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# The Reflective Age: Nostalgia at the End of History

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# THE REFLECTIVE AGE: NOSTALGIA AT THE END OF HISTORY

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

THE REFLECTIVE AGE: NOSTALGIA AT THE END OF HISTORY

This project investigates the ways in which nostalgic American media of the last decade reflects the sociopolitical conditions of the end of history. It begins with the assertion that the end of history represents a confounded, contradictory moment in which large-scale political change is relatively scarce, and belief in a progressive future has largely been abandoned, while cultural change has also accelerated at a pace never before seen—spurred on, in particular, by the constant return of dead styles and dormant IP. In other words, it seems as if nothing is changing and everything is changing simultaneously. The recent boom in nostalgic media, I contend, is a symptom of this condition, so affected by the cultural forces that produced it that the nostalgia we see today is unlike what has come before. Nostalgia in this period is often premised on a process of hyperaestheticization, which substitutes mediated visions of the past for history, subsequently encouraging a breakdown between text and referent—the '80s, in this formulation, was defined more by John Hughes, neon, and synthesizers than Reagan and austerity. These texts, in other words, often rely on an elevation of mediated reference as a means of reconstructing the past, wherein understanding of the past is merely a matter of recognizing its mediated artifacts. This nostalgic paradigm also reflects the conditions of the end of history in its cruelly optimistic compulsion to repeat, particularly in the form of reboots and revivals, in a world where everything always already repeats. Nostalgia in this period promotes the idea of reflecting on and reconnecting with the past, often as a means of recovering what has been lost, but does so in superficial ways that ultimately result in misrecognition and further alienation from history. Nostalgic media, in this way, exacerbates the fraught, confounding conditions of the end of history. Ernest Cline's 2011 novel *Ready Player One* and its 2020 sequel *Ready Player Two*, for instance, reveal the ways in which the end of history's abandonment of a progressive teleology has encouraged the notion that the past is the only viable refuge from the horrors of the present, while, at the same time, the period's emphasis on mediated pasts leads nostalgic subjects to not only misrecognize the past into which they wish to flee, but

also the circumstances that led to this point. The hyper-referentiality of the Netflix series *Stranger Things* is a perfect example of the aesthetic logic of this paradigm, with its hollowed allusions to media replacing a deeper engagement with the contours of the historical period it purports to capture. *Twin Peaks: The Return*, the 2017 revival of the celebrated series, provides a profound critique of the ways in which televisual reboots and revivals seek (and inevitably fail) to symbolically repair the problems of the present by returning to, and revising, the crises of the past.

KEYWORDS: Nostalgia, American Culture, Film, Literature, Television

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# INTRODUCTION

This project investigates how nostalgic American media of the last decade reflects the sociopolitical conditions of the end of history. It begins with the assertion that the end of history, first coined by Francis Fukuyama in 1989 to describe the triumph of liberal democracy following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the fall of communism, has, in the years since, not only become the guiding logic of much of mainstream American politics, but also heralded a confounded, contradictory moment in which large-scale political change is relatively scarce, and belief in a progressive future has largely been abandoned, while cultural change has also accelerated at a pace never before seen—encouraged, in particular, by the constant return of dead styles and dormant IP. In other words, the end of history promotes the feeling that simultaneously nothing is changing and everything is changing. In the midst of this paradoxical sense of constant flux and grinding stagnation produced by forty years of neoliberalism, spurred on by the pervasive notion that there is no alternative to the present's malaise, the past is positioned as the only viable refuge.

The recent boom in nostalgic media is therefore a symptom, I contend, of the conditions of the end of history, so affected by the cultural forces that produced it that the nostalgia we see today is historically unique. Conventionally defined by a longing for a lost time and/or space, nostalgia at the end of history takes on new dimensions, particularly as a result of cultural, social, and technological developments of the last

twenty years. Instead of longing and loss, nostalgia in this period is often premised on a process of hyperaestheticization, which substitutes mediated visions of the past for history, subsequently encouraging a breakdown between text and referent and a loss of historical situatedness. Nostalgic works, in other words, often rely on an elevation of mediated reference as a means of reconstructing the past, wherein understanding the past is merely a matter of recognizing its styles and artifacts. The longing produced in these texts can therefore be abated through engagement with media: if you "miss" the '80s, you can just throw on a John Hughes movie and be instantly transported. Historical periods are thus flattened into aesthetic paradigms, absent the political and social dimensions that actually shaped them. This brand of nostalgia also reflects the conditions of the end of history in its compulsion to repeat, particularly in the form of reboots and revivals, in a world where everything always already repeats. As Jean Baudrillard remarked, despite the moniker, the post-historical world is actually a time of *endlessne*ss, in which nothing ever really ends and old ideas and artifacts are constantly on the verge of returning. The progressive novelty that characterized much of the twentieth century, in other words, has given way to an era of rampant recycling.

The chapters of this project examine how narratives of the 2010s treat this shifting nature of our relationship to the past, showing, again and again, that the stories we tell about ourselves and our pasts illustrate the particular conditions of the end of history, producing a disoriented culture, trapped in a perpetual present. Each of the texts I discuss illustrates significant aspects of this nostalgic paradigm, from the hyperaestheticization

of the past and the subsequent elevation of reference and recognition in identity formation to the fraught desire to revise and repeat in the face of decline. Together, they describe a cultural moment that is defined by these forces, illuminating the particular conditions of what I have termed "the reflective age."

Chapter One describes the contours of the reflective age and end of history nostalgia, arguing that the period's emphasis on style, mediation, and repetition, instigated in part by the neoliberal disavowal of social politics and abandonment of progressive teleology, marks a distinct shift in the history of the nostalgia. End of history nostalgia, I argue, has become divorced from its conceptual roots, replacing perpetual, unresolvable longing for bygone experience with aesthetic infatuation that, as a result of technological advancements such as streaming, can easily be satisfied. Further, the dissolution of historical thinking that Fredric Jameson identified as a fundamental feature of late capitalism has only increased in this period, with aesthetics commonly replacing social and political reality as a synecdoche for an era. These shifts are due in part to the post-historical abandonment of progressive teleology and futurity in favor of short-term profits, incrementalism, marketization, and, in many cases, outright regression. The chapter concludes with a reading of the Netflix miniseries *Maniac*, whose temporally-chaotic setting highlights the conditions produced by the reflective age, which, like a hall of mirrors, leaves one trapped within a disorienting series of reflections, refractions, and misdirections.

Chapter Two analyzes Ernest Cline's 2011 novel *Ready Player One* and its 2020

sequel *Ready Player Two,* arguing that the novels reveal how the end of history's twin pillars of stagnation and decay, coupled with the notion that there is no alternative to the present system, have encouraged the notion that the past is the only viable refuge from the horrors of the present. At the same time, the period's emphasis on mediated pasts leads nostalgic subjects not only to misrecognize the past into which they wish to flee but also the circumstances that led to this point. Cline's novels also illuminate the depths of the post-historical elevation of culture over politics—seen in the novels' emphasis on nostalgia induced through references to mediated artifacts alone—as well as its effects on identity formation resulting from the way that neoliberalism indexes identity to patterns of consumption. Recognition, the novels illustrate, is often no longer a political issue connected to one's fundamental rights, but rather a matter of the social capital accorded to the media that define one's life. Politics, in other words, appear to be a dead end, so social life becomes a matter of pure prestige, and being seen and heard, in this context, is a function of the status of one's taste. Together, I argue, these shifts create a barrier to remedying the posthistorical stagnation and decay from which the nostalgiac flees.

Chapter Three examines the Netflix series *Stranger Things* as the archetype of this paradigm's aesthetic logic, showing how it substitutes hollowed allusions to media for a deeper engagement with the contours of the historical period it purports to capture. The series, I argue, is functionally akin to an empty container into which audiences can project whatever meanings they wish, as it regularly reduces historical elements to

markers of genre or trope that can produce a seemingly endless array of interpretations. In this process of reconstructing the 1980s based on mediated reference, the series also inadvertently reproduces many of the political problems of the period's media, including its regressive racial politics and distrust of government. As a result of these traits, *Stranger Things'* attempts to confront and conquer symbolically the horrors of the past that it hides behind metaphor and trope ultimately fall short, as the show fails to conceive of them as anything other than aesthetic form. A better future, the series suggests, is not possible, and things will only ever get worse—a conclusion that is provoked by its unwillingness to confront these problems directly.

Chapter Four reads *Twin Peaks: The Return*, the 2017 revival of the celebrated 1990 television series, as a commentary on televisual reboots/revivals and the repetitiveness that has plagued American culture of the past decade. Politically, the end of history is marked by stagnation, decay, and a preference for management over resolution; culturally, it is defined by an apparent lack of novelty and the constant return of dead styles amid seemingly unending shifts in trends—progressing, in other words, in the circular fashion of a treadmill. The series, I argue, provides a profound critique of the ways in which televisual reboots and revivals seek (and inevitably fail) to symbolically repair the problems of the present by returning to, and revising, the crises of the past. Agent Cooper's failed quest to return to the timeline of the original series and save Laura Palmer, in this light, symbolizes the way that nostalgia and nostalgic media function as cruelly optimistic fantasies that bind individuals to forms that no longer work (and

arguably never did) as they seek refuge from, or endeavor to repair, the ravages of the present.

Together, the chapters of this project illuminate multiple dimensions of the changing nature of nostalgic media at the end of history, as well as the ways in which the period's sociocultural logic and political conditions have shifted how we interact with the past and conceive of our present and future. With its unique combination of post-Cold War triumphalism, neoliberal rationality (including, especially, its championing of the cultural over the social and political), and economic and environmental stagnation and decline, the end of history, this project illustrates, should no longer be understood as a political punchline or a case of naive presentism, but rather as a coherent and totalizing period in the history of American capitalism.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE REFLECTIVE AGE: NOSTALGIA AT THE END OF HISTORY

In the title track of their 2013 album *Reflektor*, Arcade Fire singer Win Butler describes being caught within what can be described as a surreal hall of mirrors, a place characterized by disorientation and misdirection, situated within what he calls "the reflective age." He finds himself "trapped," he tells us in the opening line, "in a prison, a prism of light" and details a search for a way to enter an unknown but desired space through a "connector" only to realize in the chorus that the path forward was simply a "reflektor": "I thought I found a way to enter / but it was just a reflektor / I thought I found the connector / but it was just a reflektor." Unable to make it out by the close of the song, Butler (echoing Baudrillard) descends into a state of frenzy repeating "just a reflection of a reflection of a reflection of a reflection." The outro interpolates this line with the phrase "thought you would bring me to the resurrector, turns out it was just a reflektor."

The conditions Butler describes serve as a cogent meditation on the nature of American culture of the last decade, particularly its ever-increasing obsession with the past. While in other parts of the song, its attention turns inward as Butler considers the growing disconnect between himself and his wife (bandmate Régine Chassagne), "Reflektor" nonetheless provides a useful heuristic for interrogating the particular textures of what Simon Reynolds has termed "retromania," and the song's characterization of the present as "the reflective age" provides the central framing for this project.

The most noteworthy element of this period's engagement with the past—and this is especially true of the 2010s—is the nostalgia boom in media, which roughly coincided with the premiere of the AMC series *Mad Men* in 2007 and has, particularly in recent years, gone into overdrive with series like *Stranger Things* and a slew of remakes and reboots accompanying the reincorporation of 80s and early 90s aesthetics into popular style. What we've seen in this period is not simply a resurgence of nostalgic longing, of a desire to go back to the good old days of one's childhood or adolescence, of what we might call experiential nostalgia—that is, nostalgia for one's lived experience (or the perception thereof)—but rather an explosion of what Ryan Lizardi has called mediated nostalgia—nostalgia manifest both for and through media such as film, television, and music. What this ultimately represents is a reordering of the distinction Paul Grainge makes between nostalgic mood (the structure of feeling or affective and experiential discourse) and nostalgic mode (the commodified style or practice manifest in cultural productions) in which the nostalgic mode has come to dominate to such a degree that the mood has become utterly subordinated to it—a matter of style over substance.

"Reflektor" is important here because it helps crystallize several key differences in experiential nostalgia and mediated nostalgia as they exist today, and it serves to illustrate the conditions that help define the period. Critically, analysis of nostalgia is often linked to Walter Benjamin's reading of Klee's Angelus Novus as the Angel of History, the backward glancing spectator "at the threshold of past and future" (Boym 29), blown forward by the winds of progress. For Benjamin, the drawing serves as a metaphor for the modern hyperfixation on the past, and its blindness to the future. As Svetlana Boym and others have pointed out, however, his reading is a distinctly modernist

interpretation of the forces of history and their cultural significance, and we should always remember to historicize Benjamin's insights. To this end, Zygmunt Bauman has argued that, while the image remains powerful, the conditions of modernity that Benjamin found within it no longer adequately reflect the present, and we might conjure a very different reading of Klee's work if we were to reexamine it today:

> were we to look closely at Klee's drawing almost a century after Benjamin put on record his unfathomably profound and indeed incomparable insight…what might strike the viewer most is the Angel changing direction—the Angel of History caught in the midst of a U-turn: his face turning from the past to the future, his wings being pushed backwards by the storm blowing this time from the imagined, anticipated and feared in advance Hell of the future towards the Paradise of the past. (*Retrotopia* 2)

Bauman's reading is insightful for several reasons, but most notably because it pinpoints a crucial shift in the relationship between past, present, and future from the time of Benjamin's writing. In the years that have followed, Bauman explains, utopian aspirations have been replaced by what he terms *retrotopia*: "visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn and so inexistent future" (*Retrotopia* 5). The major socio-political forces of the latter twentieth century in the West, including especially the "privatization/individualization of the idea of 'progress' and of the pursuit of life's improvements" (5) have led to uncertain and often frightening visions of the future, which served to delegitimize utopian thinking. Its replacement, he contends, is a backward-glancing cultural narrative, which seeks a return to prior states and structures in order to undo, often unconsciously, the damages of

neoliberalism. Bauman's revision, more than anything, represents an important call to reconsider the present's relationship to the past, and rightly recognizes the power of Benjamin's Angel to do so. Because Bauman's reinterpretation misses the significance of media in today's retrograde cultural landscape, however, his Angel remains imprecise.

In an age dominated by mediated nostalgia, by a retrograde media landscape, and by visions of the past that are always already filtered by the authorizing frame of television and film (in particular), the Angel of History in the twenty-first century isn't captured by the winds of progress, as Benjamin posited over a century ago that it would be, nor is it, as Bauman contends, simply being blown from the horrors of the future towards the paradise of the past. Instead, like Butler in "Reflektor," it is caught in a hall of mirrors: trapped in a prism that, no matter where it looks, refracts its gaze elsewhere. Today, mediation imprisons the Angel of history so that, as it gazes forward, it is redirected back. A filtered misdirection that refracts the real, rather than reproducing it, replaces Benjamin's unimpeded vision with an inverted and distorted mirror image. The Angel in a hall of mirrors also finds itself unable to escape the image, as the view produced by the mirror is a function of the angle of address—determined, in other words, by the vantage of the present—and therefore its positionality determines what it is able to see.

Likewise, the Angel cannot remove itself from the image; it is always present, and its presence always filters, even obscures, what's behind. Without a clear sense of direction and relationality, the Angel in this hall of mirrors is disoriented, often unable to tell front from back, past from future, caught in a perpetual present characterized by disarray, and unable to cleanly determine the path forward which is, at every turn,

obscured by a series of misdirections. The images produced in this context cannot truly be called reflection, but are rather a reflektion—a false promise, a mediated and therefore aestheticized (re)production that distorts through its mechanism of production. Disoriented, the Angel is caught in stasis, unable to move forward or backward coherently. This is the popular cultural condition that prevailed in the 2010s.

How did such a predicament arise? As many have pointed out, one way to think about the causes of the retrograde twenty-first century is to situate it within the sociopolitical context of neoliberalism, which went into overdrive in the late twentieth century, producing a radical shift in the way that we think about the future—or, at least, rewrote the terms on which visions of the future attain cogency. Bauman, for instance, has argued that the large-scale replacement of communal social progress with privatization and an emphasis on individuality also led to frightening visions of the future, which have left us unable to imagine that better times lie ahead:

> privatization/individualization of the idea of 'progress' and of the pursuit of life's improvements…prompted the pendulums of the public mindset and mentality to perform a u-turn: from investing public hopes of improvement in the uncertain and ever-too-obviously un-trustworthy future, to re-investing them in the vaguely remembered past, valued for its assumed stability and so trustworthiness. With such a U-turn happening the future is transformed from the natural habitat of hopes and rightful expectations into the site of nightmares: horrors of losing your job together with its attached social standing, of having your home together with the rest of life's goods and chattels 'repossessed', of helplessly watching your children sliding down the well-being-cum-prestige slope and your own

> laboriously learned and memorized skills stripped of whatever has been left of their market value. The road to future turns looks uncannily as a trail of corruption and degeneration. Perhaps the road back, to the past, won't miss the chance of turning into a trail of cleansing from the damages committed by futures, whenever they turned into a present?" (5)

Mark Fisher, too, has written extensively about what he calls "capitalist realism: the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (2), which has subsequently produced an inability to imagine a better future, one that hasn't been ravaged by hypercapitalist consumption. This concept describes a phenomenon that is the culmination of a series of developments in the latter half of the twentieth century, synthesizing the response to the conditions that arose out of the shift to post-Fordist economics in the late-1970s, austerity programs in the 1980s, the demise of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, and the wholesale triumph of neoliberal politics heralded by each**.** Following these events, capitalist realism, by the mid-to-late-2000s, had established itself as the predominant structure of feeling in much of the West. These forces, Fisher later argues in *Ghosts of My Life*, ultimately coalesced to produce "the slow cancellation of the future" (2), referring to the gradual loss of the modern progressive teleology that constructs the future as not just temporally but functionally, formally, and qualitatively different (and better) than the present. Along the same lines, Fredric Jameson once noted that "where everything now submits to the perpetual change of fashion and media image […] nothing can change any longer" (qtd. in Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*), and the result is a paradoxical continuity of instability, a regularity of rapid change that in turn

destabilizes the boundary between present and future: a constantly changing present renders the duration of "present" unclear and also makes the future unpredictable. Within these confines, a turn to the past seems like the only remedy.

As Boym has pointed out, nostalgia regularly appears as a significant cultural force in times of "accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals" (xiv), and these circumstances have undeniably defined the conditions of life in America following Reagan's radical reorganization of the economy in the 80s and the technology boom of the mid-90s, both of which continued into the twenty-first century. However, what Fisher, Bauman, and Jameson point to is not purely the accelerated rhythms of life or historical upheaval—though both are undeniably true—but rather those forces combining within the context of a sociopolitical order that has fundamentally altered the way we conceive of the past and the future. In its reluctance to imagine a better future and its turn toward reproducing artifacts of the past, this cultural milieu reflects what Fisher identified as "the suspicion that the end has already come, the thought that it could well be the case that the future harbors only reiteration and re-permutation" (*Capitalist Realism* 3).[1]

Fisher was, of course, not the first to notice these trends. In particular, the idea that the western world was reaching, or had reached, some kind of terminal state had been discussed in some form or fashion for several decades by 2009—as Fisher himself put it, "This malaise, the feeling that there is nothing new, is itself nothing new" (6). This notion finds its critical antecedent expressed most forcefully in Francis Fukuyama's concept of the end of history, first laid out in his 1989 article, "The End of History?", and elaborated upon in his Bestseller follow-up, *The End of History and The Last Man* in

[1] In "The End of Temporality," Jameson argued that this sense of the end is a symptom of "the liquidation of futurity" that took place in the postwar period (704).

1992.[2] In the time since, Fukuyama's thesis—that, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, western liberal democracy had triumphed as the final development in human government—which has been both widely derided and significantly misunderstood,[3] remains profoundly influential. This was not, however, always the case, as Perry Anderson pointed out in 1992: "The most striking feature of the discussion which followed the publication of Fukuyama's essay was the virtual universality of the rejection which it met. For once, most of the Right, Centre and Left were united in their reaction. For different reasons, liberals, conservatives, social democrats, communists all expressed incredulity or abhorrence of Fukuyama's arguments" (284). The subsequent popularization of the phrase "the end of history" was driven not by the fact that it reflected what many were thinking, but by a remarkable prescience (or, as Louis Menand calls it, *luck*). Fukuyama, as Menand explains, "got out about six months ahead of the curve—his article appearing before the Velvet Revolution, in Czechoslovakia, and before the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, in November, 1989. Fukuyama was betting on present trends continuing." In other words, his great success was in the realm of prediction rather than description; he was not, at least initially, describing a widely held belief. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union that followed shortly thereafter imbued Fukuyama's work with a prophetic quality; it seemed as if events had conspired to confirm his thesis. As Anderson put it, "There has rarely been a more striking

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[2] In critical theory, the notion of the "end" of things has an even longer history, which Derrida in particular discusses at length in his critique of Fukuyama in *Specters of Marx*. Nonetheless, few, if any, of these ideas have been incorporated as successfully into the public consciousness as Fukuyama's.

[3] This is not to suggest that Fukyama's theory is without reproach, or that all criticism leveled at it was somehow unfounded; instead, I only wish to note, as the author himself frustratedly pointed out in the book's introduction and again in the afterword to the second edition in 2006, that a great deal of the popular response to his claims mischaracterized them beyond recognition, which is part of what led the idea of the end of history to become widely derided.

*rebondissement* in the fortunes of an idea. Within a year, an arcane philosophical wisdom had become an exoteric image of the age, as Fukuyama's arguments sped around the media of the globe" (281). These developments, in other words, catapulted "the end of history" into public consciousness such that, with the publication of his book three years later, Fukuyama was now responding to a cultural milieu he had helped shape. The tentativeness of "The End of History?" (signaled in the article's title taking the form of a question) was thus replaced by an unmistakable triumphalism in *The End of History and the Last Man* as Fukuyama's thesis had come to reflect the dominant attitude in much of the West. Fukuyama's task in this new context was to provide proof for a vision of the world that had already taken hold—as a blurb from Charles Krauthammer put it "Until now, the triumph of the West was merely a fact. Fukuyama has given it a deep and highly original meaning."

Far from suggesting that the end of history meant that events would cease to occur, as many of his critics suggested, Fukuyama, building on the work of Hegel (and, more importantly, Alexandre Kojève's interpretation of Hegel[4]), instead proposed an end to "history understood as a single, coherent, evolutionary process" (*The End of History* xii). Contra Marx, Fukuyama contended that the historical dialectic ended not in communism but in the already established liberal democratic order. In the absence of a viable alternative, and on the basis that it was supposedly free from contradictions and

[4] As Fukuyama himself explains: "we are interested not in Hegel per se but in Hegel-as-interpreted-by-Kojeve, or perhaps a new, synthetic philosopher named Hegel-Kojeve. In subsequent references to Hegel, we will actually be referring to Hegel-Kojeve, and we will be more interested in the ideas themselves than in the philosophers who originally articulated them" (*The End of History* 143). This intellectual lineage, Perry Anderson points out, forms the basis of one of the most common critiques of Fukuyama's arguments—namely, that "his construction rests on a basic misinterpretation of Hegel" (284). Anderson also notes that Kojeve is the first thinker to conceive of Hegel's philosophy as containing "a full conception of an end of history, as not just the result of human development but also its halting place" (314).

"completely satisfying to its citizens" (139), Fukuyama argued that western liberal democracy, supported by a free market capitalist economy, had emerged as the only rational—and thus final—ordering of human society, "the endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution" ("The End of History?" 4). We could, he explained, improve our implementation of the system but not the system itself. As Margaret Thatcher famously put it, there was no alternative. Psychically, Fukuyama explained,

> We who live in stable, long-standing liberal democracies face an unusual situation. In our grandparents' time, many reasonable people could foresee a radiant socialist future in which private property and capitalism had been abolished, and in which politics itself was somehow overcome. Today, by contrast, we have trouble imagining a world that is radically better than our own, or a future that isn't essentially democratic and capitalist. Within that framework, of course, many things could be improved: we could house the homeless, guarantee opportunity for minorities and women, improve competitiveness, and create new jobs…We can also imagine future worlds that are significantly worse than what we know, in which national, racial, or religious intolerance makes a comeback, or in which we are overwhelmed by war or environmental collapse. But we cannot picture to ourselves a world that is essentially different from the previous one, and at the same time better. Other, *less reflective ages* also thought of themselves as the best, but we arrive at this conclusion exhausted, as it were, from the pursuit of alternatives we felt had to be better than liberal democracy. (*The End of History* 46; emphasis added)

"[I]f we are at a point where we cannot imagine" Fukuyama concluded, "a world substantially different from our own, in which there is no apparent or obvious way in which the future will represent a fundamental improvement over our current order, then we must also take into consideration that History itself might be at an end" (51).

Regardless of his success in proving that History ends with liberal democracy,[5] Fukuyama's rendering of the end of history remains important in one key way: despite the skepticism it drew from most critics, and the fact that recent events (in particular, the lasting impact of religious fundamentalism, the election of Donald Trump, the rise of right-wing populism globally, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine) have led Fukuyama to revisit his own diagnosis,[6] the end of history nonetheless expressed an attitude that would come to dominate the West's cultural unconscious in the years that followed and that still persists today. As Slavoj Žižek once remarked, "It is easy to make fun of Fukuyama's notion of the 'End of History,' but most people today *are* Fukuyamean, accepting liberal-democratic capitalism as the finally found formula of the best possible society" (88). Even in the face of the multitudinous crises before us in the twenty-first century, end of history thinking gives shape to the way that much of the world, and particularly the United States, conceive of their solutions—that is, there's a remarkable consensus about the stability and overall validity of present systems, even as these crises can be directly tied to it. Obama's response to the 2008 financial crisis and the indefinite continuation of the wars in the middle east across four presidencies are, in part, symptoms of the same neoliberal consensus whose logic is underpinned by a belief in the

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[5] For a more thorough critique of Fukuyama's arguments, see Perry Anderson's *A Zone of Engagement*.

[6] See, for example, Fukuyama's 2018 book *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* and his March 2022 article "Preparing For Defeat" in *American Purpose*.

system's indefinite, and unopposed, continuation—as Anderson puts it, "the limits of the existing liberal state and market economy are held insurpassable, as systems effectively beyond popular control" (331). Crises may thus occur (and recur) but there are no structural, systemic solutions available. Subsequently, nothing ever really ends at the end of history, and the shifts that do occur come largely in the form of short-term tweaks (surges vs. drawdowns, tax rate hikes vs. cuts) rather than wholesale alteration. Mainstream political (and, arguably, social) discourse in the United States is, in this way, more often a debate between theories of management than between truly, structurally, different visions. Absent the Soviet Union, and thus without a major competitor on the global stage offering a radical alternative (which was one of the driving forces behind a great deal of the social reforms of the twentieth century)—having, essentially, won—the goal of U.S. policy at home and abroad is now maintenance of the status quo. It no longer has to prove itself, and so it has largely stopped trying. What emerged instead is a phenomenon Mike Davis has called a kind of "pathological presentism," in which "all calculations [are made] on the basis of short-term bottom-lines in order to allow the super-rich to consume all the good things of the earth within their lifetimes." Major problems, consequently, rarely get solved, just managed differently. Even when, of late, apparent threats to the neoliberal consensus emerge (such as Brexit in the UK, nascent fascist movements in the United States and Europe, and Putin's challenges to the postwar status quo[7]—which was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine under the headline "The

[7] Even these developments, despite their growing influence, have thus far largely failed to remake the world as they would have liked, and the post-historical status quo, albeit under significant strain, broadly remains intact. Fukuyama, for his part, has claimed that the election of Joe Biden in 2020 signaled the ability for the system to self-correct, and that Putin's invasion of Ukraine will result in a defeat that gives rise to "a 'new birth of freedom,' and get us out of our funk about the declining state of global democracy. The spirit of 1989 will live on," he concludes, "thanks to

Return of History"[8]), their character is typically one of regression to an earlier system instead of progression toward something new: devolution rather than evolution. "Few periods," as Jameson explained in 2003, "have proved as incapable of framing immediate alternatives for themselves" ("The End of Temporality" 704). The end of history then is a period marked by, at best, a kind of weak incrementalism and, at worst, a desire for complete reversion. Today, the debate is rarely over whether we should go back but, rather, over what time period we ought to revert to: in the 2020 election, for instance, Trump's "Make America Great Again" promised a return to a mythical past where, as Wendy Brown put it,

> families were happy, whole, and heterosexual, when women and minorities knew their place, when neighborhoods were orderly, secure, and homogeneous, when heroin was a black problem and terrorism was not inside the homeland, and when a hegemonic Christianity and whiteness constituted the manifest identity, power, and pride of the nation and the West (5)

while Biden sought to restore "the soul of the nation" via a return to the conditions of the Obama administration four years prior (effectively a call for erasing the Trump presidency much like, as we'll see in Chapter four, Agent Cooper attempts to remedy the present by erasing Laura Palmer's death in *Twin Peaks*).

Several critics over the past three decades have noted that this sense of repetitiveness has plagued the West since the fall of the Berlin Wall. As early as 1991,

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a bunch of brave Ukrainians" ("Preparing For Defeat"). Rather than marking "the end of The End of History," in other words, Fukuyama claims that Putin's invasion will instead result in a reawakening of belief in liberal democracy, effectively resolidifying the conclusions of The End of History ("Putin's War on the Liberal Order"). Despite these challenges, and regardless of whether Fukuyama's predictions again come true, the ideology of the end of history, for now, remains in effect.

[8] A Notion Fukuyama directly challenged in a March 2022 article for *Financial Times*.

Baudrillard claimed that the posthistorical world is not cyclical so much as recyclable; the West, he argued, is defined more than anything by its constant recycling of the leftovers of the twentieth century's major conflicts and ideologies, an endless procession of the reiteration of prior forms. "All the archaic, anachronistic forms," he explains, "are there ready to re-emerge, intact and timeless, like the viruses deep in the body. History has only wrenched itself from cyclical time to fall into the order of the recyclable" (*The Illusion of the End* 27). Cyclical time, Baudrillard reminds us, conventionally denotes some kind of progress—or, at least, *change*—even if it is just a matter of moving from one repetitive structure to another. The end of history is, on the contrary, defined by its resistance to change of this sort. Instead, as Bauman once argued, the posthistorical West is, at least in terms of sociocultural composition, much more liquid, constantly reshaping itself into pre-established molds (*Liquid Modernity*). Thus, while the larger political shape remains static, and its deleterious effects gradually seep into the social world, the public is left to recompose itself in response to a rapidly decaying sociopolitical landscape. Without a goal on the horizon, and in a "historical situation whose contours it does not know" (Berlant 225), the public turns to the forms of the past.

Paradoxically, as Baudrillard points out, this pattern of infinite recycling, where everything that fades is subject to a return, marks the end of history as a time of *endlessness:* "[*T*]*here is no end any longer, there will no longer be any end*...history itself has become interminable...Things are in a state which is literally definitive—neither finished, nor infinite, nor definite, but de-finitive that is, deprived of its end." (115, 120). Posthistorical occurrences are often marked as much by this lack of finality as anything else, and management of catastrophe, a form of *endless* deferral, is the predominant mode

of operation: wildfires are extinguished only to return in more devastating proportions; a president loses an election, contests the results, and is immediately primed to run again; a pandemic becomes endemic. The end of history resists punctual moments and narrative closure. As Baudrillard explained, "It is as though history were rifling through its own dustbins and looking for redemption in the rubbish" (26).

Revision is, of course, endemic to both nostalgia and the posthistorical world, and nostalgia operates in cycles, with major upheavals in taste and style resolidifying every twenty or twenty-five years before melting away again, just as sociopolitical forms are continually (re)emerging and fading. Nostalgia prevails at the end of history precisely because of this compatibility. At the same time, nostalgia also occupies a tense position: large-scale political change is relatively scarce at the end of history, but it also often seems as if things are changing at a greater pace than ever on the level of culture. Nostalgia is part of this trend, as it emphasizes superficial notions of change in the form of cultural shifts (sometimes produced by nostalgia waves themselves). Thus, nostalgia is simultaneously a reaction to the perpetual onslaught of aesthetic change *and* an effort to produce another aesthetic change through the inauguration of a new (old) regime—an exhausting cycle produced by an increasingly exhausted cultural landscape. The relationship between nostalgia and the end of history is thus more complex than it might first appear: on one hand, the conditions of the end of history provide the catalyst for expressions of nostalgic longing, dictating what is longed for; on the other hand, nostalgia also (re)produces the political, social, and cultural values of the posthistorical world. The end of history, in other words, revises conventional nostalgia, remaking the concept in its own image, and subsequently redeploys nostalgia to serve its own ends.

Posthistorical nostalgia thus shapes, and is shaped by, an overwhelmingly mediated culture that emphasizes particular expressions and objects of retrograde fascination. As the following chapters will indicate, the nostalgia industry is a major force in the posthistorical revisionist impulse. Driven by the need to reconfigure itself for present tastes in order to be resold, nostalgia TV, in particular, subjects the past to a process of rehabilitation, as its artifacts are revived and repaired—often a more deliberate and direct procedure than the one I describe in *Stranger Things* (Chapter Three) because the act of revision is carried out on the original rather than an homage. *Stranger Things,* and *Ready Player One* (the subject of Chapter Two) to an extent, repairs the past through mystification and misdirection, recomposing and reframing its nostalgic attachments under the rubric of aesthetics; revivals and reboots (the subject of Chapter Four), on the other hand, rehabilitate the nostalgic objects themselves, and, in doing so, the historical pasts they reflect.

