sorties [d'album] – expérimentations et pure recherche » (Bangalter, 2013d : 92).

Dans *RAM*, les Daft Punk « expérimentent » l'usage du studio d'enregistrement traditionnel et la collaboration avec des musiciens interprètes, alors qu'ils avaient toujours joué eux-mêmes ou fait jouer par des machines leurs compositions en home studio. Utiliser le studio d'enregistrement à des fins créatives, et plus seulement pour fixer la trace sonore d'une œuvre déjà composée, était novateur à l'époque de *Pet Sounds* (Beach Boys, 1966) et de *Sgt. Pepper* (The Beatles, 1967) (Thibault, 2016 : § 7). Cette démarche s'est ensuite répandue au cours des années 1970, avant que n'advienne une nouvelle révolution de la production musicale, celle du home studio dans les années 1980, qui permit aux créateurs d'enregistrer leur musique à moindre frais en toute autonomie. Enregistrer dans un studio traditionnel est donc une expérience nouvelle à titre individuel pour des musiciens électroniques du début du XXIe siècle qui n'ont connu que la production en home studio, et l'apport de la culture DJ et de ses approches créatives comme le sampling, le remix, la remise en cause du statut de l'auteur (Poschardt, 2002 : 392) en font, pour les Daft Punk, un nouveau terrain d'expérimentation.

Créer ses propres samples

Bien qu'étant reconnus pour avoir fait un usage virtuose des sampleurs dans leurs précédents albums, dans *RAM* les Daft Punk se sont interdit d'utiliser des samples (à deux exceptions près), préférant « créer la matière eux-mêmes » (2013b) : « on a composé et enregistré la musique que Daft Punk aurait pu sampler » (Bangalter 2013c, 17). Ce parti-pris avantageux leur a permis de combiner les multiples bénéfices créatifs et juridiques d'un matériau original avec la richesse et la modernité du sampling. Mais il implique de parvenir à reproduire ce qui fait la richesse d'un sample, que Bangalter analyse ainsi : « de la vie, de la performance musicale, un savoir-faire d'enregistrement, l'expérience combinée de gens qui lui donnent sa magie… » (*ibid*). Cela suppose également de s'approprier la sensibilité d'autres artistes, de pouvoir découvrir une part d'inconnu dans le matériau à partir duquel on travaille.

Pour ce faire, les Daft Punk se sont attachés à enregistrer par des méthodes de production traditionnelles des improvisations collectives dirigées. « Ils avaient des idées très précises sur ce que les musiciens devaient jouer, de sorte qu'ils obtenaient les parties qu'ils voulaient, mais en même temps, ils laissaient aux musiciens la liberté d'improviser », se souvient Guzauski (Tingen, 2013). Le claviériste et arrangeur de l'album Chris Caswell décrit ainsi le processus :

> Ils nous demandaient de prendre huit ou seize mesures, de les jouer d'une certaine manière la première fois, d'une autre manière la deuxième fois, d'une troisième manière la troisième fois – afin qu'ils puissent choisir entre tous ces différents ressentis. […] Au bout de 24 ou 25 fois, on se mettait à introduire du jazz, de la fusion et toutes sortes de choses. […] Ils ont pris une partie de piano que j'ai jouée la 28e fois, et l'ont fait suivre d'une partie que j'ai jouée la 10e fois. Ils ont composé ces titres en prélevant des petits morceaux de chaque séance. C'était très expérimental (Coletti, 2014).

Ce témoigne met en évidence une pratique novatrice : on peut difficilement parler de sampling dès lors qu'un matériau inédit est créé, mais on ne peut pas davantage la réduire à un enregistrement classique, car ce que les Daft Punk ont fait enregistrer à leurs musiciens n'est pas *RAM*, mais un matériau qui leur a servi à créer *RAM*. L'étape de composition n'est située ni avant, ni pendant l'enregistrement, mais en grande partie après, dans un processus créatif proche de celui des musiques électroniques, comme en atteste le témoignage du producteur de house Todd Edwards :

> Thomas m'a demandé de tenter un découpage [« *cutting up* »] de la musique. Je suis réputé pour mon style spécifique d'utilisation des samples, qui consiste à prendre des micro-samples dans l'œuvre d'autres gens et à construire des collages musicaux à partir de ça – les Daft Punk sont connus pour faire la même chose. Mais cette fois, au lieu d'utiliser des samples d'autres personnes, nous avons samplé la musique qu'ils avaient enregistrée (Tingen, 2013)

Mick Guzauski le confirme : « Daft Punk construisait, modifiait et éditait ses morceaux à l'aide de ces enregistrements *live*, de la même manière qu'ils avaient utilisé des samples pour leurs précédents albums », et précise que les structures des chansons ont été constituées a posteriori (*ibid*).

En faisant cela, les Daft Punk ne se comportent pas en simples compositeurs enregistrant leur musique ; ils induisent une situation propice à l'improvisation et laissent s'exprimer les interprètes, observant la tournure que vont prendre les choses. Cette démarche rappelle un processus créatif contemplatif propre à la musique électronique, dans lequel le créateur est avant tout un « auditeur qui écoute chanter la machine et choisit éventuellement, a posteriori, les modulations de ce chant » (Gayraud, 2018 : 419-20) ; une posture que l'on peut également rapporter à la culture DJ : « Le DJ écoute des disques en consommateur et utilise cet acte de consommation de l'art comme point de départ de sa propre création. [...] Avant de devenir musicien, le DJ est toujours avant tout quelqu'un qui écoute » (Poschardt, 2002 : 395). En quittant le *home studio* pour un studio d'enregistrement classique, et en remplaçant les machines par des interprètes humains, les Daft Punk expérimentent donc une approche hybride, empruntant autant à la relation compositeur-interprète qu'à celle d'un producteur de musique électronique.

Un art collectif

On peut également souligner que les Daft Punk se sont réservés sur *RAM* des rôles de personnages secondaires, offrant à leurs invités les places d'honneur. Fait révélateur, sur cinq *singles*, deux sont chantés par Pharrell Williams, un par Julian Casablancas et un par Panda Bear. Les Daft Punk n'interprètent que des voix additionnelles (qui apparaissent après plus de trois minutes dans « Get Lucky ») et divers instruments, sauf dans le dernier *single*. La posture de DJ auditeur-créateur évoquée plus haut contribue à expliquer cette mise en retrait : en limitant leur participation performative, les Daft Punk s'autorisent à principalement *écouter*. En effet, si le DJ est pour Poschardt « toujours en même temps compositeur et auditeur », c'est au détriment du statut d'interprète, car le home studio, avec ses séquenceurs et ses boîtes à rythme, permet de s'affranchir des conditions physiques de l'interprétation pour se concentrer sur la création (2002 : 392). La culture DJ induit également selon lui une dissolution du statut de l'auteur ouvrant la voie à une conception plus collective de la création : « le texte du futur est libéré du fardeau des vieilles identités. Il ne devrait plus offrir une unique signification "théologique" (le message du dieu auteur), mais fonctionner comme un espace multidimensionnel où plusieurs écritures se conjuguent et luttent entre elles » (*ibid.*). Ainsi, le DJ mixe les œuvres de différents auteurs, remixe les œuvres des autres et se considère honoré que l'on remixe les siennes, utilise des *samples* et multiplie les *featurings*. Les Daft Punk ont expérimenté toutes ces pratiques depuis les débuts de leur carrière, notamment avec certains collaborateurs de *RAM* (Chilly Gonzales, Pharrell Williams et Todd Edwards). On peut estimer que l'influence des musiques électroniques et la pratique du *home studio* leur ont permis de penser différemment leur autorat, en s'affranchissant plus largement des statuts d'interprète-star et de « dieu auteur » que n'auraient pu le faire des artistes issus du rock ou de la pop.

Musicalement, cette approche collective de la création se traduit notamment par une diversité de langages musicaux et de styles juxtaposés — tout comme dans mix de DJ ! Cette diversité est notamment perceptible sur le plan harmonique, où les Daft Punk s'émancipent de leur approche habituelle : un langage majoritairement modal (éolien ou dorien), relativement simple, souvent basé sur des grilles de quatre accords, et comportant peu de notes étrangères. On y trouve de nombreuses exceptions sur *RAM*, dont ces quelques exemples (fig. 3) :

- Une modulation tonale avec accord commun et enchaînement cadentiel de la dominante à la tonique, dans un style savant pré-xx^{e} siècle (A) ;

- Un couplet faisant coexister une mélodie modale en *si* éolien et une harmonie en *si* dorien, qui se termine sur une couleur plus tonale avec des septièmes de dominante (B) ;

- Un solo de piano marqué par un langage harmonique complexe typique du *jazz fusion* des années 1970 avec harmonies de quarte et jeu « *out* » (C) ;

- Des textures orchestrales stochastiques basées sur un grand nombre de motifs à hauteur non déterminée, produisant un effet de *cluster* animé par un mouvement interne (D).

Cet élargissement du langage n'a rien d'accidentel, il est directement induit par la posture créative et les instructions des Daft Punk : l'exemple A découle d'une demande formulée à Chilly Gonzales de « construire un pont musical » entre deux tonalités (Lachman, 2013 : n° 6, 2:21), tandis que le B est le fruit d'une recréation de la mélodie des Daft Punk par Chris Caswell (Coletti, 2014) ; le C est né des séances d'improvisation collective (*ibid.*), et le D s'appuie sur les compétences d'orchestrateur de Caswell.

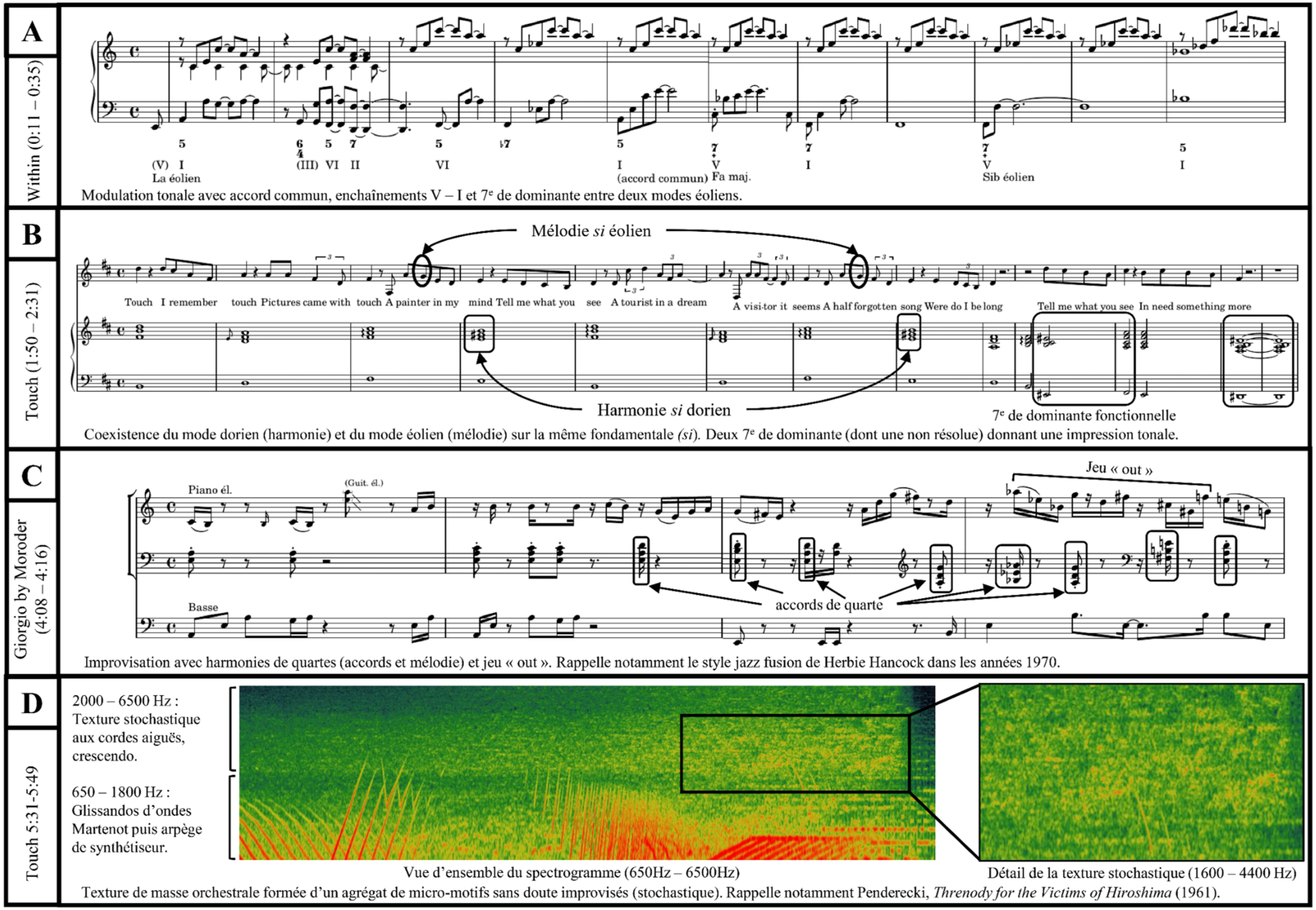
A
Within (0:11 – 0:35)
(V) I
La éolien
(III) VI II
VI
I
(accord commun) Fa maj.
V
I
V
Sib éolien
I
Modulation tonale avec accord commun, enchaînements V – I et 7e de dominante entre deux modes éoliens.
B
Touch (1:50 – 2:31)
Mélodie si éolien
Touch I remember touch Pictures came with touch A painter in my mind Tell me what you see A tourist in a dream A visi-tor it seems A half forgotten song Were do I be long Tell me what you see In need something more
Harmonie si dorien
7e de dominante fonctionnelle
Coexistence du mode dorien (harmonie) et du mode éolien (mélodie) sur la même fondamentale (si). Deux 7e de dominante (dont une non résolue) donnant une impression tonale.
C
Giorgio by Moroder (4:08 – 4:16)
Piano él.
(Guit. él.)
Basse
Jeu « out »
accords de quarte
Improvisation avec harmonies de quartes (accords et mélodie) et jeu « out ». Rappelle notamment le style jazz fusion de Herbie Hancock dans les années 1970.
D
Touch 5:31-5:49
2000 – 6500 Hz : Texture stochastique aux cordes aiguës, crescendo.
650 – 1800 Hz : Glissandos d'ondes Martenot puis arpège de synthétiseur.
Vue d'ensemble du spectrogramme (650Hz – 6500Hz)
Détail de la texture stochastique (1600 – 4400 Hz)
Texture de masse orchestrale formée d'un agrégat de micro-motifs sans doute improvisés (stochastique). Rappelle notamment Penderecki, Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima (1961).

Figure 3 : Quatre exemples de la diversité des langages harmoniques sur *RAM*

Structuration

L’inventivité des Daft Punk dans *RAM* se manifeste également sur le plan structurel. Bangalter associe les durées de certains de ses titres à une entreprise d’innovation musicale : « composer des morceaux plus longs, plus débridés comme vous dites, correspond à notre volonté de nous réinventer, d’essayer des choses de plus en plus libres » (2013a). Si l’on perçoit des formes couplet-refrain dans plusieurs chansons, dont « Get Lucky » qui en offre un exemple archétypique, Guillaume Gilles remarque que « chaque chanson a une structure qui lui est propre » (2019 : 120), certaines s’éloignant sensiblement de ce modèle. « Give Life Back to Music », « Beyond », « Contact » ou « Giorgio by Moroder » peuvent être citées parmi les plus représentatives de ce développement inventif des structures, mais « Touch » en est incontestablement le paroxysme. Située au cœur de l’album (7e piste sur 13), elle se distingue par sa durée de plus de huit minutes, apparaissant de prime abord comme un enchaînement rhapsodique de sections toutes différentes, séparés par des charnières parfois rapide et contrastantes, parfois plus lentes et progressives. Dénuée de refrain, « Touch » est structurée autour de deux thèmes successivement introduits, exposés, puis développés. Le premier, que l’on peut appeler A, est préfiguré dans l’introduction, prend corps à partir de 1:50 sous forme d’une voix d’homme naturelle accompagnée par un piano Fender Rhodes puis divers instruments, avant d’être varié (tempo, arrangement), jusqu’à ce qu’une transition nous amène au second. Le thème B, dont les prémices apparaissent à partir de 4:13, est exposé de 4:28 à 4:44 avec un chœur de voix robotiques accompagné par le duo basse-batterie, progressivement augmenté par une multitude d’instruments, incluant l’orchestre, les ondes Martenot et un chœur d’enfants. À partir de 7:42 une strophe de réexposition fait la synthèse de ces deux thèmes que tout oppose (tab. 2) : harmoniquement et mélodiquement, cet ultime couplet emprunte ses sept premières mesures au thème B et les quatre dernières au thème A ; ses paroles s’apparentent à A, mais sa métrique est similaire à B ; sa voix naturelle renvoie au thème A, tandis que son piano acoustique provient du développement de B.

	Thème A	Thème B
Harmonie	*Si* éolien (mélodie) + dorien (accords)	*Si* dorien
Tempo	≈ 70 puis 116	≈ 91
Carrure	13 mesures	6 mesures
Nombre de voix	1 voix soliste	Chœur à 4 voix
Timbre vocal	Voix d'homme naturelle	Voix robotiques
Paroles	11 vers (majoritairement 5/6 syllabes)	2 vers (8 et 2 syllabes).
Accompagnement (1ère exposition)	Harmonique, piano Fender Rhodes seul	Section rythmique basse/batterie

Tableau 2 : Contrastes entre les thèmes A et B de « Touch »

Comment comprendre cette synthèse musicale des thèmes A et B ? Pour Jane Clendinning, les dernières lignes de « Touch » expriment « l'ambiguïté quant à la nature humaine ou robotique du protagoniste, ou peut-être les deux » (2019 : 172). On pourrait extrapoler à partir de là que les thèmes A et B représentent les facettes humaine et robotique du narrateur, matérialisées notamment par la différence de timbre vocal. En résumé, les Daft Punk ont inventé pour « Touch » une structure unique conçue sur mesure, avec peut-être une visée narrative, plutôt que de l'inscrire dans un couplet-refrain ou une autre forme préexistante.

Timbre

S'il est évident que les Daft Punk utilisent la guitare, le piano, la basse et la batterie pour retrouver des sonorités du passé, le vaste instrumentarium mobilisé sur *RAM* permet également des approches plus expérimentales. Un certain bruitisme est développé tout au long de l'album, pouvant prendre la forme de bruitages cinématographiques (introduction de « Giorgio by Moroder »), d'un son sale ou distordu produit par la synthèse soustractive (fins de « Giorgio by Moroder » et « Contact »), ou d'instruments et de techniques de jeu inusités (cristal Baschet, *pedal steel*, ondes Martenot, *waterphone* ; glissandos, textures stochastiques). Dans une perspective plus technique, le « son analogique » est favorisé pour ses qualités timbrales, sans toutefois exclure le numérique. Le choix d'effectuer un enregistrement directement numérique ou de le faire transiter par un magnétophone à bande dépend par exemple des intentions musicales de chaque chanson :

> Pour les morceaux dansants, on choisissait le numérique parce qu'il était plus percutant, mais à d'autres endroits, on voulait un son plus chaud, avec moins de transitoires, alors on utilisait les enregistrements analogiques (Guzauski, 2013)

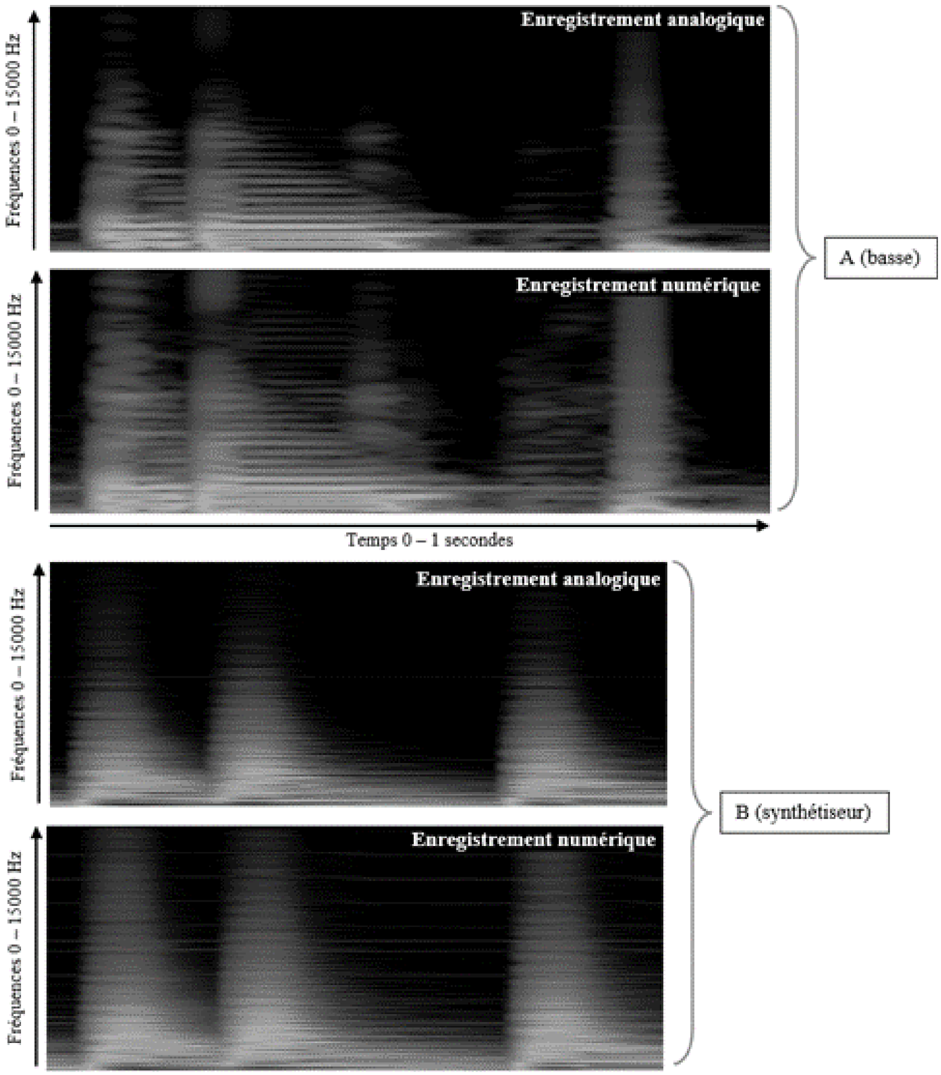

Figure 4 : Spectrogramme comparatif. Différences entre des enregistrements analogiques et numériques. Les enregistrements analogiques ont des aigus atténués (« un son plus chaud ») et des transitoires adoucies.

L'un des aspects les plus intéressants de cette recherche sur le timbre est une convergence entre les sonorités synthétiques et acoustiques, imputables au choix ou à l'usage particulier de certains instruments. Le travail du percussionniste Quinn sur « Motherboard » en est particulièrement représentatif. Le *talking drum*, très audible dans l'introduction, émet une variation de fréquence provoquée par la tension ou la détente de sa peau par l'interprète qui fait penser à l'action d'un filtre et/ou d'un *glissando* sur un synthétiseur. « Les gens me recrutent généralement pour rendre organiques des sons électroniques », indique Quinn sur le site internet *SoundBetter*. Si les Daft Punk « n'ont pas émis de requête spécifique pour que [s]es instruments organiques sonnent de façon électronique », « quand effectivement ça sonnait plus électronique, ça les enthousiasmait[8] ». Parfois, le choix des instruments parle de lui-même, par exemple le cristal Baschet, ainsi décrit par son interprète Thomas Bloch sur son site internet :

> Né en même temps que la musique concrète (Pierre Schaeffer, Pierre Henry...), les premiers synthétiseurs (Bob Moog...) et la musique électro-acoustique, le cristal en est un parent totalement acoustique, sans amplification électrique. L'ambition des frères Baschet était en effet de se rapprocher de ces sonorités qui venaient de naître au début des années 1950 (Bloch).

Dans d'autres cas, un instrument est détourné de ses affinités stylistiques : la guitare *pedal steel*, habituellement associée au blues, s'approche des sonorités électroniques dans « Motherboard » ou « Touch » : « Nous l'avons fait sonner de façon très traditionnelle ou au contraire plus psychédélique, à la lisière de l'électronique et de l'acoustique », explique De Homem Christo (2013a).

