# Introduction

## History in Reverse

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> The entirety of our history is now being written at the speed of light, which is to say in nanoseconds, picoseconds and femtoseconds whereas the organization of time was previously based on hours and minutes. We no longer live even in a world of seconds; we live in a world of infinitely tiny units of time.
>
> —Paul Virilio (113–14)

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IN SPRING 2018, AS I SAT DOWN and began to pen ideas for how to open this book, I was suddenly struck by the uncanny symmetry between the worlds of culture and politics that I was inhabiting at that moment. My partner and I had decided to catch up on *The Americans*, a Joe Weisberg creation then in its sixth (and final) season. We were on the fourth season. For those who aren't familiar with it, *The Americans*, an FX television show that first aired back in 2013, follows the exploits of two deep-cover KGB spies, Elizabeth and Philip Jennings (played by Keri Russell and Matthew Rhys) and their family, as they attempt to navigate the perils of a job that involves numerous undercover operations all while trying to maintain the appearance of normality in 1980s America.

Much of the plot for season 4 revolves around the couple's attempts to smuggle biological weapons being developed by their US adversaries out of the country and to the Soviet Union. Strange, I thought, given that at that very moment Sergei Skripal, a former Russian counterintelligence operative for the UK government, and his daughter, Yulia, lay recovering in a hospital some weeks after they had been the target of an attempted murder by shadowy figures in the Kremlin (or so the UK government insisted). That this attack had happened in Salisbury, England, using a military-grade nerve agent in broad daylight some fifty miles away from my quiet hometown on the south coast of England was like something out of a fictional realm. The event, which dominated the UK media for about a week before disappearing, will no doubt be little more than a footnote by the time you read this. Like so many similar political instances, these events demonstrate the increasing ephemerality of the public memory. As Virilio suggests, history is being written at the speed of light. How could one possibly remember?

There were more uncanny similarities to be observed. As Ronald Reagan's rosy cheeks appeared on the television screen in season 4, episode 5, giving his March 1983 Strategic Defense Initiative speech—the family in *The Americans* are often shown gathered round watching the fortieth president of the United States address the nation—I was reminded that a Reagan-like impostor currently occupied the White House. In the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, I was struck by Donald Trump's boast in the debates that his corporate tax cuts would be the biggest since Reagan's. Reagan's economic policies may have boosted the economy, but that never translated into increased wages. Figures from the Economic Policy Institute show that the 1980s marked a period in which productivity grew rapidly, but wage growth was stagnant (Bernstein). Indeed, the structural changes to the US economy in the 1980s under Reagan are often cited as the beginning of the neoliberal stripping of wealth from hard-working citizens. Yet Donald Trump's Ronald Reagan was reconfigured—at least in his rhetoric—as a hero of the working class. History was not just being written but, rather, rewritten.

This is a book about history. Or rather, this is a book about time; more specifically, time travel. One might even go as far as to call this a science fiction text. It is no coincidence that cinema has often been called a time machine (see Friedberg 100; Penley; Lee 2); while on the international political stage nostalgia has been wreaking havoc, movies with their action set in other time periods have been booming at the box office. Of the nine Best Picture Oscar winners between 2011 and 2019

(*The King's Speech*, *The Artist*, *Argo*, *12 Years a Slave*, *Birdman*, *Spotlight*, *Moonlight*, *The Shape of Water*, and *Green Book*), only one was set in the present. Even that movie, *Birdman*, was a story about memory—protagonist Riggan's (Michael Keaton) career is defined by his early role as Birdman (mimicking Keaton's own role as Batman in the late 1980s and early 1990s) and the movie centers on his struggle to escape his past and reinvent himself as a serious actor. Not to say that all of these movies are explicitly about nostalgia, but they do seem to speak of our obsession with the past. If we take *Green Book*, for example, it is difficult to argue that the movie encourages a longing for the 1960s, given its depiction of the racism and homophobia encountered by Dr. Donald Shirley (Mahershala Ali), but the use of the iconic 1962 Cadillac driven by Tony Lip (Viggo Mortensen) does lend an air of romance to the road trip that is the subject of the movie. Such films often seem to appeal through what one might call the texture of the past. Rather than operate on the narrative level, nostalgia is evoked via the aestheticization of the period setting to which the viewer is transported. Often these aesthetics alone are enough to distort our understanding of history. As Robert Burgoyne has argued, even as we have become increasingly accustomed to and comfortable with the manipulation of film through digital methods, "film appears to have acquired, more than ever, the mantle of meaningfulness and authenticity with relation to the past—not necessarily of accuracy or fidelity to the record, but of meaningfulness, understood in terms of emotional and affective truth" (223). Indeed, wrapped up in this is an argument about fidelity to history and authenticity, but as the essays in this collection attest, there's considerably more at stake than just this.

