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Future Nostalgias

Longing for the Past in today's pop culture

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To my friends and loved ones,
for making me look back fondly at what has been,
and be even more eager to see what will come.

ABSTRACT

Despite the most recent technological advancements and a distinctive tendency towards progress and acceleration, in the last few years Western societies seem to have been affected by a powerful sense of nostalgia, which is reflected in different aspects of everyday life. From movies to fashion, from music to ideologies, many are the ways in which the Past seems to be coming back in the Present, either through its medial representations, either in the form of a longing for simpler times. This surge of nostalgia in the West has been attracting an increasing attention among scholars and observers, particularly from the 1970s onwards, and it has become an essential point of discussion to paint a complete picture of our time and its relation to change, future and temporality. The present research aims to reconstruct the evolution of the concept of nostalgia across the centuries, from its inception in the field of medicine up to its latest iterations as a postmodern aesthetic category, and to understand how and why this sentiment and its declinations are so prominent in contemporary media and pop culture, with a specific focus on cinema and TV series. To do so, this thesis combines elements of History, Philosophy and other disciplines to paint a full picture of the phenomenon that has been called the "current nostalgia boom", and provides a case-study analysis of the TV series *Stranger Things* to show how the conversation surrounding nostalgia is reflected in a widely successful product.

EXTENDED SUMMARY

Negli ultimi anni, il mondo contemporaneo sembra essere attraversato da una dicotomia temporale che contrappone una forte spinta verso l'innovazione e il progresso – soprattutto in campo tecnico e scientifico – a una tendenza di segno opposto, che vede invece nel ritorno al passato e alla sua (presunta) semplicità un modo per evadere dalla frenesia del presente.

Il sentimento che esprime questa tensione tra passato e futuro è quello della nostalgia, la quale sembra manifestarsi con sempre maggiore frequenza nella quotidianità delle società occidentali, soprattutto attraverso i prodotti della cultura pop come cinema, musica e serie tv, configurandosi come uno degli elementi più pervasivi e caratterizzanti dell'epoca contemporanea. Questa tesi si propone quindi di esplorare a fondo il rapporto tra presente e nostalgia, analizzando tale sentimento e le sue declinazioni in chiave storica e filosofica, dandone un'interpretazione multidisciplinare e informata dalla ricca letteratura che, soprattutto dal volgere del nuovo millennio in poi, ha messo in luce e problematizzato l'emergere di questo fenomeno.

La presente ricerca si articola in quattro capitoli. Nel primo viene ricostruita la storia del concetto di nostalgia a partire dalle sue origini nell'Europa moderna, seguendone l'evoluzione attraverso il periodo romantico fino ad arrivare alla sua inclusione nel campo della psicanalisi e infine al suo utilizzo in ambito artistico e mediale come categoria estetica. Il secondo capitolo è quindi dedicato a definire il ruolo della nostalgia nell'era della globalizzazione, approfondendo la sua relazione con i concetti di spazio, tempo e mobilità, e collocandola nel più ampio dibattito sulla postmodernità. Il capitolo successivo ha come centro tematico il ritorno del passato e dei suoi "spettri" nella cultura pop e materiale del presente, esplorando come questo fenomeno sia spesso caratterizzato da movimenti nostalgici di idealizzazione, stereotipizzazione e semplificazione della complessità, e come ciò sia collegato alle ansie e ai desideri del presente. Il quarto, e ultimo, capitolo è invece dedicato ad un'analisi approfondita della serie tv *Stranger Things*, la quale va ad evidenziare come gli strumenti teorici e concettuali sviluppati nelle sezioni precedenti siano applicabili ad un prodotto di grande successo il cui fascino è in gran parte legato ad una visione nostalgica e accattivante degli anni '80.

Lo scopo di questa tesi, dunque, è di comprendere le ragioni dietro alla recente insorgenza della nostalgia nel mondo occidentale, le modalità in cui questa si manifesta attraverso i prodotti della sua cultura pop, e cosa ciò possa raccontare del nostro presente.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, something strange has been happening concerning our relationship with the Past. We currently live in a profoundly interconnected society, where technological advancement pushes forward its boundaries every year and the products that come out from it are an important part of our lives. Not only are we living the technological future that was imagined in the past century, but in many ways we have surpassed it from a long time, and the rush towards progress does not seem to slow down. We live in a time where the possibilities seem endless, and yet, somehow, the past is resurging everywhere around us.

Beloved movies and TV series from past decades are still being cherished or are coming back in the form of remakes and reboots; new artists release their music on vinyl records, CDs or even cassettes; the market for *vintage* items has been growing steadily, especially in the sectors of tech and fashion; we apply filters to our digital pictures to make them look old and polaroid cameras have become cool again – and the list could go on. Despite being surrounded by futuristic visions, the Past seems to be coming back in full force, resulting in a juxtaposition of temporalities that cannot help but fostering a feeling of *anachronism*.

Western societies are running towards the Future, but, at the same time, they seem to be caught by a wave of *nostalgia* that manifests itself through a variety of trends and practices. This sentiment seems to be playing an important role in how the West is conceptualizing its connection to the Past and its identity in the Present, which, consequently, is quite telling about how the Future is being approached. In this thesis we will try to understand the reasons behind what has been labelled "the current nostalgia boom" in the West, how this sentiment interacts with the contemporary media sphere and what role it is playing in one of the most pervasive and influential fields of medial application: pop culture.

In the first chapter we will explore the origins of the concept of nostalgia and we will follow the evolution of its meaning throughout the centuries, from its inception in the late 1600s up to its most recent declinations as an aesthetic category. The connotations associated with such word – "nostalgia" – have, in fact, been shifting pretty significantly during its lifetime, and the diversity of

fields in which such term has been used is in itself the proof of a surprisingly eventful journey, which encompassed mercenaries and generals, poems and novels, deadly diseases and ingenious marketing campaigns. In this chapter we will then try to make sense of this metamorphosis, to understand where nostalgia comes from and which are those key elements that remained persistent across the centuries. We will also try to link this sentiment to its ancestral roots, by putting it in dialogue with the much older myth of the Golden Age, to see how they are intertwined.

Chapter II will be dedicated to analysing how nostalgia and globalization are connected to each other and to the perception of space and time. We will discuss the role that mobility, communications and revolutions play in the spreading of nostalgia and where this phenomenon sits within the discourse surrounding modernity and postmodernity. Through the concepts of crisis, identity and desire we will come to see some examples of how, towards the end of the last century, nostalgia was implicated in the processes of mythologisation of decades like the 1950s and 1960s, which are in many ways still idealized as a golden age of stability and agency. In particular, we will focus on the determining contribution to such canonization that was given by popular media and pop culture, and we will question whether the surge of nostalgia in the '70s can be compared to the one that we are currently experiencing.

The third chapter will take the cue from the analysis conducted in the previous one to dive deep into the relationship between nostalgia and pop culture, showcasing how these two elements relate to the fears and desires of the Present. Central to this chapter will be the lexicon of spectrality and of the occult, which will prove to be effective in describing the influence exerted by the Past on present-day media. We will discuss the analytical category of *hauntology,* and we will relate it to the concepts of "lost futures" and medial resurrection. The chapter will then proceed to problematize the different ways and forms in which the Past is nostalgically re-presented in contemporary media and pop culture, dwelling especially on its idealised, rose-coloured depiction as glamorous "simpler times" and on the establishment of decade-specific aesthetic canons which result in the production of uncanny *retro* artifacts. We will then conclude with an overview on the return of outdated forms of mediality and its significance as a sign of the times. In particular, we will discuss the phenomenon of *analogue* nostalgia as a response to the increasing dematerialization of reality performed by digital technologies, but also as fascination with the aesthetics of error and decay. Through the concepts of *aura* and "loss of loss" we will try to make sense of this return, and we will try to understand what it can tell us about our Present.

Finally, the last chapter will be entirely dedicated to applying the conceptual tools that have been presented all-throughout the thesis to analyse the TV series *Stranger Things* as a cultural artifact, particularly relevant to our investigation in virtue of its great popularity and its representation of a nostalgic past. The peculiarity of the show relies in its duality between an extremely detailed

reconstruction of the material past of the 1980s and its inception as a "love letter" to the decade's pop culture. The tension between the realism of the series' props and setting and the depiction of an idealised past informed by blockbuster movies and horror novels results in a very interesting example of haunted product, whose immense popularity can also be quite telling about its modern audience's anxieties and desires. By questioning the relationship between the represented vision of the '80s, its historical counterpart and our present-day society and through many examples taken from the series' four seasons, we will then try to peel off the layers of the show to reach the object of nostalgia that lies at its core.

The present work lingers *in-between*: it combines History, Philosophy and other disciplines to paint a multidisciplinary picture of a complex phenomenon, but it also situates itself on the edge between theory and practice, drawing from the rich and growing literature that surrounds nostalgia – which will be presented in the following chapters – as well as from existing instances of the sentiment's material agency, to conduct a critical analysis on something that has both concrete and abstract implications – economic and artistic as well as concerning our perception of time.

This thesis was born from the observation that the Past, contrary to its name, is still very much present in many ways in the world around us. The signs of its lingering can be seen nearly everywhere, from media to culture to politics, and nostalgia itself seems to blur the line between symptom and disease. To comprehend the role played by such a pervasive sentiment and its declinations is, thus, an interesting gateway to access a better understanding of the Present and its dynamics.

This research also stems from the belief that we live in a very complex time, where temporality itself is a key point of discussion and which requires – perhaps more than ever – to find ways to envision a better future while maintaining a dialectic connection with its past. The place to balance this dichotomy is the Present, which sits at the convergence of Past and Future and is constantly, inevitably washed by the flow of time. To reflect on the relationship between what once was and what has to come, then, reveals the centrality of the moment – καιρός – and the importance of seizing its fullness.

CHAPTER I

THE TIME AND SPACE OF NOSTALGIA

«Nostalgia is not what it used to be».[1]

1. A Swiss disease

Nostalgia is one of those concepts which seem to inhabit our everyday life without too many peculiarities or surprising features, as a taken-for-granted emotion most people are likely to experience at some point in their lives. However, as the increasing literature on the subject shows, the feelings conjured by this term – meaning both *from* the term and *about* the term itself – are far more complex than a first glance might suggest. To understand the reasons of its relevance today and the change of its significance through time, our investigation around nostalgia and its declinations shall then begin from its origins and story.

Despite its Greek roots, the word "nostalgia" is a fairly recent addition to modern languages. Not only its first attested use dates back to no more than three and a half centuries ago, but the meaning itself has gone through a radical evolution. Nostalgia as an explicitly defined concept was in fact born in late XVII century Europe, from the unexpected encounter between Medicine and mobility.

In that time, Swiss mercenaries were often employed in conflicts all around Modern Europe, and when young physician Johannes Hofer (1669 - 1752)[2] described some of said soldiers stationed in Gaul, France, [3] he denoted them to be taken ill by a form of homesickness so powerful that it was affecting not only their psyche but their bodies as well. In particular, these men were reported to present the same peculiar symptomatology of other cases of displaced Helvetian youth of which Hofer had heard about before: fever, body weakness, heart palpitations, hunger and unwillingness to

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[1] Svetlana Boym, *The future of nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 71; quoting the title of Simone Signoret's 1978 autobiography.

[2] Johannes Hofer, "Medical dissertation on nostalgia or homesickness", transl. Carolyn Kieser Anspach, in Carolyn K. Anspach, "Medical dissertation on nostalgia by Johannes Hofer, 1688", *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* 2, no. 6 (1934): 376. Hofer himself in his dissertation wants to remind the reader that "a young man has written this and has been the first one to treat a new material" (Hofer, "Dissertation", 380).

[3] Hofer, "Dissertation", 380.

eat, disturbed sleep and, ultimately, death.[4] In the reported cases, paired with these physical ailments came oppositional behaviours such as distaste for foreign manners, intolerance towards jokes, injuries and minor inconveniences, sad wandering and a general feeling of deep melancholia.[5] The people afflicted by such a condition – Hofer writes – were mostly «young people or adolescents […] sent forth to foreign lands with alien customs», where they «do not know how to accustom themselves to the manners of living nor to forget their mother's milk»,[6] and all of them had one thing in common: a burning desire to get back to their homeland.[7]

Hofer was leading his observations on this strange disease and writing his graduation thesis in the second half of the XVII century, and his work fully embodies the spirit of the early modern science. This is reflected, as keenly noted by Lucrezia Ercoli,[8] in what Foucault will later call the «*spatialization* and *verbalization* of the pathological»:[9] diseases and their causes are located in specific areas of the body and – most importantly – they must be named. The longing for a faraway motherland was not at all something new to the human experience (as will be better explored later on in these pages) and some old expressions to designate it – notably used by the Helvetians themselves – were already present in European languages. In German it was called "*heimweh*", literally stemming from the juxtaposition of *heim* ("home") and *weh* ("pain"),[10] while in French it took the name of "*maladie du pays*" ("disease of the Country").[11] The young doctor, however, noticed that this pathological condition was lacking a proper name in medical science and, therefore, decided to solve the issue: to do so, he coined a completely new word, combining the Greek for "return" ("*nostos*") and "*algos*", the "suffering" coming from said return. *Nostalgia* as a term was then born.[12]

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[4] See Hofer, "Dissertation", 380-386.

[5] Hofer, "Dissertation", 386.

[6] Hofer, "Dissertation", 383.

[7] Hofer, "Dissertation", 381.

[8] See Lucrezia Ercoli, "Il paradigma nostalgico. Da Rousseau alla società di massa" (PhD diss., Università degli Studi Roma Tre, 2016), 9.

[9] Michel Foucault, *The birth of clinic*, trans. A. M. Sheridan. (London: Routledge, 2003), XI.

[10] See "Homesickness", Etymonline, Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed June 6, 2024, https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=homesickness.

[11] Hofer, "Dissertation", 380. It is interesting to note how Hofer relates the French name of the disease to the fact it was very common among the Swiss soldiers stationed in Gaul.

[12] Or better: "*Nostalgias*", properly à la greque as written by Hofer. (Hofer, "Dissertation", 381). Hofer himself proposes two other terms that could be used as alternatives: "*nosomanias*" and "*philopadridomania*". Later on, in the 1710 reprint of Hofer's thesis, the word "nostalgia" will be replaced by the less fortunate term "*pothopatridalgia*", encapsulating the words "*pothos*" (Greek for "desire"), "*patri*" (from the Latin "father" and thus "fatherland") and the already mentioned *algia*, hence being the "painful desire of the fatherland" (Lucrezia Ercoli, *Yesterday. Filosofia della*

Naming the disease was Hofer's first act[13] in his 1688 *Dissertatio medica del nostalgia*,[14] to which he followed with an accurate description of how it concretely operated on the body (and mind) of the patients. First, nostalgia «is sympathic of an afflicted imagination», whose origins are situated in the brain and in the motions of "living" or "animal" spirits through its channels and tubes.[15] Hofer's nostalgia hence presents itself as a condition of the mind, which is however deeply rooted in a Cartesian conception of the body. More specifically: the main – mechanical – cause of the illness could be found in the

> quite continuous vibration of animal spirits through those fibres of the middle brain in which impressed traces of ideas of the Fatherland still cling. Moreover, […] these traces are actually impressed more vigorously by frequent contemplations of the Fatherland, and from an image of it […][16]

along with a series of other external triggers.[17] As pointed out by Kevis Goodman, this description leaves space for ambiguity and circularity as both the thoughts of the native land and the associated brain motions seem to strengthen each other over time,[18] ultimately contributing to a perception of nostalgia as a self-perpetuating condition.[19] «The nostalgic – in Lisa O'Sullivan's words – gained gratification purely thorough his imaginative reconstruction of home, a process that ultimately served only to exacerbate the symptoms of his disease».[20] This convergence of mind, body, imagination and debilitating conditions gained much popularity and persisted all throughout the

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nostalgia (Milano: Ponte alle Grazie, 2022), "Parte Seconda", chapt. 3, "Desiderio dell'assente", EPUB). Ercoli, in her book *Yesterday*, explores some beautiful connections between desire and nostalgia, which we'll discuss in the next paragraphs (Ercoli, *Yesterday*).

[13] «Thus far I had been the first to consider that I should speak more fully concerning it [the disease], at the same time that I had first considered it necessary to apply a name» (Hofer, "Dissertation", 380).

[14] The Dissertatio was Hofer's graduation thesis, with which he graduated from the University of Basil (Hofer, "Dissertation", 376).

[15] Hofer, "Dissertation", 381.

[16] Hofer, "Dissertation", 384.

[17] Hofer, "Dissertation", 386.

[18] Kevis Goodman, "«Uncertain Disease»: Nostalgia, Pathologies of Motion, Practices of Reading", *Studies in Romanticism* 49, no. 2 (2010): 203, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/srm.2010.0026.

[19] Lisa O'Sullivan, "The Time and Place of Nostalgia: Re-situating a French Disease", *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 64, no. 4 (2012): 639, https://doi.org/10.1093/jhmas/jrr058.

[20] O'Sullivan, "Time and Place", 639

XVII and XVIII centuries,[21] whilst connoting nostalgia as one of the most defining and feared diseases of modernity.

2. *Displacements, epidemics and remedies*

Nostalgia as a properly defined concept was born in the late XVII century, and not by chance. Early modern Europe was a tumultuous place to be; a place of social changes and widespread violence, where distance and geography had assumed whole new significances. Religious tensions were still found even after the treaty of Westphalia (1648) and the most prominent European nations were far from being pacified. Hofer was born in 1669,[22] not long after the Thirty Years war was over, and during and after his lifetime crowds of both armies and civilians were forced to move all around the continent for a plethora of reasons. The process of formation of the modern State was then fully engaged – Louis XIV and Hofer were contemporaries – and so were other related transformations which, according to Ercoli, played a vital role in the spreading of the nostalgic disease: large-scale urbanization, the creation of the modern army and the mobilization of people for military means.[23] People all around Europe were moving away from where they were born and raised, and the forceful nature of these movements was a primary factor in causing a longing for the roots that had been lost. The key word to encompass such experiences is *displacement*: homesickness being conceived as desire to go back to one's native land – a "wasting disease" in Hofer's own words[24] – emphasizes the close relation between nostalgia, space and mobility.[25]

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[21] Tim Wildschut et al., "Nostalgia: content, triggers, functions", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 91, no. 5 (2006): 975, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.91.5.975.

[22] Hofer, "Dissertation", 376.

[23] See Ercoli, "Paradigma", 18.

[24] Hofer, "Dissertation", 380. "Wasting disease" is the English formula chosen by the Dissertation's first translator, Carolyn Kiser Anspach, in 1934 to render Hofer's Latin «tabe» (from "tabes", meaning "rot", "decay"; see Johann Hofer and Johann Jakob Harder, *Dissertatio Medica De Nostalgia, Oder Heimwehe* (Basel: Jacob Bertschius, 1688), 4; and "tābēs", Olivetti, Dizionario Latino, accessed June 6, 2024, https://www.dizionario-latino.com/dizionario-latino-italiano.php?lemma=TABES100); a translation which is particularly suitable because of its etymological roots, which make up for some pretty interesting proximities. "Wasting" comes from the Latin "vastus" ("empty", "desolated"), whose roots trace back to the proto-Indo-European suffix "eue-" meaning "to leave", "to abandon" ("Waste", Etymonline, Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed June 6, 2024, https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=waste). By playing a bit with words then, with a mandatory grain of salt, we could appreciate the ancient resonance of an "illness of leaving/abandoning" in the "wasting disease" called nostalgia which was affecting soldiers far from home.

[25] According to Mallipeddi: nostalgia «gained currency in an age of migration and settlement», of war and social upheavals (Ramesh Mallipeddi, "«A Fixed Melancholy»: Migration, Memory, and the Middle Passage", *The Eighteenth Century* 55, no. 2/3 (2014): 236, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/ecy.2014.0025).

But who were the nostalgic? We have already established that Hofer observed the victims of nostalgia to be mainly young people stranded far from home; however, he also notes that, despite it being a condition that could be found also among the other «tribes of Europe», it is «nevertheless the Helvetian race [which] are seized most frequently by this symptom».[26] Hofer himself seems pretty clueless on the reasons behind this peculiarity; however, as nostalgia became an established and recognized illness throughout European medicine we can get an idea on why that might have been the case. Fred Davis for example, reports – in his influential 1979 book on nostalgia – of Swiss doctor Johan J. Scheuchzer's hypothesis of how the alteration in atmospheric pressure experienced in leaving the mountains would have influenced the blood stream of their inhabitants, or again of how the clang of cowbells in the alps were believed to have damaged their brain.[27] Later on, when it was clear that nostalgia could afflict every nation and not only Switzerland,[28] it was noted that the Breton soldiers employed first in revolutionary and then Napoleonic France were more easily seized by nostalgia than the other conscripts, in a similar fashion to what used to happen to the Swiss.[29] Brittany, much like Switzerland, is a prominently rural region, whose territory and strong cultural and familial identity make up for a secluded, *pastoral* land to dream of,[30] or better: to *imagine*.[31] The nostalgic, then, displaced all around Europe in places far different from the ones they grew up in (and probably wanted to be), would begin to fantasize of their now lost place in the world, making it a haunting thought until they ultimately lived off their projection and (physically) fell ill.

As already mentioned, this became an issue especially with soldiers during long periods of international turmoil. Many military reports, ranging from France's First Republic and Empire[32] to

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[26] Hofer, "Dissertation", 383-384.

[27] Fred Davis, *Yearning for yesterday. A sociology of nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 2.

[28] See Jean Starobinski, "The idea of nostalgia", *Diogenes* 54, no.14 (1966): 95.

[29] O'Sullivan showcases two examples from the time, including a report by Pierre-Francois Percy, Surgeon in chief of Napoleon's grand armée (O'Sullivan, "Time and Place", 628).

[30] O'sullivan, "Time and Place", 628. See also Ercoli, "Paradigma", 17.

[31] It is important to remember Hofer's already mentioned diagnosis of nostalgia as a disease linked to an «afflicted imagination» (Hofer, "Dissertation", 381).

[32] See Fernand Papillon, "Nostalgia", *Popular Science monthly* 5 (1874): 215-219; Percy and Laurent, "Nostalgie", in *Dictionaire des Sciences Médicales, Par une Société de Médecins et de Chirurgiens. Tome trente-sixième*, (Paris: C. L. F. Panckoucke, 1819), 265-281*;* and Marcel Reinhard, "Nostalgie et service militaire pendant la Révolution", *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 30, no. 150 (1958): 1-15, all reported in Ercoli, "Paradigma", 20; also Alan Forrest, *Conscripts and Deserters: The Army and French Society during the Revolution and the Empire* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 20-21, cited in O'Sullivan, "Time and Place", 627.

the American civil war[33] and all the way up to the Second World War,[34] described various epidemics of nostalgia running through conscripts and their disastrous implications for the army's morale and physical health, with reports esteeming an incidence of 5 percent of the entire French revolutionary army getting affected by the disease.[35] Given the prime strategical importance of the military and its efficiency, a cure for the disease was then strongly needed.

In his Dissertation, Hofer believed the nostalgic illness «to be curable if an appropriate remedy could be administered», while «it is incurable and fatal or at least most especially dangerous, where the means are lacking by which it is possible to satisfy the desire of the patient».[36] The main proposed cure for nostalgia, and the most effective one according to Hofer and other physicians, was then the immediate return to the native land that was so much longed for.[37] It is worth noticing that the first recommended remedies also include pharmacological treatments and, most

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[33] See J. Theodore Calhoun, "Nostalgia, As a Disease of Field Service. A Paper read before the Medical Society of the 2nd Division, 3rd Corps, Army of Potomac, February 10th, 1864," in *Medical and Surgical Reporter* 11 (1864), 130-32.; cited in Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, 6. As reported by Boym, American nostalgia in this period was quite peculiar, as the Civil War was the first time the disease had been recorded on this side of the Atlantic, after centuries of being proudly untouched by it (Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, 6). Nostalgia as described by Hofer implied leaving behind one's own Country and the consequent clash against the new customs encountered in the land of displacement, so – given the Federal nature of the United States, differentiated but united at the same time – nostalgia in North America can bear slightly different connotations than its European kind. Interestingly enough, however, Calhoun highlights how the most affected among the Americans were those coming from the States' most rural areas (see Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, 6), denoting a certain degree of similarity with the Old Continent's experience. It is even more remarkable if paired with the fact that, on the same page, Boym quickly points out how the British seemed to be immune to nostalgia (or at least they didn't report it) (Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, 6). It is interesting to notice that XIX century England was marked by a large-scale process of urbanization, in the context of the country's industrial revolution: a study on the relationship (or lack thereof) between nostalgia and this period of British history might be a compelling subject for future research.

[34] See, C. L. Wittson, H. I. Harris and W. A. Hunt. "Cryptic nostalgia", *War medicine* 3 (1943): 57-59; quoted in Ercoli, "Paradigma", 23 or David Flicker, Paul Weiss, "Nostalgia and its military implications", *War medicine* 4 (October 1943), cited in David Lowenthal, *The past is a foreign country – Revisited* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 48. Flicker in particular warned about the danger of a potential epidemic spread of nostalgia (Flicker, "Nostalgia", 386-387 in Lowenthal, *The Past*, 48).

[35] See G. La Chèse, *Essai sur l'hygiène militaire* (Paris: Imprimerie de Migneret, 1803), 36; cited in O'Sullivan, "Time and Place", 627-628.

[36] Hofer, "Dissertation", 388.

[37] O'Sullivan, "Time and Place", 639. Soldiers affected by nostalgia were reserved special treatments and leave periods, even in times of emergency: a testament to how much it was feared as a disease and to how crucial it was to cure in order to have an efficient and functioning army (See for example Reinhard, "Nostalgie" in Ercoli, "Paradigma", 20).

interestingly, a «hope of returning to the Fatherland»,[38] which strengthens the link between illness and desire.

The correlation between health and environmental belonging had become much accredited in XVIII and XIX century Europe,[39] but, as pointed out by Goodman, «the travel cures and the travel diseases of this period are very much of a piece, [...] which makes clear that the problem was not motion in itself but the vexed relationship between mobility and the will, or choice, to move».[40] The meaning of what Goodman calls «the mobility disability then called nostalgia»[41] was slowly changing direction.

3. Space, time and the Romantic shift

By early XIX century, the discourse on nostalgia was situated at the convergence of mobility, imagination and desire, and while it was still deeply rooted in clinic and in the military field, a series of circumstances caused the beginning of the stirring away of such word from the realm of medicine.

The original "Swiss disease" was a psycho-somatic ailment that caused displaced people to obsessively long for their native country, where they came from, hence being victims – as we have already seen – of an "afflicted imagination". Let's take a moment to focus on the object of such obsession: one's *homeland*. Our discourse so far has been focused on the spatial aspect of the disease: the physical distance between the displaced and where they were born and raised – in a way, the *-land* component of "homeland". The matter would change, however, if we took a different

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[38] Hofer, "Dissertation", 389. This could be supported, for example, by the case of army physician Robert Hamilton and his patient, young Welsh soldier Edwards – reported by Nicolas Dames – who fell ill with symptoms of nostalgia while being stationed in northern England (Nicholas Dames, *Amnesiac selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction, 1810–1870* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 33-34). Already taken by what appeared to be «the commor ravings of sickness and delirium» and by obsessive thoughts of his homeland, Edwards' conditions seemed to get much better after Hamilton's (somehow strategical) promise of a six-weeks leave to visit Wales (Dames, *Amnesiac selves*, 34). On one hand this case confirms the tight connection between rural areas (such as Wales) and the nostalgic inclinations of their inhabitants, while also strengthening Hofer's predictions on the power of imagination and hope; on the other it makes for an interesting counterpoint to the forementioned Boym's observation on the immunity of the British to nostalgia (Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, 6).

[39] O'Sullivan, "Time and Place", 634, 636.

[40] Goodman, "Uncertain Disease", 208. Few pages earlier, Goodman reflects on one of these "travel diseases" by citing the interesting work of Ian Hacking on the "French fugue" of late XIX and early XX century (Ian Hacking, *Mad Travelers: Reflections of the Reality of Transient Mental Illness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP: 2002; in Goodman, "Uncertain disease", 202-203).

[41] Goodman, "Uncertain disease", 200

perspective, from the *home-* element of the word. Especially in the case of soldiers, in fact, coming from a faraway place meant not only a mobility in space: it was also a mobility in *time*. In one of his latest works, 1798's "*Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*", philosopher Immanuel Kant makes an interesting and surprising remark on the nature of nostalgia while explaining the power of imagination and its illusions. Among other examples, Kant reports of how, indeed, many Swiss

> are taken by a great nostalgia for their Country when they are forced to live abroad; which comes from the images of carelessness and merry companies of their youth. [...] If, however, they go back to those places, they find themselves disappointed and hence healed; they believe such thing to happen because in those places everything has changed, but in reality it is because they do not find their youth anymore.[42]

In this passage, Kant shows to be still bound to the clinic conception of nostalgia – his words still following the blueprint set by Hofer one century earlier – while simultaneously operating a small revolution in the interpretation of the disease. By asserting the paradoxical effectiveness of the cure due to its inevitable failure, the philosopher of Königsberg overthrows the very essence of nostalgia: the longing for a space had always been the product of a mistaken longing for a *time*.[43] This reversal of the direction of nostalgia – from space to time – operated by Kant signals, according to Vito Teti, the «birth of nostalgia as a *sentiment* of modernity», in the declination that will be the most akin to the taste of later centuries.[44]

Kant still looked at the nostalgic condition as a disease, just like Hofer, but his input sheds new light on its semantics when going back to the original meaning of nostalgia. The *algos* of the illness is still there; what changes is the direction of the *nostos*. What was originally a literal return to a physical place, now could be seen as going back to a specific time far from the present, something which once was but could never be found again. In other words: a memory. One crucial difference separates this new kind of nostalgia from the older one, and it has to do with the materiality of the object which is longed for. Kant himself blurs the lines between physical and ephemeral by implying the connection between place and memory, but he is also quick to point out how the

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[42] Immanuel Kant, *Antropologia prammatica*, in Immanuel Kant, *Critica della ragion pratica*, ed. Pietro Chiodi (Torino: Utet, 2003), 513. Reinforcing the military association of earlier nostalgia, Kant himself introduces the example by saying he had been told of the nostalgic inclinations of the Swiss by an army general who had firsthand witnessed some cases (Kant, *Antropologia*, 513). He also makes an interesting remark on the higher incidence of nostalgia on the poorest and familially-grounded areas, just like had seen before (Kant, *Antropologia*, 513).

[43] For a more detailed account on the relationship between Kant and nostalgia, see Ercoli, "Paradigma", 32-36.

[44] Vito Teti, *Nostalgia. Antropologia di un sentimento presente* (Bologna: Marietti 2020), 30 (italic not found in the original).

attempt to grasp something long lost is bound to an inevitable demise. The hollowness of this new object of desire – compared to the sheer physicality of space – shifts the realm of nostalgia and the reach of its "afflicted imagination" towards something more abstract and, hence, abstractable. As a concept heavily bound to the contingency of its present – from its birth, really – through time nostalgia underwent a process of evolution which reflected the most significant changes in Western culture and society.

We have already argued about the "mobility disability" called nostalgia as a defining experience of the modern age – a period marked by emigration, colonialism, exploration, forced movement and persistent warfare;[45] however, in Kant's small revolution we can recognize the beginning of the shift from disease to *sentiment*, a word in itself which would have acquired a greater role in the upcoming cultural milieu, while allowing for some new conceptual ground coverage.

While it is, in fact, not easy to identify a precise moment in time for the *de facto* change in meaning – given the extended and gradual nature of such transformations occurring in language – many scholars recognize the role of the romantic movement as a pivotal point of the process.[46]

Nicolas Dames, for example, traces back this «conceptual shift» to the novels of Jane Austen (1775-1817),[47] in which a new feeling of nostalgia begins to spread and accompany – not substitute, yet – the classical connotation of Hofer's disease, while taking a spin on Kant's contribution. Although, Austen does never use the actual word "nostalgia", neither in a new sense,[48] the trajectory of her literary production showcases, according to Dames, «a corpus of work that initiates the revision of a pathologized memory linked to the perils of dislocation» which will eventually lead to the contemporarily recognized experience of nostalgia.[49] Among many different and interesting case studies, Dames brings into play one of the final chapters of Austen's classic "*Pride and prejudice*" (1813), in which the two protagonists Elizabeth and Darcy are retracing and discussing the story of their relationship. In the dialogue between the two, Dames focuses his attention on some of Elizabeth's words:

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[45] See Goodman, "Uncertain disease", 199, 206.

[46] See for example Dames, *Amnesiac selves*; Goodman, "Uncertain disease"; Nadia Atia, Jeremy Davies, "Nostalgia and the shapes of history", *Memory studies* 3, no. 3 (2010): 182, https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698010364806); Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, 16.

[47] Dames, *Amnesiac selves*, 25. Dames' work is also mentioned in Goodman, "Uncertain disease", 200.

[48] Dames, *Amnesiac selves*, 28; also noted by Goodman (Goodman, "Uncertain disease", 200).

[49] Dames, *Amnesiac selves*, 24.