La convergence s'opère dans l'autre sens en ce qui concerne les voix de robot typiques des Daft Punk : « nous avons trouvé excitant de rendre une voix robotique la plus humaine possible », expliquent-ils, évoquant « une émotion de quelque chose qui n'est pas humain mais qui tente de l'être » (Daft Punk, 2013a) ; « ils voulaient qu'elles sonnent aussi humaines et pleines d'âme [*soulful*] que possible », témoigne Guzauski (Tingen, 2013). Cette quête d'humanité se traduit par des détails sonores révélant, au fond, des caractéristiques physiologiques du corps humain. On entend par exemple des bruits de respiration dans « The Game of Love » (à partir de 3:26), qui ne devraient pas s'entendre au vocodeur : leur ajout est le fruit d'une décision consciente visant à faire entendre la vie derrière cette voix de robot. Dans « Within », le son du vocodeur est élaboré de façon à reproduire artificiellement des effets comme le *vibrato* et le *portamento*, bien visibles au spectrogramme (fig. 5).

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[8] Entretien avec Quinn (non publié), 2022.

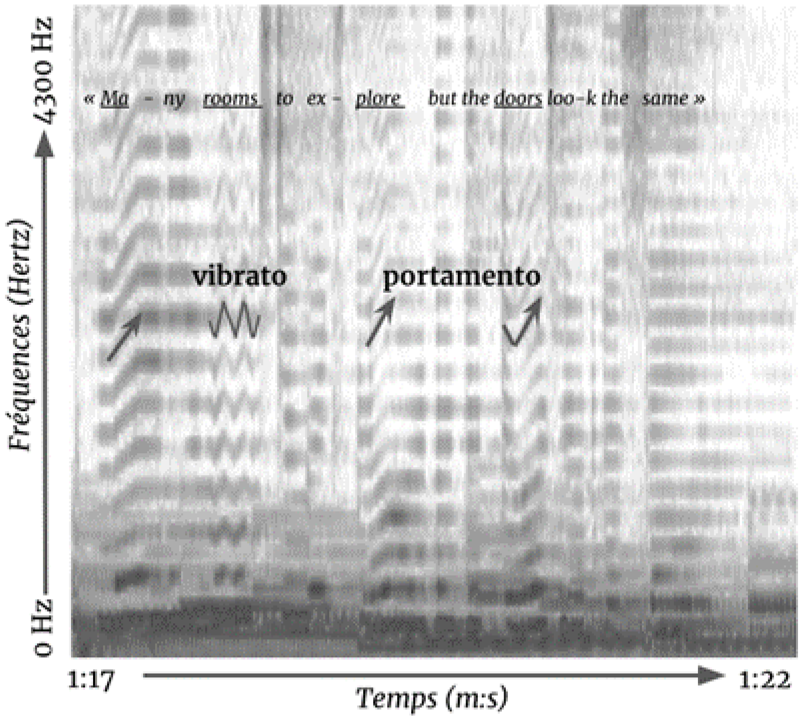

Figure 5 : Humanisation du vocodeur dans « Within » (1:17-1:22)

Au-delà de l'innovation, l'ambition

L'innovation, considérée indépendamment de l'évolution technologique, n'est que l'un des critères qui fondent la valeur de la musique pour les Daft Punk. Elle participe d'une démarche idéale de la création musicale qu'ils appellent « ambition », associent à la prise de risque et à la liberté artistique, et refusent d'opposer au succès populaire :

> On voulait […] montrer qu'on peut encore faire aujourd'hui un disque enthousiaste, ambitieux […], un truc généreux et très libre. […] ce concept de liberté s'est quelque peu perdu. Plus personne n'essaie de pousser les limites. […] Plus personne n'essaie rien. Pourquoi ? Manque de moyens, d'ambition, de volonté, voire les trois ? (Daft Punk 2013c, 76)

On pouvait déjà la déceler cette ambition dans les expérimentations de la fin des années 1960, dans des albums comme *Pet Sounds* (Beach Boys, 1966) ou *Sgt. Pepper* (Beatles, 1967). Elle a connu une apogée au cours des années 1970 avec le courant rock progressif (King Crimson, Yes, Pink Floyd…), et on la retrouve chez des artistes plus tardifs comme Radiohead — dont Bangalter, en 2001, disait se sentir proche et saluait l'indépendance et la liberté artistique (Beauvallet, 2001 : 33 ; Patterson, 2001 : 24-6).

Elle se manifeste notamment, chez tous ces artistes, par l'incorporation dans la musique populaire d'instruments classiques, jazz, extra-occidentaux, électroniques ou simplement insolites éventuellement détournés de leurs usages habituels, le développement des structures et du langage qui défie les normes esthétiques d'une époque ou d'un style, la propension à considérer le studio comme un espace de création et d'expérimentation. Si cette ambition a connu une heure de gloire dans les années 1970, elle n'appartient en réalité à aucune époque.

Risque et investissement

L'usage courant d'un studio d'enregistrement traditionnel privilégie le savoir-faire de musiciens et techniciens expérimentés pour obtenir un résultat satisfaisant et normé en un temps record ; prendre le temps d'y expérimenter coûte cher. De ce fait, la divergence entre la logique de rentabilité des financeurs et la soif d'expérimentation des artistes est devenue un poncif de l'industrie musicale dès les années 1970. Les Daft Punk l'avaient contrecarrée au début de leur carrière en revendiquant l'usage du *home studio* comme un vecteur de liberté artistique et en créant le label Daft Trax pour financer leurs propres disques (Lebray, 2022 : 365-7 ; Perrin, 2019 : 75-8). Au cours des années 2000, la crise du disque a engendré une « reconfiguration de la chaîne de valeur » (Poux *et al.* 2018, 1) qui a amené les artistes et l'industrie à chercher davantage de revenus dans le spectacle vivant, quitte à moins investir dans la production d'enregistrements musicaux, réduits à un rôle de « produits d'appel » (Louis, 2017). Les tenants de la logique économique veulent y voir un choix des artistes eux-mêmes — avec un second argument quelque peu naïf : « Le premier intérêt […] est financier : l'artiste est le seul bénéficiaire des revenus issus des concerts […]. La seconde raison poussant les artistes à mener une carrière « scène » est « l'amour du live » (le « don de soi » et le partage avec le public) » (Poux *et al.* 2018, 16). Mais il apparaît en creux que le poids des restrictions économiques *impose* le choix d'une expérience du studio restreinte à la fixation d'œuvres déjà composées plutôt qu'à l'expérimentation, contribuant largement à pousser les artistes dans cette direction :

> Le passage en studio […] *n'a aucun rapport avec la phase de création musicale* pure, déjà terminée à ce stade, mais s'apparente plus à de longues séances de répétition, où *seuls les éléments techniques rentrent en compte* (qualité du son, arrangements, mixage…). La concentration de ce travail sur un *laps de temps déterminé, et généralement court*, rend l'opération encore moins appréciée des artistes. […] La majorité d'entre eux *n'acceptent les règles économiques que*

> *parce qu'ils y sont contraints* par les maisons de disques (*ibid.*, je souligne).

Dans ce contexte, le choix des Daft Punk d'investir dans un processus de production coûteux tout en renonçant à toute déclinaison scénique de *RAM* est un défi adressé aux financeurs de l'industrie musicale. On se gardera bien, pour autant, d'en faire la caricature de musiciens idéalistes coupés des réalités économiques : l'expérimentation en studio n'est pas un sacrifice financier mais un investissement, comme le soulignent Tingen (2013) et Alexandre Perrin, qui met en lumière la rentabilité de la démarche (2019 : 77, 81). Comme tout investissement, il implique une prise de risque revendiquée par les Daft Punk.

Négativité

S'il est une constante dans le rapport critique des Daft Punk à la création musicale, c'est le rejet de tout ce qu'ils perçoivent comme des règles, normes ou standards imposés, qu'ils exprimèrent tôt (Di Perna, 2001 : 67 ; Beauvallet, 2001 : 34) et revendiquaient toujours durant la promotion de *RAM* : « Le contre-courant, c'est enlever ses œillères et ouvrir le champ des possibilités. […] Après quinze ans de crise, le formatage et la normalisation des moyens de production se sont imposés [dans l'industrie musicale] » (Daft Punk, 2013b). Ce « contre-courant » vanté par les Daft Punk rejoint la notion de « négatif », définie par Agnès Gayraud comme une « puissance » qui « travaille contre ce qui est donné, mais toujours *à partir de lui* ». Pour elle,

> dès lors que la pop se rapporte à elle-même, elle produit du négatif, c'est-à-dire de l'inadéquation entre ce qu'elle peut être et ce qu'elle se sait être. […] On peut reconnaître la négativité à l'œuvre à chaque fois qu'un artiste énonce ce avec quoi il rompt, la norme dont il est lassé et qu'il veut briser par ses œuvres. […] Chaque œuvre singulière est à ce titre une objection faite à la musique partagée existante. Cette objection peut être de faible intensité, ne marquer d'une petite différence idiosyncrasique, mais elle ne trouve sa nécessité qu'en comprenant ce contre quoi elle s'inscrit (Gayraud 2018, 450-1) ;

> L'erreur du moderniste, c'est de croire que le négatif n'a au fond qu'une direction : celle du futur, de l'innovation à tout prix (*ibid.*, 456).

La négativité des Daft Punk n'est pas un esprit de contradiction, mais une vigilance à l'égard de toute tentation hégémonique : il s'agit de promouvoir la coexistence, d'« ouvrir le champ des possibilités » :

> Il y a l'idée d'un parfum de glace, où tout le monde mangerait de la glace à la fraise. On ne dit pas que la glace à la fraise est nulle, mais qu'il y a suffisamment d'espace pour d'autres parfums. On ne dit pas non plus qu'on n'aime pas la glace à la fraise, qu'on n'aime que la vanille ou le chocolat. La musique de danse électronique […] a pris une direction, et cette direction est devenue le seul parfum. Il est vraiment important que la piste de danse renferme différentes saveurs. Il ne s'agit pas de dire que ce parfum n'est pas bon ; ce qui n'est pas bon, c'est qu'il n'y ait qu'un seul parfum et que personne, et en particulier les musiciens, ne remette cela en question (Bangalter, 2013e : 86).

Un tel discours récuse l'accusation de passéisme : loin d'affirmer qu'« il n'y a plus rien à dire avec un ordinateur » (Fanen, 2013), les Daft Punk regrettent que tout ne soit dit qu'avec un ordinateur, estimant que l'on y perd une part de liberté, de choix, de diversité. Ils montrent une autre voie, tant pour faire exister l'alternative que pour encourager d'autres artistes à refuser la norme.

Dualités réconciliantes

Une autre constante de la carrière des Daft Punk est leur inclination à réconcilier des dualités habituellement opposées, à l'instar du rock progressif qui conciliait « la nature et la technologie », « [la] tradition et [la] modernité » (Pirenne, 2005 : 306). Si l'opposition entre historisme et innovation est au cœur de cet article, une autre a traversé leur carrière, symbolisée par leurs personnages robots : l'opposition entre humains et machines. On retrouve encore ce penchant réconciliateur dans l'hybridation des processus compositionnels de la culture pop-rock et de la culture DJ pour créer « de la musique électronique basée sur des performances en direct » (Guzauski, 2013). Une fois qu'on en a pris conscience, cette propension à la synthèse semble omniprésente chez les Daft Punk ; on pourrait en multiplier les exemples à l'infini. S'ils ne sont ni les premiers ni les seuls à prôner la réconciliation d'oppositions binaires, ils semblent l'avoir généralisée, à l'opposé des puristes : adeptes du rock « à l'ancienne », du « vrai » hip-hop ou de la techno « authentique », plus enclins à définir et figer ces règles, normes et frontières qu'exècrent les Daft Punk.

Cette obsession réconciliatrice concerne aussi l'opposition débattue, notamment dans le discours moderniste, entre ambition artistique et succès populaire et économique. « Pink Floyd, autrefois, c'était le mainstream ! Ça, on l'a perdu. Le défi est de voir si on peut faire un truc mainstream expérimental », expliquent les Daft Punk (2013c : 79). Ce défi correspond à un idéal théorisé par Agnès Gayraud sous le nom d' « utopie de la pop ». « Le "populaire" de la pop doit », selon elle, « être conçu comme l'espoir d'une réconciliation entre immédiateté et vérité, entre ravissement et réflexion, entre divertissement et émancipation » (2018 : 85). Cet idéal vise donc l' « union miraculeuse de la célébrité et de la valeur artistique » (*ibid.* : 82). Gayraud cite *Sgt. Pepper*, « convergence inouïe entre recherche sonore ou exploration stylistique et adhésion instantanée du public », parmi les « canons » de cette utopie (*ibid.* : 81)[9]. Si elle ne définit pas la « valeur artistique », elle y inclut implicitement nombre de caractéristiques de l'ambition telle que la conçoivent les Daft Punk, tout en l'opposant à ce qu'elle qualifie de « dystopie » de la pop : un art de masse industriel, cynique et formatée, exclusivement soumis à la quête de rentabilité économique (*ibid.* : 90-122).

Conclusion

Que nous apprend le cas de *Random Access Memories* sur la tendance nostalgique du début du XXIe siècle décrite, analysée et dénoncée Simon Reynolds dans *Rétromania* ? Peut-être en premier lieu à la relativiser : Reynolds agrège les indices qui confirment sa théorie et omet parfois ceux qui l'infirment. En analysant les faits musicaux et les déclarations de ses auteurs, il apparaît que *RAM* n'est pas réductible à un pur produit de la nostalgie. Dès lors, une question s'impose : cet album est-il un cas particulier, une exception à la règle que Reynolds n'aurait pas su identifier — après tout, il est paru après la rédaction de son ouvrage ? Pour s'en assurer, *Rétromania* mériterait d'être réexaminé à la recherche d'autres exceptions et nuances possiblement omises. Si *RAM* représente une singularité au sein de la rétromanie, il conviendrait de s'interroger sur les circonstances qui auront permis aux Daft Punk de se distinguer de la sorte ; doit-on les imputer à leur statut de musiciens indépendant, à leur ancrage dans la culture DJ, à leur condition sociale, à leur origine géographique ?

RAM révèle en tout cas le peu de cas que font certains artistes des années 2010 des théories modernistes. Avec des mots qui ne sont pas ceux de théoriciens mais qui n'en révèlent pas moins une démarche artistique consciente, les Daft Punk expriment clairement leur refus d'inscrire leur créativité dans un carcan téléologique : ils parlent de « créer des portails vers une sorte d'espace-temps original », de « fabriquer une fenêtre hors du temps » (Ghosn, Wicker, 2013 : 72) ; visent l'« intemporalité » (*timelessness*) (Raftery, 2013 : 72) ; et désirent créer « une bulle coupée du temps où ces [collaborateurs] pourraient coexister » (Daft Punk, 2013b). Il s'agit de s'extraire d'un cadre théorique en lequel ils ne se reconnaissent pas.

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[9] À son instar et en empruntant ses mots, rappelons qu'« en esthétique, le canon est l'idéal incarné ».

Gayraud souligne le caractère paradoxal d'un paradigme moderniste accolé aux musiques populaires, rappelant que « chez Adorno, la Modernité est entièrement dressée *contre* les musiques populaires » (2018, 374-7). Le paradoxe est peut-être encore plus prégnant en ce qui concerne la culture DJ, qui défie les conceptions traditionnelles de l'auteur, de l'œuvre, de l'interprète et de la création musicale, notamment en faisant ontologiquement des enregistrements du passé la matière première des compositions du futur à travers le sampling et le remix. Ce n'est pas un hasard si la particularité du processus compositionnel de *RAM*, pensé comme un renouvellement des logiques créatives typiques de la musique électronique, a échappé à Reynolds. Poschardt répondait déjà en 2002 à son incompréhension et sa détestation du sampling (2002 : 299), réitérés dans *Rétromania* où Reynolds l'assimile à « une forme d'esclavage », « la plus pure forme d'exploitation du travail d'autrui » (2012 : 350). N'ayant jamais toléré ce fondement de la culture DJ, il n'est guère étonnant que Reynolds ne soit pas enclin à la voir évoluer fidèlement à sa nature et refuser obstinément de se soumettre aux injonctions modernistes.

Album majeur de la décennie 2010, *Random Access Memories*, loin d'un ersatz de disco rétro, appartient à son époque en ce qu'il apporte des réponses singulières à des questionnements très contemporains : le progrès (en Art, et par extension de l'humanité) peut-il se réduire à l'évolution technologique, en particulier dans une décennie où se sont révélés les dérives et dangers du numérique ? Sur quels critères définir la valeur de la musique populaire, dans un contexte de crise de la modernité dont les ouvrages de Reynolds et Gayraud se font l'écho avec des conclusions opposées ? Comment renouveler les musiques électroniques populaires après trente ans d'existence ? Ce faisant, *Random Access Memories* s'impose comme une œuvre de son temps.

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Daft Punk, *Discovery*, Daft Life/Virgin/EMI, 2001
Daft Punk, *Human After All*, Daft Life/Virgin, 2005
Daft Punk, *Random Access Memories*, Daft Life/Columbia, 2013
George Benson, *Gimme The Night*, Warner, 1980
Chic, « Le Freak », *C'est Chic*, Atlantic, 1978
Chic, « Good Times », *Risqué*, Atlantic, 1979
Chilly Gonzales, « Too Long », *Daft Club*, Daft Life Ltd, Virgin, 2003
Donna Summer, « Love to Love You Baby », *Love to Love You Baby*, Casablanca Records, 1975
Donna Summer, « I Feel Love », *I Remember Yesterday*, Casablanca Records, 1977
Giorgio Moroder, « Chase », *Midnight Express: Music From The Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, Casablanca, 1978
Michael Jackson, *Off the Wall*, Epic, 1979
Michael Jackson, *Thriller*, Epic, 1982 (incluant « Billie Jean »)
Jean-Michel Jarre, *Electronica 1: The Time Machine*, Columbia, 2015
Madonna, *Like a Virgin*, Sire/Warner, 1984
Pink Floyd, *The Dark Side of the Moon*, Harvest, EMI, Capitol, 1973
Prince, *Controversy*, Warner, 1981
Barbra Streisand, « Evergreen », *A Star Is Born*, Columbia, 1976
The Sugarhill Gang, « Rapper's Delight », Sugar Hill Records, 1979
The Beach Boys, *Pet Sounds*, Capitol, 1966
The Beach Boys, « Good Vibrations », Capitol, 1966.
The Beatles, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, Parlophone, 1967.
Todd Edwards, « Face to Face », *Discovery*, Daft Life/Virgin/EMI, 2001.

As Night Turns to Mourning: YouTube's Ahistoric Rave Archive

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Abstract: Often with little visual content aside from a static information sticker from the centre of a 12" vinyl record, electronic dance music releases from the late 1980s onwards are now widely available as YouTube uploads. Subsequently allowing for their embedding on other platforms/sites–including extensive crowdsourced music database Discogs–they go from literal records to digital approximations of the tracks that permeated UK nightlife since the emergence of acid house in the mid to late-1980s. Focusing on a sequence found within these recordings identified by Reynolds as "the Hardcore Continuum", this paper examines how the documenting of rave culture on online platforms is feeding nostalgia. This can be expressed through user comments that centre on themes of loss. However, it is argued that this practice runs in parallel with a later generation of UK-based musicians who continue to draw influence from these earlier recordings. Three contemporary examples are considered in detail: Overmono (a production duo made up of brothers Ed and Tom Russell), Joy Orbison (real name Peter O'Grady) and Burial (the recording guise of William Bevan). Noting an influence of YouTube on some of their output, it also asks if this retrospectively informed approach is a direct response to our digitally connected present. While YouTube supposedly facilitates a portal to this pre-internet past, the chapter considers the platform as a space for reframing recordings as nostalgic yet ahistoric. It particularly looks to this practice of memorialisation in conjunction with its displacement of time.

Keywords: Rave Nostalgia, Hardcore Continuum, Digital Nostalgia, Electronic Dance Music, Ahistoric

Résumé : Souvent dépourvues de tout contenu visuel autre qu'un autocollant au centre d'un disque vinyle, les productions de *dance* électronique de la fin des années 1980 sont désormais largement disponibles au téléchargement sur YouTube, permettant ainsi leur intégration à d'autres plateformes – y compris la vaste base de données musicale crowdsourcée Discogs. Ces morceaux, qui ont imprégné la vie nocturne britannique depuis l'émergence de l'*acid house* au milieu et à la fin des années 1980, passent

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donc, littéralement, d’enregistrements physiques sur disque à des supports numériques approximatifs. S’appuyant sur une séquence trouvée dans ces enregistrements et identifiée par Reynolds comme le «Hardcore Continuum», cet article examine comment la documentation de la culture *rave* sur les plateformes numériques alimente la nostalgie. Cette dernière peut s’exprimer à travers les commentaires des utilisateurs, qui se concentrent sur les thèmes de la perte. Cependant, cette pratique nostalgique est aussi contemporaine d’une génération de musiciens britanniques d’aujourd’hui qui continuent à s’inspirer de ces enregistrements des années 1980 et 1990. Trois exemples sont examinés en détail : Overmono (un duo composé des frères Ed et Tom Russell), Joy Orbison (de son vrai nom Peter O’Grady) et Burial (le pseudonyme de William Bevan). Relevant l’influence de YouTube sur certaines de ces productions, notre article pose également la question de savoir si cette approche rétrospective s’inscrit en réaction à notre présent numériquement connecté. Alors que YouTube est censé faciliter l'accès à ce passé pré-internet, cette étude considère la plateforme comme un espace permettant de définir ces enregistrements comme étant à la fois nostalgiques et anhistoriques. Nous nous concentrons en particulier sur cette pratique de mémorialisation en conjonction avec son décalage dans le temps.

Mots clés : Nostalgie *rave*, nostalgie numérique, *continuum* hardcore, *dance* musique électronique, ahistorique

Introduction

The title of this paper is knowingly mawkish and indicative of it detailing a certain, often overwrought, type of nostalgia. It should be noted that quantifying it in this way is an important factor in relationship to the research: given that this paper’s focus–electronic dance music and rave culture–may often be characterised as primarily technologically driven and, by association, forward-looking. To an extent, electronic dance music can seem to reject nostalgic impulses. For example, the dancefloor experience itself remains primarily concerned with the physical and the present while nostalgia instead discards that ‘corporeal now’: preferring the emotive charge of the past while lamenting the idea of a time, a place or an experience that supposedly holds more significant meaning (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt & Routledge, 2006). Yet despite some prevalent techno-utopia narratives and a purported reputation for newness, electronic dance music can have an intense relationship with the past that, while often underexplored, has its manifestations. These may become more obvious when music producers promote a vision of the future that seems to be borrowed from Kraftwerk in the 1970s or when supposedly cutting-edge sounds employ all the retro kitsch associated with sci-fi B-Movies. A track’s composition can also be built around obsolete technology rather than the latest gadgetry while, elsewhere, audio samples are shamelessly borrowed from yesteryear. However, the referencing of previous styles should not be viewed as inherently nostalgic. In many cases where electronic dance music will recall another age, it is with an irreverence that is clearly detached from nostalgia and its notably more sentimental tendencies.

Initially a diagnosis for homesick soldiers by 17th century Swiss physician Johannes Hofer, nostalgia may now be understood as a psychological construct rather than a medical condition (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2019).[1] Yet it retains those initial associations with a desperate longing. While its status may have been demedicalised, this has not prevented researchers identifying additional 'symptoms' of nostalgia. For example, it has been observed that it can support unrealistic idealisations of the past as a side effect of "dissatisfaction with the present" (Sweeney, 2020: 188). Nostalgia has even been linked to individuals' difficulties in adapting to a changing world: where it helps facilitate a resistance of new experiences in favour of the familiar (Wildschut *et al.*, 2006). On the other hand, there have been cited psychological benefits including nostalgia's use as a coping mechanism for dealing with loss or the improved stability and associated social connectedness derived from a relationship with one's own past (see Sedikes & Wildschut, 2016; Wildschut *et al.*, 2010; Batcho 2013).

Within the fields of electronic dance music and rave culture, we might then see nostalgia most clearly during periods of stasis, rather than at those points where elements of the past are incorporated superficially within its productive endeavours. This is certainly the case with the activity that forms one strand identified by Reynolds as the "Hardcore Continuum": a bass network evoking Deleuze and Guattari's "rhizomatic" structure (1987); where offshoots emerge unexpectedly, and new hybrids are cultivated. Mutating from euphoric melodies underpinned by frenetic breakbeats (essentially reconfigured and accelerated snatches of old records), Reynolds noted rave's initial burst of innovation as having already decelerated some 25 years ago (1997: 102-104). There have also been more recent eras said to be typified by inactivity and, in some cases, regression. In 2010, Matos observed dance music going in reverse: labelling its perceived stagnation as "Permaretro" (2010: online). Five year later, Harrison was interrogating dance music's "nostalgia problem" while pointing to revivalist tendencies proliferating via online spaces (2015: online).

The following sections subsequently explore the role that internet platforms play in supporting bouts of rave nostalgia. The role of digital spaces such as YouTube are considered in terms of memorialisation and glorification of eras prior to highlighting their further potential and influence within a more active and arguably restorative approach. Using three examples of music producers whose work incorporates elements derived from Reynolds' Hardcore Continuum while also citing instances where YouTube content has instigated new activity and artefacts, it looks to understand the motivations behind a wistful engagement with a once youthful scene that was considered to represent nostalgia's antithesis (2011: 234).