What results, then, is a nostalgia that is unlike that which has come before. "Nostalgia" as the term is popularly construed and deployed today has been divorced from its conceptual roots, and is in some ways alienated from the meanings it held throughout much of the twentieth century as well. As a number of scholars have shown, although the term has a fairly long history, it has only recently taken on the character we now associate with it. First coined by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer in 1688, the term is derived from two Greek concepts: nostos, "return home," and algia, "longing," representing "a longing for a home that no longer exists or never existed…a sentiment of loss and displacement" (Boym xiv). For Hofer, "Nostalgia was said to produce 'erroneous representations' that caused the afflicted to lose touch with the present…the

nostalgic was possessed by a mania of longing" (Boym 3-4). In its early form, nostalgia was viewed as a curable disease, akin to the common cold (Boym xiv), and seen as a root cause of a number of symptoms such as insomnia, anorexia, melancholic madness or abjectness (Armbruster 19). This particular conception grew in popularity throughout the early parts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet, as Linda Austin points out, the term had virtually disappeared by the 1870s, having been invalidated by new research in fields such as bacteriology and cellular pathology (1). As the twentieth century began, and the pace of progress and geographic mobility increased, nostalgia shifted from a curable medical illness to an incurable condition of the spirit or psyche (Hutcheon)—what Boym refers to as "not merely an individual sickness but a symptom of our age, a historical emotion" (xvi). The temporal/historical dimension we now associate with the term also became an integral part of the definition at this time, with the ache for home of Hofer's original conception replaced by a longing for a bygone temporality. Nostalgia began as a symptom of spatial displacement at a time when geographic mobility was relatively uncommon and grew into a symptom of progress as the revolutions of modernity, political and technological, changed the pace of life. Pickering and Keightley note that this shift from spatial dislocation to temporal dislocation involved "the sense of feeling oneself a stranger in a new period that compared negatively with an earlier time in which one felt, or imagined, oneself at home" (922). In this process of de-medicalization, "nostalgia also began to be seen not just as an individual emotion, but as a collective longing for a happier, singular, more innocent age" (Reynolds xxv). Nostalgia, in this conception of the term, arises largely "in compensation for a loss of faith in progress, and

for what is socially and culturally destroyed in the name of progress" (Pickering and Keightley 920).

In the reflective age, longing is no longer the primary affect of nostalgia, replaced instead with infatuation and a desire (re-)experience that, thanks to streaming, are much easier to satisfy today than in the past—at least on the surface. Two factors have enabled this shift. First, today the object and expression of the overwhelming majority of nostalgia is media. Though films, television, and music may produce an association with lived experience, that lived experience is always already framed by media through which the association is coded and/or accessed. In this way, media gives shape to lived experience. Expressions of nostalgia today, moreover, are more often for media itself than for the personal experiences captured by it, a development seen most cogently in the overwhelming volume of reboots, long-delayed sequels, and spinoffs that permeate the current tv and film marketplace. Music and fashion, too, remain decidedly retrograde in much of their aesthetic posturing. Charli XCX's 2018 hit "1999," whose chorus expresses the singer's wish to "go back to 1999," is, for instance, sonically indistinguishable from the turn of the century pop it reveres, and which forms the foundation of its longing. Its video, significantly, is an entirely mimetic exercise that places the singer within recreations of iconic music videos and films of the late 1990s, interspersed with images of her seated on the floor in a black turtleneck and glasses holding a colorful iMac. This construction locates her desire not simply to go back to her childhood but to do so framed by popular aesthetics of the period. Despite its more traditional nostalgic exclamations ("I just wanna go back / back to 1999 / take a ride through my old neighborhood"), the song reflects the merging of memory and experiential desire with media, stating in the second

line of its chorus "I just wanna go back / to 'hit me baby one more time.'" The song, as well as the cultural moment it reflects, thus conflates traditional nostalgic longing and mediated infatuation, resulting in a nostalgia that exceeds merely the combination of longing and loss.

The 1980s—ironically, the primary object of nostalgic fixation in the 2010s—represents an interesting example of the shifting nature of nostalgic media. The dominant form of nostalgic narratives in the 80s in films such as *Stand by Me*, *A Christmas Story*, and *Back to the Future* as well as shows such as *The Wonder Years*, is one in which the backward-glancing is baked into the story itself, in the form of either a narrator reflecting on past events or, in the case of the *Back to the Future series*, a character physically traveling to the past from the present. There is, in other words, a recognition of the mnemonic and transportational elements of traditional nostalgia at the core of these narratives. In contrast, in 2010s shows like *Stranger Things*, the reflective or transpositional authorizing frame has been removed, so that returning to the past, instead of functioning as an individual's experience or an act of memory, lacks any explicit narrative motivation. The justification for turning to the past precedes the turn itself, and nostalgia is always already prefabricated rather than personal.

The 2010s also saw a rise in what Linda Hutcheon has called "armchair nostalgia"—or, what James Murphy of LCD Soundsystem has more aptly labeled "borrowed nostalgia"—a kind of performative nostalgia manifest not in the individual's past experience but through an infatuation with the products and aesthetics of someone else's life. The recent '90s fashion revival among teens and young adults who lack memories of the '90s testifies to such a trend. For Gen-Z listeners (born between 1997

and 2012), Charli XCX's replication of Spice Girls and TLC music videos in "1999" might produce this ersatz emotional resonance. Borrowed nostalgia is illustrated perhaps most powerfully, however, by the clothing retailer Urban Outfitters whose brand targets trendy teen and twentysomething consumers. For a period in the late 2010s, the company sold facsimiles of early-2000s style mixed CDs, complete with simulated handwritten permanent marker tracklists alongside random assortments of decorative used VHS tapes, providing millennial customers the chance to buy an artifact from their past and digital native zoomers the chance to "reexperience" a past they never really experienced in the first place. If traditional nostalgia is conventionally animated by loss and a longing for something that is no longer, borrowed nostalgia, on the other hand, represents a longing to recover that which one never had, or even for that which may never have existed at all. This particular expression of the separation of nostalgia from experience is yet another instance of the divorcing of what we call *nostalgia* from its linguistic and conceptual origins.

The second factor in the shifting discursive nature of nostalgia is the overwhelming increase in accessibility made possible by streaming services. Today, one can, at the click of a button, immerse themselves fully in the 1990s of their childhood, spending a day (or week or month or even year) watching *Friends* and listening to Hanson. The popularity of retro fashion and aesthetics allows people to spend their entire lives surrounded by ephemera of the past. This paradigm, which Reynolds has called our "playlist past," doesn't simply provide audiences with a brief memory of better days; it seeks to fully embed them within it, constructing the past as a location of viable sustained, easily accessible escape—as Chapter Two illustrates, an especially powerful notion in a

posthistorical world defined by a lack of alternatives. Today, nostalgia and the nostalgic media that is its most prominent expression pivots on the possibility of a sustainable escape from the now. It functions not as a temporary reverie but a viable way of interacting with both the past and present, in a world now broadly conceived as a mediated space. The playlist past, then, provides not only a reminder of something lost, but the opportunity to regain it. The question remains, however, that if something can be regained, is it lost? Historically, the basic premise of nostalgia is that it is a longing for something that decidedly cannot be regained. But if the object of desire is media(ted) or aesthetic(ized), both of which enable the lost object to be regained at the push of a button, then is it still lost? And if one's longing can be abated even partially by the recreation of the original experience—if, in other words, the duration of longing is cut short—is it still longing in the traditional sense?

Mediated nostalgia also inadvertently calls into question the absence at its core. Since that which is absent is, today, also accessible, the idea of nostalgia seems paradoxical. If conventional nostalgia relies on the notion that one can't ever go home, what should we make of a nostalgia based upon returning home (or its reasonable facsimile)? In such cases, irrecoverable nostalgic loss is converted into an absence that is at least partially resolvable. Yet, when nostalgia is centered on an irrecoverable time period that is defined primarily by its media and aesthetics, the return home afforded by media is ultimately incomplete: while the aesthetics and media that have come to represent the period are easily retrieved, the time period itself remains wholly irrecoverable. There emerges then a substitutional premise for nostalgic media and aesthetics, as approximations that media suggests are close enough but which never really

can be, and so when one searches for connection to a lost past they are ultimately left unfulfilled by this nostalgic paradigm. In the end, the promise of a connector ultimately turns out to be a reflektor.

This development, too, raises the question: if nostalgia has been distanced from longing and loss, what replaced them as the primary driver of nostalgia? Reflective age nostalgia verges on a new paradigm, which replaces longing and loss with the pleasures of the style of the era. The past then becomes the site of mediated aesthetic infatuation. Above all else, one is drawn to the 80s not because of how it felt but how it looked and sounded, such that the difference between past and present is stylistic rather than personal or political. The 1980s in this model is defined more by neon and synthesizers than Reagan and austerity; the social and political dimensions of the past are subsequently flattened in favor of the depoliticized cultural—the same operation produced by the end of history more broadly.

In some ways, this conception of nostalgia reflects what Jameson identified as a central feature of postmodernism: that, within specific contexts, nostalgia functions as a mode, a "formal attachment to the techniques and formulas of the past" (Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* 11-12). In *Postmodernism*, Jameson characterizes what he calls the "nostalgia film" as a symptom of the late capitalist breakdown of historicity that further distances art from referent. Nostalgia, in this sense, is regressive, inauthentic, and symptomatic of "a collective unconscious in the process of trying to identify its own present at the same time that [it] illuminate[s] the failure of this attempt, which seems to reduce itself to the recombination of various stereotypes of the past" (*Postmodernism* 296). Jameson's analysis of the original *Star Wars* trilogy illustrates this idea. The series,

he argues, reinvents the experience of the "Saturday afternoon series of the Buck Rogers type—alien villains, true American heroes, heroines in distress, the death ray or the doomsday box, and the cliff-hanger at the end whose miraculous solution was to be witnessed next Saturday afternoon" ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 8). Crucially, however, Jameson's reading of *Star Wars'* nostalgia is limited by its subject's indirect connection to a historical period, which inherently emphasizes style that is narratively divorced from historical context. Moreover, while a certain nostalgia for 50s sci-fi may be present at the core of *Star Wars*, one cannot argue that this is central to its narrative purpose or popular reception; though present, nostalgia is far from being the series' operative force. What we're seeing today is indeed much more explicit, borne in a sense from a particular merging of traditional temporal nostalgia with the late capitalist emphasis on aesthetics at the expense of historical clarity. This signifies the preeminence of aesthetics in defining historical moments. *Stranger Things*, for example, reflects nostalgia for both a form/aesthetic (adventure films, synthesizers, etc.) and a time (the 1980s), but with the form figured as *the defining feature of its depiction of the time* in a way that was not present in *Buck Rogers*. Furthermore, what Jameson identified in these nostalgia films as a novel and significant, yet nonetheless narrow trend has now come to dominate the media landscape. Put simply, the tendencies Jameson identified remain in circulation today, but have intensified and mutated in ways *Postmodernism* did not anticipate.

Jameson is also broadly correct that this relationship to the past produces—or reinforces—a loss of situatedness and historical context, a notion that is, once again, reflective of the end of history more broadly. In fact, if nostalgia today is indeed

distanced from loss and longing, and those components have been replaced by a more immediate infatuation with style, then what has also been lost (or at least minimized) in this reformulation is the reflective nature of nostalgia as it has traditionally been conceived. Conventionally, nostalgia has often been construed as producing constructive revelations that increase awareness of place, provoking an attentiveness to the passage of time and the nature of existence within an ever-changing landscape—a notion that Boym labeled "reflective nostalgia." For Boym, nostalgia can be subdivided into two categories: the aforementioned, individualized, *reflective* mode, and a more collective *restorative* one. The latter, she argues "stresses [the etymological root] nostos [return home] and attempts transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home." This type of nostalgia is largely undertaken by the state through the erection of museums, memorials, and other memory-institutions, and seeks to emphasize national memory "based on a single plot of national identity." On the other hand, she explains, reflective nostalgia "thrives in [the etymological root] algia, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately," and is thus the realm of art and artists. Crucially, she writes, "Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt" (xviii). Reflective nostalgia is decidedly intellectual in nature, and, as Boym points out, can lead to profound ruminations on the constituent components of nostalgia especially—loss, longing, and the passage of time. Nostalgia also traditionally relies on a lack, the recognition of which serves to critique the present. Absent these components, however, mediated nostalgia in the reflective age is structurally incapable of producing such thought—and, indeed, such an endeavor is functionally antithetical to it.[9] Its

[9] This is, of course, not to suggest that reflective nostalgia is totally absent today. As Katherina Niemeyer has pointed out, there is a considerable amount of scholarship on this kind of

engagement is as superficial as the object itself. A Baudrillardian phenomenon, mediated nostalgia is based on the aesthetics of the era constructed out of a curated selection of artifacts of the pop culture of the time. Built on, and perpetuated by, a quasi-generic formulation of the period, the objects of nostalgia may or may not correspond to an original (whose existence is dubious to begin with). Thus, nostalgia forged in aesthetic reproduction is further distanced from whatever real might have existed. For this reason, nostalgia in the reflective age is ultimately alienating. "Reflektor" describes a search for a "connector," and historical reflection, broadly, and nostalgia, more specifically, have both long been construed as a means of reconnection. There is a consistent emphasis in culture and scholarly work on the power of glancing backward to produce a sense of belonging, community, and continuity. This is particularly the case with the restorative nostalgia produced by state institutions, but it is broadly present in any such act. Turning to the past, in these formulations, provides a link between past and present. The value of such a notion, however, pivots on the qualities of the object that represents "past" and on the construction of "the past" therein. In other words, if the past one turns to in order to connect is, in fact, not reflective of the historical, social, political, or material reality, or is oriented in such a way that those elements are obscured, then where does that connection

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constructive nostalgia, illustrating the ways in which art and artists working today use nostalgia to produce insightful work. Likewise, Pickering and Keightley have argued that scholars who position it solely as a lament for loss ignore the ways in which it produces positive contributions to historical imagination, suggesting instead that "we should perhaps reconfigure [nostalgia] in terms of a distinction between the desire to return to an earlier state or idealized past, and the desire not to return but to recognize aspects of the past as the basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future. Nostalgia can then be seen as not only a search for ontological security in the past but also as a means of taking one's bearings for the road ahead in the uncertainties of the present" (921). Nostalgia, in this configuration, functions not solely as uncritical yearning, but also as a potential way of interacting with history in the move toward positive social change. However, while unquestionably present, this more optimistic reading of the power of nostalgia does not represent the dominant mode in American media today, and is thus significantly less representative of the cultural moment.

lead? The result of this paradigm is a nostalgia that is regularly divorced from its critical potential, one which leaves behind (or at least subordinates) the reflective frame that encourages the nostalgiac to consider the passage of time and the changes that have ensued, which, when highlighted by narrative structure, raises the critical question: why was the past so much better? Without this reflective element, which in part serves to anchor nostalgic fantasy in the realm of history, context, and, at least in a sense, the real, we find ourselves adrift, unable to adequately situate past and present, and the pathways between them remain obscured. In this way, nostalgia in the reflective age represents a kind of false promise, one that is derived both from its emphasis on aesthetics and from its simulacric nature: once again, what appears to be a connector turns out to be a reflektor.

One might ask, in light of this, if reflection is actually missing, why we should call it "the reflective age." In fact, this relative absence of reflective nostalgia reveals one of the central characteristics of the reflective age: the conventional traits of nostalgia (reflection, longing, loss) don't appear to be missing at all, as their absence is obscured by misdirection. This project's title is thus ironic because the end of history is increasingly oriented towards the past and increasingly alienated from it. We are inundated with reflections that appear clear but are only refractions, disorientating reflections of a reflection of a reflection of a reflection.

The reflective age ultimately renders the present as a kind of temporal pastiche, in which the uniqueness of a cultural moment is defined by its particular assemblage of the tropes and styles of the past. Fisher, among others, has written extensively about the way that global capitalism has produced a commercial marketplace in which there is little

room for genuine artistic innovation or for original visions of the future, and the production of novelty is simply a matter of the endless repackaging of the past. Setting aside the few notable works that have managed to transcend extant paradigms, Fisher is nonetheless correct that the overwhelming majority of popular culture today, especially media produced by the corporate structures that have come to dominate the publishing landscape, is emphatically—and, increasingly, intentionally—a rehashing of what has come before.

The 2018 Netflix miniseries *Maniac* serves as an instructive consideration of the centrality of mediated nostalgia and retrograde media productions that together form the basis of the pastiche that we call the present. The show, which follows two protagonists as they participate in a pharmaceutical trial that promises to cure their trauma, is set in an uncanny version of the present that is both like and very much unlike our own. Visually, *Maniac*'s New York is a semiotic hodgepodge made up of temporally-coded signifiers replete with chronological contradictions[10] (various retro fashions, DOS-style personal computers, contemporary vehicles and media references) that, in conjunction, produce an indeterminant setting that resists coherent grounding in any particular historical moment. There is, in other words, no historical past, present, or future onto which one can map the events that unfold. The effect is to defamiliarize the present through a rewriting of the terms on which it was constructed, substituting signifiers that have retained cultural prominence for those that have lost it. What *Maniac* reveals in all of this is precisely the same pastiche that is endemic to the reflective age: what we think of as *now* is defined in large part through its particular combination of artifacts from the past—the present, in

[10] Not unlike those sometimes seen in the works of David Lynch, particularly *Blue Velvet*, which are discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

other words, is simply a repackaging or reordering of what has come before. Crucially, *Maniac* also recognizes that *what has come before* is predominantly the realm of style and aesthetics, of clothing, cars, technology, and interior design, of things rather than ideas, movements, or events. What we identify as the present is then merely a pastiche of past tropes, which are, themselves, heavily mediated artifacts primarily constructed and made cogent through media. There is, in short, no past, present, or history, outside of mediation.

*Maniac* also reminds us that the temporal pastiche that defines the reflective age is not singular or orderly (always confined to artifacts from a solitary period), but rather made up of a disorienting multiplicity of referents. The effect is, once again, akin to a hall of mirrors, where one's gaze is always fragmented and filtered by a confounding series of reflections that reproduce visions of other things, resulting in one's attention being pulled in a variety of contradictory directions. It's no coincidence, then, that one of the series' protagonists suffers from schizophrenia, which serves, in effect, as a reflection of the chaotic and perpetually shifting senses of reality that result from a posthistorical world. Both Owen and Annie begin the series struggling to regain a sense of connection within an alienated world, one in which you can rent a friend through an app or be paid to have an AdBuddy follow you around reading commercials at regular intervals.

The reflective age is, in sum, a moment defined by a retrograde cultural landscape whose character and omnipresence combine to produce disorientation and an inability to reckon with past, present, or future, driven especially by a nostalgia that leaves behind its historical antecedents and critical functions in favor of an emphasis on aesthetics, style, and the immediate pleasures of infatuation and repetition of the familiar. Visions of the

past in the reflective age are pervasive, but they are also unstable, disconnected, and incoherent despite, paradoxically, often being positioned as a remedy for the same traits in the present. The remaining chapters of this project describe, in more detail, the specific contours of these conditions.

# CHAPTER TWO

## *READY PLAYER ONE*, NOSTALGIA, AND RECOGNITION

This is the world out of which Ready Player One was conceived: a static state in which a litany of imminently visible crises have emerged, but change has become scarce; a world for which there is no coherent plan, and when problems arise the social and political are seized by a reactive frenzy; a world that, as Adam Curtis has explained, "doesn't tell [us] visions about the future…doesn't tell us what this is all for…has no story of what's coming tomorrow" ("Units of One"). In its bleak vision of an increasingly stagnant future, gripped by retromania, whose temporal march forward is marked only by a procession of unmitigated decline, Ernest Cline's 2011 bestselling novel Ready Player One stages a unique failure of imagination.

The novel follows Wade Watts, a teenager living in an Oklahoma City trailer park in the 2040s, as he makes his way through a pop culture treasure hunt within The OASIS, a massively-multiplayer online virtual reality video game where most of the world's population now spend their time. Five years before the start of the novel, the death of OASIS creator James Halliday inaugurated a contest within the platform, with his estate and sole control over Gregarious Simulation Systems (GSS), the company that runs the OASIS, as the prize. In the ensuing years, the competition, which revolves around solving a series of riddles leading to a hidden Easter Egg, became a worldwide phenomenon. In addition to millions of competitors worldwide, the game also attracted the interest of IOI, a rival megacorporation intent on winning control of the OASIS in order to further commercialize and monetize it. After becoming the first player to solve

one of Halliday's puzzles, Wade emerges as the world's best hope of keeping the OASIS out of the hands of IOI. Thanks to his superior knowledge of 1980s pop culture, and with the help of a small group of friends, Wade eventually succeeds in finding the egg, winning the competition and taking sole control of the OASIS.

The dystopian future that forms the backdrop of the novel's action is speculative, but only insofar as the widespread effects of climate crisis, poverty, and geopolitical turmoil that it invokes are worse than when the book was written; they are, however, fundamentally the same conflicts we face today. This is to say that, despite being set thirty years after it was written, there is nothing really new in the future of Cline's novel. Even the OASIS is merely an extrapolation of present technologies (instead of restricting participation in the virtual world to visuals alone, as is the case with current tech like the Oculus Rift, haptic sensors and motion-tracked treadmills have replaced controllers, enabling a full range of movement and sensory perception). Indeed, though parts of the world have migrated operations into the OASIS (public school, for instance, is now entirely virtual, with students arriving each morning to simulated classrooms, in a simulated building, on a simulated planet) essentially very little has actually changed.

Culturally, too, Cline's world is inert. There is no new music, film, or television to speak of, no new forms of digital culture or social media trends, no festivals, holidays, political movements, or even religious cults. Here, in light of the increased visualization of digital/social culture heralded by Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, Cline's version of the future, which was released into the world the year after Instagram's founding and several years before the other two, is simultaneously prophetic and stale. The OASIS is an inherently visual platform, and one of its central functions is the literalization of

digital spaces—online schooling in virtual classrooms, the replacement of internet chat rooms (already largely a relic of an earlier Internet age in 2011) with digital rooms filled with pixel walls and furniture. As such, it scales the current trend towards visualization in social media today into an all-encompassing fact of life. Digital "spaces" are no longer metaphorical. Yet it also imagines a world in which the thirty years from its time of publication to the time in which it's set basically only produced two cultural events (the OASISifcation of everything and the Egg Hunt-induced nostalgia boom), and both are related to the same product. Interestingly, in a recent case of life imitating art, Facebook, as part of their rebranding as Meta in October 2021, announced the creation of the Metaverse, a virtual reality space within their platform that closely resembles the OASIS. A trailer for the product showcased founder Mark Zuckerberg selecting an avatar and walking viewers through a series of features, including playing poker with friends and watching TikToks. Most notably, the ad positions Metaverse as a platform for business meetings, inadvertently showcasing the limits of imagination inherent in the end of history (nothing here is new, it's simply the virtualization of what already exists) while also marking how uninnovative Cline's vision of the future really is. The world, *Ready Player One* tells us, has basically descended into monoculture and mono-modality: novelty arrives solely within the OASIS (and, even then, only really in the form of new planets and games, which themselves receive only passing reference within the book). This is not to say, however, that Cline's world is devoid of culture; it is, in fact, obsessed with cultural objects—it's just that none of them are new. A child of the '80s and a pop culture fanatic, Halliday's competition took the form of a series of "Easter Egg" hunts requiring extensive knowledge of video games, music, and movies from the time in

which its creator grew up. As Wade explains:

> This led to a global fascination with 1980s pop culture. Fifty years after the decade had ended, the movies, music, games, and fashions of the 1980s were all the rage once again. By 2041, spiked hair and acid-washed jeans were back in style, and covers of hit '80s pop songs by contemporary bands dominated the music charts. People who had actually been teenagers in the 1980s, all now approaching old age, had the strange experience of seeing the fads and fashions of their youth embraced and studied by their grandkids. (8)

Cline thus stages a dystopian vision of the future in which the whole of the planet has become fixated on '80s pop culture. The novel is filled to the brim with references to popular movies, music, and games from the era, as Wade and other gunters (slang for "egg hunters") have laboriously studied *Anorak's Almanac*, Halliday's published journals named after his OASIS avatar, in search of clues to help them solve the first puzzle. As Wade explains, "The Almanac was over a thousand pages long, but it contained few details about Halliday's personal life or his day-to-day activities. Most of the entries were his stream-of-consciousness observations on various classic videogames, science-fiction and fantasy novels, movies, comic books, and '80s pop culture, mixed with humorous diatribes denouncing everything from organized religion to diet soda" (7). Wade has not only read the *Almanac* dozens of times, but has watched, played, or listened to each of the thousands of artifacts mentioned in the text: "I read every novel by every single one of Halliday's favorite authors," he explains,

> And I didn't stop there...If it was one of Halliday's favorites like *WarGames, Ghostbusters, Real Genius*, *Better off Dead*, or *Revenge of the Nerds*, I rewatched

> it until I knew every scene by heart…I watched every episode of *The Greatest American Hero*, *Airwolf*, *The A-Team*, *Knight Rider*, *Misfits of Science*, and *The Muppet Show*…He listened to everything. So I did too. Pop, rock, new wave, punk, heavy metal. From the Police to Journey to R.E.M. to the Clash. I tackled it all. (62-3)

Wade maintains an encyclopedic knowledge of these items, which he gleefully flaunts at every opportunity, challenging friends and rivals (and readers) with bits of obscure trivia ("Can you name the next three games in the [*Swordquest*] series?"). This proves extremely valuable as he makes his way through the stages of the hunt after being the first to complete the initial challenge five years after it began. In one part, Wade is placed within a simulation of the 1983 film *War Games* and tasked with role-playing as its protagonist, David Lightman. To win, he must recite, without error, every single line of dialogue spoken by Matthew Broderick's character as the film plays out around him. The same trick is repeated toward the end of the novel, when he must re-enact every scene from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*—a task he relishesb: "Reenacting the film wasn't just easy—it was a total blast" (357).

Even outside of the contest itself, the novel is riddled with references to preexisting media and consumer products (*Entertainment Weekly*'s review called it "the literary-fiction equivalent of VH1's *I Love the* 80's"). Take, for instance, its discussion of the intellectual properties that have been ported into the OASIS:

> GSS had also licensed preexisting virtual worlds from their competitors, so content that had already been created for games like *Everquest* and *World of Warcraft* was ported over to the OASIS, and copies of *Norrath* and *Azeroth* were

> added to the growing catalog of OASIS planets. Other virtual worlds soon followed suit, from the *Metaverse* to the *Matrix*. The *Firefly* universe was anchored in a sector adjacent to the *Star Wars* galaxy, with a detailed re-creation of the *Star Trek* universe in the sector adjacent to that. Users could now teleport back and forth between their favorite fictional worlds. *Middle Earth*. *Vulcan*. *Pern*. *Arrakis*. *Magrathea*. *Disc-World*, *Mid-World*, *Riverworld*, *Ringworld*. Worlds upon worlds" (49; emphasis added).

For Cline, it wasn't enough, apparently, to note that worlds from various movies and games existed in the OASIS; they needed to be catalogued. This is how the novel works: rather than describing things, Cline typically just says they look like, or *are*, something from a movie, show, or game. Notably, the reader's recognition of these artifacts is usually unaddressed—either you know what Arrakis is or you don't. Save for the occasional brief identifier when the reference is particularly central to the plot ("I was inside the first scene of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Another of Halliday's favorite films, and perhaps the most beloved geek film of all time" [355]), the entirety of the novel follows this pattern. Hardly a page goes by without at least one nod to a movie, song, game, or consumer product from the 1980s. As Jonathan Alexander notes, even the Twitch-esque streams that Wade and his friends operate "are filled with preexisting content, favorite TV shows, anime, or movies, played on endless loops" (529-30): "Art3mis," Wade explains, "also ran her own vidfeed channel, Art3misvision, and I always kept one of my monitors tuned to it. Right now, she was airing her usual Monday evening fare: an episode of Square Pegs. After that would be ElectraWoman and DynaGirl, followed by back-to-back episodes of Isis and Wonder Woman. Her

programming lineup hadn't changed in ages. But it didn't matter. She still got killer ratings" (203). Seemingly everything in the novel is anchored to some '80s-specificity: watches are *Swatches*, sunglasses are *Ray-Bans*, VCRs are *Betamaxes*. Media and consumption are inescapable.

To those unfamiliar with Cline's novel, or with Steven Spielberg's 2018 film adaptation, this might sound like the premise for a salient critique of twenty-first-century American culture. *Ready Player One*'s merging of dystopia, simulated reality, and hyperfixation on nostalgia for consumer products is primed to offer astute insights into the same backward glancing nature of contemporary American life that this project seeks to describe. And it does—albeit indirectly and inadvertently. This pursuit (such that it exists) is undercut by the fact that Cline is not only *not* seeking to offer such a critique, but his inclusion of these elements is actually a matter of pure homage and celebration. A self-described "full-time geek" (Egan) who traveled between stops on the novel's book tour in a vintage DeLorean complete with a model *Back to the Future* flux capacitor, Cline is as infatuated with '80s pop culture as his character Halliday. The novel's nostalgic fixation on the 1980s largely comes from the fact that its creator (born in 1972) maintains a nostalgic fixation on the 1980s of his adolescence;[1] his characters reference things because he likes them (and, crucially, because he wants his readers to like them too). Further, while the novel's '80s retromania may have been launched by the contest, Cline repeatedly emphasizes the idea that Wade and his friends *really do love this stuff*

[1] Notably, the novel offers no explanation for why Halliday and the world in 2041 is *exclusively* obsessed with the media of the 1980s, why there seems to be so little reverence for classics from even the 1990s. The only explanation is that, as the time of his adolescence, the 1980s are the primary object of Cline's nostalgia. As I pointed out in Chapter One, Spielberg's adaptation recognized the limitations of this approach, and extended references into the 2000s with figures like Master Chief from the *Halo* franchise.

and aren't just in it for the prize. For Cline, this is not the story of a decaying planet whose abject citizens are locked into a dog-eat-dog contest driven by an unnatural obsession with pop culture they never experienced; it's a righteous struggle for the soul of the internet between the true fanatics who appropriately revere '80s pop culture and the "poseurs" who are just using the contest to win glory, wealth, or power. The abundant references throughout the novel thus express unbridled enthusiasm rather than social commentary; as Laura Hudson correctly pointed out, "Ready Player One [is] far too joyously self-absorbed in its referential excesses to step back and examine what they might mean" ("Serious Bill-Paying Skillage").

To the extent that it does present some kind of critical agenda, the novel's focus is instead on the dangers of *excess*, tied directly to its virtual world. The novel's penultimate chapter concludes with the gamer equivalent of Ferris Bueller's "you just might miss it" quip: "as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's also the only place where you can find true happiness. Because reality is *real*" (364). *Ready Player One*, put simply, is more concerned with people playing games by themselves at the expense of their social life (despite otherwise championing the community-building that the OASIS provides) than it is with the sociocultural textures of a dying empire (even as it readily invokes them). Its message, exemplified in the aphorism above, is that, while escapism is necessary, people should be careful not to come untethered from those around them. Notably, despite being a form of escapism, nostalgia is not similarly problematized within the novel, and is seemingly exempt from Cline's warning—which makes sense given that nostalgic escapism is arguably the novel's *rasion d'être*. "Nostalgia," Cline explained in an interview with *Slate* in 2015, "is good. Nostalgia is like video games, or music, or movies.

It's a form of escapism," adding "I wasn't trying to make a judgment call [in the book]" (Brogan). This separation between form and content enables Cline to produce a dying world captivated by bygone styles from half a century earlier (which hardly any of the remaining population experienced the first time around) motivated by a winner-take-all competition that promises its winner untold fame and fortune, while also using this setting not as a source of lament, or even a warning of things to come, but simply as the staging ground for an action-adventure novel whose ultimate moral is that you should log off from time to time.

It's worth emphasizing, in light of all of this, that the novel's dystopian setting is really just a checklist of tropes from a twenty-first-century apocalyptic imagination. Climate, energy, technology, corporate power, capitalism, poverty, war, famine, disease: all of these crises converge in *Ready Player One*'s vision of the future, but they also remain largely outside of the plot itself, existing mainly as a backdrop for the novel's action. There is, for instance, no attention paid to the environmental impact of powering something as massive as the OASIS. In a strange twist, the novel actually suggests that the energy crisis helped *foster* the growth of the OASIS: "The ongoing energy crisis contributed greatly to the OASIS's runaway popularity. The skyrocketing cost of oil made airline and automobile travel too expensive for the average citizen, and the OASIS became the only getaway most people could afford" (59). Poverty is also only invoked to offer a backstory for its protagonist who, by the midpoint of the novel, has earned enough money from his progress in the competition to leave behind the Oklahoma City trailer park in which he grew up. This is dystopia as blank form, a genre not only emptied of its original critical function, but subsequently repurposed for unadulterated fun. As an author,

this is Cline's M.O. James Hibberd correctly points out in a 2020 interview with Cline published in *Entertainment Weekly* that, despite their settings, *Ready Player One* and Cline's 2015 follow-up *Armada* (in which the world, facing a hostile alien invasion, is saved by a guy who's really good at video games) are "far from bleak downers; both serve as wish-fulfillment escapist page-turners centered around high-stakes pop culture-stuffed treasure hunts, a world his fans are rather eager to reenter." Constance Grady's summary of the novel in *Vox* illustrates this incongruity: "The premise [of the novel] is appealingly *silly* and *insubstantial*: It's 2045, and the *dystopian* world has become *unbearable*" (emphasis added). Cline himself echoes the same sentiment towards the end of the *Slate* interview:

> [Jacob Brogan:] *Ready Player One* offers a pretty bleak vision of the future. The world is broken, and there's almost no way to fix it, so all that's left to do is get really good at video games. Do you share the novel's cynicism?
>
> [Cline:] The human condition is by its very nature painful. Becoming aware that you're going to die some day informs the rest of your life. And it's also what gives your life meaning, urgency. Virtual reality would be the ultimate escape, a copy of reality that's the way you want it to be, which makes human beings dodge to some degree, but it's also dangerous, as the real world, where our real lives happen, becomes less urgent.
>
> But I wasn't trying to write a cautionary tale with *Ready Player One*—I was just trying to write a fun science-fiction action adventure story in the vein of the

stories I loved.