[Those feelings] are now so widely different from what they were then, that every unpleasant circumstance attending it, ought to be forgotten. You must learn some of my philosophy. Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure.[50]

Elizabeth invites Darcy to look back to the past to find comfort in the recalling of memories: a pattern that closely resembles nostalgia, and a practice that makes for some interesting considerations on her relationship with time, especially in light of Kant's forementioned thoughts. Even though nostalgia is not explicitly mentioned by Austen, Dames finds here the seeds of a process that altered the general connotations Hofer's illness had had before and that would have taken it farther from the field of army physicians. In particular, he credits Austen for the emergence of «a newer nostalgia – a mode [...] of forgetting – [which] supplants any sense of nostalgia as a disease».[51]

Two elements are thereby at play, the first one being – once again – time. Kant's overthrowing put a spotlight on nostalgia as a painful longing for a time that once was, thus fostering the association of the disease with memory and the relationship of the subject with the past. Through Elizabet's words, Austen takes one step further towards the most contemporary view of nostalgia: «an evident switch has taken place – Dames writes – from memory as productive of trauma or sickness to memory as a source of pleasure, as a poignant but harmless dip into reminiscence».[52] Austen's character is not sick because of her memories, quite the contrary: she seeks a *cure* in the present by going back to the past, this one being a source of pleasure. Although it is not any kind of past: what Darcy is invited to embrace is a polished version of a memory, with all that was dissonant and painful having been removed. In other words: an *imagined* past.

The imaginative component of the original nostalgia is therefore still present, but instead of being cause of illness it is seen as a soothing remedy. The second element to be taken from Dames' analysis is precisely this: nostalgia's evolution towards the contemporary and throughout its Romantic popularization has been a process of de-pathologization,[53] a journey «from a pathology to a general cultural category».[54] The connection of this "new plot" of nostalgia[55] to the general public

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[50] Jane Austen, *Pride and prejudice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 282; quoted in Dames, *Amnesiac selves*, 26. Austen is also credited, briefly but significantly, as a key actress in the transition to literary nostalgia by David Lowental in his extensive work *The past is a foreign country*. See, for example Lowental, *The Past*, 48-49, where he also recalls this very scene of *Pride and prejudice*.

[51] Dames, *Amnesiac selves*, 25

[52] Dames, *Amnesiac selves*, 36

[53] Dames, *Amnesiac selves*, 24

[54] Dames, *Amnesiac selves*, 25

is something to take note of: what had been largely confined to a specific medical experience, was now being popularized on a relatively large scale thanks to the "media" of the time: mainly Romantic novels and poems. We will better indulge on the relationship between public and nostalgia in later chapters, but the XIX century is for sure a pivotal moment for the popular success of this otherwise obscure disease, so much that, as Svetlana Boym argues: «nostalgia as a historical emotion came of age at the time of Romanticism and is coeval with the birth of mass culture».[56]

Dames' effort of tracing back the origins of nostalgia's shift in meaning – despite it being object of some critiques[57] – constitutes a very interesting approach to tackle a complex task and shows either way that something magmatic and transformative was happening in culture and society starting from the early XIX century onwards. The Romantic movement – for as general as this label might be – put an accent on themes such as emotion, imagination and the return to nature, all feelings that have been paired with the experience of nostalgia since its birth. It is far from surprising then, given the reasonable awareness the literary community of that time had on clinical nostalgia,[58] if this category proved to be a successful mean of expression even beyond its primary significance.

This airy quality nostalgia and its interpretations came to assume through modernity on one hand makes it quite difficult to pinpoint a precise moment in time for when the forementioned shift effectively occurred on written text; on the other, it allowed for the close affinity with the realm of

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[55] The expression is borrowed from Dames, the "older plot" being Hofer's one – «[...] an initial displacement from home, [...] a sudden appearance of morbid signs of melancholy, indeed a feminization of the patient through the familiar markers of "sensibility" (sighing, weakness, longing); and then a rapid physical decline, beginning with the onset of fever» (Dames, *Amnesiac selves*, 34-35). It is important to still talk about a general "plot", or a way of engaging with the past, since Austen didn't properly use the word "nostalgia", while actually describing recognizable nostalgic scenes and feelings of homesickness (Dames, *Amnesiac selves*, 33).

[56] Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, 16.

[57] Notably Goodman, who sees traces of a sort of historically inaccurate teleological tendency in his and other scholars' work (Goodman, "Uncertain disease", 201). In particular, she points out that the connection between "nostalgia" as a term and memory was not actually present between XVIII and XIX century, and that even if «the retrospective yearning and fantasies that we *now* call nostalgia existed in force», «[...] these would have not been called, or recognized as, signs of "nostalgia"» (Goodman, "Uncertain disease", 199). Goodman's critique poses an interesting question on how a retrospective look could influence our judgement of the past and as such it must be taken into account; however Dames makes it quite clear that the object of his inquiry is the process that led to the contemporary formulation of nostalgia and the recognition of its early roots («it is my argument in what follows that her [Austen's] texts are involved in the formation of a memory-category that has become a familiar part of our mental landscape», Dames, *Amnesiac selves*, 23). Moreover, Kant's contribution provides additional support of a theoretical connection of nostalgia to the field of memory.

[58] Dames, *Amnesiac selves*, 33

literature it came to be associated with. It is indeed very interesting to notice how a term once strictly bound to the medical vocabulary turned out to be so suitable in a context usually quite far from clinic. Many reasons may come into play on why this might have happened; however, it looks like the mention of an "afflicted imagination"[59] included in its initial formulation managed to capture something that was perhaps deeper and more rooted into the human experience than what even Hofer thought.

On these premises, the concept of nostalgia became more and more relevant in XIX century literary production, while simultaneously continuing to evolve.[60] French writer and medical connoisseur Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), for example, is credited for the first actual usage of nostalgia – in his extended work of the *Comédie Humaine* – as something «not linked specifically to the past, but [which] referenced the fantastical, a thwarted passion that could be directed towards a number of, often impossible, dreams».[61] Nostalgia's journey of abstraction seems then - virtually – completed: from Swiss soldiers longing for their home to Kant's aching yearning for a lost time, from the contrasting pleasure resulting from recalling the past to a connection with pure fantasy. The importance given to imagination and desire, constituting elements of nostalgia since its clinical conception, became instrumental – more than a century later – to express the feelings of a society which was rapidly changing, in almost every aspect. We previously mentioned, however, how this newly literary-fied idea of nostalgia did not – *yet* – substitute the old clinical one; which begs the question: «what happened to the disease formerly known as nostalgia?».[62]

4. Nostalgia defeated

By the latter half of the XIX century, Western societies were caught into some frenetic changes. The second industrial revolution had brought many breaking innovations in every field of daily life, and the progress registered in both medicine and agriculture was reflected in a generalized improvement of living conditions. At the same time, the flourishing of railroads and the consequent decrease in travel times (for civilians and for armies as well) deeply impacted the perception of both

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[59] Hofer, "Dissertation", 381

[60] Many more notable examples, accompanied by masterful interpretations, can be found for instance in Svetlana Boym's chapter "From cured soldiers to incurable romantics: nostalgia and progress" (Boym, *Future of nostalgia*) or in Vito Teti's book (Teti, *Nostalgia*).

[61] O'Sullivan, "Time and Place", 643. O'Sullivan highlights the occurence in Balzac's work of the abovementioned Breton nostalgia, proving it to be of popular knowledge at the time (found in the novel "Pierrette", quoted in the paper) (O'Sullivan, "Time and Place", 643).

[62] Goodman, "Uncertain disease", 201.

time and space. «The diminution of transport distances – Wolfgang Schivelbusch argues – seemed to create a new, reduced, geography»,[63] in which locations once very far from each other on the map could now be reached in a matter of few hours of train travel. Schivelbusch continues:

> as the space between the points [connected by railroads] [...] was destroyed, those points moved into each other's immediate vicinity: one might say that they collided. They lost their old sense of local identity, formerly determined by the spaces between them. The isolation of localities, which was created by spatial distance, was the very essence of their identity [...].[64]

In a matter of decades, places were not as far as they used to be, which also meant that time was coming to assume a different value: people (and armies) in Europe and in the United States could now move through Countries with unprecedented speed, and even by doing so they were – virtually – less far from home than they would have been in any other previous period.

On top of that, the emergence and development of communication technologies such as the telegraph and the telephone completely transformed the way people could exchange information and news, thus making very much easier for them to keep in touch, even through long distances. It was – arguably – the beginning of what we could call a "globalization of space and time",[65] a process destined to be a defining feature of the contemporary acceleration. The up-and-coming society, who had embarked into the fastest technological advancements ever seen until then, was still very far from a widespread access to such novelties; however, the possibility of a rapid movement – of people, objects and information – was concrete and something to be taken into account.

In the previous paragraphs we discussed how nostalgia was proven to be closely related to space and time, as well as to rural areas and their strong recognizable identity. The deep changes which had occurred particularly from the beginning of the 1800's soon came to affect all of these embedded traits of Western societies, which was ultimately reflected on the disease known as nostalgia. Space and the very idea of distance were changing: home could be reached in much more

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[63] Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey. The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 57.

[64] Schivelbusch, *The railway journey*, 60

[65] In our current era, on one hand space has become global to the extent that the almost totality of the globe is now virtually accessible in a short amount of time. On the other hand, time has become global thanks to the next-to instantaneous exchange of information now occurring across the world, which allows for a sense of proximity and connection. On the importance of the understanding of space and time into the globalization discourse(s), see for example Nicole Oke, "Globalizing Time and Space: Temporal and Spatial Considerations in Discourses of Globalization", *International Political Sociology* 3, no. 3 (2009), 310–32, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-5687.2009.00078.x.

reasonable times and definitely with more ease. Rural communities were changing: the countryside was not so isolated anymore, and families that were distant in space could be – more or less effortlessly – connected by technology in a short amount of time.[66] In conclusion: there was not much to be truly nostalgic for anymore, at least in its traditional sense. Nothing, maybe, except for *time*, understood as the inevitably long gone past, impossible to retrieve by definition and deeply related to the realm of *feeling* – even in Kant's understanding.

As expected from these premises, the cases of medical nostalgia started to drastically decrease. In his 1867 report on the progresses of military hygiene, general and prominent physician Michel Lévy[67] stated:

> La nostalgie est devenue une maladie très-rare chez le conscrit, grâce aux ménagements dont il est l'objet, à la cessation de pratiques plus ou moins brutales, à des nuances de mansuétude dans l'exercice du commandement, à des conditions de bien-être qui lui affirment la vigilante sollicitude de tous ses chefs. La musique, le chant, la danse, ne laissent pas que d'agir sur son moral.[68]

Lévy's report benefits from what seems to be a great optimism regarding the defeat of nostalgia, which might also be attributed to the celebration of progress in Napoleon III's imperial France. However, to support his statement, the famed physician brings some data to the table, gathered by M. Èly:[69] the death rate of nostalgia in the French army during the years 1863-1865 was – on average – of 0.008 out of 1000, marking in fact a striking difference when compared to the 0.86 registered between 1820 and 1827.[70] Furthermore, as noticed by O'Sullivan,[71] more than twenty

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[66] See O'Sullivan, "Time and Place", 647.

[67] Michel Lévy (1809-1872) was an exceptionally authoritative figure in the medical field of his time, having a truly impressive curriculum of both offices and publications. On top of many experiences in the French military, he redacted the *Annales d'hygiène publique* and he was member of the Conseil de santé des armées, health inspector of the army, professor of hygiene in Val-de-Grâce, director of the Ecole de Médecine et de Chirurgie militaires, president of the Académie de Médecine and medical consultant of emperor Napoleon III (O'Sullivan, "Time and Place", 643; Marie-Odile Stempfer , "Levy Michel", Feferation des Societes d'Histoire & d'Archeologie d'Alsace, accessed July 5, 2024, https://www.alsace-histoire.org/netdba/levy-michel/).

[68] «Nostalgia has become a very rare disease in the conscript, thanks to the cares of which he is the object, to the discontinuation of more or less brutal practices, to the tones of meekness in the exercise of commanding, to the conditions of well-being which affirm to him the vigilant solicitude of every one of his chiefs. Music, song, dance, they do not fail to influence his morale» (Michel Lévy, *Rapport sur les progrès de l'hygiène militaire, in Recueil de rapports sur les progrès des lettres et des sciences en France* (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1867), 51-52).

[69] In Lévy's words, *monsieur* Èly was «l'un de nos médecins militaires les plus instruits et les plus distingués», whose name «restera attaché à la Statistique médicale de l'armée», showing Lévy's great trust in the accuracy of the reported data (Lévy, *Rapport*, 7).

[70] Lévy, *Rapport*, 53.

years earlier Lévy himself had written about nostalgia in much different tones, alongside a reported symptomatology in line with Hofer's one which was afflicting many of the conscripts.[72] «Quel est le médicin militaire qui n'a observé les ravages de la nostalgie [...]?» – he was asking back then. «Peu des nos jeune soldats échappent aux atteintes de cette suffrance inexprimable».[73]

The general framework had then become deeply different in the matter of a few decades, in and out the military nish, and this swing in pace observed in Lévy's writings can be read as truly symptomatic of the bigger changes – cultural and technological – that were encompassing late-modern Western societies.[74] as well as one of the contributing factors to the shift in meaning of nostalgia.

5. From disease to aesthetic category

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[71] O'Sullivan, "Time and Place", 644.

[72] Many interesting similarities with the classic medical conception of nostalgia can be found in Lévy's earlier treaty. For example: the observable symptomatology; the peculiar vulnerability of younger people – especially those coming from rural or isolated areas (*Brittany*, Vandée, Corsica); the recognition of the role of imagination; the cure, with the promise of a return to the homeland (Michel Lévi, *Traité d'hygiène publique et privée. Tome I* (Paris: J.-B. Baillière et fils, 1862 (4th edition)), 220-223). Such a high-level testimony is a testament to the success and longevity of Hofer's work.

[73] "Who is the military doctor who has not yet observed the devastations caused by nostalgia?". "Few of our young soldiers escape the breaches of this inexpressible suffering" (Lévy, *Traité*, 220). The wording of nostalgia as a "*suffrance inexprimible*" intriguingly echoes Scottish physician William Cullen's uneasiness in his taxonomical classification of nostalgia among other *dysorexiae* ("false or defective appetites") (William Cullen, *Nosology: Or, a Systematic Arrangement of Diseases, by Classes, Orders, Genera, and Species; with the distinguishing characters of each, and Outlines of the Systems of Sauvages, Linnæus, Vogel, Sagar, and Macbride* (Edinburgh: C. Stewart and co., 1800), 162-164, cited and discussed by Goodman in Goodman, "Uncertain disease", 198). Cullen (1710-1790) found nostalgia to be non-separable from the other *dysorexiae*, while at the same time noting its – consequent – improper fall into the larger category of the "*locales*" diseases (those illnesses affecting only one part and not the entire body), if not into the realm of diseases itself! (Cullen, *Nosology*, 162; in Goodman, "Uncertain disease", 198). Such ineffability being associated to nostalgia thus granted it the appellative of «uncertain disease» (Cullen, *Nosology*, 162; in Goodman, "Uncertain disease", 198), marking an aura of uncertainty that – Goodman argues – was later passed on to *literary* nostalgia (Goodman, "Uncertain disease", 202).

[74] For example, the access to education was becoming more and more widespread. Lévy himself spoke greatly of the newly established *écoles régimentaires*, which he deemed «si conforme aux plus chers intérêts du pays et de l'époque actuelle, si propre à rehausser la dignité de l'armée par un développement régulier de l'intelligence», especially to transform the illiterate (often coming from the rural areas) into proper citizens (Lévy, *Report*, 50-51). Once again, Napoleon III's physician writes with a generous dose of optimism, which must be taken both as a testimony of a strong faith in progress and also with a grain of salt given his connections to the imperial government («quel heureux échange entre l'État et les populations rurales!»; Lévy, *Report*, 51).

The newly discovered relationship with space and time – still in the making – and the progressive disappearance of the traditional diagnosis of nostalgia in the late XIX century fostered some co-depending tendencies on the subject. First, the "wasting disease" began to be encompassed by other disciplines, different from clinical medicine. We have already discussed about the relocation of nostalgia that was being quietly operated within the realm of literature; at the same time, because of this and other factors – notably the forementioned technological revolutions and the consequent drop in cases within the armies, "nostalgia" as a clinical term was quickly becoming outdated and anachronistic.[75] The ongoing acceleration paired with both faith in progress and the advancement of new fields of studies – early psychology *in primis* – soon relegated nostalgia as something which clinically belonged to the past,[76] whilst being still very popular in poetry and increasingly associated to the realm of mental disorders. As Svetlana Boym argues:

> The word appeared outmoded and unscientific. Public discourse was about progress, community and heritage, but configured differently than it had been earlier. Private discourse was about psychology, where doctors focus on hysteria, neurosis and paranoia.[77]

The proved rarity of the nostalgic illness alongside some of the most drastic changes society had ever seen, contributed to the perception of Hofer's once psycho-physical disease as something now destined to disappear, being more and more regarded as a mental disorder and a side-condition rather than as a standalone sickness.[78] As the XIX century had handed over the treatment of mental illnesses to psychiatry,[79] by the beginning of the 1900's nostalgia had in fact got fully associated with such discipline.[80] Nostalgia's residence in the realm of proper psychiatry was, however, short-lived as, in Krystine Batcho's reconstruction,

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[75] O'Sullivan, "Time and Place", 647.

[76] O'Sullivan "Time and Place", 647.

[77] Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, 16. This emphasis on progress can be confronted with Lévy's 1867 report.

[78] Krystine Irene Batcho, "Nostalgia: The Bittersweet History of a Psychological Concept", *History of Psychology* 16, no. 3 (2013): 167, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032427.

[79] Batcho, "Nostalgia", 167.

[80] Constantine Sedikides, Tim Wildschut, Jamie Arndt, Clay Routledge. "Nostalgia. Past, present and future", *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 17, no. 5 (2008): 304. Atia and Davies properly word the assimilation of nostalgia into the study of the mind as an «eventual disappearance as a diagnostic category within the emergent science of psychiatry» (Atia, "Nostalgia and the shapes of history", 182). Sedikides lists some of the symptoms the new psychiatric nostalgia came to be associated with, «anxiety, sadness and insomnia» (Sedikides, "Nostalgia", 304), all of which directly echo Hofer's first description of the illness (see Hofer, "Dissertation"): the symptomatology remained similar, whilst its interpretation changed – evolved – alongside society (a *fil rouge* that will be found later on in this work).

During the first half of the 20th century, nostalgia had lost its place of interest in psychiatry, and the psychoanalytic movement contributed to shifting nostalgia into the developing discipline of psychology.[81]

Within the field of psychology itself, and particularly with the advent of psychoanalysis, the nature of nostalgia finally came to be regarded as a variant of depression, linked to desire and melancholia,[82] and arguably remained confined as such until the latter part of the century.[83]

The contemporary view of nostalgia as «a sentimental longing for one's past»[84] could be seen as the culmination of a process that was carried out in its latter part within the psychological discourse before their eventual parting of ways, of which Krystine Batcho highlights two important moments.[85]

As early as 1933, Beardsley Ruml had distinguished full-fledged nostalgia from more mild "nostalgic sentiments" – the first being the «extreme variant» of the latter – which are «associated not only with place, but also with persons, time, and even abstract symbols».[86] As observed by Batcho, Ruml's consideration of nostalgic sentiments already envisions a "normalization" of the nostalgic experience, allowing it an initial escape from pathology. [87] Moreover, Ruml also notes that «aesthetic sentiments are in large part nostalgic, as in the romantic attitude generally»,[88] reinforcing a direct link with what could be found in late XIX century literary imagery. Almost a decade later, Willis McCann wrote that although «absence from home is a prerequisite for homesickness»,[89] «the

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[81] Batcho, "Nostalgia", 167.

[82] Harvey A. Kaplan, "The psychopathology of nostalgia", *The Psychoanalytic Review* 74, no. 4 (1987): 466 (also quoted in Batcho, "Nostalgia", 167); Constantine Sedikides, Tim Widschut, Denise Baden, "Nostalgia. Conceptual issues and existential functions", in *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology*, ed. Jeff Greenberg (New York: Guilford Publications, 2004), 201. Although, interestingly enough, "nostalgia" is not properly found in either Freud, Jung or Klein (See Roderick Peters, "Reflections on the origin and aim of nostalgia", *Journal of analytical psychology* 30, no. 2 (1985): 136, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-5922.1985.00135.x).

[83] Sedikides, "Conceptual issues", 201, 202. There are some minor notable exceptions to this general direction: for example, the already mentioned Wittson et al. and Flicker (Wittson, "Cryptic"; Flicker, "Nostalgia and its military implications"), who still described nostalgia in its classic military clinic terms in the midst of World War Two. This makes for some significative connections between how nostalgia was conceptualised by Hofer in a time of turmoil and how its clinical resurgence follows the outbreaks of war.

[84] Sedikides, "Nostalgia", 305.

[85] Batcho, "Nostalgia", 169.

[86] Beardsley Ruml, "Theory of nostalgic and egoic sentiments", *Psychological bulletin* 30, no. 9 (1933): 656; also found in Batcho, "Nostalgia", 169.

[87] Batcho, "Nostalgia", 169.

[88] Ruml, "Theory", 656.

[89] Willis H. McCann, "Nostalgia: a review of the literature", *Psychological bulletin* 38, no. 3 (1941): 174.

meaning of the concept "home" varies from individual to individual and also is relative to time and place».[90] Attention being given to the idea of "home" as a fundamental component of nostalgia is – and will be later on – very much remarkable in a complete understanding of its evolution. By combining the two arguments of Ruml and McCann, being the actual non-pathologic nature of nostalgic feelings and their subjectivity, psychology had indeed made a clear step towards a further broadening in meaning of the object of the current investigation.[91] Both these authors, however, made it very clear that their view on nostalgia was one of a badly-connoted mental condition, something which still places them at a distance from the most contemporary perspective on the subject.

While tracing back the trajectory of nostalgia through the XX century, Constantine Sedikides makes an interesting remark on the relationship between the former disease – now treated as a disorder – and the term which for the most part had been used pretty much interchangeably with it:[92] *homesickness*. The psychological perspectives of the early-mid 1900's, in fact, still «equated nostalgia with homesickness»,[93] meaning that despite the shift in connotation that was initiated during the Romantic period and the technological advancements in connectivity, for the most part of the past century nostalgia at its roots was still reconducted by the academics to the *maladie du pays*. It was only by the second part of the XX century – according to Sedikides – that «there were compelling reasons for nostalgia and homesickness to finally part ways».[94]

By the end of the 70's, Fred Davis noted that something was changing in the language. Through the shifting of the term from the realm of military pathology to the field of psychology, "nostalgia" as a word had been «introduced to popular parlance» – something that, to an extent, could also be reconducted to earlier literary works[95] – which eventually catalysed the «process of semantic drift»

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[90] McCann, "Nostalgia", 174; also quoted in Batcho, "Nostalgia", 169. McCann intriguingly builds on this by stating: «The term "home" is used to mean any part of, or even all of, the environment circumscribed by a dwelling, a neighbourhood, a town, or even an entire state or nation. [...] It simply means that an individual in a foreign land will claim as his "home" his entire native state, including even those parts in which he would be a total stranger and in which he probably would succumb again to homesickness for a more restricted place which he would now refer to as home» (McCann, "Nostalgia", 174). Once again, the success of Hofer's original inclusion of imagination and its grasp on the nostalgic mind proves to be relevant.

[91] Batcho, "Nostalgia" 169.

[92] The abovementioned Ruml and McCann are clear examples of this.

[93] Sedikides, "Conceptual issues", 202. Specifically, four categories were typically associated with it: « soldiers, seamen, immigrants, and first-year boarding or university students» (Sedikides, "Conceptual issues", 202), all groups which, for different reasons, *moved*.

[94] Sedikides, "Nostalgia", 304.

[95] As we have seen in previous paragraphs.

from its initial reference.[96] The majority of Davis's students – which he surveyed on the topic – did not, in fact, associate the word "nostalgia" and the word "homesickness" anymore: the new keywords were «*warm, old times, childhood,* and *yearning*».[97] After being "demilitarized" and "declinicalized", nostalgia was then undergoing a third process of transformation: a "depsychologization" which was quickly getting rid of anything bad or malfunctional still clinging to the word itself, in favour of – and through – a «positively tinged popular and commercial usage».[98]

We have already discussed how the slipping away of nostalgia from space towards time could be traced back to the XIX century; however, the process that had started back then from the transformation of the ideas of distance and mobility came of age after the Second World War, when space really became globalized. Already mentioned as a central notion by McCann, nostalgia's original and core referent was the concept of *home*: the faraway, long-gone object of desire and will to return, being it the physical motherland itself or the memories associated with it. The world that came after the War was deeply changed and mostly committed towards an idea of progress that encompassed a global-scaled sense of connections and mobility, and this scenario – Davis noted – began to significatively affect the relationship within people and their spatial idea of home.

> [...] the passing of "home" in the old sense arises from the tremendous mobility of persons in their occupations, residences, localities, and even countries of birth [...]. This constant movement in sociogeographic space has begun to dislodge man's deep psychological attachment to a specific house, in a specific locality, in a specific region [...]. In short, *home* is no longer where the heart is.[99]

If the space of modernity was increasingly becoming shrunk down thanks to communications and transportation, as well as more *liquid* – borrowing the term from Zygmunt Bauman,[100] then we can understand how the stability of the link between homesickness and nostalgia began to faulter. The loosening of the concept of home, which nostalgia originally had at heart, entails what Davis

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[96] Davis, *Yearning*, 4.

[97] Davis, *Yearning*, 4.

[98] Davis, *Yearning*, 4-5.

[99] Davis, *Yearning*, 6. Davis is really careful to not completely detach the idea of modern home from its concrete connotations of space – because that is not always the case. The main argument being made is about the increasing discrepancy that was occurring between the older sense of spatial belonging and the new perspective brought by the acceleration of mobility (see Davis, 6).

[100] See Bauman's description of fluidity in modernity (Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid modernity* (Malden: Polity Press 2000), 2).

called «the gradual semantic deterioration of its [nostalgia's] core referent of *homesickness*».[101] «Because, then», Davis continues,

> home as such can for so many no longer evoke the "remembrance of things past" it once did, it has fallen to other words, "nostalgia" among them, to comprehend the sometimes pedestrian, sometimes disjunctive, and sometimes eerie sense we carry of our own past and of its meaning for present and future.[102]

The conceptual detachment between nostalgia and homesickness is, arguably, the pivotal moment that marks the end of the Swiss disease's slow path towards abstraction and the beginning of its new life as an established aesthetic category. In the psychoanalytic canon of nostalgia, home has become a symbol[103] for something which is not *present* – but *past*.[104] «There is a particular archetypal constellation – Peters writes – and [...] nostalgia is a manifestation of it. "Home" seems to be the central symbol of a "symbolic canon" and it is that from which one is separated».[105] Just as space had become time in Kant's contribution, the object of yearning has shifted from the physical home to a generalized vision of past times, and the yearning itself has gone through a radical transformation. It is not by chance if Davis's students associated a degree of "warmness" to the term "nostalgia": here we can seize the impact of the romantic reworking of the relationship with time –

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[101] Davis, *Yearning*, 5.

[102] Davis, *Yearning*, 6. On the relationship between nostalgia and homesickness, it is worth mentioning Krystine Batcho's dictionaried summary. «Originally coined as a better name for longing for home, *nostalgia* was then applied to longing for one's past. The availability of the apt existing label *homesickness* for longing for home allowed for the uneasy distinction between the two constructs of homesickness and longing for one's past. With no existing label for *longing for one's past*, nostalgia became used more often in reference to longing for the past and less often to homesickness» (Batcho, "Nostalgia", 173). Such analysis is in line with the definitions of current English dictionaries (see also Widschut, "Nostalgia", 976).

[103] Batcho, "Nostalgia", 168.

[104] The ambiguity of the term "present" is here sought intentionally.

[105] Peters, "Reflections", 137. On the topic of the symbolic significance of home, Lisa O'Sullivan makes a very interesting reference worth mentioning. While analysing the "proliferation of meanings" being attached to nostalgia in the early XIX century, she highlights the work of physician and writer Jean-Baptiste Descuret (O'Sullivan, "Time and Place", 642). In his 1841 publication *La medicine des passions*, Descuret mentions nostalgia while writing about the need for attachment and marital fidelity, stating that «Sa predominance [de la fidélité conjugale] pourra aussi determiner la nostalgie, qui ne depend pas seulement de l'amour des lieux témoins de notre enfance, mais encore du regret de nous voir séparés des êtres qui nous sont chers» (Jean-Baptiste-Félix Descuret, *La medicine des passions ou les passions considérée dans leurs rapports avec les maladies, les lois et la religion* (Paris: Béchet et Labé 1841), 129-130). This passage – although not directly mentioned by the scholar – is evidence of Descuret's view of «"home" in symbolic terms, [...] not necessarily associated with any sense of nation», as argued by O'Sullivan (O'Sullivan, "Time and Place", 642). This also makes for an interesting early connection with the forementioned work of McCann.

the philosophy of Austen's Elizabeth was ultimately embraced – and its progressive de-pathologization operated by psychoanalysis.

In a matter of a few years, six to be exact, Davis's prediction of nostalgia extending its meaning «to *any* sort of positive feeling toward *anything* past»[106] proved to be very accurate and farsighted. David Lowenthal's 1985 and likewise influential book *The past is a foreign country* indeed stated that

> For most nostalgia is no longer affliction but affection for a rose-coloured past whose loss is assuaged by bittersweet remembrance. And because that past [...] feels ultimately recoverable, "the bitter is less potent than the sweet".[107]

Once a deadly disease, nostalgia has now become a de-pathologized way of experiencing the past with mostly positive connotations;[108] an aesthetic trope, which found its way from the romantic period up to the contemporary *ethos*, fully embracing its «new life as a cultural, and especially a literary, mode».[109]

6. The indefinable object of nostalgia

From its clinical conception and all throughout its semantic evolution, nostalgia has maintained one, central feature: to be nostalgic is to be *nostalgic for* something. As we have seen, it being space, time, or a generalized, symbolic *home*, the experience of nostalgia is marked by the longing for an object which, by the very definition of longing, is not *present*. In his book *L'irreversibile et la nostalgie*, Vladimir Jankélévitch writes:

> Within space, ubiquity is impossible [...] and omnipresence, for a finite being, contradicts the very idea of presence: the remedy, however, [...] is found alongside the evil, and it is called movement [...]. Within time, the cumulation of past and present is not less impossible than the miracle of

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[106] Davis, *Yearning*, 8.

[107] Lowenthal, *The Past*, 49.

[108] Katherine E. Loveland, Dirk Smeesters, Naomi Mandel, "Still preoccupied with 1995: the need to belong and preference for nostalgic products", *Journal of consumer research* 37, no. 3 (2010): 394, https://doi.org/10.1086/653043.

[109] Atia, "Nostalgia and the shapes of history", 182.

omnipresence within space [...]. [T]he irreversibility of time prevents spatial return from falling back exactly on its starting point.[110]

What Jankélévitch elegantly points out is that no matter what, time, space and their entanglements are subject to the irreversibility of change, which the Greeks called πάντα ῥεῖ.[111] Building on his and Kant's works, Ercoli points out that «the true object of nostalgia, therefore is not absence opposed to presence, but the past in relation to the present»,[112] whose nature is one of ultimate irretrievability.[113] If the object of nostalgia is not physically defined and ultimately cannot be reached, then an empty space sits at the core of such feeling: *home* is a void which is impossible to be filled. This hollowness at the heart of nostalgia however, is quite problematic when considering its final referent and raises the question: what is, then, which the nostalgic is desireful for?

The answer lies in the other stable element which has accompanied nostalgia from its origins: imagination. What keeps together both the desire for a space and the desire for a time is, in fact, the idealization of their symbolic referent – once again, home – which becomes more and more affected by the nostalgic imagination, until it turns into something Other than reality. In Ercoli's words, which can arguably be applied to every stage of nostalgia's evolution: «What is imagined by the nostalgic Swiss, thus, is a new object: a place that does not exist if not as an imaginative unity».[114] The "new object" shaped and conjured by the nostalgic mind is an idealized piece, characterized by the fact that it does not exist: in other words, a *utopia* in its most Greek meaning.

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[110] Vladimir Jankélévitch, "L'irreversibile e la nostalgia", trans. Antonio Prete, in *Nostalgia. Storia di un sentimento*, ed. Antonio Prete (Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 1992), 154-155 (original translation: «Nello spazio l'ubiquità è impossibile […] e l'onnipresenza, per un essere finito, contraddice l'idea stessa di presenza: ma il rimedio […] è dato insieme al male, e si chiama movimento […]. Nel tempo il cumularsi di passato e presente non è meno impossibile di quanto non sia, nello spazio, il miracolo dell'onnipresenza […]. L'irreversibilità temporale impedisce al ritorno spaziale di ripiegare esattamente sul punto di partenza»); quoted in Ercoli, "Paradigma", 33.

[111] This concept is ultimately exemplified by Greek philosopher Heraclitus, whose famous fragment "You cannot step into the same river twice" (see Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982), 49-50) makes for a great commentary on the current experience of nostalgia.