Where the movies mentioned above might evoke nostalgia for their periods in a formal sense, a recent flurry of Disney films seems to show the industrial process at its most ruthlessly efficient. When you think about it, it's a great marketing strategy: if you were ten when *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), or the *Lion King* (1994) came out in the early 1990s, there's a good chance that your children (if you had them) might be about ten when the remakes hit the screens in 2017 and 2019. Your nostalgia becomes the perfect excuse to take your ten-year-old child to the cinema. I have often wondered what the point of the live-action remakes are, given that Disney's 1990s animation techniques don't really age—in fact, the remakes will probably age more rapidly—but given their box office success, it would appear that Disney has found a formula that works. Of course, we can still enjoy this nostalgia. *Toy Story 4* (2019), for example, showed that Disney can still create original narratives that

mobilize nostalgia to get patrons through the doors but that ultimately have a heartbeat of their own. But there is a sense that these new old movies are in some way haunted by the ghosts of their originals. Is it possible to watch the new *Aladdin* movie without comparing Will Smith's performance as the Genie (unfavorably) to Robin Williams's show-stealing work in the original? Likewise, why is it that James Earl Jones reprises his role as Mufasa in the live-action *Lion King*, whereas other stars, like Jeremy Irons, who voiced Scar, are missing? Mufasa's ghostly presence quite literally haunts the movie, perhaps. All of these decisions are talking points for fans who crowd internet fora, and while it's true that Disney's takeover of Lucasfilm in 2012 had many *Star Wars* fans up in arms, the pull of new old material was just too strong for the franchise's continuation not to be a commercial success.

In the introduction to his 2017 work *Retrotopia*, published only a week after his death, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman reworks an image of the Angel of History that he draws from Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940). Interpreting a 1920 print by Paul Klee titled *Angelus Novus* (New Angel), which he bought in 1921, Benjamin envisions an angel forced backward by the onslaught of history, a "storm" that "irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm," pronounces Benjamin, "is what we call progress" (201). Bauman notes that nearly a century after Klee's painting was made, "one would catch the Angel of History once more in full flight" (1). Now, however, Bauman imagines the Angel in full reverse, "the storm blowing this time from the imagined, anticipated and feared in advance Hell of the future towards the Paradise of the past" (2). For Bauman, one senses, there was little to recommend the debris of history. Yet it would seem that the past, at least in the public consciousness, has become a haven into which one can escape an increasingly uncertain future. In such circumstances, it might appear easier to go backward than forward. Progress becomes synonymous with reversal; nostalgia becomes the symptom of a complete loss of faith in what's to come.

Similarly, Mark Fisher writing in 2014 saw the twenty-first century as a time uniquely predisposed toward nostalgia: a product of the inadequacies of our present and the failed promises of neoliberal capitalism. For Fisher, ours was a moment devoid of the intellectual and cultural creativity of earlier periods like the 1970s and 1980s, and he argued that even the "recombinatorial delirium" of postmodernism now seemed exhausted (8). Fisher asked, "could it be that neoliberal capitalism's destruction of

solidarity and security brought about a compensatory hungering for the well-established and the familiar?" (14). Or is it that "neoliberal capitalism has gradually but systematically deprived artists of the resources necessary to produce the new," creating "an increased tendency to turn out cultural productions that resembled what was already successful" (15)? Whereas Bauman saw our nostalgia as something to be wary of because it seemed to mark an end to our belief in progress, Fisher seemed to see in it the ultimate indictment of our present political and cultural moment.