To read *Ready Player One* as its author apparently intended requires readers to divorce the novel's dystopian setting from its core meaning in a way that seems antithetical to the very existence of dystopia. This raises the question: why invoke a dying world at all if only to shrug at it and look elsewhere?[2]

To ask readers not only to imagine a hopeless future, but actually to find pleasure in it is, on its face, a strange request. It seems self-contradictory. And yet, a survey of popular American media of the past two decades (at least) suggests that this kind of dystopian entertainment is exceedingly common. From disaster movies and post-apocalyptic fiction to the mid-2000s zombification of all kinds of media, imagining a bleak future has become the standard. To imagine a dystopian future is then to do what everyone else does. One might ask, nonetheless, why dystopia has become so commonplace, and if there's any broader relationship between the novel's setting and its narrative purpose that might clarify this trend. Here, the interview with *Slate* reveals something interesting about the way that Cline conceives of the dystopian imagination. After Brogan pushes back against the author's retreat into intent—"But do you think that dystopias…hurt our ability to imagine a better future?" —Cline responds "I think real life hurts our ability to imagine a better future." In this, Cline recognizes a connection between social conditions and fictional dystopian futures, that the social shapes the aesthetic more than the reverse. Dystopian fiction, in other words, is the product of a world that encourages one to imagine a negative future. This is not a new formulation, of

[2] It's also worth asking how we've reached a point where dystopia, and in particular a dystopia that very closely mirrors our present, can provide the setting for a "fun science-fiction action adventure," where it can be something other than a cautionary or critical project—where, beyond this, such a book can not only exist but become a bestseller and spawn a film directed by Steven Spielberg.

course; what is noteworthy, however, is that, in writing *Ready Player One*, Cline responds to these conditions by constructing a world not of *escape*—one in which characters triumph over these challenges to make the world anew—but of *escapism*, where the central motive is distraction. The characters in this novel are not trying to piece together a new society from the rubble or trying to rebel against an oppressive government—in other words, to effect systemic change; they're just trying to find a way to shut it all out and have fun. *Ready Player One* in effect turns its back on the problems of the world, even as it regularly suggests their inevitability.

In this way, the novel is borne of and pivots upon an inability to imagine anything better. At the conclusion of the *Slate* interview, Cline offers only the faintest glimmer of hope (one that, perhaps unsurprisingly, takes the rhetorical form of an '80s action-adventure movie): "Today, the cavalier attitude that a lot of people have about climate change and overpopulation, deforestation and oceans dying off, all of that, is really scary. But also, as human beings, that's when we really shine and kick ass, when our backs are to the wall and our whole species' survival is in question." It's unclear what prior pseudo-apocalyptic events Cline is referring to, but he's not alone in adopting this deterministic, bystander theory of change: *surely somebody will do something*. In light of these beliefs, it's also unsurprising that the novel repeatedly presses the claim that there is no clear solution to any of the problems facing the world. The disbelief in the possibility of fundamental change is why Wade and his cohort are so focused on saving the OASIS from the evil corporation that wants to gain control of it and over-monetize their only viable form of escape/-ism: without escapism, they have nothing, and fighting to ensure that such a totalizing form of escapism isn't necessary is evidently out of the question.

And, as Cline implies above, it doesn't have the makings of a "fun" novel.[3] Repeatedly, the novel emphasizes the related notion that we are surrounded by systems beyond our control, and that all action outside the OASIS is just "rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic" (201). The goal, really, is to ensure control over the management of the inevitable decline. In this, *Ready Player One* anticipates Adam Curtis's arguments, in his 2016 film *Hypernormalisation*, about the contemporary pattern of constructing alternate realities in an effort to manage the *unmanageable*.

It would be very easy for Cline's novel to push beyond mere management and end with its heroes saving the world from its impending demise or, at the very least, offering a path to salvation. Such an ending would not outwardly compromise the novel's fidelity to its genre, nor contradict its message. One might argue, in fact, that Wade shifting focus outside the OASIS in this way would actually enhance the novel's message about the value of not abandoning the real world. This is not to say that Cline is obliged to follow this path, but to point out that the lack of contradiction suggests another reason for the novel's focus to remain virtual. If not directly related to artistic cohesion, then perhaps the reason is that Cline simply believes that solving these issues would be a bridge too far, too much of a fantasy, even for a "fun sci-fi action-adventure novel." Perhaps even a novel where a bunch of teenagers outwits the second-most powerful corporations on the planet, with access to unlimited resources, must have its limits. And yet, for a book so thoroughly driven by homage, that depicts a fantasy whose dimensions are shaped by these influences at every turn, it's curious that its big ending doesn't have the same

[3] This notion seems to contradict the immense commercial success of young adult series like *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *Harry Potter*, as well as a number of '80s movies (more on that later), which suggest that changing the world actually *is* compatible with Cline's goal of "fun action adventure."

weight. The novel's final battle in the OASIS, between gunters loyal to Wade and IOI's slew of mercenaries, is appropriately grand in scale—bearing all the hallmarks of famously epic scenes like the Battle of Helm's Deep from *Lord of the Rings*—but, in terms of real-world consequences, it barely registers: "the status quo established at the beginning of the narrative," Jason Alexander explains, "does not change: the world's primary communications networks will still be in the hands of a billionaire whom the rest of the users will have to trust to keep them safe from more villainous billionaires. The only difference is that a nerd now has control" (529). And even this is just a continuation of the status quo, as, at least at GSS, a nerd was already in control. Wade replacing Halliday ensures that nothing will change—and this is by design: Wade wins the contest by proving that he knows Halliday's favorite things better than anyone on the planet. Poverty, starvation, the energy crisis, climate change, and every other horror of contemporary life the novel invokes also remain completely unaffected. This is not incidental, but actually essential to the world Cline has built: the persistence of these conditions is necessary because Wade's triumph is only given meaning by the continued existence of the crises threatening the world; if the world were made better, the battle for the OASIS would lose its significance—a fitting conclusion in a posthistorical world that, as Baudrillard once pointed out, is more concerned with *preventing* things from happening than producing new events (17).

The scope of the novel's victory is therefore at odds with the '80s media it reveres, most of which is significantly more ambitious: Luke, Han, and Leia save the galaxy from authoritarianism, David Lightman prevents thermonuclear war, and Indiana Jones prevents the Nazis from attaining immortality, while Wade only manages to secure the

future of video games (and only until everything else collapses). Here, the novel's desire for realism seems to have come into conflict with its fantasy, producing a contradiction that it must try to reconcile: how do you save a world that can't be saved?

The answer is found in the fact that they do save *a* world. Keeping the OASIS out of the hands of the greedy megacorporation IOI, prevents a future in which the problems of the real world leak into the virtual one. Early in the novel, Wade lays out the stakes involved in preventing IOI from gaining control of the OASIS:

> They would start charging a monthly fee for access to the simulation. They would plaster advertisements on every visible surface. User anonymity and free speech would become things of the past. The moment IOI took over, the OASIS would cease to be the open-source virtual utopia I'd grown up in. It would become a corporate-run dystopia, an overpriced theme park for wealthy elitists. (33)

IOI is presented in contrast to Halliday's *benevolent* megacorporation, GSS—which, as Wade explains in the sequel, has become an "unstoppable megacorporation with a global monopoly on the world's most popular entertainment, education, and communications platform" (29). Thus, as A.O. Scott points out in his review of the film, *Ready Player One* (book and novel) relies on a dichotomy that doesn't exist in reality:

> Halliday is a sweet, shaggy nerd with a guileless Northern California drawl and a deeply awkward manner, especially around women. Sorrento [the face of IOI] is an autocratic bean counter, a would-be master of the universe who doesn't even like video games. These characters are clichés, but they are also allegorical figures. In the movie, they represent opposing principles, but in our world, they are pretty much the same guy. A lot of the starry-eyed do-it-yourselfers tinkering

in their garages and giving life to their boyish dreams back in the '70s and '80s turned out to be harboring superman fantasies of global domination all along. They shared their wondrous creations and played the rest of us for suckers, collecting our admiration, our attention and our data as profit and feudal tribute.

The only difference between the two corporations—which, for *Ready Player One* is the *crucial* one–is one of aesthetic preference. It's OK for such figures to exist, the novel suggests, as long as they like the right things.

By winning the contest, Wade preserves the continued functioning of the OASIS *as it is*, in effect saving the (virtual) world from the fate to which the real one has already succumbed. *Ready Player One* is thus able to invoke the world-saving convention of the media Cline loves, to preserve his fantasy of triumph, by displacing it into a different context. Through the OASIS, then, *Ready Player One* constructs a substitute world that, unlike the real one, *can* be saved.

In saving the OASIS, *Ready Player One* also evinces a nostalgia for a type of story that is rarely told in the twenty-first century, about a world in which destruction can be averted. Cline's attempt to reproduce this narrative is thus an expression of nostalgic fantasy for an outmoded media convention, a Jamesonian pastiche in which obsolete cultural forms reemerge, hollowed of their original function and redeployed as style.[4]

The question, however, still remains: if not its influences, what delimits the extent of the novel's triumphs and the changes they enact? Here we see contemporary social reality structuring (arguably superseding) Cline's homage. In its reluctance to imagine a better future beyond its virtual world, as well as its retreat into '80s pop culture, the novel

[4] See Jameson's intro to *Postmodernism* and chapter nine, as well as "Postmodernism and Consumer Society."

expresses sentiments that arose as a result of the conditions of the end of history. In this context, *Ready Player One* doesn't imagine a better future because it can't: because the notion of a better future has lost its credibility; because we're already living in a time that was itself another time's "better future" and, in many ways, have little to show for it (whatever one thinks of the progress of the past few decades, it's difficult to say that we've so far lived up to what was imagined for the twenty-first century); because of, ultimately, a sense that the future is already written and nothing else *is* possible. To paraphrase Mark Fisher, it's easier to imagine the complete virtualization of oligarchic capitalism through the construction of a massive, worldwide video game than it is to imagine anything better.

The novel is an expression of a feeling of powerlessness so pervasive that even the prospect of becoming the wealthiest person on the planet with a controlling stake in the world's largest corporation is not enough to provide one with the ability to imagine a viable alternative to the status quo: midway through the novel, Wade's love interest Art3mis asks "What would you do if you won…How would you spend all that money?" After replying that he'd "move into a mansion. Buy a bunch of cool shit. Not be poor," she presses for more: "Wow. Big dreamer…And after you buy your mansion and your 'cool shit,' what will you do with the hundred and thirty billion you'll have left over?" "Not wanting her to think I was some shallow idiot," Wade explains that he would

> have a nuclear-powered interstellar spacecraft constructed in Earth's orbit…I'd stock it with a lifetime supply of food and water, a self-sustaining biosphere, and a supercomputer loaded with every movie, book, song, videogame, and piece of artwork that human civilization has ever created, along with a stand-alone copy of

the OASIS. Then I'd invite a few of my closest friends to come aboard, along with a team of doctors and scientists, and we'd all get the hell out of Dodge. Leave the solar system and start looking for an extrasolar Earthlike planet (97-8)

When Art3mis asks if Wade realizes that "nearly half the people on this planet are starving" Wade replies that "the reason so many people are starving is because we've wrecked the planet. The Earth is dying, you know? It's time to leave" (98). Art3mis, often positioned as the novel's moral core, replies that she would use the money to "make sure everyone on this planet has enough to eat. Once we tackle world hunger, then we can figure out how to fix the environment and solve the energy crisis," which elicits an eye roll from Wade: "Right…And after you pull off that miracle, you can genetically engineer a bunch of Smurfs and unicorns to frolic around this new perfect world you've created…You really think it's that simple…That you can just write a check for two hundred and forty billion dollars and fix all the world's problems?" (98). In this, Wade expresses the belief that the only option is, essentially, giving up—the problems are beyond solving. The novel initially poses this as a debate between a supposedly clear-eyed cynicism and lofty idealism, and, at least here, it seems to suggest that neither is totally correct. In the novel's final scene, after they've defeated IOI and won the contest, Wade and Art3mis return to the question:

"So what happens now?"

I smiled. "We're going to use all of the moolah we just won to feed everyone on the planet. We're going to make the world a better place, right?"

She grinned. "Don't you want to build a huge interstellar spaceship, load it full of videogames, junk food, and comfy couches, and then get the hell out of

here?"

"I'm up for that, too," I said. "If it means I get to spend the rest of my life with you." (371)

Cline ultimately avoids declaring one approach correct, dissolving the debate into a romantic appeal. Wade, though, having now learned the meaning of love and friendship, does seem to have developed a desire to think beyond himself, and recognizes the value of striving for something even if the result isn't guaranteed.

If the end of *Ready Player One* seems to leave the door open for the possibility of a better future, Cline's 2020 sequel quickly shuts it and, by the end, locks it and throws away the key. *Ready Player Two*, taking place three years after the end of the first novel, begins with Wade recounting the group's activities in the time since. Following his victory in Halliday's egg hunt, Wade elected to share his wealth and control of GSS with his three friends who helped him along the way. With their newfound prosperity, each has taken on considerable philanthropic missions aimed at combating pet issues ranging from world hunger to housing discrimination against the LGBTQ community. In true neoliberal fashion (they are, after all, the most powerful people on the planet), they also attempted to solve problems on the level of government itself:

> We'd also started funneling cash to the struggling U.S. government and its citizens, who had been surviving on foreign aid for decades. We paid off the national debt and provided aerial-defense drones and tactical telebots to help reestablish the rule of law in the rural areas where local infrastructure had collapsed along with the power grid. Human law enforcement officers no longer had to risk their own lives to uphold the law. Our police telebots were able to

> carry out their mission to serve and protect without putting any human lives at risk. Their programming and their operational fail-safes prevented them from harming anyone in the line of duty. (61)

Unfortunately for the so-called High-Five,[5] their "noble efforts weren't moving the dial…For the time being we were holding chaos and collapse at bay, but humanity's perilous predicament just kept getting worse." The reason, Wade explains, was "painfully obvious": "We'd already passed the point of no return. The world's population was fast approaching ten billion people, and Mother Earth was making it abundantly clear that she could no longer sustain all of us—especially not after we'd spent the past two centuries poisoning her oceans and atmosphere with wild industrial abandon. We had made our bed, and now we were going to die in it" (61). In response, he has used his considerable wealth to begin construction of the same "nuclear-powered interstellar spacecraft" he fantasized about in the first book, with room for "up to two dozen human passengers" and the goal of finding a new planet fit for human habitation (62). Even as he recognizes the optics of this move, Wade rationalizes it as the only way to ensure a future for humanity, and, thus, "the only responsible thing to do": "with Earth teetering on the brink of destruction, leaving our eggs in one basket was foolish" (65).

The return of Wade's cynicism in the early stages of the second novel is partly driven by the disintegration of his relationship with Art3mis (which was arguably the true source of his newfound conviction anyway); however, despite having won her back by the end of the novel, and having once again beaten back the forces that threaten the future of the OASIS, the spaceship actually remains the group's (and, seemingly Cline's) only

[5] One of the quintet's original members was murdered by IOI during the Hunt, and so, while the moniker remains, the High Five is now only four.

tangible solution to problems the world faces, albeit with a slight twist. Following the discovery of technology that can create sentient AI clones by mapping human brains, which is the catalyst of most of the novel's action, the group decides in the end to send copies of themselves and the OASIS into space to search for a habitable planet while they remain on Earth. The AI copy of Wade's consciousness, who narrates the final chapter, is uncharacteristically hopeful despite recognizing that very little has actually changed:

> Things aren't perfect. The people who remain back on Earth are still facing plenty of huge problems. But they also still have the OASIS as their collective means of escape.
>
> […]
>
> Even with all of the problems confronting our counterparts back on Earth, it's comforting to know that there are smart, resourceful people back there, doing everything in their power to make life better for their fellow human beings—while digital copies of many of those same people are out here in space, searching to find humanity a new home. (587-8)

Here, Cline again slips into the same bystander theory of change that he expressed in the *Slate* interview—*something, somehow needs to change; hopefully someone will figure it out because I can't.* As in *Ready Player One*, *Ready Player Two* closes with an attempt at an '80s movie morality lesson: "the only thing you can do is keep right on playing. Because the game that is your life still isn't over yet. And there's no telling how far you might be able to get, what you might discover, or who you might meet when you get there" (589). Since Cline has stated that the final book in the trilogy will be a prequel, this is how the saga ends. There are only two options for dealing with the horrors of the

modern world: escapism (distraction) and giving up (abandonment).

There is, here and throughout both novels, a paradox: a seemingly unshakable belief in the power of the individual to overcome whatever is laid before them coupled with the sense that we've reached the end of what can be achieved (or, at least, the limit of what can be imagined). As Susan Aronstein and Jason Thompson have argued in their examination of the novel's appropriation of Arthurian legend, *Ready Player One's* conclusion offers readers "the grail, the ultimate Easter egg, arguing that true meaning…lies outside of the world of the game, in the meta-level of genuine human exchange. [Cline] paints our modern world as a wasteland in need of an Arthur to restore it, and no code, trick, or joke—no magic, no memory, and no Merlin—he argues, can do that" (63). And yet, in *Ready Player Two*, no Arthur arrives. Wade may have found the grail—twice—but salvation is not on the horizon.[6] In this, the scale of Wade's success is both massive and minuscule. He has taken on the second most powerful corporation in the world, outsmarted literally everyone else on the planet, and defeated a supposedly all-knowing all-powerful artificial intelligence, and yet none of it has had any broader impact on the crises faced by humanity that the series, for some reason, cannot let go of. In truth, at the novel's close, *nothing has really happened*: a narrative that begins by invoking a multitude of global catastrophes supposedly ends in triumph despite its champion having made zero impact on any of them. Not only this, but Wade's victories also ensure the survival of one of the major obstacles to real change in the novel: the OASIS itself. The novel makes clear that, more than anything else, Halliday's invention encourages

[6] Additionally, it's hard to see how "genuine human exchange," as Aronstein and Thompson put it, will solve climate change or the energy crisis, so the novel's supposed insights aren't really up to the task facing the world either.

*escapism* (and thus passive acceptance) over *escape* (liberation), placating the masses[7] and leaving them in a state of inertia.

The series is thus an expression of the profound pessimism that has developed as a result of the end of history. Wade synthesizes this view early in the first novel, soberly summarizing the state of the world as he wishes someone else had done for him:

> "Basically, kid, what this all means is that life is a lot tougher than it used to be, in the Good Old Days, back before you were born. Things used to be awesome, but now they're kinda terrifying. To be honest, the future doesn't look too bright. You were born at a pretty crappy time in history. And it looks like things are only gonna get worse from here on out. Human civilization is in 'decline.' Some even say it's 'collapsing.'" (17-18)

Because fundamental change is seemingly impossible, and because the system doesn't provide—and, in fact, regularly suppresses—any stories that give meaning to these struggles, this powerful sense of hopelessness emerges. It's no wonder that the novels can only conceive of two approaches: distraction and abandonment. This is what happens when the belief that a system is broken couples with the notion that there is no alternative to it. All there is left to do is either look away or fantasize about escape. A few pages after the description above, Wade explains that Halliday's Easter Egg hunt provided him with precisely this, a way to find meaning in the world through purposeful distraction: "Suddenly, I'd found something worth doing. A dream worth chasing. For the last five years, the Hunt had given me a goal and purpose. A quest to fulfill. A reason to get up in the morning. Something to look forward to. The moment I began searching for the egg, the future no longer seemed so bleak" (19). In the second novel, however, after the

[7] Once again, for Cline, this is a *good* thing.

excitement of the Hunt has dissipated, Wade drifts back into hopelessness about the future of humanity and begins construction on the aforementioned spaceship. The hunt for the egg is thus revealed to be only a temporary respite from the insurmountable despair facing the planet. Nothing good is permanent, and presentiment always returns.

This inevitable malaise is one of the ways in which the novel's nostalgia interacts meaningfully with its end-of-history-inflected dystopia. In a time when things only seem to get worse, and the future appears to be written in stone, the past naturally becomes a place of solace and comfort. Importantly, however, this is not actually the function of nostalgia for the novel's characters: Wade and his friends never really express any nostalgic longing. Aside from generally lamenting the present decline and distracting themselves from the present with the artifacts of another time, there are no "I was born in the wrong generation" discussions in either novel, and none of the characters express a particular desire to "go back" despite the 1980s, for all its (generally unacknowledged) faults, appearing considerably better than the novel's present. The reason for this is simple: having never experienced the actual 1980s, their entire notion of the period comes from media and consumer products, which, through the OASIS, they can already experience firsthand in perfect simulacra. Wade's best friend Aech, for instance, has modeled her personal chat room after "a large suburban rec room, circa the late 1980s. Old movie and comic book posters covered the wood-paneled walls. A vintage RCA television stood in the center of the room, hooked up to a Betamax VCR, a LaserDisc player, and several vintage videogame consoles. Bookshelves lined the far wall, filled with role-playing game supplements and back issues of Dragon magazine" (37). What *Ready Player One* stages for its characters, is not a nostalgia for events, for a specific

time or a place filtered through a particular subjectivity, but an attachment to *things*—which are much more easily reproduced and acquired, and, furthermore, have a particular aesthetic quality. There's a reason the VCR is a Betamax from the 1980s rather than a Toshiba from the early 2000s, though the two objects served the exact same purpose in reality—although, in Aech's virtual chat room, neither serve *any* purpose aside from contributing to the room's aesthetic. As in *Stranger Things*, we see here a hierarchy at work, where the aesthetic of an object is its most essential quality: style for the sake of style. It's easy to see why, when the objects of their infatuation are immediately available, these characters don't long for the past that used to contain them. Insofar as one's nostalgia is tied to *things* rather than experiences, the OASIS has, in effect, made longing obsolete. Baudrillard has argued that "Nostalgia…was beautiful for never being satisfied, as was utopia for never being achieved" (*The Illusion of the End* 120). The fantasy *Ready Player One* stages, in which nostalgia *can* be satisfied, is a grotesque revision that simultaneously deprives it of its beauty and its critical potential. *Ready Player Two* takes this a step further, incorporating the creation of technology that enables one to relive memories—theirs or someone else's. This objectification and commodification of memory, transposes intangible events into products that can be obtained and consumed.

The OASIS itself is also a space that is fundamentally shaped by the end of history. It is a site where the cultural has utterly supplanted the political and the historical. At one point in the first novel, Wade notes that real-world elections were pointless, but that he always voted in OASIS elections [201]). In a reactionary move, Cline, through Wade, also expresses disdain for the fundamentals of democracy, noting that "now that everyone could vote from home, via the OASIS, the only people who could get elected

were movie stars, reality TV personalities, or radical evangelists" (201). The OASIS elections exist only in the form of pop cultural artifacts, wholly abstracted from the context in which they were created. Halliday's virtual reality simulation is thus the epitome of what Slavoj Zižek has described as "a place deprived of its history; a *worldless* place" (10) that exists in the post-ideological world. If, as Jameson has argued, the postmodern subject is one who has lost their sense of history, the OASIS is the ultimate postmodern space, a post-historical playground. In Cline's future, all conflict plays out in the artificial world of culture, a literalization of contemporary "culture wars" but further abstracted from political reality in favor of petty disputes over the management of products and aesthetic properties. History, as a result, doesn't really happen anymore. In fact, not only is the OASIS a space where the transplanting of culture for history and politics ensures that meaningful ever happens, stasis is actually its primary function. The OASIS exists to provide stability in a world of decay.

The OASIS not only works to ensure that the world is trapped in a perpetual present, but also to make the utopian(ized) past inhabitable again—an act that takes place both within the world of the novel and for its readers. As a readerly experience, *Ready Player One* promises to immerse its readers in a world of '80s nostalgia through a fantasy of a future where (via simulation) inhabiting the past is physically (or, at least, *visually*) possible. In one part of the novel, Wade visits a planet where Halliday had also sought precisely this result:

> In the early days of the OASIS, Halliday had created a small planet named Middletown, named after his hometown in Ohio. The planet was the site of a meticulous re-creation of his hometown as it was in the late 1980s. That saying

> about how you can never go home again? Halliday had found a way. Middletown was one of his pet projects, and he'd spent years coding and refining it. And it was well known (to gunters, at least) that one of the most detailed and accurate parts of the Middletown simulation was the re-creation of Halliday's boyhood home. (65)

For Halliday,[8] Middletown was the literalization of nostalgia: instead of returning to his home in a memory, he converted that memory into physical space. The purpose of doing so is unclear, since the town was only populated with invented citizens powered by artificial intelligence instead of friends and family (most of whom are, presumably, dead), and, though one wonders what the use of this kind of hollowed out nostalgic simulacrum might be, it's a question the novel doesn't really interrogate.[9] Nonetheless, with Middletown, the distance that forms the impossibility at the heart of nostalgia seemingly became a little bit less—a tantalizing prospect for readers drawn in by the promise of a romp through the increasingly-forgotten media that shaped their adolescence.

Halliday, we're told, devoted a considerable amount of time to the task of creating Middletown, working not only from memory but also maps, phone books, photographs and other artifacts to piece together what his memory couldn't render. The goal, Wade explains, was "to make everything as authentic and accurate as possible" (102), which raises an important question: authentic and accurate *to what*? The implication from

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[8] And, arguably, for Cline, whose hometown of Ashland, Ohio is located about three hours from Middletown. This is yet another example of Halliday's biography mirroring his creator's.

[9] Middletown is briefly referenced in *Ready Player Two*, when Wade reflects on the OASIS re-creation of the Oklahoma City trailer park in which he grew up: "Those visits made me understand why Halliday had re-created Middletown in such loving detail, when it had been the setting of so many of his own unhappy childhood memories. He wanted to be able to revisit his own past, to get back in touch with the person he used to be, before the world had changed him" (42). While this explanation offers a little more insight, the affordances of visiting a virtual recreation of one's hometown over simply *remembering* it remain unclear.

Halliday's use of these documents is that he was seeking to replicate historical reality by going beyond the limitations of memory; yet, at the same time, nostalgic desire is also shown to have superseded reality as "Halliday had coded the planet so that no matter when you visited or where you were on the surface, it was always a perfect late-autumn afternoon, circa 1986" (101). In this, the supposedly *realistic* recreation is characterized by an impossible subversion of reality designed to *improve* physical reality so that it better reflects the ideal. When Wade arrives in Middletown, he makes note of the AI inhabitants of the town who seem, above all else, designed to evoke *'80sness*, producing another evasion of true authenticity in their hyperrealism: "[they were] all dressed in mid-1980s attire. A woman with a giant ozone-depleting hairdo bobbed her head to an oversize Walkman. A kid in a gray Members Only jacket leaned against the wall, working on a Rubik's Cube. A Mohawked punk rocker sat in a plastic chair, watching a *Riptide* rerun on a coin-operated television" (101). Though Wade doesn't notice, the town's AI population, who seem to have been designed based on a list of "80s things," are remarkably unreal, a reflection not of the actual Middletown, Ohio of 1986 (not everyone in the '80s, particularly in small towns, looked *this* '80s), but more like a cinematic invention where everything is designed to *signify* for an audience—when he first arrives, Wade notes that it was "like stepping out of a time machine" and, having no frame of reference for the 1980s *except* media, adds a few sentences later that it reminded him of the (fictional) town from *Footloose* (101-2). In this way, Middletown is ultimately an *idealized* version of Halliday's hometown that sought authenticity only insofar as it was necessary to evoke the time and place without contradiction, a means of facilitating immersion.

Cline's novel is predicated on the desire to provide this—the world of *Ready Player One*, and its invention of the OASIS, in other words, exists for the purpose of reanimating the past. This desire is instantiated, at least in part, by the end of history, where the future is no longer desirable in itself and the past has morphed into a site of fantasy. The future is invoked in this novel mainly as a means of creating the conditions for the existence of a technology that enables one to inhabit a time that *is* desirable, one that can, crucially, remake that time in its idealized, ultra-desirable form; in short, the future exists in the novel as a mechanism for returning to the past.

If the novel is functionally a mechanism for returning to the past, then it's worth considering *how* it does so. Unlike a novel that is *actually* set in the 1980s either naturally or through some sort of time travel, Cline's series never truly leaves the 2040s. (But, of course, nor does it ever actually arrive at the 2040s; both places are imaginary, one a retrospective simulacrum, the other a prospective projection. The 80s are thus everywhere and nowhere). Wade's trip to Middletown in the first novel, for instance, is purely simulated, and largely a fictional (re)construction. The sequel comes a bit closer in a few scenes that place Wade in the shoes of other people as he experiences their memories firsthand through the OASIS (similar to the "Flicksyncs" of *WarGames* and *Monty Python* from the first novel), but Wade is never *physically* there, and these glimpses of the actual 1980s are brief and deeply personal, which doesn't provide readers much opportunity to fully immerse themselves in the period. The novels' interaction with the past is thus almost exclusively bound up in references to media and consumer products.

In this, Cline's novels evince an extreme form of the same hollowing of allusion

that I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Three. In *Stranger Things*, another highly-referential nostalgic narrative, the main thrust of the relationship between text and referent is presence alone—the text only needs to provide enough to suggest the reference. *Ready Player One* takes this to another level: in *Stranger Things*, these references are often at least partially coded, in the form of trope, narrative structure, sound design, and cinematography (kids riding bikes in the suburbs *evokes* the same in *E.T.*); in the novels, on the other hand, Cline typically just *says the name of the thing* ("Like Marty McFly, I woke up at exactly 10:28 A.M., to the song 'Back in Time' by Huey Lewis and the News" [*Ready Player Two* 39]). It's the authorial equivalent of pointing at an animal in the zoo, saying "hey, look, a tiger," and then moving on to the next exhibit. Formally, this also reflects Fredric Jameson's claim that postmodernism enacts the abstraction of modernist aesthetics (*Postmodernism* 17). Here, the modernist emphasis on *allusion* becomes the postmodernist emphasis on *reference*, taken to its extreme. Meaning is imparted here through gesture alone, contained in the technique itself rather than in what it produces. The reference, in other words, is not a means to an end, *it is the end*. There is nothing deeper lurking in the technique, and the result is a comparatively impoverished experience. As Laura Hudson explained in her review of *Ready Player Two*,

> *There are no pleasures to be had here, only a reminder of things that once produced pleasure*. A random page of dialogue from *The Princess Bride* does not inspire a sense of romantic, swashbuckling adventure. Reciting the names of stars in every John Hughes movie does not convey their adolescent joy and heartbreak. And telling us that a climactic battle "was like Yoda versus Palpatine, Gandalf versus Saruman, and Neo versus Agent Smith" does not make it feel like any of

those far more interesting things. (emphasis added)

*Ready Player One*'s deployment of this hollow referentiality in service of nostalgia is a perfect reflection of the decoupling of nostalgia from experience that I discussed extensively in Chapter One. Not only is it alienated from personal experience, but it's also divorced entirely from any sort of meaningful context: a dangling signifier capable only of evoking recognition. Emotion, in this form, arrives solely in the gratification one might feel from getting the reference and, possibly, the jolt of endorphins that comes from being reminded of something you once enjoyed. Pleasure has largely been outsourced to the past.

This system of nostalgia by referential accumulation is not incidental; it is central to the way that *Ready Player One* operates. It's part of the novel's essence, so deeply ingrained that the first trailer for Spielberg's adaptation (co-written by Cline), which, in keeping with the spirit of its predecessor, prominently featured a cavalcade of recognizable intellectual properties like Master Chief, Chucky, and the Iron Giant, was mocked by viewers online as *Recognizing Things: The Movie*.[10] The text's encyclopedic approach to homage is without question its most prominent feature. This is borne, at least in part, of the novel's aforementioned lack of context for its references. On nearly every page, the reader is confronted by a series of references that they either understand or

[10] This is part of a growing trend in Hollywood as major studios seek to consolidate their brands through synergistic content. The first trailer for the 2021 *Space Jam* sequel, for instance, featured a scene where a crowd of characters from Warner Brothers properties, ranging from *Batman*'s Mr. Freeze and Bette Davis's Baby Jane to the white walkers from *Game of Thrones* and Alex's droogs from *A Clockwork Orange*, watch a basketball game together. This can also be seen to an extent in the 2012 animated film *Wreck-It-Ralph*, and in many of the films from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, particularly the *Avengers* movies. While studios seeking to use new releases as tools for cross-promotion and brand loyalty is not exactly the same as Cline's fanboy exuberance, the formal techniques, and the emphasis on recognition as primary content, fundamentally are.

don't. As Grady puts it, "The primary aesthetic pleasure [of the novel] is one of recognition: Yes, I know that reference, and yes, I agree that it sucks or rocks."

This has led many reviewers and critics to identify exclusion as the novel's central purpose. Megan Amber Condis, for instance, has argued that "The references serve as a gate-keeping mechanism: readers prove themselves to be a part of the gamer in-group described in and valorized by the novel if they can demonstrate encyclopedic knowledge of Halliday's/Cline's canon" (5). This reading, however, doesn't accurately capture the true character of the novel's system of references. While it might be true that readers who recognize Cline's references will feel a sense of thrill or achievement (and perhaps even belonging), it bears repeating that an overwhelming portion of the references in the series are actually to exceedingly mainstream artifacts, many of which are decidedly *not* classic geek/nerd/gamer texts, and for readers who lived through (or arguably even *near*) the 1980s much of the novel will likely be very familiar, whether they identify as part of Cline's subculture or not. Thus, while classic gaming trivia may not appeal to many readers—even self-identified gamers who were born in the late 1990s and have no experience with Atari games like *Galaga* or *Contra*[11]—it also isn't the primary mode of reference in the novel; instead, gaming is merely a subset of the larger class of references in the novel: the 1980s of Cline's adolescence. More than a novel for gamers or geeks, this is a novel built around a reader (or, arguably, author) of a certain age; *Ready Player One*'s ideal reader is one who, like Cline, came of age in or around the 1980s because simply living through this time grants most Americans automatic familiarity with the overwhelming majority of the novel's canon.

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[11] The potential exclusion of the late-millennial or Gen Z gamer provides further proof that "gamer" is not an adequate description of the novel's ideal reader.

Indeed, despite accusations of gate-keeping, *Ready Player Two* makes abundantly clear that Cline *wants* his readers to be able to enjoy his novels, to take part in his nostalgic fantasy, even without getting all of the references. As Samantha Nelson pointed out in her review, Cline's sequel "reads like a fusion between a Wikipedia page and a video game walk-through: It makes copious references but absolutely ensures readers get the joke by having characters share the source of a quote." Moreover, in addition to the references to games and other more conventionally white, masculine pop cultural artifacts like those we saw in the first novel, *Ready Player Two* also spends considerable time discussing those produced by women and people of color (seemingly as a corrective for the criticism Cline faced in the aftermath of the first). Though he might prefer that readers automatically get his references, and readers who do are more likely to take pleasure in the work, the expansion of Cline's canon suggests that his goal is actually the opposite of traditional gate-keeping, in that the novels seek to gain validation *through* recognition. The more readers taking pleasure in the '80s nostalgia-fest, the better. The fact that in both novels' references are often deployed with a triviality that enables unfamiliar readers to continue the story without substantial loss further emphasizes that Cline's goal is inclusive.