[112] «Il vero oggetto della nostalgia, quindi non è l'assenza contrapposta alla presenza, ma il passato in rapporto al presente» (original), Ercoli, "Paradigma", 33.

[113] As already discussed, Kant in his brief coverage of nostalgia argues that Swiss soldiers end up healed by the very discovery of the unreachable nature of their past (Kant, *Antropologia*, 513).

[114] «Ciò che lo svizzero nostalgico immagina, quindi, è un nuovo oggetto: un posto che non esiste se non come unità immaginativa» (original); Ercoli, "Paradigma", 34.

Coming from the Greek *ou-topos*, "non-place",[115] "utopia" was first used in Thomas More's famed homonymous book[116] and in current language it came to be associated with a picture perfect, idealized society or space. Interestingly enough, the etymology of "utopia" has been often mistakenly thought to derive from the particle "*eu-*", meaning "good",[117] thus creating a misguiding but equally fascinating short-circuit of connotations. The perfect place, the incarnation of goodness, is, in fact, *nowhere* – literally – just as the time and space desired by the nostalgic. «The place (*topos*) that does not exist in *u-topia* – Emmanuelle Fantin writes – echoes the journey to our home place (*nostos*) that makes us suffer in *nost-algia*».[118]

There is, however, an even deeper connection between nostalgia and utopia, an echo of something far more ancient than both of these words. If nostalgia and utopia were both artificially born in the context of early Modernity (XVI-XVII century), the experience encompassed by these words has way older roots than its most successful recent formulations. Between the VII and the VI century B.C., Greek poet Hesiod wrote the poem "Works and Days", centred on agrarian work: here among the hexameters lies a story which was destined to great success in the following millennia and which is very much relevant to understand the connection between nostalgia and utopia.

After the proem and a recollection of the myths of Prometheus and Pandora,[119] the author proceeds to narrate another myth, concerning the history of mankind and its eventual fall, known as the "Myth of the Ages". Before the reign of Zeus, when Cronus ruled over the Olympians, the first lineage of mankind was created. These people

> lived like gods, with carefree heart, remote from toil and misery. Wretched old age did not affect them either, but with hands and feet ever unchanged they enjoyed themselves in feasting, beyond all ills, and they died as if overcome by sleep. All good things were theirs [...].[120]

This "golden race"[121] - as Hesiod called them – did not, however, last indefinitely: new lineages replaced that original, blissful one, as humanity begun its rapid decline. The sequence of people of

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[115] "Utopia", Etymonline, Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed July 5, 2024, https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=utopia.

[116] See Thomas More, "Utopia", in *Utopia: A Revised Translation, Backgrounds, Criticism*, ed. George M. Logan, trans. Robert M. Adams (W.W. Norton & Company, 2011).

[117] Etymonline, "Utopia".

[118] Emmanuelle Fantin, "Anti-nostalgia in Citroën's advertising campaign", in *Media and nostalgia. Yearning for the past, present and future*, ed. Katharina Niemeyer (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 101.

[119] Esiodo, *Le opere e i giorni*, in *Tutte le opere e i frammenti con la prima traduzione degli scolii*, ed. Cesare Cassanmagnago, (Milano: Bompiani, 2009), 178-185, vv 1-105.

[120] Hesiod, *Works and days* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 40. For a more accurate English translation of extended pieces of Hesiod's text, we will refer to the 1988's edition published by Oxford University Press.

silver[122] and bronze,[123] heroes[124] and finally people of iron[125] – current mankind, according to Hesiod – marked the descent of Man into disgrace, tormented by suffering, hatred, violence, war and all sorts of evil. Through some powerful and striking visual associations, Hesiod thus created the imagery of the "Golden Age", when humanity was happy and without troubles before its eventual fall: a trope that influenced Western imagery for the centuries to come.[126]

The myth of the Fall, of Paradise lost, is largely found among many different cultures from around the globe,[127] but for the sake of the current investigation it is worth highlighting two features of Hesiod's particular testimony.

First, the Golden Age is described in full antithesis to the later ages, especially to the one which was contemporary to the author – marked by iron and bound to be abandoned by the gods Αἰδώς ("decency", "modesty")[128] and Νέμεσις[129] (the divine justice punishing for ὕβρις: the arrogance and excess that undermine the cosmic order).[130] Hesiod laments how the fall of humanity was characterized by a loss of morals, religion and traditional customs, to the point of exclaiming: «Would that I were not then among the fifth men, but either dead earlier or born later!».[131] These verses showcase how the poet was clearly unsatisfied with the time he was living in, perceived as a dangerous deviance from order and harmony, and expressed his melancholy by yearning for an idealized, long-gone past. It is then worth mentioning that – not by chance – the only one of the five Lineages with redeeming qualities was, in fact, the fourth one – in the "Age of Heroes" – «a more

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[121] Esiodo, *Opere*, 184-185, vv 109 (original: «χρύσεον […] γένος»).

[122] Esiodo, *Opere*, 186-187, vv 127-142.

[123] Esiodo, *Opere*, 186-187, vv 143-155.

[124] Esiodo, *Opere*, 186-189, vv 156-169c.

[125] Esiodo, *Opere*, 188-191, vv 169d-201.

[126] See Ercoli, "Paradigma", 147.

[127] See Ercoli, "Paradigma", 142, 156-157. As observed by Ercoli, the etymology of "paradise" encapsulates the secluded nature of such place (Ercoli, "Paradigma", 157). The term "paradise" can, in fact, be traced back to ancient Persian "*pairi*" ("around") and "*diz*" ("to make", hence a wall), therefore designating an enclosed space, separated from the outside ("Paradise", Etymonline, Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed July 5, 2024, https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=paradise). Such origins leave some room for speculation. On one hand, the term may simply refer to a lush, walled garden (echoing the description of the garden of Eden, the archetypical lost paradise in most Western societies); on the other, the impenetrable nature of the walls of paradise may also connote the inaccessibility of the state of original happiness after the Fall.

[128] See "αἰδώς", Olivetti, Dizionario Greco Antico, accessed July 5, 2024, https://www.grecoantico.com/dizionario-greco-antico.php?parola=aidws.

[129] Esiodo, *Opere*, 190-191, vv 197-200.

[130] See "Nemesi", Treccani, Vocabolario on line, accessed July 5, 2024, https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/nemesi/; and Esiodo, *Opere*, 186, vv 134, 146.

[131] Hesiod, *Works*, 42.

righteous and noble one, [...] our predecessors on the boundless earth»,[132] conveniently preceding Hesiod contemporaries.

What the poet sees is the inevitable change happening in society and the consequent stirring away from age-old traditions, decadence to his eyes, to which his response is an aching longing – a form of *nostalgia* – for the times gone by, being them the blissful state of the imagined origins or the better morals of the previous generation.[133] It must be also noted, however, that Hesiod preserves a spark of hope despite the absolute darkness he sees in current humanity: his wish of escaping his time is indeed double-sided, looking back for guidance but also towards the future in the hope that the next generation will re-establish the rightful order.[134]

A second, much relevant feature of Hesiod's account of the Golden Age has to do with the χρύσεον γένος ("golden kind") itself and its relationship with time. The first lineage of mankind is, in fact, described as suspended in an idyllic condition, a state of happiness that spared them from troubles and pain.[135] Particularly remarkable are the verses 113-114 and 116,[136] where they are said to not suffer from the ailments of old age, their limbs being «ever unchanged»,[137] nor from death, for they died «as if overcome by sleep».[138] Such Golden lineage was not immortal like the gods, and yet their life seems pretty untouched by the passing of time – or rather by *change*.[139] Just as

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[132] Hesiod, *Works*, 41. Hesiod, however, is very clear in denouncing also the violence and the wars which characterized the Age of Heroes (see Esiodo, *Opere*, 188-189, vv 161-167).

[133] The increasing discrepancy between the older and the newer generations is especially evident in the description of the gloomy destine that humanity was facing, when Hesiod specifically refers to the relationship between the young and the old. «Nor will father be like children nor children to father [...]. Soon they will cease to respect their ageing parents, and will rail at them with harsh words, the ruffians, in ignorance of the gods' punishment; nor are they likely to repay their ageing parents for their nurture» (Hesiod, *Works*, 42).

[134] Hesiod's hope towards the future, however, passes through the prophecy of a divine destruction of humanity at the cusp of its corruption (Esiodo, *Opere*, 188-192, vv 180-201).

[135] Esiodo, *Opere*, 184-185, vv 109-120

[136] Esiodo, *Opere*, 184-185

[137] Hesiod, *Works*, 40

[138] Hesiod, *Works*, 40

[139] In his notes to the text, Cesare Cassanmagnago warns us from any over-interpretation of the figure of Cronus depicted in *Works and Days*, especially when confronted with Hesiod's other major poem, the *Theogony* (note 34 in Esiodo, *Opere*, 953). Whilst keeping this in mind, we can nevertheless notice how the Golden lineage is the only one to have lived during the reign of Cronus before his overthrowing operated by Zeus (Esiodo, *Opere*, 185, vv 111, see also Esiodo, *Teogonia*, in *Tutte le opere e i frammenti con la prima traduzione degli scolii,* ed. Cesare Cassanmagnago (Milano: Bompiani, 2009), 144-169, vv 495-496; 881-885). The fact that the original Golden Age pre-dates the reign of Zeus situates this idealized period at even greater distance in the mythological past, fostering the sense of irretrievability associated with it. The close resemblance between the Titan's Greek name, Κρόνος, and the Greek for "time" ("χρόνος") is however considered to be a case of false etymology, despite it being mentioned by the likes of Cicero (See

much as the later lineages are marked by decline and corruption, the Golden one sat in a bubble of secluded, static harmony.[140] «The golden lineage – Ercoli notes – possesses the archetypical features of the object of nostalgic feeling: nostalgia dismisses evolution and covets permanence, it rejects change for it shies away from uncertainty».[141] The Golden Age, thus, is a time without a time, an idealized image of perfection and motionless *cosmos*[142] born in times of trouble; a dream of happiness that passed by just as dirt covered its sleepy inhabitants.[143]

It is there, then, at the confluence of time and desire, where «nostalgia joins utopia».[144] As Fantin points out: «[nostalgia] struggles against time's irreversibility, but, at the same time, it tries to reach an intangible and blurred time. Nostalgia strives for timeless time, untied from the historical continuum».[145] A place without change, for as comforting of a though it might be to some, is totally unrealistic and non-existing – a fantasy – and yet, the very idea of a lost paradise proved to be incredibly seminal all throughout Western history.

Nostalgia, despite its many declinations, has a lot to do with the mythological structure of the Golden Age and the consequent Fall, for it ultimately configures as *desire*, a tension towards something past which, by its very own nature, cannot be reached. The often non-defined and non-definable essence of its object gives nostalgia what Jennifer Kitson and Kevin McHugh call its «amorphous and *sensual* qualities», a liquid promise of something other and better than reality, which makes for a powerful and propulsive force.[146] Nostalgia – Kitson and McHugh argue –

> is less about time (a specific history) and more about diffuse longing – less about home (a specific geography) and more about cultivating sensual environs (pastness). [...] The experience of nostalgia,

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M. Tullio Cicerone, *De natura deorum*, in *Opere politiche e filosofiche, vol. 3*, ed. Domenico Lassandro and Giuseppe Micunco (Torino: UTET, 2007), 254-255, note 148).

[140] It could be argued that the metal itself associated with it, gold, is renowned for being incredibly resistant to chemical alteration.

[141] «La stirpe aurea ha in sé i caratteri archetipici dell'oggetto del sentire nostalgico: la nostalgia respinge l'evoluzione e agogna la permanenza, rifiuta il cambiamento perché rifugge l'incertezza» (original); Ercoli, "Paradigma", 148.

[142] The Greek "κόσμος", meaning order and beauty ("κόσμος", Olivetti, Dizionario Greco Antico, accessed July 5, 2024, https://www.grecoantico.com/dizionario-greco-antico.php?parola=%CE%BA%CF%8C%CF%83%CE%BC%CE%BF%CF%82).

[143] See Esiodo, *Opere*, 184-185, vv 116 and 121.

[144] Fantin, "Anti-nostalgia", 101.

[145] Fantin, "Anti-nostalgia", 101.

[146] See Jennifer Kitson, Kevin McHugh, "Historical enchantments – materializing nostalgia", *Cultural geographies* 22, no. 3 (2015): 488, https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474014549946.

we propose, is enchantment with distance, an unbridgeable yet distinctly felt spatio-temporal chasm between *now* and *then*.[147]

To be unsatisfied with the present and turning back in search of a better reality: that is the experience of the nostalgic, from Hesiod to Hofer to Davis. It does not matter if the object of longing does not actually exist in the present – if it ever existed:[148] its mirage-like, ultimate irretrievability paradoxically fuels the desire to reach it. Nostalgia *is* the distance, between here and there, between then and now.

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[147] Kitson, "Enchantments", 488.

[148] Susan Stewart's book *On longing* well summarises the hollowness of nostalgia. In fact, she argues that «Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience» (Susan Stewart, *On longing. Narratives of the Gigantic, the Miniature, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham/London: Duke University Press 1993), 23). Furthermore, Hesiod is strongly echoed in her analysis: «Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward [...] a past which has only ideological reality» (Stewart, *On longing*, 23).

CHAPTER II

PAST AND FUTURE

«The wind of change blows straight into the face of time».[1]

«Le vent se lève !... Il faut tenter de vivre !»[2]

1. Global nostalgia

One fundamental dichotomy has been running through the analysis presented so far, and it concerns the tension between the single individual and his or her historical context. Nostalgia was, in fact, born as an illness affecting people with some quite specific features, being them geographical origin, occupation, social background or personal inclinations. These categories evolved with time, especially following nostalgia's drift in meaning; nevertheless, until the Second World War their referent mostly remained the ailments of specific persons,[3] to be intended as single units inside larger groups. At the same time, it is evident that nostalgia also presented a strong connection with everything else surrounding said individuals: their historical context, made of wars, displacements, international turmoil and major technological advancements all of which played an important role in the spread of nostalgia through the centuries. As made particularly evident by its military past and by some striking outbreaks,[4] the feeling of nostalgia thus seems to intersect both the personal and the public sphere. This dualism intrinsic to the nostalgic experience is well captured by Svetlana Boym, who argues that despite an apparent longing for an individual space –

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[1] Scorpions, "Wind of Change", track 4 on *Crazy World*, Mercury Records, 1991.

[2] Paul Valéry, "Le Cimetière marin", in *Charmes* (1922).

[3] See both the clinical and psychoanalytical approaches to nostalgia, discussed in the previous chapter.

[4] See for example the already mentioned cases of nostalgic "pandemics".

the literal home in the case of Hofer – or even a time – one's childhood and youth, as proposed by Kant – there is something deeper lurking under the surface.[5]

> I realized that nostalgia goes beyond individual psychology. [...] In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. [...] The nostalgia that interests me here is not merely an individual sickness but a symptom of our age, a historical emotion.[6]

Can a period be intrinsically nostalgic? The ultimate decline of nostalgia's clinical conception coincided with some of the most drastic changes history had ever seen. The processes started in the late XIX century concerning the shrinking of space and time thanks to the already discussed new technologies of transportation and communication, eventually led to the large-scale state of globalization we came to know today,[7] where the interconnection between different individuals and societies brought the global exchange of information and ideas to an exceptionally frictionless, *fluid* condition. Evidence of this can be found in the glaringly pervasive network that is nowadays' internet, but it is arguably traceable back to the Second post-war period, when television made its debut in the houses of millions. Suddenly the world could penetrate the everyday life of common people like never before, through the powerful form of images and via the proliferation of mass media products, which contributed to the shaping of a new global, common imagery. «Tele-technologies – Mark Fisher writes, building on Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard – collapse both space and time. Events that are spatially distant become available to an audience instantaneously»,[8] the most radical example of this contraction being cyberspace.[9] In a globalized world, the local is included in the universal, and the universal can be found in the local, being it through an object or a screen.

In a fascinating parallel with the field of Physics, the modern declinations of the variables of space and time are also deeply connected to velocity and acceleration: modernity's seeming obsession with speed intersects the discourse on mobility with concepts such as "the death of

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[5] Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, xv.

[6] Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, xv-xvi.

[7] From now on, with "globalization" we will refer especially to the cultural and social consequences and connotations of an otherwise economic phenomenon.

[8] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my life. Writings on depression, hauntology and lost futures* (Winchester/Washington: Zero Books, 2014), 20.

[9] See Fisher, *Ghosts*, 20.

distance" and "hypermobility",[10] which are at the forefront of the process of globalization. As Sam Migliore writes, «The world today can be characterized in terms of rapid movement [...] of people, products and resources [...], and the instantaneous transmission of information», a state of *ceaseless mobility* that has been made possible by «a combination of globalization forces and technological changes that [...] allow for unprecedented movement».[11]

Space and time are no more what they used to be: transfigured by velocity, they are both collapsed and intertwined. Following the analysis of philosopher Frederic Jameson,[12] Juhani Pallasmaa verbalizes this new relationship between the two variables through a peculiar double reversal: time has become *spatialised*[13] - meaning the «will to use and subject time to the use of space»[14] – and space has become *temporalized* – «exemplified by the fact that we commonly measure space through units of time».[15] The resultant of all these forces of modernity – the collision of space and time, the worship of acceleration and the fluidity of media – is the experience of *simultaneity*, or what Pallasmaa calls «the collapse or implosion of the time horizon onto the flat screen of the present».[16] «Today – the Finnish architect continues – we can appropriately speak of a simultaneity of the world; everything is simultaneously present to our consciousness»:[17] a completely new phenomenon which implies a requestioning of our relationship not only with the present but also with past and future.

As speed has become «the most seminal product of the current phase of industrial culture»,[18] Boym's view of nostalgia as rebellion against "the time of history and progress" becomes central to understand the consequences of the current acceleration. If this category could in fact be applied to different periods of deep changes in history, the unprecedented rupture generated by the

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[10] See Sigurd Bergmann, Tore Sager, "In between standstill and hypermobility – Introductory remarks to a broader discourse", in *The ethics of mobility: rethinking place, exclusion, freedom and environment*, ed. Sigurd Bergman and Tore Sager (Aldershot/Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), 1.

[11] Sam Migliore, "Mobility, nostalgia, and Ethnic identity: the Racalmutesi experience in Canada and beyond", *Italian Canadiana* 35 (2021): 269, https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v35i0.37233.

[12] See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), which we will mention again later on.

[13] This concept is explicitly taken from Jameson (see Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 154).

[14] Jameson, *postmodernism*, 154.

[15] Juhani Pallasmaa, "Existential homelessness – Placeness and nostalgia in the age of mobility", in *The ethics of mobility: rethinking place, exclusion, freedom and environment*, ed. Sigurd Bergman and Tore Sager (Aldershot/Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), 148.

[16] Pallasmaa, "Existential homelessness", 148.

[17] Pallasmaa, "Existential homelessness", 148.

[18] Pallasmaa, "Existential homelessness", 149.

contemporary collapse of time and space, paired with the homogenising pervasiveness of mass culture, conjured the perfect storm for nostalgia to take over the global public.

Within this framework, it is possible to grasp the fundamental link between Davis's instance on the new positive, commercial nostalgia[19] and Boym's understanding of the phenomenon as a "historical emotion" symptomatic of the current age,[20] as one feeds the other and viceversa. Following the advent of mass communication, in fact, the separation between the individual and public components of nostalgia has become more and more blurred and permeable, just as the distance between the two spheres – private and public – faded. In a time of great acceleration, the changes operating externally – the context – necessarily involve a transformation on the individual level as well, and the resistance to said changes reverberates on the whole structure. «Nostalgia – Boym continues – is not merely an expression of local longing, but a result of a new understanding of time and space that made the division into "local" and "universal" possible».[21]

As expected from these premises – and empirically shown, for example, by Wildschut et al.[22] – nostalgia is today quite a common experience among the Western population: «[it] is not an esoteric phenomenon, but rather, a strand in the fabric of everyday life»[23], and many are the authors and scholars to register the prominent nostalgic tendencies of the last few decades, which Katharina Niemeyer calls the «current nostalgia boom».[24] This emerging global reach of nostalgia is the fundamental difference between its old and new conceptions: what once was one's own affliction now is perceived as a generalized experience, the permeating *feeling* of a time. In the next paragraphs and chapters, we will then explore the modes and declinations through which nostalgia seems to permeate contemporary global culture and its products; however, a foreword on the relationship between such phenomenon and the concept of progress is still necessary.

2. The angel of postmodernity

Nostalgia and progress seem paradoxically connected – of which the myth of the Golden Age is an archetypical account – and a hypothesis on why this is the case might be found by following

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[19] Davis, 4-5.

[20] Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, xvi.

[21] Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, xvi

[22] Wildschut, "Nostalgia", 981; see Study 2.

[23] Wildschut, "Nostalgia", 982

[24] Katharina Niemeyer, ed., *Media and nostalgia. Yearning for the past, present and future* (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1. The same terminology can be found earlier in Atia, "Nostalgia and the shapes of history", 2 (2010), referring to the «late 20th century nostalgia boom in the USA».

Boym's analysis on the cultural and political turmoil of later modernity. Spanning from the French revolution of 1789 up until last century's overthrowing of Communism in Eastern Europe, Boym notes that nostalgia in fact often follows revolutions,[25] and it does so through a double-sided trajectory intrinsic to revolutions themselves. After a brutal rupture that caused a considerable change of the *status quo*, two observable movements take place: one looks towards the future and rides the wave of the New, while the other seeks shelter from the – more or less figurative – violence of the falling of the Old and dwells on the past.[26]

> In France it is not only the ancient regime that produced revolution, but in some respect the revolution produced the ancient regime, giving it a shape, a sense of closure and a gilded aura. Similarly, the revolutionary epoque of *perestroika* and the end of the Soviet Union produced an image of the last Soviet decades as a time of stagnation, or alternatively, as a Soviet golden age of stability, strength and "normalcy" [...].[27]

A tangible sign of what Boym describes in Eastern Europe was, for example, the phenomenon of late '90's "*ostalgie*": a term made up by the German "*osten*" ("East") and "nostalgia"[28] to appoint the longing for an idealized «fallen world based on socialist security and full employment, communal solidarity and progressive welfare programs»,[29] famously materialized in Wolfgang Becker's movie *Good Bye Lenin!*.[30]

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[25] Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, xvi

[26] Davis had already discussed about the "particularly insidious subspecies" of "false consciousness" that «in defiance of the logic of historical dialectics, looks longingly backwards to obsolete societal arrangements rather than forward to the better ones destined to emerge. Indeed, what more powerful antidote to revolutionary fervour than nostalgia's penchant for believing that the future can only be worse than the past?» (Davis, *Yearning*, 109)

[27] Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, xvi.

[28] See Ercoli, *Yesterday*, "Parte Prima", chapt. 3, "L'insostenibile leggerezza della nostalgia".

[29] Paul Betts, "The twilight of the idols: East German memory and material culture", *The journal of Modern History* 72, no. 3 (2000): 755, https://doi.org/10.1086/316046. An interesting document on the topic – also mentioned by Betts – is the 1995 survey conducted for the German newspaper *Der Spiegel*, which includes some direct accounts of nostalgia towards the once GDR not many years after the fall of the Berlin wall (see "Stolz aufs eigene Leben", *Der Spiegel*, July 3, 1995. https://www.spiegel.de/politik/stolz-aufs-eigene-leben-a-2e1e2c36-0002-0001-0000-000009200687).

[30] On the connection between Becker's movie and *ostalgie*, see for example Timothy Barney, "When We Was Red: Good Bye Lenin! and Nostalgia for the "Everyday GDR", *Communication and Critical/Cultural studies* 6, no. 2 (2009), https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420902833163. Here Barney touches on many important contributions to the scholarly discourse surrounding nostalgia – from XVII century medicine up until Davis and Lowenthal – as well as on some of Boym's theories that will be later explored in the course of the present investigation. His work directly shows the ambivalence of nostalgia proposed by Boym, applied to the context of Becker's movie: «Perhaps, then – Barney

Human history has often been traversed by moments of deep change followed by periods of relative adjustment, just like an irregular alternation of systole and diastole, and yet modernity in its longer run seems to have been shaken from the ground up more times than any other period, and in much more radical ways. The sky of early modernity was fractured by three thunderbolts, three major *revolutions* – in their most literal sense – that completely disrupted how the world was looked at until then. Following Giacomo Marramao's lead, events such as the discovery of the Americas, the Copernican revolution and the violence of the religious wars in Europe teared apart the fabric of the Old and opened up the doors to a reformulation of most founding values of society.[31] A common feature that connects all of these moments is the prominence of what we could call a troubled discovery of *Otherness*: the otherness of the New World, the otherness inside Christianity and, finally, the otherness of the human gaze towards the universe. With Copernicus in particular – even though a similar argument could be made for the other two mentioned occurrences – Man suddenly was no longer at the centre of the cosmos and humanity found itself out of the place it used to fill: in other words, modernity was a *displacement*, and this foundational character was to be passed on to its later declinations.

> If, on one hand, today's global space, in its genesis and structure, is not conceivable if not as a *consequence of modernity*, on the other hand the genesis of the modern world is literally unthinkable without the "globalising" event represented by the opening up of the seas and the conquer of the New World. Simply said, globalization, the unfolding of the planet as a circumnavigable globe, is not only a consequence, but a precondition of modernity.[32]

Just like revolutions and their follow-ups are constantly in conversation, as pointed out by Boym, the contemporary world and its unprecedented velocity cannot prescind from a dialogue with the period that originated such acceleration.

This vision of continuity-in-discontinuity sits on the verge of the current debate around the longevity of modernity itself, and on whether to consider its spirit still alive and operating or faded into something radically different and new, too disruptive to be contained by the old label: *postmodernity*. The discourse surrounding postmodernity is a very complex one and it encompasses a variety of views and scholarly analyses on society, economy and technology, some of which emphasize the relative continuity of the processes started during modernity – albeit subject to

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concludes – GBL [*Good Bye Lenin!*] is a better representation of everyday German life and identity for the early 2000s than it is for the late 1980s and early 1990s» (Barney, "When We Was Red", 148).

[31] See Giacomo Marramao, *La passione del presente. Breve lessico della modernità-mondo* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008), 165.

[32] Marramao, *Passione*, 28.

change – while some others accentuate the most groundbreaking qualities of the last few decades.[33] Marramao, for example, is quite critical of the latter position, arguing that, in History, periods and ages hardly follow one another through a logic of neatly, well-defined absolute endings or beginnings: on the contrary – he claims – historical time moves by following some more nuanced, although not untroubled transitions, like the one from what he calls the old «nation-modernity» to the new, globalized «world-modernity».[34]

On the other hand, scholars like Fredric Jameson present a more cutting and compelling view on the transforming phenomena that have emerged in the latter part of the last century. In his seminal book "*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*", Jameson writes:

> The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism, in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the crisis of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc. etc.): taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism. The case of its existence depends on the hypothesis of some radical break or *coupure*, generally traced back to the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s. [...] this break is most often related to notions of the waning or extinction of the hundred-year-old modern movement (or to its ideological or aesthetic repudiation).[35]

Something happened after the Second World War that deeply affected – once again – how the fabric of the world was perceived, a threshold that was traversed with little to no chance of return.

Trying to keep together the ideas of continuity and discontinuity that have been orbiting the discourse around modernity, we could then register the advent of some new declinations of the forementioned Otherness through which the contemporary times have been shaped, all of which have roots traceable back before the Second world conflict and all of which have gradually come of age after the end of the war and in the following years. The otherness of *machines* – the oldest one, dating back to the industrial revolutions, now being refined to an unmatched level of efficiency and independence from human control; the otherness of *mass telecommunications*, which ultimately created a virtual and globally interconnected place which is outside of space itself; and finally, the otherness brought by the possibility of *total annihilation*, a prime example of which can be seen in the development of nuclear weapons: just like the previous phase of modernity, the most recent decades have been characterized by an accelerating fracture with the past, which – paradoxically –

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[33] For a comprising overview on the concept of postmodernity, see for example Jameson, *Postmodernism*, IX-XXII, introducing his influential book.

[34] See Marramao, *Passione*, 28-29.

[35] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 1.

could be read as in line with the process of displacement that has arguably been the undertone of modernity. Such radical changes, seemingly confined to the background of everyday life and yet so deeply intertwined with the cultural and economic evolution of societies, might be the key to explain the grasp nostalgia has on the present, which has been noticed by so many analysts.

One particularly powerful rendition of the dynamic force of progress and its consequences is the description of Paul Klee's painting "Angelus novus" given by Walter Benjamin and mentioned by Boym herself. Although Benjamin wrote his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* in the midst of the war, his work proved to be nevertheless much relevant for the decades to come. On Klee, Benjamin writes:

> A Klee painting named "Angelus novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. [...] This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[36]

The angel of Klee – as read by Benjamin – is pushed towards the future by the wind of change and progress, and yet he cannot help but looking back on what was left behind by History's ineluctable march, on what was irredeemably lost. The angel's gaze is accompanied by the will to restore what has been brough to ruins and to awaken the dead: just like revolutions are the product of what came before, as argued by Boym the inseparable nexus between past and future is a two-way connection and it equally implies the production of the past itself, in the sense of both a critical interpretation of it and an attempt to restore it – a *re-production*. This is, ultimately, the intrinsic behaviour of the nostalgic, whose yearning for the past grows stronger the stronger the storm of progress blows, but it also represents the generalized feeling of the current era: the «reflective and awe-inspiring modern longing that traverses twentieth-century art and goes beyond *isms*»,[37] and which transpires through its products. Postmodernism, according to Boym, is one – the latest – of

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[36] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the philosophy of history", in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 257; also quoted in Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, 29. It is worth noting that the storm that Benjamin describes, pushing the angel away, is blowing *from* Paradise. This element ties up with what was discussed in the previous chapter about Hesiod and the myth of the Fall, with Paradise being one of the declinations of the lost Golden time before the decline. Klee's angel is then being banished even further from the long gone ideal, by a wind – the idea of progress and more in general the passing of time – so strong it is impossible to arrrest.

[37] Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, 29.

these *isms* of which «twentieth-century art was enamored», alongside prefixes such as "*neo*" and – fittingly – "*post*", and it is credited to have «rehabilitated nostalgia together with popular culture», although with some limitations.[38]

Whatever the case might be – for the longer, continuative conception of modernity or for the more disruptive proposal of postmodernity – an undeniable change of pace has been taking place starting from the final decades of the last century onwards, a shift so radical that calls into question the place of the individual in society and in the world, and which can help explaining the overall pervasiveness of the current "nostalgia boom".

3. Continuity and discontinuity

Klee's angel being eradicated by the wind of change is yet another example that plays into the overarching theme of displacement as a key element of both nostalgia and modernity. The «catastrophe» the angel sees behind himself is the moment of rupture that brought to pieces the world that was before, which now lies in ruins: in its cutting duality, this event directly echoes the previously discussed larger trope of the Golden Age and its inevitable Fall, creating a discontinuity between *then* and *now*. Building on Doane and Hodge's view of nostalgia as a «rhetorical practice»,[39] Stuart Tannock highlights the nature of nostalgia as a «periodizing emotion»[40] and remarks its ancestral connection with the works of Hesiod and other abovementioned authors.

> [...] that was then, and this is now. In the rhetoric of nostalgia, one invariably finds three key ideas: first, that of a prelapsarian world (the Golden Age, the childhood Home, the Country); second, that of a "lapse" (a cut, a Catastrophe, a separation or sundering, the Fall); and third, that of the present, postlapsarian world (a world felt in some way to be lacking, deficient, or oppressive).[41]

The – rhetorically functional – brutality of the "lapse" and its consequent disruption of the *status quo*, act as a trigger for the dynamics of resistance that were analysed in the previous paragraphs,

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[38] See Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, 30. The specific role played by popular culture will be discussed in depth in the next chapters.

[39] Janice Doane, Devon Hodges, *Nostalgia and sexual difference* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 3; in Stuart Tannock, "Nostalgia critique", *Cultural Studies* 9, no. 3 (1995): 456.

[40] Tannock, "Nostalgia critique", 456.

[41] Tannock, "Nostalgia critique", 456-457.

culminating in the (re)production of the prelapsarian past as a lost utopia[42] and the will to «awaken the dead»[43] – being them, out of metaphor, all the values and constructions that were left behind.