So, are we more susceptible to nostalgia today? That's certainly what some scholars have argued. Ryan Lizardi writes that "in today's hypermediated world, technological affordances make it easy to create our own "playlist past" of downloaded vintage video games and DVD boxsets of long-forgotten television shows" (3). Fisher also ties our nostalgia to technological shifts: "In conditions of digital recall," he laments, "loss is itself lost" (2). Just as Michael Dwyer highlights the new technologies of the 1970s and 1980s that were inspiring a younger audience to revisit and nostalgize the America of the 1950s, it would be worth pausing here to note the similarities in how such technology is now shaping a new nostalgia (especially for the 1980s and 1990s) for the Netflix generation. An increase in scholarly interest in this area, as demonstrated in the recently published *Netflix Nostalgia: Streaming the Past on Demand*, edited by Kathryn Pallister, suggests that there is something specific to today's media platforms that have encouraged this move toward a nostalgic culture and with it a nostalgic politics. But what to make of this shift is more challenging. For Lizardi—who coins the phrase "narcissistic nostalgia" to help describe an environment where "new technologies [have enabled] the inclusion, exclusion, and ordering of individual media texts to be played back at any time," often at the cost of the "dismiss[al] of collective cultural experiences" (3)—we are being "exploited by contemporary media to develop individualized pasts that are defined by idealized versions of beloved lost media texts pumped up with psychic investment to a level of unreality" (2). Thus nostalgia, particularly when considered as an industry tool, becomes a highly conservative force. Rather than bring us closer to our past, it has a tendency to erase certain histories (often the marginal) replacing these with a cathartic, whitewashed, and sanitized simulacrum that can be used to escape from a collective guilt and responsibility for today's political confrontations.

Christine Sprengler, on the other hand, sees a debate between good and bad nostalgia as ultimately somewhat fruitless because "the tendency to assess nostalgia on the basis of its object . . . informs nearly

all attempts to evaluate [it]" (32). Sprengler highlights the changing fortunes of nostalgia in academic criticism over recent decades: in the 1980s and 1990s, she argues, Reagan's use of nostalgia "made it difficult for anyone but staunch Republicans to find value in it" (32). One might note Fredric Jameson as the cultural theorist most associated with this more pessimistic understanding of the role of nostalgia in the cultural and political sphere. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, Sprengler notes a shift toward a new, more optimistic engagement with nostalgia in scholarship. She cites Grainge, Moran, McDermott, Cook, and Cashman as figures who reevaluated nostalgia during this period (33). Another more recent example might be Gilad Padva, whose 2014 book, *Queer Nostalgia*, offers an important contribution to the field. While this volume's focus is firmly on mainstream US film and TV culture, Padva's positive evaluation of the way nostalgia has helped shore up more marginal identity constructions offers a useful counterpoint to the sometimes cynical take on nostalgia found across a number of chapters in this collection, my own included.

Whether you believe that the wave of nostalgia we're currently experiencing offers positive hopes for reengaging with history, or whether you see a warning that our culture is in full retreat from the present, there is evidently much more to nostalgia than just the formation of catchy political slogans or the recycling, remaking, and rebooting of a few old movies and TV series. Nostalgia is an industry, but it is also, as scholars have noted, an amalgam of a complex web of different affects, practices, aesthetics, emotions, and fetishes. This volume is an attempt to work through some of these and to explore how nostalgia has come to dominate today's media, culture, and politics in an effort to assess what this all means for us. Beyond this, on a conceptual level, a collection on nostalgia must touch on issues relating to time, history, and memory—three hugely important touchstones for identity. Many of the questions raised in this volume highlight these touchstones as areas of contestation. As Paul Grainge has written, "the desire for memory as stable, reassuring, and constant has always been plagued by the fear of its instability and unreliability, and its disposition towards fantasy and forgetting" (5). A number of the papers in *Was It Yesterday?* treat memory as a battleground on which individuals compete with multinational corporations and the movie and TV industries to help shape certain conceptions of history.