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[1] A translation by Carolyn Kiser Aspach of Hofer's 1688 medical dissertation on nostalgia was published in 1934. Its introduction cites the original document as containing the first usage of the term.

Digital Nostalgia

There were early signs of a nostalgia trade within UK electronic dance music that Thornton observed via a 1991 advertisement placed by the organisers of the Sunrise parties (1995: 140). Having already gained notoriety for illegal events thanks to outraged coverage from the country's tabloid press, the Sunrise promoters used this advert to sell video cassettes featuring footage from its raves in 1988 and 1989.

In 2023, the material once sold through magazines is freely available on YouTube. Unified by shaky camerawork and distorted audio, this documentation of Sunrise's large scale open-air events can be found alongside other parties such as Fantazia at Donnington, Shropshire. Other uploads converted from the original VHS tapes highlight a whole series of warehouse parties that took place across English towns and counties. Yet despite the uploaded media's poor quality, thousands of YouTube users are undeterred from engaging with these recordings. If anything, their grain and lack of production values are a patina: with the low resolution likely contributing to understandings of a video's age and authenticity. And while some of these sequences have also been incorporated into the numerous documentaries and exhibitions that have gone on to explore the history and culture of rave, the YouTube uploads offer further insight into how users are interacting and responding to them.[2]

In some cases, there are additions to the comments section simply request "Track ID?": further information/identification of individual records that appear at points in the recording. (This request is also common for uploads of DJ mixes transferred from their original cassette tape to sites such as Soundcloud.) Elsewhere the comments section can indicate a sense of community and identity including the kind of user anecdotes that have been collated by Twitter/X account, @UKRaveComments and 2016 fanzine *Hardcore You Know the Score*.[3] These might include first-hand accounts of the events including variations on "takes me back to the days when the music was fresh and the vibes were pure" (Simmonds, 2016: 10). Martin says that these comments are from people "who know that their raving days are over and are looking back on them rather than trying to recreate them" (2013: online). In such examples, there is no attempt to recapture the spirit, but rather it appears to serve as a comforting reminder. The videos sold by Sunrise in 1991 were explicitly flagged as fulfilling this particular purpose: the opportunity for past participants to be reminded of a lived experience (Thornton, 1995: 140). However, the appeal of these recordings is alternatively described as being more for those who "wished they had been there" (*ibid*.). A substantial number of comments on the YouTube-uploaded versions will suggest similarly motivations. So, while memories of these early UK raves live on within online communities (in this case, with people using YouTube as a platform to share footage from their youth), these do sit alongside an arguably more regressive use of the comments section that details a sentimental longing for an unexperienced past. For example, "why wasnt i born 10 years earlier!" (sic) reads one comment added by, user, @illhorse (Deeman72, 2012: online) while another from @megankeily4858 (in response to footage from a *Dance Britannia* documentary uploaded to the platform) says: "I'm 21 and I've danced at all sort of modern legal "raves" that just don't seem to beat the authenticity of this" (Goodstuff79, 2010: online).

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[2] Examples of the documentaries to focus on dance music's history and culture would include Jeremy's Deller's *Everybody in the Place* (2018) and the *Pump Up the Volume* series (2001) which, despite both projects being made for its British TV broadcast, have since been uploaded to YouTube. Exhibitions have included 2019's *Sweet Harmony* at London's Saatchi Gallery.

The reference to the illegality of early rave events could also be part of the attraction for those clearly too young to have participated. The illicit nature of the parties featured on YouTube is most likely in contrast to the more widely adopted club culture that now exists as part of an established entertainment industry. Seemingly becoming dance music lore, rave culture may instead represent a form of youth rebellion against mainstream society with its own distinct fashion, music, and drugs.[4] For many, it clearly indicates a time of freedom and self-expression that allowed a deviation from mainstream society (if, most likely, only for the weekend). The vicarious nostalgia–this rave dysphoria–may therefore suggest a desire to escape the present. However, the nostalgic urge that accompanies it is also evident in responses to YouTube content that focuses less on the scene's more transgressive aspects. In terms of music located within Reynolds' Hardcore Continuum (a discography that extends well beyond the era documented in the footage from illegal raves), such comments are also present where individual tracks are added. These are often minimal in their visual content: with static images of the information label from a 12" record that, for the purpose of the upload, has had its audio digitally ripped.

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[3] The UK Rave Comments Twitter/X account started operating during the Covid outbreak (and subsequent lockdown) in the UK (see Gorton, 2020: online). The cited fanzine was produced by Jake Simmonds while at university. At the time of writing, Simmonds is a graphic designer at XL recordings: a label that developed in tandem with the growth of the UK rave scene and has included Jonny L, Joy Orbison and Overmono on its roster.

[4] For historical and sociological accounts of dance music cultures see Collin (1997), Garratt (1998), Rietveld (1998), Reynolds (1998), Sicko (2010) and Brewster and Broughton (2000). McKay (1996; 1998) alternatively questions developments as radical or resistant while Redhead (1999) looks at dance music scenes as representations of modern youth culture.

Warner describes the vinyl record as music's "central artefact" (2003: xi): then touching on the disc's symbolic status; something that seemingly transcends a primary function as a carrier of sound. Indeed, it has been argued to be a medium that "engenders a semiotic configuration and an aesthetic experience that is not reducible to music alone" (Grønstad and Vågnes, 2010: 11). In dance music, the 12" single is specifically understood as an alternative to its more "pop" 7" version. Prior to distribution as digital files, the vinyl 12" single was the format for the extended remix and other alternate dancefloor versions. Subsequently the mainstay of the specialist dance music record stores, it also operated outside of more typical music distribution with the use of additional networks for upfront promo, white label and acetate 'dubplate' pressings that fed demand for exclusive new tracks: often months before a record would receive wider commercial release. With a reputation as the preferred format for tastemakers (something that dates back to disco's heyday), the depiction of the 12" single on YouTube serves as a reminder of their place in the cultural zeitgeist. Since embedded on sites such as the extensive crowdsourced Discogs platform, the imagery now mainly helps to complete the documentation: adding to the discography with both audio and visual indexing of a specific recording.[5] As archived ephemera, these may be perceived as memorials: not dissimilar to the materials that online platforms facilitate in remembrance of the departed (see Moreman and Lewis, 2014).[6] However, borrowing from Zeavin, interaction with digital nostalgia in this way can be a "stuck melancholic performance" (2023: 181) while Harrison addressed the associated inertia as "the stifling effects of looking back" (2015: online). To this end, digital rave nostalgia that functions in this way might best be viewed under Boym's definition of "reflective nostalgia" (2001): built around materials from the past and driven towards emotional responses that incorporate "elements of both mourning and melancholia" (Boym, 2001: 55). Essentially, they are indicative of passive engagement. More active engagement–in warehouses, fields and nightclubs–was another place and another time. Here the uploaded media serves as a simple 'marker': a cenotaph commemorating what happened elsewhere.

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[5] Discogs was first registered in 2000. It predates YouTube by five years.

[6] There are occasions where the discussed YouTube uploads explicitly converge with actual online memorials. For example, tracks from producer DJ Tango attracted comments of "R.I.P." on his death in 2018. Further to this, certain pieces of music may be associated with a friend or relative whose death is being grieved. These can prompt comments that will mark that connection such as "R.I.P dad still can't believe your gone I will be pumping plenty hardcore tunes for you […] love you dad" (sic) (EmotionsBySound, 2009: online).

Restorative Nostalgia

While engagement with original rave content in digital spaces may have been viewed in the last section as a regressive act, Boym provides us with an alternative to this merely reflective nostalgia in the form of "restorative nostalgia". This section explores this more constructive approach as an alternative to casual reminiscence through a consideration of pre-existing materials as offering opportunities for new artefacts that connect with contemporary scenes and eras. To do this, it notes instances where this has already taken place within Reynolds' Hardcore Continuum before looking at how a reactivation of archived materials has come to permeate the recordings of three music producers who emerged in the first part of the 21st century.

As Boym asserts, nostalgia is not always about the past: "it can be retrospective but also prospective" (2001: xvi). Evidenced through examples such as The Fabulous Baker Boys' 'Oh Boy' track: a 1997 garage record that utilises the vocal hook from Jonny L's 1992 rave anthem 'Hurt You So' (see Reynolds, 1998: 420-421), it can recontextualise what is often a simple refrain and allow sonic fragments to persist as a kind of distant folk memory.[7] Reynolds sees these traces of earlier works as "pledging allegiance" to the Hardcore Continuum's spirit (Reynolds in Cookney, 2015: 191): a respectful nod to other styles that share the same underground roots. Explored most comprehensively in a series of essays for *The Wire* magazine, this Continuum then plots a graph between UK electronic dance music forms including hardcore rave, jungle, drum n bass, UK garage and dubstep while united by many key features including that use of specific samples/musical elements alongside shared means of dissemination and the involvement of the same participants across genres. In defining the "systematic core of The Hardcore Continuum" Reynolds explains it as "a particular set of relations based around pirate radio, dubplates, raves and rave-style clubs, along with certain kinds of music-making technology" (2010: 70).

It is with an apparent reverence for these relations that, production guises, Burial, Joy Orbison and Overmono pledge their own allegiance to the Hardcore Continuum while seemingly avoiding mere pastiche.[8] The three embody a shift from the reflective to the restorative in their embrace of bygone eras. Burial, a pseudonym for producer William Bevan, evokes a sense of wistfulness regarding hardcore rave and UK garage resulting in records that are considered innovative reimaginations of the past. Joy Orbison, a less introspective prospect, still intertwines the influences of drum n bass and UK garage: incorporating samples and spoken vocals that strategically weave a narrative harking back to the early rave culture. Overmono (contrastingly a duo) vividly embrace the Hardcore Continuum: blending 1990s euphoria with deep bass that somehow "sidesteps pure revisionism" (Anon, 2018, online).

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[7] Jonny L (real name Jon Lisners) additionally re-emerged as one half of, UK garage duo, True Steppers. (True Steppers also reworked his earlier 'Hurt You So'.) Other producers also appear at different points in the Hardcore Continuum. One regularly cited example would be Steve Gurley whose work includes hardcore rave and drum n bass releases as Foul Play and Rogue Unit plus later UK garage output under his own name.

[8] Other examples that could be explored in terms of the Hardcore Continuum's continuing influence on later music would include The Streets - 'Weak Become Heroes', M.I.A.'s 'XR2', Toddla T's 'Take it Back', 'All Under One Roof Raving' by Jamie XX, Pearson Sound's 'Alien Mode', 'Problems' by Floating Points, output from Manchester's Lone, Zomby's 'Where Were You in 92?' long-player, Paul Woolford's Special Request project and tracks such as

Reboot 1: Burial

Burial can already be plotted within the Hardcore Continuum through his emergence alongside a wave of London-based dubstep producers in the early 2000s. Yet, there is a reactivated nostalgia within his output that teases at styles that preceded dubstep. As one commentator states, his approach is cited as "nostalgic feelings which somehow give life to active memories" (sul1i, 2022, online): where an influence does not manifest through the explicit use of samples as cited previously. Instead of some recognisable, crowd-pleasing vocal that might be borrowed from the past, Burial's records are more mournful, distant recollections of hardcore rave and UK garage: half-forgotten sounds under a layer of crackle akin to a needle encountering the dust particles collected within a vinyl record's groove. Fisher described them as "like walking into the abandoned spaces once carnivalised by raves and finding them returned to depopulated dereliction. Muted air horns are like the ghosts of raves past" (2014: 98). Another reading acknowledges Burial's ability to take "the standard tropes of 2-Step and UKG-pitched-up feminine pressure and syncopated shuffle-beats–and transform them into a crackle-shrouded pirate broadcast from some spectral, re-imagined past" (Kek-W, 2012: online). Receiving widespread critical acclaim since the release of his 2006 self-titled debut album, Burial's haunting vocal snatches, melancholic tones and skeletal UK garage-influenced rhythms are then quite distanced from the more aggressive and bombastic sounds of many of his dubstep contemporaries. Sometimes forsaking the dancefloor entirely, he has gravitated towards incorporating field recordings within drawn-out ambient soundscapes seemingly with the intention of capturing the evocative and emotional. Observing that distance from more typical club-focused DJ tracks, he has said that the music is "more about when you come back from being out somewhere […] dreamlike, and you've still got the music kind of

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'That's Too Slow' by Jasper Tygner (complete with its video that incorporates some of the vintage rave footage discussed in this paper).

echoing in you, in your bloodstream, but with real life trying to get in the way" (Hancox, 2007: online).

On the track 'Gutted' (2006), the producer incorporates the spoken word sample "sometimes you've got to go back to the ancient ways" and we may consider this in terms of Burial's musical output: how his productions might prompt a return to some ancestral past. Certainly, there's that influence from rave and UK garage yet, more specifically, there's a rawness to the work that comes from a reliance on old software and what he has referred to as his recordings' poor technical quality that will link back to records from another generation. Yet his approach to public life also sees him tapping into a legacy. As Hancox states: "Burial doesn't do DJ gigs, live performances or radio shows, and only a few photos exist of him" (2007: online). In fact, the producer is notorious for maintaining a degree of anonymity. What's generally known about him comes from the few interviews that exist and, within these rare media interactions, he has indicated how his aversion to stardom is "not a new thing [...] it's one of the old underground ways" (Fisher, 2012, online). Burial then subsequently reminds us that the rave scene was initially built on word-of-mouth promotion, printed flyers and a network of dedicated, yet largely anonymous individuals who organised and promoted its events (see Thornton, 1995: 137). That mystery has also surrounded many producers of rave records: with tracks circulating as white label pressings and under obscure aliases. As Hsu notes, Burial pays homage to the "beloved niche dance music of the past" (2019: online).

Reboot 2: Joy Orbison

Born Peter O'Grady, Joy Orbison is a British electronic music producer and DJ guise known for a style of production that blends aspects of house, dubstep, techno and garage music. Gaining prominence in 2009 with the release of, debut single, 'Hyph Mngo', he has similarly been reluctant to engage significantly with the press. However, like Burial, he has participated in some interviews where he highlights the importance of elements from the Hardcore Continuum. Drum n bass, he says, "was really forward-thinking music [...] there's no date to it" (Hinton, 2022: online) while his formative interest in UK garage would prompt his teenage self to "make bootleg tapes of pirate radio shows" (Szatan, 2019: online). But it is his own 'Ellipsis' vinyl release from 2012 that most explicitly highlights the influence within his recordings. While lacking the rhythmic complexity of his early output, its lush chords are notably accompanied by a repeated spoken vocal sample: "we just used to, like...". Taken from a 1996 Dutch TV interview with drum n bass duo Source Direct that has since been uploaded to YouTube, the refrain is part of a longer response to a question regarding the twosome's introduction to the scene (Prestonloyola, 2008: online).[9] In the original video, childhood friends, James Baker and Phil Aslett document their time staging pre-Source Direct parties while trying to evade the police. Joy Orbison then takes the first-hand account of underground rave culture and reconfigures it within a modern composition that nods to the past again through the eventual addition of a piano line that could easily have been included in a record from 1991.

Reboot 3: Overmono

The guise of brothers Ed and Tom Russell, Overmono utilises a blueprint where "ruffneck drums [are] in check with smiley-face signifiers and notes of '90s euphoria" (Ravens, 2020: online). The influence of UK garage's 2-step variant is additionally evident in the rhythms that underpin their outputs: resulting in the kind of groove and swing that Reynolds described as "a kind of slow-motion Jungle – a languorous frenzy of micro-breakbeats, hesitations and hyper-syncopations; moments when the beat seems to pause, poised, and hold its breath" (1999: online). On the track 'So U Know', the pair's production takes its hook from a sampled and sped up R&B diva vocal much like "two thirds of Hardcore/Jungle anthems between 1991–94" (Reynolds, 1999: online). Presumably in recognition of the pair's ability to reconfigure vintage sounds for modern audiences, Overmono was invited to create the soundtrack for *Better Days: The Story of Rave*: a 2021 documentary focusing on 30 years of UK club culture.

Kindred

The connections between the work of the three producers introduced in the last section highlight a specific kinship. Further to the reactivation of their Hardcore Continuum interests, Joy Orbison and Overmono have also recorded together while signed to the same record label: suggesting an obvious bond. (Burial, meanwhile, is notorious for being reclusive: seemingly rejecting interaction with all but a handful of rare collaborations.)

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[9] Burial also has recordings that incorporate elements from YouTube. In 2007's 'Etched Headplate', he uses a vocal sample from Alicia Reynolds. Otherwise known as YouTube user @Caramelma4o1, her disembodied voice is manipulated across a spacious, clicking six-minutes complete with slow pulsing bass. It winds "through pitches with massive anxiety, with lingering sadness" (Hennings, 2007: online): then radically recontextualising what is a blurry upload of an American teen singing an a capella cover version of Amada Perez's 'Angel' in the direction of her webcam.

However, there remains further relatedness that is integral to each example. Only despite what could be mistakenly assumed to be informed by active participation in the first wave scenes that influenced their subsequent productions, the individuals behind all these production guises have been largely informed by secondary accounts of rave culture. Joy Orbison, born in 1986, has discussed the explicit influence of his family on both his knowledge and interest in earlier scenes. The cover artwork for his *Still Slipping Vol.1* release pays tribute to this: featuring a photograph of his auntie Leighann: the family member who first introduced him to club music.[10] Additional influence has come from his uncle: drum n bass DJ/producer Ray Keith.

These familial connections have proved pivotal, yet he suggests they are commonplace insisting that: "when we were growing up, dance music seemed so relatable, everyone got into it through their older brother or your mate's older sister" (Hinton, 2022: online). Burial has also discussed how he drew from the experiences of others when confessing "I'm not old enough to have been to a proper old rave in a warehouse or a field but I used to hear these stories about legendary club nights, about driving off into the darkness to raves" (Hancox, 2007: online). Particularly, he has documented his own brother's proximity to the scene where "he was out there, going to places. He'd tell us stories about it. We were brought up on stories about it" (Fisher, 2012: online). As Hsu elaborates on that relationship, "the brothers would listen to new twelve-inch jungle records together, and Bevan (Burial) would imagine what it was like to experience these sounds in their native environment" (2019: online).

The Overmono brothers have a ten-year age gap between them, and articles have discussed how the younger sibling–who seemingly was the first to embrace more retro Hardcore Continuum-aligned themes in his preceding Tessela solo work–was introduced to dance music when hearing it come from his brother's neighbouring bedroom. In interview, the pair have additionally discussed how they were gifted "tons of vinyl" by their brother-in-law: a DJ in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Eede, 2017: online). With this archive being used as sample sources for many of their own tracks, they exemplify "the ease with which records travel in space and time" (Thornton, 1995: 112).

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[10] The artwork itself feels nostalgic. Much like Overmono's 'Everything U Need' release (2020) there's a banal, British, suburban quality that almost evokes the kitsch photography of Martin Parr. In interview Joy Orbison has spoken of the incorporation of his suburban roots into his practice saying that "it's making something glossy out of the mundane" (Hinton, 2022: online). Furthering this aesthetic, promotion of Overmono's 2023 album included a takeover of a typical London pub alongside a range of retro merchandise including commemorative plates and tea towels.

However, as with Burial and Joy Orbison, there may remain questions surrounding authenticity and the producers' stake in the scenes that foreshadow their recorded output. For Overmono's Ed Russell, he believes that his own "sense of ownership" is precisely because he was too young to have experienced rave culture first time around (Eede, 2017: online). He explains that:

> It is still what I've come from and what I've grown up with. For me it feels much more natural to take influence from '90s UK rave culture than making disco records or something, because it wouldn't feel authentic at all. Obviously early rave records were doing stuff like that in that they were speeding up parts of early hip-hop records or whatever, so that's not to say that you have to always have some ownership over what it is you're producing, but for me it feels that I can go through and take influence from this big archive of samples we have, and have it still feel genuine (*ibid.*).

His argument is then one that questions rave's own musical originality while highlighting a creative process as being faithfully maintained. Yet, for some commentators, there is still "a discontinuity between the current moment and the heady days of the rave scene" (Davidson, 2023: 430). For example, in Burial's music, listeners might locate a "somewhat voyeuristic aspect of his music, the way that it always feels as if you're lurking" (Hsu, 2019: online). Yet more than just the outsider looking in, there are also unsettling feelings of incompleteness for some: a despondency that seems to permeate his tracks. This may be traced back to Burial's own views of early rave music when he laments how "it's got this sadness now, because most club culture got commercialised in the 1990s; oftentimes it got taken off ravers and sold back to them" (Hancox, 2007: online). In turn observing rave as representing a false prophecy, we might consider that the optimism found in its nostalgic artefacts can never truly be recaptured due to the knowledge that it would still lead us to our current state.

Building further on the romanticising of the experience of an older rave generation, there can be an additional tendency to reject technical developments that happened in the period after recordings were made. This would include the paradox where the technology that now grants access to this material is viewed as having deprived a later generation of a more authentic experience. Examples of this are evident on YouTube comments for rave video uploads such as "NO PHONES… just real interaction with each other...can we have this again please???" from user @crystaldawn8875 (Oldskool Raver, 2012: online) or @jakjak4271's "I'd trade all my technology right now for one night like this..." (Maskevito, 2013: online). Now existing as digital copies, these videos still point directly to an era prior to the mass adoption of the internet and social media: "before

YouTube algorithms, before streaming and payola playlists" (Ribakoff, 2022: online). However, in its idealistic return to the past, such commentary avoids acknowledging that the depicted participants within the footage were still subjected to a voyeuristic gaze through the use of electronic equipment (in this case, VHS cameras). Instead, it is presented as somehow unmediated: where the thoroughly camera-shy Burial even suggests that "…It wasn't as artificial, self-aware or created by the internet. It was more rumour, underground folklore. No mobile phones back then. Anyone could go into the night and they had to seek it out…" (Fisher, 2012: online).

The curious aspect of rave nostalgia's digital resurgence is then its ability to reshape that relationship with technology. Hassan discusses this pre-digital era as one where analogue means prompted cultural traditions to diversify and evolve (2020: 168-169). By comparison, he argues that contemporary life has birthed "a state of stasis, a stagnancy, in the mass cultural lifeblood, where growth, evolution and change are being forced out in direct proportion to digitality's colonisation of every sphere of society" (2020: 169). Whether reframing the captured cultural moment as more real than our 21st century social interactions through to rejecting the progress that now affords us the ability to reminisce, this privileging of the past over the present somehow refuses to implicate YouTube itself as 'technology'. Maybe, to quote Don Draper in *Mad Men*, the platform isn't assumed to be some space-age rocket ship: instead, it's that time machine that "takes us to a place we ache to go again" (2017).

Conclusion

The distinct romanticising of analogue material uploaded to YouTube as indicative of freedom from technology's tyranny is an absurd contradiction. Yet, as Andersen suggests, the popularity of nostalgic content on the platform may be due to "an unconscious collective reaction to all the profound nonstop newness we're experiencing on the tech and geopolitical and economic fronts" (2012: online). In a world where social interaction is assumed to be increasingly mediated by mobile technologies, there is a documented desire to return to what is viewed as simpler times. Producer Burial has referred to his childhood "listening to pirate radio in my room at night and buying records" before stating that such practices have been ruined by "the internet" (in Clark, 2006: online). The mythology that then surrounds the past and the ease in which we might now vicariously access its artefacts prompts some dissatisfaction. The future once imagined has given way to these portals: to now, where "new technology has reinforced the nostalgic cultural gaze [and] now that we have instant universal access to every old image and recorded sound" (Andersen, 2012: online).

On platforms like Discogs, that content is painstakingly archived: classified and carefully curated. Materials that define the Hardcore Continuum are located within its vast, chronologically arranged discography. Elsewhere, the historical framing is often removed resulting in what Matos described as a "curious kind of flattening out" of our audio-visual heritage (2010: online). Users can then have access to an archive that is ahistoric: one where the documentation of history as a series of ordered events is of little concern. YouTube's algorithm, as the key example, appears to have the past as a randomized playlist: where footage from old raves is merged with Joy Orbison or Overmono's 21st century reconfigurations and UK garage anthems. Content from official record label channels can be followed by fan-made videos for Burial's pathos-tinged tracks (see Cookney, 2017: 255-267). There is seemingly little attempt to present rave as a sequence with a reliable, logical order. Everything is 'on shuffle'. Reynolds addresses this as an "atemporal smorgasbord" with specific implications for younger audiences when saying:

> Historical depth drops out, the original context or meaning of the music becomes steadily more irrelevant; music is just material to redeploy. If you've grown up, as anyone under the age of 30 really has, with a relationship to music based around total access, superabundance, and the erosion of a sense of sounds having placement within an historical or temporal scheme, then thinking about music in terms of causal links and development through time becomes ever more alien to your consciousness. (Reynolds, 2010: 73)

When presented by YouTube, that barrage of displaced moments simultaneously (and paradoxically) includes comments highlighting resentment that users experience through their engagement with the type of modern technology that facilitates these nostalgia trips. Yet, like those stories passed down from an older relative who experienced it 'for real', this content still contributes to "a powerful collective memory which expands to include each new generation of those who weren't there" (Ravens, 2020: online). However, perhaps like memory itself, what's left are the disjointed flickering glimpses of something just out of reach.