Furthermore, Tannock's account of the Fall presents another relevant analogy with Klee's painting: just as the wind blows the angel *towards* the future, the «lapse» described by Tannock is not to be thought of as a sudden, vertical divide between before and after, but more as a «horizontal separation, as the running into the ground of the past by the present».[44] Revolutions in their broader sense are often not an abrupt, overnight product of the past, but rather the fruit of the processes that had matured within the past itself. The nostalgic rhetoric of sudden decline, however, may shape the narration of history to neglect the responsibilities of what came before, thus attributing the Fall to external forces come to disrupt a perfect order.[45]

This horizontal conception of change falls within the tension between continuity and discontinuity, of which nostalgia is the keystone. Many are in fact the authors to point out the mediating role of nostalgia between past and present: confronted with deep changes, be them more or less gradual, the nostalgic rhetoric intersects both claims of discontinuity (pointing out the Fall) and of continuity (advocating for a return to the familiar), thus resulting in a negotiation between the two forces.[46]

The longing for continuity in times that redefine societal structures and conventions, however, reflects the need to preserve from displacement another, deeper kind of figurative home: the *self* and its identity. «Nostalgia – Fred Davis writes – [...] is deeply implicated in our sense of who we are, what we are about, and [...] whither we go. [...] [It] is implicated importantly in the continuities and discontinuities we experience in our sense of self»;[47] it contributes, in Ercoli's words, to «form, maintain and (re)build» our sense of identity, constantly challenged by discontinuity.[48] Among the uncertainties of the New, looking back – "who have I been?"[49] – helps us answering the question

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[42] The connection to utopia is also hinted by Tannock himself a few pages later (see Tannock, "Nostalgia critique", 460). A good summary and contextualization of the ideas presented by Tannock can be found in Pierson (see David Pierson, "AMC's Mad Men and the politics of nostalgia", in Niemeyer, *Media and nostalgia*, 142).

[43] Benjamin, "Theses", 257.

[44] Tannock, "Nostalgia critique", 457

[45] See Tannock, "Nostalgia critique", 460

[46] See Tannock, "Nostalgia critique", 457 and Atia, "Nostalgia and the shapes of history", 184

[47] Fred Davis, "Nostalgia, identity and the current nostalgia wave", *Journal of popular culture* 11, no. 2 (1977): 419.

[48] See Ercoli, "Paradigma", 233. Ercoli in this passage explicitly recalls Davis.

[49] See Ercoli, *Yesterday*, "Parte Prima", chapt. 3, "L'insostenibile leggerezza della nostalgia"; and Davis's interesting remarks (Davis, *Yearning*, 35-36).

"who am I?",[50] a perspective which seems to be shared by recent medical and sociological research.[51] Nostalgia, thus, is not just a rose-coloured, sentimental longing for the times gone by, but a reaction to discontinuity – as also supported by Tannock[52] – and an endeavour to hold on to one's own identity in times where the unity of the self is challenged. It is a quest for *meaning* among the disruption of meaning itself.[53]

This feeling of alienation of the self from the new fashions embraced by a changing world is well expressed by Christina Goulding in her account of I. D. Yalom's work *Existential psychotherapy*, where many contributing factors are analysed:[54]

> [...] the growth in interpersonal isolation and loneliness, geographic isolation, the lack of social skills and intimacy, and the gradual erosion of institutions such as the church, the extended family, and the residential neighbourhood. Consequently, alienation is not just confined to the weak and helpless in society, rather it is endemic to those who feel that they lack power and control over their destiny.[55]

What is worth noticing is that Yalom's book was first published in 1980, and yet the larger operating processes described back then are arguably still shaping the most contemporary times, having evolved alongside society and becoming intertwined with newer, emerging phenomena such as the rise of the internet and the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is in times of *crisis* that nostalgia, maintaining a symbolic and narrative continuity[56] with the times of – perceived or

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[50] See Ercoli, "Paradigma", 233 and Davis, *Yearning*, 35. This question about home, identity and their relationship with both nostalgia and the past remains significant, in a broader sense, also in other contexts. One of them, for example, is the case of migrant communities reunited abroad, a phenomenon of which Sam Migliore provides an interesting depiction in his study on Italian mobility in Canada (see Migliore, "Mobility").

[51] See Janelle Lynn. Wilson, "There and Then: Nostalgia as a Time and Space Phenomenon", *Symbolic interaction* 38, no. 4 (2015): 481, https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.184.

[52] See Tannock, "Nostalgia critique", 459.

[53] «[…] one wants to raise the question of how these discontinuities are interpreted, of how they are given meaning in the structure of nostalgic rhetoric» (Tannock, "Nostalgia critique", 459).

[54] See Irvin D. Yalom, *Existential psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

[55] Christina Goulding, "Romancing the past: heritage visiting and the nostalgic consumer", *Psychology and Marketing* 18, no. 6 (2001): 579, https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.1021.

[56] The concepts of symbolic and narrative continuity are taken from, respectively, Giuseppina Sapio, "Homesick for aged movies: Why do we shoot contemporary family videos in old-fashioned ways?", in Niemeyer, *Media and nostalgia*, 46 and Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: a middle passage from Africa to American diaspora* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 191. The diversity of matters of these two texts – one analysing the social structures behind home-shot family videos and the other describing the experience of African people deported through the Atlantic slave trade – shows just how versatile and pervasive the conceptual constellation surrounding nostalgia can prove to be in investigating the human experience.

idealized – certainty, offers a balsamic «escape from the realities and anxieties of a world in which the individual [has] little control».[57]

Within the present analysis, the concept of crisis and its interpretation are of great importance. Curiously, as a term it shares some unique similarities with "nostalgia", as it is also a word with Greek roots – albeit much older ones – and features a connection with medicine: κρίσις, from the verb κρίνω ("to distinguish", "to separate"), did refer in fact to the pivotal phase of a disease – for better or for worse – as well as a determining choice or decision, whose outcome would have prompted a significant change.[58] In its contemporary usage, the ambivalence of the original concept got lost and nowadays "crisis" is only used to identify periods of struggles and uncertainty. Looking through the lens of its older meaning, however, provides a more profound reading of its correlation to nostalgia: the world inevitably changes, and even if the outcome – positive, negative or in between – is not discernible from the start, the very idea of the displacement brought by periods of crisis often results in attempts to resist the New and dwell on the Old. From such an angle, it is clear how the structure of the Golden Age is founded on the assumption that golden will always be what shimmers from the past, a fact that – however, paradoxically – also implies the necessity of crisis and change, which, like the wind of Benjamin and Klee, cannot be evaded.

Interestingly enough, while still lingering in the field of etymology, "displacement" shares the Latin prefix "*dis-*" (indicating a lack of, a separation from, a disjunction, and hence an absence)[59] with another word belonging to the same conceptual constellation: "*disaster*". In forming such word, the prefix is then paired with the Latin "aster" – "star", celestial body[60] – making the proper, etymological meaning of disaster that of "event which caused the loss of the star", thus the main reference point, hence deriving its connotations of catastrophe. Explicating this lexical proximity serves the purpose of highlighting two relevant connections for the present analysis.

First, this vicinity ties up the conversation on modernity and nostalgia: what better example of a – etymological – disaster than the Copernican revolution, which quite literally moved away the centre of the universe from its place and gave it a new angle of observation, a new Star? If nostalgia arises from displacement, revolution and disaster – the catastrophe seen by the Angelus Novus – then modernity and its long shadow truly are entangled with such feeling, among the different discourses and interpretations, between continuities and discontinuities. In Charles Beaudelaire's

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[57] Goulding, "Romancing the past", 580.

[58] See "Crisi", Treccani, Vocabolario on line, accessed August 13, 2024, https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/crisi/.

[59] See "Dis-", Treccani, Vocabolario on line, accessed August 13, 2024, https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/dis-1/.

[60] See "Disastro", Treccani, Vocabolario on line, accessed August 13, 2024, https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/disastro_res-caac544f-0018-11de-9d89-0016357eee51/.

definition of the concept, its «fullest elaboration» according to Svetlana Boym,[61] «Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art of which the other half is eternal and the immutable».[62] The short circuit itself caused by the elusive nature of the concept of modernity and the simultaneous identification of a canonically established historical period – having yet a very debated outline – with such appellative speaks of the ambiguous, smoky essence of this notion. We know what modernity is, but there is no clear consensus on when or if modernity ended.[63] The sheer distinction between what is modern and what is contemporary is something that vacillates and blurs even in the common language as these two terms are often used interchangeably, which contributes to identify Modernity as the Transient and the Ephemeral. If that is the case, then the fuzzy threshold between modernity and postmodernity can prove to be crucial in understanding the recent trend of nostalgia, and we will soon argue why.

Secondly, and building on the previous point, the nexus between nostalgia and disasters – the first following the latter – shows another fundamental component of the sentiment's anatomy, which is the importance of *loss*. Leaving home (figuratively but not only), seeing the world changing all around, and each one of the other already mentioned experiences of displacement could be metaphorically described as "losing a star", meaning the cardinal point(s) of reference to which one's identity is attuned to, being them physical or symbolic. Change implies loss, if only of the times went by, and it is the object of said loss which the nostalgic aims to recover, rebuilding the ruins and awakening the dead.[64] Absence and the melancholy stemming from the irretrievability of its referent – the hollow object of nostalgia, the distance between Then and Now – are key to the most recent conversation on nostalgia[65].

> As in an album of photographs or a collection of antiquarian relics, the past is constructed from a set of presently existing pieces. There is no contiguous identity between these objects and their referents. Only the act of memory constitutes their resemblance. And it is in this gap between

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[61] See note 4 to chapter 2, Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, 359-360.

[62] Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, 19; the original can be found in: Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Completes* (Paris: Gallimard Bibliotheque de la Pleiade, 1961), 1163.

[63] It is interesting to remark how the two, arguably, most popular events proposed to identify the beginning of the modern age, the fall of Constantinople in 1454 and Colombo's arrival in the Americas in 1492 could both easily fall into the already discussed matter of Otherness and displacement.

[64] See again Benjamin, "Theses", 257.

[65] Ercoli argues that the link between nostalgia, desire and absence is far more ancestral, dating back to the Platonic myth of the androgynes (see Ercoli, "Paradigma", 113-115). «Nostalgic desire, thus, feeds off of absence since its origin and it is always marked by a constitutive impotence» (original: «Il desiderio nostalgico, cioè, si nutre fin dall'origine dell'assenza ed è per sempre segnato da una costitutiva impotenza»; Ercoli, "Paradigma", 115).

resemblance and identity that nostalgic desire arises. The nostalgic is enamoured of distance, not of the referent itself. Nostalgia cannot be sustained without loss.[66]

Loss and desire are so intrinsically bound to the core of the nostalgic sentiment that some scholars argue that such feeling can be ultimately seen as a self-referential, «paradoxical state of longing for the sake of longing»,[67] a «desire for desire».[68] The – conceptually antithetical – permanence of loss is at the heart of what fuels present-day nostalgia, and as such it must be taken into account along with its shades and features. While proposing their conception of sensory nostalgia as «enchantment with distance», Jennifer Kitson and Kevin McHugh argue that «Central to the experience of nostalgia is an affective spatiality and temporality of loss, a distance between *now* and *then* that cannot be bridged».[69] These dimensions of loss are to be confronted and discussed within the framework of the new, contemporary declinations of space and time, hence engaging in conversation with the so-called postmodern condition.

> The Initial approach to this particular "great transformation" – the displacement of time, the spatialization of the temporal – often registers its novelties by way of a sense of loss. [...] [F]rom this nostalgic and regressive perspective – that of the older modern and its temporalities – what is mourned is the memory of deep memory; what is enacted is nostalgia for nostalgia, for the grand older extinct questions of origin and telos, of deep time and the Freudian unconscious [...], for the dialectic also, as well as all the monumental forms left high and dry by the ebb tide of the modern moment, forms whose Absolutes are no longer audible to us, illegible hieroglyphs of the demiurgic within the technocratic world.[70]

What is deemed to be lost and what remained washed out on the shore by the wave of the (post)modern will then be discussed in the next paragraphs.

4. Post-war mythmaking

The fundamental shift that gave nostalgia the positive, aesthetically successful aura it is currently often associated with arguably happened sometime in the early years of the Second Post-war

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[66] Stewart, *On longing*, 145; quoted in Kitson, "Enchantments", 491.

[67] Kitson, "Enchantments, 491, 498.

[68] Stewart, *On longing*, 23. A certain degree of semantic familiarity with the previously discussed points can be appreciated, as the etymological root of "desire" also belongs to the lexicon of Astronomy (see "Desire", Etymonline, Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed August 13, 2024, https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=desire).

[69] Kitson, "Enchantments, 490.

[70] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 156.

period,[71] sharing a curious proximity with the «radical break or *coupure*» that supposedly gave birth to postmodernity.[72] This connection could be interpreted as anything but coincidental, as the determining factors of both phenomena can be seen as quite complementary.

Many are in fact the elements that conjured both the feelings of crisis and prosperity, on which nostalgia depends on, from the 1950s onwards – social, economic, technological, political and cultural – and despite the present research not being a suitable space for a meticulous analysis of each one of them, we can still identify some of the major trends and ruptures that, arguably, affected the worldview of the Western public.

The Second World War was a catastrophe of unprecedented proportions, and, as such, the world that came right after was deeply changed. In a matter of years, from the ruins of the countries destroyed by the war emerged some fast-developing, competitive economic powerhouses – like, for example, the economic booms registered in Italy, Germany and Japan – that were internally thriving while pushing the global market through competition and innovation. The economic progress that stemmed from the post-war reconstruction and a fast industrialization was then reflected on the possibilities and habits of common people, who, on average, could now afford some considerably improved lifestyles. The introduction of new technologies playing major roles in workers and families' lives contributed to a sense of pioneering[73] and detachment from the horrors of the recent past, despite the lingering, rising tensions of the Cold War. The commercial success of mass telecommunications, with television at the forefront, contributed to the construction of a shared imagery and in fostering the vision and the soft power exerted by countries like the United States, for instance through the popularization of the American dream showcased by Hollywood productions. The shaping power of film and TV was crucial for creating a positive sense of newness and of a reassuring progress, which was ready to leave the ruins of war behind and to find an – at least a self-portraited – sense of stability and optimism.

> The first Beat poets; and occasional "antihero" [...]; a few daring Hollywood impulses; nascent rock and roll itself; the compensatory importation of European books, movements, and art films [...]: such, in retrospect, seems to be the balance sheet of fifties culture. All the rest is Peyton Place, bestsellers and TV series. And it is indeed just those series [...] that gave us the content of our positive image of the fifties in the first place. If there is "realism" in the 1950s, in other words, it is presumably found there, in mass cultural representation, the only kind of art willing (and able) to

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[71] See the already mentioned work of Fred Davis (Davis, *Yearning*, 4).

[72] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 1.

[73] As Jameson writes: «the economic preparation of Postmodernism or late capitalism began in the 1950s, after the wartime shortages of consumer goods and spare parts had been made up, and new products and new technologies (not least those of the media) could be pioneered» (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, XX).

deal with the stifling Eisenhower realities of the happy family in the small town, of normalcy and nondeviant everyday life.[74]

The bright force of reconstruction embodied by the 1950s and the «*psychic habitus*» of such new age, however, eventually paved the way to some more radical changes in society, the «absolute break, strengthened by a generational rupture, achieved more properly in the 1960s».[75] This specific decade is remembered as a major turning point in Western culture for the disruptive momentum it brought against the most traditional visions and values of society, while at the same time being run through by a copious amount of violence and tensions.

The Sixties were the time of civil and social rights movements (the protests for equal rights of the American black communities and Martin Luther King's "*I have a dream*" speech; the student protests and workers' strikes in Europe; the Stonewall riots...), of revolutions and divisions (the Cuban missile crisis and the consequent de-escalation; the construction of the Berlin wall; the Prague Spring and its repression...), of changes in the perception of societal roles and tabus (the beginning of the sexual liberation; the second wave of feminism; the perceived agency of the youth; the popularization of drugs...), of violence and calls for peace (the assassinations of the Kennedys, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in the United States; the hippie movement and the protests against the war in Vietnam...) and much more. This exceptional decade opened with Jurij Gagarin being the first man in space and closed with the first step on the moon. In pop culture, these were the years of the first "British invasion", marked by the *Beatlemania*, and the rise of countercultures, of Kubrick's *2001* and the iconic Music and Art Fair of Woodstock. In a way, the rise of rock and roll and distorted guitar – so different and much more chaotic and rebellious compared to anything that had come before in music – perfectly exemplifies the nexus between the Sixties' disrupting *zeitgeist*, pop culture and the rejection of the old.[76] It was a tumultuous decade,[77] full of novelties

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[74] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 279-280.

[75] See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, XX.

[76] In this context, the song "You Really Got Me" (1964) by British group The Kinks and the legend associated with it could symbolically encapsulate the mark left on society and pop culture by the Sixties. Kinks' guitarist Dave Davies, in fact, recalls that the recognizable fuzzy, heavily distorted guitar tone featured in the song – allegedly «the first hit record to use distortion» – was created when he slashed his amplifier's speaker cone with a razor blade, thus changing its sound (see Dave Simpson, "How we made You Really Got Me", *The Guardian*, 10 June, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/jun/10/how-we-made-you-really-got-me). The first hit single deliberately featuring this new sonority, destined to influence music for the decades to come, was quite literally born out of an act of disruption of the norm and its creative usage. In his influential book on retro culture – which we will mention again in this analysis – Simon Reynolds reports the words of British artist Billy Childish mentioning this song: «If you listen to the guitar solo in The Kinks' "You Really Got Me", it sounds like it's going to fall apart. It might go wrong. It's alive and vital and uncontrolled and unbridled. It's got a huge amount of humanity and spirit in it» (Simon Reynolds,

and contradictions, but most importantly it is nowadays looked at as defined by a sense of *agency* and *future*. The context, however, would change rather quickly.

> The nostalgia wave of the seventies is intimately related – indeed, the other side of the psychological coin, so to speak – to the massive identity *dislocations* of the sixties. [...] millions upon millions of Americans experienced during those years what is perhaps the most wide-ranging, sustained and profound assault on native belief concerning "natural" and "proper" that has ever been visited on a people over so short a span of time. [...] Clearly, if one can speak of a *collective* identity crisis, of a period of radical discontinuity in a people's sense of who and what they are, the late sixties and early seventies in America come as close to that condition as can be imagined.[78]

If the Sixties were turbulent but strongly oriented towards progress and change, the Seventies were the moment when this rush met a strong setback, whose center of gravity could arguably be identified in the year 1973, defined by two major events.

The first one worth mentioning – while not being the first one to happen chronologically – was the global energetic crisis sparked from the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, which resulted in a dramatic increase of the cost of oil and, consequently, of products all around the globe. It was a significative moment, as it led to the realization that society relies on certain material grounds which can prove not as stable as they were thought to be. It was also a time to take conscience of the limited nature of the resources upon which the world economy was depending – and still does – and their close connection to politics and power. It was the first, striking proof after the economic boom that the future and its hunger for energetic consummation are not completely unbound, but they need to take into account the availability of said resources.

The second event that left a deep mark into popular imagination was the failure of the United States' military intervention in Vietnam. The defeat and retreat of the American soldiers from the country after years of strongly contested violence and destruction, and the first *de facto* military defeat of the US meant a shocking, symbolical displacement to the eyes of many, American citizens themselves in the first place. What makes this event significant and particularly relevant for the sake

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Retromania. Pop culture's addiction to its own past (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), 269). Arguably, a good summary of what is left of the spirit of those years.

[77] The identification and grouping of events into decades, each one with a distinct personality or character, is convenient from a narrative point of view but must be taken with a grain of salt. Fred Davis is pretty explicit in addressing this issue: «The decade reference is of course somewhat arbitrary. Some of the "dislocations" like the Vietnam war and Watergate extended into the seventies just as some of the nostalgia revivals [...] can be traced ack to the late sixties» (Davis, *Yearning*, 105, note 12). To be noted is also Davis's usage of the term "dislocations" to identify ruptures and discontinuities.

[78] Davis, *Yearning*, 105-107.

of our investigation has to do with the role the United States have arguably been playing after the Second World War, as the politically, economically, military and culturally leading country of the Western world.[79] The fact that the West's spearheading power was proven to be fallible, and in such a sensational way, led to a necessary phase of internal and external reflection, which was mirrored in the products of popular culture of the time. «[I]t is my sense», Jameson writes,

> that both levels in question, infrastructure and superstructures – the economic system and the cultural "structure of feeling" – somehow crystallized in the great shock of the crises of 1973 (the oil crisis, the end of the international gold standard, for all intents and purposes the end of the great wave of "wars of national liberation" and the beginning of the end of traditional communism), which, now that the dust clouds have rolled away, disclose the existence, already in place, of a strange new landscape [...].[80]

As the most successful and influential exporter of movies and TV series, through its products and soft power the US thus contributed to spread the sense of limitation and *loss* of certainties – which had already gained momentum with the disruptions of the Sixties – implied by these traumatic events. The convergence of defining factors such as *symbolical displacement*, a *loss of agency and identity* and a perceived *postlapsarian crisis* conjured – quite unsurprisingly – a resurgence of the feeling of nostalgia in the Seventies, as registered by Davis. The most discussed of these nostalgic cinematographic products to come out of this decade has to be the 1973 movie "American Graffiti", directed by George Lucas, whose nostalgic advertising – *"Where were you in '62?"* – is a perfect example of the recoil coming right after the downfall of America's illusions.[81] In Ercoli's words:

> George Lucas's cinematographic work structures a paradigm of decadence that starts from the banishment from the earthly Paradise symbolized by the last summer of youth: we were happy, before Vietnam, before the loss of innocence. A great exorcism in which cinema takes the place of literature.[82]

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[79] To explicit this aspect of post-war international dynamics is important to understand why, in this context, referring so often to the United States and their influence is necessary and not a sign of «Americanocentrism». Jameson himself, anticipating this kind of critique being possibly moved to his discourse on Postmodernism, points out how «it was the brief "American century" (1945-1973) that constituted the hothouse, or the forcing ground of the new system» (see Jameson, *Postmodernism*, XX).

[80] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, XX-XXI.

[81] Among many examples, it is mentioned in: Davis, *Yearning*; Jameson, Postmodernism; Reynolds, *Retromania*; and Ercoli, "Paradigma".

[82] «L'opera cinematografica di George Lucas struttura un paradigma della decadenza che parte dalla cacciata dal Paradiso terrestre simboleggiato dall'ultima estate dell'adolescenza: eravamo felici, prima del Vietnam, prima della

The parallel between the last season of adolescence and the world before the Vietnam War – both being great seizures characterized by a loss of innocence – sets the latter within the classic literary trope of the *Pastoral*, identified as «the purest literary expression of nostalgia» and associated with «a more innocent, simple and secure time».[83] From this moment on, the 1950s and the «mesmerizing lost reality of the Eisenhower era» will constitute for the American audience «the privileged lost object of desire»: a golden moment frozen in time, consisting of the reassuring stability of the «pax Americana», nascent rock and roll, and the «first naïve innocence» of early countercultures.[84] It does not really matter if this shimmering picture in black and white[85] corresponds to an actual representation of those years: the structure of the golden age and its rhetoric act like a filter for anything that could undermine the idealized, longed-for vision of what was lost after the Fall. The staggering success of the 1950s – or rather, of their collective recollection – and their visual resurrection operated on the screen, consolidated this decade's place in American mythology, and make for a very interesting example of the new, postmodern intertwinement of nostalgia and pop culture: a process that would mark the decades to come.

5. *Nostalgia for the past, nostalgia for the future*

What about now, then? What are the roots of the «current nostalgia boom», and are they comparable to what came before?

As already discussed in a previous paragraph, the state of the world today is one of extreme, *globalized* hyperconnection. It is a world that experienced the arrival of the Future – borrowing Simon Reynolds's rendition of the turn of the year 2000 – after the «long, sustained ascent» of the 1990s[86] and that very soon came to realize how said future was significantly different from how it had been imagined.

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perdita dell'innocenza. Un grande esorcismo in cui il cinema si sostituisce alla letteratura» (original); Ercoli, "Paradigma", 193. To be noted is the parallel between the years went by of the long-lost youth with the fall from the garden of Eden. Simon Reynolds, in his analysis of Lucas's movie, also writes of it in terms of a «pre-political Eden», as «the movie captures the golden sunset of the fifties, just before the sixties – with all its high hopes and crashing disillusion – kicked off full-stream in 1963» (see Reynolds, *Retromania*, 294).

[83] See Wilson, "There and then", 482, and her account of Christopher Lasch's work.

[84] See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 19.

[85] On the interesting symbology given by the unnuanced duality of black and white, see Ercoli's beautiful analysis of Gary Ross's "*Pleasantville*" (1998) and its dialectic account of the relationship with a nostalgic past (see Ercoli, *Yesterday*, "Parte Prima", chapt. 2, "Pleasantville o della città perfetta").

[86] See Reynolds, *Retromania*, 404-405.

Quite like the Seventies but perhaps with an even more striking impact, the new millennium has been characterized by a series of major shocks, pretty much in every aspect of public and private life, that made crumble and fall the established certainties of many. Examples of events that defined such loss of confidence are: the 2001 terrorist attack on the Twin Towers and its political and military consequences – still a painful scar in the American cultural landscape, whose sense of security was completely shattered in one single day; the 2008 economic crisis and the following, long "Great Recession", whose echoes are still reverberating today; most recently, the 2020 pandemic of Covid-19, which reminded the whole world of the fragility of its systems and which defined the formative years of a generation. For how much of a challenge and a painful memory each one of these moments might have been due to their large scale, however, the feeling of displacement caused by such occurrences and historical transitions could arguably still be ascribed to a traditional understanding of the triggering factors of nostalgia as we came to identify them in our analysis so far – namely the already mentioned categories of concrete and symbolical discontinuity, loss and crisis. Nevertheless, it is the presence of other two concurring elements, pretty much unique to the post-2000 society, that might explain the exceptionality of the contemporary return of the Past.

5.1 A crisis of Future

The first element deals with the Present, but it has much more to do with what is to come. If the rush towards progress in the years right after the war seemed potentially endless, by the end of the century it was clear that the resources and modalities on which said rush was based on were not sustainable in the long run.[87] The emergence and popularization of the concepts of environmental crisis, climate change and global warming between the mid-1970s and the late-1980s[88] and the increasingly alarming developments related to the subject over the last few years, have, in fact, arguably been undermining that forementioned sense of *future* and *agency* that had characterized the social and political turmoil of the past. As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton wrote in 1981,

> In the last quarter of the twentieth century we have the dubious privilege of seeing both the
> beginnings of the human romance with things, in the distant past, and also its possible end, in the all
> too imminent future. For the first time in history there is an increasing awareness that resources of

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[87] On the interesting dialectics between the concept of ecological sustainability and nostalgia, see Jeremy Davies, "Sustainable Nostalgia", *Memory Studies* 3, no. 3 (2010): 262-268.

[88] See NASA, "Whats in a Name? Global Warming vs. Climate Change", accessed August 13, 2024, https://gpm.nasa.gov/education/articles/whats-name-global-warming-vs-climate-change.

energy that have fuelled material expansion are finite and that their desperate pursuit threatens the continuation of life on the planet.[89]

In the wake of the ever-increasing awareness of the effects of human activity and growth on the planet, the acknowledgment of what has been called the «ecological crisis of reason»[90] and the – less philosophically worded – «threat of environmental apocalypse»[91] have taken a toll on the realistic availability of a bright future, a future in which «[o]ur universal *homelessness* is no longer transcendent, but produced by the corruption of our habitat».[92] The scale of the climate emergency the world is – and will be – called to face, paired with the pessimistic stench of ineluctability it is starting to be perceived with, due to the deeply ingrained roots of the capitalistic system and the slowness of the counter-measures being taken, contribute to paint the picture of a society running towards an inevitable crash, especially in the eyes of the younger generations.

The difference with the crises of the past Is subtle but clear. What is being undermined by the vision of an impending catastrophe and its irreversibility is not only any positive view of the present, but the very idea of a feasible agency for a better future: a major displacement – symbolical yet potentially ever so tangible – caused by damaging the frame of life itself, the context of all contexts.

If the present leads to no future, then, perhaps, some solace could be found elsewhere: in the Past.

> [O]ur belief in progress itself has been shaken badly recently – by the resurgence of faith-based fundamentalisms, by global warming and toxic catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico, by evidence that social and racial divisions are deteriorating rather than improving, by the financial crisis. In a

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[89] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The meaning of things. Domestic symbols and the self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), IX; also quoted in Goulding, "Romancing the past", 581.

[90] See Val Plumwood, *Environmental culture. The ecological crisis of reason* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), chapter 1. «The crisis or failure in which we stand – Plumwood argues – is conventionally said to be a crisis of ecology, which suggests a crisis or failing of nature. In reality, the "ecological" crisis is a crisis or failing of reason and culture, a crisis of monological forms of both that are unable to adapt themselves to the earth and to the limits of other kinds of life» (Plumwood, *Environmental culture*, 15). Such an account of the limits and dangers of an exploitation-driven drift of reason echoes Max Horkheimer's critique of "instrumental reason" and the «complete transformation of the world into a world of means rather than of ends» (see Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), chapter 1; p. 102).

[91] Davies, "Sustainable nostalgia", 263.

[92] Davies, "Sustainable nostalgia", 265 (italic not present in the original). Interestingly enough, the concept of material and symbolical home is at the forefront, as well as its loss.

destabilised world, ideas of durable tradition and folk memory start to appeal as a counterweight and a drag in the face of capitalism's reckless and wrecking radicalism.[93]

As argued by Tannock, building on Davis's reflections on continuity and discontinuity,[94] nostalgia is especially triggered when the sense of agency and identity of the individual are perceived as «blocked or threatened», which in its turn stems from a «separation from an imaginatively remembered past».[95] Memory and the most recent «obsessions» with more or less accurate recreations of said past, then, can be seen as a «reaction formation against the accelerating technical process that is transforming our Lebenswelt (lifeworld) in quite distinct ways».[96] Such backward-looking practices are in a way akin to the most classic conception of nostalgia and its longing for a time went by; however, the peculiarity of the contemporary situation configures them as symptomatic of something slightly different and perhaps more profound than a mere recalling of the past through rose-coloured glasses .

When talking about the idea of continuity (and the eventual disruption of it), the angle of observation is usually directed towards the past – the present being or not being in continuity with that; nevertheless, the very concept of continuation implies not only a figurative geometrical ray extending from the present to the past, but a full line encompassing Past, Present and Future. From this caveat, then, it follows that the category of discontinuity can be applied as well to the very idea of future itself, of which the shattering of the consumerist model which the post-war dream was built on is a prime example. If the past is no longer *sustainable* in practice, then drastic changes are coming, switching the direction of what the future was thought to look like: the result is a radical displacement of the idea of Future for how it was imagined in the past, which triggers the rhetoric structure of nostalgia.[97]

The crisis *of* the Past – meaning both chronologically and conceptually – then, is actually a crisis *of* the Future – both coming *from* and directed *towards* it. At the same time, nostalgia for the Past – a past where a better future seemed within reach, where the agency of individuals was not dampened yet – can thus be revealed as actually being nostalgia *for the Future*. It does not matter if

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[93] Reynolds, *Retromania*, 404.

[94] See for example Davis, *Yearning*, 35; also quoted in Tannock, "Nostalgia critique", 456.

[95] Tannock, "Nostalgia critique", 456.

[96] Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories. Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia (*New York/London: Routledge, 1995), 7; quoted in Niemeyer, *Media and nostalgia*, 3.

[97] «What "sustainability" implies most readily is not separation but continuity, the keeping of things as they are and the diminution of the otherness of the future. [...] It subordinates change to itself, saturating the future with the present. [...] It responds to the threat of environmental apocalypse by offering us the infinite postponement of loss» (Davies, "Sustainable nostalgia", 263)

said past is an accurate rendition or an idealized version of it, as long as it is perceived as something Other than the present. This concept and its consequences will be explored more in depth in the next chapter.

If the future seems uncertain and not as bright as expected, the remedy – as already mentioned – can be looked for in the safety and familiarity of the Past, just like Hofer's patient used to do.[98] The availability of said Past and the possibility to experience it both lead us to the second factor that defines the exceptionality of nowadays nostalgia.

5.2 Synchronicity and anachronism

The other element that clearly defines our current era is the capillary diffusion of digital technologies. In particular, in most countries the network comprised of mass media, the internet and every shade of their intertwinements is a major part of everyday life, and it is virtually unescapable.

It is within this framework that the past becomes widely accessible and commodified: the path that started with the birth of photography and passed through cinema, home movies[99] and personal cameras, all the way to the internet and its massive archival capacity, made it possible for casual consumers to interact with reproductions of the past which give – with various degrees of fidelity – the illusion of proximity to what is no more.

In this regard, the most peculiar aspect of the recent years is the combination and wide availability of both means of reproduction (smartphones, cameras, recorders) and stable means of fruition (online archives, TV, streaming platforms): the result is a sense of *synchronicithy*, in which almost every moment, every memory, every past decade is accessible through technology – in its directly recorded form or in its «imaginatively remembered» recollection[100] – alongside with the visual imagery, style, music, and *zeitgeist* that came to be associated with it. In anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's words:

> The past Is now not a land to return to In a simple politics of memory. It has become a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios, a kind of temporal central casting, to which recourse can be taken as

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[98] It is important to notice, however, the fundamental differences between the triggers and the scale of contemporary nostalgia compared to the one described by Hofer: the intriguing assonance between the two does not in fact result in a perfect overlapping.

[99] For an interesting account on the social and cultural dialectics of home movies and their evolution, see Sapio, "Homesick for aged movies".