In this introduction, rather than attempt to set out a clear definition of nostalgia, I opted instead to set the scene and give a little background about what inspired this collection. There are just too many different

nostalgias to theorize in such a short introductory note. Instead, the first four chapters in part 1 of this book are all in some way dedicated to finding a mode of discourse by which we might better explore, define, and frame nostalgia. Thus, in the opening chapter, Jason Sperb brings together a host of competing definitions and ideas of the nostalgia film. He identifies the characteristics of affective, peripheral, representational, and narrative nostalgias before considering the role of identity in the nostalgia film. In chapter 2, Christine Sprengler begins by considering the theoretical landscape spawned by studies of nostalgia. She argues that the "metamodern" offers perhaps the clearest understanding of how nostalgia has tended to operate in recent movies, using the examples of *La La Land* (2016), *Hidden Figures* (2016), and *Carol* (2015) as a means to demonstrate the metamodern style. In the third chapter, Daniel Varndell explores an array of filmic moments, focusing particularly on the role the star image plays in evoking various types of nostalgia. For Varndell, these intertextual moments sometimes reveal the aging star as fading and at other times act as triumphal returns demonstrating that true star power can overcome the passage of time and the ravages of aging. He also examines the gender dynamic that often seems to energize such moments and our reactions to them. Ross P. Garner's chapter on fan cultures closes this part and moves the debate around nostalgia to material cultures by focusing on merchandise. Garner seeks to redeem nostalgic merchandise, which he argues is often dismissed as an offshoot of consumer exploitation by giant conglomerations, arguing through his concept of mimetic tangible nostalgia that nostalgic commodities offer a bridge between the consumer and the spatial and temporal worlds of their franchises.

In part 2 each chapter effectively draws on the history of their respective periods to unpack the various films and TV series they explore and identify what it means for a movie or show to transport us back to a particular decade. In chapter 5, Steven Rybin focuses on the re-creation and sentimentalization of 1950s Hollywood in his work on Warren Beatty's evocation of Howard Hughes in *Rules Don't Apply* (2016). In chapter 6, Fran Mason raises questions about why crime texts, particularly *American Hustle* (2013), *The Nice Guys* (2016), *Free Fire* (2016), and season 2 of *Fargo* (2015), return to the 1970s for their action set pieces. For Mason, the 1970s offers a blank canvas, or a temporal free-zone as he calls it, which locates the action beyond the politics of the period. Next, in chapter 7 Justin Wyatt considers nostalgia from an industry perspective, exploring the different formulas by which nostalgia can be successfully

and unsuccessfully marketed to today's audience through the musical reboots of *Fame* (2009), *Footloose* (2011), and *Grease Live!* (2016), which have their roots in the late 1970s and early to mid-1980s. In chapter 8, Tracey Mollet "goes home" to the 1980s in her exploration of *Stranger Things*. She explores how the show applies the values of today to the America of the 1980s to "correct" the politics of the period, thus testing the meaning of the idea of going home, both in terms of the show's focus on a missing child wanting to return home, and for the viewers whose nostalgia means that the 1980s feels like going home.

Part 3, which contains chapters centered more explicitly on the political implications of nostalgia, opens with Vera Dika's examination of the dialogue between Jordan Peele's 2017 Oscar-winning hit *Get Out* and its horror sources. Like those works identified in her earlier and crucial book on nostalgia (*Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film*), Dika's chapter locates a spirited resistance to the nostalgia of our times in Peele's glances backward in *Get Out*. Dika argues that for Peele, the use of intertextual references, which might evoke nostalgia on their own, together expose the codes of the horror movie and reconfigure history itself as horrific rather than nostalgic. In chapter 10, I tackle a different genre by exploring science fiction and nostalgia in Steven Spielberg's *Ready Player One* (2018). I use the film as a basis to explore how nostalgia often depoliticizes the past and thus produces conservative rather than radical texts, even those that might otherwise use progressive ideas and technology in their explorations of the future. In opposition to this, Christina Wilkins explores HBO's *Westworld* (2016) series in chapter 11, offering a more upbeat conclusion by arguing that nostalgia in the show operates as a progressive rather than conservative force because it brings about self-actualization. Chapter 12, by Ian Peters, follows some of the lines of inquiry put out by this introduction in its analysis of the role that the Cold War has played in television series after September 11, 2001, focusing on *The Americans*, *Deutschland 83* (2015), and *Deutschland 86* (2018). Peters shows how different nations, depending on their cultural history, respond differently to Cold War nostalgia deployed in the face of uncertain times and uncertain threats in the twenty-first century.