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Anemoia and the Vaporwave Phenomenon: the ‘New’ Aesthetic of an Imagined Nostalgia

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to show how vaporwave music, which emerged exclusively through the Internet in the beginning of the 2010s, embodies the longing of a generation born in the 1990s and the 2000s for a time they hardly knew – if at all. Vaporwave music is a microgenre, a concept which, according to Anne H. Stevens and Molly C. O’Donnell, can refer to “digital musical phenomena” catering to a “niche” audience (2020: 1). Vaporwave relies heavily on sampling musical genres ranging from 1970s’ smooth jazz to 1980s’ Japanese city pop, and on drawing visual inspiration from the digital landscape of the 1990s. It cannot and should not be defined as a purely musical phenomenon; it is also an aesthetic and a language–as Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth explain, vaporwave “circulates more like a ‘meme’ than a music genre” (Born and Haworth, 2017: 80) and is “embraced not only as a cultural and social but as an aesthetic medium, visual as much as musical” (ibid 79). Vaporwave plays on different aspects of nostalgia – such as reflective and restorative nostalgia, two concepts defined by Svetlana Boym – and on an ambiguous rejection of the present. Through the case study of “mallsoft” music, a subgenre of vaporwave recreating as a nostalgic bubble the soundscape of the American mall of the 1980s and 1990s, this paper will develop the concept of “anemoia,” defined by John Koenig in a 2014 YouTube video entitled “Anemoia: Nostalgia For A Time You’ve Never Known.”

Keywords: Nostalgia, Music, Æsthetic, Vaporwave, Retro

Résumé : L’objectif de cet article est de montrer comment la musique *vaporwave*, apparue exclusivement sur Internet au début des années 2010, incarne la nostalgie d’une génération née dans les années 1990 et 2000 pour une époque qu’elle a à peine connue, voire pas du tout. La musique *vaporwave* est un microgenre, un concept qui, selon Anne H. Stevens et Molly C. O’Donnell, peut désigner des «phénomènes musicaux numériques» s’adressant à un public «de niche» (2020 : 1). La *vaporwave* s’appuie fortement sur l’échantillonnage de genres musicaux allant du *smooth jazz* des années

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1970 à la pop urbaine japonaise des années 1980, inspirée visuellement par le paysage numérique des années 1990. Elle ne peut et ne doit pas être définie comme un phénomène purement musical ; c'est aussi une esthétique et un langage - comme l'expliquent Georgina Born et Christopher Haworth, la *vaporwave* «circule plus comme un «mème» que comme un genre musical» (Born et Haworth, 2017 : 80) et est «adoptée non seulement comme un médium culturel et social, mais aussi comme un médium esthétique, visuel autant que musical» (*ibid.*, 79). La *vaporwave* joue sur différents aspects de la nostalgie - comme la nostalgie réflexive et la nostalgie réparatrice, deux concepts définis par Svetlana Boym - et sur un rejet ambigu du présent. À travers l'étude de cas de la musique «mallsoft», un sous-genre de la *vaporwave* recréant comme une bulle nostalgique le paysage sonore du centre commercial américain des années 1980 et 1990, cet article développera le concept d'»*anémoia*», défini par John Koenig dans une vidéo YouTube de 2014 intitulée «*Anemoia* : Nostalgie d'une époque que vous n'avez jamais connue».

Mots clés : Nostalgie, musique, esthétique, *vapor wave*, rétro

Introduction

Music journalist Simon Reynolds, whose critical work in the history of music offers insight into a 21st century characterized by a myriad of musical microgenres, opened his essay *Retromania* with the following statement: "We live in a pop age gone loco for retro and crazy for commemoration" (2011: ix). To be able to understand our current fascination with all things retro, it is imperative to first define such a concept. According to Reynolds, two major elements defining what retro is are, firstly, that "[it] is always about the relatively immediate past, about stuff that happened in living memory" (*ibid* xxx) and secondly, that "[it] involves an element of exact recall" (*ibid* xxx). These words date back to 2011, the year in which the musicologists Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, in their contribution to *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, locate the very dawn of vaporwave, which emerged exclusively through the Internet in the early 2010s. The aim of this article is to show how vaporwave, a musical microgenre questioning these very elements of definition given by Reynolds, embodies the longing of a generation born in the 1990s and the 2000s for a time they hardly knew – if at all.

While Reynold's 2011 work does not yet deal with a fully-fledged vaporwave, it does take interest in Daniel Lopatin and his "echo jams" (*ibid* 80-82) as well as James Ferraro (*ibid* 346), both precursors of vaporwave music, which relies heavily on sampling musical genres ranging from 1970s' smooth jazz to 1980s' Japanese city pop,[1] and on drawing visual inspiration from the digital landscape of the 1990s which witnessed the birth of the Internet. Indeed, vaporwave is essentially an Internet phenomenon, made widely available through online platforms such as Bandcamp and YouTube:

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[1] Among the artists sampled are for instance Lonnie Liston Smith for the smooth jazz genre, as well as Tatsurō Yamashita and Mariya Takeuchi for city pop.

> Vaporwave is therefore characterized by an intense material and citational reflexivity in relation to the Internet. Indeed, the genre is a product of the net, which acts at once as content source, creative medium, means of delivery and communication, and as a concept informing all these practices. (Born and Haworth, 2017: 81)

Additionally, Simon Reynolds emphasizes the part played by the Internet as a crucible in which the old mingles with the new, favorable to the emergence of a retromania: “The Internet places the remote past and the exotic present side by side. Equally accessible, they become the same thing: far, yet near… old, yet *now*” (Reynolds, 2011: 85). In his work on music and memory, Adam Trainer argues that it is nowadays through the Internet that we think our relationship to the past:

> Our relationship with memory and the representation of our individual and collective pasts have changed. The personal and affective are undeniably tethered to our negotiation of culture through increasingly mediated experiences, which now occur predominantly in the digital realm. (2016: 409)

The term “mediated” used by Trainer is interesting when one considers that nostalgia, which functions as a link with a distant past – which has been lost but not erased – can now be experienced in a context of immediacy, as it always lies just a few clicks away. Indeed, in his interview with the journalist Hussein Kesvani, the author and musician Grafton Tanner explains that vaporwave is a new expression of nostalgia in an era where memories, the aesthetic and records of periods pasts are readily available:

> On social media, you have access to nostalgia at your fingertips. You can be recommended old photos or Facebook posts that can invoke memories, or sometimes, when you want to remember a better time, you can scroll back to old photos. So in a lot of ways, the way we use the internet is partly rooted in nostalgia, and you can read vaporwave as a genre that reflects that moment of time. (2019: §11-12)

In the age of vaporwave, our memory is digital, our nostalgia virtual. This article, through the analysis of concepts such as “anemoia” and “hiraeth,” focuses on nostalgia as a multifaceted process as well as on the importance vaporwave grants not merely to memories but to the act of remembering itself.

The nostalgia(s) of *vaporwave*

In his work entitled *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts*, Grafton Tanner explains that vaporwave transcends the musical field and is used in other media by artists sharing the same "vaporwave sensibility" (2016: iv). To some extent, this sensibility is generational; it is shared mostly among people born in the very embers of the 20th century, who only hazily remember – and to some extent imagine – the atmosphere of the 1980s and 1990s through childhood memories and associate its musical echoes with blissful carefreeness. As the art journalist Genista Jurgens comments: "[Vaporwave] speaks to a generation in a way not seen since disco in the 70's, hip hop and pop of the 80's and grunge of the 90's" (2016: §9). Thus, vaporwave is intimately linked to the notion of nostalgia, defined by the cultural theorist Svetlana Boym in her work *The Future of Nostalgia*, published in 2001: "Nostalgia (from *nostos*–return home, and *algia*–longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy" (2001: xiii). The emotion pervading the feeling of nostalgia is eminently bittersweet; the heart is heavy while the imagination grows wings. Indeed, the impalpable quality of nostalgia can be found in a vaporwave building up the realm of the ideal: "It is worth noting that the term *virtual* is particularly well represented among vaporwave artist names and song titles, here representative not only of the digital and online realm but also of a kind of ideological utopia free from the tangible everyday" (Trainer, 2016: 420). For instance, vaporwave artist Ramona Xavier released two albums in 2013 under the pseudonym PrismCorp Virtual Enterprises. These two albums entitled *Home*™ and *Clear Skies*™ are characteristic of a specific subgenre of vaporwave called Utopian Virtual, which celebrates the sense of safety found in a pristine world akin to the pages of a catalogue. Thus, listening to vaporwave is akin to world-building – the denizens of such a world, like music critic Scott Beauchamp, belong to it as much as it belongs to them:

> Listen to the entire album [*Far Side Virtual* by James Ferraro], if you can spare the time. Put it on in the background as a soundtrack to work to. It's crisp, upbeat, and pleasant. The sounds that it's composed of are recognizable to me, like familiar voices from my past or little nodules of experience from my childhood. I grew up in the late '80s/early '90s, and an upbeat sound collage of voices from a Utopia that couldn't quite pull itself off aren't just simply pleasing—they feel like part of my identity. (2016: §11)

World-building, here, thus refers to the active process of constructing, more than an atmosphere, an environment from half-remembered memories and more or less vivid impressions. As such, it could be argued that the nostalgic process is as much one of construction as it is one of reconstruction. Indeed, in the case of vaporwave and its siblings, the nostalgic process appears to be active, as the concept of "reconstructed nostalgia" offered by the musician Paul Ballam-Cross seems to show: "[Reconstructed nostalgia] highlights both the cultural references and the manner in which the listener's own experiences of nostalgia are rebuilt within [vaporwave, synthwave and chillwave] (2021: 72). Synthwave music is characterized by its use of imagery and instruments from the 1980s, such as the analog synthetizer. While the dynamic rhythm of synthwave can evoke the action-packed movies from the 1980s, such as *Escape from New York* (1981) directed by John Carpenter, chillwave offers a slower musical experience – for instance through the use of reverb, an effect also used profusely in vaporwave music. Vaporwave, then, is perhaps more about the very experience of nostalgia as a process rather than the mere nostalgic effect produced by the retro element. The world of vaporwave does not exist as a place, however – it exists as a time outside of time, in protest against an era of constant acceleration, as can be interpreted for instance from its frequent use of reverb. This is consistent with Boym's conception of nostalgia:

> At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time–the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. (2001: xv)

The term "rebellion," used by Boym, raises an important issue concerning vaporwave, resonating with Trainer's words of "ideological utopia": its political dimension. While, as the academic and musician Laura Glitsos points out, "[t]he pleasure of vaporwave is […] understood as a pleasure of remembering for the sake of the act of remembering itself" (2018: 101), some artists and listeners use vaporwave music as a political statement expressing a rejection of the times they are living in. These two opposed conceptions correspond respectively to Boym's concepts of "reflective nostalgia" and "restorative nostalgia,"[2] each drawing upon a different aspect of nostalgia:

> Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself and delays the homecoming–wistfully, ironically, desperately. Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on

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[2] Reynolds also mentions these concepts in his prologue to *Retromania*, xxvii-xviii.

> the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. (2001: xviii)

Consequently, Boym warns about the potential danger of drowning in a nostalgia and of letting the distinction between imagination and reality be blurred: "The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. In extreme cases it can create a phantom homeland, for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill" (*ibid* xvi). Indeed, Grafton Tanner, in his interview with Kesvani, reflects upon the political distortion of the original concept of vaporwave:

> You have a generation who live in uncertain times, and the danger of this kind of music is that it doesn't take long for someone who, in a state of intense nostalgia, can be manipulated into thinking that we should return to the past when things were better […]. You'll have people who think things were better in the past because they were more stable and fixed. And people in more dangerous vaporwave communities like the far right — who have their own vaporwave community known as "fashwave" — can say, 'Yes, in the past, things were better when there wasn't gender or racial equality.' That yearning for the past — for a better time — can lead to people forming their politics based on misremembering. (2019: §13)

In an article entitled "'Fashwave': synth music co-opted by the far right," Michael Hann focuses on the way fashwave was born from the distortion of synthwave music and aesthetic: "The graphics associated with fashwave look like those of synthwave, too: the same reliance on 80s sci-fi, especially Tron. […] What fashwave adds is swastikas, pictures of Donald Trump or Adolf Hitler" (2016: §10). While such distortions[3] appear incompatible with the pleasure of those listening to vaporwave for the sake of reflective nostalgia, it remains that vaporwave cannot be studied through the artistic lens alone – an important part of its essence does lie within a political and metaphysical rejection of the present and of a certain kind of future. Indeed, as Ross Cole points out in his article "Vaporwave Aesthetics: Internet Nostalgia and the Utopian Impulse," "[Nostalgia and utopia] amount to a rejection of the present, whether in favor of the safety of recognition or the possibility of change" (2020: 302).

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[3] The anti-capitalism linked to vaporwave will be analyzed in the following section.

Rejecting the present and a certain kind of future

Thus, according to Grafton Tanner, the essence of vaporwave is not solely derived from the mere pleasure of basking in the harmless, reassuring glow of nostalgia and familiar retro; it also stems from the need to express and share a deep existential angst, as vaporwave artists entertain

> this desire to turn our fascinations and fantasies into more disquieting forms, to suggest that not all is perfectly well, to remind us that maybe we have not been liberated in the Internet Age. These artists are skeptical of capitalism's promise to redeem us in the name of material goods and of the nostalgia that hangs over an era obsessed with the clichés of history. (2016: iv)

Consequently, Stefan Colton opposes two categories of artists: "nostalgics who take pilgrimages to defunct blockbusters to worship the ruins of VHS, and anti-consumerist crusaders against the kitsch of capitalism" (2017: §11). Indeed, by taking back for itself corporate imagery and symbols of capitalism, vaporwave is understood and promoted by some as an indictment of the vacuity and absurdity of late-stage consumer culture, but this indictment is at the same time an artistic sublimation: "[V]aporwave luxuriates in an unruly and ambivalent celebration-cum-critique of late consumer capitalism" (Born and Haworth, 2017: 82). Thus, vaporwave is essentially two-faced, an ambiguity also underlined by the musicologist Adam Harper: "Is it a critique of capitalism or a capitulation to it? Both and neither" (2012: §3). This ambiguity is so prominent that it is conceptualized by Adam Trainer as musical post-irony: "Moving past the cynicism of irony, musical post-irony is both a critique and a celebration, an unapologetically confused rendering of subjective experience that fuses the intertextuality of contemporary pastiche with personal and experiential affectivity" (2016: 424). This would reconcile the love-hate relationship of vaporwave listeners towards the atmosphere they grew up with, composed of "advertising soundtracks for consumer electronics, luxury hotels and other icons of consumer capitalism, computer game soundtracks and sonic idents" (Born and Haworth, 2017: 79) and associated with the innocence of childhood as well as with the disillusions they experienced when becoming adults. A darker hypothesis linked to vaporwave's celebration of corporate aesthetic can be found in the concept of accelerationism, analyzed by Harper:

> Accelerationism is the notion that the dissolution of civilisation wrought by capitalism should not and cannot be resisted, but rather must be pushed faster and farther towards the insanity and anarchically fluid violence that is its ultimate conclusion, either because this

> is liberating, because it causes a revolution, or because destruction is the only logical answer. (2012: §3)

This could contribute to explain the inherent absurdity of the vaporwave aesthetic,[4] with its random montages of motley elements. Absurdity thus becomes significant; while vaporwave may constitute an acceptation of society's pointlessness to some extent, it defies meaninglessness through the creation of a system of signs,[5] the randomness of which is so systematic it becomes codified.

Vaporwave's rejection of capitalism is inscribed in its creative process; it is meant to be shared without limits and without regard for authorship and copyright:

> The anonymity of vaporwave erases the notion of authorship altogether. In a way, a vaporwave release belongs to the genre at large and not to any one producer, establishing a multifarious genre field that eschews something so totalizing as ownership. (Tanner, 2016: 12)

Thus, vaporwave artists are not creating for a profit, and vaporwave as a microgenre is "driven entirely by an online network of artists who remained largely anonymous and often gave their music away for free[6] (in addition to freely sampling others' work without a second thought to copyright laws)" (Goldner, 2019: §10). According to Sean F. Han and Daniel Peters, vaporwave's disregard for copyright laws has another layer of signification; while it is linked to a rejection of capitalist logic, it also offers a commentary on vaporwave itself:

> The rampant stealing of material is essentially a huge middle finger to today's consumerist society – a silent mockery of its own fans for buying into something that's merely repackaged and presented back to the population. The 80s-centric sampling hints at capitalism's obsession with the new and updated, forcing listeners to appreciate music that was meant and limited by an era we left behind more than 30 years ago. (2016: §18)

In other words, vaporwave does not escape from the flaws it denounces. This could be interpreted as another aspect of its essential ambivalence: while vaporwave rejects the crushing wheel of late-stage capitalism, it still acknowledges it as its matrix.

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[4] For a detailed analysis of the visual dimension of vaporwave, see Ross Cole's "Vaporwave Aesthetics: Internet Nostalgia and the Utopian Impulse" (2020).

[5] Let us not forget vaporwave also spreads as a meme, and thus could be considered a form of language.

[6] Numerous vaporwave albums are available on online platforms such as YouTube.

According to Anne H. Stevens and Molly C. O'Donnell, some microgenres "seem to be […] tethered to particular moments of cultural anxiety or technological innovation" (2020: 5). The intimate link between vaporwave and the early days of the Internet that has been pointed out earlier is also a manifestation of a sense of wonder in front of the infinite potential of new technologies – a sense of wonder still uncorrupted by the dystopia of a technology pervading and ruling each and every aspect of life. Thus, as the journalist Julia Neuman argues:

> Now that we're in the thick of a data-driven takeover with no signs of turning back, where are we supposed to seek comfort? The '80s were the final years before technology snatched us in its inescapable grip. Temporarily dialing back to a time when technology was a controllable beast, and robots were just a wild prediction, seems like a pretty good answer. (2015: §12)

In Tanner's opinion, there is a specific historical event, at the dawn of the 21st century, that marked the end of an era and that has forever lost to the past the carefreeness celebrated by vaporwave – September 11, 2001:

> With unprecedented access to the Internet, the flattened desert where past, present, and future comingle, we find ourselves living in a state of atemporality, yearning for a time before the present. In the West, the time for which we pine is one before the twenty-first century, which arrived violently on September 11, 2001, and before the rise of the Internet. (2016: iv)

Consequently, it is no coincidence if the musical and aesthetic inspirations of vaporwave do not go beyond the end of the 1990s: "The vaporwave era of inspiration thus generally ends in 2001, after the dot-com bubble burst and 9/11. The intact Twin Towers appear on many vaporwave album covers,[7] including *Floral Shoppe*,[8] as a symbol of the era" (Colton, 2017: §7). Some vaporwave artists such as Jornt Elzinga – best known under his pseudonym 猫 シ Corp[9] – cultivate through their music the art of evasion. As the music journalist Simon Chandler notes from a 2017 interview with Elzinga: "[猫 シ Corp.]'s suggesting that *NEWS AT 11*—and perhaps his other records—are involved in an attempt to deny the reality of certain historical traumas" (§3). According to Beauchamp, this attempt at denying the pain of reality is manifested through the creation of an alternate, ideal world "[offering] up an alternative history of post-Cold War America" (2016: §15). 猫 シ Corp thus explains to Chandler that "the loss of innocence is key" (2017: §1) in understanding vaporwave. He further describes his 2016 album Class of '84 as "an image of a (past) world that we love to escape to because our old world died in 2001" (ibid §1). However, the idea of a "past world" needs to be specified; Chandler's words suggest that vaporwave is perhaps less about reconstructing the world as it was in the past than it is about constructing it as it should have been today: "[Vaporwave's] tropes help artists such as [猫 シ Corp] — and perhaps society as a whole — to deny that history has branched off in the way it actually has, and to act as if things have continued as their nostalgia reconstructs it" (ibid §4). In striving to artistically create an alternate reality where his listeners can meet with an innocence and a carefreeness they no longer enjoy in their daily life, 猫 シ Corp has become vaporwave's "greatest exponent of mallsoft" (ibid §1), a subgenre of vaporwave recreating the soundscape of the American mall of the 1980s and 1990s as a nostalgic bubble. Thus, through mallsoft music and its aesthetic, nostalgia can be experienced both as a time and as a place.

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[7] Other examples include *9/11* by Pepsiman (2016) and *Soft Nostlagic* by vcr-classique (2022).

[8] Released in 2011 by Ramona Xavier under the pseudonym Macintosh Plus. *Floral Shoppe* is considered one of the most emblematic examples of vaporwave music.

[9] Read "Cat System Corp."

Mallsoft music: soundscapes and imagined nostalgia

According to composer Raymond Murray Schafer, "Music forms the best permanent record of past sounds" (1994: 103). While mallsoft could arguably be defined as music, it is more accurately a soundscape, a concept developed by the expert on urban design Michael Southworth in his 1969 article "The Sonic Environment of Cities." A soundscape is thus a sonic environment, an atmosphere linked to a very specific landscape. It is crucial to observe with the historian David Crouch that landscapes are not mere sceneries devoid of meaning – they are *experienced* by the individual:

> The idea of landscapes in western culture is centered around consumption rather than production. A landscape appears as constructed by someone else: a company, a designer, a government, a wealthy owner, or by Nature. It is read as an icon of what people stand for, but rarely of an ordinary everyday culture; rather of someone else's idea: an image of the countryside; of the past; of a nation; an idea of a region's identity and heritage. (1993: 27)

By recreating a specific soundscape, mallsoft enables its listeners to enjoy the experience – by echo – of a landscape that has become unrecognizable; that of the typical American mall of the 1980s and 1990s. The work of Raymond Murray Schafer allows one to polish the definition of mallsoft even further; in his seminal 1977 work *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Turning of the World*, Schafer develops the idea of lo-fi soundscape, a specific sort of soundscape characterized by a sonic blur: “In a lo-fi soundscape individual acoustic signals are obscured in an overdense population of sounds” (1994: 43). Indeed, mallsoft does not only rely on sampling Muzak®, “an easy-listening style of music often played in shopping centers” (Glitsos, 2019: 110); it also recreates the muffled echoes of the customers’ voices, the commercial announcements made through loudspeakers, as well as all the other sounds of life in a busy commercial area.[10]

The mallsoft experience is the embodiment *par excellence* of vaporwave’s ambiguous relationship to capitalism. On the one hand, the mall constitutes the epitome of consumer culture:

> Today and tomorrow, capital lives everywhere, in our TVs, phones and minds, but nowhere is it more holy than in the gleaming temples of its interface with the public – the office lobby, the hotel reception area, and most of all, the shopping mall. This music belongs in the *plaza*, literal and metaphorical, real and imaginary – the public space that is the nexus of infinite social, cultural and financial transactions and the scene of their greatest activity and spectacle. (Harper, 2012: §9)

On the other hand, it is also the altar of nostalgia, a sheltered shrine reminding the listeners of golden days[11] when they accompanied their parents on a shopping spree, immersing themselves in jumbles of sounds and neon glimpses. As the writer John Koenig explains, mallsoft “[is] a nostalgia for shopping trips with your mom when you were just a little kid, with tinny Madonna playing in the background” (qtd. in Kesvani, 2019: §5). Thus, in his 2019 article on the mallsoft experience, Kesvani provides the testimony of listener Michael Tills:

> It sounds stupid, but mallwave does let me escape from the shittiness of everyday life […]. It’s just a couple of hours in a day where everything at least feels okay, that I don’t have to worry about whether or not I’m going to get a job, the political situation in the U.S. — all that shit. I guess it makes me think that there was a better time, or a time when people in this country felt better. (*ibid* §8)

Mallsoft cultivates the art of the echo, of the haze, of the blur. Indeed, as Harper remarks, “vaporwave typically takes material from the early 1990s onwards that can pass for contemporary” (2012, §13). The choice of the words “pass for” highlights the uncanny dimension of vaporwave, the blurring of the authentic and the fabricated – a dimension noticed by Ross Cole, who mentions the anachronistic tendency of the microgenre: “Vaporwave fetishizes the look of the ’90s internet yet meshes this with the 1980s; it sounds like familiar chart music yet also sounds unheimlich” (2020: 317). The concept of the uncanny, introduced by the psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch and expanded upon by Sigmund Freud, addresses the blurring between the known and the unknown – the experience of the familiar as unfamiliar.