[100] In Tannock's previously mentioned words (see Tannock, "Nostalgia critique", 456).

appropriate, depending on the movie to be made, the scene to be enacted, the hostages to be rescued.[101]

Now more than ever the Present is intersected by the Past, and the commercial products coming out of such clogged flow of time reflect the contemporary acquired taste for temporal eclecticism.[102] Through the power of media, it is possible not only to experience the feeling of a time – virtually *any* time – that was never lived, but even to be nostalgic for it.[103] This peculiar way of consuming time, which Appadurai calls «armchair nostalgia»,[104] has proved to be a key factor in mass culture's thirst for market appeal, resulting in nostalgia turning into a profitable, aesthetic practice;[105] nothing but «a part of the consumption experience».[106]

In her very compelling essay on Citröen's (anti-)nostalgic advertising, Emmanuelle Fantin makes use of the categories of "prosopopoeia"[107] – a rhetoric figure in which the chronological order of life and death is abolished[108] – and "heterochronia"[109] – a term borrowed from Michel Foucault and standing for an «absolute rupture» with the traditional sense of time[110] – which provide effective

[101] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization* (Minneapolis/London: Minnesota University Press, 1996), 30.

[102] This terminology can be found in Christopher Lasch's brief note on Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, «a novel written "somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales" (i.e., in deliberate disregard of the conventional sense of time)», where Vonnegut «makes a passing observation that illustrates the eclecticism with which the modern sensitivity approaches the culture of the past» (Christopher Lasch, *The culture of narcissism. American life in an age of diminishing expectations* (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 91). The quote in question is part of a passage where Billy pilgrim, Vonnegut's protagonist, is interacting with a creature from the planet Tralfamadore, who explains: «[...] each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message – describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. [...] *What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time*» (Kurt Vonnegut, S*laughterhouse-Five* (New York: Dial Press, 2009), 112). Despite Vonnegut's book being published in 1969, the Tralfamadorian's description seems curiously fitting for visualizing modern culture.

[103] See Ercoli, "Paradigma", 183.

[104] Appadurai, *Modernity at large*, 78.

[105] See Appadurai, *Modernity at large*, 76-78.

[106] Goulding, "Romancing the past", 569.

[107] See Fantin, "Anti-nostalgia", 99.

[108] See "Prosopopea", Treccani, Vocabolario on line, accessed August 13, 2024, https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/prosopopea/.

[109] See Fantin, "Anti-nostalgia", 102.

[110] See Michel Foucault, "Des espaces autres", in *Dits et écrits 1954-1988. Vol IV (1980-1988)*, ed. Daniel Defert and Francois Ewald (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 759. "Heterochronia" is a concept made up by the juxtaposition of the Greek "hetero" ("diverse", "other") and "chronos" ("time") and worded to be in assonance with "utopia", or rather with

renditions of the temporal ubiquity conjured by modern media. If u-topias are nowhere by design and thus non-existing, the antipodal concept of heterochronia describes the substantial – and yet paradoxically ethereal – simultaneous presence of different time entities within the same timeline. Furthermore, what is quite intriguing to observe is the connotational nexus between the two terms mentioned by Fantin and the dialectical spheres of loss and permanence, as in fact prosopopoeia encompasses the possibility of the dead to speak with the living and Foucault's example of heterochronicity is – indeed – a cemetery:[111] two situations in which the Past acquires materiality in the Present and which end up diverting the gaze from the Future. In Jerome De Groot's wording: «time is disrupted and made non-linear», when «[t]hat which should not be "alive" is recalled to the present».[112] Albeit aesthetically pleasing and expression of a familiar imagery, such disjunction with a traditional conception of time is not without consequences, whereas, on the contrary, being assimilable to yet another form of symbolical displacement. «The presence of the past in the present fragments contemporary identity and traumatizes the now»:[113] De Groot is writing about horror and fictional monstrous depictions, and yet such a discourse seems particularly fitting for the current investigation – something which will be even more clear in the next chapters.

The medial ever-exposure to the past and its aesthetics gives it a newfound, concrete yet ethereal (conceptually bound to digital re-production) form of materiality that is reflected in everyday taste and consumption choices. The Past – generically defined or more or less temporally situated – in the era of mass digital recollection thus becomes a visitable *space*, through technological modalities and thanks to their grasp on collective imageries; a space of plastic safety and familiarity, where the world preceding the Fall (of the Present, of the Future) is artificially resurrected, and whose insular nature makes it for a desirable place to retire from the anxieties of the world.[114] Such a wording directly echoes Jamesons's account of Postmodernity and is designed to dialogue with one of its specific features, being it the «great transformation» consisting of «the displacement of time, the spatialization of the temporal».[115]

"Time is out of joint" is the defining sentence taken from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*[116] and recalled by many of the presented authors to address the modern relationship with temporality and

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its complementary «counter-space» of "heterotopia" in Foucault's essay, where utopias are effectively realized (see Foucault, "Des espaces autres", 755).

[111] See Foucault, "Des espaces autres", 759.

[112] Jerome De Groot, *Remaking History* (Oxon/New York: Routledge, 2016), 121.

[113] De Groot, *Remaking History*, 121.

[114] See John Potts, "Journeys through the Past: Contempt, Nostalgia, Enigma", in Niemeyer, *Media and nostalgia*), 213-214.

[115] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 156.

[116] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 52.

historicity.[117] The result of synchronicity, stemming from the practices identified by prosopopoeia and heterochronia, is the accustomization to a two-way *anachronism*[118] – the present being found in the past and the past being found in the present. It is marked by a «blurring of official contemporaneity», a «waning of historicity» which has become «increasingly typical of our experience of cultural products»,[119] or rather of a «consumerist packaging of the past».[120] As different past decades – yet, sometimes centuries – have found their way and a stable presence into our current time, anachronism «is now taken for granted»[121] and concurrently we are finding ways to inhabit these temporal disjunctions.[122] «The Past has never been more present».[123]

In the next chapter we will discuss and analyse the defining features of said relationship with time and the way pop culture intersects the contemporary experience of nostalgia.

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[117] See for example Fisher, *Ghosts*, 18, 21 and 130; Ercoli, *Yesterday*, "Parte Prima", chapt. 2, "Pleasantville o della città perfetta". Of primary significance, however, as mentioned by Mark Fisher, is the analysis of the sentence operated by Jacques Derrida in his compelling work *Specters of Marx*, which, as we will address soon, is especially foundational for Fisher himself and his book *Ghosts of my life*. See in particular Derrida's first chapter (Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 1-60).

[118] See Fantin, "Anti-nostalgia", 99.

[119] Fisher, *Ghosts*, 12.

[120] Michael Pickering, Emily Keighteley. "Retrotyping and the Marketing of Nostalgia", in Niemeyer, *Media and nostalgia*, 92; also quoted in Fantin, "Anti-nostalgia", 99.

[121] Fisher, *Ghosts*, 14.

[122] Kitson, "Enchantments, 495.

[123] «Il passato non è mai stato così presente» (original); Ercoli, *Yesterday*, "Introduzione".

CHAPTER III

THE HAUNTING OF THE PRESENT

«Unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters».[1]

1. Lost futures, spectrality and the return of the dead

With the turn of the 2000s – and especially after 2008 – it was clear that while the future had arrived, the same could not be said for the promises that it had been carrying. Promises of economic progress and prosperity, of innovation and advancements: an overall optimism and a faith in the New which were shattered by the Great Recession, by «neoliberal capitalism's destruction of solidarity and security», by «the vast inflation in the cost of rent and mortgages»[2] and by the looming threat of climate change. These ground-shaking transformations and their worldwide resonance, thanks to the current fully-fledged state of globalization, seem to have taken a toll on the naïve idea that the Future will be better than the Past, that things will end up turning for the better. Where has the Future gone, then?

According to Franco Berardi, the current social and cultural landscape is the result of an ongoing process that started in the later decades of the XX century, and which gradually eroded the post-war confidence in progress.

> [...] the 1970s and '80s witnessed the beginning of the slow cancellation of the future. Now those bizarre predictions have come true. [...] But when I say "future" I am not referring to the direction of time. I am thinking, rather, of the psychological perception, which emerged in the cultural situation of progressive modernity, the cultural expectations that were fabricated during the long period of modern civilization, reaching a peak in the years after the Second World War. Those expectations were shaped in the conceptual frameworks of an ever progressing development, albeit through different methodologies [...].[3]

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[1] Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, XVI.

[2] See Fisher, *Ghosts*, 15.

[3] Franco Berardi, *After the Future*, ed. Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn, trans. Arianna Bove et al. (Edinburgh, Oakland, Baltimore: AK Press, 2011), 18; also quoted in Fisher, *Ghosts*, 6.

In a way, then, the future – chronologically speaking – showed up on time, but the *expected* Future failed to do so. «Not only has the future not arrived» Mark Fisher gloomily concludes, «it no longer seems possible».[4]

The result of such a deeply pessimistic view of contemporary society and its overall direction are what Fisher calls "lost futures": the broken promises of a better tomorrow, the dead visions of what could have been but never was; *ghosts* of past possibilities that failed to materialize but which now continue to linger on the Present.[5] This «increasing divergence between experience and expectation»[6] alongside with the shadows still cast by said «abandoned futures»[7] end up conjuring a strong feeling of nostalgia, which, as already anticipated in the previous chapter, turns out to be a yearning for those same Futures that have been lost.

Resituating Ute Holl's discourse on nostalgia and colour in cinema, it can be argued that the time of contemporary nostalgia is the «*futurum exactum*»:[8] the Latin verbal tense which used to identify an action supposed to happen before another one, connoting a precise expectation of what was about to come while seeing it from a relative past perspective. The betrayal of what was set up to be by this symbolical *futurum exactum* and the consequent disillusionment towards progress can be seen as one of the main factors that fuel today's withdrawal into the Past; a past which, decades later, seems charged with potential and ready to leave itself behind. Arguably, the peculiar trait of the modern declination of nostalgia is precisely this: the longing for a sense of Future – intended as agency, expectations and possibility of the better to be ultimately realized – disguised as nostalgia for the past wherein this "*futurability*" was perceived to inhabit.

> What is being longed for [...] is not a particular period, but the resumption of the *processes* of democratisation and pluralism [...]. What should haunt us is not the *no longer* of actually existing social democracy, but the *not yet* of the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, but which never materialised. These spectres – the spectres of lost futures – reproach the formal nostalgia of the capitalist realist world.[9]

Fisher's above-mentioned analysis is namely on social democracy, but it is significantly applicable to a more general perspective on current postmodernity as well. The reference to a

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[4] Fisher, *Ghosts*, 21.

[5] See Fisher, *Ghosts*, chapter "00: Lost Futures".

[6] Pickering, *Retrotyping*, 83.

[7] De Groot, *Remaking history*, 63.

[8] Ute Holl, "Nostalgia, tinted memories and cinematic historiography: on Otto Preminger's *Bonjour Tristesse* (1958)", in Niemeyer, *Media and* nostalgia, 161.

[9] Fisher, *Ghosts*, 27.

«capitalist realist world» directly echoes the author's previous influential book – indeed titled *Capitalist Realism*[10] – in which Fisher also intersects Lacan's concept of the Real[11] while approaching the already discussed threat of an environmental catastrophe. In this perspective – quite fittingly – the impending ecological disaster is a prime example of such "Real": the unrepresentable, «traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies» of reality for how it is presented to us by capitalism.[12] The broken promises of post-war optimism and its economic model, the painted tomorrows that never came, can thus be seen as some of said fractures and inconsistencies, through which the ghosts of lost futures manifest, as well as the belief that Yesterday might have actually been better than Tomorrow.

The theme of ghostliness and spectrality that characterizes the discourse around nostalgia and abandoned futures persists in Fisher's analysis, as the author borrows from the work of Jacques Derrida to introduce the central category of *hauntology*. In his book *Specters of Marx*, Derrida coins such term – a philosophical «puncept» as Fisher calls it[13] – by merging the concept of "ontology" and the verb "to haunt", to explore the legacy of Marxism in the world that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and its interactions with neoliberal capitalism. While inquiring the significance of Shakespeare's already mentioned *Hamlet*, Derrida writes:

> *What* is a ghost? What is the *effectivity* or the *presence* of a specter, that is, of what seems to remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum? Is there *there*, between the thing itself and its simulacrum, an opposition that holds up? [...] Let us call it a *hauntology*.[14]

Furthermore, speaking of the essence of contemporary media:

> [...] this element itself is neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it spectralizes. It does not belong to ontology, to the discourse on the Being of beings, or to the essence of life or death. It requires, then, what we call [...] *hauntology*.[15]

The space inhabited by the ghost is an *in between*, neither here nor there: it is a lingering on a threshold, between presence and absence; to be *and* not to be.[16] The role of the spectre come back

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[10] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism. Is there no alternative?* (Winchester/Washinghton: Zero Books, 2009).

[11] See Jacques Lacan, "Le symbolique, l'imaginaire et le réel", *Bulletin de l'Association Freudienne*, 1, no. 1 (1982): 4-13.

[12] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 18.

[13] Fisher, *Ghosts*, 17.

[14] Derrida, *Specters*, 10.

[15] Derrida, *Specters*, 63.

[16] «Derrida's neologism uncovers the space between Being and Nothing» (Fisher, *Ghosts*, 120).

from the past is to haunt the living and their *home* – the house just like the Present – with the faded images of what used to be and *should not* be anymore, and yet finds a way to re-present itself.

The word "haunt" – Fisher argues – possesses an etymological proximity to the German "*unheimlich*", translatable as "un-homely" or "uncanny".[17] The concept of the uncanny, described by Nicholas Royle as a «crisis of the proper» and a «peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar»[18], is thus a central category to understand how the ghosts of the past – of which the forementioned visions of lost futures constitute a very interesting declination – find a place in the Present and in its discourse about nostalgia. As Fisher notes, the connection between haunting, home and the uncanny results in the spectral term of "haunt", anciently standing for "providing with a home, house", signifying «both the dwelling in place, the domestic scene and that which invades or disturbs it».[19] The spectre comes from the past, just like the dead king in Hamlet,[20] and lingers into a space which is not supposed to be its own. Its permanence in such a liminal *in-between-ness*, however, is not without consequences on the reality it has invaded. The image of the ghost is a symbol of society's current relationship with its past in the context of the Postmodern, and hauntology is the way this influence of the times went by manifests in the late capitalistic world: hauntology is «the *agency of the virtual*», or better «that which acts without (physically) existing».[21]

Nostalgia, as discussed in the first chapter of the present investigation, is indeed a space *in between* – between here and there, between now and then – and thus it is a place where these ghosts from the past find room to situate and inhabit, symbolically speaking. Uncanny is what seems familiar but at the same time does not, because it *is not*: the Past coming back in popular culture with its perceived innocence, agency and futurability is an example of such uncanny spectres, something which resembles the collective memory of what once was but, in reality, does not quite overlap with it.

Just like the popular imagery of gothic fiction trained us to expect, the permanence of the ghost is due to a failed conjuring away of what should be left dead but is refused to be let gone – which is the work of nostalgia. Referring to the Freudian duality of *mourning* and *melancholia*,[22] Fisher –

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[17] Fisher, *Ghosts*, 125.

[18] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 1.

[19] Fisher, *Ghosts*, 125.

[20] For the significance of the analysis of Shakespeare's tragedy, see again Derrida, *Specters*, chapter 1.

[21] Fisher, *Ghosts*, 18.

[22] See Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hoghart Press and the Institute of Psycho-

through Derrida – argues that hauntology is in fact structured as «a failed mourning», understood as the lack of «the slow, painful withdrawal of libido from the lost object»,[23] which would require a conscious conjuring away of the dead for them to stay in their place and not come back to haunt the living.[24] This, however, does not happen with melancholia, which, in Freud's account, is marked by the permanence of libidinal desire towards the object which was lost, for such loss «is withdrawn from consciousness».[25] The presented perspective on nostalgia for the Past as a disguised nostalgia for the Future, then, might be perceived as having an interesting affinity with the un-mourned ghosts of desire that are – more or less – unconsciously expressed through nostalgic visions of the Past.

The proximity of the once Swiss disease and melancholia,[26] together with the thematic constellation surrounding nostalgia which was portrayed in the previous chapters, interacts with Fisher and Derrida's discourse on spectres, which in turn connects it to the contemporary return *of* the Past and *to* the Past in current forms of mediality and iconography. Hauntology can, in fact, be read as the expression of the two-way direction towards which postmodern nostalgia is directed, both yearning for the past and for the future. Referencing Martin Hägglund's analysis of Derrida – «What is important about the figure of the specter, then, is that it cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is *no longer* or *not yet*»[27] – Fisher identifies the two driving senses operating in hauntology as well:

> The first [direction] refers to that which is (in actuality is) *no longer*, but which *remains* effective as a virtuality (the traumatic "compulsion to repeat", a fatal pattern). The second sense of hauntology

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Analysis, 1957), 237-258. Freud's work and its interactions with nostalgia are also well analysed by Ercoli in her chapter "Malinconica nostalgia" (see Ercoli, *Paradigma*, chapter II).

[23] See Fisher, *Ghosts*, 22.

[24] See Derrida, *Specters*, 120; also referred to in Fisher, *Ghosts*, 22.

[25] See Freud, *Mourning and melancholia*, 245.

[26] See for example Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, 5. Interestingly enough, Freud's account of the symptoms of melancholia – namely «a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings [...]» (Freud, *Mourning and melancholia*, 244) – are very much reminding of the condition of those affected by nostalgia as described by Hofer and most military physicians during nostalgia's pathological conception (confront with Hofer, "Dissertation", 380-386, where melancholy is even explicitly mentioned).

[27] Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the time of life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 82; directly quoted in Fisher, *Ghosts*, 18.

refs to that which (in actuality) has *not yet* happened, but which is *already* effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behaviour).[28]

Through its increasing presence in contemporary media forms, fuelled by uncertain times and the nostalgia that arises from them, the Past is coming back (or forward?) stronger than ever and – quite interestingly – it contributes to shape the taste and imagery of the nostalgic Present itself. Concepts like the ones of lost futures and anachronism as they have been presented above, are cracks on the constructed fabric of reality through which it is possible to get a glimpse of the complexity and oddity of the present times, which seem to be increasingly made up of – and hungry for – images of decades went by, resurrected and preserved through technological means. From this angle, the Present is revealed to be a baroque construction with a taste for «illusions, contrasts and antithesis», a place where different timelines can coexist, «where borders between opposite concepts vanish, where everything seems to be reconcilable: death and life, dream and reality, and, of course, past and present».[29] It is this «precarious, though audacious, balance between a world rooted in memory and striving for progress»[30] that the ghosts from the past come to haunt and perturb, shifting the balance towards a backward-looking, rose-coloured revival of the dead.

The frequent usage of the language of the occult, alongside medical terminology, to describe the contemporary experience of nostalgia – noted, for example, by Kitson and McHugh[31] – is on one hand an attempt to articulate the complex feelings conjured by the grasp of the past into the present; on the other it is symptomatic of something deeper: of «a clear anxiety about temporality»,[32] a «wider modern preoccupation with the past – the nostalgic temper [...]».[33] Terms such as "enchantment", "infection", "contagion", "possession", frequently found in the literature on nostalgia,[34] are themselves reminiscent of the aesthetics of popular gothic and horror tales and tropes, of which «the zombie, the vampire, the possessing spirit» are the most representative.[35]

The return of what was thought to be dead but which, instead, comes back to disrupt the established direction of life and temporality is indeed a very effective allegorical representation of the most recent nostalgic trends and forces that have been operating all-throughout popular media.

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[28] Fisher, *Ghosts*, 19.

[29] Fantin, "Anti-nostalgia", 97.

[30] Fantin, "Anti-nostalgia", 97.

[31] See Kitson, "Enchantments", 491.

[32] De Groot, *Remaking history*, 120.

[33] David Lowenthal, "Material preservation and its alternatives", *Perspecta* 25 (1989): 67; also quoted in Kitson, "Enchantments", 493.

[34] Kitson, "Enchantments", 491.

[35] De Groot, *Remaking history*, 119.

The latest popularity of these fictional representations in movies, TV and books constitutes a very interesting phenomenon to further the analysis on the modern nostalgic condition, and to for this reason we will come back to it in later paragraphs.

> Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work, within the living present: all it says [...] is that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity [...]. Derrida's ghosts are these moments in which the present – and above all our current present, the wealthy, sunny, gleaming world of the postmodern and the end of history, of the new world system of late capitalism – unexpectedly betrays us.[36]

2. Re-presentations of the past

As mentioned earlier, one of the defining features of the ghost is its uncanny nature. The past that comes back through the spectre, in fact, is not in its original, truthful form: it is nothing but an image which resembles what was once alive, hence its belonging to the domain of spectrality and not to materiality; an idea of a different time which might come close to the authentic but ends up eventually shifting away from it – a *memory*.

Just like the spectre looks familiar to its referent although not entirely, memories are far from being an experience of objectivity and, on the contrary, they might be altered by elements like imagination and unreliable narrations. Even though history and memory are not and cannot be the same,[37] for its capacity of combining strong visual assertions and the symbolical associations that collective memory[38] – the «web of remembered experience embodied in collectively communicable

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[36] Michael Sprinkler, "Marx's Purloined Letter", in *Ghostly demarcations: a symposium on Jacques Derrida's "Spectres de Marx"* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 39; also quoted in De Groot, *Remaking history*, 110.

[37] See Niemeyer, *Media and nostalgia*, 4.

[38] On the complex concept of "collective memory", here only briefly recalled, see Paul Ricoeur's in-depth analysis in *Memory, history, forgetting* (Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, history, forgetting*, transl. Kathleen Blamey & David Pellauer (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004)). Quite interestingly, Ricoeur himself makes reference to the haunting of the present operated by the past: «Confronting the phenomenon of fascination with the forbidden object, how can we help but leap to the plane of collective memory and evoke the sort of hauntedness, described by historians of the present day, which stigmatizes this "past that does not pass"? Hauntedness is to collective memory what hallucination is to private memory, a pathological modality of the incrustation of the past at the heart of the present, which acts as a counterweight to the innocent habit memory [...]» (Ricoeur, *Memory*, 54).

symbols»[39] – came to build for the past decades, the representation of the past in popular media and fiction (namely in cinema and TV) sits at the convergence of these two modalities of referencing pastness and it arguably plays a major role in shaping a shared imagery surrounding specific historical periods. However, just like memory to a certain extent, the medial representation of the past is a product, something artificial that «can be manipulated and sold»,[40] and as such it may fall victim to more or less conscious embellishments and even falsifications.[41] It is precisely here, in the gap between historical reality – of the past, but also of the present – and its medial narration that nostalgia and its accompanying spectres find some ground to operate.

Since its inception in late XVII century, in fact, nostalgia has preserved a strong bond to imagination and its capacity of distorting reality.[42] This connection resurfaces with significant evidence in what Fred Davis had called «Simple Nostalgia», commonly referrable to as the "simpler times" argument – «that subjective state which harbors the largely unexamined belief that things were better (more beautiful) (healthier) (happier) (more civilized) (more exciting) *then* than *now*»[43] – or in its greater declination in the myth of the Golden Age. What both of these forms of yearning for the past have in common, as noted by Ercoli, is the fact of them ultimately being forms of narration,[44] thus lacking any sort of material consistency outside of the narrative realm itself – just like ghosts do. «Nostalgia for the golden origins – Ercoli writes, paraphrasing Susan Stewart – is [...] first and foremost a form of narrative. And the narrated past has never existed except as narrative: it is always absent and threatens to reproduce itself as a perceived lack».[45]

Since the Second post-war period, and arguably until today, the defining modalities and products of modern narration are the ones that are visually consumed in movie theatres and at home via TV, streaming services and the internet. It is here, then, that nostalgia and the artificial resurrection of a rose-coloured past are fed – both meaning they are given to the public *and* they get nourished themselves, the ambiguity is intended – and thrive.

As we have previously discussed, in fact, nostalgia answers to the symbolical displacement stemming from times of crisis (in its most Greek significance) and fast changes, from the perceived

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[39] Jeffrey Andrew Barash, *Collective memory & the historical past* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 87.

[40] See De Groot, *Remaking history*, 74.

[41] See Niemeyer, *Media and nostalgia*, 3.

[42] See Hofer, "Dissertation".

[43] Davis, *Yearning*, 18.

[44] See Ercoli, "Paradigma", 159.

[45] «La nostalgia delle origini dorate […] è innanzitutto una forma narrativa. E il passato narrato non è mai esistito eccetto che come narrazione: è sempre assente e rischia continuamente di riprodursi come una mancanza sentita» (original); Ercoli, "Paradigma", 159; paraphrasing Stewart, *On Longing*, 23.

loss of agency and perspective on the future and from the anxiety that comes along with it. It does so by providing mediatized, narrative solace and shelter into a familiar, care-free, visitable Past, where contemporary troubles had not arrived yet and where the future seemed at hand.

Defying nostalgia's alluring promise of the past being recoverable,[46] however, a disenchanted analysis of our relationship with time will reveal that «[w]hat is gone can only be re-enacted, repeated, reconstructed, reshown, rethought and restored by an artificial act, by *mimesis*».[47] Thanks to the digital preservation of the past and to the unlocked possibility of its medial reproduction, though, said mimesis has now become much more present – just like the Past itself – in the form of the many differently characterized decades that crowd our current mediatic heterochronia.[48]

Because of their successful and yet illusionistic nature, these narrative spaces are most likely to generate both wonder (for the often-shiny depiction of the decades went by) and suspicion (of these shimmering representations being inauthentic and symptomatic of something else).

The combination of the malleability of the portrayed past in popular media, its entanglement with market-appeal and the logic of capitalistic consumption, as well as the triggering of nostalgic structures in times of trouble and fast change, indeed results in most recent pop culture being flooded by a constant reference to a mythologised, nostalgically waxworked version of the Past.[49] Seen from afar, nostalgia and its sugar-coated – *uncanny* – revivals of the "simpler" times went by are indeed the resultant of many of the trends, needs and on-going processes that lately have been shaping the Western world.

Simon Reynolds, for example, in his very influential book from 2011 ("*Retromania*") describes the latest era of postmodernity, following the last turn of the century, as characterized by a slowing down of its time into a «sluggish» state caused by the clogging of its flow,[50] which recently has been oversaturated by the presence of the past.

> In the 2000s the pop present became ever more crowded out by the past [...]. Instead of being about itself, the 2000s has been about every other previous decade happening again all at once: a simultaneity of pop time that abolishes history while nibbling away the present's own sense of itself as an era with a distinct identity and feel.[51]

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[46] «That the past should be irrevocably lost seems unbearable. We crave its recovery. Is there no way to recapture, re-experience, relive it?» (Lowenthal, *The past*, 55).

[47] Niemeyer, *Media and nostalgia*, 3.

[48] On the concept of heterochronia, see its previous discussion in chapter 2, paragraph 5.2.

[49] Potts, "Journeys", 216.

[50] See Reynolds, *Retromania*, X.

[51] Reynolds, *Retromania*, X-XI.

The beginning of the new Millennium – as seen by Reynolds – is populated by revenants: the Past – and not *any* past, but specifically the most recent, *immediate* one[52] – has come back to life in the form of «*re*vivals, *re*issues, *re*makes, *re*-enactments» and an «endless *re*trospection»;[53] so much so that the 2000s have earned the title of «the "Re" Decade», being them «dominated by the "re-" prefix».[54] As a result, almost every area of pop culture has recently been haunted by the ghosts of the other times: music, cinema, theatre, television, but also toys, food, design, commercials and, ultimately, fashion.[55] The latter, in particular, is presented by Reynolds as remarkably interesting because of its cyclical character and the application of its model to the modern cultural industry. «Fashion – he writes –

> is the nexus between late capitalism and culture, where they intermesh. Popular music gradually assimilated fashion's artificially accelerated metabolic rate, its rapid cycles of engineered obsolescence. In fashion, the future cannot be invented fast enough, while the recent past piles up in mounds of symbolically depreciated commodities.[56]

Just like in fashion, then, it seems like the recent medial pop culture has been witnessing the triumph of the "retro" – described by Simon Reynolds as «a self-conscious fetish for period stylisation (in music, clothes, design)» –, which finds its creative expression through «pastiche and citation».[57] Bygone decades – arguably from the 1950s onwards – and their "distilled" atmosphere are hence brought back to life by the means of quotation and revival of their very identifiable and established stylistic features, which are now, with distance, seen as "exotic" and attractive. It is by the postmodernist spatialisation of time and thanks to the distinctiveness of these features that the consumeristic approach to the past is thus enacted: «[t]his very topicality, this date-stamped quality

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[52] «Earlier eras had their own obsessions with antiquity, of course, from the Renaissance's veneration of Roman and Greek classicism to the Gothic movement's invocations of the medieval. But there has never been a society in human history so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of its own immediate past. That is what distinguishes retro from antiquarianism or history: the fascination for fashions, fads, sounds and stars that occurred within living memory» (Reynolds, *Retromania*, XIII-XIV).

[53] Reynolds, *Retromania*, XI.

[54] Reynolds, *Retromania*, XI. Such appellative clearly echoes Tom Shales's 1986 homonymous article, to which we will come back later on. (Tom Shales, "The ReDecade", *Esquire*, March 01, 1986, https://classic.esquire.com/article/1986/3/1/the-re-decade).

[55] See the brief overview presented by Reynolds in Reynolds, *Retromania*, XV-XVIII.

[56] Reynolds, *Retromania*, 421.

[57] See Reynolds, *Retromania*, XII.

is what causes [the feeling of an era] to become quickly dated and then, after a decent interval, so potentially epoch-evoking, so *revivable*».[58]

The success of such re-presentations of the Past, as well as their consequent frequent deployment and sought-after market-appeal, are conceptualized in what Reynolds calls «retromania»: a phenomenon which encompasses «the entire range of contemporary uses and abuses of the pop past»[59] and which in itself is very telling of the nostalgic backward-looking tendencies of contemporary society.[60] Not only are the aesthetics from yesterday considered glamorous and charming: it is the very idea of *going back* to be coveted and to give value to some of these products.

Such a dynamic is well exemplified by the case of movie remakes, which are objects that clearly embody the *anachronism* which was discussed in the previous chapter,[61] and which are very clever moves from a marketing perspective as well. Thanks to retromania and to the ubiquitous presence of the Past in the Present, in fact, they possess the ability of appearing as valuable for both those who *remember* the first iteration of the product in question and those who *were not*, but who in turn will most likely be attracted not because of the object itself but right in virtue of its nature of re-presentation of something past. Within the remake, the Past is actively part of the Present; a concept which is very well expressed by Frederic Jameson:

> The word *remake* is [...] anachronistic to the degree to which our awareness of the preexistence of other versions [...] is now a constitutive and essential part of the film's structure: we are now, in other words, in "intertextuality" as a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect [...].[62]

A similar analysis might be applied to many other medial iterations of bygone times.

While being popular because of their mass appeal, these revivals of the past also happen to be incredibly profitable and possess great potential to be sold, consumed and reinvented, since the starting materials are so abundant, very much culturally significant and renown – *iconic* – and are suitable for endless narrative re-configurations. The cycle of nostalgic returns – a *re*cycling, as

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[58] Reynolds, *Retromania*, XIX.

[59] Reynolds, *Retromania*, XIII.

[60] «This kind of retromania has become a dominant force in our culture, to the point where it feels like we've reached some kind of tipping point. Is nostalgia stopping our culture's ability to surge forward, or are we nostalgic precisely because our culture has stopped moving forward and so we inevitably look back to more momentous and dynamic times? But what happens when we run out of past?» (Reynolds, *Retromania*, XIV).

[61] See chapter 2, paragraph 5.2.

[62] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 20.

Simon Reynolds calls it[63] – seems indeed self-sufficient by constitution, as every trend, style, decade, with its symbolical and aesthetic connotations, gains value in function of another one being run out, and so on.[64] «Nostalgia – Charles Panati writes – was once a disease, today [...] selling a sweet image of the past brings big bucks».[65]

In order to satisfy the main requirements that are determinant for the success of nostalgic products – fulfilling the escapist desires of contemporary audiences while being palatable, and hence marketable, to the wider audience possible – the image of the Past that is sold *needs* to be eye-catching, attractive and captivating, thus ending up with two co-depending results: a simplification and edulcoration of the portrayed time-period, very much reminiscent of the structure of the Golden Age, and a correlated accentuation of those characteristics that, visually and symbolically, have come to be associated with that time frame. Let us take a moment to look at each of these phenomena individually.

2.1 Retrotyping

The Present is not painted in pastel, matt colours: it is a complex object, made of an intricate web of connections and relations, of conflicts and contradictions; a whole spectrum of shades that shies away from simplicity and monistic explanations – despite what certain political agendas tend to claim. The Past, having once been called "Present", is no different. The distance between *now* and *then*, however, can easily blur the sight of what is faraway in time, confusing the details, smoothing out the edges, erasing the nuances. This is precisely the work of nostalgia, or better, of what Davis had called "simple nostalgia", looking back with its rose-tinted glasses to a world that offered – seemingly, from afar, just like a ghostly mirage – a comforting relief to the anxieties of the present.

The past which is portrayed in nostalgic media is an example of this, most of the times being a stripped-down version of itself, where the elements of conflict and complexity – the elements proper of History and signifiers of the belonging to a historical context – are eradicated or stereotyped[66] in favour of the depiction of a time which is simpler *by design*.

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[63] Reynolds, *Retromania*, XI.