Cline seems to want, and surmises his readers want, above all else, to be *recognized*. It's no coincidence that the two most important characters in the novel are essentially avatars for different elements of their creator. Biographically, Halliday and Cline share a lot: similar birth years, similar hometowns in the same state, similar obsessions with the pop culture of their adolescence. They also share a desire to create a world in which their tastes become dominant. At one point in the novel, Halliday's

closest friend and GSS co-founder Ogden Morrow explains that "Jim always wanted everyone to share his obsessions, to love the same things he loved. I think this contest is his way of giving the entire world an incentive to do just that" (122). *Ready Player One* is Cline's attempt to do the same. Wade, too, as Nick Schager points out, serves as a kind of stand-in for Cline:

> Just as Wade uses his Parzival avatar to create a perfect version of himself, so Cline does the same with Wade – since Wade's boundless, super-radical-amazing '80s erudition is really Cline's, and something the author can't help but brag about in detail. When Wade boasts about his virtual car ("my time-traveling, Ghost Busting, Knight Riding, matter-penetrating DeLorean") one can practically hear Cline squealing with delight over the idea of owning such a fit-for-a-fourth-grader's-imagination mash-up vehicle.

In this light, the novels stage a world where its creator is represented by the two most important people on the planet. It's a power fantasy, of sorts, whose source is explicitly cultural, derived from one's mastery of a specific kind of pop culture knowledge. Readers who identify with Wade, Halliday, and Cline—who, in other words, *recognize* themselves within the novel—can also partake in this fantasy. Because this is the foundation of the novel, its popularity is therefore less a matter of aesthetic quality and more a function of its ability to capture readers within this fantasy. It casts Cline as a curator rather than creator, enacting through its gestural referentiality what Mark Fisher labeled the "transformation of culture into museum pieces" (*Ghosts of My Life* 4), decontextualized artifacts made to be discussed but not experienced. Here, the author has engaged in the same act as his character: just as Halliday, through his contest, constructs

a world obsessed with what he deems valuable, so too has Cline, through his novel, created a narrative built around the valorization of his preferred media. The ultimate effect is to create a platform for recognition, in which praise of the novel necessarily involves praise for Cline's taste and, therefore, as I will shortly show, his *identity*.

Recognition in the novel is not simply a matter of being seen within characters; it's actually the central function of the series, the element that provides unity to the entire project. This effort mirrors a larger trend in the pop culture and politics of the period, as the twenty-first century has seen an explosion of recognition claims, where the desire to be "seen and heard," typically divorced from ideologically-driven redistributive measures, has become one of (if not *the*) central mandates of the response to many contemporary social issues. As Nancy Fraser explained in 2000, "Claims for the recognition of difference now drive many of the world's social conflicts, from campaigns for national sovereignty and subnational autonomy, to battles around multiculturalism, to the newly energized movements for international human rights, which seek to promote both universal respect for shared humanity and esteem for cultural distinctiveness. They have also become predominant within social movements such as feminism, which had previously foregrounded the redistribution of resources" (107). This tendency has only intensified since Fraser first described it. Contemporary notions of identity politics, which have in many circles become detached from its more materialist beginnings, perhaps best exemplify the trend.[12]

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[12] This is, of course, not to discount the work of activists and scholars working within various social movements that have proliferated in recent years, from the Movement for Black Lives and prison abolition to #metoo and reproductive justice, nor is it to suggest that identity and materiality are incompatible. It is, on the contrary, to suggest that the mainstreaming of many of these movements has generally also involved a movement away from material and/or redistributive premises toward a more metaphysical emphasis on awareness and identity that has,

The current emphasis on identity and recognition—or, more specifically, their incorporation into mainstream culture outside of the expressly political—has also spawned a number of offshoots that warrant closer attention, especially in the way that they are reflected in Cline's novels. Most notably, as the discourse around identity politics has become mainstream, many Americans now seek to be recognized based on individual, often idiosyncratic, identities that coalesce around aesthetic taste more than conventional social categories such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. This is, of course, not to suggest that race, class, gender, and sexuality are absent from these formulations, or that these categories are somehow discrete. My point here is simply that, in many cases, taste occupies an elevated status in self-definition.

End of history neoliberalism, in other words, indexes identity to patterns of consumption (gamer, Marvel fan, hip-hop head, K-Pop stan), and the self, as a result, must then be recognized through the things that constitute it. In order for a Marvel fan to feel validated, in other words, their favorite movies must be appreciated by the broader public. Critique of the product then becomes a critique of the identity of those who like it.[13] Mediated nostalgia, therefore, is just another expression of consumer choice that has come to define the self. Identity, in this formulation, is a product of the products that one enjoyed as a kid. Recognition of that childhood self becomes a matter of the recognition

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thus far, yielded little in the way of substantial change despite increased visibility and (arguably) public support. This is both a reflection of the difficulty of effecting serious social change on the scale to which these movements aspire, which takes considerable time and effort in the face of seemingly unending hurdles and setbacks, and of the anti-social logic of post-historical neoliberalism, which displays a unique ability to subsume critique into itself in a way that ultimately maintains the status quo. To put it cynically, DEI seminars at Fortune 500 companies have proliferated, but so have police budgets.

[13] This is the animating logic behind a number of recent entries in the culture war—most notably gamergate, whose spirit has been linked to *Ready Player One* by several commentators (Condis; Grady; Hudson).

or validation of the consumer's choice, and re-experiencing the media that helped define an adolescence becomes an act of self-recognition, and, perhaps more importantly, of cultural validation. To be seen and heard, in this context, is to have memories of favorite childhood tv shows seen and heard. *Ready Player One* exemplifies what happens when the consumer preferences that formed an essential part of adolescent identity become obsolete. Where identity has become tied to patterns of consumption and taste, increasing obsolescence results in the subject's feeling misrecognized. In posthistorical neoliberalism, where conventional social structures have become increasingly atomized, cultural irrelevance, when the products that define one's identity are no longer widely recognized (neither understood nor validated), is akin to social death—as Lauren Berlant puts it, "Under capitalism, being in circulation denotes being in life" (42). As a project, *Ready Player One* is thus an attempt to fight against the death of one's identity—to ensure that it remains not only culturally relevant but, most of all, dominant; it is an attempt to reassert the primacy of (a certain kind of) Gen-X[14] pop cultural heritage. As a work of fiction, *Ready Player One* stages a utopian fantasy where this kind of social death never occurs because the world has become enraptured by the increasingly outmoded tastes and pop cultural objects of its creators' adolescence. The novel imagines a future where Gen-X pop culture, and the identities that are tied up in it, are not only still relevant but actually reassert themselves as the dominant force.

This situation arises at the end of history because, in the absence of systemic political alternatives, and with the attendant foreclosing of possibility, neoliberalism suggests instead a marketized solution to social stratification: the way to gain recognition

[14] To be clear, this is not exclusive to Generation-X, either. Millennial memes like "only 90s kids remember" similarly showcase a self that is at least partially constituted through nostalgic recognition.

is to vie for status in the realm of culture. Thus, whether recognition is the structuring mechanism of History as Fukuyama contended, he was, nonetheless, correct to identify recognition as a fundamental force in life at the end of history. Specifically, Fukuyama claims that the innate desire for recognition, modified by the conditions of the end of history, will produce a return to Hegel's originary battles for pure prestige: "Liberal economic principles," he explains, "provide no support for traditional communities; quite the contrary, they tend to atomize and separate people" (325), and thus the decline of community life in the universalized liberal state at the end of history, coupled with the lack of urgent sociopolitical action may lead to "bloody and pointless prestige battles" (328). While he imagines these battles taking the form of literal combat between individuals or groups, the posthistorical outsourcing of conflict to the realm of culture, which Fukuyama didn't quite foresee, has instead led to discursive battles over petty cultural disputes with only prestige at stake. All of this arises out of what Fukuyama terms *megalothymia*, a term he coined in *The End of History* for "the desire to be recognized as superior to other people" (182), a state which, he contends, is fostered by the conditions of the end of history. Though not explicitly antagonistic toward a particular opponent, *Ready Player One* essentially serves this function for Cline and his audience: in its insistence in the greatness of its canon, the novel itself becomes a claim for prestige. Its status as a bestseller then serves to bestow the novel's canon—and, more importantly, the identities it represents—with the recognition they seek. Recognition of the canon's superiority imparts recognition of the subject's superiority.

*Ready Player Two* then plays out as a corrective, in which the freshly recognized subject confers recognition to groups whose contributions might have been excluded

previously, but whom he deems worthy of validation too. Cline's sequel, in other words, is really a book about identity. As such, it reads like a response to criticism leveled at the first novel, which, despite its bestseller status, also met with considerable resistance, especially for the construction of its aforementioned canon. Condis effectively summarizes the opposition the novel faced:

> The pop culture "syllabus" embedded within *Ready Player One* [is] almost exclusively white and male because it reflects and reproduces the historical and material conditions that led to the creation of its featured texts…By lending its authority only to certain texts (texts by and about those who inhabit historically privileged positions within gamer culture) and by excluding, ignoring, or ghettoizing texts by and about those who inhabit other positions, *Ready Player One* reproduces the social system that produced it, a social system in which true, archetypal geeks are modeled on their progenitors: white males. (10)

Ultimately, for many, the novel is premised less on providing the fun action-adventure novel Cline intended, and instead imagines "a world of elitist gatekeeping…a world in which a person's value is determined by their knowledge of esoteric cultural trivia, where those of lesser value must be defeated and wiped away, and where gaming is all that matters. And, crucially, it is a world specifically for straight white men" (Grady). "The main thing *Ready Player One* is doing," Grady, discussing the backlash that the novel faced around the time of the film's release, concludes "is telling those '80s-boy-culture-obsessed gamers that they matter, that in fact they are the most important people in the universe."

*Ready Player One* pivots on Cline's tastes, which are those of an archetypal straight white male geek of a certain age; the novel is, undoubtedly, a power fantasy built *especially* for those who embody that identity. In defense of its alleged homogeneity, however, proponents of the novel might point out that the novel's characters are relatively diverse. The High Five is composed of a white man, a white woman, a black lesbian, and two Japanese men, and, while none are as important as Wade—unambiguously the novel's hero, whose perspective alone focalizes the story—their contributions are essential. These characters, moreover, can be viewed as making the novel's intention to welcome everyone into its fantasy, ignoring the fact that the novel's fantasy is not one in which everyone would want to participate since it is structured in a manner that necessarily excludes (not everyone *likes* this stuff), despite the author's intention.

*Ready Player One*'s treatment of Aech's race and sexuality showcases both the author's "good" intentions and the failures that result from the ideology that shaped his project. Throughout most of the novel, Aech, Wade's best friend and fellow gunter, is referred to using masculine pronouns in response to her avatar's appearance ("a tall, broad-shouldered Caucasian male with dark hair and brown eyes" [38]). Because the two have never met in real life, not until the final third of the novel does Wade (and the reader) learn that Aech is actually, in her words, "a fat black chick" (519). Aech explains her decision to present as a white man in the OASIS:

> Her real name, she said, was Helen Harris, and she was only a few months older than I was. She'd grown up in Atlanta, raised by a single mother. Her father had died in Afghanistan when she was still a baby. Her mother, Marie, worked from

> home in an online data processing center. In Marie's opinion, the OASIS was the best thing that had ever happened to both women and people of color. From the very start, Marie had used a white male avatar to conduct all of her online business, because of the marked difference it made in how she was treated and the opportunities she was given.
>
> When Aech first logged into the OASIS, she followed her mother's advice and created a Caucasian male avatar. 'H' had been her mother's nickname for her since she was a baby, so she'd decided to use it as the name of her online persona. (320)

Here, Cline acknowledges the privileges accorded to his own identity that are denied to others. However, as Condis explains, while "One might think that Aech's story could open up space within the narrative of the novel to critique such a non-inclusive definition of gamer culture…Cline [instead] forecloses this possibility by focusing more on how Aech's masquerade affects his narrator, Wade, than on how it affected her as she lived it" (14). Indeed, the novel follows Wade's reactions very closely as he moves from shock and betrayal ("How could he—*she*—deceive me all these years?" [318]) to forgiveness ("We'd connected on a purely mental level. I understood her, trusted her, and loved her as a dear friend. None of that had changed, or could be changed by anything as *inconsequential* as her gender, or skin color, or orientation" [emphasis added; 321]), but outside of telling her life story, *Ready Player One* pays little attention to the seriousness of the issues Aech's reveal invokes, and these concerns don't arise again until Cline revisits them in the sequel. Further, Wade's framing of Aech's masquerade as "inconsequential"—which "confuses the notion that Aech's race, gender, and sexuality

don't matter to [Wade] with the notion that they do not matter generally" (Condis 15)—perfectly encapsulates the novel's essential ideology: what matters are your tastes rather than your place in any conventional social categories; (pop) culture, again, is everything. With Aech, Cline's point is the *erosion* of difference rather than the equal recognition of it. By dismissing differences of race, gender, and sexuality as immaterial, the novel attempts to pave the way for anyone who enjoys its canon to partake in its fantasy.

The issue, of course, is that the novel is still inherently hierarchical, built around the notion that some cultural artifacts are superior to others, and, subsequently, that the identities tied to the appreciation of these *worthy* artifacts are also superior. At the same time, no matter what he says, Cline can't make race immaterial, and he can't truly create an inclusive canon composed of media that overwhelmingly favors one group. In other words, there is a fundamental contradiction between the novel's desire for inclusion and the entries in its canon. *Ready Player Two* is an attempt to resolve this conflict: if the first novel is an effort to gain recognition for its author and for the readers who share his tastes, its sequel seeks to distribute the same cultural capital to those who might have felt left out based on identity differences.

In *Ready Player Two*, Cline's efforts to remedy this incongruity take two primary forms: recognition through empathy and recognition through media. The former arrives mainly through revelations Wade experiences as a result of the OASIS Neural Interface (ONI), a new technology introduced at the beginning of the novel that "allows an OASIS user to see, hear, smell, taste, and feel their avatar's virtual environment, via signals transmitted directly into their cerebral cortex. The headset's sensor array also monitors and interprets its wearer's brain activity, allowing them to control their OASIS avatar just

as they do their physical body—simply by thinking about it" (8-9). More importantly for Wade's (and the novel's) emotional development, "the ONI allows you to relive moments of other people's lives. To see the world through their eyes, hear it through their ears, smell it through their nose, taste it with their tongue, and feel it through their skin" (9). As Aech explains, this has led to

> a drastic increase in empathy and environmental conservation among daily ONI users, along with an overwhelming drop in racist, sexist, and homophobic ideologies. And that's all around the world, across all age groups and social strata. For the first time in human history, we have technology that gives us the ability to live in someone else's skin for a little while. And we've seen a huge drop in hate crimes around the globe too. And crime rates in general. (108)

All it takes to solve these centuries-old social conflicts, the novel suggests, is the ability to walk a mile in someone else's virtual shoes; the ills of the world are not produced politically, socially, or systemically, but are instead conceived of as *purely* individual phenomena resulting from a deficit of empathy that can be corrected through access to the right experiences. Accordingly, Wade explains, this has had a major impact on his own emotional development:

> Thanks to years of surfing the ONI-net [an online database of curated ONI files that allow the user to experience events from a variety of identities and social positions], I now knew what it felt like to be all kinds of different people, having all different kinds of sex. I'd experienced sex with women while being another woman, and sex with men as both a woman and a man. I'd done playback of several different flavors of straight and gay and nonbinary sex, just out of pure

> curiosity, and I'd come away with the same pure realization that most ONI users came away with: Passion was passion and love was love, regardless of who the participants involved were, or what sort of body they were assigned at birth. (145)

This part of the novel reads like a direct response to Wade's homophobia in the first book, which comes out as anxiety over Art3mis's real identity. The two have never met IRL, but Wade has a "massive cyber-crush" on her nonetheless (35). Though he claims to be certain that she's female, and imagines her looking exactly like her avatar, he also acknowledges multiple times that this might not be true, usually substituting her for (seemingly) the most repulsive person he can imagine: "I reminded myself that the person operating the avatar in front of me might not be a woman at all. This 'girl,' whom I'd been cyber-crushing on for the past three years, might very well be an obese, hairy-knuckled guy named Chuck" (88). This Chuck figure shows up as the embodiment of Wade's sexual anxiety each time he considers the issue. At one point, after telling her that he doesn't "want to find out that I've got a crush on some 300 lb. dude named Chuck who lives in his mother's basement in suburban Detroit," he also falls into transphobia, asking "Are you a woman? And by that I mean are you a human female who has never had a sex-change operation?" (173). The ONI's revelations about gender identity and sexuality are, in this light, an especially pointed apology for moments like these.

The novel doesn't shy away from the implications of the ONI on sexuality and gender identity, either. These developments, Wade explains, also led to a new category: øgender. "People who identified as øgender," he says, "were individuals who chose to experience sex exclusively through their ONI headsets, and who also didn't limit

themselves to experiencing it as a specific gender or sexual orientation" (145). This was not a rare designation:

> Coming out as øgender became incredibly common in the wake of the ONI's release. For the first time in human history, anyone eighteen years of age or older could safely and easily experience sexual intercourse with any gender and as any gender. This tended to alter their perception of gender identity and fluidity in profound ways. It had certainly altered mine. And I was certain that it had done the same thing for every other ONI user with even a mildly adventurous spirit. Thanks to the OASIS Neural Interface, your gender and your sexuality were no longer constrained by—or confined to—the physical body you happened to be born into. (145)

We see deployed here the same kind of liberatory utopian premise that Cline lays out for minorities in the first novel: the OASIS allows you to be whoever you want to be, all you have to do is climb into the right skin: race, gender, sexuality, all of these things are *purely* performative, based in doing rather than being—aesthetics rather than content. Difference, again, is immaterial, and utopia is construed as a place where everyone is, essentially, free to be the same.

This is, of course, *not* the reading Cline seems to intend. The novel is unambiguous in claiming the benefits of these developments, and the affordances of the ONI for individual identity. To show this, *Ready Player Two* introduces a new character, L0hengrin, who was "famous for changing her avatar's gender, unexpectedly and without warning—sometimes in mid-sentence. When she transformed into a male, she seemed to prefer the likeness of a young James Spader, especially his look from the 1985 film Tuff

Turf. Regardless of her avatar's current gender, L0hengrin's public profile specified that her preferred gender pronouns were she and her" (131). After using his OASIS admin powers to snoop through her school records, Wade discovers that L0hengrin had been assigned male at birth. Thanks to the ONI, however, Wade was unperturbed by this news: "Discovering this minor detail didn't send me spiraling into a sexual-identity crisis, the way it probably would have back when I was younger" (145).

The revelations that Wade attains from the ONI are not confined to fleeting moments like these. They are, instead, built into the novel's central quest. At the end of each stage, Wade is thrust into the ONI-captured memories of Kira Morrow, the deceased wife of Halliday's former partner and the object of his unrequited love. These moments chart the emotional history of Halliday's relationship with Kira, which, when he experienced them from her point-of-view, Halliday truly understood for the first time. Wade's journey is meant to provide the same revelations about the inner lives of women that Halliday had gleaned, namely, that they have their own thoughts and feelings, and aren't simply objects of male attention. There's a fundamental crudeness, both philosophical and formal, to the process of empathy the novel lays out—as Samantha Nelson puts it, Wade can't help but point out Kira's breasts each time he's placed within her body. The novel, Hudson notes, "revolves around the idea that after reliving the recorded memories of women, supposedly clueless men experience a moment of enlightenment and now realize that women are people. It never occurs to [Wade] that he also could have come to the same conclusion about [Halliday's misogyny] by using the greatest empathy machine of all, his brain, and running the...program that is listening to other people and believing them about their experiences." Only by (virtually) becoming

someone else can these men understand the experiences of others. Further, the novel's need to point out that women are people is decidedly retro, out of place in the 2020 literary and cultural milieu and more befitting the '80s movies of Cline's adolescence. The author's obsession with the nostalgic pop culture he grew up with has seemingly produced a kind of arrested development, in which his understanding of these issues has not advanced beyond the time they were first revealed to him.

Alongside its discussion of the validity of minority identities, *Ready Player Two* also introduces a reexamination of its canon and the history that underpins it. The novel repeats its predecessor's questing structure, with the "search for the seven shards" replacing the "hunt for the golden eggs." This time, however, rather than sending Wade on a journey through his own favored media as before, Halliday's second quest is built around the media that Kira loved (which, not coincidentally, is quintessentially '80s). As a result, the stages of the search are more focused on the media that would be relevant to a stereotypical (white and straight) '80s girl. The novel spends considerable time celebrating these texts, while also using them as an opportunity to critically explore how they reflect the experiences of women, people of color, and LGBTQ individuals.

Cline's gestures toward inclusion, however, are always filtered through the same flattened neoliberal consumption-recognition matrix: the works of minority artists, and the minority identities (Cline believes) they represent, are recognized in the terms already established by the first novel, that is, their contribution to the pop culture of Cline's adolescence. Instead of validating elements of uniquely black and queer culture, for instance, the novel merely highlights (tenuously) the contributions members of these groups have made to the pre-established '80s pop nostalgia canon; rather than attempting

to recover artistic contributions that were stifled, in other words, *Ready Player Two* only includes references to elements already included, which the previous novel overlooked, such as Prince and, even more problematically, John Hughes movies. "Look," the novel seems to say, "there's something for everyone here." These diversification efforts are also often coupled with dialogue recognizing the representational injustices of the '80s canon, which are named and then quickly discarded—a permissive act, much like *Stranger Things'* acknowledgment of unconscious racial bias that I analyze in Chapter Three. A central aim of *Ready Player Two* is maintaining the integrity of Cline's original canon through incorporation by absorbing more artifacts (and identities) into the existing set-up instead of reconceiving the project.

This effort plays out most extensively when the novel's action moves to two planets, Shermer and Afterworld, where the knowledge and experiences of Art3mis and Aech are fully recognized for the first time. The former planet, Wade explains,

> was home to a lovingly detailed, decades-in-the-making Oasis re-creation of Shermer, Illinois, the fictional Chicago suburb where the filmmaker John Hughes set many of the movies he wrote and/or directed over the course of his celebrated career.
>
> […]
>
> The simulated suburb had a scaled-down replica of Lake Michigan along its northern and eastern borders, and a shrunken version of downtown Chicago bordering it to the west and the south, so all the '80s Windy City landmarks featured in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* could be incorporated in the simulation, too, including the Sears Tower, the stock exchange, Wrigley Field, and the Art

> Institute of Chicago. And out beyond the lake and the Chicago city limits, there was a ridiculously abbreviated version of the United States, so that the simulation could incorporate cities and locations from Hughes's scripted *Vacation* and *Home Alone* films. (292-3)

On Shermer, "interactive re-creations of all of these movies were constantly playing all around you. And the events depicted in those films played out over and over again simultaneously, day after day and week after week, on an endless loop" (296), allowing players to watch their favorite films from new angles or even disrupt the narratives.

Upon the group's arrival, Wade's description of the idyllic town is undercut by critique from Aech and Art3mis:

> The sun was rising above the lake to the east. A beautiful spring morning in an upscale Midwestern suburb at the height of Reagan's America. Period-appropriate cars and trucks—1989 or earlier—filled the tree-lined streets
>
> "Look at this lily-white hellscape," Aech said, shaking her head as she stared out her own window. "Is there a single person of color in this entire town?"
>
> "Sure," Art3mis replied. "But most of them hang out at a place called the Kandy Bar over in Chicago. This place does have a serious diversity problem—like the whole of '80s cinema…"
>
> Aech nodded. "Well, maybe the next shard will be hidden in the kingdom of Zamunda." (302)

This kind of critique is also coded into the planet's structure: after opening a map of the town, Wade notes that "Shermer had a set of railroad tracks running diagonally through

its middle, dividing the town into two more-or-less equal halves, which were labeled RICH and POOR" (296).

Strangely, however, this critique is embedded in a planet designed as an homage that, we are told, was constructed by "legions of fans" over the course of several decades (292). In this, there is an odd tension between the obvious affection Cline and his characters have for Hughes's films, and the way that the novel frames them. If we take *Ready Player Two* seriously, we're left wondering why those who love Hughes's films enough to dedicate years of their life re-constructing the town in the OASIS would so pointedly undercut it. (This question can also be asked of Cline himself.) One way to resolve this quandary is to consider the possibility that this kind of crude critical ventriloquism is actually part of the homage. In this scenario, the presentation of the politics of Hughes's films is to be read as kitsch, a knowing acknowledgment of a shortfall rendered in such a way that it not only fails to undermine the work, but actually enhances it. What was, in its time, a sincere (if cynical) attempt to depict life in America becomes instead a site of humor, a way to laugh at how silly we used to be (which, in turn, subtly promotes the notion that we no longer *are* that way). This procedure also effectively obscures the fact that the reactionary politics of Hughes's films coincided with the ideological project of a burgeoning right-wing movement that has only grown more powerful in the years since. Therefore, by reframing Hughes's politics as a joke, the novel's critique is effectively defanged at the moment it is uttered, with the fundamental crudeness of "RICH" and "POOR" sides of the tracks serving as a mechanism that enables ironic detachment for readers at the expense of a deeper reckoning with the period. This framing, however, though not exactly inaccurate, is also somewhat of an

oversimplification, insofar as Hughes's films are often about imagined conflicts between middle and upper-middle class rather than a simple dichotomy between rich and poor. The novel's criticism likewise mystifies a key premise of the filmmaker's ideological investments. Shermer's geography thus invokes the kind of relationship between fan and reference that is central to *Ready Player Two*'s revised approach to its nostalgic canon, staging the struggle to find pleasure in a problematized past. If you can laugh off the *bad* parts, the novel suggests. you can still enjoy the *good* ones.

These critiques are voiced in the first ten pages of the Shermer section of the novel and then largely abandoned, although midway through the section, the novel adopts a critical pose one final time, as Art3mis debates whether Duckie from *Pretty in Pink* deserves sympathy based on the way that he treats women in the film (317). Otherwise, the novel proceeds unabated as the group (led by Art3mis, who, as a girl, is naturally *the* expert on Hughes's films) spends the next four chapters on Shermer, dressed as the "Dork Squad" from *Sixteen Candles*, trying to solve the latest clue by rearranging events on the planet to reflect the original casting of Robert Downey Jr. (inhabiting the planet as his character from *Weird Science*) as Duckie in *Pretty in Pink* while restoring the film's ending to an earlier version that Hughes supposedly favored but was disliked by test audiences. In other words, the novel retains an overt attachment to Hughes's work, and desires to languish in the nostalgia Shermer induces despite acknowledging the reasons it shouldn't. Importantly, however, though *Ready Player Two* takes steps to point out the flaws in Hughes's oeuvre, and to some extent indicts itself for loving these films anyway, the novel fails to identify, much less reckon with, how they shaped its understanding of the world. In other words, while much of the series is dedicated to surface-level reference,

the ideological underpinnings that are shaped by its canon are largely omitted from the moments of critique. The novel's engagement with Hughes's world(view), in other words, runs deeper than it lets on, particularly in its narrow construction of the social world, which borrows heavily from films like *Home Alone* and *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. While in one section the novel appears to mock the vulgar "RICH" vs. "POOR" framing these films sometimes employ, the series also earnestly reproduces this simplification elsewhere in its insistent belief in the redemptive power of pop culture and teenage rebellion; in its reductively positing race, gender, and sexuality as merely superficial, performative differences, divorced from one's true *inner* self;[15] in its casting Wade's victory over IOI as a win for the little guy, obscuring the fact that GSS, the most powerful corporation on the planet, was already under the control of the supposed-little

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[15] This is not to suggest that the opposite is necessarily true, but to pinpoint, yet again, the retro simplicity of the novel's conception of these issues. In reality, there remains considerable debate about the relationship between performance, identity, and the notion of an "true inner self," most of which is at odds with Cline's work. In *Ready Player Two*, especially, identity is construed purely as a matter of performance, with an emphasis on visual representation similar to the changeable skins found in video games—you are what you look like, in other words. In this, the novel expresses something akin to the belief in the liberatory power of fluidity found in 1990s transhumanism (a fitting match for a novel that also wholeheartedly believes in the similarly retro depiction of the liberatory power of the internet). In its forays into gender theory, *Ready Player Two* also seems trapped in the 1980s and early '90s, bound, in particular, to the same oversimplification of Judith Butler's arguments about performativity that has proliferated in the years since *Gender Trouble*, in which gender is construed as merely, and exclusively, a matter of performance (setting aside the more nuanced questions of social construction, embodiment, and notions of one's inner self that Butler's work tackles). Further, despite nodding to transgender theory with the inclusion of "øgender" identity, the novel also displays an understanding of the relationship between gender, sexuality, and identity that contradicts the arguments of numerous trans theorists, such as Jay Prosser and Gayle Salamon, who suggest that one's sense of identity is not simply produced by performance. Simultaneously, the novel's treatment of the changes brought about by the ONI—"For the first time in human history, anyone eighteen years of age or older could safely and easily experience sexual intercourse with any gender and as any gender"; "People who identified as øgender were individuals who chose to experience sex exclusively through their ONI headsets, and who also didn't limit themselves to experiencing it as a specific gender or sexual orientation" (145)—conflates gender with sexuality by defining gender identity as a function of the gender one performs (or the digital skin one wears) when having sex and the gender (or skin) of the person one has sex with. In this, and each of the examples above, Cline's novel remains mired in antiquated conceptions of the ideas it invokes.

guy whose influence on the cultural field, now near total, had made zero difference to the rapidly deteriorating state of the world (and, in fact, coincided with it). While *Ready Player Two* works to problematize some of its predecessor's tendencies, it primarily voices superficial critiques of the texts it references, while the ideological and philosophical dimensions of these works are reproduced with little alteration.

Ultimately, the novel tries to have its cake and eat it too: it recognizes the complaints levied against its predecessor and then attempts to reconfigure the objects of its attachment so it can partake in the same nostalgic fantasy anyway (while subsequently obscuring its attachment to the more heinous elements of its canon). Rearrangement and realignment in service of maintaining the integrity of the existing project, in other words, substitutes for fundamental change. In this regard, the novel enacts the same "we see you and we hear you" response model increasingly deployed by corporations and public officials embroiled in scandal. Witnessing (itself a form of recognition) takes the place of material action—a hallmark of the posthistorical moment.

Cline modifies this strategy on Afterworld, a planet built around the music of Prince. "The Afterworld's surface," Wade explains, "is covered with a stylized re-creation of downtown Minneapolis in the late 1980s, along with locations from Prince's other movies and music videos. You can walk into a simulation of every club gig and concert he ever performed during his career" (371). This is a welcome change of scenery for Aech, who "probably know[s] more about Prince and his artistic output than any other human being in history" (370). As with Shermer, Afterworld is Cline's attempt to dive into nostalgic artifacts that he presumes would be more relevant to groups (black people, women, the LGBTQ community) that might've felt excluded in the first novel, as well as

an opportunity for the author to consider again the way that heteronormativity shaped his original work. Aech voices this critique by chiding Wade for previously dismissing *Purple Rain* because of latent sexual confusion:

> "And do you remember how many times you actually sat through the entire film with me? Nada. Never. *Not once*. And we both know why, don't we? It was because Prince always made you feel a little sexually confused and uncomfortable, didn't he?"
>
> The old Wade would have denied this. But like I said, the ONI had broadened my horizons. Enough, at least, for me to recognize the truth about my adolescent self.
>
> "Ok, maybe that's a *little* true," I said, smiling. "Whenever I was watching old episodes of Friday Night Videos and 'When Doves Cry' came on, I always averted my eyes when he was getting up out of that bathtub. Every single time." (370)

However, though initially presented as an olive branch to readers of color and a challenge to heteronormativity, Prince's inclusion in the novel also becomes an opportunity for Cline to reflect critically on homophobia. Before finding the Raspberry Beret and defeating the final boss on Afterworld, Aech explains:

> "Later in life, after he became a Jehovah's Witness, Prince came out as anti-gay," she said. "He believed that God didn't approve of homosexuality, so he couldn't either. Can you really believe that, Z?" She shook her head. "For decades he was an icon and a role model to generations of sexually confused kids and adults. He

spoke for us, through his lyrics: '*I'm not a woman, I'm not a man. I am something that you'll never understand.*'"

She started to get choked up and had to pause for a few seconds to collect herself.

"Then, one day," she went on, "Prince suddenly changes his mind, and says, 'No, no. I was wrong all along. You really should hate yourself for being gay because God says it's a sin for you to be the person He made you to be…'" (428)

Cline's treatment of Prince in this section relies on a problematic conflation of gender and sexuality that again belies the author's misunderstanding of the issues the novel raises: the lyrics of "I Would Die 4 U," referenced in the passage above, pertain to gender identity rather than sexuality, while the rest of the section relates to sexuality (Wade's sexual confusion, Aech's lesbianism). Though the two issues may be linked, they are also discrete, and sections like these not only blur the lines between them, but do so from a place of profound misunderstanding, steeped in a decidedly retrograde conception of identity. Further, in light of the critique voiced by Aech, it's somewhat curious that Prince was even selected to begin with, as these biographical realities seem to undercut the value of his inclusion in a way that wouldn't necessarily be true for other figures, particularly ones who actually identify as queer, and don't come with the same anti-gay baggage. If the purpose of including Prince was to reference an artist whose identity and fandom weren't sufficiently invoked in the first novel, to offer Others a chance to celebrate their parts of the '80s, the homophobia discussion in effect undermines the effort. Then again, there are few figures who tick boxes as Prince does, and fewer still

who are recognizably part of the '80s canon. Recognizing an artist who fundamentally isn't part of the existing cultural formation of '80s pop culture would disrupt rather than maintain its integrity, and such an act would be at odds with the fundamental purpose of *Ready Player Two*'s expansion. As on Shermer, Afterworld is Cline's misshapen attempt to celebrate and criticize all at once—this time, an effort made even more incoherent by its bizarre insistence on using a single object to serve multiple, contradictory functions.