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[10] 猫 シ Corp’s 2016 album Shopping @ Helsinki offers a typical illustration of a mallsoft soundscape.

[11] As Chandler notes, “it’s the memory of simpler and more innocent times that plays a big part here in 猫 シ Corp.’s artistic vision” (2017: §7).

Mallsoft belongs – as most vaporwave does – to the realm of hauntology music, a term echoing the concept mentioned by Jacques Derrida in his work *Specters of Marx*. Adam Harper’s considerations on hauntology music, developed in a blog post entitled “Hauntology: The Past Inside the Present,” enable a better understanding of the relationship between phenomena such as vaporwave and nostalgia; the former is a way to experience nostalgia itself as a process. In this regard, vaporwave – the music itself on the one hand and the philosophy behind it on the other – is both object and the prism through which it is perceived: “Hauntology is not a genre of art or music, but an aesthetic effect, a way of reading and appreciating art” (2009: §8). Thus, the mall as a soundscape is paced, haunted by mallsoft listeners in the same way as it is haunting them: “Mallsoft music isn’t meant to get stuck in one’s head immediately but possibly returns to your memory days or even weeks later” (McNeil, 2015: §2).

Interestingly enough, the ghosts of hauntology music hover at the crossroads of memory and imagination; as Laura Glitsos points out: “vaporwave is undoing and deforming memory in order to construct a phantasmal and liminal *remembering experience* in which memory both happens and does not happen” (2018: 106). Indeed, the type of nostalgia generated by vaporwave music – and mallsoft in particular – has a peculiarity: in some cases, it revolves around memories that never were from a time that was never lived:

> Chillwave, synthwave, and vaporwave, as well as their respective subgenres, share a connective bond in that each genre references nostalgia as a fundamental building block of both their musical and visual aesthetics. While nostalgia in music (and reference to the music of the past) is certainly not new, the way in which nostalgia functions in relation to these differs from the majority of music revivals. Chillwave, synthwave, and vaporwave rely instead on imagery and themes which evoke comforting nostalgic feelings or memories as a form of collective imaginative self-soothing, ultimately generating a nostalgia for times and places that have perhaps existed only in the listener’s imagination. (Ballam-Cross, 2021: 70)

That is also how 猫 シ Corp defines the essence of vaporwave to Chandler: "a glorification of a past that never was" (§7). Thus, in Tills' case – a young man born in 1999 – Kesvani explains that his nostalgic experience of the mall springs essentially from his imagination:

> The mall is a happy place, reminiscent of a time when he was younger and carefree — where his life played out to a soundtrack of Weezer, No Doubt and the Counting Crows. Except, Tills never experienced such a mallrat adolescence. In fact, the closest mall to his home, the Fayette Mall in Lexington, is so small that you could probably visit every store in under an hour. […] Indeed, Till's life at the mall is imaginary. He's nostalgic for the 1990s, which he thinks was a better time to live. (2019: § 2-3)

According to vaporwave artist Jake Stevenson, the rousing of such a feeling is the goal of a significant portion of vaporwave music. He insists on its creative aspect and its ability to elicit the "completely new" out of a sensation of familiarity:

> While not all vaporwave aims for nostalgia specifically, most vaporwave aims to build a soundscape of escape by referencing lost places of the past (seen in numerous pop culture samples) or by creating something so effectively nostalgic it feels like a lost memory, despite being completely new. (2020: §17)

This peculiar type of nostalgia – an imagined nostalgia – is encapsulated in two concepts: that of "anemoia," as defined by John Koenig, and that of "hiraeth," as understood by 猫 シ Corp.

In a 2014 video posted on his YouTube channel *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, John Koenig defines the feeling of anemoia as "a pang of nostalgia for times you've never experienced" (0:18-0:22). This "obscure sorrow" is at the very core of vaporwave, which takes up its name from "a pun on 'vaporware,' the name for commercial software that is publicly announced but never goes into production[12] […]" (Born and Haworth, 2017: 79). A cousin concept would be the feeling of hiraeth, which in Welsh refers to the longing linked to homesickness. It is this feeling that informs 猫 シ Corp's mallsoft music:

> The concept that most modern vaporwave aims to achieve is called "hiraeth," defined in the description of the album HIRAETH by the legendary Cat Corp. as "a homesickness for a home to which you cannot return, a home which maybe never was; the nostalgia, the

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[12] One of the pseudonyms of vaporwave artist Gabriel Eduardo is Windows96, an operating system abandoned by Microsoft.

> yearning, the grief for the lost places of your past." (Stevenson, 2020: §16)

While anemoia and hiraeth refer to the longing – the feeling itself – Laura Glitsos tries to conceptualize its mechanisms. In her 2018 article, she applies to vaporwave the concept of compensatory nostalgia developed by academic Chris Healy in his 2006 article "Dead Man: Film, Colonialism, and Memory" in order to understand how one can be nostalgic for something one never experienced: "As Chris Healy explains, 'compensatory nostalgia' (2006) stems from the paradox between remembering and forgetting that is ubiquitous in contemporary Western culture, and which occurs as a result of media saturation (p. 222)" (104). Consequently, this again posits vaporwave as a product of its time, the slowness of its flow going against a relentless stream of information. The craving of Western culture for this blurring of the line between memory and imagination can also be found in a microgenre sharing striking similarities with vaporwave and serving as one of its major influences – Japanese city pop. The critic and journalist Cat Zhang describes this type of music – coming from what Reynolds calls "The Empire of Retro" (2011: 162) – in the following terms:

> Essentially, city pop is Western music that's been adapted by the Japanese, now coming back to us as a retrospective source of fascination. The head of the internet music label Business Casual once said that listening to city pop was like "seeing old commercials from another world, selling the same brands and consumer products but in a different way than I remember." It is familiar enough to be comforting, but implicitly exists at a slight remove; the Japanese lyrics preserve an aura of exoticism and mystery, giving Western listeners room to freely project their desires. On YouTube, where city pop flourishes, listeners dwell fondly on artificial memories of Japan: "I remember back in the day when I'd drive through the Tokyo streets at night with the window rolled down, neon lights on buildings, everyone having a good time, the '80s were great," wrote one commenter to the popular mix "warm nights in tokyo [city pop/シティポップ],"[13] before the illusion dissolves: "Wait a minute, I'm 18 and live in America." Every city pop upload is filled with similar comments. (2021: §4)

Thus, in microgenres such as mallsoft and Japanese city pop, the nostalgia is – to a significant extent if not entirely – imagined. It derives from a double creative process initiated by the artist and completed by the listener; in other words, it is a collaborative world–building experience:

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[13] This mix had been deleted by YouTube for a copyright issue before being posted again.

> In engaging with this music, listeners embrace a collective form of nostalgia for situations that are unlikely to have existed. In this collaborative memory, it is not the real 1980s or 1990s for which listeners are nostalgic, but the plainly fictional form found only in the listeners' imagination, often taking inspiration from popular culture. By engaging with the imagery of this (either in the cover art of the release or in similar media), users construct a collective "memory" of times and places that have never (or will never) exist. (Ballam-Cross, 2021: 90-91)

The resilience of vaporwave

While vaporwave is by no means the only microgenre drawing upon the retro for musical and visual influences to have emerged from the depths of the Internet's "data sea" (Reynolds, 2011: 84), it distinguishes itself from similar phenomena such as chillwave and synthwave, the latter being, according to Aleix De Vargas-Machuca in his article on the origins of vaporwave and its different subgenres, its "direct sibling" (§3). One major difference would be the ironic dimension inherent to vaporwave: "While synthwave prioritizes a reinterpreted form of 1980s film scores and culture, often seeming like an extended act of homage, vaporwave reinterprets popular media with a heavily ironic edge" (Ballam-Cross, 2021: 78). Considering this microgenre with its characteristic irony in mind and its rejection of capitalist logic, one observes that vaporwave artists are more concerned with what their music conveys rather than with its marketability. Vaporwave has no calling for – in lay terms – going mainstream:

> Vaporwave, itself a kind of musical parody of pop consciousness, never strived for mass appeal. It doesn't need our validation. That's true for any artifact of counterculture: mass acceptance would weaken its claim to authenticity. Forcing it into a form fit for mass appeal would dilute its identity. (Beauchamp, 2016: §3)

In fact, since – as a rule – vaporwave music profusely resorts to unauthorized samples of already existing music, its commercialization is quite simply impossible.

However, this extensive use of sampling also raises another issue: with nothing "new" to offer, vaporwave was likely doomed to a very swift death by exhaustion. Yet, when Adam Harper checked its pulse in 2013, it was still alive and well: "Although vaporwave can all too easily become formulaic, the many releases this year that either tagged themselves 'vaporwave' or clearly adopted the style show a startling creativity and diversity"

(§2). More recently, in 2019, after almost ten years of existence, vaporwave had its first dedicated music festival, which took place in New York: 100% ElectroniCON. This tends to show that the microgenre – despite all odds – not only endures but continues to gather a growing audience. Going back up the stream of creativity noticed by Harper, one may observe that vaporwave music is a creative process rather than a finished product; with its cousin lo-fi (understand low-fidelity music), it draws attention to its creative ropes and material dimension:

> Vaporwave stands in opposition to the sleek production of contemporary music and can also call attention to the artifice of music production with oddly cut loops (causing the jagged samples to resist turning over on the downbeat of a measure), continuous repetition, and by exposing the audible "click" of the sample looping over in the mix. (Tanner, 2016: 10)

Another crucial factor explaining vaporwave's survival and thriving is its versatility; it is indeed much more than a purely musical phenomenon:

> Vaporwave is a product of this age: cultivated almost entirely within the medium of the Internet, and remarkable for the extent to which the net is embraced not only as a cultural and social but as an aesthetic medium, visual as much as musical. (Born and Haworth, 2017: 79)

Thus, on the one hand, it possesses an easily identifiable aesthetic (a mix of classical sculpture, digital paraphernalia from the 90s and rudimentary montages in a pastel color palette); on the other hand, Born and Haworth also show that vaporwave functions as a language – a language familiar to Internet users from the 2010s onwards: "[V]aporwave circulates more like a 'meme'[14] than a music genre" (*ibid* 80).

Yet, in meme culture, a meme "dies" precisely when its use is normalized – when it is used by whom some initiates half-jokingly, half-scornfully call the "normies." Such people are defined by the online version of the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "one whose tastes, lifestyle, habits, and attitude are mainstream and far from the cutting edge" (§2). Thus, by that measure, in the middle of the 2010s, vaporwave died – or so a part of its community thought:

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[14] The second entry of the online version of the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a meme as "an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture." The first entry specifies that it circulates by being "spread widely online especially through social media."

> In 2015, MTV unveiled a major re-branding. Vaporwave art (glitchy collages of palm trees, mall aesthetics, '90s computer graphics) and vaporwave music had replaced punk in its transitions and shorts: MTV had co-opted vaporwave overnight. The Viacom executives had decided it was this that would surely reach those millennials. (Colton, 2017: §14)

Granted that "[t]he re-appropriation of corporate cultural artifacts *is* vaporwave" (*ibid* §13), then vaporwave got an unpleasant taste of its own medicine. Indeed, it should be kept in mind that companies have taken due notice of the retromania Reynolds writes about, and have developed the concept of pseudo-nostalgia as a marketing tool – a fact illustrated by the academics Tom van Laer and Davide Christian Orazi through the example of the Netflix series *Stranger Things*:

> A key feature of contemporary marketing is the development of products and services that feature a new theme on an old idea. Called "retromarketing," it is the relaunch or revival of a product or service from a historical period, which marketers usually update to ultramodern standards of functioning, performance or taste. Sure, nostalgia sells – but what retromarketers really try to induce are feelings of "pseudo-nostalgia." We call it pseudo-nostalgia because younger consumers of these revived products and services have never experienced the original. Generation Z will not have been there, done that. (2022: § 4-6)

Thus, what van Laer and Orazi call pseudo-nostalgia[15] appears to spring from the same emotional source as anemoia; yet while vaporwave aficionados seek to evade consumerism to go back to the essential simplicity of nostalgia, companies have turned nostalgia and memories into consumer goods. This tendency had been noticed as soon as 2001 by Stephen Brown, an expert in business studies:

> Marketing, as everyone knows from day one, class one, study one, is customer orientated and it therefore follows that the rise of retro is a direct reflection of customer preferences. As consumers age,[16] they are more inclined to retrospect and marketers are simply responding to the demand. (10)

Grafton Tanner, in his interview with Hussein Kesvani, highlighted the growth of this trend almost twenty years later:

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[15] Pseudo-nostalgia appears to be functioning in the same way as Arjun Appadurai's concept of "ersatz nostalgia." As Glitsos explains: "[W]e see the relationship between media and the production of nostalgia without 'real' memory, or what Arjun Appadurai describes as 'ersatz nostalgia' – a kind of 'nostalgia without memory' (1996, p. 82)" (2018 106).

[16] Vaporwave, however, shows the proclivity of a younger audience to reminiscing.

> Nostalgia is a popular tool in marketing, and it's probably the most defining cultural product of our time. You see it in movies and TV with reboot trends, and of course, apps like Spotify use algorithms that recommend music that you've probably listened to in the past. (2019: 11)

How to explain, then, vaporwave's survival to the relentless blows of its sworn enemy, corporate capitalism? According to Jake Stevenson, it is thanks to a dedicated audience that the vaporwave phenomenon was able to outlive its life expectancy as an Internet microgenre: "It used to be a running joke back around 2016 that vaporwave was dead, but a passionate and active community helped to maintain the music's growth and reshape its modern viability" (2020: §29). The formation of a community around shared nostalgic bearings – and more importantly, the same vision of the nostalgic experience – has allowed vaporwave to transcend the mere counter-cultural dimension characteristic of microgenres. In her article "Why Won't Vaporwave Die?", Genista Jurgens thus notices the reflective power of Simpsonwave, one of vaporwave's subgenres drawing upon the television series *The Simpsons*, a landmark of pop culture and a nostalgic bridge between the 1990s and the 2020s: "The shallow and superficial irony that was haunting vaporwave has been replaced by honesty, sincerity and emotional connection" (2016: §12). Consequently, a microgenre which started as the wistful acknowledgment of a loss has been able not only to survive, but to thrive, to build, to connect. Beyond passion and dedication, it is the ability of both the artists and their audience to perpetually breathe life into vaporwave, to create, in the words of Jake Stevenson, "an entirely new type of music and also one you've heard before" (2020: §5) – to always find new ways back home.

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Brand New Your Retro? Yugo-nostalgia and/as Yugo-futurism in alternative and popular music

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Abstract: Through its different forms, Yugoslav (popular and alternative) music serves as one of the essential and most common materials of post-Yugoslav collective memory, both trans-nationally and trans-generationally. Similarly, numerous approaches, different theoretical and media discourses, covering the several decades of the musical and pop-cultural production – also known as Yu-Rock – were usually understood as practices of Yugo-nostalgic consumerism. However, this paper opposes such a reading of both (Yugo-)nostalgia and Yugoslav popular and alternative music/cultural scene of the late socialist Yugoslavia. In spite of the seminal notion of retromania, which can absolutely be applied to the revival and domination of the Yugoslav New Wave scene of the 1980s in the last several decades in the regional media- and memoryscape, also against all "top-down" nationally driven restrictions, the afterlife, the reception, and reflection also score different elements and modes related to both the affect and memory, and to the Yugoslav legacies – such as retro-utopia, neostalgia, or Yugo-futurism, and New Yugoslavism – neologisms all coined by or directly applied to the actors of the actual scene. The paper highlights several reflections on Yugo-nostalgia and the utopian and futuristic articulation of both the socialist past and the post-socialist present, as well as the explicit (self-)referentiality regarding the YU Rock/New Wave production as represented and performed by one of its key actors, Disciplina Kicme, i.e. Disciplin a Kitschme, and its similar off projects. The band figures as one of the key representatives of the scene and of the Yugoslav supranational phenomenon. Thus, by looking into their work in the post-Yugoslav period, which combines the elements of nostalgia structurally and thematically, through performance, lyrics, symbols and aesthetics, the paper argues for the emancipatory use of nostalgia rather than a mere retrospective idealization and de-politicized re-branding, namely, as a critical reflection and as a tool to rethink the futures in time of the cancellation of the future.

Keywords: Alternative Music; New Wave; Retrotopia; Neostalgia; Collective Memory

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Résumé : À travers ses différentes formes, la musique yougoslave (populaire et alternative) constitue l'un des matériaux essentiels de la mémoire collective post-yougoslave, tant au niveau transnational que transgénérationnel. De même, de nombreuses approches ainsi que différents discours théoriques et médiatiques portant sur plusieurs décennies d'une production musicale et pop-culturelle connue sous le nom de Yu-Rock ont été perçus comme des pratiques de consommation nostalgique de la Yougoslavie. Pour autant, cet article s'oppose à une telle lecture de la (Yugo)nostalgie et de la scène musicale populaire et alternative yougoslave de la fin de la période socialiste. La notion de rétromania reste bien sûr essentielle et peut tout à fait s'appliquer à la renaissance et à la domination de la *New Wave* yougoslave (née dans les années 1980) dans le paysage médiatique et mémoriel de ces dernières décennies, à contre-courant de toutes les injonctions nationales imposées d'en haut. Toutefois, l'héritage et la réception du Yu-Rock exploitent également des éléments liés à l'affect, à la mémoire, et même au patrimoine yougoslave, produisant des phénomènes comme la rétrotopie, la néostalgie ou encore le yougo-futurisme. Ces néologismes ont tous été inventés par les acteurs de la scène musicale actuelle ou leur sont directement associés. L'article met en lumière plusieurs interprétations de la nostalgie yougoslave et de l'articulation utopique et futuriste entre le passé socialiste et le présent post-socialiste du pays. L'article s'intéresse aussi à l'(auto-)référentialité explicite de la musique rock/*New Wave* incarnée par l'un de ses acteurs clés, Disciplina Kicme, (*Disciplin a Kitschme*) et ses projets similaires en-dehors de la Yougoslavie. Le groupe est l'un des principaux représentants de la scène supranationale d'origine yougoslave. Ainsi, en examinant le travail post-yougoslave de ce groupe qui combine, structurellement et thématiquement, les éléments de la nostalgie dans leur performance, paroles, symboles et esthétique, l'article plaide pour un usage de la nostalgie plus émancipateur qu'une simple idéalisation rétrospective et dépolitisée. Il s'agit alors de considérer la nostalgie comme une réflexion critique et un instrument opératoire permettant de repenser les futurs à l'heure de l'annulation de l'avenir.

Mots clés : Musique alternative, *New Wave*, rétrotopie, néostalgie, mémoire collective

Introduction

Reflecting on her seminal work on the future of nostalgia, Svetlana Boym stated that "the twentieth century began with utopia and ended with nostalgia. Optimistic belief in the future became outmoded, while nostalgia, for better or worse, never went out of fashion, remaining uncannily contemporary" (Boym, 2007: 7). However, what might have sounded paradoxical a couple of decades ago today seems more like a realistic description of the state of contemporary popular culture and politics. More than a historical emotion, as Boym framed it, nostalgia serves as the defining emotion of our age (Tanner, 2021). Indeed, taken either as an emotion, as a cultural or industrial niche and marketing strategy, or as a mode of cultural memory, nostalgia is everywhere.

This observation can be closely linked to the notions of "retromania," particularly in popular music, as suggested by Simon Reynolds (2011), or the "cancellation of the future" in the present capitalist society and popular culture, as addressed by the late Mark Fisher (2014). Reynolds and Fisher both reflect pop culture's re-appropriation of its past, which relies on repeating the bygone past and backwardness rather than attempting to create something new. Moreover, Fisher further dramatizes the situation by stating that the 21st century doesn't seem to have started yet, adding that we are "trapped in the 20th century" (8). However, it appears as old news to many subjects and social groups living in the so-called post-socialist transition.

In this article, I will dive deeper into the post-socialist context and examine the negotiations between Yugo-nostalgia and/as Yugo-futurism. I will first highlight the potential political and emancipatory aspect of (Yugo-)nostalgia and its capacity to address the different temporalities and actualization of elements from the past used to imagine the present and future. In this respect, I will also examine selected YU-Rock and New Wave articulations to address these aspects in the context of current dominant retro-trends in popular music.

Yugo-nostalgia and/as Yugo-futurism – toward emancipatory potentials

Predominantly understood in the context of the post-socialist nostalgic, or *ostalgic*, phenomena in formerly socialist states in Eastern Europe, Yugo-nostalgia (*Jugonostalgija*) is undoubtedly firmly positioned within the memory landscape in the post-socialist and post-Yugoslav context.1 Yugo-nostalgia is broadly understood as the positive remembrance and emotions toward the socialist Yugoslav state and the overall past period of socialism.2 It went through various semantic changes and appropriations over the last few decades. The very term Yugo-nostalgia was coined as a derogatory political label by the Croatian press in the early 1990s (Ugrešić, 1998), and it later served as a counter-memory practice. Since the end of the wars, Yugo-nostalgia has usually been associated with various consumerist practices in different genres and media, which are dominantly viewed as highly depoliticized (Volčič, 2007; Luthar, Pušnik, 2010).

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1. The notion of Ostalgia or *Ostalgie* is a coinage that refers to the post-DDR nostalgia for the period of communism before the reunification of Germany in 1990. In the past several decades, it has also been used as an umbrella term for the variety of contextually specific memory practices referring to the socialist period across formerly socialist states in Europe (cf. Velikonja 2009, Bošković 2013, Kolanović 2018).
2. SFRY, the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, existed from 1945 until the violent breakup, followed by a series of wars during the 1990s.

As several authors point out, Yugo-nostalgia is usually framed by a set of dichotomies (Hofman, 2015; Petrov, 2016). In the first place, with regards to the dominant binary framework of conflicting memories concerning the remembrance of Yugoslavia's socialist past, Yugo-nostalgia is seen as an idealization of the former country and its ideology (Luthar, Pušnik 2010; Galijaš 2015). Thereby, it stands in direct opposition to historical revisionism based on the ethno-nationally erasure of Yugoslavia's past.[3] The binary framework is also perceptible in the dominant approaches to the concept. As Ana Hofman notes, in such approaches, Yugo-nostalgia is seen as either a derogatory and trivial practice or a more productive political memory practice and sociocultural phenomenon (2015: 146).

Similarly, according to Tanja Petrović, there are three dominant ways in which the concept of Yugo-nostalgia is challenged and discredited (2012: 124-138). The first one is related to the international, Europe-wide context, in which the socialist past is viewed as highly problematic for the future democratization of the newly formed states. The second type of narrative comes from within the national perspectives and the local political elites. Yugoslavia's (socialist) past is seen as politically threatening and unethical, given the 1990s violent breakup of the country. Finally, the third type focuses exclusively on the trivial and consumerist, i.e., de-politicized, aspect of Yugo-nostalgia. It refers to the many objects and symbols of the popular and everyday culture of the time – in both consumption and production practices – which excludes political and ideological aspects and precludes any possibility of a productive and emancipatory aspect.

Responding to such approaches, Petrović criticizes the one-dimensional understanding of Yugo-nostalgia and reminds us to pay closer attention to the heterogeneity of the narratives and practices designated as (Yugo-)nostalgic and calls for their proper contextualization. Indeed, by seeing only a one-sided and simplified nature of (Yugo-)nostalgia, such accounts also fail to take into consideration the much more complex, multilayered or polysemous nature of nostalgia (Mihelj, 2017: 240). They usually fail to recognize the ambiguities, antagonisms, contradictions, and paradoxes in the articulations that deal with the material of the past. Moreover, it is worth noting that Yugo-nostalgia does not necessarily refer to the sentimental emotional state of individuals or groups longing to restore the Yugoslav state or the past in its totality. Instead, Yugo-nostalgic memory relates mainly to the period's mundane and ordinary aspects of life, to Yugoslavia's everyday and popular culture, and to the personal and collective experiences and sensations shared by different social groups.

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[3] For other relevant typologies and modes of remembering the Yugoslav socialist past in the post-Yugoslav and post-socialist mnemonic context, see Scribner, 2003; Velikonja, 2017; Kolanović, 2018.