[64] Reynolds, however, has some doubts on the endless reiteration of these cycles. «Surely, at a certain point, recycling will just degrade the material beyond the point that further use-value can be extracted» (Reynolds, *Retromania*, 424).

[65] Charles Panati, *Panati's Parade of Fads, Follies and Manias* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 4; also quoted in Niemeyer, *Media and nostalgia*, 23.

[66] Pickering and Keightly, referring to nostalgic advertising, talk of «a highly sentimentalist manner which operates by eradicating sources of tension and conflict in social life and by generalising intimate and uncomplicated belongings» (Pickering, "Retrotyping", 87).

On a similar note, Pickering and Keightley refer to the concept of a *"regressive nostalgia"* – which «through a limited set of idealised images of the past, appeal[s] only to the component of backwards longing [...] and conceal[s] or den[ies] the loss and painful sense of lack»[67] – which, in turn, is akin to Svetlana Boym's definition of "*restorative nostalgia*". Opposed to a "*reflective*" conception of the sentiment, which instead «thrives in *algia*»[68] and calls into question a monolithic vision of the past to then address the future,[69] «[r]estorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. [...] Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. [...]».[70] Furthermore,

> [r]estorative nostalgia knows two main narrative plots – the restoration of origins and the conspiracy theory [...]. The conspiratorial worldview reflects a nostalgia for a transcendental cosmology and a simple premodern conception of good and evil. [It] is based on a single transhistorical plot, a Manichaean battle of good and evil [...]. Ambivalence, the complexity of history and the specificity of modern circumstances is thus erased».[71]

Boym's argument has a way broader scope than our current reflection, but it touches on some interesting points which are relevant to the discourse on how the past is represented.

In regressive nostalgia and its commercial application, the "simpler times" – we could argue – are not (only) the product of faulty, embellished memories, but they are the result of a deliberate manufacturing of said past in order for it to be the most attractive and sellable as possible.

The vision proposed by this kind of nostalgias – simple, regressive, restorative – is one of a Past which does not belong to the flow of time, but rather floats unbothered and self-sufficient into a flat historical void, on the edge of the Fall. Just like the Golden lineage sung by Hesiod,[72] the decades evoked by popular and commercial nostalgia are mostly a product of imagination, out of time and subtracted from *change*: they are the illusory conjuring of a past that never was,[73] safely secluded in its aura of permanence, far away from trouble and uncertainty – which is, ultimately, how the archetypical object of nostalgia is structured.[74]

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[67] Pickering, "Retrotyping", 84.

[68] Boym, *The future of nostalgia*, 41.

[69] «Reflective nostalgia is a form of deep mourning that performs a labor of grief both through pondering pain and through play that points to the future» (Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, 55).

[70] See Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, XVIII

[71] Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, 43.

[72] See the previous analysis in Chapter 1, paragraph 6.

[73] See Fisher, *Ghosts*, 137.

[74] See Ercoli, "Paradigma", 148; already mentioned in Chapter 1, paragraph 6.

What is being longed for in nostalgic movies, TV series, advertising and so on is a (re)constructed, static Past that, by setting up a reassuring spatialised time,[75] offers to seemingly cure the crisis of the Postmodern, opposing a concealment of tensions and change to the traumatic speed and evanescence of the present.

Such idealized representations, which act to «inoculate us» against any sense of historical movement,[76] are manifestations of the process which Pickering and Keightley call "*retrotyping*", defined as

> a distinctive manner of remembering which depends on a purposive selectiveness of recall that celebrates certain aspects of a past period and discards others that would compromise that celebratory process.[77]

"Retrotyping" merges together the words *retro* – very popular to refer to everything past – and *typing*, from "type", indicating the generalization of an object – of a period, in this case – into a familiar category and aesthetic. The historical eras depicted by retrotyping nostalgic media and sold as products, thus, are not true representations of their real-life counterparts: instead, they are a washed-out, simplified version of those days went by – *ghosts* of those times, we could say – filtered and distorted by the lens of collective memory and market-appeal.

Reminiscent of Jameson's reflection on the general postmodernist lack of depth – the «new kind of superficiality» which «[is] perhaps the most supreme formal feature of all Postmodernisms»[78] – and its specific application to the field of history and its aesthetic displacement,[79] Pickering and Keightley give a further account of the nexus between the essence of retrotyping and the modern relationship with the past. Building on the words of Patrick Hutton,[80] they indeed identify

> a lack of sufficient time or purpose for engaging with and drawing on the past, caused by the hectic pace of contemporary social and cultural change, leaving us prey to reiterative cycles of consumption which mimic the incessant patterns of wider social change and further dislocate us from the past, our only compensation for this being the aesthetic idealisation of highly selective

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[75] See Ercoli's application of Jameson's categories in her analysis of "*Happy days*" (Ercoli, *Yesterday*, "Parte Prima", chapt. 2, "Happy Days").

[76] See Pickering, "Retrotyping", 92.

[77] Pickering, "Retrotyping", 88

[78] See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 9.

[79] See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 20.

[80] See Patrick Hutton, "How the old left has found a new place in the memory game", *History and Theory* 50, no. 1 (2011): 98, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2303.2011.00569.x; quoted in Pickering, "Retrotyping", 88.

aspects or features of the past that are exploited in the advertising and promotion of commodity goods and services.[81]

Coming back to Stuart Tannock's imagery, retrotyping is precisely the «nostalgic production of a prelapsarian world»: a *rhetorically* constructed space – disguised as time – wherein to find those feelings of «agency, identity and community» that are perceived to be lacking in the contemporary present, whilst ignoring the fact that these resurrections are mostly fictional and they «inevitably gloss over contradictory or negative components that compromise the sense of possibility found in such spaces».[82] The very idea of "lost futures" is very much closely tied to said medial representations of the past that pervade pop culture, which – due to this ubiquity and visual persuasiveness – might be slowly replacing the organic collective memories of the past decades in favour of their "retrotyped" versions.

What is being sold by this type of media, in the end, is a dream[83] of the Past – a Past that was, in turn, still capable of dreaming of the Future – which is very akin, rhetorically and structurally, to the idealised visions found in *utopias*. Compared to the common association between the classic "non-places" and the future-oriented idea of moving towards their realization – although not explicitly found in More's original text –, such oneiric glimpses of a better time are instead directed in the opposite sense: towards the return to something which *already was* – or at least which is *supposed* to have been, and is reflected in its haunting phantasmatic form.

It is from the observation of such a dynamic operating in the present that Zygmunt Bauman elaborated the concept of "*retrotopias*" to describe the inversion of the direction of longing that has been taking place in the postmodern era. «After the prospects of human happiness – Bauman keenly argues –

> [...] have been unfixed, untied from any particular *topos* and individualized, privatized and personalized [...], it is their turn now to be negated by what they valiantly and all but successfully attempted to negate. From that double negation of More-style utopia – its rejection succeeded by resurrection – "retrotopias" are currently emerging: visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but

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[81] Pickering, "Retrotyping", 88.

[82] Tannock, "Nostalgia critique", 457.

[83] «Nostalgia – of a past that never happened and of a future that never realised – does not belong to the archive of events, but rather to the unreal visions of dream» (original: «La nostalgia – di un passato mai avvenuto e di un futuro che non si è realizzato – non appartiene all'archivio degli eventi, ma alle visioni irreali del sogno»; Ercoli, *Yesterday*, "Parte Prima", chapt. 2, "Viaggio in Italia").

undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn and so inexistent future, as was their twice-removed forebear [...].[84]

The simplified, retrotyped past which is glamourized in nowadays' popular media is arguably one form of these backward-looking utopias: a spatialised non-time that is actually a non-place, something which never was but uncannily, in the distance, seems like it might have and which is visitable through its medial (re)construction: some*time* no*where* to be found; a *u-chronia* turned *u-topia*, wherein the ethereal dream-like timeliness essential to the Golden Age gets materialized and becomes situated.[85]

In the course of the present analysis, however, we have already pointed out how the visions akin to and referencing utopia and its ancestral counterpart, the myth of the Golden Age, are related to a conception of nostalgia which tends to shy away from historical temporality and the processes of progress and change. At the same time, we have correlated the most recent nostalgic trends with a perceived lack of agency and sense of Future in the Present, which are consequently sought after in the Past and its depictions. Apparently in contradiction, the temporal *stasis* structural to the Golden Age and the drive for change which is found in today's portraits of the decades preceding the turn of the 20th century – namely from the 60s to the 90s – can in fact coexist, thanks to retrotyping.

The tumultuous, future-oriented past decades which now seem so propulsive and inspirational in their feeling of possibility and drive to change, seen through the lens of retrotyping become nothing more than little time capsules of vibrancy: secluded observable spaces that, just like a photograph, manage to capture a moment of blissful rebellion which does not strike fear – but which, on the contrary, seems quite desirable – by virtue of its familiarity and known finale; a snapshot of movement frozen in time.[86] With its raising to a – marketable – iconic and symbolic status, the dynamic becomes institutionalized into the static.

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[84] Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia* (Cambridge/Malden: Polity Press, 2017), "Introduction: The Age of Nostalgia", EPUB. To be noted is the fact that Bauman introduces the book – his latest work, indeed published posthumously – referencing both Benjamin's account of Klee's "Angelus novus" (see Bauman, *Retrotopia*, "Introduction: The Age of Nostalgia") and Svetlana Boym's description of nostalgia as «a sentiment of loss and displacement, but [...] also a romance with one's own fantasy» (Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, XIII; quoted in Bauman, *Retrotopia*, "Introduction: The Age of Nostalgia").

[85] «Utopia is a spatial matter that might be thought to know a potential change in fortunes in so spatialized a culture as the postmodern; but if this last is as dehistoricized and dehistoricizing [...], the synaptic chain that might lead the Utopian impulse to expression becomes harder to localize» (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, XVI).

[86] «[I]f Postmodernism is the substitute for the sixties and the compensation for their political failure, the question of Utopia would seem to be a crucial test of what is left of our capacity to imagine change at all» (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, XVI).

Through this process, the timeless nature of the Golden Age is reconciled with the agency that is longed for in a present haunted by its lost futures. The achievement of such compromise between opposing forces is well explained by Bauman, who argues that what he calls "retrotopia" actually «shares with Thomas More's legacy its fixity on a territorially sovereign *topos*: a firm ground to provide», while simultaneously diverging from it – retrotopias being the «negation of utopia's negation».[87] Retrotopias – Bauman explains, indeed differ

> from that legacy in approving, absorbing and incorporating the contributions/corrections supplied by its immediate predecessor: namely the replacement of the "ultimate perfection" idea with the assumption of the non-finality and endemic dynamism of the order it promotes, allowing thereby for the possibility (as well as desirability) of an indefinite succession of further changes that such an idea *a priori* de-legitimizes and precludes. [...] [R]etrotopia derives its stimulus from the hope of reconciling, at long last, *security* with *freedom*.[88]

This is why the later decades of the past century, arguably from the Sixties to the 1990s,[89] seem so desirable and are object of countless revivals and nostalgic re-productions. Sufficiently distant to be enchanted by nostalgia,[90] they present a utopian view of a simpler time that has been lost, when change seemed achievable and people – especially youth – could perceive firsthand the results of their agency into their present. It is a form of utopia which takes place in the past and is fuelled by the retrotypical depiction of those decades, as well as by the contemporary lack of hope in the future. It does not matter if the idealized portraits of those eras majorly gloss over the social, economical, political issues, contradictions, insecurities and instabilities that made them part of the fabric of history: on the contrary, such attractive, rose-coloured renditions are instrumental, both for the public to find back what is perceived to be lacking in the present and for the industry who thrives on said desires. To seemingly resurrect what was deemed to be dead – fulfilling the age-old aspiration of reverting back the flow of time – is the illusionistic promise made by digital mediality and its products to a Present that is nostalgic for a better Future, which is ultimately recovered in the Past and its sense of possibility: a utopian "past future".[91]

Given the exploited selling potential of a statically defined "golden" past and the transmutation of its most groundbreaking periods and tendencies into aesthetic archetypes – with the consequent taming of their revolutionary drive –, the words of Max Horkheimer clearly echo as a forewarning

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[87] Bauman, *Retrotopia*, "Introduction: The Age of Nostalgia".

[88] Bauman, *Retrotopia*, "Introduction: The Age of Nostalgia".

[89] Even though, most recently, the early '00s are slowly crawling to claim their seat at the nostalgic table as well.

[90] See Kitson, "Enchantments", 490.

[91] See Ercoli, "Paradigma", 159.

on the ability of late capitalism and its harbinger, the *cultural industry*, to appropriate and make use of those subversive forces that would normally push for a change of the status quo, in favour of the preservation of the system itself.

> Even the notion that opposes [the established order] is incorporated, assimilated, decontaminated. [...] The late stage of society [...] manages to incorporate as its own ornament even criticism, negative art, resistance.[92]

2.2 The formal canonization of the dead

With the Past having become – at least in its consumeristic, nostalgically mediatized form – an «aesthetic category in its own right, far removed from history»,[93] comes an even further declination of the nostalgic imagination; one essentially akin to retrotyping and presenting similar results – an extreme consequence of it, we could say – but ultimately slightly different in its conceptual significance.

We have already discussed how the practices of re-presenting and re-shaping the past for nostalgic and commercial purposes end up producing a glamourized, simplified version of a period, its major components of conflict and contradiction having been filtered out in favour of its positives – its «Sunday best»[94]. What does it happen, however, when the defining and most recognizable features – visually, sonically, stylistically – of the represented decades are emphasized and reiterated to the point of becoming self-sufficient, without the need of anchoring themselves to the purpose of explicitly reviving a certain time period; when those features from yesterday become an art form for the Present?

The success of a past-reminiscent imagery, its appeal and frequent referencing in contemporary media, fashion and advertising can be seen as yet another iteration of the nostalgic retreat from the Present to find some sense of meaning, security and identity. However, the ingraining of a retro-inspired attire into Western public's taste might be read as the defining feature of a once cyclical nostalgia now turned chronical and endemic.

Some scholars, like Christina Goulding, venture as far as to speak of the current over-representation of the past as of a «nostalgia epidemic» – curiously very reminiscent of the early life

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[92] Max Horkheimer, "Schopenhauer today", in *Critique of instrumental reason*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell et al. (London/Brooklyn: Verso, 2012), EPUB.

[93] Gil Bartholeyns, "The Instant Past: Nostalgia and Digital Retro Photography", in Niemeyer, *Media and nostalgia*, 67.

[94] Pickering, "Retrotyping", 93.

of the word, when Hofer's disease plagued European armies and was feared by generals everywhere – which nowadays «has hit most sectors of the leisure and entertainment industries».[95] Ten years prior, in the early 1990s, Charles Panati had already written that «today [...] nostalgia is an American epidemic, fast becoming a global pandemic. We are continually in the grip of another nostalgia fever»,[96] a prediction which has proven to be quite spot on. Similarly, Svetlana Boym – accredited for «the single most influential recent intervention in nostalgia studies»[97] – has stated that

> [i]n counterpoint to our fascination with cyberspace and the virtual global village, there is a no less global epidemic of nostalgia, an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world.[98]

«Everywhere we look – Goulding points out – the past is in front of us», though it is in its most sentimental and romanticized depiction, which has often very little to do with a complex picture of History[99] and a lot more with its sugar-coated retrotyped version, ending up in resembling more of a portrait of its rose-coloured collective memory than the actual past itself. As Goldman and Papson argue:

> collective memory is no longer grounded entirely in history or social context, but also in the perpetual process of abstracting and rerouting meanings. [...] We cannot underestimate the cultural impact of the constant process of decontextualizing signifieds, turning them into signifiers, and redirecting them towards other signifieds.[100]

If the Past as an aesthetic category becomes separated from its (supposedly) referenced counterpart, then the escapist tendency that such a practice is symptomatic of can go even further and develop forms of expression which mimic what once was to create something original, but which ultimately does *not belong* to the realm of the new, something that is anachronistically suspended between the new and the old, between *here* and *then*: an imagery which recalls a generic "pastness" but which is not supposed to come from the past – even though it looks like it could. In other words: in its quest for meaning, familiarity, authenticity, lost agency and so on, the Present

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[95] Goulding, "Romancing the past", 565.

[96] Panati, *Parade*, 4.

[97] Davies, "SUstainable nostalgia", 265-266.

[98] Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, XIV.

[99] Goulding, "Romancing the past", 565-566.

[100] Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, "Advertising in the Age of Hypersignification", *Theory, Culture & Society* 11, no. 3 (1994): 39-40, https://doi.org/10.1177/026327694011003002; quoted in Goulding, "Romancing the past", 565.

proceeds to make use of an iconography taken from other eras but re-elaborated to suit its current needs, through a form of aesthetic appropriation which perhaps speaks of a deeper desire; a concealed hope that, maybe, along with those elements from the past will also come back the – nostalgically conceived, retrotypically edulcorated – easiness and sense of possibility associated with the referenced decades gone by. The products resulting from this overlapping of Past and Present are prime instances of *anachronism* and of the *uncanny*: haunted artifacts that would like to simultaneously belong to multiple timelines but end up defying all of them.

Mark Fisher gives two examples of such phenomenon, both taken from recent popular music: namely the Arctic Monkeys' "I Bet You Look Good On The Dancefloor" (2005) and Amy Winehouse's cover of "Valerie" (2007). These two records – Fisher argues – present the typical features of «postmodern retro», something that is evident in «the way in which they perform anachronism».[101] Fisher further explains the experience of misplacement found in these songs:

> While they are sufficiently "historical"-sounding to pass on first listen as belonging to the period which they ape – there is something not quite right about them. Discrepancies in texture – the results of modern studio recording techniques – mean that they belong neither to the present nor to the past but to some implied "timeless" era, an eternal 1960s or eternal 1980s.[102]

Fisher's analysis directly references the remarks carried on years prior by Frederic Jameson himself. Built around an observation of the "nostalgia movie", Jameson gives indeed a very interesting insight on the phenomenon of the historical present being «colonized» by what he calls «nostalgia mode»[103] as an artistic form and by its constant link to the past as a supposed referent. In particular:

> the incompatibility of a postmodernist "nostalgia" art language with genuine historicity becomes dramatically apparent. The contradiction propels this mode, however, into complex and interesting new formal inventiveness; it being understood that the nostalgia film was never a matter of some old-fashioned "representation" of historical content, but instead approached the "past" through stylistic connotation, conveying "pastness" by the glossy qualities of the image, and "1930s-ness" or "1950s-ness" by the attributes of fashion [...].[104]

The definition of a well-established, identifiable *feeling* of a decade, encompassing its music, its atmosphere, its fashion in clothing and every other stylistic feature that comes from that time and

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[101] Fisher, *Ghosts*, 11.

[102] Fisher, *Ghosts*, 11.

[103] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 20.

[104] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 19.

especially from its popular recollection, ends up in those elements becoming emphasized, stereotyped and generalized for the sake of recognition and their elevation to the status of icons – which is thus possible to endlessly reference. Fisher describes such trait of postmodern pop culture – Jameson's "nostalgia mode" – as «a *formal* attachment to the techniques and formulas of the past», something which he traces back to a «retreat from the modernist challenge of innovating cultural forms adequate to contemporary experience».[105]

One very interesting outcome of the kind of nostalgia stemming from such attachment to the established canons – referred to by Fisher as «*formal* nostalgia»[106] – and of the subsequent condensation of the past into a simplified, yet extremely glamorous, aesthetic version of itself is the production of objects which are clearly inspired by a certain time, but which have absorbed and mastered so well the essence of its referent (the retrotyped version of it; its memory) that they end up looking more real than the supposed reality they are referencing.

Examples of this "hyper-nostalgic" mimetism, coming once again from the field of popular music, are the recent hit songs "*Blinding Lights*" by The Weeknd – currently Spotify's most streamed song of all time, with almost four and a half billion spins – and "*As It Was*" by Harry Styles – following at number four, with "only" one billion streams less. These songs, respectively from late 2019 and 2022, not only present many sonic elements that we would *expect* from pop tunes coming straight out of the 1980s, but they meticulously *satisfy* our desire to experience a pop song from that era by ticking every box of what we could want (and canonically expect) from it. They seem to have distilled the essence of that decade – its "1980s-ness" – and the result is a paradoxical hyperreality, which «looks and sounds "more 1980s than the 1980s"» themselves.[107]

Compared to the records mentioned by Fisher, these songs maintain the same uncanny, textural discrepancy typical of their anachronistic nature; however, they arguably differ from them precisely for their seemingly perfect, purposeful adherence to what could be *imagined* or *remembered* to be the archetypical form of their referent. In Guesdon and Le Guern's words: the nostalgic aesthetic showcased by such products «rewrites collective memory with a view to being more faithful to an idea or to the memory of an original than to the original itself».[108] These songs are at their core very

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[105] Fisher, *Ghosts*, 11.

[106] See Fisher, *Ghosts*, 8.

[107] See Mattia Merlini, "More 1980s than the 1980s: Hauntological and Hyperreal Meanings of Synthwave Soundtracks", *Sound Stage Screen* 3, no. 1 (2023), 28, https://doi.org/10.54103/sss14136. The concept of a hyperreal 1980s-ness can be found earlier in David Keenan's influential article on "hypnagogic pop", an underground music genre indeed described as «based on a creative mishearing of hyperreal 1980s chartbusters» (David Keenan, "Childhood's end", *The Wire*, (no. 306) August, 2009, 26).

[108] Maël Guesdon and Philippe Le Guern, "Retromania: Crisis of the Progressive Ideal and Pop Music Spectrality", in Niemeyer, Media and nostalgia, 77.

successful offsprings of what David Keenan, in 2009, had identified as the underground current of «hypnagogic pop» – namely «pop music refracted through the memory of a memory»: muffled visions of another time, filtered by retrospective and charged with a dreamy liminality[109] – now polished enough to meet the needs of a vast public. The specific timeframe of these records' release is also worthy of attention, as their enormous success is closely tied to the conversation on the surge of nostalgia in times of trouble, as an escapist strategy or as a way to long for the Future, for their appeal might be also explained by the extremely uncertain time during which said songs came out – arguably right at the opposite ends of the COVID-19 pandemic. After all, as Keenan wrote, this kind of pop «is true modern magic, a music that dreams of the future by dreaming of the past. All you have to do is believe».[110]

The seeming abdication of the Present towards some major efforts in pushing forward the boundaries of culture and innovation – at least in Fisher's deeply pessimistic account – interacts with the already discussed concept of "lost futures" (or, more specifically, with Berardi's idea of a «slow cancellation» of the idea of Future that allegedly took place starting right from the 1970s),[111] to explain why contemporary artists seem stuck in recycling older styles, despite the production of new original material.

> While 20th-century experimental culture was seized by a recombinatorial delirium, which made it feel as if newness was infinitely available, the 21st century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion. It doesn't feel like the future.[112]

At the same time, the already addressed commercial success of the past and its reiterations, fuelled by sugar-coated nostalgia and escapism, contributes to foster the grip of *formal* nostalgia on the Present and its products. The contemporary cultural industry, run through by repetition and regressive nostalgia, acts like it was «trapped in the 20th century» and its consolidated styles, conveying a feeling of «living after the gold rush»,[113] after the Greats have lived and died and have been canonized – if they are not still around trying to cling on to their days of glory –, thus leaving little to no room for said formal attributes to be re-negotiated. It could be argued that rarely, especially in artistic productions, the *avant-gardes* have been recognized and praised during their time; however, the phenomenon in question, regarding the aesthetic use and appeal of conventional

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[109] Keenan, "Childhood's end", 26; quoted in Guesdon, "Retromania", 77.

[110] Keenan, "Childhood's end", 31.

[111] See, again, Berardi, *After the Future*, 18.

[112] Fisher, *Ghosts*, 8.

[113] See Fisher, *Ghosts*, 8.

forms of "pastness" might be seen as the expression of something different than mere conservativism.

What Jameson calls "1950s-ness" constitutes – as noted by Ercoli – a very significant shift in how nostalgia operates. «It is no more the matter of a feeling of loss and rupture» – she writes: «[n]ostalgia crystallizes itself into a stable and enduring condition. [...] Time becomes place: the 1950s are a world which is recognizable mainly through commodities and images».[114]

Neon signs, movie posters, the use of reverb and synths, polaroid pictures, period-inspired clothes, grainy filters, TV snow and superimposed video glitches, are all examples of these fascinating elements that linger on the doorstep between the old and the new: popular culture and its medial products have recently been showered by similar references to the past and its aesthetics, and so have been many forms of advertising – which reflect what is supposed to be attractive for the public. A closer look at the target demographics of these products, then, may reveal further details on the nature of the current wave of nostalgia and on why it is so peculiar.

One intriguing detail about this new declination of the nostalgic disease, in fact, is that it seems to affect not only those people who were alive during the decades that are now being recalled and longed for, but also – and perhaps most importantly – those who were too young to have experienced them in the first place. Contradicting Fred Davis's account on experienced nostalgia (or not entirely?),[115] in the Mid-Nineties Jannelle Wilson gathered the testimonies of her students (aged

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[114] «La nostalgia si cristallizza in una condizione stabile e perdurante. […] Il tempo diventa luogo: gli anni cinquanta sono un mondo riconoscibile principalmente attraverso le merci e le immagini» (original); Ercoli, "Paradigma", 195.

[115] «The weight of testimony seems to suggest [...] that the past which is the object of nostalgia must in some fashion be a personally experienced past rather than one drawn solely, for example, from chronicles, almanacs, history books, memorial tablets, or, for that matter, legend. (Can I be nostalgic for [...] a place I have never seen, or you for [...] a time when you have not lived?)» (Davis, *Yearning*, 8). What if, however, that past (even just in its retrotyped aesthetic) was not only limited to books, and tablets but it was part of our daily experience of popular culture and of its products? Then, maybe, Davis's testimony would still stand as valid? The «blurring of official contemporaneity» that is the postmodernist *anachronism* (see Fisher, *Ghosts*, 12; and its referent in Jameson, *Postmodernity*, 21) questions where the line of experienced reality is to be traced and thus how nostalgia can relate to memory in the space between the personal and the collective. Later on, and still with some caveats, Davis himself seems to allow a similar hypothesis. Talking about the visitors' experience in American Disney-themed parks – namely Disneyland and Disney World – and their sentimental depiction of «the small-town atmosphere of America at the turn of the century», Davis (in the late '70s) indeed wrote the following. «That few of us are old enough to have experienced those days at first hand is of little account. So successful have Disney and the other myth-makers of the mass media been in celebrating and memorializing this "age of innocence" in the American imagination that, even though we may not have lived then, we feel – because of the movies we have seen, the stories we have read, the radio serials we've listened to – "as if we had." This, incidentally, is a nice, if rare, instance of a created, secondhand reality [...] practically acquiring the same nostalgic status as something experienced firsthand in our very own lives» (Davis, *Yearning*, 121).

18 to 24) regarding which historical time they would have liked to visit, if given the chance.[116] Confronted with the staggering popularity of the past compared to the future, and specifically of the 1950s and 1960s,[117] Wilson noticed that many of the responses were referencing music, clothes and the perceived *zeitgeist* – either simple and reassuring (the '50s), either free and politically involved (the '60s) – of the chosen period, in a way that was clearly moulded on the depiction of those years that had been popularized by mainstream media.[118] On these grounds, Wilson then drew the conclusion that «nostalgia for bygone times does not require having actually experienced those times. The dominant ideology, via the mass media, creates and sustains nostalgia».[119] Furthermore, and quite relevantly considered our previous analysis:

> The students' nostalgia reflects their feeling of displacement. [They] may not feel that they have a very bright future. [...] In spite of how things "really" were during the '60s, popular portrayals of the 1960s make that time look much more meaningful and exciting than "our" decade, the 1980s. in the '60s, the younger generation *did* something – stood for something – and society had to listen and respond.[120]

Time has now passed since Wilson's students answered her survey, allowing for distance to make new additions to the decades that are on display on the counter of nostalgia. The "non-meaningful" and "unexciting" Eighties and Nineties, for example, have now been sufficiently polished and revamped to be actually part of that same process of medial idealisation and canonization from which they were excluded at the time of Wilson's survey. Time changes how certain historical periods are perceived, while at the same time other elements like the reactions to change (or lack thereof) tend to remain consistent. What is important to notice and keep in mind, however, is the pervasive, plastic capacity of popular culture and the media – now more than ever – to shape the way we perceive the world: its Present, Past and Future. «The power of popular culture manifests itself».[121]

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[116] The exact question, according to Wilson was the following: «If you could step into a time machine and press any year to go to – forward or backward in time – what year would you pick, and why?» (Wilson, *Sanctuary*, 93).

[117] Wilson reports that 76 percent of the interviewees chose the past, against the 24 percent in favour of the future (see Wilson, *Sanctuary*, 93).

[118] See Wilson, *Sanctuary*, 93-100.

[119] Wilson, *Sanctuary*, 99. Such a dynamic is quite akin to Appadurai' aforementioned «armchair nostalgia». In particular: «Rather than expecting the consumer to supply memories while the merchandiser supplies the lubricant of nostalgia, now the viewer need only bring the faculty of nostalgia to an image that will supply the memory of a loss he or she has never suffered» (Appadurai, *Modernity*, 78).

[120] Wilson, *Sanctuary*, 101.

[121] Wilson, *Sanctuary*, 93.

The creation of a "1960s-ness" or an "1980s-ness",[122] their use as a catalogue of stylistic features to choose from – a *hauntology* intended as «spectral anthology», following Guesdon and Le Guern's play on the word[123] – and the consequent simultaneous mixing up of different timelines in the present made possible by popular media, all concur to the accustomization of the public to the already mentioned *anachronism* – which is precisely «the slippage of discrete time periods into one another».[124] The past – and to a certain extent the future[125] – becomes an established style, and with that the idea that yesterday was better (more exciting, more authentic) than tomorrow gets deeply ingrained within the fabric of the Present. The anachronism ultimately leads to *stasis*.[126]

3. Analogue nostalgia and the "loss of loss"

One fundamental feature of anachronism is the paradoxical coexistence not only of objects belonging to different timelines but also, as noted earlier by Fisher, of their perceivable dissimilar "textures".[127] A single aspect of postmodernity that has been undisputably oriented towards the future despite the general nostalgic trends – which on the contrary have arguably been feeding on it – is technology, which has been moving forward and improving at great pace. Since the economic boom of the Second post-war period, every field of production has known an unprecedented growth and a seemingly ever-accelerating progress, which has led to significant changes both in quality of life and in how that daily life looks and sounds. The production techniques of pop culture and the physical means by which they are achieved and consumed have indeed been evolving over the years, resulting in different products from different decades to be characterized, as a matter of fact, by specific "textures".

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[122] The latter in particular will be object of a specific examination in the next chapter.

[123] Guesdon, "Retromania", 76.

[124] Fisher, *Ghosts*, 5. Similarly, Wilson remarks that, despite the validity of conceptualizing nostalgia as a backward-looking search for identity and continuity, it must be considered that the modern nostalgic condition «is not simply a "living in the past", but rather, an active engagement with the past, and a juxtaposition of past and present» (Wilson, *Sanctuary*, 157).

[125] Very interesting in this regard is Fisher's observation on «the fate of the concept of "futuristic music"». Once synonym with total deviation from the norm, something unexpected and experimental, today we come to actually expect a certain kind of sonority when presented with such label. «The "futuristic" in music – Fisher writes – has long since ceased to refer to any future that we expect to be different; it has become an established style, much like a particular typographic font» (Fisher, *Ghosts*, 9).

[126] See Fisher's intriguing analysis of the final episode of the TV series "*Sapphire and Steel*" (Fisher, *Ghosts*, 2).

[127] See again Fisher, *Ghosts*, 11.

Similarly to what Reynolds had written on the continuous renovation cycles happening in fashion,[128] it could be argued that the combination of such rapid evolutions in medial technologies – with different items and forms of mediality quickly becoming obsolete (most times willingly) and hence part of the past – and the consequent association of their products to the specific timeframes in which they were popular is also an important factor at play in the construction and definition of the canonical representation of an era. It should not be surprising, then, that material culture is actively at play in the nostalgic longing for the Past and its idealized aesthetics.

As described by Dominik Schrey, the cycle of obsolescence that has been characterizing the recent consumerist economy has indeed turned into a fuel for nostalgic tendencies and curious retrospectives, which resulted in paradoxical returns of dead obsoletes.[129] Evidence of such phenomenon being at work can be found pretty much in every corner of recent pop culture, from the renaissance of analogue photography[130] to the resurgence of vinyl in music,[131] up until the trendy comeback of "brick" mobile phones:[132] our daily landscape is being populated by items from other times that should have been outgrown by more advanced technologies but found their way into the Present. Anachronism has achieved material consistency.

As Schrey notices, the successful return of outdated technology – both in terms of sales and appreciation of the aforementioned – has given an intriguing ambiguity to Bruce Sterling's 1995 quote: «we live in the Golden Age of Dead Media».[133] Originally written to address the thriving market of products destined to a planned obsolescence, the same sentence can now be used, in fact, to describe the nostalgic resurrection of those devices and related aesthetics that were deemed to be buried by the flow of technological progress.[134]

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[128] See again Reynolds, *Retromania*, XIX and 421.