This effort illuminates another way to read the novel, which further clarifies the role that its nostalgia plays at the end of history. *Ready Player Two* has been criticized for lacking the charms of its predecessor, and it's easy to see why when you consider the task the book undertakes: *Ready Player Two*'s particular combination of homage and critique reads like a misshapen attempt at simultaneous reiteration, apology, and penance. It seeks, in other words, to apologize for the thing it wants to continue doing—sometimes right in the middle of it. Cline still loves the movies and games of his adolescence, but he also seems to believe those who argued that he shouldn't. The novel is therefore riddled with guilt, plagued by intrusive critical thoughts, such as, "We don't have time for literary criticism right now, Aech, valid though it may be! OK?" (466). It tries but fails to reconcile this contradiction. Perhaps, then, Cline's sequel is less an act of gate-keeping, or chauvinism, than an act of melancholic desperation, an effort to try to make what used to work *work again*. The novel is nostalgic, in this sense, not just for the '80s, but also for the conditions of the first novel's 2011 release, a prelapsarian paradise unimpeded by criticism. Midway through *Ready Player Two*, one of its villains (ventriloquizing Cline's critics) asks "Don't you kids ever get tired of picking through the wreckage of a past generation's nostalgia?...I mean, look around. The entire OASIS is like one giant

graveyard, haunted by the undead pop-culture icons of a bygone era. A crazy old man's shrine to a bunch of pointless crap" (435). On the face of it, the novel's answer is pretty firmly *no*, but *Ready Player Two* is also haunted by the idea that maybe the answer should be *yes*: nostalgia in Cline's series *is* a kind of graveyard, a catalogue of dead things, and *Ready Player Two* contributes mightily to the death of the artifacts it reveres by focusing so closely on their limitations. Even *Ready Player One*, in jubilantly trying to re-assert the relevance of its canon, tacitly acknowledges its demise. In a way, Cline won the battle but lost the war: *Ready Player One* staved off death for just a little while, but, as it always does in the real world, death returned. In the end, the series is all about death: the reinvigoration of dead styles on a dying world with a dead-end future is inaugurated by Halliday's death, and, in its invention of AI copies of human consciousness, the series ends with what Wade describes as the end of death: "We might be part of the last generation ever to know the sting of human mortality. From this moment forth, death would have no more dominion" (578). No longer, the book explains, will people experience loss. Ironically, by defeating loss, *Ready Player Two* also effectively ends nostalgia. The novel, in other words, ends by hoping for a future where it would never need to exist. "I want to give the world the means to ensure that no one will ever have to lose someone they love again," Wade explains, "I think this will make life a lot less painful for most people" (546). Styles die out more quickly than the average person, so, for a life defined by them, nostalgia is all the more vital as a means of escaping the inevitable. Nostalgia, the desire to recover that which has been lost by temporarily reviving the dead, is ultimately about pain management, a way to manage death in a time when there's nothing else to turn to.

# CHAPTER THREE

## *STRANGER THINGS,* NOSTALGIA, AND AESTHETICS

In the summer of 2019, the Netflix series *Stranger Things* partnered with Eggo for a marketing campaign in the build-up to the release of its highly anticipated third season. The show, which follows a group of teens and adults in small-town 1980s Indiana as they struggle to keep at bay a succession of supernatural forces unleashed following the opening of a portal to an alternate dimension, had become a surprise hit following its 2016 premiere, and quickly became the streaming service's most recognizable original production. Eggo waffles—a favorite of Eleven, one of the show's teen protagonists—had seen a surge in sales following the show's premiere and gained iconic status within its fandom, so a partnership capitalizing on the hype represented a logical next step. The two franchises had previously collaborated on a trailer for the series' second season, which premiered during Super Bowl LI, in which a vintage "L'eggo my Eggo" commercial was progressively interrupted and eventually overtaken by scenes from the show's upcoming season. The much more elaborate 2019 campaign featured a variety of tie-ins including an Eggo-branded *Stranger Things* spoiler blocker for fans' internet browsers, recipes tied to each of the upcoming nine episodes, and instructions for making costumes using Eggo boxes. Eggo also bought billboards in towns across the country named Hawkins, the fictional town in which the series is set. These billboards featured the Eggo logo with blood dripping from the E—a nod to Eleven's frequent nosebleeds.

This marketing effort culminated in two larger releases. In June, Eggo claimed to have unearthed a series of unreleased advertisements from 1985 featuring hidden teasers

related to the show, which they subsequently posted across social media platforms. Following this, the company also created limited edition boxes replicating the look of the ones they sold in the '80s—identical save for the "Limited Edition 1985 Graphics" label at the top. Initially, these retro Eggos were only available online through Amazon, but saw a larger release in select stores across the United States following the series' July 4th debut.

The latter two examples, the ads and the box, provide an acute illustration of the hyperaestheticized nostalgia for which *Stranger Things* is the archetype. The ads, for instance, hinge upon a nostalgia for consumer products and advertising that is entirely mediated and thus based upon the recreation of an aesthetic object; the nostalgic allure of the ads, in other words, derives from their replication of the stylistics of '80s ads. Grainy visuals and tape distortions blanket one video showing a "typical" middle-class suburban breakfast table featuring milk, orange juice, and, of course, Eggos before cutting to a screen that reads "One Eggo Can Change Everything." These visual imperfections exist even though the ad was produced digitally and published exclusively online, thus bypassing the analog processes that created them in the ads being copied. The ads, in this way, have a simulacric core: a detailed recreation of an object that never existed but is meant to appear as though it did in order to replicate the same response one would have toward the original, had it ever existed. The ad is, in other words, a thing that serves, at best, as a vague *reminder* of the thing it is parodying, and therefore the nostalgia it seeks to produce is further removed from its actual object.

The boxes also emphasize aesthetics as primary content: while the packaging is retro-styled, the waffles inside—supposedly the product—remain unchanged. The only

difference between the Limited Edition 1985 Graphics Eggos and regular 2019 Eggos is the package itself, and thus, as it relates to the function or quality of the product, nothing substantial is different. The aesthetic, therefore, *is* the substance. Consumers don't buy Limited Edition 1985 Graphics Eggos for the Eggos, but for the Limited Edition 1985 Graphics. As with the ads, the sole draw of the product derives from its visual recreation of something from the past. The irony, however, is that this recreation is inherently imperfect because the Limited Edition 1985 Graphics label announces the boxes as a recreation breaks the illusion of visual fidelity, signifying that it is, in fact, *not* the thing it is meant to look like. The Limited Edition 1985 Graphics Eggos are, therefore, a reproduction whose status as reproduction is built into its appeal—it's not the real thing, but it sure looks like it.

This is *Stranger Things* in a nutshell. The series' nostalgic appeal derives from its seemingly faithful recreation and reassembly of a variety of tropes and aesthetic norms common to '80s media, representing a hyper-recombinatorial approach to the past, in which the past is configured merely as the particular confluence of genres, tropes, and stylistics. Its nostalgia is thus primarily oriented towards cultural ephemera rather than grounded in past experiences. Though there is potential overlap between lived experience and those represented in cultural ephemera for viewers of a certain age, it is significant that the lens the show provides for those viewers to reminisce about their lived experiences is explicitly tropological and mediated—it is accessed, if at all, through reference, genre, narrative structure, sound, and visual style. As in the Eggo ads, *Stranger Things* aims to recreate a thing that never truly existed: 1980s childhood, but only as it was depicted in films of the era, and only through a kind of parodic pastiche—childhood

in a hundred references. To the extent that the show depicts seemingly generalizable nostalgic experiences (e.g. children riding bikes in the suburbs), it regularly converts those realities into mediated references (*E.T.*, *The Goonies*), distancing the nostalgia those moments induce from its mnemonic core, always already framed by media. Like the Limited Edition 1985 Graphics Eggos, *Stranger Things* is all about recreation: a copy whose entire function is to call attention to itself as copy. Yet, in doing so, it also announces itself as decidedly *not* the thing it is aiming to recreate. For *Stranger Things*, therefore, looking like it (sounding like it, feeling like it) is everything; as with the box, the aesthetic *is* the substance.

In this regard, *Stranger Things* and the 1985 Limited Edition Graphic Eggo boxes are the same product: hyper-aestheticized containers whose draw and value lie more in the exterior than interior[1], whose form supersedes its substance, and whose interior qualities are artificially[2] elevated by the nature of the exterior. In addition to the stylistic similarities, *Stranger Things*' design shares an aesthetic paradigm with the Eggo boxes. *Stranger Things* is not simply an Eggo box; rather, it is functionally akin to a 1985 Limited Edition Graphic Eggo box whose contents are (for the sake of analogy) unknown: they could be plain, blueberry, chocolate chip, or perhaps some special *Stranger Things* tie-in flavor—or, better yet, the box could be empty. An evocative exterior coupled with

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[1] To justify this rhetorical flourish by way of clarification: for *Stranger Things*, I use 'exterior' here as a synonym for 'form,' referring to its stylistics, including, most notably, its emphasis on nostalgic parody and pastiche. Interior, in this case, refers to the series' narrative content and meaning. I recognize that such a distinction is, in some ways, problematic, and that the line between content and form in narrative is not as stark as that between box and Eggo; however, I believe that the value of the analogy overrides whatever clumsiness it may produce.

[2] "Artificially" because, in both cases, the form—to the extent that it can be considered discrete from content—creates the perception (or the environment for the perception) that the content is more than it is. It infuses, in other words, a product with an air of novelty and complexity that isn't present in the content alone. This is in contrast to texts where the relationship between content and form is more evenly symbiotic.

an indeterminant interior allows—even encourages—the consumer to project into the box whatever its graphics elicit for that individual, and the box is crucially never opened to reveal its actual contents. What one imagines inside the box is overdetermined by what one sees on the outside, and the limits of this act of imagination—or *interpretation*—are only partially delimited, allowing for a wide range of possibilities. *Stranger Things* thus produces a system of meaning-making through suggestion and accumulation; it is a pastiche whose signification allows for a seemingly endless range of interpretations.

In the relatively short time since the release of its first season—despite what I have argued above (or, as I will shortly show, *because* of it)—the series has become the subject of surprisingly diverse readings by fans as well as critics both popular and academic. A gloss of the interpretive frames into which viewers have placed the show offers a glimpse into this myriad and often contradictory landscape: the series has been seen as a distinctly and celebratory nostalgic vision of the 1980s and its media (McCarthy; Genzlinger; Chaney;); a critique of the 1980s, Reaganism, and middle-class suburbia (Butler; Smith; Burges; Nussbaum); an allegory or metaphor for the traumatic experience of coming-of-age and entering into a world of adult conformity (Khan; Butler); a form of digital gothic or an expression of longing for the analog in a digital world (Landrum; Rust); an exploration of queerness past and present as well as a critique of straight nostalgia (Burges and Middleton; Roach; Berns et al.; Briefel); an example of a distinctly white nostalgia (Bering-Porter; Giovannone); and a critique of white nostalgia (Reich).

A list such as this would seem to illustrate that *Stranger Things* is a rich, complex, and perhaps even profound series. While there is textual evidence supporting any of these interpretations, taken together the readings reveal that the core function of the series is to

reconstruct a version of the 1980s in which every major narrative incident or component, by replication or divergence, cites some "source." The show's references, therefore, weave together potential meanings so vast as to embrace numerous, self-contradictory interpretations, for which the show offers no path to a final judgment or method for achieving argumentative clarity. *Stranger Things* relies on ambiguity produced through connotation, and, beyond overly familiar maxims such as "friendship is important," and "growing up is hard," it provides no clear denotations. To the extent that we consider meaning to be a text's content, the series' reliance on stereotype, trope, and genre, then, provides both its form *and* its primary content. Put simply, it *suggests* a lot but *says* very little, and each new suggestive connotation diminishes its capacity for *saying* anything.

The abundance of critical readings, overwhelmingly devoted to elucidating the meaning encoded by the aesthetics, often mistake aesthetic posturing for thematic substance. Aviva Briefel's *Post45* essay "Familiar Things: Snow Ball '84 and Straight Nostalgia" exemplifies this mistake in its reading of season two's closing sequence, which takes place at a school dance. On its face, the scenes that occur at "Snow Ball '84"—including, most notably, a dance between two of the series' adolescent protagonists, Mike and Eleven, which signals the culmination of a heterosexual coupling the show had been building towards since early in the first season (and one of the central narrative components of season three, which was released concurrently with *Post45*'s special issue and is thus not incorporated into Briefel's analysis)—depict a conventionally nostalgic vision of adolescent romance that could be found in many films produced before, during, or after the '80s. Briefel argues, however, that the scenes pointedly "invoke the iconic and distinctly non-nostalgic prom scene from Brian De

Palma's *Carrie*,[3] which subtly counteracts the forced identification of Snow Ball '84." *Carrie* and *Stranger Things,* she argues,

> Both show characters grooming in front of mirrors in preparation for the big event, deploy overhead establishing shots of the glittery gym and its painfully invested teenagers, and rotate the camera around the dancing couples. At the center of both sequences is a "pity" dance that serves as an initiation into heterosexual rituals: Tommy's girlfriend, Sue, forces him to ask Carrie to the prom to compensate for her own prior bullying of the outcast girl; in Stranger Things, Nancy invites Dustin to dance after he has been rejected by several girls his age. In both cases, the pitying character teaches the pitied one to dance through instructions to "just listen to the music."

Briefel seems to have fallen into *Stranger Things'* referential trap. As the above evidence inadvertently indicates, there is no obvious visual link to *Carrie* in the scene unless one counts establishing shots and basic camera movement employed in practically every school dance scene in recent film history.[4] The focus on *Carrie*, while ignoring more obvious links to '80s films such as *Footloose* and *Pretty in Pink*, seems to derive especially from the "pity" dance, which, although not unique to *Carrie*, is admittedly a more selective reference point. However, such a reading relies heavily on a flimsy correlation (that the dances are out of "pity") that ignores key differences. In the scene,

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[3] It's worth noting, too, that *Carrie*'s 1976 release puts it significantly outside of the 1980s that the overwhelming majority of *Stranger Things*' nostalgic objects are confined to. Further, it would be, to my knowledge, the only one with no direct connection to the show's conception of the '80s either through directorial style (Spielberg's 1977 *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*) or sequelization (*Star Wars: A New Hope*, 1977*)*. This slippage provides further evidence of the malleability of the series' referential core in critical appraisals.

[4] For example: *Footloose*, *Pretty in Pink, Grease, Back to the Future, She's All That*, *Never Been Kissed*, *10 Things I Hate About You,* and *Napoleon Dynamite*.

Mike's older sister Nancy—one of the show's unambiguously "good" characters—notices Dustin crying alone on the bleachers after his crush chose to couple up with his friend Lucas, and his subsequent offer to dance was crudely rejected by another girl. After convincing Dustin to join her on the dancefloor, Nancy offers advice: "Girls this age are dumb," she explains as Dustin, now smiling, holds her waist, "Give them a few years, and they'll wise up. You're gonna drive them nuts." Unlike Tommy, who, as Briefel notes, was "forced" to dance with Carrie, Nancy dances with Dustin out of sincere sympathy, and Dustin appears genuinely reassured. In contrast to *Carrie*, whose scenes of relentlessly bullying prior to the dance give audiences every reason to be skeptical, there is nothing sinister or foreboding in Nancy's encouragement, and the show itself provides no reason to doubt Dustin's newfound resolve. In fact, Dustin's trajectory over the third season unambiguously validates Nancy's mid-dance counsel and, in doing so, further distances their dance from Mike and Carrie's and thus from the critique of heteronormativity Briefel reads into it. *Stranger Things 3*, which takes place a year after Snow Ball '84 and follows the gang as they once again try to stem the tide of the Upside Down—this time while also grappling with the Soviet Union, which has set up its own research facility deep below the town's new shopping mall—concludes with the revelation that Dustin's mythical "girlfriend from camp" is, in fact, real, and climaxes with the two performing a ham radio duet of the theme from *The Neverending Story*. Heteronormativity may be inevitable in both texts, but in *Stranger Things*, its attainment is a source of triumph.

Nonetheless, Briefel concludes, "With these *allusions*, the audience is invited to recognize the oppressiveness of dominant nostalgia narratives and turn to the cinematic

memory of a horror film in which heterosexuality is an undeniable source of terror" (emphasis added). In other words, Briefel's reading requires an intertextual relationship in which the entirety of the scene's "meaning" is revealed by the reference: although it shows one thing, an intertextual reference proves that it is saying the opposite. *Stranger Things*, in other words, merely has to *look* like something else in order to borrow its message. The fact that the series elsewhere shows little to no interest in such a critique of heteronormative nostalgia (and, indeed, often celebrates it) is seemingly unimportant because of its *reference*—or, to more precisely lower the allusive bar, because of its *referential environment*. Where everything is a reference, all potential meanings are subordinated to its connection.

Briefel's article, therefore, typifies an apparent desire throughout *Stranger Things* scholarship to make the show transcend the confines of nostalgic pablum and to *say something*, even if that means upending its own nostalgic premise. The series, in this light, is functionally a husk that allows viewers to find within its panoply of '80s cultural ephemera whatever they want to see. To be sure, *Stranger Things* is not unique in generating contradictory and/or mutually exclusive critical readings. What *is* unique, however, is that the source of this trend in *Stranger Things* criticism can be tied to a couple of specific factors, both of which have larger cultural and critical implications.

The series converts nostalgia and the 1980s into aesthetics, participating in the same system of reference that, as Joel Burges and Jason Middleton have argued, distinguishes *the 1980s* as a historical period from *the '80s* as a phenomenological object. *Stranger Things* is, in other words, not interested in investigating the 1980s as a historical moment or in reflecting the period beyond its invocation of cultural ephemera. In this

process of aestheticization, in the move from the 1980s to the '80s, cultural artifacts and historical realities become de- or re-contextualized markers—kids ride bikes as in *E.T.*, otherwise apolitical families have Reagan Bush '84 signs in their yards—hollowed of purpose and thus endlessly signifying. This vagueness produces a vision of the '80s that is more indeterminant and thus more alienated from historical reality than traditional nostalgic texts.

The series' indeterminacy, however, is one of its central draws. Because its intertextual accumulation provides limitless interpretive ground, the series' nostalgic charm and denotative vagueness facilitate prolific sites of viewer identification. *Stranger Things* is, in this way, a kind of choose-your-own interpretive adventure. This is what encouraged, for instance, Burges and Middleton to dedicate over half of their intro to the *Post45* special issue to critical reflections on their own experiences as adolescents in the '80s, framed by a passing reference in the series' pilot to a particular issue of *X-Men* with which both writers were familiar; it is what, in the same issue, enabled Elizabeth Reich to read the Upside Down as "a metaphor for the extra-temporal, perpetually endangered, and suffocating existence of black life in the US" while at the same time allowing David Bering-Porter to identify the show's tokenizing treatment of race and its neoliberal brand of white nostalgia.

While divergent readings are not unique to *Stranger Things*, there is something greater to reckon with here. As Amy Rust and others have noted, series creators Matt and Ross Duffer and executive producer Shawn Levy have continually emphasized their desire for total authenticity and fidelity, manifest in efforts to meticulously reproduce the '80s through set design and props. While one might argue that the inclusion of extra-

dimensional demons in the series signals its divergence from objective reality, these elements are, in fact, discrete from its historical setting—there is, in other words, no sense that the series is diverging from its historical setting despite this, and so these overt gestures of subjective imagination don't infect its temporal verisimilitude. Obvious acts of divergence from the real ultimately reinforce the *realness* of the elements that remain unaffected. Further, the overwhelming emphasis on '80s media—where strange things are actually quite common—also works to normalize the existence of the paranormal within the real. This emphasis on authenticity obscures the brush strokes of historical recreation in order to impart the notion that we are really seeing the '80s and not simply an interpretation of it—recalling Neil Postman's claim that, in a post-photographic world, "truth is in the seeing."

This also marks a contrast with the reflective narrative mode employed by films and television from an earlier nostalgic paradigm, such as *The Wonder Years* and *A Christmas Story*, which I discussed in the introduction. In these examples, memory serves as the authorizing mechanism for turning to the past, highlighting the subjective nature of the historical reconstructions contained within. While texts like these gained popularity because, for many viewers, they distilled some essential quality of the past they reconstructed, it is nonetheless significant that, in contrast to *Stranger Things*, they made clear efforts to delimit interpretation through this framing. This difference highlights what is borne out elsewhere in the series: a focus not on depicting supposedly generalizable individual experiences but on capturing the essence of the phenomenon directly. The '80s, in other words, is not contained within the lives of the people who

lived it but in the tropes and stylistics that governed them—or, more precisely, that governed their *depiction*.

Despite *Stranger Things*' deep investment in accuracy, however, its vision of fidelity (i.e. the location of the '80s phenomenon that it posits) is overwhelmingly superficial, made up of sound and vision, haircuts and products. It's worth noting here that the Duffer Brothers, for all their investment in '80s nostalgia, were actually born in 1984, a full year after season one is set. So, while Mike, Eleven, and the gang were learning about love and going on shopping trips to the Starcourt Mall in Season 3's 1985, Matt and Ross Duffer were teething. Their experiences as 15-year-olds in 1998 were surely quite different from those they've nostalgically created for their characters thirteen years earlier, and so their sense of the *authentic '80s* is therefore almost entirely drawn from film and television rather than memory and experience.[5] It's no surprise, then, that the series sees the '80s as a matter of styles and things, access to which can be granted simply through reference and resemblance. The '80s for the Duffer Brothers—excepting whatever memories of kindergarten they may have retained—was never really anything other than a mediated object, pure aesthetic and affect. *Stranger Things*' interest in other forms of reproduction, attempts at capturing some kind of '80s zeitgeist or detailed historical reality, are similarly always borne of and/or filtered through media and thus not attempts at directly recreating a historical reality itself but the historical reality supposedly captured within the media of the period. The result is a series that seeks to reproduce in objective terms but does so through a necessarily subjective process. This is true not only in the creators' act of deciding *what* captures the '80s, but, as the diverse

[5] This is not to suggest that no one can provide an accurate rendition of a past they did not experience, but rather to illustrate, once again, how distanced the series' nostalgia is from experience, further pinpointing media rather than memory as the defining frame of reference.

critical readings above indicate, also in the series' process of making meaning through vague intertextual reference that leaves interpretation fully at the feet of the viewer. Though the series positions itself otherwise, *Stranger Things*' recreation of the '80s is thus a doubly subjective act.

Through its focus on the '80s as phenomenon, its emphasis on reconstruction through hypermediated reference, and its evasion of denotative clarity, the series cedes interpretive ground to its audience. By deemphasizing subjectivity in its representation and turning to media as the foundation for its reconstruction, the series implicitly configures the past as a purely subjective phenomenon. For *Stranger Things,* the '80s is whatever you want it to be: Reagan, neon and synths, yuppies vs. geeks, *The Breakfast Club,* bicycles, Duran Duran, stifling heteronormativity, triumphant heteronormativity, unparalleled freedom and/or danger, and on and on. There is no *there* there, just a listicle of events, traits, and tropes.

*Stranger Things* therefore presents an interesting study of the conflict between nostalgia and history. Conventionally, nostalgia follows an Edenic structure, with the past configured as a kind of prelapsarian paradise in contrast to a fallen present. As Philip Roth pointed out in *American Pastoral*, one can map the same pre-and postlapsarian model onto narratives of American history in the latter half of the twentieth century, with the fall of the belief in an American paradise coming at the hands of '60s political unrest that fundamentally altered how the nation is able to see itself. President Reagan's nostalgia for the '50s similarly positioned the '60s and beyond as a time after the fall, and revisionist films like *Back to the Future* reflect the same perception through their desire to repair the damage by returning to the moment just *before*. There is a sense that

America as a notion never fully recovered, and that things have only gotten worse in the years that followed—a status continually reinforced by 24/7 news coverage and a media landscape that thrives on the spectacle and sensation of the horrors of modernity. As in Eden, the fall comes with knowledge, and a recognition of oneself as fallen. In the 2010s, when the American public is constantly reminded, by film, television series, and news, of the sins of its past, conventional nostalgia poses a problem: how can viewers, especially the more socially-minded millennials and zoomers who make up the plurality of *Stranger Things'* audience, maintain an awareness of the AIDS and crack epidemics while simultaneously looking back longingly on the period in which they were most prominent? How can they yearn for a time of laxer parental supervision without being reminded of the horrifying reason that the practice has disappeared? The answer, for *Stranger Things*, is that they can't—at least not at the same time. The series' aestheticization is its greatest resource for preserving its nostalgia, providing an answer to the question "how does one long for a time that is itself already fallen?"[6]

This is most acutely exemplified by one of the series' simplest and most frequent images: kids riding bikes. Although markedly nodding to Spielbergian adventure films, even without its mediated reference, shots of the *Stranger Things* kids pedaling through

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[6] It's worth noting that *Stranger Things* '80s nostalgia is not the first instance of this longing for a time after the fall. Within this paradigm, the '70s revival of the 1990s and early 2000s—which began with *Dazed and Confused*, another temporally-minded film focused on positing a zeitgeist of the era—are also set in this period. While these examples share with *Stranger Things* the notion that the present has lost something essentially good that it has located in the past, and similarly work through a process of selection that jettisons contradictions, ultimately narrowing the period in order to fulfill its nostalgic vision, they lack *Stranger Things'* more explicit recognition that the past is also damaged. There are a few possible explanations for this. For one, this is perhaps due to the tighter focus on specific movements, most notably rock n roll culture, which thrive on a rejection of the status quo—and so there is an element of critique built into the nostalgia itself. Additionally, the '90s and early 2000s represent a broadly pre-digital cultural moment before the internet and social media-induced hyperawareness of the 2010s set in, so many viewers were perhaps less attuned to the contradictions a nostalgic vision of the past elides.

town have broad nostalgic resonance; for many viewers, moments like these call back to specific lived experiences. At the same time, as with all nostalgic objects, these memories are haunted by the notion that they contain a now-impossible experience. Unlike arcades and acid wash jeans, however, changes in attitudes towards childhood autonomy are not simply a matter of the passage of time, of fading styles and fads, but rather derive from the emergence of historical realities: namely, the rise in reports of child abductions and murders in the '70s and '80s and its intensified coverage on television news.[7] There is, in this way, an additional, terrible, layer to the series' evocations. Rather than trying to ignore this unsavory resonance, *Stranger Things* acknowledges it. Season one of the series revolves around the disappearance of Will Byers, one of the show's protagonists, who goes missing in the pilot while riding his bicycle home after a night of *Dungeons & Dragons* at Mike's house. The show redirects the historical fact of abduction that haunts the incident onto the aesthetic supernatural, with the abduction coming not at the hands of a child predator, but a demon ripped from the pages of a *D&D* handbook—a revision of the substitution found in Stephen King's *It,* but divorced from the novel's more deliberately metaphorical resonances.[8] The series thus offers a knowing nod to one of the decade's horrors while also mapping it onto genre, and the threat of child predation to the show's nostalgia is thus removed by means of aesthetic displacement. Child abduction at the hands of the demogorgon is therefore a stand-in for the real that, in the end, suppresses it.

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[7] While studies have since shown that this rise in reports and coverage in the news did not correspond to a rise in actual cases, the moral panic that ensued was nonetheless a historical reality that helped shape the cultural landscape.

[8] This is most apparent in the contrast between the two predator stand-ins: Pennywise, who appears in the form of a clown—an icon rich in signification—and the Demogorgon, a vaguely humanoid form with a nightmarish visage that symbolically doesn't resonate in any particular direction.

Season three takes the series' aestheticized abstraction of historical conflict to another level with its *Red Dawn*esque Soviet invasion plot, which introduces the idea that the USSR is also conducting secret experiments involving the Upside Down deep beneath Hawkins. The season opens on a shadowy lab filled with workers in hazmat suits using some kind of ray gun to create one of the portals that link to the Upside Down while uniformed military officials watch over from a glass-enclosed control room. After the experiment goes awry, vaporizing several scientists and destroying most of the tech, a brooding Soviet general inspects the wall where a portal failed to open fully. "We are close," the head scientist nervously protests "you can see our progress. We just need more ti-." His pleas are cut off as the general's buzz-cutted henchman reaches out to choke him, lifting him off his feet as the Soviet marching song "The Red Army is the Strongest" begins to play. "You have one year," the general tells a second scientist as the first lifelessly falls to the floor.

*Stranger Things* 3 is thus inaugurated with the replication of a particular kind of '80s Cold War narrative, a cartoonish vision of unflinching Soviet bad guys determined to do evil whatever the cost. This thread carries throughout the season, but is most visible in Grigori, the aforementioned henchman who is later sent to kill Sheriff Hopper following his discovery of the Soviet operation. The ensuing action casts Grigori as one-part Terminator, one-part Ivan Drago, synthesizing the robotic, amoral determination of each, and the series, once again, relies on preestablished trope for its resonance—one that is, in this case, particularly divorced from its historical context. In the series, the Cold War generally only loomed in the background through passing references until the third season—brief gestures toward verisimilitude but little more. The turn to the USSR in the

third season thus represented a largely untapped well of '80s phenomena for the series to exploit in its perpetual quest for material to revisit. *Stranger Things'* expanded treatment of the hostilities is particularly interesting because, more than any of the series' other sociohistorical inspirations, the Cold War resonated in the 1980s in a very different way than it does in the 2010s, and the series' re-vision of the conflict is a product of that distance.

For many Americans—and, seemingly, for the show as well—because the threat of nuclear annihilation at the hands of the Evil Empire never came to pass, its dissolution marks the Cold War as a closed narrative event. We know, in other words, how it ends, and the Red Menace no longer looms large.[9] Indeed, not only has the threat long been dissipated, but in the age of terror attacks and forever wars, a war that never came to pass might seem quaint by contrast, producing for many viewers—especially those who didn't live through it—a kind of anachronistic dramatic irony within the series. The reality, of course, is that even though thermonuclear war never came to pass, events such as the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the Cuban Missile Crisis, U.S. involvement in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East—not to mention the array of domestic policies and practices that emerged as direct or indirect consequences of the conflict—all certainly had, and continue to have, a profound impact nationally and globally. In *Stranger Things*, however, the Cold War threat is confined to the Soviet Union's desire to acquire advanced weaponry in its quest for the total annihilation of the United States. As such, *Stranger Things*' representation of Cold War anxieties neither addresses nor invokes these broader

[9] Although the resurgence of Russia as a geopolitical boogeyman following the 2016 election, and the subsequent conflation of the USSR (especially hammer and sickle imagery) with the contemporary Russian state across various social media platforms, shows that earlier tensions still remain in the minds of many Americans—particularly those who lived through it.

legacies—and is, in fact, invested in the notion that the conflict was contained purely within the geographic borders of the U.S. and the USSR—pivoting instead on a shallow caricature drawn from action movies. Grigori is a perfect representation of this, a trope derived from two characters initially constructed as vessels for specific cultural fears subsequently redeployed in an era where those fears no longer have any cogency. In the end, he's nothing more than an ahistorical side-show oddity, a kitschy testament to how silly it all was.

This is also reflected in the third season's more extensive turn toward the conventions of '80s action movies. Though the series had always featured action sequences, in the first two seasons they veered more towards those found in horror and science fiction, almost always pitting humans against monsters rather than against one another. Hopper's plotline in season three, which casts him as a hard-nosed detective working to uncover the secret behind the Soviet presence in Hawkins, breaks this pattern with the inclusion of numerous action tropes. One such scene features an especially over-the-top interrogation, in which Hopper nearly dismembers the mayor with a cigar cutter ("Are you insane?" the Mayor asks. "I don't know," Hopper replies, "let's find out"). In another sequence, Grigori and Hopper pursue one another with silenced pistols in a hall of mirrors, a scene whose neon lighting coupled with Hopper's pastel Hawaiian shirt nods more to *Miami Vice* and *Magnum P.I.* than anything Spielberg ever produced. The season's penultimate scene is a fistfight to the death between Hopper and Grigori whose blocking and cinematography recalls late-'80s action staples like *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon*. These scenes, and the generic shift they signify that accompanies the series'

turn to the Cold War, are yet another instance of *Stranger Things*' reluctance to confront history without invoking trope, genre, or style.

As with its treatment of missing children in season one, season three's turn to trope in its confrontation with historical reality is ultimately a surface-deep misdirection, one that neutralizes a threat to the show's nostalgia—who wants to go back to worrying about nuclear war?—by means of aesthetic displacement. More importantly, however, *Stranger Things*' nostalgized Cold War illustrates precisely why this effort to nullify challenges to one's rosy view of the past is so problematic: the turn towards a temporally-specific trope in the representation of a historical period produces a kind of feedback loop wherein the redeployment of the trope reinforces the notion that it was, at least in some way, accurate, which then lends a sense of authenticity to the trope and the reconstruction it's contained within. This kind of reductive shorthanding, directed towards something that is conventionally viewed as settled history, serves to produce and/or perpetuate ahistorical perceptions of the past.