The field of popular culture is of key importance here. First, Yugoslavia's (popular) culture, which was created trans- or supranationally, represents one of the main identity markers and highlights of socialist Yugoslavia (Volčič, 2007: 23). Similarly, its content and narratives in post-Yugoslav memory also confirm that it outlived the Yugoslav state and affects different groups and generations in the present (cf. Perković 2011; Perica, Velikonja 2012; Petrov 2016). The representations of different features and motives belonging to Yugoslavia's past, both unofficial and official state symbols, as well as cultural references, can thus be found across genres and media – in literary works, films, TV shows, popular music, museum exhibitions, the Internet (cf. Velikonja 2009; Perica, Velikonja 2012; Petrović 2012; Bošković 2013; Petrov 2016; Pogačar 2016). For that reason, consuming popular content from the Yugoslav period or using those symbols in contemporary productions, especially in music or film, does not necessarily rely on the uncritical deployment of the past. Therefore, although many of these narratives and memory representations include a commercial note, it is essential to acknowledge that several modes and potential deployments of the material of the past can co-exist simultaneously, allowing for a more nuanced reading of nostalgia (Petrov, 2017). Finally, as I approach Yugo-nostalgia by examining the articulation of popular and alternative music in the (post-)Yugoslav context, I am particularly interested in the potential of these narratives to intervene in the present issues and to be future-oriented. This also includes viewing (Yugo-)nostalgia *vis a vis* the recent developments in various discourses in cultural studies, especially regarding the retro trends dominating popular culture and popular music.

In this respect, Svetlana Boym's take on nostalgia and her distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia provides a fruitful insight and an excellent departure point regarding the diversity of nostalgic memory practices and of their potential uses (Boym, 2001). It applies both to the post-socialist, i.e., the specific post-Yugoslav context, and to the various articulations of popular culture.[4] Restorative nostalgia is dominantly associated with national memory. It aims to restore the complete image of the past that is fixed and frozen in time. On the other hand, reflective nostalgia relies on the fragments, details, and leftovers of the past. Boym notes that reflective nostalgia "does not follow the single plot, but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones" (xviii). Thus, as a form of nostalgia that also emphasizes uncertainty and underlines the interweaving of individual and collective frameworks and symbols of memory, it often combines irony and critical reflection with longing and affect (50).

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[4] For the direct application of Boym's two categories in the context of Yugo-nostalgia, see Lindstrom, 2005; Beganović, 2012.

The reflective, critical, and open-ended aspect of nostalgia, as suggested by Boym, plays a significant role in the possible and diverse deployments and multilayered narratives and aspects applied to Yugo-nostalgia. It also helps to highlight the emancipatory potentials of the concept, as already stressed in recent studies by different scholars (Palmberger, 2008; Velikonja, 2009; Perica, Velikonja, 2012; Petrović, 2012; Bošković, 2013; Petrov, 2016). Similarly, it suggests a shift in temporal orientation, calling for the constant negotiation between instances of the past and present, and imaginations of the future (Mihelj, 2017: 239-240). In this respect, according to Velikonja, nostalgia is more than a simple idealization of a bygone past; it is always oriented towards the present. It critically engages with ongoing hegemonic narratives and discourses, and potentially serves as a starting impulse for re-thinking alternatives to the *status quo* (Velikonja, 2009: 374-375).

The nostalgic evocation or reconstruction of the past, even if linked to pop-cultural narratives and products exclusively, very often serves to re-negotiate Yugoslavia's socialist past and also potentially challenges dominant memory narratives about the Yugoslav past and its socialist legacy (Pogačar, 2016: 281). The same applies to the intense consumption of Yugoslav pop-cultural products and texts, such as songs, films, design, etc. Also, Petrović sees the need for continuity as one of the key components in negotiating between narratives and issues of the past and present as well as between individual and collective memories (2012: 131). This is particularly relevant given the specific post-Yugoslav/post-war setting since the country's violent breakup impacted many people's everyday lives and biographies. It is even more significant in a political climate in which words like "Yugoslavia" or "Yugoslav" are viewed as highly problematic in both political and everyday life.

Furthermore, by negotiating between two periods, nostalgia also tells us what is missing in the current period compared to the past (Velikonja, 2009). As Keightley and Pickering point out, nostalgia is a composite of lack, loss, and longing (2012: 117). Thus, the reflexive take on the past suggests a re-evaluation of past experiences, achievements, and losses. Additionally, it serves to critically observe various dominant discourses and narratives created in the present. Various motives, symbols, or features of the official and/or cultural productions from the past can be incorporated into different narrative strategies to create multiple meanings and political readings. Thus, irony, parody, and melancholic tonalities are essential to these articulations.

From another perspective, such attempts to criticize the present also open up the potential of (Yugo-)nostalgia to re-think or envision a better future by reflecting on the elements, experiences, or narratives of the past

(Velikonja, 2009). Nostalgia is not exclusively oriented toward the past or the present. As Boym suggests, it can also be prospective, oriented towards the future, or even sideways (2001: XIV). In this respect, just like several other authors, Mitja Velikonja underlines the utopian aspect and the re-application of past elements and materials to imagine a better future as the most substantial emancipatory potential of (Yugo-)nostalgia (2009: 390-395). Moreover, according to Velikonja, "nostalgia always refers to the period that had a future, looked forward and dreamed about better times." (2014: 72). In the case of the Yugoslav and post-socialist case, the lived experiences of supranational and inter-ethnic solidarity and unity among several generations of Yugoslavs, sharing the overall ideological and cultural orientation towards a better future, and its numerous articulations in very powerful cultural and artistic scenes, as well as Yugoslav socialist legacies, not only serve as an image of a better and happier past. They also serve as material for various nostalgic and memorial re-readings and re-applications in the negotiation and the imagination of the future.

In other words, the retro-utopian dimension of Yugo-nostalgia can be perceived by evoking, tracing, and mapping optimistic and future-oriented promises, narratives, and practices. This furthermore includes reflecting on failures and non-accomplished potentials of Yugoslavia's socialist past. Applied to the present-day post-Yugoslav setting, they are re-actualized and thus usable for new potential frameworks of (collective or individual) identities in the present and future. Thus, as literary critic and writer Dinko Kreho notes, this type of Yugo-nostalgia should primarily be viewed as nostalgia for the future and, consequently, as a future of and *within* Yugo-nostalgia.[5] Kreho's point of view refers directly to Mark Fisher's reflection on nostalgia for non-materialized and potential futures from the past that are haunting us in the present (2014: 27). It can be viewed as a type of Yugo-nostalgic futurism that is confronting the loss of futurity in the post-socialist hegemonic discourse, and equally opposes the dominant ethno-nationalistic discourses that exclude the Yugoslav socialist and supranational paradigm.

At the same time, the utopian and future-oriented perspective of Yugo-nostalgia also addresses the negotiation of the notion of Yugo-futurism, which can virtually be seen as the complementary concept of Yugo-nostalgia or as one of its potential deployments and enactments. Yugo-futurism has been used informally as a relatively new term, mainly in pop-cultural and artistic discourses across the post-Yugoslav space. It can be read as an alternative to the highly contested Yugo-nostalgia, as it opposes the affective component that is integral and crucial to the notion

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5. http://proletter.me/portfolio/jugonostalgija-za-buducnoscu/ (last accessed: 07.07.2020)

of nostalgia.[6] This aspect is mainly emphasized by the younger generations who have no first-hand memories of the socialist period, or it can be directed against the dominant post-Yugoslav ethno-nationalist paradigm, insisting on cultural cooperation and newly established ties but also leaving the space open for further and future readings of the post-Yugoslav and post-socialist space (Majstorović, 2013: 148-150).[7] Similarly, Velikonja also points to a significant number of various creative manifestations and articulations in design, visual arts, music, and multimedia production, what he also terms "neostalgia", i.e., new nostalgia. Again, this is primarily widespread among the younger, post-Yugoslav generations, and it foregrounds parody, irony, and the creative re-contextualization of the essentially official symbols of the past period (2009: 385-388).

However, what is meant by the retro-utopian and Yugo-futurist aspect of Yugo-nostalgia is by no means leaning on the ready-made material from the past. Instead, this primarily implies the critical self-reflection and re-evaluation of the past while questioning its possible re-actualization in the present or future. In other words, even in its orientation toward the future, it relies heavily on the reflexive take on Yugoslavia's ideological, cultural, and artistic heritage and numerous potentials and discontinuities. Therefore, regarding the potential negotiation of these terms, Yugo-nostalgia and Yugo-futurism, I propose to view both notions as complementary. This also implies embracing Yugo-nostalgia *as* Yugo-futurism and Yugo-futurism *through* Yugo-nostalgia, stressing the capacity of both terms to be read and deployed in the future.

Therefore, in the following analysis, I will look into the music of the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav periods in order to highlight the negotiations between the (Yugo-)nostalgic tonalities and the imagination of (Yugo-) futurism in the post-Yugoslav context. As a soft memory material, music is a significant trigger of affective memory and nostalgic evocation. It also lies at the heart of many mnemonic narratives, discourses, and reflections. In this respect, I will first outline the significance and ambiguities of Yugoslav pop-rock music, particularly in the context of the New Wave scene of the 1980s, but also in the light of contemporary practices and trends of retro and nostalgic re-visiting.[8]

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[6] One of the recent issues of the renowned Slovenian journal for theater and performative arts, "Maska" is also dedicated to the notion of Yugo-futurism and Yugo-futurist art. https://maska.si/revija/jufu-2/ (last accessed: 05.10.2023)

[7] In this sense, it is also similar to the "Yugosphere", a concept coined by British journalist and researcher Tim Judah, as another alternative to Yugo-nostalgia, and which relies on the creative and economic exchange and cooperation among various subjects between formerly Yugoslav states (cf. Petrović, 2012).

[8] Although I am fully aware of the generic and regional diversity of the musical production in the Yugoslav period, by using the term (Yugoslav) popular music, I primarily refer to Yugoslav pop-rock, i.e., YU-Rock, the musical production that existed between the 1960s and early 1990s. I will highlight the so-called New Wave (Novi Val, or Novi Talas) scene that emerged at the beginning of the 1980s and was one of the more creative alternative/subcultural and state-wide recognized de-centralized musical scenes.

In the last section, I will examine the music production of one of the key representative bands of the YU-Rock and Yugoslav New Wave scene, *Disciplina Kičme/Disciplin A Kitschme ("Backbone Discipline")*. Instead of a reception analysis or an in-depth textual analysis of the band's lyrics, the focus is on highlighting some key features and strategies in which elements of the past and futurism are negotiated and applied during the different phases of the band's career, especially in the post-Yugoslav period. As *DAK* certainly figures as one of the emblematic (post-)Yugoslav bands, belonging to both popular and alternative scenes, the examination of (Yugo-)nostalgic and (Yugo-)futuristic elements seems crucial *vis a vis* dominant retro trends in the context of popular musical culture.

Post-Yugoslav re(tro)-approaching of Yugoslav Rock

As Ana Hofman points out, music-related studies are ranked highly in post-Yugoslav memory politics, given the variety of genres. Also, they are most frequently mentioned in different accounts of Yugo-nostalgia (2015: 147).[9] Furthermore, because of its high presence in other media as well, Yugoslav music remains a vital element in addressing the issues of post-Yugoslav memory politics, culture, identity, and nostalgia use.[10] However, as several authors already stress, this phenomenon and the high interest in Yugoslav popular music does not necessarily have to be taken as the nostalgic idealization and commercialization reserved only to the post-Yugoslav context (Velikonja, 2014; Hofman 2015; Petrov, 2016, 2017). Rather, these accounts largely resemble the contemporary examinations and retrospective interest in global trends and dynamics in popular and subcultural domains.

These practices are also set in dialogue and follow the overall retro trends as emblematic features of the popular and subcultural scenes in contemporary music culture. They highlight self-celebration through various acts and practices of re-branding and recycling the old (cf. Reynolds, 2011; Gueston, Le Guern, 2014: 73). This is even more obvious regarding the set of cultural practices and events that Reynolds attributes to the notion of "retromania", such as the re-vivals, re-issues, re-makes, and re-enactments through a plethora of re-prints of old musical products (2011: XI). These practices include the "YU-Rock" and "Balkan-Beat" parties and festivals across and beyond the post-Yugoslav space, CD re-issues, tribute bands, and tribute recordings, as well as re-appearances of the most significant or even more innovative Yugoslav bands in their original formation, but only for honorary tours of the biggest stages in former Yugoslav states, which are also usually labeled as explicit signs of commercial and de-politicized Yugo-nostalgia (Baker, 2010; Perković, 2011, Volčič 2007).[11]

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[9] Several recent studies might illustrate various focal points, mostly regarding different music genres and examinations in different environments (cf. Petrović 2012; Velikonja 2014; Hofman 2016, Petrov 2016; Jovanović 2017).

[10] This is also noticeable in a plethora of memory narratives that either thematize or include Yugoslav popular music across media - mostly documentary and feature movies, TV programs, biographies, and autobiographies of specific musicians or bands throughout past decades (cf. Kolanović 2018; Milivojević 2022).

YU-Rock refers to the rock music produced in Yugoslavia from the early 1960s until the early 1990s. It primarily followed the same trends and developments as in the USA and Great Britain. Thus, from the mid-1970s onward, the local Yugoslav rock bands, more original and unique, abandoned the practice of covering the rock standards and appropriated various genres of "Western" pop-rock music, often combined with local motives. In this way, they gradually formed a broader all-Yugoslav audience and created the pan-Yugoslav rock and alternative scene. The most popular bands in the period came from different Yugoslav republics – *Bijelo Dugme, Smak, Korni Grupa, Leb i Sol, YU Grupa, Pop mašina, Time, Buldožer, Riblja Čorba,* etc. That primarily pointed to the phenomenon's overall significance and popularity. On the other hand, it also followed and confirmed the dominant cultural and ideological model of supranationalism and territorial de-centralization applied to Yugoslav socialism (cf. Tomc, 2003; Janjatović, 2007; Ivačković, 2013).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Yugoslav rock scene was heavily influenced by the radical shift in musical articulation shift resulting from Punk and post-punk, i.e., new wave subcultural music production.[12] This phenomenon first highlighted the change in the musical/melodic aspect, but it also brought an innovative approach to the musical production, its visual identity, performance, and "do-it-yourself" design and overall approach. Above all, the most significant and most noticeable was a clear cut in the lyrics. For the first time, they included an explicit and more profound social critique and self-reflexivity in the 1980s (cf. Reinkowski 2014).

As several authors have pointed out, rock and popular music played a significant and ambivalent cultural and political role in Yugoslavia (cf. Tomc, 2003; Perica, Velikonja, 2012; Petrov, 2016; Muršič, 2017). On the one hand, it was a state-sponsored or state-tolerated cultural phenomenon. As such, it served as an explicit manifestation of equal participation in production and consumption within the larger field of popular culture for all Yugoslav nations and ethnic groups (almost) equally, shedding light on bands and band members from every part of the country. More significantly, it also served as the medium for the transgenerational transfer of the official socialist ideology and partisan mythology (Perica, Velikonja, 2012: 55-63). Namely, various bands and performers recorded and performed numerous tracks with socialist and partisan topics, including motifs from official history narratives or covering traditional songs. Also, they were invited to and took part in various official events organized by the communist party (*ibid.*). On the other hand, as primarily a youth-oriented culture, rock music also became a dominant medium to express the interests of various social groups and identities and to negotiate social issues. Thus, as Muršič notes, as much as it represented an important part of the system, it also served as an island for experimentation and confrontation with the system (2017: 10).

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[11] For the same practices in different genres of Yugoslav popular music, see Baker, 2010; Petrov, 2016.

[12] The New Wave (*Novi Val* or *Novi Talas* as termed in the Yugoslav context) style in rock music is not exclusively Yugoslav but a transnational phenomenon. It is closely related to youth (sub)cultures, first emerging in the USA and UK. In both contexts, it leads back to the mid-and late 1970s, combining different musical, artistic, and visual modes in production and performance (cf. Reinkowski, 2014).

In a similar respect, highlighting the influence and the significance of this phenomenon, Ante Perković calls Yugoslav pop music – with particular regard to the Rock and alternative scene primarily – the (Yugoslav) "seventh republic" (2011).[13] According to Perković, from the 1960s onward, and especially during the last Yugoslav decade, between Zagreb and Belgrade, Yugoslavia's two most important cultural and administrative centers, an alternative landscape was established. For Perković, this represented a utopian space where diverse nations and traditions were not necessarily viewed as problematic but were rather seen as a comparative advantage. Instead, it should be seen as a pop sphere that developed and spread across the Yugoslav space, parallel to and independent from the official and elitist cultural production. Also, viewed from the post-Yugoslav vantage point, it is clear that it outlived the Yugoslav state and continued to exist, establishing continuity with the past, while also being directed toward the future (21).

Juxtaposing retro- and nostalgic orientation with futurity, openness, and progressiveness – in both content and form – in Yugoslav rock music seems to open up a set of paradoxes and ambiguities. This appears particularly interesting regarding the New Wave scene – taken here in both Yugoslav and transnational contexts – and the period of the 1980s. As a more recent period, the 1980s has served as an emblematic and a dominant point of reference in retro and nostalgia-fueled culture since the early 2000s (Reynolds, 2011). This has been done either by re-visiting and re-discovering bands, songs, and scenes, by reproducing the exact sound of the period by new acts and performers, or even by making ironic intertextual use of existing past features.

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[13] Perković's coinage primarily refers to the six republics within the Socialist Federative Yugoslav State. Also, it serves as an appropriation of Greil Marcus' study on Bob Dylan's "Invisible Republic".

In the Yugoslav context, however, the 1980s were the period directly associated with the New Wave scene that was rapidly growing across the country in all major Yugoslav cities and republics: Slovenia (*Pankrti, Borghesia, Laibach, Lačni Franz*), Croatia (*Prljavo Kazalište, Azra, Film, Haustor, Paraf*), Bosnia (*Zabranjeno Pušenje, Plavi Orkestar*), Serbia (*Šarlo Akrobata, Električni Orgazam, Idoli, Disciplina Kičme, EKV, Partibrejkers, Rambo Amadeus*). Therefore, it is paradoxical at first glance that the future-oriented and forward-looking scene, although showing no signs of retro tonalities or references to earlier periods, is found in a significant number of (Yugo-)nostalgic memory narratives and retro-colored events and productions (cf. Milivojević, 2022). Additionally, many acts associated with the New Wave and the 1980s scene have resurfaced for honorary or anniversary tours, exclusively performing their old repertoire. They have also been featured in CD re-issues and compilations, often retrospectively grouped with mainstream or folk performers not previously associated with the Yugoslav rock scene.

On the other hand, it is because of its symbolic capital that such a high interest in these acts and their re-invention also makes sense. According to Pogačar, Yugoslav pop and rock in the 1980s served as a "formative" genre for many Yugoslavs. Also, in the following period, it was seen as the last common identity platform opposing the nationalist paradigm and even taking explicit antinationalist and anti-war positions during the wars of the 1990s (2016: 293). Furthermore, the resurgence and reproduction of this music and different pop-cultural artifacts conjure up both emotions and sensations from the past. Despite re-contextualization, this phenomenon opens up perspectives for alternative visions oriented both towards the past and future for the younger generations who who did not directly experience the period (Milivojević, Müller-Suleymanova, 2022: 187).

In the last section, I will examine (Yugo-)nostalgia and/as (Yugo-) futurism in the (post-)Yugoslav work of the *Disciplina Kičme*, one of the New Wave-based bands that is still active, and whose relation to the past is different from the previous retro and nostalgic patterns. Instead, through a more reflexive approach, *DAK* attempts to re-negotiate different temporalities by combining elements of various musical genres and by re-visiting the seminal features of the Yugoslav socialist past.

Retro, (Yugo-)nostalgia, (Yugo-)futurism: negotiating (post-)Yugoslav temporalities with *Disciplina Kičme*

The Belgrade-based band *Disciplina Kičme* has undergone several incarnations since the early 1980s, led Dušan Kojić Koja, the band's founder, composer, and primary vocalist and bass guitarist. After the country's breakup, the band remained active under the slightly modified name, *Disciplin A Kitschme*, which has been in use since the mid-1990s. What distinguishes *DAK* as both a typical and an exceptional band of the YU-Rock and Yugoslav New Wave scenes can be detected in its evolutionary trajectory spanning several decades. Its significance lies in its influence and connection to the broader landscape of alternative and popular music in post-Yugoslav region. It is also obvious in the band's musical, lyrical, political, and visual expression.

In this regard, experimentation, originality, and critique of the social mainstream, dominant culture, and official narratives have been critical features since the band's early period in the 1980s. Moreover, those features can also be used to describe the band's more recent phase. *DAK* started in the early 1980s with a formation comprising bass guitar and drums. Although these two instruments have remained present until this day, in the late 1980s and early 1990s the band featured two drummers, a brass section consisting of trumpet and saxophone, as well as incorporating a turntable and sampling. This innovative and distinctive sound revolutionized Yugoslavia's music scene, propelling DAK to significant popularity before the dissolution of the SFRY. (Janjatović, 2007: 62-64; Ivačković, 2013: 351-353).

Addressing the notion of nostalgia and Yugo-nostalgia in the context of *DAK*'s music seems highly problematic to anyone familiar with the band's history and its future-oriented approach and constant efforts to reinvent their music in each phase of their history. Moreover, in numerous interviews, the band's leader, Koja, explicitly opposed the notion of Yugo-nostalgia. This can primarily be interpreted as the rejection of the uncritical longing for the Yugoslav state or official ideology. Furthermore, it also implies an explicit refusal to reproduce and restore the band's sound and repertoire from its earlier years or its peak of popularity in the Yugoslav 1980s, which is mostly the case with many Yugoslavia's New Wave bands. Also, looking into their musical production, one notices the constant negotiation of different temporalities. The band combines nostalgia, retro, and futurism tonalities in its compositions and performances by incorporating various sound and visual elements.

Since its beginnings, *DAK* has integrated different influences as well as new and old music genres, combining rock n' roll, jazz, funk, rhythm n' blues with post-punk, hip-hop, and drum and bass. In different ways and in numerous instances, the band uses irony, parody, and sincere homage, incorporating various musical elements and sequences into their original songs. More prominent examples can be found on several albums from the band's earliest phase. *DAK* establishes intertextual links with their songs to create an ironic distance from the original material. First, it is the case with the song *Pečati* from the band's debut album, which includes a solo sequence on bass guitar playing Yugoslavia's national anthem. Similarly, on the band's third album – the first with brass instruments – the closing tune, *Ne, ne, ne…*, includes a brief sequence in which the trumpet plays the Serbian nationalist classical melody, *Marš na Drinu*. The band plays with political symbols through intertextual links and pastiche in both cases. The first example, wherein the national anthem is played on bass guitar, suggests an ironic distance and represents an explicit subcultural subversion of the official state symbols. However, it also establishes an alternative rock culture connection by referring to Jimi Hendrix's emblematic performance of *Star Spangled Banner* at the Woodstock festival. In the second example, the band revisits the classical melody composed during World War I and belonging to the Serbian nationalist canon, thus explicitly displaying an ironic distance and playing with the nationalist conflicts already present in socialist Yugoslavia.

Negotiating temporalities through the combination of various musical elements and revisiting old material is explicitly embraced as part of the band's constant experimentation. However, the band defies retro elements in re-producing the original sound from the past periods in the way it was used frequently in the early 2000s, as noted by Simon Reynolds or Mark Fisher. Rather, in its treatment of the modern and futuristic music genres in each period – in the late 1980s, the 1990s, and 2000s – *DAK* finds a way to navigate between the new/futuristic and old/nostalgic approaches.

In the 1980s, this approach was explicitly evident in DAK's emblematic experimentation with the newly emerged hip-hop culture and sound, which was highly innovative and unique within the Yugoslav context. The band integrated rapping, sampling, and scratching, which are key elements of hip-hop subculture and music (Christopher, 2019: 49-50). Moreover, it is through rap that Koja created his *alter ego*, the superhero character *Zeleni Zub*, who has also served as one of the pop- and subcultural symbols of the late Yugoslav scene.[14] Furthermore, in numerous songs, music videos, and albums from that period, the band incorporated retro-futuristic references and comparisons inspired by early comic book culture and, more directly, by superheroes such as "Batman," "Mandrake," and "Phantom." Similarly, regarding the sampling used, Roy Christopher also reminds us that "sampling technology allows producers to make new compositions out of old ones, using old outputs as new inputs, like a hacker cobbling together code for a new program or purpose" (*ibid.*). Thus, in some of the band's biggest hit songs from the late 1980s and early 1990s, one finds samples from hip hop futurist band Public Enemy and radio programs from the period, but also old funky tunes, vintage cartoons, and early post-war Yugoslav movies, all combined.

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[14] Koja and his character were included in one of the most popular movies among the younger generation in the last years of socialist Yugoslavia, *Kako je propao rokenrol* (1989).

Drawing upon the minimalistic formation of bass and drums in two post-Yugoslav phases, namely the 1990s and 2000s, the band also combined the two opposite musical genres to explore and negotiate between the future and past. Initially, as a reconstituted band with new members residing in London, a consequence of the Yugoslav War in the 1990s, Koja and DAK revitalized the band's traditional sound. They achieved this by performing and recording a series of both old and new songs, not only by singing them in English but also by embracing futuristic and innovative styles such as drum and bass and rave. However, unlike electronic productions and DJ-based sets, the drum and bass sound on DAK's three albums (*I Think I See Myself on CCTV; Heavy Bass Blues; Refresh Your Senses, Now!*) was played live using classic live rock instruments.