[129] See Dominik Schrey, "Analogue Nostalgia and the Aesthetics of Digital Remediation", in Niemeyer, *Media and nostalgia*, 27.

[130] See Sergio Minniti, "Buy film not megapixels. The role of analogue cameras in the rematerialization of photography and the configuration of resistant amateurism", in *The Camera as Actor. Photography and the Embodiment of Technology*, ed. Amy Cox Hall (London: Routledge, 2020), 78-79.

[131] See Michael B. Beverland, Karen V. Fernandez and Giana M. Eckhardt, "Consumer Work and Agency in the Analog Revival", *Journal Of Consumer Research* 00, 2024; ucae003, 1, https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucae003.

[132] See James Tapper and Aneesa Ahmed, "The 'boring phone': stressed-out gen Z ditch smartphones for dumbphones", *The Guardian*, April 27, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/apr/27/the-boring-phone-stressed-out-gen-z-ditch-smartphones-for-dumbphones.

[133] Bruce Sterling, "The Life and Death of Media", in *Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Music and Culture*, ed. Paul D. Miller (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2008), 80; quoted in Schrey, "Analogue nostalgia", 27.

[134] Schrey, "Analogue nostalgia", 27.

From a performing perspective, there is no apparent reason for why a contemporary photographer would prefer to give up the modern and more convenient high-resolution digital cameras in favour of unreliable and inaccurate analogue devices from the 1980s;[135] or, again, for why artists of the 2020s would choose to release their material in the format of vinyl records, CDs and music cassettes, which are all subject to physical limitations and eventual deterioration if compared to their MP3 or streaming counterparts. These are all examples of contemporary trends in medial fruition which are being embraced especially by the younger generations – whose life has been closely tied to the digital medium – and which ultimately share two defining features: they are physical (instead of digital), and they are opaque (opposed to the high-fidelity transparency of their digital alternatives). Rationally, these objects should not qualify to be desirable but nevertheless they are; and yet, perhaps, it is precisely in those signs of faulty materiality – of virtual mortality – that an answer could be found.

First and foremost, old media are closely bound to the historical time in which they used to thrive, and as such they are a fundamental part in reconstructing the feeling of an era, especially in its "canonized" and "retrotyped" depiction. This can be true both in terms of the physical objects that were popular in the past as well as the "texture" – the grain – that they used to add to the mediatized products which they provided: in both cases, the rehabilitation of these older forms of mediality into the Present succeeds to conjure another time and its atmosphere.

The accelerating, increasingly pervading, mediatization of life, culture and entertainment that characterized the second half of the last century, paired with the widespread contemporary possibility of its fruition, ensures these outdated formats of media and their aesthetics to be perfect time capsules of nostalgia.

> Nostalgia obviously has links to the inevitably mediatized past. It is based on the indivisible connection between one's own past and the media that accompanied that past. Media storage saves it and thereby makes it repeatable and memorisable today.[136]

What these objects from the past convey – alongside with the past itself that they depict, as filtered through their opacity – is quite akin to Walter Benjamin's concept of "*aura*", defined as «a

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[135] Although it could be argued that in the specific case of photography the sought-after effect could actually be undermined by the high degrees of fidelity and quality provided by the latest technologies (like AI), at the same time through these very technologies it is often possible to digitally simulate – quite convincingly – the imprint that would be left by traditional analogue devices.

[136] Katharina Niemeyer and Daniela Wentz, "Nostalgia is not what it used to be: serial nostalgia and nostalgic television series", in Niemeyer, *Media and nostalgia*, 134.

peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be».[137] An object, a work of art, but also natural elements[138] or words,[139] that possesses an aura is thus something capable of explicating a gap – in space, in time –, between itself and something Else, which remains «essentially distant» and «inapproachable»[140] for how apparent of a proximity there might be, revealing the Otherness between two elements and sending it back to the ultimate impossibility of their overlapping. The auratic object is *situated* in the Present and yet, at the same time, it communicates an unbridgeable distance, rooted in the object's belonging to that "web of space and time".

The concept of aura is closely connected to the *uniqueness* of its object,[141] which, in turn, is the foundation of its *authenticity*.

> Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. [...] The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.[142]

In his seminal essay, "*The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*", Benjamin eventually sentenced the death of the aura due to the technological advancements of his time – namely photography[143] and film[144] –, which allowed for countless replicas of what once was unique, causing a decline of its *presence* – intended as its situation in time and space, its *hic-et-nunc*.[145]

This leads us back to another Present, our current one, where the technical reproduction of not only works of art but of any form of mediality has even transcended their physical form, in favour

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[137] Walter Benjamin, "A short history of photography", transl. Stanley Mitchell, *Screen* 13, no. 1 (1972): 20, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/13.1.5; originally published in 1931.

[138] See Walter Benjamin, "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction", in *Illuminations*, 222-223.

[139] See Walter Benjamin, "On some motifs in Baudelaire", in *Illuminations*, 200.

[140] Benjamin, "Baudelaire", 188.

[141] «The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition. This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. [Different views of the same object], however, were equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its aura» (Benjamin, "The work of art", 223).

[142] Benjamin, "The work of art", 220.

[143] « [...] the liberation of the object from the aura, which is the most incontestable achievement of the recent school of photography» (Benjamin, "Photography", 20).

[144] See, for example, Benjamin, "The work of art", 221.

[145] « […] that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. [...] One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced» (Benjamin, "The work of art", 221).

of their much more popular and convenient digital recreation. If Benjamin described the eradication of the work of art from its *situation*, what the digital dematerialization and (virtually) endless reproducibility have caused is an even further detachment of the object from its unique place-ness in its whole spatial materiality – a *dis-placement* through the means of de-spatialisation.[146] The ethereal, virtual ubiquity and subjectivity of the contemporary fruition and reproduction of media, thus, mark the triumph of proximity and of the "Apollonian", all-around, diurnal transparency of modern reproduction technologies: the distance once conjured by the aura is no more, as the referent and the referred-to overlap in the identical flawlessness of a perfect copy.[147]

What the resurrected faulty, physically bound formats of media do today, then, can be seen as an attempt to escape the impersonal perfection which defines the digital and its reproductions, as well as the intangible nature of its products. Even if by Benjamin's standard they could all be held accountable for the death of authenticity when compared to the older uniqueness of art, in today's world, marked by the de-materialization of things and by what has been called the economy "of access",[148] these forms of analogue mediality from another time appear as the closest surviving gateways to experience that lost authenticity and uniqueness. A vinyl, a Polaroid picture, a printed book; they are something that can be touched, which exists on its own – in space and time – without relying on external means, which ages and bears on itself the marks of the years. Despite being reproductions, these objects arguably recall an experience of (relative) uniqueness – not in the sense of Benjamin's proper authenticity of the original but in them being unique iterations in their own

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[146] "Spatialisation" here is used to identify the material dimensions of the object, as well as its belonging to a physical location, which get lost in its digitalization: it should not, thus, be intended as a reference to Jameson's use of the word.

[147] «Today – wrote Benjamin in 1936 – people have as passionate an inclination to *bring things close* to themselves or even more to the masses, as to overcome uniqueness in every situation by reproducing it. Every day the need grows more urgent to possess an object in the closest proximity, through a picture or, better, a reproduction. [...] The prizing of the object from its shell, the destruction of its aura is the mark that the sense of the sameness of things in the world has grown to such an extent that by means of reproduction even the unique is made to yield up its uniqueness». (Benjamin, "The work of art", 20-21).

[148] In his far-sighted, homonymous book, Jeremy Rifkin lays out the features of the "the Age of access", characterized by a new economic system – an offshoot of late capitalism – that favours limited time access rather than physical property. «In a world of customized production, » Rifkin writes, «continuous innovation and upgrades, and ever narrowing product life cycles, everything becomes almost immediately outdated. To have, to hold, and to accumulate in an economy in which change itself is the only constant makes less and less sense». Furthermore: «The shift from a propertied regime based on the idea of broadly distributed ownership to an access regime based on securing short-term limited use of assets controlled by networks of suppliers changes fundamentally our notions of how economic power is to be exercised in the years ahead». (Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access. The new culture of hypercapitalism, where all of life is a paid-of experience* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), 6).

individual materiality, opposed to the evanescent sameness of the digital – whilst marking and preserving a conscious distance – in time, in the *anachronism*. In other words, they resemble having an *aura*.

Together with the resurgence of these forms of dead media, came along a popularization of the aesthetics that are typical of said obsolete technology and especially of their defective opacity. Grainy photographs, vinyl crackles, video glitches, the deterioration of old film: what once was a not-so-welcomed technical contingency – an *error*, the vulnerability to time – is now sought after and has acquired new aesthetic value.[149]

The result of this trend is one of the ultimate expressions of contemporary anachronism: the simulation of analogic error through its recreation by digital means. Such a phenomenon seems to be configured – Dominik Schrey argues – as an expansion of what Laura Marks had called "analog nostalgia", described as «a retrospective fondness for the "problems" of decay and generational loss that analog video posed».[150] Said fascination with digital breaking and fragmentation and their consequent aesthetic deployment are then intriguingly equated by Schrey to the Romantic taste for artificial ruins, with one fundamental difference:

> these [virtual] ruins are no longer "signifiers of absence" [...]. On the contrary, the purpose of this digitally simulated analogue decay seems to be the signification of *presence*: as it simulates exactly the life or "soul" that the digital was always accused of lacking.[151]

If the fake ruins from the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries were trying to simulate something which at some point was and then left only traces behind, the illusionist work of digital decay is to leave those traces of "situation" into something which never was and continues to not be, but which seems to have been dipped in time for just an instant that lasted decades, almost as if it went from thin air, to solid, and then back to air waves again.

What the creation of new "old" objects tries to do is to give those ethereal items *authenticity* through an (artificial) *aura*, a practice which was codified by Virginia Postrel – directly referencing Benjamin's concept – as one of three ways in which aesthetics can interpret and perform

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[149] Writing about the addition of an artificial granularity to digital home movies, Giuseppina Sapio points out that «[f]irst of all, the grain is not necessary. It was considered inevitable in analogue film, however, and its presence has established a "home-movie style" that people try to reproduce in digital form» (Sapio, "Homesick", 45).

[150] Laura U. Marks, *Touch. Sensuous theory and multisensory media* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 152; also quoted in Schrey, "Analogue nostalgia", 34.

[151] Schrey, "Analogue nostalgia", 35-36 (italic not present in the original).

authenticity, the other two being through "purity" and "tradition".[152] The act of emulating «authenticity-as-aura» by artificially manufacturing «the changes and imperfections left by the passage of time»[153] over something which is not subject to temporality in a traditional way,[154] is in itself inherently paradoxical and hauntological, for it calls into question and short-circuits the relationship between the transparency and the opacity of media, as some advanced digital tools attempt to "transparently" simulate the opacity and the faulty texture of their predecessors.[155] The line between authentic and inauthentic, between contingency and agency, error and art, gets blurred, and the result is utterly uncanny.

> In the age of digital recording and playback, the sound of error has changed significantly. [...] The moment of the scratch is no longer the signal of malfunction but is instead the almost nostalgic trace of a bygone era of mechanical reproducibility, one can say that it has become auratic, and as such it suddenly becomes available for aesthetic practices of all sorts.[156]

To stage the physical breakdown of media and to love the sound of error are symptomatic of a nostalgia for a now disembodied – dis-placed – dimension of fallible corporeity and being-in-time: a «yearning for this older regime of materiality» that has in part evaporated into the airwaves, in an era wherein materiality is often «occulted from us».[157]

> [...] a fascination with television, vinyl records, audiotape, and with the sounds of these technologies breaking down. This fixation on materialised memory led to what is perhaps the principal sonic feature of hauntology: the use of crackle, the surface noise made by vinyl. Crackle makes us aware that we are listening to a time that is out of joint; it won't allow us to fall into the illusion of presence.[158]

If, as established in earlier chapters, nostalgia is conjured by loss, then the nostalgic return of analogue formats is due not only to the connection between these medial objects and their idealized decades of reference: the contemporary taste for their decay is indeed also bound to the lost capacity

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[152] Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style. How the rise of aesthetic value is remaking commerce, culture, and consciousness* (HarperCollins e-books, 2003), Adobe Acrobat eBook Reader, 110-111.

[153] Postrel, "Substance", 111.

[154] «Analogue nostalgia simulates a process of aging that has not happened yet, and never will happen (at least, not in the form that is simulated) » (Schrey, "Analogue nostalgia", 35).

[155] For an overview of the topic, see Schrey, "Analogue nostalgia", 31-32.

[156] Thomas F. Levin, "Indexicality Concrète. The Aesthetic Politics of Christian Marclay's Gramophonia", *Parkett* 56 (1999): 162; also quoted in Schrey, "Analogue nostalgia", 32.

[157] Fisher, *Ghosts*, 21.

[158] Fisher, *Ghosts*, 21.

of digital media to be affected by time and to ultimately fade away – to be lost. Within the age of the digital and the internet, what has been increasingly dismissed from the realm of mediality – and of memory as well, in a sense – is, in fact, the possibility of *loss* itself, having it been scattered in the global cloud or concealed inside cables in the depths of the oceans. It could be argued that the eventuality of loss is what gives an object much of its significance in the web of space and time – of life – and hence its uniqueness and value, in a broader sense. However, Mark Fisher writes, «in conditions of digital recall loss itself is lost».[159] Furthermore, he explains:

> The digital seems to promise nothing less than an escape from materiality itself, [...] the switch from the fragility of analogue to the infinite replicability of digital. What we have lost, it can often seem, is the very possibility of loss. [...] Crackle, then, connotes the return of a certain sense of loss.[160]

The return of outdated analogue media in the Present, thus, ultimately answers to the feeling of disembodiment that has been growing within a great part of daily life in the Western world, from entertainment to jobs and services, as well as to the consequential perceived lack of authenticity and value of the virtual and of its products. This comeback of the analogue is a complex phenomenon, encompassing many facets of society – economical, cultural, material, artistic –, and at last it is part of the broader sentiment of nostalgia that has been pervading recent popular culture. As such, it interacts with every other iteration and declination of said nostalgia, and it plays an important role in the haunting of the Present.

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[159] Fisher, *Ghosts*, 2.

[160] Fisher, *Ghosts*, 144.

CHAPTER IV

POPULAR NOSTALGIA:

THE CASE OF *STRANGER THINGS*

> «Classic Hollywood: it's your memories, only perfect and better».[1]

1. A global phenomenon

In the previous chapters we emphasized how nostalgia and its representations through popular media are deeply intertwined, and how they interact with both collective memory and the needs and fears of the Present. Especially in the era of mass production and consumption of medial objects – which copiously flood the entertainment market in various formats and degrees of quality – it is easy, however, to overlook these products as relevant cultural artifacts and to relegate them instead to the realm of mindless consumption, for the sake of *divertissement*. While it is true that, usually, the primary goal of movies, TV series, videogames, and so forth is to, indeed, entertain the public, their intrinsic nature of products crafted *in* the Present and *for* the Present (being them directed towards a consuming audience) makes them significant modalities to intercept and access the overarching themes and feelings – the *zeitgeist* – which are central to the timeframe in which they operate.

Such remarks hold particularly true in the case of nostalgic texts – or, in general, of fictional products that look at the past –, given the connection of nostalgia and fiction to narration and imagination. Arguably, when the Present speaks of the Past, it never does so in a neutral way – especially when the recollection is filtered by nostalgia, as we discussed earlier – and as a result the traces that both spheres leave on each other's representations are quite revealing of the relationship between the two. On the topic, Jerome De Groot writes:

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[1] Jim and A.Ron, hosts, Dungeons and Demogorgons – A Stranger Things Podcast, Season 1, episode 1, "101 – Chapter One: the Vanishing of Will Byers", Bald Move, October 16, 2017, 31 min., 38 sec., https://baldmove.com/stranger-things/101-chapter-one-the-vanishing-of-will-byers/ at 5:48.

it is key to look at the various ways that the past has been translated into the present (and the present into the past), in order to discern how historiographic ideas circulate and are modulated in the cultural imagination [...]. It is necessary to look on novels, or films, or plays, or games, or TV series, not as poor versions of history, nor within a binary wherein they are at the margins of a centrifugal historical culture, nor as parasites on "proper" historical knowledge and practice, but as establishing modes of historical awareness, engagement, narrativization, and comprehension.[2]

From these premises, while bearing in mind the discourse on nostalgia and its manifestations that was developed in the previous chapters, follows the importance of looking deeper at contemporary products of pop culture as proper cultural texts despite their apparent levity, for their very narrative substance and popularity are meaningful telling signs of the trajectories and desires of the Present. In the next paragraphs we will then take a closer look at one of these pop artifacts, which is perhaps the most striking and successful example of nostalgic media of recent years, to see how the ideas and concepts discussed so far on the theme of nostalgia are directly embodied and find concrete application in contemporary medial productions.

Stranger Things is an American TV series created by brothers Matt and Ross Duffer, first released on Netflix in July 2016 and currently comprising of four seasons (with a fifth and final one announced for 2025) of eight or nine hourlong episodes each. The show, set in 1980s small-town America, blends numerous genres – horror, sci-fi, fantasy, thriller, mystery – and is known for its many references and homages to the period's pop culture, which emerge in many stylistic, directorial and narrative choices.

The plot begins in November 1983 in Hawkins, Indiana, whose suburban tranquillity is disrupted when eleven-year-old Will Byers (Noah Schnapp) goes inexplicably missing after being abducted by a creepy creature in the woods. The whole first Season revolves around the efforts of Will's family and friends to find him back, helped by Eleven – "El" – (Millie Bobby Brown), the mysterious girl with telekinetic powers that Mike (Finn Wolfhard), Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo) and Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin) met in the woods while looking for their missing friend. It is soon revealed that Will is trapped in the Upside Down, a parallel dimension where the monstruous Demogorgon – who kidnapped Will and now terrorizes the town – lives and from where it escaped through a portal inadvertently opened by Eleven herself. The girl was, in fact, kept confined inside the facilities of Hawkins' research lab by government agents and scientists while being studied and experimented on as part of the MK Ultra project, before she ran away in some troublesome circumstances. After many investigations and interconnected plotlines, the season ends with Will

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[2] De Groot, *Remaking history*, 6.

being found, the Demogorgon defeated, and the portal finally sealed; however, the very last sequence makes it clear that the newfound normality will not last for long, as Will is suddenly hit by ominous visions of the Upside Down just before the roll of the ending credits. The later seasons, which see the addition of new members to the cast – most notably Max (Sadie Sink), who joins the kids' circle in Season 2 – are fundamentally centered on the interactions between Hawkins and the Upside Down, the inhabitants of the former having to deal with the horrors from the latter coming to disturb the established order, as well as around Eleven's journey to settle in while escaping governmental forces. Each season is separated from the previous one by a chronological gap of several months, resulting in each one of them being set in a different year of the Eighties, from 1983 to 1986, allowing the viewers to follow the evolution of the main characters and the showrunners to visually – and sentimentally – explore the timeline of the decade.

Since its release on Netflix, the show was met with immediate success and favour from both public and critics,[3] and its fourth season (2022) has been the streaming platform's most watched TV show (in English) of all time in terms of hours watched and the second one for number of total viewers, just recently surpassed by Tim Burton's Wednesday.[4] Such enormous popularity, paired with the show's overtly nostalgic atmosphere and all-around haunted symbology, makes for *Stranger Things* to be a perfect example of nostalgia in contemporary popular media. The following sections of the chapter will be dedicated to analysing the main features that make this series such a «terrifyingly good»[5] nostalgic product and to investigating the correlated reasons of its success among a vast public.

2. Ghosts and love letters

To look at *Stranger Things* from a right angle, it is useful to understand where it comes from.

As already mentioned, the show is set in the 1980s and for the entirety of its running time it is very resolute in asserting it to its viewers, through meticulously detailed reconstructions of period-accurate settings, an atmospheric synth-driven soundtrack and countless references to '80s cinema

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[3] See, for example, Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr, ed., *Uncovering Stranger Things. Essays on Eighties Nostalgia, Cynicism and Innocence in the Series* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2018): 1.

[4] "Top 10 Most Popular TV Shows on Netflix of All Time", Netflix, visited September 14, 2024, https://www.netflix.com/tudum/top10/most-popular/tv . The data are referring to the first 91 days that followed each title's release.

[5] J. W. McCormack, "*Stranger Things* Is Terrifyingly Good '80s Nostalgia", *Vice*, July 25, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en/article/stranger-things-is-terrifyingly-good-80s-nostalgia/ .

and pop culture. In the previous chapter we established how one of the most powerful ways to conjure the feeling of an era is through its commodities and material culture, and *Stranger Things* does exactly that: everything, from the characters' costumes[6] to the design of interiors, from the objects that physically populate the daily lives of the protagonists to the imagery evoked in their dialogues, every single element talks about the Eighties and is *perfectly* exuding what Jameson would have called "1980s-ness".

The objects of the show, the props used to recreate the atmosphere of the decade, seem enchanted with an aura that authentically reminds of another time, like they actually belonged to the portrayed period: a sentiment that proves to be correct as in most cases they actually *do.* For Season 1, the series' props department reportedly had, in fact, a budget of around 220.000 dollars, which was used to retrieve original pieces from the 1980s, scouring «eBay, flea markets, prop rentals, and estate sales in Georgia», or to carefully reconstruct the products and designs of that time.[7] Interviewed on the topic, prop master Lynda Reiss meaningfully declared: «I don't want to do a nostalgia-tinged product, [...] I want it to be the '80s. I don't want it to be what everyone just thinks is the '80s. Our baseline was the reality of the Midwest in 1983».[8] As a result, the experience of watching *Stranger Things* is truly akin to taking an all-around immersion into the colours, materials and "textures" of a resurrected past era, which is designed to look as real as possible and invites the audience to join in.

This is particularly evident from one of the series' earliest sequences – the very first one right after the first opening credits: the episode's title, "*Chapter One, The vanishing of Will Byers*", initially lingers on the screen – in all of its nostalgic ode to Stephen King's recognisable cover font[9] – to then slowly begin to come closer and closer to the fourth wall, until the camera (and hence the spectator along with it) passes *through* the words themselves and into the actual scene. Just like flipping a book cover, it is the mark of the trespassing of a doorstep: a gate into another world, into

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[6] For a detailed insight on the thought process behind each character's design and the relative construction of their accurate '80s-accurate style, see the very interesting explanation of the show's costume designer Amy Parris (Amy Parris, "How Stranger Things' Costume Designer Created Every Character's Season 4 Look | GQ", video, posted June 24, 2022, by GQ, YouTube, 28 min., 39 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iI3j673h0GE&t=896s).

[7] See Tim Moynihan, "The Stories Behind Stranger Things' Retro '80s Props," *Wired*, July 27, 2016, https://www.wired.com/2016/07/stories-behind-stranger-things-retro-80s-props/ .

[8] Moynihan, "Props"; also quoted in Joseph M. Sirianni, "Nostalgic Things. Stranger Things and the Pervasiveness of Nostalgic Television", in *Netflix Nostalgia. Streaming the past on demand*, ed. Kathryn Pallister (Lanham/Boulder/New York/London: Lexington Books, 2019): 193.

[9] For a very interesting account on the making of the series' logo and introduction credits, see Jason Landrum, "Nostalgia, Fantasy, and Loss: *Stranger Things* and the Digital gothic", *Intertexts* 21, no. 1-2 (2017): 146- 147, https://doi.org/10.1353/itx.2017.0006.

another time. After stepping in, the viewer is met with a slow panning of a living room: old-fashioned tapestry on the walls, a messy wooden table with some cans, cigarettes and books, a boxy TV turned on a news channel, some glimpses of other house décor, a blocky remote, a rotary telephone, and, finally, police officer Jim Hopper (David Harbour) asleep on the sofa.[10] The episode's cold open had already introduced the audience to the setting of the series; however, this long sequence, with its careful dwelling on common, everyday items, takes the viewer by hand and leads them right into the Duffer's Eighties, establishing from the beginning the way in which said time is brought back to life – through its material culture.

Despite the prop department's efforts of reconstructing a lived 1980s, there is, however, one interesting remark to be made: the show's own creators, twin brothers Matt and Ross Duffer, were born one year after Will's abduction in the Upside Down, in 1984, which means, as noted by Zachary Griffith, that by the end of the decade they were still extremely young and that their coming of age took place between the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Such timeline is crucial to understand the essence of the brothers' work, because, except from their early childhood, it seems like

> their sense of the *authentic '80s* is therefore drawn almost entirely from film and television rather than memory and experience. The '80s of the Duffer brothers [...] was never anything other than a mediated object, pure aesthetic and affect.[11]

The actual recollection that the Duffers might have (or have not) of life in the Eighties is a personal matter that cannot be properly investigated; however, keeping track of the relationship between the showrunners and the period depicted in their most successful product allows to have a better grasp of how their directorial taste is related to the 1980s and how this was translated into their work. In many interviews, in fact, the two brothers have repeatedly stated their love and admiration for the movies and books that shaped their formative years, as well as their intent to pay homage to their respective authors.[12] *Stranger Things* is thus configured by design and must be understood as «a love letter to the Golden Age of Steven Spielberg and Stephen King»,[13] which

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[10] *Stranger Things*, season 1, episode 1, "Chapter One, The vanishing of Will Byers", directed by Matt and Ross Duffer, aired July 15, 2016, on Netflix, at 9:20-10:05.

[11] Zachary Griffith, "*Stranger Things*, Nostalgia, and Aesthetics", *Journal of film and video* 74, no. 1-2 (2022): 7.

[12] See, for example, Matt and Ross Duffer, "Netflix Stranger Things | Interview with the Duffer Brothers", moderated by Vanessa Christin Poehlmann, video interview, posted August 23, 2016, by moviemaniacsDE, YouTube, 4 min., 17 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slrs96l_AO0 .

[13] Sirianni, "Nostalgic Things", 188.

was, as declared by the Duffers themselves, «what they loved from that time period».[14] In a way, we could argue, nostalgia is embedded in the show from its very inception.

As a result, *Stranger Things* is not afraid to wear its references on its sleeve. Scattered all throughout its running time are, in fact, countless nods, citations, allusions to blockbuster movies from the "long" 1980s[15] and geek culture in general: Spielberg classics like *E.T.* (1982), *Poltergeist* (1982), *Close Encounters of the Third kind* (1977), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), as well as other cult films like *The Goonies* (1985), *Alien* (1979), *Ghostbusters* (1984) and *Star Wars* (1977), but also novels like King's *Firestarter* (1980), *It* (1986), *Carrie* (1974), *The body/Stand by me* (1982) and their cinematic adaptations, up to staples of geek knowledge like *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Lord of the Rings*, and superhero comics. The list could go on for very long, and in some dedicated websites it does,[16] as fans of the series engage in the show's intertextuality and trans-mediality by spotting as many references and "easter eggs" as they can[17] – a sort of pop-cultural trainspotting[18] that Mark Lawson described as «a central pleasure for viewers».[19] Eleven *is* Carrie, but also E.T., and has powers like Yoda (in episode two of the first season, Mike significantly shows her a figure of the character), all together, all at once: the whole series functions as an anthology of '80s classics come back to life – a *hauntology*, we could say, *à la* Guesdon and Le Guern[20] –, a glorious pastiche of geek artifacts that feels like, as critic Myke Bartlett had to say, «the screen equivalent of a "Best

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[14] Ken Miyamoto, "How to Sell Your TV Series the Stranger Things Way," Screencraft, January 17, 2023, https://screencraft.org/blog/how-to-sell-your-tv-series-the-stranger-things-way/ .

[15] In his essay on the series, Dan Hassler-Forest refers to "the Long 1980s" as «that period in American socio-cultural and economic history that begins in the late 1970s and extends outward into the early 1990s» (Dan Hassler-Forest, "'When you get there, you will already be there'. Stranger Things, Twin Peaks and the nostalgia industry", *Science Fiction Film and Television* 13, no. 2 (2020): 179, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/760791.

[16] The most extensive and complete list can arguably be found in the "Stranger Things Wiki" ("Influences & references", Stranger Things Wiki, visited 16 September, 2024, https://strangerthings.fandom.com/wiki/Influences_%26_references).

[17] See Tracey Mollet, "Looking Through the Upside Down: Hyperpostmodernism and trans-mediality in the Duffer Brothers' Stranger Things series", *Journal of Popular Television* 7, no. 1 (2019): 60, https://doi.org/10.1386/jptv.7.1.57_1. By doing so, Mollet argues, the show proves to be very aware not only of its roots in the past, but also of the complex dynamics of the web 2.0, which dictate the relationship between fan engagement and market success.

[18] See Hassler-Forest, "When you get there", 183.

[19] Mark Lawson, "Nostalgic Nightmares: How Netflix made Stranger Things a Watercooler Smash", *The Guardian*, August 5, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/aug/05/netflix-hit-stranger-things-highlights-tvs-trend-for-nostalgia ; also quoted in Mollet, "Looking through", 58.

[20] See, again, Guesdon,"Retromania", 76.

of the '80s CD»,[21] with all of its conveyed charge of nostalgia. In 2016, Stephen King himself famously tweeted: «Watching STRANGER THINGS is looking watching Steve King's Greatest Hits. I mean that in a good way».[22]

The celebratory nature of the show and its overt referentiality to medial culture, however, open up a clear contradiction with the accuracy put into the physical reconstruction of the 1980s' environment in which those references are set – the *authentic* '80s that the prop department wanted to conjure. An evident tension runs through the series, between what claims to be a period-correct representation of life in the 1980s – expressed by the means of material culture but also through the characters themselves – and the artificial, medial essence which is constitutive of the pop culture the Duffer brothers want to pay homage to. As the show invites the viewer into its nostalgic world, the lines of demarcation between fantasy and reality blur, get diffracted in countless quotations and then refracted into memory, just like a kaleidoscope. Within this tension it is revealed the fundamentally *double* uncanny nature of the series, and its expression of anachronism.

Props aside, we established that the past represented in *Stranger Things* is, at its core, fictional and deeply rooted in the period's medial culture. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that these products were themselves an accurate representation of their time, rather than an *expression* of its fears and desires.

The 1980s, with their bold and colourful aesthetics, were indeed a challenging time for many reasons: they were the years defined by the conservative leaderships of Margareth Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, by the first AIDS crisis, rising inequalities[23] and worldwide economic and cultural turmoil. Having to deal with a global recession in the early decade and the consequent economic stagnation and widespread unemployment that followed, it is no surprise, then, if people – often encouraged by politics – ended up turning their heads towards a time when singles and communities were perceived to be secure and at peace, wielding more power over their destiny while being less dependent from the complex mechanisms of the global economy. «[T]he '80s? Now here was a nostalgic decade!» exclaimed Janelle Wilson following up her aforementioned survey on students;[24] a feeling that is backed up by Tom Shales's very significant 1986 article in which the TV critic

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[21] Myke Bartlett, "Rose-coloured rear-view. *Stranger Things* and the lure of a false past", *Screen Education* 85 (2017): 21.

[22] Stephen King (@StephenKing), "Watching STRANGER THINGS is looking watching Steve King's Greatest Hits. I mean that in a good way.", Twitter (now X), July 17, 2016.

[23] See for example Paul Ryscavage and Peter Henle, "Earning inequalities accelerates in the 1980's", *Monthly Labor Review* 113, no. 12 (1990): 3-16, published by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics.

[24] Wilson, *Sanctuary*, 103.

described the 1980s as a «Re Decade»,[25] marked by an urge to «replay, recycle, recall, retrieve, reprocess, and re-run» previous forms of entertainment and visions of society[26] (namely the secure and idyllic '50s) – just like Reynolds did for the 2000s. After all – as it was noticed by both Shales and Wilson[27] – the Eighties were the years of time travel movies and especially *Back to the Future*, where the first stop made by Marty McFly and Doc Brown's DeLorean is exactly the 1950s, the same rose-coloured time of Americana aesthetics and prosperous nuclear families which Ronald Reagan's "make America great again" (that we know very well today) so fondly recalled and which were so vividly captured by film and television during his presidency.[28]

> 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.[29]

The same classics that our present associates with the Eighties and which inform nowadays' nostalgic productions, thus, at the time were already accused of being retrospective re-iterations of old memorabilia – a detail which gets easily lost in the distance and is revealed only by sources and observers from that time. Not even Spielberg – half of the «tale of two "Stevens"»[30] that inspired the creators of *Stranger Things* – was spared from Shales's critique, as he argued that «the Indiana Jones pictures [...] are themselves replications of the movies that little Stevie Spielberg saw as a kid».[31]

Shales's and Wilson's accounts prove that the historical 1980s were indeed a very nostalgic time in terms of popular media and political attitude, which in turn connotes a period whose Present was

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[25] To be noted is the already established connection with what Simon Reynolds wrote about the 2000s (see Reynolds, *Retromania*, XI).

[26] Shales, "ReDecade", 67; also quoted in Sorcha Ní Fhlainn, "A rift between worlds: the retro-1980s and the neoliberal Upside Down in Stranger Things", *Gothic Studies* 24, no.2 (2022): 202, https://doi.org/10.3366/gothic.2022.0134.

[27] Wilson, *Sanctuary*, 103.