Nostalgia often relies on these misconceptions. It requires the past to be better than the present, so if the past really *wasn't* better than the present, or if the notion has lost cogency, the nostalgiac needs to remake it. Nostalgia is, of course, always about remaking the past to varying degrees, but the degrees and methods haven't always been the same, and what we have seen with nostalgia for the 1980s and beyond in media like *Stranger Things* is markedly different than what has traditionally come before, especially in the realm of film and television. Historically, nostalgic revision was a process of subtraction (intentionally or through selective forgetting), creating a coherent vision of the past by subordinating, or outright removing, its conflicts. Classically-nostalgic films

such as *American Graffiti* and *Dazed and Confused* as well as shows like *Freaks and Geeks* (unlike examples such as *The Wonder Years*, *Crooklyn*, and *Lady Bird* that emphasize primarily a time period rather than direct lived experience) do this by enacting a narrowing of scope, focusing, for instance, on one group of high schoolers in a specific place at a specific time, which enables them to avoid directly invoking the broader conflicts of the period (insofar as the group in question can be seen as insulated from them), even as those experiences coalesce to posit a generalizable zeitgeist for the era. Recent "nostalgic" series such as *Mad Men*, *Glow*, and *The Americans*, as well as the remake of *IT*, confront this process directly, drawing viewers in by invoking the pre-established affective and stylistic allure of the era before deconstructing the premises that underride them and drawing to the surface the conflicts they subordinate. *Stranger Things,* however, engages in a newer phenomenon, one that began to emerge in the early-2000s with shows like VH1's *I Love the '80s/'70s/'90s* (2002-2005)[10] and the *Vice City* (2002) and *San Andreas* (2004) entries in the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise, as well as a series of retro and revivalist developments in music, seen in garage rock acts like The Strokes, The White Stripes, and The Hives; and, at the end of the decade, in the arrival of '80s-influenced genres like outrun, synthwave, and vaporwave. As Simon Reynolds has noted, "The 2000s were dominated by the 're-' prefix: *re*vivals, *re*issues, *re*makes, *re*-enactments…The 2000s was also the decade of rampant *re*cycling: bygone genres *re*vived and *re*novated, vintage sonic material *re*processed and *re*combined" (xi).

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[10] Although, as I have argued in the previous note, the '70s nostalgia that emerged in the 1990s was qualitatively different than the '80s nostalgia of the 2010s, I would make an exception for VH1's *I Love the 70s*, which has more in common with the paradigm that followed. This is probably due to the fact that the *I Love The…* series was fundamentally shaped by its first installment, *I Love the '80s*, and its emphasis on style and pop phenomena was tailored to this original subject. *I Love the 70s* was simply a matter of importing new content into the existing frame.

Artifacts like these reveled particularly in a spectacularized nostalgia that, although it also engaged in subtraction, was animated more by an infatuation with style than a rosy view of the past—or, better yet, its emphasis on style enabled its rosy re-vision[11]. In these examples, nostalgia is manifested less in a sense of longing and more in mimesis, in pointed efforts to directly reproduce temporally-coded aesthetics.

Broadly, this emphasis on aesthetics can also be seen in a number of areas within contemporary popular culture, from pseudo-traditionalist niche movements like cottagecore, tradwife, and bronze age mindset, to lofi and analogue styles popular in music and as filters on Instagram. Most notably, there has emerged online, particularly among zoomers on YouTube and TikTok, a particular interest in "aesthetic" (often stylized as "A E S T H E T I C" and sometimes deployed as a general quality, like in a video published on YouTube in October 2021 titled "How To Be Aesthetic at School (2021-22) | Complete Guide & Tips"). Aesthetic, in this context, extends beyond the mere relabeling of sartorial "style," representing the conversion of all facets of life into a generic formation ("vintage," "hypebeast," "baddie," "artmom," "kidcore"), marking everything from clothing and hairstyles to accent, bodily comportment, and even social media fonts as signifiers of selfhood that can and should be actively cultivated from a list of curated options. It is, in other words, the intentional conversion of oneself into trope—fitting, in some ways, for a life posted and viewed as much as lived. The logic of zoomer aesthetic, crucially, extends backward, with numerous videos that assemble the styles and

[11] While labeling anything from the *GTA* series "rosy" might at first seem like a stretch, the series is clearly meant to present a vision of the past that is fun and alluring, and which pays little serious attention to the negative realities its gameplay corresponds to. The '80s Miami and '90s California of these games are merely a theme park for players to explore, not a space for serious interaction. These games are instead, much like *Stranger Things*, attempts to parody the zeitgeist of the era but only as it exists in pop mythology drawn from films, television, and music.

things of the past into a coherent "type" for which there is no original. One TikTok (since deleted) began with the caption "*rare aesthetic* Actually growing up in the 2000s" followed by a montage of pop cultural artifacts from the period, including Avril Lavigne, Nintendo Gamecube, *The Cheetah Girls,* the wall of a Blockbuster Video, an AIM chatroom, and glittery lip gloss. In videos like these, the past and the subjects that occupied them are both rendered tropologically, defined by a particular confluence of aesthetic markers.

*Ready Player One*, which I discussed in greater detail in chapter two, similarly conceives of the 1980s as a confluence of mediated objects disconnected from lived experience, a time period (re-)constituted through pop culture reference. The quest at the story's core, and the herculean labors that follow, hinge upon the Wade's absorption of unexperienced 1980s popular culture. The novel thus represents the same kind of nostalgia that we see in *Stranger Things*: alienated from personal experience and abstracted from lived reality, subsequently flattened into an infatuation with aesthetics and style. Notably, Steven Spielberg's 2018 adaptation revises the novel's focus on the '80s to include a wider collection of nerd culture references spanning from the 1970s to the 2000s, substituting *The Iron Giant*, Master Chief, and the T-Rex from *Jurassic Park* for more oblique references to *Joust, Max Headroom*, and Rush. What persists across both film and novel, however, is the notion of a past remembered and reassembled through reference and recognition; moreover, Spielberg's substitutions reveal just how hollow this nostalgia is, irreverently re-skinning objects for a broader target audience with little narrative consequence—Spielberg notes in a *Los Angeles Times* article that they were unable to secure the rights to *Blade Runner* for a sequence that takes place

within the world of the Ridley Scott film, so, rather than cutting the scene, *The Shining*'s Overlook Hotel was substituted instead (Rottenberg). In this nostalgic formulation, differences between objects are of little consequence, so long as both are recognizable and signify pastness.

*Stranger Things* is the apotheosis of these trends, merging a formal attachment to style and genre more commonly found in non-narrative television, music, consumer products, and social media with a sense of longing enabled by processes of substitution and subordination most commonly found in narrative cinema. In this way, *Stranger Things* is discrete from most of its predecessors as well as its contemporaries in television and film; though borne of the same reverence for style, synthwave, a genre that provides much of the series' non-'80s soundtrack including its theme, does not posit a vision of the 1980s in its attachment to the aesthetics of the era—there is, in other words, little sense that this kind of retro-inflected musical movement has any bearing on one's understanding of the period from which its stylistics are derived. There's a limit to its mimesis. Though paradigmatically similar, the same cannot be said of *Stranger Things*. The mélange that results from its particular merging of aesthetics, history, and nostalgia produces a past that is more malleable and alienated, and whose acts of emphasis and historical omission are, at the same time, less noticeable and more powerful: if the past is no longer primarily about lived and historical realities, but about a style, and, if that process involves the conversion of those lived and historical realities into tropes and genre elements, then it can easily retain its affective allure. If what you love about the

‘80s is turquoise, arcades, and *Ferris Bueller*, then why pay any mind to the War on Drugs?[12]

This system of abstracting the conflicts of the ‘80s is not limited to the tropification of historical events. While the series broadly functions as an empty container, the cinematic influences out of which it is constructed often impose meaning onto the characters, narratives, and iconography that *Stranger Things* essentially lifts wholesale. This model of replication without revision reproduces the implications of the original, in effect serving to reify the notions they encode—not only as components of the reality of the ‘80s, but as generalizable truths. Critics often point to nostalgic media’s pattern of “imagining contemporary values…in the context of the past” (Bering-Porter). While *Stranger Things* certainly participates in this process, its mode of pastiche is more strikingly engaged in the opposite maneuver: laundering ideological constructs of the past into the present. Most notably, from its pilot, which opens on a dark and ominous building labeled “Hawkins National Laboratory / Department of Energy,” *Stranger Things* has engaged in a pattern of uncritically borrowing political framing from the films that influenced it. For instance, *Stranger Things* essentially lifts wholesale the central conflict of *E.T.*, pitting children against nefarious government agents determined to wrest control over the supernatural entity at the narrative’s core. Eleven, the series’ E.T.

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[12] Here, the disconnect between mediated and experiential nostalgia is especially important. While those who lived through the 1980s might retain positive memories of, or associations with, the period and its media, and thus the primary version of the decade they hold in their minds may not include unseemly historical realities, the two are not mutually exclusive: a soldier’s nostalgia for the camaraderie of war, for instance, does not preclude the recognition of its damage. It is, in short, the distinction between personal memory and history. On the other hand, mediated constructions of the 1980s, particularly those produced largely for audiences without mnemonic connection to it (or whose memory is already filtered due to age), produce visions of the period that, in the absence of memory and lived experience, compete directly with historical narratives for cultural supremacy.

substitute, spends much of the first season on the run, having escaped from the government facility where she had been held since infancy, subjected to various experiments using her telekinetic abilities. Like Spielberg's Elliot, Mike offers Eleven shelter and attempts to teach her about American life—"This is my living room, it's mostly for watching TV"—while government agents attempt to locate and recapture her by any means necessary. Unlike *E.T.*, however, *Stranger Things*' depiction of the federal government doesn't neatly fold into a larger opposition between the cynical adult world and childhood innocence[13]—in fact, it doesn't appear to have metaphorical value at all. In this, despite its liberal gestures toward inclusion and feminism, the series offers a strikingly conservative vision of the federal government as an overbearing, immoral, and oppressively paternalistic institution. "[*Stranger Things* is] especially refreshing for libertarians," Matthew McCaffrey explained, writing in 2016 for the right-wing conspiracy blog *InfoWars*, "[they] can finally enjoy a show where the main villain is government itself: at last, the antagonist isn't the market or even a corrupt politician, just government. Maybe its best plot twist is that there's nary an evil corporation to be seen." Insofar as one can derive a coherent set of claims or values from the series' depiction of this conflict, *Stranger Things* is essentially indistinguishable from the conservative politics that dominated the decade, encapsulated by Reagan's mantra "The government *is* the problem."

In some instances, the series' conservatism surpasses the kind embedded in its Speilbergian inspirations—showcasing, inadvertently, the unprogressive nature of these

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[13] *Stranger Things'* cast of protagonists includes several adult allies who fight alongside the children, destabilizing any age-based boundary. Further, the emphasis on childlike wonder, imagination, and goodness emblematized in Elliot's treatment of *E.T.*, which forms one side of the metaphorical opposition with the cynical adult world represented by the government, is also notably absent in *Stranger Things*.

nominally-liberal influences. This is most notable in its Reaganesque vision of competing paternalisms. The show provides a contrast between federal and local government filtered through Eleven's two father figures, Dr. Brenner and Sheriff Hopper. Brenner, the face of the shadowy government agency running mind-control experiments deep in the bowels of the Hawkins National Laboratory, who had abducted Eleven shortly after her birth in an effort to harness her telekinetic powers for use as a superweapon, is referred to as "Papa" by Eleven throughout the series. Flashbacks show their relationship to be emotionally neglectful, psychologically abusive, and physically exploitative. One scene early in the first season shows Eleven seated before a caged, hissing cat as Brenner watches on from a control room. Having previously crushed a soda can with her mind in another flashback, the scene implies that Brenner expects her to now use her powers on a living creature. After Eleven refuses, she's dragged kicking and screaming by two orderlies to a small, dark room and thrown inside. As the door closes, Eleven rises to her feet, and uses her powers to knock one of the men against the wall and snap the neck of the other before collapsing to the floor in despair. After Brenner approaches, we see a close-up of Eleven's face as his hands slowly move into frame and caress her head. He then carries her body, weeping and limp with exhaustion, back to her room. This scenario is repeated in the season one finale, where Brenner finds Eleven, once again collapsed from exhaustion, having used her powers to fend off the Demogorgon. "Eleven, Eleven, can you hear me?" he says as he cradles her head in his hands while the camera looms over his shoulder, framing a close-up on Eleven's face. She replies, weakly, "Papa?" and he responds with a subtly sinister imitation of care "Yes, yes, it's your papa." Eleven becomes unsettled once she notices her friends being forcefully restrained, with Mike

yelling "Let her go you bastards!" As she begins to writhe, Brenner caresses her face: "Shh shh, you're sick. You're sick, but I'm going to make you better. I'm going to take you back home where I can make you well again, where we can make all of this better so no one gets hurt." Eleven, having now learned the true meaning of love and friendship, rejects his overtures: "Bad…bad," she says, turning to Mike and then calling his name. The scene is interrupted by the reappearance of the Demogorgon, which attacks Brenner and the agents, giving the kids cover to escape; it concludes with the monster tackling Brenner, presumably killing him. Though he doesn't play an active role in the series' 2nd and 3rd seasons, Brenner does reappear in flashbacks and hallucinations, highlighting the traumatic impact that he continues to have on Eleven's psyche. In all of this, *Stranger Things* repeatedly emphasizes the notion that Brenner, and the federal government for which he is the series' most prominent representative, is cold, manipulative, and overbearing—an ill-suited father for a child or a nation, affirming Reagan's critique of what later came to be known as the "nanny-state."

In contrast, the series offers a Reagan-inspired elevation of local government through Sheriff Hopper, a caring and good-hearted man hardened by the trauma of his daughter's death. Following Eleven's disappearance in the season one finale, Hopper assumes a paternal surrogacy role for her in seasons two and three, first leaving boxes of Eggos in the woods where she's presumed to be in hiding, and later offering her shelter in his cabin. In order to protect Eleven from the government agents who remain intent on recapturing her, Hopper initially forbids her from leaving the cabin, which becomes a source of tension throughout the second season. On Halloween, for instance, Eleven, in a homemade ghost costume, asks to go trick-or-treating:

Hopper: You want to go *trick-or-treating*? You know the rules.

Eleven: Yes, but—

Hopper: Yeah, so you know the answer.

Eleven: But they wouldn't see me…

Hopper: I don't care. I don't care. Alright? You go out there, ghost or not, it's a risk. We don't take risks, alright? They're stupid. And?

Eleven: We're not stupid.

Hopper: Exactly.

In this, the series creates a parallel between the confinement Eleven experienced at the hands of the government and the one instituted by Hopper. While both are overbearing, the show makes clear that Brenner's captivity is abusive while Hopper is responding to very real concerns about Eleven's safety. Though frustrating for Eleven, *Stranger Things* clearly views the latter as much more permissible, thereby elevating Hopper's model of paternalism and (if inadvertently) the local government he represents. Though at times impulsive and over-protective, the series ultimately depicts Hopper as a model of oversight and protection based on genuine desire for Eleven's well-being. If he's overbearing, it's not to exploit Eleven, as is the case with Brenner, but because he cares too much.

Mapping this contrast onto the '80s conflict between federal and local government also casts in a different light the series' disdain for supervision. Throughout *Stranger Things*, government agents are seen surveilling Hawkins through a variety of tactics as part of their effort to recapture Eleven, ranging from tapped phones and parabolic microphones to good old-fashioned costumed eavesdropping. The show's scope,

then, is a bit broader than just *parental* supervision. So, while, as I've argued above, *Stranger Things* expresses a longing for the freedom associated with the lax parental oversight of the '80s while simultaneously recognizing the reason for its demise, it also seems to invite a broader consideration of watching in the context of an era where surveillance is nearly omnipresent and privacy is an increasingly rare commodity. As Jason Landrum explains, the series' emphasis on surveillance is particularly resonant for contemporary viewers: "Twenty-first-century audiences live with constant awareness of being watched. We are watched by cameras everywhere. We know that nothing we do on our computers is ever truly deleted…The nostalgia…of *Stranger Things* rests on the fantasy of there being a time in the not-so-distant past when we could get lost" (156). This fantasy is heightened by the relative quaintness of '80s surveillance in the series, implemented through more targeted techniques like phone tapping rather than the seemingly-pervasive ambient surveillance of smartphones and computers in the 2010s. However, for all its interest in invoking the subject, and despite all of the narrative potential held by such a comparison, *Stranger Things* is once again ultimately uninterested in offering depth or clarity beyond the notion that the past was less bad than the present. There is, of course, historical precedent for the sort of government overreach that the series invokes, both in its nods to secret programs like MK Ultra and its broader treatment of surveillance. However, the series, in keeping with the rest of its historical engagements, does not treat the subject with any seriousness or complexity, ultimately rendering it yet another trope that only exists within the series for its ability to heighten the narrative conflict and signify pastness. Following from the contrast outlined above, the series' perspective on surveillance is quite simple: we were watched less in the past,

which had some benefits and some drawbacks; federal government surveillance is tyrannical and bad but local oversight is ultimately good as long as it is done for the right reasons.

The series' replication of '80s politics under the guise of trope also extends to its sense of place, as Hawkins reproduces the heartland-centric, Morning-in-America vision of the country that Reagan and numerous '80s films worked so hard to foster, imbuing small towns with a special status not afforded to other locales. Here, the cultural narrative suggests, is where *real* Americans live, where the nation's true spirit resides, and where "monsters are twice as horrifying when they attack those good solid people and shatter what we falsely perceive as the innocence of small-town America" (Smokler). It's a familiar trope, one that can be found in different forms throughout films of the period, from *Back to the Future*'s Hill Valley and John Hughes' Shermer, Illinois to David Lynch's Lumberton and Twin Peaks.[14]

This mediated configuration of the American small town has been central to The Duffer Brothers' project from the beginning, and, though they regularly draw parallels between it and their hometown in interviews, the Duffers' vision of Hawkins and small-town America in the 1980s is, on the whole, less a mnemonic exercise and more a cinematic (re)creation. From its initial sale to Netflix under the title *Montauk*—an homage to the coastal New York of *Jaws* and the New England settings of King's novels—the series' sense of place has always been tied, directly or indirectly, not to the places where its creators grew up (as one might expect with a conventionally nostalgic tale of childhood), but to those in the films they loved. Though the coastal setting was

[14] The latter two examples are, of course, meta-commentary on precisely this formulation—a notion I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 3.

eventually abandoned due to the complications of shooting on Long Island in the winter, the idyllic small-town setting remained as principal filming was moved to Atlanta, Georgia—a location that, as Matt noted in an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, much more closely resembled their own childhood in Durham, North Carolina (Fienberg). Despite acknowledging this similarity, however, the Duffers ultimately chose to set their fictional town in Indiana. The decision to bypass North Carolina, where the Duffers grew up, and Georgia, where the series is filmed and which apparently resembles their hometown, in favor of a third location that, in reality, has very little in common with either is a microcosm of the shift away from memory and toward mediation that I discussed in the introduction: *Stranger Things*' nostalgia is oriented more towards the imagined small towns its creators saw on television and in films than the one they actually lived in.

And yet, there's more to the series' construction of Hawkins than just the nostalgic hierarchy it implies. As with much of *Stranger Things*, what distinguishes Hawkins from the fictional towns that inspired it is that, unlike its predecessors (which are set at the time of their creation), *Stranger Things* takes place thirty years before the time in which it was made. Thus, instead of attempting to reflect its own contemporary reality, Hawkins is a recreation of a setting from a different time, and therefore the product of a different cultural and historical context. While this is true for nearly all works involved in historical recreation, the Duffers' fictional town is particularly interesting because it is not simply an attempt to recreate a historical environment, but rather to recreate a historical environment that was itself already an act of creative imagination—Hawkins, in other words, isn't set in the 1980s as much as in the '80s of

the movies it borrows from. As Lacey N. Smith has pointed out, though images like the white picket fence, orderly supermarket shelves, and downtown movie marquee "coalesce to form an imaginary ideal suburbia, it is a mediated imaginary, inspired more by a proliferation of portrayed suburban environments across a variety of media than by the material, inhabited suburbs of everyday life" (217). The small towns upon which Hawkins was based, in other words, did not exist except in fiction. In a sense, this means that *Stranger Things'* "historical" setting is doubly fictional: not only based on examples drawn from media, but from media examples that were themselves not drawn from reality. With its quaint Main Street ripped from *The Andy Griffith Show* and its quiet, well-manicured lawns, Hawkins actually represents a dying vision of Americana that was already the subject of nostalgic yearning in the 1980s. The small-town and suburban images that permeate the '80s media that the series draws upon were, even then, less a historical fact (insofar as they represented some kind of norm of national experience) and more a function of an ongoing ideological project that sought to revive cultural and historical conditions, based in large part on television and cinema. The ideological project that drove this construction of American life in the '80s was, in other words, more interested in the representational value of these small towns than in the locations themselves, and their revival was more conceptual than materially executed[15] (Smith 217). As Alan Nadel has argued, this nostalgia for a cinematic or televisual reality is, in fact, one of the defining features of Reagan's presidency, and movies of the period are replete with narratives and images seeking to naturalize filmic paradigms as historic ones. Thus, in borrowing from these films, what *Stranger Things* presents as an *accurate* depiction of

[15] Despite championing them in speeches, Reaganite austerity programs and trickle-down economics only exacerbated the decline of towns like Hawkins across the nation.

small-town life in the 1980s is instead merely a simulacrum of '80s fantasy, mistaking cinematic wish fulfillment for historical reality. Hawkins, then, like numerous '80s films before it, represents the attempted establishment of a fiction as history, an effort to make something that *wasn't* seem as though it *was*. Critically, in the case of *Stranger Things*, this means that its nostalgic suburbia is doubly removed, further alienated from its (increasingly obscured) origins and therefore less recognizable for what it is.

The elevation of small towns, Middle America, and suburbia was, more than anything else, an effort to mark boundaries, to delineate what was and was not American. In its wholesale replication of these spaces, *Stranger Things* doesn't just work to naturalize the '80s suburban fantasy as a historical reality, it also grants validity to the ideas the fantasy was constructed to represent. In light of this, one must ask, what other notions are naturalized in Hawkins' reproduction of the trope of the '80s small town? What does Hawkins reinscribe in its efforts to construct the "ordinary" '80s suburban childhood? It's worth emphasizing here that the series' setting does not hinge upon a single point of reference, but is instead a pastiche constructed through an assembly of aesthetic ideas, "a representation of suburban-ness, meshed with small-town-ness, and Midwest-ness, and other simulacra that coalesce under the guise of a coherent visual past informed by the 1950s but colored by the aesthetics of 1980s pop culture" (Smith 220). Though each of these components are, at least in some ways, discrete, they nonetheless converge around a few shared traits: as Smith has pointed out, these concepts primarily serve to "reinforce ideologies that sustain late capitalism and the suburban consumerism built to foster it," such as the nuclear family, patriarchal gender roles, and liberty through mass consumption (217).

Most of all, the influences that produced Hawkins pivot upon an exclusionary brand of white nostalgia, a notion that is evident not simply in the overwhelming lack of diversity in both Hawkins and the towns that influenced it, but also in the positions that the few characters of color occupy within these spaces. Hawkins is defined as much by its demographics as by its aesthetic markers (lawns, bicycles, mom-and-pop shops)—its demographics, in this sense, function as yet another aesthetic marker, linking the series to its mediated and ideological forbearers. As a location, Indiana is especially useful to the series because it approximates the Americana triumvirate (midwest, small town, suburban) that *Stranger Things* relies upon while also offering a historically very white population. Like Hughes' Shermer, Illinois, and King's Castle Rock, Maine before it, Hawkins is therefore a setting where an overwhelmingly white population can be convincingly placed without its lack of diversity seeming like a contrivance (which would unsettle the series' liberal aspirations). *Stranger Things*' vision of its idyllic small town is, in this way, inseparable from its racial politics—and both are functions of its aesthetically-driven and tropologically-dependent nostalgia. Whiteness, in other words, is part of what makes Hawkins *Hawkins*.

This is reflected both in the town and in the series' central cast. Its core group of children and adults notably contains only one nonwhite member, which simultaneously represents a seemingly-purposeful gesture towards diversity *and* a nod towards the token minority cliché from classic '80s films such as *The Goonies* and *Ghostbusters*. Like many of the tropes that *Stranger Things* relies upon, the inclusion of Lucas in the show's group of adolescent protagonists serves no broader narrative purpose, and, aside from his race, Lucas is arguably the least distinct in the group. That Lucas is fairly one-dimensional is

not unusual for the series, as most of the teen characters, at least initially, conform to a particular type: Mike is the headstrong leader, Will is the sensitive one, Dustin is the late bloomer, Nancy is the good girl, Steve is the bad boy, Jonathan is the outsider, Max is the tomboy; in Lucas' case, however, his "type" is not tied to personality traits, but to his race. It is perhaps not a coincidence, then, that Lucas is also the least-developed character over the course of the show. As the series progresses, the other teens each come to transcend their initial type in one way or another: Steve goes from being the coolest guy in class to working at an ice cream shop in the mall and hanging out with kids several grades below him; Jonathan comes out of his shell and begins dating Nancy, who has shed her "good girl" attitude and fixation on popularity, and the two begin transitioning into the adult world as interns with the local newspaper; Dustin finally gets a girlfriend; Will tries to overcome his trauma and assert himself. In the show's three seasons, there is no significant change in Lucas' attitude, his standing within the group, his social circumstances, or anything else that might constitute development for a teenage character. His only growth arrives in the form of a relationship with season two newcomer Max (who, in the space of one season, goes from an unsociable tomboy who loves skateboarding and arcades to a girly-girl who teaches Eleven about the wonders of the mall while "material girl" plays in the background). Because his type is, essentially, "black," and because the films that *Stranger Things* is so reliant upon don't offer any other types of blackness or minority status to which he could pivot, Lucas is seemingly unable to progress beyond his initial role.

As Bering-Porter has noted, "Lucas replaces Data, the Asian character from *The Goonies*, with a black character, but one who serves a similar purpose, unintentionally

highlighting a certain display of whiteness and white culture that is often hidden in plain sight." His presence within the group also completes the parallel with The Losers Club from *It*—which the Duffer Brothers lobbied to remake before turning their attention to *Stranger Things* (Fienberg)—composed of five white boys, a black boy, and a white girl.[16] In this way, Lucas' presence is dictated by, and derives meaning from, its reference. This is particularly evident in the first season, where Lucas' blackness is only an allusion that provides a superficial notion of diversity to an otherwise all-white production—or, more cynically, deflects the series from charges of exclusion.

In the second season, the writers attempted to respond to allegations of tokenism with a scene that more critically highlights Lucas' role in the group. Mike and Lucas get into an argument when they meet up before school on Halloween in homemade *Ghostbusters* costumes. Mike takes offense at the fact that he and Lucas have inadvertently chosen to roleplay as the same (white) character. Mike, their conversation reveals, had assumed that Lucas would be Winston, the sole black Ghostbuster. The ensuing exchange reveals Mike's implicit racial bias, and calls into question the logic of tokenism that Lucas, as a character, himself exemplifies:

> Lucas: No one wants to be Winston, Man.
>
> Mike: What's wrong with Winston?
>
> Lucas: What's wrong with Winston? He joined the team super late, he's not funny, and he's not even a scientist!
>
> Mike: Yeah, but he's still cool.

---

[16] It's worth noting, too, that the Losers Club is itself drawing on a longstanding cliché dating back to the silent era with *Our Gang*. In this context, Lucas' presence as token represents yet another example of the series' replication of a trope with a history that it shows no interest in reckoning with.

Lucas: If he's cool, then you be Winston.

Mike: I can't.

Lucas: Why not?

Mike: …because…

Lucas: Because you're not black?

Mike: I didn't say that.

Lucas: You thought it.

The conversation is replaced by embarrassment when they notice that the other students are arriving without costumes. Although Lucas and Mike later reconcile, the topic of racial prejudice never reappears. This episode, as Bering-Porter points out, reflects the show's ultimate failure to reckon with the issues it raises:

> The inclusion of Lucas, first as a token, then more fully, serves as a weak gesture towards diversity. The show's acknowledgment of its mistake is a familiar gesture, rooted in sympathy that does little to change the conditions through which people of color are othered…His more fulsome inclusion becomes a way of marketing *Stranger Things* as "diverse" and revealing its own awareness of this gesture towards diversity, allowing the audience to take a certain pleasure in the show's white nostalgia.

As this passage suggests, the series' engagement with this critique is limited to acknowledgment alone—Lucas' role in the show did not change, nor did the series abandon the racial ideology that governs it.

Despite its acknowledgment of the inherent flaws in its earlier approach, *Stranger Things'* third season illustrates that the series cannot conceive of race beyond trope. Its

elevation of Erica, Lucas' younger sister, from a minor character in the first two seasons to a major player in its third, creates a binary where blackness is either empty token or stereotype. In seasons one and two, Erica's role is confined to brief comedic appearances as a feisty sibling, mocking the dorkiness of Lucas and his friends. "God you are such a nerd," she says to Lucas in his *Ghostbusters* costume, "No wonder you only hang out with boys." By the midpoint of the third season, however, Erica has become enmeshed in the adventure, accompanying Dustin, Steve, and Robin in their accidental descent into the secret Soviet bunker below the mall. Although heightened character development could accompany this increase in screen time, Erica remains largely the same: a boisterous, no-nonsense, sassy black girl, a pint-sized Madea primed for comic relief. In one episode, the trio attempts to convince her to investigate a mysterious air duct that none of them can fit into:

Erica: Yeah, I don't know…

Dustin: You don't know if you can fit?

Erica: Oh, I can fit. I just don't know if I want to.

Robin: Are you claustrophobic?

Erica: I don't have phobias.

Steve: Ok, well, what's the problem?

Erica: The problem is I still haven't heard what's in this *for Erica*.

The scene then cuts to a shot of Steve sliding a comically large ice cream sundae across a table. "More fudge please," Erica replies as she slides the sundae back to him. "Go on," she urges with an exaggerated hand gesture. Later, after Erica reluctantly agrees to help out, they find themselves trapped in an elevator. After Robin discovers a bottle

containing a strange green substance, Erica attempts to smash it: "It could be useful," she explains, "We could survive down here a long time without food, but if the human body doesn't get water, it will die…If it comes down to me drinking that shit or dying of thirst, I drink" she concludes with a cheeky grin.

The only revelations about Erica in the third season are that she's good at math and likes *My Little Pony* (unexpected, based on Dustin's reaction, because she's black and has an attitude). Erica is coded as black in a way that Lucas—whose affect is indistinguishable from his "ordinary" white friends'—and their parents aren't. This is apparent both in her characterization and in the series' mise-en-scène. Unlike Lucas, whose non-familial interactions are always with white people, Erica first appears in season three accompanied by four unnamed and previously unseen black girls who have no lines. When she reappears in the following two episodes, she's again surrounded by three black girls who, despite several minutes of screen time, still don't speak. Who these girls are and why this population of ten-year-old black girls equals the rest of the show's black population combined is apparently unimportant; all that matters is how these girls frame Erica, the blackness they confer and the "diversity" they add to the show's cast. Race, in this light, is a matter of utility.

This form of diversity, as Bering-Porter correctly notes, identifies a central impetus in the series: to maintain the power of its nostalgia by protecting it from critique. For *Stranger Things*, the value of blackness lies in its ability to authorize contradictions, as the inclusion of black characters and brief forays into critical discourse enables the series to maintain its white nostalgia without outwardly appearing to do so. Just as neoliberal capitalism suppresses challenges to its dominance by incorporating dilutions of

them into itself, so too does *Stranger Things* absorb and then defang its contradictions in order to maintain its nostalgia. Race functions like child predation and the threat of nuclear annihilation: a threat to its nostalgia that must be acknowledged and then cast aside. The parallels with '80s films then serve as a cover for the series' replication of a regressive racial politics.

Because the series conflates the 1980s with its depiction in the media of the period, a hierarchy emerges, with cinematic precedent at the top. In this way, the white Americana of Spielberg, King, and John Hughes is more central to the '80s than any historical or mnemonic reality, and fidelity to these sources is more important than whatever political sympathies the series may have. The exclusionary whiteness of the American small-town, and the racial politics encoded within it, therefore comprise yet another '80s trope that *Stranger Things* uncritically reinforces in its pursuit of accuracy. This is the particular danger of *Stranger Things'* brand of mediated nostalgia: the series is so focused on style that it ultimately loses sight of the implications produced by the aesthetic elements it borrows. While the series' liberal gestures suggest that it may not intend to say the unsavory things that its references imply, these notions nonetheless come to fill the empty space created by its reluctance to offer anything substantial of its own. *Stranger Things*' nostalgic deference to the paradigms established by its influences buries any potential for the series to offer critique in its own contradictions. Ultimately, the series finds itself trapped within the confines of the past it reimagined.