Similarly, even after the band's return to Belgrade, they kept the new name on their following three albums, composed and recorded with the new members. The band also maintained its distinctive heavy bass blues approach. During that phase, however, the band included harmonica and another female vocalist instead of the emblematic brass section of the 1980s. On their most recent albums (*Kada kažeš muzika, na šta tačno misliš, reci mi?; Uf!; and Opet.*), *DAK* re-created its sound by challenging more traditional genres such as rhythm n' blues. Again, this was done mainly by combining elements from the opposite musical genre and by questioning the retro and futuristic approach. The band thus created a drum-and-bass oriented rhythm n' blues sound based on heavy distortion and loud up-tempo sound. But the band also created linearity and coherence in its production and recordings. Their sound is constantly intersected with small audio traces of leftovers and outtakes from the past, with their own performed sessions, and numerous snippets used in sampling, instrumental mistakes, and skips. Those elements helped the band create and underline an ambiguous treatment of temporality. Such a treatment relies on a specific combination and examination of both past and future elements and approaches, as exemplified in the lyrics of the song *Čovek koji ne nosi sat* ("A man who doesn't wear a watch"), from the first album the band released in the 2000s:

Čovek koji ne nosi sat
Dobro zna da poštuje vreme
Kad mu pričaju
Kaže im da mu ne govore
(“A man who doesn’t wear a watch
He knows how to respect time
When they talk to him
He tells them he doesn’t want to know”)[15]

Just as the band adopts a reflexive approach to contemporary retro by mixing various music genres, it is both possible and crucial to explore the negotiations between Yugo-nostalgia and Yugo-futurism. This exploration begins with questioning the assertion that Disciplina Kičme/Disciplin A Kitschme is a Yugoslav band. This statement is not necessarily bold, especially considering that the band’s first widespread hit in the 1980s was a cover of the YU-Rock classic “Čudna šuma” by YU Grupa. What’s more, *DAK* opens the song with female voices over the drums intro: “Najbolja jugoslovenska grupa svih vremena, Disciplina Kičme!” (“The greatest Yugoslav band of all time: Disciplina Kičme!”).[16] The Yugoslav and supranational distinction is most apparent in the band’s initial concept and evolution, also referring 1980s Yugoslavia, via a statement that DAK is also and primarily an emblematic Yugoslav New Wave band.[17]

Yet, as Ljiljana Reinkowski notices, it is also worth keeping in mind that the Yugoslav New Wave, emerging from the grassroots perspective embraced by the younger generation of Yugoslavs and firmly rooted in the official ideology of supranational “brotherhood and unity”, was more than a rock scene. The Yougoslav New Wave also included other art forms, mirroring the country’s social and political developments. It critically addressed those issues through popular culture, challenging the older Yugoslav generations, and disrupted ideological frameworks and official master narratives (2014: 394-395). Thus, Reinkowski contends, the Yugoslav New Wave could also be seen as the new or final Wave of Yugoslavism, representing the final expression of Yugoslav brotherhood and unity, whose potential was left unfulfilled because of the disintegration of the country just a few years later (*ibid.*).

This is evident in the case of *DAK* during the same period. Specifically, in the last few years prior to the dissolution of the Yugoslav state, when the band reached its the peak of popularity in Yugoslavia, it had two members from Belgrade and Zagreb, respectively. This reflected the significance of the Yugoslav New Wave scene in the later period and its integrative role among the Yugoslav youth. Zagreb's band members Jurij Novoselić and Srđan Gulić were previously active members of key New Wave bands in Zagreb, namely *Haustor* and *Film*. In this case, as Reinkowski also argues, the new wave of brotherhood and unity was not exclusively rooted in ethnic/national common characteristics but rather in their transnational and pop-cultural bonding. It therefore represented a voluntary and more inclusive alternative to the official brotherhood and unity among all Yugoslav nations and nationalities (cf. Perica, Velikonja 2012; Wachtel 1998).

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[15] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXJsLNZResI (last accessed: 11.04.2023)
[16] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRGAHn--iQc (last accessed: 11.04.2023)
[17] Similarly, the band’s albums were released by labels from various Yugoslav republics, namely Slovenia and Serbia. Although this was a common practice in the Yugoslav period, in the case of DAK, it was both major and independent labels, which confirms their popular and alternative status.

Furthermore, in the post-Yugoslav period, the dis/continuities in the band's career mirrored the dis/continuities in the supranational ideology of socialist Yugoslavia. These trends also applied to the generation associated with the Yugoslav New Wave and the broader Yugoslav rock music scene. In the case of DAK, with the beginning of the war in Croatia in 1991, the dissolution of Yogoslavia also meant the dissolution of the band.[18] Thus, by explicitly opposing the dominant ethno-nationalist paradigm based on anti-Yugoslav feelings, DAK underscored different perspectives on its Yugoslav identification. First, it is achieved by the deterritorialization of the band and of its past repertoire in London, following Koja's emigration in the 1990s. The notion of deterritorialization does not only imply the physical dislocation of the band, or of the band's members. Rather, it refers to Deleuze and Guattari's concept, in which a particular idea, a cultural or social practice, or a body alters its original context and is recontextualized in a new and different setting. Through deterritorialization, new potentials and possible interpretations, readings, and relationships emerge, thereby influencing the new context (1987). Thus, applied to DAK, the band's first album of the 1990s, *I Think I See Myself on CCTV* (1996), featured almost exclusively new drum and bass versions of the band's old songs from the Yugoslav period, sung in English, and in a later period continued to re-create the sound, even recycling old elements. The same can also be applied to the band's career and history.

Similarly, the band was equally active in the post-Yugoslav space and continuously performed in all former Yugoslav republics. In doing so, it reaffirmed the cultural and geographical ties once challenged by the dissolution of the state and of its vital scenes. Lastly, in the 2010s, the band restored the broken Serb-Croatian ties by including Igor Đeke from Croatia as the new member on harmonica.

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[18] https://zurnal.info/clanak/disciplina-kicme-je-djelovala-u-postavi-bratstva-i-jedinstva/5534 (last accessed: 11.04.2013)

Reflections of the Yugoslav past and elements of nostalgia are also revealed in the band's renewed discography, audio and video productions. The band's lyrics are often quite critical of the hegemonic discourses of the post-socialist transition. They dramatize various phenomena – from capitalist pop-cultural consumerism and social media influence to regional nationalisms. Similarly, DAK rejects the nostalgic ready-made appropriation or the severe retrospective aestheticization of the past in terms of performance, by combining the older material, now presented in a completely new tonality and different generic modes, with their new songs. The band foregrounds the new flexibility inscribed in the reflective take on the past (Boym, 2001). It thus also looks to re-contextualize the same material, which enables the negotiations between different temporalities and cultural symbols.

Such a treatment of the past is illustrated by two music videos in which the band revisits two symbols of the future-oriented imagination of Yugoslav socialism. The two physical sites that can be seen on those videos – buildings located in Belgrade –, serve as unofficial memory sites. Made for the new version of the band's old song, *Do not!*, the video highlights the typical socialist urban landscape and the utopian architecture of socialist Yugoslavia.[19] Although based in London at the time, the band revisits Belgrade in this video meant to illustrate an updated version of the band's first single. The socialist setting thus implies a reflexive take (and continuity) on the socialist and Yugoslav past. Thereby, the band disregards the sharp cut in the band's career and the post-Yugoslav context. The same architecture can also be seen in one of the band's more recent videos, for *Reci ruke u vis!*. This time, however, it is coupled with another building, the Student's Cultural Center (*Studentski Kulturni Centar, SKC*), which served as a critical venue in developing the alternative and new wave cultural scene in Belgrade and Yugoslavia in the 1980s.[20] Associated with the band's sound, The image of this architecture, laden with symbolic meaning and personal experiences, is treated as the leftover and the ruin of the past period. In this respect, it suggests the notion of loss and invites possible alternative readings. Therefore, by reflecting on the elements and sites from the Yugoslav socialist past, the band invites the audience to re-evaluate the bygone and lost ideas and elements and apply them to the apparent or future setting.

Following those examples, *DAK*'s musical treatment of past material indicates that the band does not challenge the retro or nostalgic components. As already mentioned, the band leader's rejection of nostalgia can also serve as an act of distancing from the ongoing dominant meta-discourses on Yugo-nostalgia and its various manifestations in past decades

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[19] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=waFe4uqU7V0 (last accessed: 11.04.2023)
[20] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ue5zTFEGKGs (last accessed: 11.04.2023)

(cf. Petrović, 2012: 147-148). Moreover, both *DAK* and Koja figure as key symbols of the Yugoslav pop-cultural and subcultural scene in the 1980s, and thus also became the subject of numerous (Yugo-)nostalgic narratives and approaches. Similarly, by performing *Disciplina Kičme*'s old songs, although in an entirely new arrangement, and also by producing and recording new music in the post-Yugoslav period with other projects, Koja also intervenes actively as a commentator reflecting on those narratives and the country's overall production. In that respect, such involvement and reflection also belong to the specific and symbolic pop-cultural "Yuniverse," as Martin Pogačar puts it. Re-actualizing that phenomenon in the post-Yugoslav current context expands its range and significance for the future, transgenerationally and transnationally (Pogačar, 2010: 199).

Conclusion

In shedding light on the multilayered and emancipatory potential of (Yugo-)nostalgia, this article sought to challenge the traditional view of nostalgia as a backward-looking sentiment, particularly in its intersection with contemporary politics and popular culture. It thus investigates multiple possibilities of negotiating between Yugo-nostalgia and/or Yugo-futurism, mainly through reflecting on different temporal instances as well as on the critical, creative, and self-reflexive examination of (post-)Yugoslav popular and alternative music. The field of popular culture, Simon Reynolds explains, seems crucial, not only because nostalgia is often used as a pop emotion but also primarily because the notions of retro or retromania, alongside that of nostalgia, are shaping the discourse surrounding popular music, memory, and the utilization of the past. However, as Mitja Velikonja reminds us, although there are visible differences between retro and nostalgia, retro productions should not be taken unconditionally but should be appropriately contextualized (2014: 62-63). Thus, this article contends that the (post-)Yugoslav context significantly contributed to the updating of the two concepts, in negotiating between past and future elements and in applying them to popular culture and music. As one of the leading (post-) Yugoslav bands, *DAK* embraced a "brand-new retro" approach, thus highlighting the confluence of past and future elements and features. These articulations create the opportunity to explore futuristic elements derived from the past. Simultaneously, this deeply reflexive perspective leaves the future ripe for potential re-applications of diverse elements and tonalities from the past, which can influence and re-shape multiple identities. Hence, this approach underscores the capacity of popular music to act as both the catalyst and the arena for potential negotiations between the past and the future, especially within the specific (post-)Yugoslav context, despite and through nostalgic or retro impulses.

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https://zurnal.info/clanak/disciplina-kicme-je-djelovala-u-postavi-bratstva-i-jedinstva/5534
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=waFe4uqU7V0
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ue5zTFEGKGs

Discography:

Disciplina Kičme/Disciplin A Kitschme Discography
Sviđa mi se da ti ne bude prijatno (Helidon, 1983)

Ja imam šarene oči (Dokumentarna, 1985)
Svi za mnom (Helidon, 1986)
Uživo! Najlepši Hitovi! (PGP RTS, 1987)
Dečija pesma (PGP RTS, 1987)
Зелени Зуб na planeti dosade (PGP RTS, 1989)
Nova iznenađenja za nova pokolenja (PGP RTS 1991)
I think I See Myself on CCTV (Babaroga Records, Tom Tom Music, 1996)
Heavy Bass Blues (Babaroga Records, Tom Tom Music, 1998)
Refresh Your Senses, NOW! (Tom Tom Music, 2001)
Kada Kažeš Muzika, Na Šta Tačno Misliš, Reci mi? (PGP RTS, 2007)
Uf! (PGP RTS, 2011)
Opet. (Mascom Records, 2015)

Renégocier l'histoire par la musique ; ou comment la bande originale de *Django Unchained* (2012) permet de reconquérir l'esclavage

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to analyze how the nostalgia behind the choice of tracks on the *Django Unchained* soundtrack renegotiates slavery as it has hitherto been portrayed in American cinema. We propose to study the way in which this soundtrack operates a displacement of the imaginary, enabling the emancipation of this long-anonymous, victimized, coerced slave who is finally freed by the field of possibilities opened up by the cinematic medium.

Keywords: Nostalgia, Music, Original Soundtrack, Fiction, History

Résumé : Cet article vise à analyser la façon dont la nostalgie à l'origine du choix des morceaux composant la bande originale de *Django Unchained* permet de renégocier l'esclavage tel qu'il était jusqu'alors dépeint dans le cinéma américain. Nous nous proposons d'étudier la façon dont cette bande originale opère un déplacement des imaginaires, permettant alors l'émancipation de cet esclave longtemps anonyme, victime, contraint qui est enfin affranchi par le champ des possibles qu'ouvre le médium cinématographique.

Mots clés : nostalgie, musique, bande originale, fiction, histoire

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Introduction

Est-il juste de la part d'Ennio Morricone de juger la bande originale de *Django Unchained* « sans cohérence »[1] ? Quentin Tarantino est connu pour la diversité de ses bandes sons, dans lesquelles se rejoignent différents genres, offrant alors un ensemble disparate pouvant donner le tournis. Dans le cas de *Django Unchained*, on dénombre vingt-trois morceaux, allant du rap au *gospel*, de la *pop* à la musique classique – pour n'en citer que quelques-uns – et constituant donc un éventail de références très large. C'est sans doute cette variété qui fait qu'Ennio Morricone relève de façon plutôt péjorative le caractère incohérent des musiques utilisées par le réalisateur, qui ne semblent pas faire sens et qui ne se justifient même pas d'un point de vue chronologique. En effet, le choix de certaines musiques peut paraître en contradiction avec l'action du film située en 1858, prenant pour toile de fond l'esclavage et ayant pour objet l'histoire d'un ancien esclave du nom de Django. Ce dernier s'associe avec le Dr Schultz, un chasseur de primes d'origine allemande qui l'aide à retrouver sa liberté, et ainsi débute la dernière *revenge story* du cinéaste américain : au début du film, le Dr Schultz vient à la rencontre de Django et lui explique qu'il a besoin de lui pour traquer des criminels recherchés ; ils collaborent donc ensemble et parviennent assez tôt à leurs fins. Le Dr Schultz aide ensuite Django à retrouver à sa femme, dont il avait été séparé et qui est toujours esclave à Candyland, l'une des plus grandes plantations du sud des États-Unis.

Il semble bien y avoir un certain anachronisme entre le thème traité, renvoyant à une période bien précise de l'histoire, et la bande originale dans laquelle le réalisateur exploite des morceaux appartenant à tous les genres et à toutes les périodes. Cependant, relever seulement la supposée incohérence de celle-ci en minimise toutes les fonctions et occulte la façon dont cette bande originale parvient à remodeler l'histoire et à amener une lecture différente de l'esclavage. En effet, l'usage de musiques préexistantes, qu'elles soient empruntées à des films plus anciens ou qu'elles appartiennent à la culture populaire, permet de reconsidérer l'esclavage et l'idée que nous en avons, ce qui ne serait pas possible sans l'anachronisme constitutif de cette bande originale. C'est la raison pour laquelle il s'agit maintenant de faire sens de cet anachronisme, de cette supposée incohérence afin de comprendre comment le fait même que cette bande originale soit empreinte de nostalgie est ce qui permet de reconquérir l'esclavage et de retravailler la figure de l'esclave.

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[1] Lyman, Eric J. « Italian Composer Ennio Morricone: I'll Never Work With Tarantino Again ». The Hollywood Reporter, 15 mars 2013, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/italian-composer-morricone-slams-tarantino-428954/.

Il sera d’abord question de la façon dont la bande originale du film ouvre le territoire des possibles, permettant alors d’exorciser l’histoire et d’explorer l’esclavage sous une forme plus libre. Nous verrons ensuite que la souplesse amenée par la bande originale est ce qui permet de retravailler le personnage de l’esclave, de venir commenter ou contredire les représentations existantes et de permettre son émancipation, comme le prouvera notre analyse du personnage de Django. Enfin, nous verrons que lorsqu’il s’agit de la violence, la musique peut légitimer comme dénoncer la cruauté de ce qui se passe à l’écran, se faisant soit complice soit critique, et amenant le spectateur à soutenir Django dans sa quête.

Déterritorialisation et déplacement des imaginaires

Quentin Tarantino est un réalisateur connu pour son champ de références très large. Nommé comme étant un « défenseur de la culture populaire » (Roche, 2019 : 41), il lui rend hommage à travers ses films en mobilisant un éventail de sources, créant alors un ensemble varié et complexe. Dès son premier film, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), le réalisateur puise dans la culture populaire et « recycle »[2] des musiques telles que *Hooked on a Feeling* de Blue Suede ou encore *Stuck in the Middle with You* de Stearlers Wheel, amorçant alors un procédé qui sera récurrent dans chacune de ses productions cinématographiques. *Django Unchained* ne fait pas exception : le film est en effet le nœud de références multiples, du fait de la diversité que propose sa bande originale. On note quelques compositions originales, à savoir *Freedom* d’Anthony Hamilton et Elayna Boynton, *Ancora Qui* d’Elisa Tiffoli, *Unchained* de 2Pac et James Brown, ou encore *100 Black Coffins* de Rick Ross, qui sont noyées parmi une multitude de morceaux préexistants que le réalisateur exploite dans son film. Alors que certaines de ces musiques sont empruntées au genre au western, comme les compositions d’Ennio Morricone ou de Luis Bacalov, d’autres viennent des années 1960/70, et témoignent d’un intérêt personnel de la part du réalisateur :

> *I want to thank all the artists who contributed original songs (a first for me) to the picture. Most of these contributions came out of the artists’ own inspiration and their illustration of the film’s soul is invaluable… In addition to the new original songs I am also using a lot of older recordings on the soundtrack – many of which came from my personal vinyl collection. Instead of having the record companies give me new digitally cleaned up versions of these recordings from the 60s and 70s, I*

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[2] Selon le terme employé par David Roche qui parle d’esthétique du « recyclage » pour décrire le style de Quentin Tarantino, *in* Roche, David. « *Inglourious basterds* »*: de Quentin Tarantino*, Vendémiaire, 2019.

> *wanted to use the vinyl I've been listening to for years – complete with all the pops and cracks. I even kept the sound of the needle being put down on the record. Basically because I wanted people's experience to be the same as mine when they hear this soundtrack for the first time.*[3]

À travers ces quelques lignes, Quentin Tarantino témoigne d'une certaine forme de nostalgie qui le pousse à se tourner vers ses vieux disques et à les exploiter dans ses productions cinématographiques. Bien qu'il utilise des compositions originales, ce qui est pour lui une première comme il le précise d'ailleurs, le réalisateur prend plaisir à réutiliser d'anciens morceaux et à les restituer tels quels dans ses films. Notons d'ailleurs que c'est par la plasticité, autrement dit par la liberté qu'offre le médium filmique que la cohabitation de compositions originales et de morceaux préexistants est possible, puisque celui-ci permet de rassembler au sein d'une seule et même œuvre des compositions distinctes, a priori « sans cohérence », pour reprendre l'expression d'Ennio Morricone. Cette plasticité, Tarantino l'exploite dans l'ensemble de ses films, et l'éclectisme de la bande originale de *Django Unchained* est en fait l'un des éléments constitutifs ce qu'on pourrait appeler « l'esthétique tarantinienne », dans la mesure où le même procédé peut être relevé dans chacune de ses œuvres. Ce penchant nostalgique pose tout de même des questions, particulièrement dans le cas d'une fiction historique telle que *Django Unchained* : comment l'Histoire réagit-elle au contact de l'hybridité de cette bande originale ? Son éclectisme vient-il décrédibiliser l'action du film ? Il est maintenant question d'analyser, non pas les références qui sont mobilisées dans *Django Unchained* mais plutôt la façon dont celles-ci permettent de reconsidérer l'esclavage et participent à sa réécriture.

De la même manière que dans son film précédent, *Inglorious Basterds* (2009), Quentin Tarantino reprend les codes du genre du western dans *Django Unchained*, qui est un genre très codifié, à l'esthétique bien distincte. Dès la scène d'introduction, cet ancrage générique est marqué par l'usage de *Django* de Luis Bacalov qui vient structurer la première scène du film : la police et la couleur font référence au film de Corbucci (1966), et le sous-titre « *and with the Friendly Participation of Franco Nero* », fait référence à son acteur principal, renvoyant donc de façon explicite à l'influence du western spaghetti sur le travail du réalisateur. Cette influence est d'ailleurs visible tout au long du film, d'une part par sa scénographie et son iconographie qui reprennent ses codes génériques, mais également par le nombre de musiques empruntées à des westerns qui ponctuent le film : dans l'une des premières scènes du film, lorsque le Dr Schultz et Django se rendent dans un village voisin avec pour ambition de tuer le *marshall* de celui-ci, on peut entendre *The Braying Mule* d'Ennio Morricone, qui accompagne l'arrivée des deux personnages. Cette même musique reprend juste après que le Dr Schultz a tué le *marshall*, ce qui assoit une certaine cohérence musicale et inscrit bien le film dans la veine des westerns spaghetti, en exploitant les morceaux de l'un de ses compositeurs les plus populaires. Plusieurs exemples peuvent montrer la prédominance des productions italiennes dans le film : quand Django s'entraîne à tirer, on peut entendre *Il Giorini dell'ira* de Rizierto Ortolani, ou encore lorsque Django s'apprête à tuer les frères Brittle et qu'il est accompagné de *La Corsa* de Luis Bacalov, pour n'en citer que quelques-uns. L'influence du genre sur le réalisateur n'est plus à prouver, et celui-ci reconnaît à plusieurs reprises prendre Sergio Leone comme mentor, et parle en termes élogieux de Sergio Corbucci :

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[3] *« 100 Black Coffins »: Rick Ross' Jamie Foxx-Produced « Django Unchained »* Track Drops | HuffPost Entertainment. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/100-black-coffins-rick-ross-jamie-foxx-django_n_2219818. Consulté le 12 avril 2023.

> *Sergio Corbucci is one the greatest Western directors who ever lived, he's one of the greatest action filmmakers who ever lived, he's at the tip top of the action filmmaking game which I actually think is the most cinematic game a director can do.* (Tarantino, Gerald, 2013 : 56)

Dans le même entretien, Quentin Tarantino dit en parlant du film *Django* de Corbucci qu'il est une véritable « révélation ». Il semble toutefois important de noter que, bien qu'il reconnaisse l'influence de ces réalisateurs sur son travail, Tarantino ne cherche pas à copier trait pour trait John Ford, John Wayne ou les réalisateurs phares du genre : le réalisateur sait que le western est un genre qui se doit de vivre avec son temps, il en propose alors sa version :

> *What is exciting about the western genre, probably more than any genre there is, even though they all take place a hundred and something years ago, westerns reflect the decade in which they were made more than musicals, more than period dramas, even more than comedies actually (...) this is my version of the 2000s.* (*Ibid.* : 67)

La dimension historique supposée de *Django Unchained* s'éloigne donc petit à petit, pour laisser plutôt place à ce qui apparait comme étant la réadaptation contemporaine d'un western, revisitée d'un point de vue esthétique et idéologique. Bien qu'on accorde aux réalisateurs un certain degré d'interprétation, leurs choix sont souvent soumis à des considérations éthiques et politiques, c'est d'autant plus vrai lorsqu'il s'agit de l'esclavage. Nous pouvons alors nous interroger sur ce que devient l'esclavage dans cet hommage au western spaghetti, qui s'éloigne a priori de tout souci de vraisemblance et de toute préoccupation historique.

Le western est un genre connu pour permettre « l'aventure », dans le sens où il est synonyme d'exploration, de conquête. Dans le cas présent, il permet, du fait de sa souplesse, de se dégager d'un ancrage référentiel trop marqué afin de revisiter l'Histoire sur un mode plus libre. En plus de constituer un hommage au genre du western, la bande originale contribue également à situer l'action du film sur un mode fictionnel, et de s'éloigner de considérations historiques et factuelles afin de reconsidérer l'Histoire, de la réévaluer d'un point de vue contemporain. Il n'est plus alors question de reconstitution ou de représentation, mais plutôt d'exploration, ou encore d'expérimentation de l'Histoire, ce qui rappelle d'ailleurs Melvyn Stokes qui parlait de *Django Unchained* comme d'une « *fantasy of what might have happened rather than we did* » (Stokes, 2013 : 121). La bande originale du film participe donc en partie à cette « déterritorialisation », puisqu'elle permet ce déplacement des imaginaires et place l'action sur un mode fictionnel ; et sa diversité, qui a pu être critiquée comme étant source d'incohérence, témoigne plutôt de la mise en place, ou encore de la création d'un système qui vise à donner forme à cette reconfiguration de l'Histoire. L'histoire de Django telle qu'elle est présentée dans le film serait bien sûr inconcevable du point de vue d'un esclave dans les années 1860, mais ce qui fait que Django parvient à se venger et à se libérer de ses chaînes, à passer de Django à Django Unchained, est bien le fait que son histoire soit revisitée sur un mode plus libre : c'est donc bien la possibilité de l'élaboration fictionnelle qu'offre le western qui permet cette renégociation de l'esclavage.