The final part of the collection contains two essays that stand apart from the others in seeing the contemporary period as no more or less nostalgic than earlier times in film history. Murray Pomerance offers a personal account of his own nostalgia for a number of films, particularly *The Graduate* (1967), to consider the generational nature of nostalgia. He argues that nostalgia films of today often get the past wrong, and he con-

siders how memory operates. In a final flourish, William Rothman argues that "nostalgia ain't what it used to be," questioning the premise of the collection as a whole and arguing that today Americans spend less time living in the past than they have historically, highlighting the movies of the 1940s and 1950s as offering overwhelmingly nostalgic experiences. In doing so, he questions whether the films of today could ever be nostalgic objects for future generations in the same way.

Let me finish this introduction by thinking again about nostalgia in a personal sense. In Italo Calvino's wonderful little novella, *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo tells the inquisitive Kublai Khan of a city he encountered on his travels around the Khan's empire:

> In Maurilia, the traveler is invited to visit the city and, at the same time, to examine some old postcards that show it as it used to be: the same identical square with a hen in the place of the bus station, a bandstand in the place of the overpass, two young ladies with white parasols in the place of the munitions factory. If the traveler does not wish to disappoint the inhabitants, he must praise the postcard city and prefer it to the present one, though he must be careful to contain his regret at the changes within definite limits: admitting that the magnificence and prosperity of the metropolis Maurilia, when compared to the old, provincial Maurilia, cannot compensate for a certain lost grace, which, however, can be appreciated only now in the old postcards, whereas before, when the provincial Maurilia was before one's eyes, one saw absolutely nothing graceful and would see it even less today, if Maurilia had remained unchanged; and in any case the metropolis has the added attraction that, through what it has become, one can look back with nostalgia at what it was. (Calvino 26)

In this passage, Polo neatly illustrates the value of nostalgia—its power to allow us to reevaluate the present—and its dangers. Indeed, as Polo intimates, one "must be careful" with nostalgia. While looking backward can help us appreciate a certain beauty and simplicity in the past, there must be a recognition that returning to that past would only reveal the fraudulence of nostalgia. In most cases, nostalgia is the site of harmless whimsy. Our passing regrets at the changes we have witnessed are a way of coping with the turbulent times in which we live. But when we take the time to consider how far we have come, I personally believe that very

few would honestly wish to go back in time. When we look back on the past, we do so not just with an affection but with an understanding that it would be folly to turn back the clock. The expression "to look back through rose-colored glasses" neatly reveals nostalgia's artifice. Hence, nostalgia should never provoke in us a genuine desire to return to the past because such a romantic vision is always understood as just that—a romance.

Today, there is a space, just as there has always been, for the nostalgia film—and with it a little romance in one's life. Indeed, many of the contributions in this volume demonstrate their author's passion, reverence, and even adoration for the nostalgic texts that have held our collective interest over the past decade and more. It might seem there can be little harm in indulging wistful fantasies of postcard by-gone days now buried beneath the sediment of the ever-shifting present. Today, however, there is not just a space but a genuine need for cultural artifacts that can mobilize our imagination and inspire us to look forward. Perhaps for this reason, it is vital to understand how nostalgia circulates in our culture. In uncertain times, we must look ahead toward the possible rather than behind toward the "catastrophe" of history, as Benjamin's Angel sees it (201). Our new catastrophes cannot simply be covered over with the old ones.

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