As Noah Berlatsky has pointed out, *Stranger Things* is stuck in a loop: "It defeats the monsters and creates a better future. Then it looks around…and has to wearily jump to the past to try to get back to a better future all over again." Victories are always

conditional and short-lived: they save Will in the season one finale, and a month later he coughs up a slug-like creature triggering a menacing vision of the Upside Down; Mike and Eleven share a dance at Snow Ball ’84 after defeating the Mind Flayer, then the camera slowly backs out of the gym, inverts itself, and reveals the Mind Flayer still alive in the Upside Down. *Stranger Things* thereby imports the logic of closure more commonly found in cinematic sequels, relying on an escalation of conflict and a broadening of scope with each successive entry. Every season has a new monster, each less specific than the next—demonic Eggo boxes, built to contain whatever horror one wants to map onto them. The result is a narrative that, as it progresses, piling on newer and greater horrors with each episode, suggests that all things will only get worse, that decay may be slowed down but never stopped, and that the horrors will always return in one form or another. Though its characters persist, the series doesn’t appear to believe that a better future is actually possible; its nostalgic attachment to a particular bygone childhood and its insistence upon the death that growing up brings seemingly won’t allow it. But even if it wanted to repair the damages of the past and present, *Stranger Things*, and the hypermediated nostalgia for which it is the archetype, is structurally incapable of pursuing such a project, even symbolically, because its insistence on style means that there’s nothing to point to as *the* thing to conquer, only form. *Stranger Things* fears anything that lies beneath the surface, whether it’s the subterranean Upside Down or the horrors of the modern world that it hides beneath metaphor and trope. Because the series cannot conceive of the past as anything other than an aesthetic, there’s nothing material for it to confront, only un- or re-articulated doom. This is the true death of its nostalgia: a cycle intent on endlessly reproducing dead styles as the world burns in the distance.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## *TWIN PEAKS: THE RETURN*, NOSTALGIA, AND REPETITION

"Our Very First Show, Again," the first episode of the Netflix series *Fuller House* (2016-2020)—a reboot of the popular ABC sitcom *Full House* that aired from 1987 to 1995—begins by replaying the opening credits of the original series, featuring shots of late 1980s San Francisco as the Tanner family crosses the Golden Gate Bridge in a vintage convertible and frolics in the park while the original theme plays out its familiar opening lament, "Whatever happened to predictability? / The newsman, the paperboy, evening TV." The new-old intro is truncated, however, when, in place of the actual credits, the show cuts to an establishing shot of the famous house, beneath the inscription "29 years later." Inside the house, viewers are re-introduced to the core cast from the original series, who, we learn, have gathered to help DJ, the eldest child in the original Tanner family, following the death of her husband. ("Our Very First Show," the *Full House* pilot, takes place three months after the death of DJ's mother as her father's best friend, Joey, and her maternal uncle, Jesse, move in to support the family.) As the original cast (*re*)appears, one by one, we learn that Danny, Uncle Jesse, Aunt Becky, and Uncle Joey are all departing later that day, to resume their (old) new lives in other cities, leaving DJ alone for the first time since her husband's death. (The first scene of the series' original pilot features Danny and the kids bidding farewell to his mother in a similar context). The family, gathered around the dinner table, share brief bits of news updating viewers on what has happened since the show went off the air: Danny and Aunt Becky now have a morning show in Los Angeles (they co-hosted *Wake Up, San*

*Francisco* in the original run); Jesse is a composer for *General Hospital* (a knowing nod to the fact that John Stamos got his big break on the series); Joey (a struggling stand-up in *Full House*) works as a comedian in Las Vegas; DJ is a veterinarian; Stephanie is a DJ in London; Michelle, the cast announces and then breaks the fourth wall with a sarcastic glare into the camera, has a successful fashion career in New York (the Olsen twins declined to participate in the new series)—all, we are assured, are living the lives fans would have imagined; they have not, it seems, sold their dreams. After the scene concludes, the new-new-old opening credits begin, accompanied by a version of the iconic theme, with slightly altered lyrics, now sung by popstar Carly Rae Jepsen:

| "Everywhere You Look (*Full House* Theme)" | "Everywhere You Look (*Fuller House* Theme)" |
|---|---|
| Whatever happened to predictability? | Whatever happened to predictability? |
| The milkman, the paperboy, the evening tv? | The milkman, the paperboy, the evening tv? |
| ~~Clouds as mean as you've ever seen~~ | Everybody eventually |
| ~~Ain't a bird who knows your tune~~ | Says that they're as lost as you |
| ~~Then a little voice inside you whispers~~ | So everybody shout it together |
| "~~Kid~~, don't sell your dreams so soon!" | "Hey, don't sell your dreams so soon!" |
| Everywhere you look, everywhere you go | Everywhere you look, everywhere you go |
| There's a heart, a hand to hold onto | There's a heart, a hand to hold onto |
| Everywhere you look, everywhere you go | Everywhere you look, everywhere you go |
| There's a face of somebody who needs you | There's a face of somebody who needs you |
| Everywhere you look | Everywhere you look |
| When you're lost out there and you're all alone | When you're lost out there and you're all alone |
| A light is waiting to carry you home | A light is waiting to carry you home |
| Everywhere you look | Everywhere you look |

As the music plays, fans are treated to a medley of new, old, and new-old images, beginning with a computer-generated picture frame on a computer-generated wood-paneled wall showing the cast from the original first season, followed by a photo of the cast from the original final season against the same false background. These images give

way to a sprawling re-shot look at the Golden Gate Bridge, presented in high definition from an angle that mirrors the helicopter shot early in the original credits. The intro then segues, as each member of the cast is introduced, into sequences merging past and present: the core returning cast (Candace Cameron Bure [DJ], Jodie Sweetin [Stephanie], Andrea Barber [Kimmy]), are superimposed on montages of their characters from the original introduction; new characters (children of the core returning characters) are superimposed over their baby pictures; "special guest stars" (Stamos, Bob Saget [Danny], Dave Coulier [Joey], et al.), appear in split-screen shots showing clips from the original introduction alongside footage of them repeating the same actions (Stamos plays guitar on a bench, Saget catches a football, etc.). After the credits, we find DJ and Stephanie in their old bedroom, talking about the passage of time. "Isn't this crazy? I wound up living back in my old bedroom. I moved in here when I was five" DJ says. "Yeah," Stephanie replies, "then I moved in. Now here we are again. Circle of life." The two reminisce about an incident from the original pilot, in which, after being asked to share a bedroom, they got into an argument that ended with Stephanie clinging to the top of the curtains, a pose she attempts to reenact. That evening, at a going away party (which takes place in the family living room), when Stephanie, DJing for the group, announces it's "time to take it back to the late '80s when this party got started—New Kids on the Block!" the women all congregate to perform the choreography from the video for "You Got It (The Right Stuff)." Later, Uncle Jesse sings the song "Forever" to Aunt Becky, with everyone looking on—just as he did at their wedding in the original series. Eventually, the whole group joins in. We meet Comet Jr. Jr., the granddaughter of the family's original dog, who gives birth to a litter of puppies near the end of the episode. We also see DJ's best

friend and family-pest Kimmy get a hug from Danny: "I've been waiting twenty years to hug the king of huggers," she says. In the final scene of the episode, Danny, Uncle Jesse, Aunt Becky, and Uncle Joey offer to extend their stay in order to help the increasingly overwhelmed DJ. Danny, previously planning to sell the house, announces that he has changed his mind, saying DJ and her kids can stay as long as they like. Their new plans are quickly scuttled, however, when Stephanie and Kimmy (like Jesse and Joey before them) offer to move in instead. DJ agrees. Moments later, when the baby starts crying, Joey says "I know how to handle this" and begins to sing the theme song from *The Flintstones*. (In the original pilot, when Michelle starts crying, Joey says "I know how to handle this" and sings the same song). As in the original pilot, the family gathers around the crib and joins in, and the camera cuts to an overhead shot of the baby as they all circle the crib. Also, as in the original, DJ and Stephanie perform the "a dabba-doo time" line in duet, and Stephanie yells "Wilma!!!!" This all appears in split-screen, with the new footage replicating the old, shot for shot and gesture for gesture. The audio is also doubled, such that the slightly quieter original sing-along forms a haunting echo of the new track. After they finish singing, hug, say farewells, and Danny, Uncle Jesse, Aunt Becky, and Uncle Joey depart, the new-old Tanner family—DJ, Stephanie, Kimmy, and their children—gather around the crib to sing once more the *Flintstones* theme. The camera fades to black, shows a dedication to the deceased mothers of Saget, Coulier, Stamos, and creator Jeff Franklin, and the credits roll.

The *Fuller House* pilot thus concludes having reestablished, through repetition, the order of the original series: everything has been revived, recycled, reassembled, reunited, and reinstated.

The paradox of culture at the end of history is that nothing ever really *ends* anymore. Though characterized by (a certain kind of) stasis, the posthistorical world is also marked by the constant ebb and flow of preexisting artifacts and styles, such that when one fades out of fashion it is always replaced by another reiteration. What came to an end at the end of history, in other words, was (a certain kind of) progress, a belief in a progressive political teleology, rather than change itself. Change, at least on the level of culture, has instead accelerated at an unprecedented rate. Old things are constantly returning anew, such that in place of modernity's implicit forward velocity, cultural change has manifested its energy in the circular fashion of a treadmill. The end of history is, in this way, a (pseudo-)cyclical temporality, and we find ourselves caught in its pattern of infinite recursion. This chapter will, as a result, be especially attentive to the prefix *re-*, particularly when it indicates cyclicality, recycling, a process of repetition, a return to prior states, or accompanies instances of *doing again*.

In his 2010 retrospective, *Retromania*, Simon Reynolds called the 2000s the "re-decade." Though, at the time, Reynolds was right to recognize the increasingly backward-glancing nature of post-millennium Anglo-American pop culture, the following decade proved even more deserving of the moniker. Already, by the middle of the 2010s, the various retro movements in music and fashion that, Reynolds correctly pointed out, dominated the 2000s had given way to more straightforward acts of recycling, rebooting, and revivalism. In other words, the popularity of artists like Adele, The Strokes, and the White Stripes whose vaguely-vintage homages (the primary focus of much of Reynolds' analysis) provided the foundation for otherwise novel songwriting

was on the wane (with fewer and fewer retro acts popping up each year), replaced by even more targeted efforts to reproduce what-used-to-be with even greater fidelity; the artifacts of bygone eras served less as inspiration than as products, full stop. The prevailing production process, in other words, was no longer to make new from old, but instead to make the old new.

In one sense, this is nothing new, as remakes in film and television, alongside covers and commemorative re-releases in music, had been major parts of the American mediascape for most of the twentieth century. What is novel about this period, however, is the sheer volume of mediated reproductions that emerged in the second decade of the twenty-first century after a period of relative scarcity. Additionally, the present situation is distinct from previous historical examples, particularly in film and television, due to the widespread availability of the originals thanks to streaming. In the Classical Hollywood era, for instance, remakes were being produced at a time when most people had no access to the originals, and, even later on as television gained access to film libraries, availability was determined by station programming rather than the consumer. In music, re-releases were often little more than marketing gimmicks aimed at ensuring that older releases made their way back onto the shelves of brick-and-mortar stores. The rise of home cinema, video rental, and, even more significantly, streaming platforms like Netflix and Spotify, saw control shift to the hands of consumers, who now found themselves able to access originals in a way they never had before. These technological developments meant that reproductions were now more redundant than ever, as their earlier justification (lack of access). was no longer operative. This shift has therefore

fundamentally altered the role that remakes and other reproductions play in the media landscape of the twenty-first century.

This shift, from creating new-from-old to creating new-old or reproducing old anew, became particularly noticeable in film and, especially, television. Accelerated by the persistent quest for content amid the streaming wars, retro-inspired but nonetheless novel IP like *Mad Men* and *Stranger Things* were eventually outnumbered by a slew of revivals, reboots, and remakes. An article from 2018, for instance, offered a list of 121 movie remakes and reboots currently in development, from *Clueless* and *Blade* to *Das Boot* (Brew and Harley). A similar list published in March 2021 identified 25 TV reboots either premiering or beginning production that year alone, featuring several influential titles like *Sex and the City* and *Beavis and Butt-Head* (Spencer). In another example of doubled nostalgia for nostalgia, *Field of Dreams* was revived in 2021 when the New York Yankees and Chicago White Sox played a regular season game on the titular field in Dyersville, Iowa (the park itself is an homage to Comiskey Park, where the White Sox played from 1910 until 1990), dressed in throwback uniforms just like those in the film. As in the film, the two teams were led onto the field by Kevin Costner, who then gave a speech repeating some of his famous lines ("Is this heaven?") while a portion of the film's score played in the background. The ABC specials *Live in Front of a Studio Audience*, which premiered in 2019, present another layer of abstracted televisual repetition. In this series, single episodes of hit shows from the '70s and '80s, such as *All in the Family* and *The Facts of Life,* are performed word-for-word and shot-for-shot on perfectly recreated sets before a live audience by a new cast made up of familiar stars of today, none of whom had any connection to the original shows (Woody Harrelson plays

Archie Bunker, Jamie Foxx plays George Jefferson, etc.). It's unclear, in an era where the shows of the past are so easily accessible via streaming services, what the draw of this series is supposed to be, particularly when much of the action falls into (inadvertent?) irony—Kevin Hart, cast as a child pretending to be a superhero in the first scene of the *Diff'rent Strokes* episode, resonates very differently than when Gary Coleman, an actual child, initially performed the part, which would seem to undercut the sincerity of the original show and its nostalgic draw. Nonetheless, the show was a relative hit for ABC, raking in top viewership numbers and winning multiple Primetime Emmys. Extreme examples such as these aside, '80s and '90s TV, following the conventional 25-year nostalgia cycle, was the largest source of material during this period. Since 2016, when *Fuller House*—arguably the first of its kind[1]—premiered, *Roseanne* (*The Connors), The Wonder Years*, *Punky Brewster*, *Saved by the Bell*, *Doogie Howser M.D.* (*Doogie Kameāloha, M.D.*), *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (*Bel-Air*), *Mad About You*, *Will and Grace*, *The X-Files,* and *Twin Peaks* have each re-appeared in one form or fashion. Thus, by the end of the 2010s, though (as chapter two points out) more conventional homages still proliferated throughout film, television, and music, in terms of sheer volume the balance had overwhelmingly shifted toward reproduction—a trend that has continued into the first few years of the 2020s and shows no signs of slowing down.

This onslaught is not just a response to the fact that nostalgia is trendy; there is, as always, an economic imperative behind such a move. Premised on the extraction of profit

[1] *Girl Meets World*, a Disney Channel reboot of a *Boy Meets World*—a show whose original run was similar to *Full House*'s— premiered two years earlier in 2014, but was much less nostalgically-driven, focusing less on the lives of the few holdover characters and more on their offspring. Moreover, the show played out stylistically like a conventional Disney Channel sitcom tailored for children and pre-teens. Unlike Fuller House, which, as the pilot attests, was explicitly geared towards fans of the original show, the target audience for *Girl Meets World* seemed to be the *children* of the fans of the original.

from all it can touch, capitalism's expansionist logic sees existing IP lying dormant (i.e., not producing anything new and thus not making as much money as it could) as an untapped resource. This notion is underscored by the fact that these intellectual properties typically have established communities of fans, which is especially important for television, a medium that relies on creating sustaining connections between audiences and characters and is therefore more likely to produce the kind of deep nostalgic attachments that bring viewers back. It is no coincidence, in this light, that (as the list above indicates) the overwhelming majority of televisual reboots and revivals are shows that originally centered on the family or on teens whose age cohort is now well into adulthood. These situations provide another layer of nostalgic resonance for returning viewers, who find occasion not just to reconvene with their beloved characters, but also discover new avenues of identification (viewers who watched *Full House* as children may now find parallels with DJ's adventures in parenting; they may also come to better appreciate characters, like teachers and other authority figures, whose lives in the original run seemed distant from their own). Nostalgia TV, in other words, promises returning viewers the opportunity to again see their lives reflected on the small screen. The strength of these attachments makes revived and rebooted IP a treasure trove for studios.

In part for these reasons, nostalgia TV is also relatively less risky to produce, since new projects don't carry the same guarantee of an audience (and, therefore, have a greater potential for total failure). The profit margins for making something new, in other words, are often tighter than they are for remaking something old. Not coincidentally, the end of history exists in the context of a broader economic model that also seeks to minimize cost and risk, setting aside, where possible, the question of quality and long-

term outcomes. As Zygmunt Bauman has pointed out, "It is the mind-boggling speed of circulation, of recycling, ageing, dumping and replacement which brings profit today—not the durability and lasting reliability of the product" (*Liquid Modernity* 14). Or, to paraphrase Donald Borenstein (@Boringstein) in response to a trailer for Disney and Pixar's *Lightyear* (a *Toy Story* spin-off framed as the movie that the Buzz Lightyear toy from the original series was based on), the end of history is the "pulling all the copper wire out of the house stage" of American empire. It is an era of rampant recycling and refashioning, an era that is, increasingly, uninterested in (or unwilling—even unable—to sanction) the kind of novelty that defined much of the twentieth century. This is the perpetual condition of the end of history: an endless procession of the same things happening again.

It is interesting, in this light, that reboots and revivals are almost always set in the present. Rather than picking up where the originals left off, revivals like *Fuller House*, *Punky Brewster*, *The X-Files*, and *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* begin in the present day, often devoting much of the first episode to filling in the gaps between the years of production. Reboots like *Bel-Air* and *Saved by the Bell* likewise eschew the original's now-nostalgic settings in favor of the present, attempting to refashion the original's formula for contemporary tastes along the way (*The Fresh Prince*'s fish-out-of-water comedy of manners becomes a drama about race and class difference; *Saved by the Bell*'s cast adds poor and queer characters). The returns of both revivals and reboots are, therefore, less explicitly nostalgic for the time period of which they are avatars. Instead, they satisfy nostalgia for a product that contains a particular set of forms, styles, and systems of relation that together reflect a particular time. The overall gesture of the

reboot/revival, therefore, is to merge these forms, styles, and systems of the past into the present. This effort is perfectly captured in the *Fuller House* Flintstones split-screen scene, which expresses the essence of the impulse driving the revival/reboot. By reenacting the past, with the original cast alongside itself, the scene emphasizes at once both change and its lack—a cinematic *plus ça change*. The differences between the past and its present reiteration, the scene suggests, are merely aesthetic. The effect of the second repetition, with the new-old cast, is to elide differences full stop, with each character reinterpreted as an earlier form: the daughter becomes her father, the aunt becomes her uncle, the goofy female friend becomes the father's goofy male friend: old framed as new, new reframed as old. The effect is to erase difference (is the daughter-turned-mother really the father?) and highlight sameness, to produce continuity where it doesn't necessarily exist.

The relationship between nostalgia and the end of history is more complex than it might first appear: on one hand, the conditions of the end of history provide the catalyst for expressions of nostalgic longing, dictating what is longed for; on the other hand, nostalgia also (re)produces the political, social, and cultural values of the very same posthistorical world it is a reaction to. "Everywhere You Look (*Fuller House* Theme)" is a good example of this. The song is doubly nostalgic (nostalgic for a time that was itself nostalgic), an expression of longing for how things used to be as well as an expression of nostalgia for an earlier expression of nostalgia. The song's opening two lines, lifted directly from "Everywhere You Look (*Full House* Theme)," mourn the disappearance of a way of life that had already, the original song tells us, been lost ("Whatever happened to..."). Just as the original song implied that the original show offered a televisual

antidote to the loss of traditional American family values, the revitalized song suggests that the revived show will recapture the original show's reactionary paradise of milkmen, paperboys, and evening TV. The new song also suggests that the problems that plagued society in the '80s and '90s remain unresolved today (it's unclear if they were resolved while the show was airing and then simply returned, or if they ever went away), leaving it caught in a double bind: the song seeks to acknowledge its heritage by comparing the problems of the past and the present, but to do so it must, like the original, also invoke the idea that the series provides some kind of redress for the losses named by the song. This is an example of the way that nostalgia internalizes the end of history's contradictions: it expresses a need to recycle the past in order to remedy the present even though the same forms and objects were around when the problems began (and were specifically premised on counteracting them). Put another way, it suggests that things will improve if we simply re-do the same things over and over, even if the past three decades have been, more or less, an exercise in just that to no avail.

The theme is also an expression of another problem: repeating the original's opening lament flattens the distinction between the two periods, while also, ironically, undercutting the complaint about the loss of predictability—how long must the milkman, paperboy, and evening TV be missing before their absence becomes predictable? When does the new normal stop being new? The end of history, once again, presents a complication here, with its paradox of endless change in the midst of grinding stagnation. On one hand, the end of history is nothing if not predictable, and the neoliberal order that was reshaping America when the original song was penned (the true source of much of the sociocultural upheaval in the period) had been firmly in place for decades by the time

*Fuller House* arrived. In this light, very little has changed, and the predictability complaint rings false. On the other hand, many of the same sociocultural upheavals that occasioned nostalgic responses in the '80s and '90s have only accelerated in the time since the show ended. In *this* light, the complaint has at least a logical foundation. Here, again, is a state of confusion brought about by the end of history's mystifying conflation of the cultural and political, which the *Fuller House* theme perfectly reproduces.

It is in the context of this uniquely post-historical moment of seemingly end*less* nostalgic repetition, reboots, and revivals that season three of *Twin Peaks* was released. Following a twenty-five year hiatus, the show, often referred to as *Twin Peaks: The Return*, returned on Showtime as an 18-episode miniseries on May 21, 2017, continuing the storyline of *Twin Peaks* twenty-five years after it began—just as Laura Palmer had enigmatically promised in the original series, whispering "I'll see you again in twenty-five years." Repetition (and especially doubling, as the title suggests), a thematic interest for the series since its inception, plays an even more crucial role in *The Return*, forming the backbone of its commentary on the nature of nostalgia and televisual reboots/revivals. In doing so, the series not only sheds light on the nature of nostalgia at the end of history, but also offers a salient critique of the fantasmatic attachments produced in this cultural context.

The original series, which premiered on ABC on April 8th, 1990, followed FBI Special Agent Dale Cooper's investigation into the murder of a young girl in the seemingly idyllic titular small town in the Pacific northwest. Along the way, audiences were introduced to a slew of idiosyncratic characters, surreal imagery, and generic

pastiche, as we learned that the mystery of Laura Palmer's death went in directions darker and more unexpected than we could have imagined. Following a labyrinthian series of twists, including the revelation that Laura's murder at the hands of her incestuous father was actually part of a deeper struggle between supernatural forces of good and evil that inhabited the town, the series concluded one season later, with Cooper, having (at the urging of ABC executives) solved the show's central mystery several episodes earlier, trapped in the interdimensional Black Lodge, while a doppelgänger, possessed by the evil spirit BOB, returned to Twin Peaks in his place. The show ended with the doppelgänger smashing his head into a mirror, whose reflection shows the grinning face of BOB, rather than Cooper's, and laughing maniacally as blood drips down his forehead. The enigmatic, cliffhanger conclusion of the show's original run was followed almost immediately by a cinematic prequel, *Fire Walk with Me*, which largely avoided resolving the remaining mysteries established in the series, opting instead to explore Laura's final days and the events leading up to her death, often in gruesome detail. Though critical assessment has warmed in the years since, when released the film was almost universally panned, and interest in the series, once a must-see event and bona fide cultural phenomenon, quickly faded.

The premiere of *The Return* opens with footage from the original series, in which Laura says, "I'll see you again in twenty-five years" before fading to black. In lieu of conventional exposition, *The Return* reminds viewers of its catalyzing events through a montage featuring a mist-covered forest canopy, an abandoned mill, the empty halls of a late-80s high school, a girl running in slow motion with her hands covering her face, and a slow zoom on Laura's infamous homecoming photo in the school's trophy cabinet that

ends with a close-up. "Twin Peaks" appears across Laura's face, and the opening credits begin, featuring new (but familiar) images of a waterfall, red curtains, and a black and white zig-zag floor, all accompanied by Angelo Badalamenti's original score. Agent Cooper, we learn in the next scene, is still trapped in the Black Lodge and, we see a few scenes later, his doppelgänger has been living in his place for the last twenty-five years.

Though familiar, the new season, shot from a single 18-hour script and subsequently edited into episodes (officially titled "Part One," "Part Two," etc.), takes time to return *fully* to its original state (but, arguably, never really does). Like *The Odyssey*, whose similarity to the series has been noted by several critics[2] and which Frost has cited as an inspiration, *The Return* is not so much about the return's completion as about the process of return*ing*. Agent Cooper, Frost and Lynch's Odysseus, spends most of the series not only trying to return to Twin Peaks but also to his old self and, in another sense, to return *The Return* to the conditions and conventions that characterized the original series. This process lasts most of the first season and occupies the majority of his narrative arc. In typical Lynch fashion, the process is also not straightforward: although Cooper appears in the second scene of the first episode, he is still trapped in the Black Lodge, which he doesn't exit until the third episode; once out, Cooper erroneously replaces Dougie, a lookalike "manufactured" by the original doppelgänger to allow him to remain outside the Black Lodge longer than his initial twenty-five year mandate. As a result of this confounded process, Cooper returns in a bewildered state, unaware of who he is, unable to speak in complete sentences, and only capable of repeating back phrases (particularly those that stir his recognition of his original life). In this stage, Cooper's activity is defined by repetition—he slowly *becomes* himself again by repeating the

[2] See Nochimson, Boulegue.

tropes and traits that defined him in the original run. This fulfills a central desire for fans of the series, some of whom had been longing for the return of their beloved character for two decades. Cooper spends the following thirteen episodes absently meandering through Dougie's life in Las Vegas, variously encountering abstracted elements of his original persona such as coffee, pie, or law enforcement. Not until the sixteenth hour of *The Return* does Cooper fully return to the character in the original series. After waking up from a coma and remembering who he is (simultaneously adopting his old, familiar mannerisms), Cooper books a flight to Twin Peaks to resume his quest to save Laura, whose murder twenty-five years ago, he has become convinced, can be prevented. He arrives at the Twin Peaks Sheriff Station just in time to reunite with the old crew, help defeat his doppelgänger, and destroy BOB. Having reestablished the order of the original series, Cooper's Homeric return to Twin Peaks/*Twin Peaks* has succeeded. Like *Fuller House*, everything has been revived, recycled, reassembled, reunited, and reinstated.

His triumphant return to Twin Peaks (and *Twin Peaks*) is relatively short-lived, however, as within minutes of the show's reconstitution Cooper again leaves Twin Peaks/*Twin Peaks.* As though driven by the need to undo the damage done in the original series, Cooper travels through a portal in the basement of the Great Northern Hotel which eventually takes him back to February 23rd, 1989, the night Laura Palmer was murdered, and the day before the series began. Cooper is digitally edited into now-black-and-white scenes from *Fire Walk With Me* as he watches Laura in the woods with James hours before her fateful encounter with Leo and Jacques. After they fight, James leaves, and she returns to the woods, where Cooper reaches out to her. The scene cuts to a shot from the original series showing Laura's hair in close-up as her body, wrapped in plastic, has

washed ashore. As before, the camera surveys the body, before cutting to a wide shot. This time, instead of being discovered by Pete Martell as he heads out to fish, the body fades away, leaving no trace. Now in color, Laura, in the woods, asks Cooper "Where are we going?" and Cooper replies "home." *The Return* then re-airs the opening scene of the original pilot, showing Josie looking at herself in the mirror, and Pete greeting Catherine before leaving to fish. As Pete walks outside, we can see that Laura's body is no longer there, and, unlike in the original, Pete carries on with his day. When we return to the woods, Cooper is leading Laura through the darkness. At one point, however, he looks back and sees that, like Eurydice, she has disappeared. *Twin Peaks*, which *The Return* had only just returned to, has vanished; the entire narrative has been rewritten.

In the finale, Cooper and Diane (Cooper's formerly unseen secretary to whom he dictates taped messages in the original series, now played by frequent Lynch collaborator Laura Dern) drive into the desert, enter a portal of some kind, and find themselves on a dark desert highway. They get a room at a motel, have sex, and in the morning Diane has disappeared. Cooper finds a letter addressed to "Richard" from "Linda" that says "when you read this I'll be gone. Please don't try to find me, I don't recognize you anymore. Whatever it was we had together is over." Bemused, Cooper (Richard) heads to Odessa, Texas, and enters Judy's diner that, unlike Twin Peaks' idyllic Double-R Diner, is dingy and patronized by three aggressive men who are harassing their waitress. After (uncharacteristically) beating the men, Cooper (Richard) gets the address of another waitress who works at the coffee shop but isn't there that day. When he knocks on her door, a woman played by Sheryl Lee (the actress who plays Laura Palmer) opens it and identifies herself as Carrie Page. When asked if she is Laura Palmer, she says, in a Texas

accent, “No, I’m not her.” After Cooper fails to stimulate her memory, she asks what’s going on, and Cooper replies, “As strange as it sounds, I think you’re a girl named Laura Palmer. I want to take you to your mother’s home—your home, at one time. It’s very important.” He shows his FBI badge, and she agrees to leave with him, citing a need to “get out of Dodge” anyway. They return, once more, to Twin Peaks, drive past the Double-R (which she says she doesn’t recognize) and arrive at the Palmer house. When they knock on the door, they’re greeted not by Laura’s mother, but by a woman who identifies herself as Alice Tremond, played by the home’s actual owner (who had never appeared in the series before), who says that she doesn’t know of anyone by the name of Sarah Palmer, and that she bought the home from someone named Chalfont. (Mrs. Tremond and Mrs. Chalfont are names given to an elderly woman to whom Laura used to deliver meals, who appeared in both the original series and the film). Confused, Cooper and Carrie turn from the house and walk back onto the street. Cooper, walking as if in a daze, asks “What year is this?” Carrie looks at the house, and we hear the sound of Sarah Palmer yelling “Laura” on the morning she disappeared, taken directly from the original series. Carrie, who seems to have heard it too, starts shaking and then violently screams. There is a loud electrical pop, then the lights in the house cut out, and the show cuts to black. After thirty seconds, an image of Laura whispering in Cooper’s ear fades in and the credits roll.

This is the end of Agent Cooper’s long-awaited return to Twin Peaks, the end of *Twin Peaks: The Return*, and, in more ways than one, the end of *Twin Peaks*. In his desire to revitalize the past by preventing the demise of one of its artifacts, Cooper has seemingly undone everything: the end of *Twin Peaks: The Return* thus marks the end of

*Twin Peaks* the show as well as the obliteration of the universe the show depicted, both literally (the show is over) and diegetically (everything that happened from the original series until the finale has, apparently, been undone). Cooper's attempt to revive Laura has inadvertently created a rupture, distorting the past, and everything that followed, beyond recognition: nothing is as it was, everything is now something else, all stability and coherence have been lost. Revival, in this way, is configured as an act of destruction rather than creation; the process of *doing over again* that is endemic to televisual reboots and revivals is as much, the show seems to suggest, about erasing what came before as making something new. And yet, as Carrie's scream illustrates, traces of the past still haunt these redacted versions anyway—the past can never truly be undone, only repressed. (Carrie, one might argue, is a frame that masks Laura's original trauma, a cinematic staging of Freud's return of the repressed). Ultimately, *The Return* tells us not only that you *cannot* return home, but also that you cannot bring home back by revising the conditions that led to its disappearance.

This discussion also illustrates how nostalgia serves as a sustaining fantasy of the end of history. Nostalgia is symptomatic *and* generative of the end of history because it both *reproduces* and *is an example of* the kind of fraying fantasies of American life that permeate the period: security, stability, progress, and coherence, most of all. Nostalgia is a fantasy of reproduction and impossible return, one whose impossibility is contradicted by the return of styles and shows, which seem, in turn, to suggest the possibility of a deeper return, one that lies beyond style and form. Structurally (and contradictorily) nostalgia provides the potential for a dual fantasy: nostalgia, especially in the form of reboots/remakes, invokes progress even as it actually more broadly signifies

return/recursion, and, in doing so, it enables one to produce a version of the past that identifies (increasingly superficial/aesthetic) differences while typically not providing the space for one to consider why they are different (because, as *Stranger Things* shows, in the process of aestheticization, or of marking difference through mediated objects, those things are mystified). In short, it allows one to believe that select things are improving—or at least *changing*. At the same time, as *Ready Player One* illustrates, nostalgia also provides a fantasy world through which one can escape an increasingly pessimistic reality; nostalgia TV, in particular, promises to provide stability and the comfort of the familiar in the face of the seemingly unending cultural change and sociopolitical decay. In the end, nostalgia at the end of history promotes the fantasy of a progressive social world while at the same time providing a fantasmatic escape from the reality of decay and decline.

This produces a fraught double bind, in which people are caught between two contradictory fantasies that cannot be resolved, and find themselves helplessly attached to ideas, attitudes, and ways of being that no longer work, but which they are nonetheless compelled to repeat (often without even realizing it). The end of history inspires nostalgic thinking in part because it produces a desire to escape the present despite simultaneously refusing refuge in the future, while the same turn to nostalgic fantasy—particularly the kinds of hyper-aestheticized, non-reflective ones that have overwhelmed the cultural landscape of the past two decades—also impedes any efforts actually to improve the conditions that drew one to it in the first place. As I pointed out in Chapter One, the end of history is, above all, marked by stagnation and decay, the dissolution of progress; the solution to such problems, though politically complicated, is certainly not to turn to

fantasies of the past[3] (least of all, the past's own fantasies), particularly when they are founded in notions that have already failed to prevent the present state from emerging. To put it another way: if the fall came before 1987, as the *Full House* theme suggests, what sense does it make to return to 1987, as the reboot urges?

But making logical sense is not the point; the function of fantasy is not to *fix* reality as it actually is, but to provide an outlet for unsatisfied desires by reconfiguring or recalibrating one's image of their life so that it satisfies what they find lacking in reality; "[fantasy] supplements the functioning of ideology and keeps subjects relatively content with an imaginary satisfaction" (McGowan 15).More specifically, as Lauren Berlant explains, "Fantasy is the means by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world 'add up to something'" (3). Nostalgia, a response to a pessimistic reality that ultimately obscures the real cycles of decay and stagnation that produced it, feeds on the feeling that the world increasingly does not add up to anything coherent, stable, and is not itself desirable (and, thus, desire must be fulfilled elsewhere). Fictive narratives are powerful conduits for this process because, as Jameson (drawing on Althusser) points out in *The Political Unconscious*, they resolve at the fantasy level conflicts that do not allow resolution in the realities of everyday life. The function of nostalgia and nostalgic media, in other words, is not to create logical consistency but to provide space for the psychological fulfillment of certain desires, even as this fantasmatic fulfillment has no bearing on the material world (and possibly impedes it).

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[3] In this, the neoconservative foundations of the posthistorical turn to nostalgia again rears its head. As imagined by Leo Strauss (and later expounded by Fukuyama, among others), and vocalized most forcefully by President Reagan, the neoconservative project relied on the creation of an explicitly mythical American past around which a new polity could subsequently be (re)fashioned.

This predicament recalls Berlant's notion of cruel optimism, which describes a relation where

> something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially. (1)

Nostalgia at the end of history, in this light, is perhaps the ultimate example of the phenomenon Berlant identified: a form of cruelly optimistic fantasy that "recalibrates what we encounter so that we can imagine that something or someone can fulfill our desire...project[ing] qualities onto [the past] so that we can love...and manipulate it for having those qualities—which it might or might not have" (122), a process that ultimately "blocks the satisfactions [it] offers" (51) but nonetheless binds the individual to the promises it has come to represent, whose contours are a direct result of the social conditions that led to its emergence. Nostalgia at the end of history is, in short, a cruelly optimistic attachment to things that no longer work that is accompanied by a compulsion to repeat them anyway.