Ce passage de la non-fiction à la fiction offre plus de souplesse d'un point de vue narratif et filmique, et permet d'élargir le territoire du film, qui se libère de toute contrainte et s'ouvre alors d'un point de vue métafictionnel. Il ne s'agit donc pas seulement d'intertextualité mais également de la façon dont la bande originale de *Django Unchained* commente des films antérieurs et vient alors réactualiser ce qui constituait jusqu'alors les représentations cinématographiques de l'esclavage. Dans la première partie du film, au moment où les membres du Klux Klux Klan se préparent à attaquer le Dr Schultz et Django, on peut entendre une reprise par Masamichi Amano de *Dies Irae* de Verdi, qui entre en résonance avec la scène de *Birth of a Nation* (1915) de Griffith qui met également en scène les membres du Klux Klux Klan mais cette fois sur *La Chevauchée des Walkyries* de Wagner. Comment l'usage même de *Diae Irae* de Verdi vient-il commenter, voire critiquer le film de Griffith ? Dans *Django Unchained*, les membres du KKK se préparent à attaquer mais sont coupés dans leur élan car les sacs qu'ils ont sur la tête ne leur permettent pas de voir correctement, donnant alors lieu à une scène comique, voire ridicule, désamorçant complètement l'espèce de grandeur censée être mise en place par l'usage de la musique de Verdi. Cette scène semble alors venir répondre à celle du film de Griffith et vient corriger, bien des années après, ce qui est toujours considéré comme étant l'un des films les plus importants du cinéma américain, et par ailleurs l'objet d'une certaine obsession de la part de Tarantino, comme il le souligne lors d'un entretien avec Henry Louis Gates (Gates, 2013 : 56). On comprend donc que *Diae Irae* n'a pas seulement le rôle d'un accompagnement musical, puisque cette musique vient critiquer le Klux Klux Klan et la représentation qu'en faisait Griffith au moyen d'outils métafictionnels. La signification de « *diae irae* » étant « *day of wrath* », l'usage de ce morceau semble annoncer que quelque chose d'important est sur le point d'arriver ; mais l'ironie de cette scène réside dans le fait que leur objectif échoue du fait de leur stupidité, ce qui vient donc déconstruire l'espèce de mythe mis en place par des productions américaines plus anciennes. Quentin Tarantino vient donc d'une certaine façon casser le mythe, prouvant qu'il ne vise pas une reconstitution exacte de l'Histoire – la présence même du KKK en 1858 étant un anachronisme – mais simplement une façon de revisiter celle-ci ainsi que l'histoire du cinéma, puisque son film vient critiquer, répondre à des productions plus anciennes tout en déconstruisant les stéréotypes existants, témoignant alors du pouvoir salutaire de la fiction qui donne la possibilité d'aller interroger l'histoire et de lui répondre.

Émanciper et affranchir la figure de l'esclave

La diversité de la bande originale de *Django Unchained*, qui semble à première vue en contradiction avec l'action du film, permet cependant d'ouvrir le territoire du film et de réécrire l'image de l'esclave jusqu'alors transmise dans le cinéma américain. L'esclave n'est plus défaitiste, affaibli, asexué ; il se réaffirme en tant qu'individu, se libère de ses chaînes, allant même jusqu'à prendre sa revanche sur l'Histoire. Rappelons que les films de Blaxploitation et de l'ère New Jack faisaient de l'esclave une figure bien stéréotypée : en effet, les films appartenant à la Blaxplotation se définissaient en grande partie par un certain excès de sexe et de violence gratuite et donnaient une image assez négative des esclaves, et plus généralement des afro-américains. Les films sortis pendant l'ère New Jack s'éloignent du côté excessif des films des années 1960 mais offrent un point de vue assez pessimiste, voire nihiliste, surtout dominé par la figure du *white savior*, usant alors de ce point de vue paternaliste faisant du blanc le sauveur à qui le mérite de l'égalité raciale reviendrait. Comment l'hybridité de la bande-originale de *Django Unchained*, en plus d'opérer ce déplacement des imaginaires et de permettre la réécriture de l'histoire, permet-elle également de remodeler la figure de l'esclave ? Concentrons-nous maintenant sur ce personnage de l'esclave, jusqu'alors malmené dans le cinéma américain, qui s'affranchit finalement de ses chaînes et retrouve son individualité.

Le médium cinématographique fait qu'il est possible de faire vivre au sein d'un seul et même film un éventail de compositions, qu'elles soient originales ou qu'elles soient empruntées. Le commentaire d'Ennio Morricone laisse penser que la bande-originale de *Django Unchained* n'est qu'un condensé de non-sens, que le choix des musiques par le réalisateur se fait sans considération aucune. Pourtant, l'élan de nostalgie qui pousse ce dernier à réutiliser des musiques préexistantes est ce qui va mener à l'affranchissement de son personnage principal, Django.

Dès la première scène du film, *Django* de Luis Bacalov nous laisse entrevoir une mise en situation :

> *Django, have you always been alone?*
> *Django, have you never loved again?*
> *Love will live on*
> *Life must go on*
> *For you cannot spend your life regretting*
> […]
> *Django, now your love has gone away,*
> *Once you loved her,*
> *Now you've lost her,*
> *But you've lost her forever, Django*
> […]
> *When there are clouds in the skies and they are grey*
> *You may be sad, but remember they'll all soon pass away*
> *Oh Django, after the showers the sun will be shining*

Si l'on s'intéresse aux paroles, au regard de ce que l'on sait du développement du film, on comprend que cette musique fait office de préfiguration narrative et qu'elle permet d'introduire la situation du personnage de Django. On comprend en effet que ce dernier a perdu sa femme « *now you've lost her* », et par le biais de « *You may be sad, but remember they'll soon pass away […] after the showers the sun will be shining* », on peut anticiper la fin du film, étant donné que l'on sait que Django retrouve sa liberté. Le contexte est donc posé, dès le début du film, au moyen de la musique de Bacalov, qui ne témoigne pas seulement de l'influence du film de Corbucci sur le réalisateur mais qui voit à travers les paroles de cette musique une façon d'expliciter, de faciliter la lecture de son film, au vu des clés qui nous sont données.

Intéressons-nous maintenant à *I Got a Name* de Jim Croce, qu'on peut entendre après que Django a rencontré le Dr Schultz :

> *Like the pine trees linin' the windin' road*
> *I've got a name, I've got a name*
> *Like the singin' bird and the croakin' toad*
>
> *I've got a name, I've got a name*
> *And I carry it with me like my daddy did*
> *But I'm livin' the dream that he kept hid*
> […]
> *And I'm gonna go there free*
> *Like the fool I am and I'll always be*

Il faut encore une fois prêter attention aux paroles pour voir ce que l'usage de cette musique fait au personnage de Django, qui juste après sa rencontre avec Dr Schultz semble retrouver son identité, d'une part par la répétition de « *I've got a name* » mais également de façon encore plus explicite par « *and I'm gonna go there free* ». La musique accompagne le développement du personnage qui se fait à l'écran et ajoute une certaine lisibilité à l'image, montrant graduellement que Django (re)devient Django.

Un peu plus loin dans le film, lorsque Django piège les trois négriers, récupère son fusil et retourne chercher Broomhilda à Candyland, on peut entendre *Who Did That To You?* de John Legend. Il s'agit cette fois-ci d'une composition originale, que le réalisateur n'emprunte donc ni à une production précédente ni à la culture populaire, mais qui exprime cependant une forme de nostalgie puisque le compositeur, John Legend, reconnaît s'être imprégné du style *soul* des années 1950 aux États-Unis ; la nostalgie étant ici une sorte de moteur[4]. Les paroles ne se contentent pas d'accompagner ce qui se passe à l'écran, elles vont même au-delà, informant alors le spectateur et laissant comprendre qu'il s'agit d'un moment essentiel du film, guidant alors jusqu'à son paroxysme :

> *Now I am not afraid to do the Lord's work*
> *You say vengeance is his but Imma do it first*
> *I'm gonna handle my business in the name of the Law, mmh*
> […]
> *You better call the police*
> *Call the coroner*
> *Call up your priest*
> *Have them warm ya*
> *Won't be no peace*
> *When I'll find that fool*
> *Who did that to you*

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[4] Talisha. *Unraveling the Mystery: "Who Did That to You" by John Legend in the Django Unchained Soundtrack* – HollyWoodCelebGossips.Com. 5 septembre 2023, https://hollywoodcelebgossips.com/unraveling-the-mystery-who-did-that-to-you-by-john-legend-in-the-django-unchained-soundtrack/.

Cette approche nostalgique qui pousse le réalisateur à se tourner vers des musiques préexistantes ou à s'en inspirer va au-delà d'une simple appréciation personnelle de la part de ce dernier, et constitue également une façon de suivre le développement de Django, de souligner son individualité et de l'accompagner dans sa quête de revanche. La dernière musique, *Triniti : Titoli* d'Annibale E I Cantori Moderni, amène le dénouement du film et intervient comme une sorte de conclusion :

> *He's the guy who's the talk of the town*
> *With the restless gun*
> *Don't you bother to fool him around*
> *Keeps the varmints on the run, boy*
> *Keep the varmints on the run*
> *You may think he's a sleepy-type guy*
> *Always takes his time*
> *Soon I know you'll be changing your mind*
> *When you've seen him use a gun, boy*
> *When you've seen him use a gun*
> *He's the top of the West*
> *Always cool, he's the best*
> *He keeps alive with his Colt 45*

Cette chanson, qui vient clore le film, permet également d'amener une conclusion au processus entamé par les musiques précédentes qui laissaient se dessiner l'individualité de Django : ce dernier est maintenant libre, et se trouve même célébré dans les paroles de cette chanson : « *he's the top of the West* », « *he's the best* ». La musique se trouve donc avoir une valeur réhabilitative, puisqu'elle annonce et soutient l'affranchissement de Django, qui ne vient pas sans conséquence pour celui qui incarne la figure archétypale du *white savoir* dans le film, à savoir le Dr Schultz. Le Dr Schultz tient dès le début du film le rôle de celui qui vient libérer Django, venant à sa rencontre et l'emmenant avec lui dans sa quête pour retrouver les frères Brittle. Alors que Django retrouve petit à petit sa liberté, le Dr Schultz se fait finalement tuer à Candyland, venant alors contredire cette espèce de mythe du *white savior* perpétré dans de nombreux films Hollywoodiens. On assiste donc à la mise à mort du *white savior* qui est soutenue par les choix filmiques en place, puisque la musique délaisse petit à petit le Dr Schultz pour se concentrer sur Django et l'accompagner dans sa quête de libération.

Au début du film, la musique semble s'organiser autour du Dr Schultz, qui devient alors une sorte de repère et point de structure pour la bande originale du film. La musique est d'abord coordonnée aux actions du Dr Schultz, comme c'est le cas lorsque que ce dernier se donne pour mission de tuer le *marshall* : la musique commence quand il se met en marche et s'arrête quand il descend du cheval, rentre dans l'auberge et s'adresse au tavernier. *The Braying Mule* reprend ensuite quand le *marshall* a été tué et suit le personnage du Dr Schultz autour duquel semble se construire l'action ; cette idée étant renforcée par le fait qu'il soit le seul dans cette scène ayant une idée de ce qui se passe. Une fois le *marshall* tué, dès que le Dr Schultz finit sa phrase, *His Name is King* (qui est une reprise par Rick Ross, John Legend, Anthony Hamilton et Elayna Boyton d'une musique de Luis Bacalov) commence :

> *His name was King*
> *He had a horse*
> *Along the countryside*
> *I saw him ride*
> *He had a gun*
> *I knew him well*
> *Oh, I heard him singing*
> *I knew he loved someone*

Les paroles de la musique semblent faire écho au personnage du Dr King Schultz, dont le prénom entre en résonance avec le premier vers « *his name was King* ». Cette musique laisse penser que l'action du film s'organise autour du personnage du Dr Schultz, puisque ce dernier semble être celui qui vient libérer Django et que la musique prend comme repère. Cependant, petit à petit, la musique ne fonctionne plus en tandem avec le Dr Schultz mais bien avec le personnage de Django, comme le prouve *Freedom* d'Anthony Hamilton et d'Elayna Boyton que l'on entend quand Django retrouve les frères Brittle. En plus d'expliciter l'objectif de Django, « *looking for freedom* », la musique permet de recentrer l'attention sur Django, qui se devient son nouveau repère. Cette idée est soutenue par la scène qui vient juste après, dans laquelle Django s'apprête à tuer les frères Brittle, accompagné par *La Corsa* de Luis Bacalov : cette fois-ci, la musique prend bien pour repère le personnage de Django, qui est mis en avant par le plan en contre-plongée et nous montre l'une des premières scènes du film dans laquelle Django prend le dessus et commence à prendre sa revanche. Jusqu'à la fin du film, la musique délaisse donc le personnage du Dr Schultz pour se concentrer sur celui de Django, comme on peut l'observer à plusieurs reprises : par exemple, lorsqu'on entend *I Got a Name*, la caméra se concentre sur Django et il apparaît clairement comme le repère de la structure filmique, d'autant plus qu'il sera présenté ensuite comme « Django Freeman » par le Dr Schultz lors de leur arrivée à Candyland. Les musiques encadrent donc les actions de Django, comme c'est le cas lorsque celui-ci s'entraîne au tir et qu'on peut entendre *Il Giorini dell'Ira* de Rizierto Ortolani ; ou alors lorsqu'il est accompagné par *Nicaragua* de Jerry Goldsmith jusqu'à Candyland. Django prend ses fonctions de personnage principal et le personnage du Dr Schultz apparaît moins, jusqu'à être finalement assassiné : le *white savior* disparait alors et la libération de Django est entièrement entre ses mains ; la musique vient donc soutenir son émancipation, comme on l'entend à travers *Freedom* de Richie Havens, *There Ain't No Grave* de Johnny Cash ou *Who Did That to You* de John Legend, et ce jusqu'à la scène finale dans laquelle *Trinito : Titoli* d'Annibale E I Cantori Moderni entre en résonance avec *His Name is King*, puisque cette fois c'est bien le personnage de Django qui est mis à l'honneur et non plus celui du Dr Schultz.

La musique se fait donc émancipatrice ; puisqu'elle permet de renégocier le personnage de Django et d'en faire le personnage principal du film, mettant alors de côté la figure du *white savior* et venant contredire le mythe perpétré par le cinéma américain. La musique, à travers ses paroles et la façon dont elle accompagne le développement de Django tout au long du film, lui offre la possibilité de se libérer de ses chaînes et de réaffirmer son individualité ; ce qui permet de reconquérir le personnage de l'esclave jusqu'alors diminué au grand écran. Ce qui apparaît donc à première vue comme un anachronisme est finalement ce qui permet cette réécriture, cette réévaluation du personnage de l'esclave et permet à Django de prendre sa revanche sur l'Histoire.

Légitimer et dénoncer par le biais de la musique

Dans *Django Unchained*, la violence est atmosphérique : elle apparaît à l'écran de façon graphique et est l'un des points de tension majeurs du film, ayant d'ailleurs fait l'objet de critiques à sa sortie. Il a été reproché au film de magnifier la violence, de pousser son esthétisation à l'excès, occultant alors tout l'arrière-plan politique du film. Ce qui a été interprété comme un déchaînement de violence gratuite est dans la plupart des cas accompagné de musiques, qu'elles soient des compositions originales ou des emprunts à des morceaux préexistants. Se pose alors la question de l'effet qu'ont ces musiques sur la violence telle qu'elle est présentée à l'écran : vient-elle dénoncer ou exalter celle-ci ?

Il semble nécessaire de distinguer plusieurs types de violence : bien qu'elle soit omniprésente dans le film, les scènes étant considérées comme particulièrement violentes engagent différentes interprétations et ne peuvent être appréhendées de la même façon. Nous distinguerons donc la violence réhabilitative, voire cathartique, qui est celle par laquelle se fait la libération de Django ; et un autre type de violence, qui correspond cette fois à celle se voulant représentative des horreurs de l'esclavage, censée amorcé sa dénonciation. Lorsque la musique accompagne Django dans son processus de revanche cathartique, la musique vient alors souligner les différentes tensions en place, comme c'est le cas lorsqu'on entend *La Corsa* de Luis Bacalov quand il s'apprête à tuer les frères Brittle : la musique amène ici un certain suspens, et vient surtout soutenir Django. Plus tard dans le film, lorsque le Dr Schultz se fait tuer et que la terrible scène du bain de sang commence, on peut entendre *Unchained*, qui se trouve être un mix de *The Big Payback* de James Brown et *Untouchable* de 2Pac, qui donne alors une scène à l'allure très carton-pâte, où la violence prend des traits cartoonesques, la rendant alors appréciable, voire désirable. Ici, la violence a bien une dimension cathartique puisqu'elle intervient lors d'une scène dans laquelle Django a enfin l'occasion de s'opposer aux esclavagistes ; et la musique vient soutenir cette dimension cathartique en montrant que la violence peut être appréciable dans la mesure où elle permet à Django de se libérer de ses chaînes. Le même procédé est mis en place lorsqu'on entend *Too Old to Die Young* de Brother Dege, qui nous montre Django tuer de façon dynamique et rythmée plusieurs personnes, laissant de nouveau le spectateur avec l'impression que la violence est quelque chose de mécanique, une sorte d'artefact modelé pour les besoins esthétiques du film.

Il serait pourtant erroné de dire que la violence est toujours décrédibilisée par la musique ; c'est ici que la distinction entre violence réhabilitative et violence dénonciatrice est à prendre en compte, puisque si l'on s'intéresse aux autres scènes de violence du film, dans lesquelles il est plutôt question de dénoncer la cruauté de l'esclavage, la musique joue un autre rôle : par exemple, lorsque Broomhilda est sortie du four, on peut entendre *Sara's Sister Theme*, une composition empruntée à Ennio Morricone, qui vient amener de façon assez contradictoire une certaine douceur à la dureté de la scène, et qui permet de venir appuyer la violence de la scène en cours par un contraste entre la douceur émanant de la musique de Morricone et les cris de Broomhilda qui viennent prendre le dessus et surprennent par leur puissance. À l'inverse des musiques citées précédemment, qui apportaient plutôt un style très chorégraphié et artificiel à la violence, on comprend par le biais de cette scène que la violence infligée aux esclaves n'est pas montrée de la même façon que la violence « nécessaire » par laquelle Django passe pour arriver à sa libération. Il semble également important de noter que lors de deux scènes particulièrement violentes, à savoir celle du combat de mandingues lors de l'arrivée du Dr Schultz et de Django à Candyland, et lors de la scène dans laquelle D'Artagnan se fait dévorer par des chiens à la demande de Mr Candy, on n'entend pas de musique : on constate en effet l'absence d'accompagnement musical, qui laisse place à des hurlements, ou encore à des bruits produisant un effet fort graphique sur le spectateur, laissant entendre toute la cruauté des actions en cours sans ornements ou fioritures d'aucune sorte. Alors que la musique semble prendre le dessus sur l'action dans les scènes de revanche, on comprend donc qu'elle s'éclipse, ou du moins qu'elle se fait plus discrète, dans les scènes ayant pour but de critiquer la violence de tout un système. La façon dont la musique transforme le message du film est donc à nuancer : bien qu'elle influence la réception de certaines scènes, faisant de la violence un spectacle agréable du fait de son aspect factice, très orchestrée ; elle peut aussi la souligner, voire l'exacerber. C'est aussi de cette façon que la musique montre encore une fois sa capacité à corriger la réalité, à revenir sur l'Histoire par le biais de la fiction : elle donne une certaine légitimité à Django quand il a recours à la violence pour retrouver sa liberté, et permet alors de revisiter le passé, et de modeler la réception qu'en a le spectateur, qui est poussé à accepter la violence alors présentée à l'écran. La dimension nostalgique qui transparait dans la bande originale de *Django Unchained* est donc ce qui donne le droit à Django de prendre sa revanche, par un effet d'association entre image filmique et musique. Le jeu qui se met en place permet donc de revenir sur le passé et de le reconsidérer au regard de problématiques contemporaines ; faisant du film un objet hybride, pris entre le passé et le présent. Cette idée est illustrée par la façon dont *Django Unchained*, bien que situant son action dans les années 1860, utilise *100 Black Coffins* de Rick Ross, qui est d'ailleurs l'une des rares compositions originales du film. D'un point de vue politique, l'usage même d'une musique appartenant au genre du hip-hop porte certaines implications : le genre du hip-hop est un phénomène culturel moderne, utilisé par les artistes pour dénoncer les injustices sociales et est considéré comme une réponse à l'oppression et au racisme. Puisque le hip-hop est considéré comme une contre-culture, le genre porte en lui certaines associations, et son utilisation va être porteuse de sens, comme c'est le cas dans le film étant donné qu'on entend la musique de Rick Ross juste après que Django a fait tomber Hoot de son cheval et qu'il a répondu à l'un des blancs. La musique marque l'idée d'un soulèvement contre l'autorité :

> *Unless it had to do with mine in the middle of the night*
> *Killers coming for you life, all you wanna do is shine?*
> *I broke off the chains only the realest remain*
> *I see your praying to Jesus, but will that help ease the pain?*
> *Seen a brother get slain for a jar full of change*
> *Yet I post on the block, look like I'm Big Daddy Kane*
> *Is you a cat or a mouse? Keep them rats out the house*
> *A lotta scars on my back, get tattoes all around*
> *Hundred dead bitches, hundred black coffins*
> *Money on his head, bitch, I'm trying to make a fortune*
> *I need a hundred black coffins for a hundred black men*

100 Black Coffins établit une sorte de commentaire politique, d'une part à travers ses paroles mais également par son usage au sein d'une bande-originale aussi éclectique que celle dont il est question ici. Notons que pour la première fois depuis le début de sa carrière au cinéma, Quentin

Tarantino insère dans son film des compositions originales, ce qui soulève une question : quelle est l'incidence de ce choix sur l'ensemble de la bande originale ? Ce morceau semble rappeler que même si Tarantino est empreint de nostalgie et prend plaisir à célébrer et à réinterpréter des morceaux préexistants, le film reste le produit de son contexte de production et l'utilisation de *100 Black Coffins* reflète davantage les préoccupations contemporaines qu'elle ne s'insère dans l'action du film. En effet, la dimension politique qu'on accorde au genre du hip-hop fait que son usage dans le *Django Unchained* vient souligner une espèce de continuité entre les violences infligées aux esclaves et les violences auxquelles sont sujet les afro-américains de nos jours. Les musiques qui composent la bande originale du film viennent donc à la fois réactualiser le passé, le remodeler et permettre une certaine reconfiguration de l'histoire, tout en permettant également de commenter le présent, de trouver une résonnance dans un contexte de production précis.

Conclusion

C'est finalement par la nostalgie qui pousse Quentin Tarantino à exploiter d'anciens morceaux, à fouiller dans la culture populaire et dans des productions cinématographiques plus anciennes que Django est enfin libre. Par ce remodelage de l'Histoire, tout est maintenant possible et Django peut enfin mettre fin aux stéréotypes véhiculés jusqu'alors dans le cinéma américain. La bande originale du film, si disparate qu'elle soit, prouve que l'art peut venir corriger l'histoire et se permettre ce que seule la fiction peut se permettre, à savoir l'expérimentation de ce qui était jusqu'alors inenvisageable.

L'étude de la façon dont la musique permet de renégocier l'Histoire mériterait d'être élargie à *Inglorious Basterds*, film sorti en 2009 dont la bande originale pourrait facilement être l'objet d'une étude contrastive avec celle de *Django Unchained*, ce qui nous permettrait de déceler les spécificités de l'esthétique tarantinienne.

Margaux Collin est en troisième année de Doctorat à l'Université de Reims, où elle enseigne également. Sous la direction de Christine Chollier, elle travaille sur le traitement de l'esclavage dans les adaptations cinématographiques produites pendant la présidence d'Obama, à savoir *Django Unchained* de Quentin Tarantino, *12 Years a Slave* de Steve McQueen et *Birth of a Nation* de Nate Parker. Elle s'est également intéressée aux enjeux de l'adaptation cinématographique en produisant une étude comparative de *Mandigo* (Fleisher, 1975) et *12 Years a Slave* (McQueen, 2013).

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