This turn to cruel optimism is not simply for the sake of establishing a categorical parallel; rather, it provides another way of considering the nature of nostalgic repetition at the end of history. The cruelness of nostalgia today lies in its invitation to return and repeat, to try to make what (seemingly) used to work *work again*, or to recapture what

has been irrevocably lost, in order to, in one way or another, repair that which has become broken (a process that is always doomed to fail). Conceptually, nostalgia is premised on the notion of *nostos*, the (continual, insatiable) *return* home that one longs for precisely because it is impossible. This is nostalgia's cruel, unresolvable paradox: it is occasioned by the same conditions that prevent its fulfillment. Yet, as I noted in the introduction, this is a process that is complicated when irrecoverable pasts are represented by recoverable, mediated objects. The '80s will never actually return, and you can never be a kid again, but, thanks to Netflix, you *can* watch *Full House* again, and even consume new versions of it. This only serves to strengthen the nostalgic bind by giving viewers a way to indulge in a version of the fantasy that simultaneously makes its larger aim seem more realizable—you no longer need to imagine returning home, *Fuller House* gives you a portal to achieve it (in thirteen 22-minute increments per year).

Cooper's failed homecoming demonstrates the confounded premise of the reboot/revival's repetitive, cruelly optimistic nostalgia. He's determined to return out of an optimistic belief that he can fix what has gone wrong; and yet, as the show demonstrates, this belief is precisely what brings the ultimate downfall of *Twin Peaks,* seemingly (re-)writing the show out of existence. Before heading to the Great Northern Hotel in Part 17, Cooper says to his friends in the sheriff's office, "The past dictates the future," a notion that lays out the logic of what follows: if the present (the future of the past) is in disarray, then it must be the result of events that occurred in the past; the logical conclusion of this claim is that, in order to resolve the conflicts of the present, one must return to the source of its undoing (the past). Cooper is bound to this logic early in the season, when, in the process of leaving the Black Lodge, he's led by a strange figure

into what appears to be outer space. The figure urges him to jump. Clearly disconcerted by the prospect of leaping into the unknown, Cooper turns back and continues his attempted return. In this moment, we see Cooper's deep attachment to what is familiar, and his compulsion to move backward instead of forward. As a result, the scene reflects the binding logic of posthistorical nostalgia's cruel optimism: the future represents uncertainty; the fantasy world of the past, on the other hand, represents the opposite. Cooper's tragic flaw is not his belief that he can change the past—he ultimately does—but rather his unshakable attachment to retrograde problem solving. This is his ruin and the ruin of *Twin Peaks* as a whole. Most concerning of all, this ruin brings no change to the larger state of affairs. The world that Cooper (Richard) and Carrie occupy in the finale—presumably, the one in which Laura's murder has been erased from existence, which, Cooper's logic suggests, should improve the present—is pointedly shown to be no better than the scenes of Twin Peaks and Las Vegas that we get prior to the finale (which are both shown throughout to be in states of decay): the diner where Carrie works is patronized by a group of abusive cowboys whose sexual harassment of their waitress recalls Laura's treatment by many of the men in the original timeline, and Cooper finds Carrie in dire straits, cooped up in a house with a corpse with a bullet in his head sitting in the living room. Nothing is really better, as far as we can tell; the misery has only been rearranged and/or repressed. For every Laura we remove from history, the show seems to suggest, there will always be a Carrie. Cooper's bemused "what year is this?"—the final line of the series—invokes the fatal flaw in his logic: if the past dictates the future, but the future is not what his revised past was supposed to produce, then is this somehow not

the future? It's the wrong question, of course, but Cooper, still bound to his original attachments, fails to see it.

The return of Laura's repressed trauma in this final scene, encoded in her mother's call and Carrie's scream, also calls into question the gender and racial dynamics of nostalgic returns. As Franck Boulegue points out, "instead of building a new home for Laura, Cooper is obsessed with taking her back to the one that was the source of all her troubles" (16). While Twin Peaks was a place of safety and comfort for Cooper—a town where, as he put it in the original series, "a yellow light still means 'slow down,' not 'speed up'"—Carrie's haunting cry reminds us that it was nothing of the sort for Laura. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that Laura, not only a murder victim, but also subjected to repeated sexual assaults by lascivious men throughout the town, including her own father, would have any interest in returning. For her, in other words, Twin Peaks was not the quirky, charming town it was often represented as in the show and pop culture, and her home, where her father repeatedly raped her, is a far cry from a nostalgic object. And yet, as Cooper recognizes, Twin Peaks is, somewhat paradoxically, not Twin Peaks (or *Twin Peaks*) without Laura. Whether dead or alive, her presence is an essential element of *Twin Peaks*, and so his homecoming is necessitated by hers. She is the homecoming queen, after all. In all of this, there is a procedural parallel between *the Return* and the inclusion efforts of recent televisual revivals and reboots, which seek to bring into the fold groups who, in the original, were excluded or whose presence was minimize— even if the past they're being brought into wasn't desirable for them in the first place. Would low-income people of color or members of the LGBTQ+ community really feel at home in the wealthy, conservative, overwhelmingly white world of *Saved by the Bell*?

Furthermore, aside from enabling the show's return, what is the point of dramatizing this false reunion to begin with?

Before leaving Twin Peaks in Part 17, Cooper says, "We live inside a dream," and his face becomes superimposed on the scenes that follow (a sequence lasting nearly five minutes). This moment can be read as a kind of metafictional break in the series, with Cooper's visage, observing the proceedings, announcing his recognition of the fantasmatic nature of the events that both precede and follow. In this reading, Cooper is not reaching back to save Laura Palmer, the girl who lived in Twin Peaks, but Laura Palmer, the *character* who lived in *Twin Peaks*. In the second episode, for example, Laura tells Cooper "I am dead, yet I live," a status that reflects her reality as a mediated object: the character is diegetically dead, but also repeatedly revived by scenes like these each time viewers watch the show. Cooper is not rescuing her from actual death, in other words, but from the narrative death depicted in *Fire Walk With Me*. *The Return*, as such, dramatizes the revisionist act inherent in nostalgia TV. We can read the final section of the finale, with Cooper (recast as Richard) trying to return Laura (reframed as Carrie) to Twin Peaks, as an effort to reboot the show under a new premise.

This effort evokes an important distinction between the processes of the revival and the reboot: revival brings back from the dead and attempts to restart where it left off; reboot restarts anew. In this light, Cooper's first attempt to save Laura is akin to a revival, literally bringing her back from the dead by preventing the event in the first place. The second attempt, in the finale, resembles a reboot, as Cooper and Laura are no longer the same characters, but rather new ones recreated from the ashes of originals, containing echoes of their previous forms but repackaged in a fundamentally altered state that

reflects its new moment of creation. In this "new" version, Cooper, rebooted as Richard, maintains his original mission but is uncharacteristically brutal—a brutal man for a brutal age, one might say—and becomes confused when his mandate, conceived in 1989, becomes unresolvable; Laura, rebooted as Carrie, is middle-aged, works as a waitress in another part of the country, and only recalls her past as Laura in the final seconds of the series. Neither of these attempted restarts succeeds: Cooper's revival of Laura loses sight of the original as it tries to drag an artifact of the past into the present, removing it from its proper context and undoing all that made it what it was. Cooper's reboot falls apart when the pair reach the Palmer house and find that it is inhabited not by Laura's mother, but by the home's real-life owner. Having broken free of the "dream" of the televisual reality he previously inhabited, and remade the televisual past, Cooper, as Richard, now confronts the real world, which is uncanny, recognizable only through echoes with the original "dream" (same house, different owner). He's left stunned by how incompatible the fantasy, both the original and the revision, is with reality. The turn to the televisual past, and the effort to retroactively refit it, has ultimately unmoored them from reality, and his final question ("What year is this?") takes on another meaning, evoking the confounded temporality produced when a fantasmatic attachment to the media of the past is confronted by the real. Cooper's attempted reboot only partially obscures, but in no way resolves, the reality that it was created to overcome, and it subsequently fails to be reconciled with the real world. Cooper, an artifact from the 1980s, created for a purpose that has already reached its conclusion, is lost in the present (the "real" present, not the fictional "dream" one), out of place and out of time. Dale Cooper, and the mediated fantasy he represents, is unorientable in the present.

The reparative returns that dominate nostalgia TV are premised on a belief in the power of repetition with a difference, but, as *The Return* illustrates here, these efforts, optimistic though they may be, inadvertently trap participants in a cycle of repetition in which nothing is ever fully resolved. Projects seeking this kind of procedure are fundamentally driven by a reconstructive rather than reflective (to use Boym's paradigm) impulse, seeking to rebuild what was (with a few tweaks) instead of considering more deeply what ends such repetition serves—in part because such reflection would emphasize the fundamental incompatibility of the fantasy and the reality it purports to represent. This raises an important question: of what use is it to revise a fantasmatic, mediated past if it is so radically incompatible with reality? What, in other words, is the purpose of trying to repair the past? Nostalgia TV, particularly revivals and reboots, provides a fantasy version of both reality and history; however, as Part 18 demonstrates, reality, history, and televisual fantasy, though they may resemble one another in superficial ways, are ultimately irreconcilable.

This irreconcilability marks a stark contrast with most televisual revivals and reboots. The split screen scenes that form the end of the *Fuller House* pilot, for instance, suggest the opposite: the fantasies of the past are not only reconcilable with the present, but they are also an essential element of it because the present is merely a repackaging of the past. An attachment to the past that leads one to endlessly repeat it, the show suggests, is not only a good thing, but it also borders on an immutable law. *Fuller House* invests fully in fantasies of stability, coherence, safety, and continuity provided by doing the same things over and over. *The Return*, on the other hand, reflects the despair that arises from nostalgia-induced stasis, showcasing how ill-equipped a strategy of comforting

repetition is for the crises at hand. That the series again ends on a borderline-incomprehensible, resolution-defying cliffhanger (after returning from one 25 years earlier) also presents a stark contrast with the process of closure and reopening brought about by conventional revivals and reboots. As such, *The Return*'s evasion of closure reminds us of its role in sustaining the kinds of nostalgic fantasies that these shows rely on, which are also essential to the end of history writ large (in the way that the posthistorical world relies on a false perception of ending and resolution).

To fully understand this, and what it illuminates about the end-of-history repetition compulsion, it's worth considering in more detail the context that shapes Cooper's odyssey. Whether you read the finale as an exercise in metafiction, a journey into an alternative timeline created by meddling with the past, a turn to an alternative dimension within the multiverse, or a signal of the end of a cycle in the Vedic cosmic order, it's clear that Cooper's quest to return to Twin Peaks—and to return *Twin Peaks* to what it once was—ultimately fails. I have already discussed several ways in which we can read the failure itself, but more can be said about the context into which Cooper's journey is situated. As Boulegue and Martha Nochimson have each pointed out, Cooper's quest, in both its structure and its allusions to Greek myth, recalls the classical epic, in which a hero, emerging into a world of disarray, endeavors to return it to its original order. Cooper's failure in the end is one obvious way in which *The Return* deviates from the conventional epic formula, but what is most novel, and therefore most interesting, is not so much *that* he fails as the conditions of his failure. Nochimson argues that

> The classical epic reveals how all the pieces of the universe and culture, seemingly in conflict, are actually part of a harmonious whole in which

> the epic hero is able to fulfill epic tasks. The opposite is true in Lynch's modern American epic. Misrule through discontinuity and fragments that are incapable of fitting together is the rule on all levels of reality. (249)

The world of *Twin Peaks: The Return*, in other words, is shown to be necessarily dissimilar to its classical counterpart, fundamentally, irreconcilably disordered rather than temporarily disunified. This is not incidental, but an essential part of the story the series is trying to tell, and *The Return* continually returns to scenes of sickness and decay: foreclosed houses dot the landscape of the Nevada suburbs where Cooper first re-emerges; a drug-addled mother squatting in one of the homes ignores her son, almost leading to his death; the sociopathic son of one of the show's original characters runs over a child at an intersection and flees the scene; a kid finds a gun in his family's van and shoots the windows out of the Double-R; a woman caught in traffic shrieks that she is running late while a young girl in the passenger seat vomits bile. As Emily VanDerWerff pointed out in her review of the finale, "You never get the sense of a warm, goofy place that so dominated the original series' depiction of the town (and made its sinister undercurrents all the harder to shake). Something broke here, long ago, and the connections between these people have been severed" ("A Potentially Frustrating").

Unlike *Fuller House*, which emphasizes how wonderful everyone's lives are now, most of *Twin Peaks'* returning favorites are either treading water or worse off than when we last saw them: Shelly is a divorced single mother, still chasing the bad boy even as she's confronted by her daughter repeating the same mistakes; though Shelly insists he's "still cool," James works the night shift as a security guard at a warehouse; Sheriff Truman is taking a leave of absence to recover from illness; Sarah Palmer sits in her

living room alone, drinking and chain smoking while watching looped images of a boxer being knocked out and a pack of lionesses devouring a gazelle on TV; Ed is still trapped in a loveless marriage with Nadine; Norma, poring over financial statements instead of making her famous pies, has franchised the Double-R, and is increasingly concerned by the drop in quality resulting from cost-cutting; Audrey is apparently locked in a mental institution after suffering a breakdown following her rape by Cooper's doppelgänger. The Log Lady, frail, on oxygen, dies midway through the season. (Catherine E. Coulson, the actor who played the Log Lady, died only four days after filming). The cast list is, in fact, littered with deaths.[4] The past twenty-five years have not been kind to the population of Twin Peaks; virtually everything is worse off than it was when we left it. The town, once marked by its idyllic charm and oddball sensibilities, is a shell of its former self.

These developments stand in stark contrast to *Fuller House*, which begins with an offscreen tragedy that the rest of the pilot attempts to remedy, an effort that is, even in the show's first half hour, stunningly successful. This effort also mirrors the role that the series promises to play in its viewers lives, offering salvation from the traumatic events and absences that have plagued their lives since the show ended. Though perhaps unsurprising given the conventions of the sitcom genre, it's nonetheless notable that such crises are not given the space to fester in *Fuller House* because they are antithetical to the

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[4] In addition to Coulson, Miguel Ferrer, who played FBI Agent Albert Rosenfeld, died before *The Return* premiered; David Bowie was too ill to reprise his role as Phillip Jeffries (his parts in the new episodes were either reused from *Fire Walk With Me* or dubbed) and died a few months before filming concluded; Harry Dean Stanton, like Coulson, was able to reprise his role from *Fire Walk with Me*, but passed away only weeks after the finale aired; Co-creator Mark Frost's father Warren, who played Doctor Hayward, appeared briefly in the Showtime series, but passed away before the show aired in 2017; Don Sinclair Davis, who played Major Briggs, died in 2008; Jack Nance, who played Pete Martell, died in 1996. Frank Silva, who played BOB, died in 1995. *The Return* is haunted by these absences, which cast a noticeably, unmistakably real, shadow on the nostalgia of *Twin Peaks'* return.

show's nostalgic mandate. On the other hand, by leaving events unresolved, *The Return* again presents a distinction from typical narratives of revival, rejecting, along the way, the fantasy of therapeutic televisual nostalgia. Its setting aligns the show with a distinctly postmodern ethos, reflecting the fragmentation, discontinuity, and chaos that has become a hallmark of postwar American fiction's response to the emergent world order.

The series deviates from (or expands upon) more traditional postmodern framing, however, in its responses to the specific conditions of the end of history; the series is, in other words, better understood not as a post*modern* epic, but a post*historical* one. What makes this epic posthistorical is not that it fails (a trait shared by many modern and postmodern "epics"), or that it depicts the world as fragmented and dis- (or un-)ordered, but that its failure arises from an attempted return both to a past and to a mediated state in an effort to repair the present's malaise. Unlike the epic hero, Cooper fails to return order to the world, and, unlike the postmodern hero, he fails specifically because of his optimistic attachment to reviving and revising the past. He actually saves Twin Peaks, in a sense, by helping defeat BOB, but it is a victory that, because of this framing, he doesn't recognize as such.

Misrecognition, a hallmark of the reflective age, as previous chapters have illustrated, is a central problem throughout *The Return,* especially when, as is the case with Cooper's failed quest, misrecognition derives from an attachment to a processes of repetition or belief in a false version of reality. Like the original series (whose title announces its thematic interest in doubling), instances of repetition, particularly ones that are either false or unnatural, permeate the series. As I previously noted, the scenes of Laura's mother Sarah watching television in her living room reveal that her gaze is fixed

on unnatural looping scenes of violence. These scenes, reflecting her traumatized psyche (her daughter was murdered by her husband, following years of incestual rape) highlight the unsuitability of television as a means of recovery because its looping of the same acts over and over obstructs progression. Midway through the season, audiences are also treated to a repeat of James' performance of "Just You" from season two. In the original, James performs the song in the living room of the Palmer home, accompanied by Maddy, Laura's identical cousin (an impossible copy), and Donna. The effects on the recording make the performance uncanny: James is not only obviously lip-syncing the vocals, but through post-processing his voice has been pitched into an unnatural falsetto, with each syllable repeated by an echo. The trio's performance (it's unclear if Maddy and Donna are the voices in the recording, but they're also obviously lip-syncing on screen) is also backed by drums and bass that are clearly not present in the room where the performance is supposedly taking place. When James performs the song on the Roadhouse stage in *The Return*, all of the uncanny elements are repeated: he is still obviously lip-syncing and, because he is much older, the artificially pitch-shifted falsetto seems even stranger. It is, moreover, the same recording from the original series, and he is accompanied by two unnamed backup singers who are not Maddy (murdered by Leland in season 2) or Donna (Lara Flynn Boyle did not return for the new season), but whose voices are the same, as are the unseen bass and drums. The scene, in other words, doubles the sense of unreality: it repeats a scene from the original, which was built on an act of obvious imitation. The repeat performance is even more estranged from reality than the initial one, which was not original, since it was a recording. The scene, in other words, is a copy of a copy of a copy with no stable point of origin (when was this originally "performed"? by whom?).

In this scene, *The Return* once again evokes the disconnect between reality and televisual fantasy, exemplified in the obvious disparity between what we see, what we hear, and what we know. Television, in other words, makes impossibility seem possible—a notion that mirrors the same end of history fantasy of nostalgic repetition exemplified in scenes like the *Fuller House* split-screen, which attempts to naturalize a premise (endless repetition and stasis) that is only possible through media.

Perhaps *The Return*'s doubled characters constitute its most significant examples of repetition. In addition to Richard, Linda, Carrie, Cooper's evil doppelgänger, and Laura's doppelgänger in the red room (also in the original series), *The Return* introduces the concept of "tulpas," or copies created through mystical means who, unlike doppelgängers, are seemingly unaware of their inorganic status. These are examples of what FBI Director Cole labeled "Blue Rose Cases," so named, Agent Preston offers, because "a blue rose does not occur in nature, it's not a natural thing; [the tulpa] was not natural, conjured." Dougie Jones, who Cooper's doppelgänger created in order to delay his return to the Black Lodge, is one such example. We also learn toward the end of the series that the Diane, who in the original series was the unseen recipient of Cooper's tape recordings) was actually a tulpa, also created by Cooper's doppelgänger. When the two are removed from the world, they are transported to the red room where MIKE informs them "Someone manufactured you," again emphasizing the constructed nature of these copies, whose existence is defined by the very thing that their false appearance is meant to obscure.

Repetition like this, the show stresses, is not natural, and can be manufactured to support a fantasy that leads one to misrecognize reality. Dougie's wife, Janey-E,

seemingly falls into this trap. Despite these sudden, inexplicable differences, Janey-E willingly partakes in the fantasy of new-Dougie because it offers her financial stability (Cooper-Dougie wins enough money gambling to cover the debts they owed), kindness, and attractiveness. Though every available sign points to the reality that he is not the same Dougie she knew before (he lost considerable weight seemingly overnight, has jet-black hair, and can barely even speak in full sentences), she falls back in love with him anyway. These deceptive doubles suggest how nostalgia entices people to fall in love with simulations, copies, and fantasies. More specifically, they mirror the idealization process essential to the reboot/revival, which produces fantasmatic "replicas" of the past that are designed to fulfill desires unmet by the present or the past. Janey-E and Sonny Jim's lives have been so improved by Cooper-Dougie's presence that Cooper initiates the manufacture of a new Dougie tulpa, made in his image, to replace him once he awakes from the coma and leaves for Twin Peaks. When we see Janey-E for the last time, she's embracing this new copy-of-a-copy Dougie, who has returned to Las Vegas to take the place of the Cooper-Dougie they came to love, and who no longer resembles the original Dougie in any way. What is staged as a joyous family reunion is, in truth, the melancholic embrace of a copy of a copy of a copy.

Audrey Horne's scenes in *The Return* provide a much darker reflection on misrecognition and, particularly, on mediated fantasy's capacity for obscuring a traumatic reality. In the original series, Audrey was a vivacious, headstrong, precocious teenager who, like many following Laura's murder, sought to dig into the town's hidden secrets. The original series finale leaves Audrey, by that point a fan favorite, possibly dead after a bomb explodes at the bank where she had handcuffed herself to a vault in protest of a

forest development project. When she reappears in the twelfth episode of *The Return,* she clearly is not the Audrey we remember, nor is she living the kind of life we might have expected. Spread across five episodes, Audrey's scenes revolve around an argument with Charlie, who is supposedly her husband though the two have an odd rapport, about Audrey's desire to go to the Roadhouse to look for Billy, her lover, whom she claims has gone missing. After quarreling with Charlie in his office, they eventually head to the Roadhouse, where she has a breakdown during a musical sequence and is instantaneously transported to a white room where she looks in a mirror and screams. With support from *Twin Peaks: The Final Dossier*, a companion to the new season published by Frost, Audrey's final scene has often been interpreted as indicating that she is in a mental institution, engaged in an elaborate fantasy. Audrey's scenes thus constitute an act of misrecognition engineered to replace a painful reality with a fantasmatic one. Crucially, the show does not allow the viewer to differentiate Audrey's fantasy from her reality. If we accept the premise that Audrey is in a mental institution, we are left with two scenarios: we either saw what happened to Audrey or we saw her fantasy. The velocity of the final cut from the Roadhouse to the white room suggests that Audrey did not actually visit the Roadhouse. The scene suggests, instead, that Audrey is brought back to "reality," as in hypnosis, with the snap of the fingers. This notion is reinforced by Audrey's crisis of recognition, which extends not only to herself, but also to Charlie and to her sense of place.

Like Cooper (as Dougie) before her, Audrey reconstitutes herself as the character from the original series through repetition. Following her mental breakdown, Audrey's mediated fantasy has led her to misrecognize her life on nearly every level, and the lines

between diegetic and non-diegetic worlds, between fantasy and reality, have become disordered—a process not dissimilar to the one induced by the influence of nostalgia TV. Popular notions of "the past," it is worth pointing out, are constructed through repetition and recitation, through media (and of media), of events/traits/tropes. Emily VanDerWerff argued, in her recap of episodes three and four, that *The Return* "is about the formation of identity. Are we ourselves? Or are we a collection of outside influences that we trick ourselves into thinking is a coherent person?" In light of the connection the show forges between identity, the past, and mediation, we might expand this question: Was the past we saw on TV actually the past? Or was it a collection of tropes and events, ossified in media, that we tricked ourselves (or were tricked) into thinking was a coherent whole? *The Return*, for its part, seems to suggest that this is at least partially the case, and Audrey's apparent institutionalization parallels how reboots and revivals, and even original series like *Stranger Things*, seek to rehabilitate the past through this substitutional process.

*The Return*'s treatment of nostalgia and fantasy marks an important departure from Lynch's earlier work. Though Lynch's expressions of nostalgia never go unproblematized,[5] *Blue Velvet* and the original run of *Twin Peaks,* in particular, nonetheless demonstrate the filmmaker's belief in the virtue of idealized fantasy. The

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[5] See, for instance, the anecdote in *Lynch on Lynch* in which the director follows up a recollection of his idyllic '50s childhood by noting "Little did we know we were laying the groundwork then for a disastrous future. All the problems were there, but it was somehow glossed over. And then the gloss broke, or rotted, and it all came oozing out" (5), and describes coming closer to a seemingly-idyllic cherry tree only to find "pitch oozing out—some black, some yellow, and million of red ants crawling all over it. I discovered that if one looks a little closer at this beautiful world, there are *always* red ants underneath" (10-11). This inseparability of light and dark, idyllic and horrific, is mirrored in otherwise "nostalgic" works like *Blue Velvet*, which insists upon the embeddedness of the two fantasies within the same world—light and dark always coincide, as showing in the opening dive from the seemingly perfect suburban lawn which reveals a chaotic hoard of bugs just below the surface.

robin that symbolizes optimism and the triumph of good over evil at the end of *Blue Velvet* may be obviously fake, in other words, but there remains, the filmmaker contended, value to be found in the aspirations it symbolizes. Here, and elsewhere, the film acknowledges that its turn to '50s sentimentality is fantasy, a cinematic invention and thus not reflective of the real, while at the same time pointing to the positive elements contained within that sentimentality. Lynch's film, in other words, does not mistake its nostalgia for reality, nor does it attempt to mystify this substitution, but rather highlights the beauty of the aspirations contained in the artifice (even if the nation wasn't actually as hopeful or kind as it presented itself, or if the hope and kindness were built on false or otherwise corrupt foundations, hope and kindness, the film attests, are good things). Lynch's early work, in other words, views mediated nostalgia with optimism, as a positive force so long as it is properly recognized as fantasy and, crucially, not falsely separated from—or used to mask—the horrors of reality.

This is seemingly no longer the case in *The Return*. As I pointed out in discussing the end of history decay that afflicts the town in 2016, Twin Peaks in the original series and Twin Peaks in *The Return* are quite distinct, and the optimism contained in the fantasmatic nostalgia of *Twin Peaks* has turned cruel in *The Return*. While the original series seeks to highlight the aspirational within its mediated, artificial fantasy, *The Return* repeatedly suggests that such a maneuver is no longer useful at the end of history, where the rot and decay brought about by neoliberalism has become so pervasive that fantasies of The Good Life ring false, and where stable grounding in reality has been wholly overtaken by the same kind of mediated, idealized fantasy that Lynch's work previously championed—such that aestheticized fantasies of the past are often no longer recognized

for what they are and are instead mistaken for representations of historical reality. So often at the end of history, as we have seen in chapters two and three, in substituting nostalgic fantasy for historical reality, the horrors of the past are separated from the idealized reconstruction, and are subsequently either obscured or symbolically repaired. Thus, the dialectic of the idealized and the horrific that Lynch's philosophy previously relied upon becomes inoperative, as the ideal fantasy has not only overtaken the horrific, but also masquerades as reality, and the sense of artifice underscoring the fantasy has been lost. Cooper's failed attachment to the reparative power of repetition and revision, in this light, indicts the original series and Lynch's own optimistic attachment to nostalgia.

"In the end," as Timothy William Gallow points out, "[Cooper] finds himself chasing a 25-year-old tragedy as the world becomes increasingly unrecognizable" (216). His downfall, in other words, is that his attachment to the past and desire to repeat it has led him to misrecognize reality—or, perhaps, to recognize that reality was never recognizable to begin with—and he ultimately becomes unmoored from the world around him. To borrow a metaphor from Franck Boulegue, the series is an exercise in squaring the circle, an impossible attempt to re-form (reform) a past that has already taken shape. If, as the series suggests, these cycles of nostalgic repetition, instigated by the conditions of the end of history, invite us to mistake fantasy for reality, and to subsequently misconstrue the relationships between past and present, then nostalgia TV poses a considerable problem for the posthistorical subject. As chapter two points out, recognition is a constitutive element in the kinds of nostalgia that emerged in the past decade or so. As this chapter shows, however, these acts of recognition are, more often

than not, actually acts of misrecognition, borne of a process by which, Berlant explains, "fantasy recalibrates what we encounter so that we can imagine that something or someone can fulfill our desire" (122). Problems arise when this process is no longer understood as fantasy (or as a process at all), and misrecognition is mistaken for recognition. These repetitive acts of fantasmatic misrecognition, sociopolitically instigated and reinforced by media, can only end in the death of referentiality, relationality, and, ultimately, recognition itself. The result is a posthistorical subject who, like Agent Cooper, is thrust into a world where they are fundamentally unorientable, alienated from both the past they crave and the present they are fleeing, asking "What year is this?"

# CODA

## BACK TO THE BEGINNING: NOSTALGIA *AFTER* THE END OF HISTORY?

Most of this dissertation was written before the Supreme Court rulings of June 2022, which, alongside ongoing events like the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, suggest that a major shift has taken place in the American (and global) political landscape. The end of history, to put it bluntly, may be ending. (According to some, it has already done so.[1]) Increasingly, therefore, the texts, narratives, and traits described in this project represent an even more narrow periodization than initially laid out, marking not just the nadir of post-historical American culture, but also the moments just before its collapse. Upon reexamination, this period entails more than just a cruelly optimistic binding to formulas of the past that no longer work; it also signifies, more broadly, an attachment to a liberal fantasy of universal stasis in a time of an ascendant right that no longer agrees to such a premise. These developments highlight the frailty of the end of history's fundamental premises: in addition to suggesting a teleological end, the end of history also promotes a notion of universality—that, for better or worse, there is broad popular and political agreement about the shape of history—which recent events suggest was not accurate (see, for instance, the conflict between Fukuyama's Hegel-inflected teleology and that of evangelicals). What often appeared, in the 1990s

[1] See, for instance, Alex Hochuli, George Hoare, and Philip Cunliffe's 2021 book *The End of the End of History* and Matthew Ellis's 2021 dissertation *The Return of History*.

and 2000s especially, to be a general consensus among liberals and conservatives about the core principles of western liberal democracy and its historical contours actually obscured distrust and growing discontent on the right, which provided the impetus for a coherent political project that slowly took aim at nearly all levels of government. What was typically positioned as fringe populism (the Tea Party movement, for example) eventually became the center. Thus, after slowly building structural power over several decades, the new right is finally exercising its power at the state and judicial level at a time when most of its opponents, still gripped by the neoliberal notion of the end of politics, have outsourced much of theirs to the private sector. Instead of confronting this issue directly, liberals in power often seem more invested in maintaining a rarely functional notion of bipartisanship, as well as a policy of corporate appeasement,[2] than in political counter-maneuvers that might upset the already dwindling status quo. Thus, in a somewhat ironic turn, while Fukuyama's end of history began, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, as neoconservative triumphalism, its remaining proponents now reside almost exclusively on the other side of the aisle, and liberal fidelity to a false sense of closure has enabled, perhaps more than anything else, the end of the end. American liberal politics, in other words, is now gripped by nostalgia for an order that is in the process of disappearing.

[2] See, for instance, the Biden administration's quick walk-back of a portion of its (already modest) student loan forgiveness program at the first sign of corporate legal challenge.

Thus, it appears that the same circumstances and beliefs that gave rise to nostalgia at the end of history, particularly the liberal embrace of a politics of stasis even in the face of crisis, have also produced the institutional vacuum upon which the right has seized. As Wendy Brown argued in *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, the antidemocratic political formations that seem to herald the end of the end of history are not only a response to decades of neoliberal decay, but are also fundamentally shaped by neoliberal logic, conjoining "familiar elements of neoliberalism (licensing capital, leashing labor, demonizing the social state and the political, attacking equality, promulgating freedom) with their seeming opposites (nationalism, enforcement of traditional morality, populist antielitism, and demands for state solutions to economic and social problems" (2). The nostalgic traditionalism that forms the discursive foundations of right-wing politics today is also symptomatic, as Brown illustrates, of the losses and displacement wrought by forty years of neoliberal economics, against which historically dominant social categories, such as whiteness and masculinity, now only provide limited cover (175). The right's oft-stated desire to return to the paradise of a mythical past, in this light, is animated less by a desire to wholly supplant or remake neoliberal economics, and more by a desire to restore these identitarian protections against its displacements.

Though painted with a more liberal brush, a similar anxiety about loss of status and influence can be seen in *Ready Player One* and *Two*, thus strengthening the logic of linking nostalgic thinking with posthistorical devastation. Cline's novels are distinct, however, in two ways: first, in their desire to elevate the cultural prestige of minority

identities (only, of course, on terms established by the re-throned cultural elites), which, though problematic in its own way, is several steps removed from the right-wing pursuit of Christian, white, masculine supremacy; second, in their posthistorical embrace of the primacy of cultural over political power, which is a premise that the right, despite regularly stoking the flames of the culture war, doesn't seem to agree with. Cline's novel thus reflects the fundamental asymmetry of the liberal and conservative approaches to the various *ends* wrought by the end of history: *Ready Player One* makes the '80s cool again, the Supreme Court nullifies Roe v. Wade.

Further troubling, in this light, is the emphasis in media of the period on aesthetics and other metaphysical responses[3] to the conditions of the end of history at a time when the right is actually putting into practice their own horrifyingly-material solutions.[4] This is particularly noticeable in discourse surrounding the period's pseudo-apocalyptic teleology. *Ready Player One*, *Stranger Things*, and *Twin Peaks: The Return* each deal, in one way or another, with the loss of futurity endemic to the end of history, and, in doing so, showcase the continual failures of mainstream liberal responses to it. As Chapter Two explains, *Ready Player One* simply invokes this crisis only to shrug at it, and hope that someone, somewhere, will conceive of a magical technocratic solution, while *Ready Player Two* attempts to address inequality through canonical representation. *Stranger*

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[3] See, for instance, Biden's continual references to restoring the nation's "soul" as a means of countering right-wing material maneuvers.

[4] While there will always be incongruity between media's responses to problems and those of actual political organizations, and though there are certainly a number of groups fighting against the recent gains of the right in a very material way, these media trends nonetheless reflect larger trends in the responses of those who are actually in power.

*Things*, on the other hand, hides its concerns about the future behind metaphor and trope, seemingly fearful of direct confrontation and identification. In *The Return*, we see the failed pursuit of these metaphysical solutions to material problems, resulting only in a pattern of rearticulation where the same structural issues persist, but are framed in a new way. In each, the problems of the end of history are met with an inability even to imagine coherent alternatives or solutions.[5]

In short, these works of art reproduce the same logic guiding the political responses that enable the right's ascendancy. The texts I discussed in this project, therefore, not only showcase the relationship between nostalgia and the end of history, they also reflect the period's demise. The nostalgia expressed in *Ready Player One* and *Stranger Things*, in particular, more than just responds to the conditions of post-historical American culture; it also constitutes a microcosm of the conditions that have led/will lead to the period's collapse.

[5] Meanwhile, the right is actively working to stave off (their conception of) the end—or, at least, to be the ones piloting the ship into oblivion, ensuring that their enemies are the first ones cast off.

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## PUBLICATIONS

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