[28] Not by chance Shales ironically called Reagan the «first re-President», who is «made up of reprocessed bits and pieces of old movie heroes. Ronald Reagan, Ronald Rerun, Ronald Re-Again; it's so neat, it hurts» (Shales, "ReDecade", 70).

[29] Griffith, "Aesthetics", 13

[30] Matt and Ross Duffer, "'Stranger Things' creators on their hit show – Extended Interview", moderated by Jamie Wax, video interview, posted September 8, 2016, by CBS News, YouTube, 14 min., 59 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=--zKkviSZ7A&t=1s, at 3:23. The joke, made by the CBS host Jamie Wax, is more accurate in spoken form, as King's name (Stephen) is pronounced the same as Spielberg's, despite the different spelling.

[31] Shales, "ReDecade", 70.

troubled and rather preferred escaping into a fantasy of the Past; and yet, in the eyes of today's audience that decade seems so glamorous and desirable: «the eighties – Antonia Mackay writes – have never been so popular».[32] Why? The mirror game at play in *Stranger Things* may give us a hint on one of the reasons behind the phenomenon.

Just like pop culture in the 1980s was so nostalgic for an idealized vision coming from thirty years prior, so does the show created by the Duffer brothers, albeit with one major difference: in their case, in fact, nostalgia is no more directed towards the actual decade in question (for how imaginative of a version it might be) but instead it targets that decade's own representation in popular media, which the two showrunners enjoyed in their youth and was itself a product of nostalgia. What is missing from the picture, overshadowed by the passing of time and by layers of sugar-coating, is exactly the replacement that the nostalgic 1980s operated in collective memory by the means of popular culture. In other words: through blockbuster movies and their legacy, the *signifier* (the aesthetic '80s) became the *signified* (the historical 1980s).[33] From this, it follows that

> *Stranger Things*' "historical" setting is doubly fictional: based not only on examples drawn from media, but on media examples that were themselves not drawn from reality. [...] Hawkins actually represents a dying vision of Americana that was already the subject of nostalgic yearning in the 1980s.[34]

The series, thus, is built as the ultimate example of retroytped past: the main sources of historical conflict are absent or tamed, also because they were not so much present in its referenced material (the idealized '80s) in the first place, resulting in a glamourized out-of-timeliness which at the same time looks and feels even more real than its actual counterpart. The result is a sort of *hyper-spectrality*, where the ghosts that linger in the present are themselves re-presentations of other, much older spectres, conjured by similar outbursts of nostalgia.

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[32] Antonia Mackay, "*Stranger Things* in strange times: Nostalgia, surveillance and temporality", in *Screening American nostalgia: essays on pop culture constructions of past times*, ed. Susan Flynn and Antonia Mackay (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2021), 66.

[33] The conceptual distinction between the historical 1980s and their aestheticized version, the '80s, is borrowed from Griffith (see Griffith, "Aesthetics", 7).

[34] Griffith, "Aesthetics", 14. This is in apparent contrast with what production designer Chris Trujillo had to say on how the town was created: «We weren't making a slick, glossy version of the '80s, but, rather, a gritty, textural feeling that is lost in high-definition movie-making these days» (Bill Desowitz, "'Stranger Things': How the Duffers Created Their Scary The Upside Down", *IndieWire*, June 13, 2017, https://www.indiewire.com/awards/industry/the-upside-down-into-the-scary-1201840622/). However, this could be seen as yet another example of the tension between material realism (the town *feels* lived in) and adherence to the fictional canon.

The show itself is a profoundly haunted artifact, on multiple levels. From its directorial style and countless references to the careful reconstruction of old material culture, all the way to its double-folded nostalgia and its narrative tropes: everything is an artificial resurrection of something that was *and* was not, ending up in creating an inebriating convergence of reality and *phantasy* – a psychological concept that lexically seems to evoke a merging of "fantasy" and "phantom" and which is theoretically described as «a state of mind that is largely unconscious, yet not clearly differentiated from conscious reality», as opposed to «a consciously imagined unreality in fantasy».[35] The revenant '80s of *Stranger Things* are, then, the quintessential uncanny product, as they present an image so perfectly curated and familiar to be eerie, suspicious and comforting at the same time.

A direct example of how the show purposefully aims to recreate a distilled essence of the decade, filtered through its material culture to make it feel even more real than the real itself – for sure more '80s than the 1980s –, can be found in the words of the Duffer Brothers themselves. In episode 2 of the second season ("Chapter Two: Trick or Treat, Freak"), the four boys of the main cast can be seen strolling around the streets of Hawkins, trick-or-treating in full Ghostbusters costumes during the town's Halloween party.[36] Commenting on the show in general, and then referencing this specific scene, the Duffers had to say:

> It really does start with us with, like, five other nerds writing ideas off on a whiteboard; and then, suddenly you got, you know, a hundred children running around in '80s Halloween costumes, in a *perfectly designed* '80s street.[37]

Most cinema and TV are carefully thought out artifacts in every department, especially for those stories set in the past; however, the streets of Hawkins *are* and *feel* like perfectly designed '80s suburban streets during Halloween: they are exactly how we would *imagine* them to be in one of the countless depictions of October 31st in the 1980s that we could find in popular media of the time, especially in blockbuster movies. What seems to have come out of the Duffers' whiteboard, more broadly, is the distilled essence of all those products of pop culture that the writers – and most of the public – enjoyed watching when they were kids, taken all together, all at once, to create a product

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[35] Kevin Lu, Greta Kaluzeviciute and William Sharp, "Things Can Only Get Stranger: Theoretical and Clinical Reflections on Netflix's *Stranger Things*", *The Journal of Popular Culture* 55, no. 3 (2022): 620, https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.13143.

[36] *Stranger Things*, Season 2, episode 2, "Chapter Two: Trick or Treat, Freak", directed by Matt and Ross Duffer, aired October 27, 2017, on Netflix, at 38:30.

[37] Matt and Ross Duffer, "Stranger Things: Spotlight | The Duffer Brothers | Netflix", video, posted August 23, 2018, by Stranger Things, Youtube, 2 min., 49 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uh-whWkZ_s , at 1:25.

that operates at the level of collective memory and which makes Halloween in Hawkins adhere to the established *canon* of the genre, which Hollywood trained us to expect. This is why *Stranger Things* feels so much like the '80s: because in its peculiar blending of homages and curated material culture are condensed all of the "greatest hits" through which the 1980s' American cultural industry successfully colonized the Western imagery. The game of references which the show is built on, thus, acts as a trigger that reactivates that '80s iconography that is so familiar – and hence nostalgic – to those who grew up in the Eighties and which the younger audiences got to know second-hand just based on its medial legacy.

As noticed by Bartlett, in fact,

> every single song played within Stranger Things belongs on a greatest hits collection. There's a rule when investigating financial fraud dictating that figures that look too perfect are likely fraudulent. Likewise, by cherry-picking the most recognisable elements of the 1980s – the best of the best – Stranger Things (and many other period pieces) ultimately ensures that it lacks verisimilitude.[38]

The conflict conjured by the coexistence of real (or accurately reconstructed) signifiers from the 1980s, the familiarity of the pop culture products that are referenced and the adherence to the idealized – retrotyped – vision of the period that has stuck in collective memory, ultimately make of *Stranger Things* an utterly postmodern object and a *simulacrum* of the era it depicts.[39] Conceptually derived from the works of Plato, the simulacrum is indeed held by Jameson as one of the defining features of postmodernity and its waning of historicity:[40]

> This omnipresence of pastiche [...] is at least compatible with addiction – with a whole historically original consumers' appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudoevents

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[38] Bartlett, "Rose-coloured", 21.

[39] Mollet points out how the show's prominent inter-textuality and trans-mediality would qualify it not only as a postmodern product but also as an expression of what has been called "*hyperpostmodern*" – namely «a heightened degree of intertextual referencing and self-reflexivity that ceases to function at the traditional level of tongue in cheek subtest, and emerges instead as the actual text of film» as well as «a propensity for ignoring film specific boundaries by actively referencing, borrowing and influencing the styles and format of other media forms, including television and music videos» (Valerie Wee, "The Scream Trilogy, 'Hypermodernism', and the Late-Nineties Teen Slasher Film", *Journal of Film and Video* 57, no. 3 (2005): 44, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20688497; quoted in Mollet, "Looking through", 59). On the other hand, Hassler-Forest argues that the series is specifically a simulacrum of '80s' science fiction cinema: «Formally neither a reboot or a revival, [...] its pastiche-like mashup of decades-old fan favourites conveniently brings together the primary characteristics of nostalgia culture in the 2010s» (Hassler-Forest, "When you get there", 178).

[40] See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 21.

and "spectacles" [...]. It is for such objects that we may reserve Plato's conception of the "simulacrum", *the identical copy for which no original has ever existed.*[41]

The product created by the Duffers seems to embody precisely the characteristics of Jameson's postmodernism. The attention to detail in the design of props and costumes gives away a certain degree of sought-after realism, which nevertheless falters when the very foundations of its ghostly, referential structure – the '80s portrayed in 1980s pop media – are revealed to be spectral and haunted themselves. The past portrayed by *Stranger Things*, thus, does not exist outside of mediality, and yet the show presents itself disguised as a faithful copy of something real: a pseudo-decade that is rather structured as a *spatialized* time – defined by its objects, style, media and tropes as they are portrayed in nostalgic collective memory –, which is possible to visit through the means of its medial and phantasmatic resurrection and overshadows its complex historical referent. In that, the Duffers' series seems to express what Jameson had identified as a «new connotation of "pastness" and pseudohistorical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces "real" history».[42]

To be fair, there are moments in which such "real" history infiltrates *Stranger Things*, some of them being more explicit than others. For example, during the already mentioned trick-or-treat night stroll in Season 2, among the streets crossed by monsters and characters of every sort it is possible to spot a couple of signs that read "Reagan Bush '84",[43] marking the upcoming elections that would have soon reconfirmed Ronald Reagan for its second term. Another sign of the times can be found in Season 4, where the mysterious deaths that are disrupting the tranquil life of Hawkins are attributed to a supposed satanic cult led by Dungeons&Dragons master Eddie Munson (Joseph Quinn), a narrative that mirrors the period's moral panic, and especially the worries caused in the United States by the popular role-playing game itself.[44] These two examples are indeed some telling historical markers, which for sure help to ground the show to its referenced timeline, but their presence could be seen as yet another aesthetic feature belonging to the collective recollection of the era, as part of its established canon, in a similar fashion to how – as previously discussed – the internal tensions of the Sixties have been turned from politically dynamic to aesthetically static.

The most explicit nod to the historical context of the Eighties, however, must be the inclusion, from Season 3, of a Soviet plan to experiment on and take advantage of the Upside Down and its

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[41] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 18 (italic not present in the original text).

[42] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 20.

[43] *Stranger Things*, Season 2, episode 2, "Chapter Two: Trick or Treat, Freak", at 39:02 and 39:27.

[44] See in particular Jason's (Mason Dye) speech at the public assembly in Stranger Thing, Season 4, episode 6, "Chapter Six: The Dive", directed by Nimród Antal, aired May 27, 2022, on Netflix, at 32:50.

horrors, with some of the following sub-plots being set in the Soviets' base under Hawkins' new mall and in the Soviet Union itself later on in Season 4. The inclusion and materialization of the fears of a Soviet infiltration in the United States during the Cold War is for sure an element that reconducts the series to the specific international context of the 1980s; nevertheless, as pointed out by Griffith, even this depiction of historical tension cannot help but feel like a reiteration of a narrative trope that has been seen before in action movies and comics alike: «a cartoonish vision of unflinching Soviet bad guys determined to do evil, whatever the cost».[45] The evil Soviets – but the same could be said for the federal "bad men" who hunt down Eleven in most seasons – are, again, exactly how the audience would imagine them to be: from their character design up to their accent and goals, they perfectly adhere to the canon, the stereotype set by Cold War American movies and popular products, and, just like any superhero movie villain, we know that the protagonists will prevail. Similarly to what has been argued earlier about the Sixties, in fact, these international tensions which once implied historical dynamism and a symbolical clash between different worldviews do not feel scary from the audience's perspective, but rather glamorous and engaging and part of what made the '80s the '80s, because *we know how they end*. We know that the "Evil Empire" eventually collapsed and for this reason the concerning conflict that marked the Cold War period is perceived, in Griffith's words, as a «closed narrative event» and not as something whose legacy would creep far down into the future.[46]

What is lacking from the series' picture, then, is any hint of historical depth, of an outlined complexity that would defy the otherwise flat and caricatural portraits based off the period's pop culture. In the next paragraph we will better discuss another kind of relationship that *Stranger Things* might entertain with the historical Eighties, but either way, for what concerns the happenings of history outside of Hawkins' bubble it is safe to say that their representation in the series is closely bound to the cinematic depictions that enshrined them in collective memory, with the consequent depthlessness typical of postmodernism.[47] As Jameson wrote between the 1980s and the 1990s, such a direction taken by cultural production might be symptomatic of «a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach».[48]

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[45] Griffith, "Aesthetics", 9.

[46] Griffith, "Aesthetics", 9.

[47] See the already mentioned quote from Jameson that proclaimed «a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the Postmodernisms» (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 9).

[48] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 25.

What *Stranger Things* portraits is a carefully curated illusion that not only feels familiar because it incorporates pieces of known media[49] but it seems to be designed to satisfy our nostalgic desire to reach another time, in history and maybe in our lives as well. And yet, perhaps this uncanny re-presentation of an idealized time, that never was but nevertheless lives on through the products of its referent's popular media, is exactly what we want to see, by being oblivious of history and wanting to escape it in the first place. Like in dreams, both phantasies and the most successful products of pop culture are created to intercept and express some of our deepest desires and anxieties: maybe, then, we do not crave a realistic depiction of the historical 1980s but instead we want to experience just their nostalgic, phantasmagorical vision filtered by pop – the *'80s* – which is precisely what media like *Stranger Things* give to their audience. For sure, the popularity of this decade after the turn of the millennium answers Shales's curiosity back in 1986, and proves his prediction to have been significantly accurate:

> One question now is whether the Eighties have a look that anybody will ever try to re-create. [...] It could be argued that although the Eighties are a retro decade, a kind of collective nostalgic breather, eventually an Eighties style will emerge, but then it could be argued right back that all the decades from now on will be Re Decades, because we will be more and more armed with the instruments of replay, and the technology will facilitate even more wizardly defiances of time.[50]

In the next paragraph we will try to explore these sentiments related to the series and we will question what they can tell us about our Present.

3. Stranger times

The '80s of *Stranger Things* are an idyllic and glamourized time, but this does not mean that they are necessarily portrayed as a safe place to be. Hawkins itself is the stereotypical suburban small town where «nothing ever happens»[51] and life follows the canons of the slow, Americana aesthetic that so many Hollywood productions have popularized. With some exceptions – namely the less affluent Byers, who live in the woods and work low-pay jobs[52] – its inhabitants represent

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[49] Hassler-Forest points out that «in an increasingly fragmented media environment, familiar franchises have an advantage over original material» (Hassler-Forest, "When you get there", 176).

[50] Shales, "ReDecade", 70.

[51] Mollet, "Looking through", 66.

[52] For a comment on a possible reading of the relationship between the families of *Stranger Things* and the Reaganomics politics, see Rose Butler, "'Welcome to the Upside Down'. Nostalgia and Cultural Fears in *Stranger*

the perfect picture of the middle-class nuclear family promoted by Ronald Reagan's conservative rhetoric, which was in turn informed by a nostalgic vision of the tranquil, pastel '50s. Such stillness, however, is disrupted by the events which kickstart the series' narrative, when the peaceful town is suddenly unsettled by a series of disappearances, murders and mysterious paranormal phenomena. The dangers and horrors lingering inside Hawkins seem, then, to contradict the aura of warm nostalgia that otherwise surrounds the show: is it possible to yearn for something dark and dreadful, for a time where scary things threaten to lay siege to ordinary life? To be nostalgic for such a time might seem paradoxical, or else the expression of something deeper and more complex, that speaks about the direction of our society.

We have already established how the show sits in a sort of in-between, suspended pseudo-historicity that is built by drawing from both the real material culture of the 1980s and the decade's medial representations – the now retrotyped '80s – while, at the same time, its creators seem to avoid any deep take on the period's wider historical context. As noted by Rose Butler, though, these pop signifiers from the 1980s which make up *Stranger Things*' referential structure, are not completely un-historical themselves, to the extent that they did not came to existence outside of a specific context, which is in turn reflected in their narratives and themes.[53] Like it was mentioned earlier, the "golden age" of Hollywood blockbusters and the emergence of genres like science fiction, time travel and paranormal horror can be seen as a response to the troubles and uncertainties that marked the Reagan era in the United States. These movies, in fact, not only showcased an nostalgic, '50s-inspired portrait of suburbia, but they also reflected the fears and anxieties of a society that was going through a challenging period of tough economic recession and of internal and international turmoil, and which was hence expressing that desire of going back to a simpler time. Themes like surveillance, time travel, the invasion of suburbia by external forces – being them monstruous creatures or the government –, the passage from childhood to adulthood, the summoning of obscure entities and the battle between good and evil, are all present in Spielberg's movies and King's books,[54] and they arguably translate and materialize the lingering feelings of the "long" 1980s epoch. The subject is idyllic, but the underlying forms of narrative and the presence itself of a rose-coloured grain are signs of the times, which speak of a certain degree of discontent with the Present and a concern for the future.

Things", in *Horror Television in the Age of Consumption. Binging on Fear*, ed. Kimberly Jackson and Linda Belau (New York: Routledge, 2017), 193-195.

[53] See Butler, "Welcome", 190.

[54] For some examples of these correspondences, see Mackay, "Strange times"; Butler, "Welcome", and Mollet, "Looking through".

In many ways, then, the cult classics from which *Stranger Things* draws inspiration are effectively products of their time, and as such the historical 1980s reverberates in them, even through their glossy, nostalgic tones. What is interesting to notice, however, is that by virtue of its intertextuality, the series created by the Duffer brothers continues to be marked by pretty much the very same themes, which got «transferred directly»[55] into the show's narrative through its countless references, to then get adapted to its specific features. From the federal agents hunting down Eleven to the disappearance of Will, from the Demogorgon infiltrating Joyce's (Winona Ryder) house up to Vecna (Jamie Campbell Bower) and the Mind Flayer doing the same with the minds of Hawkins' residents, the Duffers' series seems preoccupied, by extension, with very similar anxieties to the ones that populated the works it so often quotes.

There are many reasons why *Stranger Things* has become one of Netflix's biggest productions, and one of them might arguably be because those same fears and desires that were expressed in 1980s pop culture and then echoed through its uncanny reiterations, managed in some way to still resonate with contemporary audiences. Different authors have pointed out the many similarities existing between the 1980s and our present times, the most uncanny of which is arguably the return of Reagan's own nostalgic motto, now embodied by Donald Trump.[56] Economic recession, growing inequalities and unemployment, international tensions, the rise of conservativism and nostalgic politics, a pervading uncertainty about the future: these are all elements that could conceivably be attributed to the Eighties as much as to the 2010s and early 2020s, which might also explaining (at least partially) both decades' attraction for modern declinations of the Pastoral. This kind of historical associations is always at risk of defying complexity and of being subjected to some confirmation bias, and for such reasons they must be taken with a grain of salt; and yet, it is a very remarkable coincidence that the year in which the first season of Netflix's most famous nostalgic show about the '80s – 2016 – coincided with the electoral campaign that led Donald Trump in office.

Many of the scholars that have been mentioned all throughout the current work had already pointed out the nostalgic tendencies of the last couple of decades, way before *Stranger Things* came out to the public: nevertheless, as a product of its era, the Duffer brothers' show seems, thus, to have intercepted the backward-looking spirit of its time and to have created «a bridge between the Reagan era and the Great Recession».[57] For these reasons, Netflix's hit series can be considered as

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[55] Butler, "Welcome", 191.

[56] See for example Mackay, "Strange times"; Butler, "Welcome"; Bartlet, "Rose-coloured"; Ní Fhlainn, "Rift".

[57] Butler, "Welcome", 195.

hybrid space, stretched in between the 1980s and the 2010s[58], which speaks to and of both these timelines – perhaps not so much historically but rather emotionally. For its peculiar blend of nostalgia and fear, of glamour and haunted-ness, the Duffers' show is then a very fitting object to grasp a sense of the current time, of its concerns and its yearnings.

In *Stranger Things*, the centre of disruption and, hence, of anxiety – where the monstruous creatures that trouble Hawkins come from – is the Upside Down: a vast and desolated parallel dimension that mostly mirrors the human world,[59] but which looks as if it was in a state of deep abandonment and decay. Rusty signs and run-down buildings are covered in dreadful vines under an ever-stormy sky that gives the dimension a recognizable blue-grey cold colour palette, while some omnipresent ash-like spores fluctuate everywhere in flakes, just like snow. The dimension itself is visualized as something parallel and originally separated from the town of Hawkins, and got its nickname from the way in which Eleven explained to the other boys where Will had gone after disappearing, by flipping over their D&D board and placing the missing kid's character in the pitch-black reverse side of it.[60] Stylistically, this analogy has been reiterated by the fact that each time the characters cross the boundary of such world, the camera signals their entrance by rotating on its axis of 180 degrees, just like the protagonists were the figurines of the boys' D&D game.[61]

After the facts of November 6, 1983 – the beginning of the story, when Eleven escaped the research facility and inadvertently opened up a gate to the Upside Down[62] – a connection between the two worlds was nevertheless established, with the consequent overlapping of both dimensions into one another. Aside from the original rift situated in Hawkins Lab, other examples of these

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[58] Here we have described *Stranger Things* and its setting as a "space" in reference to the previous discussion of Jameson's spatialization of time in the postmodern, while the idea of its in-between-ness is borrowed from Antonia Mackay, who also talks about space and time although with a different connotation: «the show – Mackay writes – continually references movies from the 1980s – movies which are only recognizable because time here sits *in-between* the past and the contemporary moment. [...] *Stranger Things* resides in an *in-between* – not 1980s, not 2016, but both. Rather than suggest the show connects us to past selves, the show in fact creates a non-space and non-time *in-between* both» (Mackay, "Strange Times", 68-69).

[59] Some speculations have concluded that the version of Hawkins mirrored in the Upside Down is actually a frozen in time «snapshot» of the town as it was on November 6, 1983, when Eleven connected the two dimensions (see Stranger Things Wiki, "The Upside Down", Visited 21 September, 2024, https://strangerthings.fandom.com/wiki/The_Upside_Down).

[60] *Stranger Things*, Season 1, episode 2, "Chapter Two: The Weirdo on Maple Street", directed by Matt and Ross Duffer, aired July 15, 2016, on Netflix, at 40:50.

[61] See, for example, *Stranger Things*, Season 1, episode 8, "Chapter Eight: The Upside Down", directed by Matt and Ross Duffer, aired July 15, 2016, on Netflix, at 10:42.

[62] See *Stranger Things*, Season 4, episode 7, "Chapter Seven: The Massacre at Hawkins Lab", directed by Matt and Ross Duffer, aired May 27, 2022, on Netflix.

different planes coming into contact with each other can be seen in the other entrances to the Demogorgons' world, like the one found by Nancy (Natalia Dyer) in the woods in Season 1[63] – effectively the first time we got a glimpse of the other side of Hawkins – or, again, in the rotting of the pumpkin field shown in Season 2.[64] During the show, many of the protagonists and the monsters make use of these passage doors between the town and its obscure counterpart, but the lines separating the two worlds are often shown to be more blurred than it seems, with the characters being able to sense or even communicate with those who are on the other side, like Jonathan (Charlie Heaton) and Joyce do,[65] or, in the case of the Demogorgon, to force their way through the walls of the Byers' house,[66] in a clear nod to Wes Craven's 1984 *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.[67]

The interactions between the human world and the Upside Down, however, are marked by a very distinctive stylistic feature: every time that something in the parallel world is near somewhere in Hawkins – or better, in its other-dimensional counterpart – its presence it is signalled by a flickering of every electronic device nearby, most notably lightbulbs. In the very first episode of the series, even before Will's vanishing, we can see the lights outside Mike's house flickering just as his friends leave after a day-long session of D&D, foreshadowing the presence (on the other side) of the still unknown Demogorgon, who would soon after abduct Will into its world.[68] Furthermore, in episode 3, the same dynamic is exploited by Joyce to communicate with her still missing son, by setting up some Christmas lights on a wall and painting letters to create a «quasi-Ouija board»,[69] for Will to spell out messages from the Upside Down through the faltering lights.[70] Depending on the context of the episode – and on the tone the directors want to convey – the electrical manifestation

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[63] *Stranger Things*, Season 1, episode 5, "Chapter Five: The Flea and the Acrobat", directed by Matt and Ross Duffer, aired July 15, 2016, on Netflix, at 48:36.

[64] *Stranger Things*, Season 2, episode 1, "Chapter One: MADMAX", directed by Matt and Ross Duffer, aired October 27, 2017, on Netflix, at 17:47.

[65] *Stranger Things*, Season 1, episode 8, "Chapter Eight: The Upside Down", at 23:11

[66] *Stranger Things*, Season 1, episode 3, "Chapter Three: Holly, Jolly", directed by Shawn Levy, aired July 15, 2016, on Netflix, at 45:52.

[67] The Duffer brothers directly confirmed this and other references in their very interesting appearance on WIRED (Matt and Ross Duffer, "Every Stranger Things Movie Reference Revealed by the Duffer Brothers (Seasons 1-3) | WIRED", video, posted July 25, 2019, by WIRED, YouTube, 28 min., 57 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGGc1wGmgbM&t=722s).

[68] *Stranger Things*, Season 1, episode 1, "Chapter One: The Vanishing of Will Byers", at 4:45. In the episode's cold open we had already seen the lights of Hawkins Lab behaving in a strange way right before an unseen creature seized one of the scientists who was trying to escape. The quick faltering outside Mike's house, however, happens as a tiny detail in a cheerful context, and for this reason it adds a thin layer of tension.

[69] Landrum, "Nostalgia", 143.

[70] *Stranger Things*, Season 1, episode 3, "Chapter Three: Holly, Jolly", at 45:01.

of a haunting presence can assume different forms, from the softer, trail-like glow of Christmas lights that follows Joyce and Hopper's movements in episode 8 of the first season ("Chapter Eight: The Upside Down"), to the violent pulsations of every lightbulb in the Byers' house when the Demogorgon is fighting Jonathan, Nancy and Steve (Joe Keery).[71] What seems consistent throughout the show, though, is that while each interaction between something related to the Upside Down and Hawkins results in some faltering of electronic devices, the most hectic episodes happen when a monstrous creature is involved. As pointed out by Butler, Landrum and others, the trope of supernatural forces communicating through electricity is not new in pop culture and, given the Duffers' love for '80s cult classics, the inclusion of such feature in their story can be seen as yet another homage to Steven Spielberg, specifically referencing his *Poltergeist* (1981).[72] However, we could dare to see other connections as well.

Throughout the literature on the series, many authors have given some very interesting and diversified interpretations of the Upside Down, its features and their symbolical meaning (or lack thereof). From the already discussed embodiment of period anxieties to standing as a metaphor of 1980s' deregulated finance,[73] from representing the psychoanalytical subconscious[74] to providing an allegory of impending adulthood,[75] up to being just an empty signifier that academy wants to fill up with significance,[76] the discussion around *Stranger Things*' horrific dimension has touched many fields of analysis, proving it to be a surprisingly suggestive ground for debate and speculation on a variety of subjects. Coming from our inquiry on nostalgia, however, there are some familiar themes that are tied up to the Upside Down and its relationship with the success of the series.

The connection between the Upside Down and electricity, for example, is a significant one and goes beyond the spooky aesthetics of the horror genre. What the contact between our dimension and its terrifying counterpart does, in fact, is revealing the precariousness of Hawkins, seen through its inhabitants and its objects. When the lightbulbs flicker or when the series' old '80s screens glitch (like Mike's TV, right before Will's disappearance),[77] they are in fact shown in all of their material faultiness, ultimately displacing the modern idea of technology being reliable and efficient at all times. Arguably, the Upside Down and its invasion of suburban tranquillity depict a scenario in

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[71] Both moments are from *Stranger Things*, Season 1, episode 8, "Chapter Eight: The Upside Down", at 23:00 and 20:00.

[72] See in particular Butler, "Welcome", 193, and Landrum, "Nostalgia", 148.

[73] See Ní Fhlainn, "Rift".

[74] See Lu, "Things".

[75] See Butler, "Welcome", 196.

[76] See Hassler-Forest, "When you get there", or Griffith, "Aesthetics".

[77] *Stranger Things*, Season 1, episode 1, "Chapter One: The vanishing of Will Byers", at 3:24.

which what we take for granted is disrupted and can be broken: something that present-day Western societies tend to conceal under the guise of digital abstraction and disembodiment. The whole show, truthful to its accurate reconstruction of 1980s material culture, is instead populated by what Bartlett calls «pieces of delightfully clunky technology»:[78] those same analogue objects that, as we discussed earlier, now result so fascinating and aesthetically appealing exactly by virtue of their material imperfection. The faltering lights triggered by the Upside Down, then, can be seen as an integral part of the analogue aesthetic of the show and are not too far from what Levin's aforementioned "sound of error" represents for recorded media.[79] The electromagnetic interferences themselves are often accompanied by the fuzzy sound typical of older electric lightbulbs, which thus becomes a signal of both materiality and haunting.

The elements of error and analogue, as discussed before, recall a time when was still prominent the possibility of *loss*, as opposed to a contemporary world which, instead, is «dominated by the idea that nothing should be lost».[80] Arguably, much of *Stranger Things'* charm relies precisely on this tension between Past and Present, physicality and disembodiment, loss and timelessness: from the curated vintage props and costumes to the vision of Hawkins in ruins in the Upside Down, all the way to the characters themselves and their plotlines; everything seems built in opposition to the modern "loss of loss" exposed by Mark Fisher[81] and to intercept the feelings of nostalgia that come with such condition.

Our Present is marked by the omnipresence of information technologies, which pervade virtually every part of our lives and give us the impression of being always connected to everything and everyone we could think of, to have most things under control at all times but, also, to – possibly – be always controlled.[82] The theme of surveillance is commonly found among the literature surrounding the Duffers' series,[83] as it is a major presence in the plot of the show as well. The

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[78] Bartlett, "Rose-coloured", 23.

[79] See chapter 3, paragraph 3.

[80] Landrum, "Nostalgia", 138.

[81] See chapter 3, paragraph 3.

[82] Landrum summarizes these 21st century anxieties quite effectively: «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. We worry that our cameras on our phones and computers are recording us. We worry that Siri, Alexa, and the Google Assistant are listening to us. We know that what we say on the phone is being data-mined for threatening keywords. We know that any email we send can be retrieved to be used to incriminate us. We know our Internet browsing creates a profile of who we are and what we buy, a profile that is then sold over and over again to various corporations and political organizations. We know that, ultimately, we cannot evade those who want to watch us» (Landrum, "Nostalgia", 156).

[83] See for example Mackay, "Strange times"; Landrum, "Nostalgia"; Ní Fhlainn, "Rift".

characters, Eleven more than anyone, are in fact constantly dealing with entities that try to track them down – being them Dr. Brenner's (Matthew Modine) "bad men" of Season 1 and following, or the Soviet soldiers under the mall in Season 3, or again the telepathic Vecna in the latest season – and yet, somehow, they always manage to escape them, and they do because loss is *still possible* in the '80s. At least in the retrotyped, nostalgic memory we have of the Eighties, during this decade it *was* indeed still possible to escape surveillance and technology, it *was* still possible to not be seen, it *was* still possible to *get lost* or go missing, willingly or not.[84]

> By using technology associated with boyhood in the1980s, the boys evade the surveillance of their parents as well as the surveillance of the sinister government agency. Because the boys can communicate with one another, but adults cannot communicate with them, they have independence that allows them to stay out past dark and seek their own adventures. The freedom to roam with one's friends, connected only by walkie-talkies, creates nostalgia for an analog age in which people were free from the tether of a cell phone.[85]

The kind of nostalgia conjured by *Stranger Things*, then, goes beyond the glamorous depiction of its era (although this still remains an important component of the show). It seems to appeal to a deeper desire of the contemporary world, which could be romantically described as a "longing for wonder", for a time when not every answer was at reach and things had value because they could be lost – *we* could get lost –, which ultimately is the feeling of being young and adventuring into the unknown. This sentiment is embodied by one of the series' most recognisable visual features, which is *kids riding bikes*: an imagery which is depicted countless times in the series and has been recalled in almost every poster or trailer of the show. The kids-on-bikes nostalgic aesthetic is clearly reminiscent of Spielberg's *E.T.* and *The Goonies*; however the amount of cure and screen-time that was specifically dedicated to this stage prop – each of the four boys having four versions of their bike to be used in different situations, for a total of sixteen, as stated by prop master Reiss[86] – reveals the importance of this element for the series' intent and overall atmosphere. In Joseph Sirianni's words:

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[84] See Landrum, "Nostalgia", 138.

[85] Kayla McCarthy, "Remember Things: Consumerism, Nostalgia, and Geek Culture in *StrangerThings*", *The Journal of Popular Culture* 52, no.3 (2019): 669. https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12800.

[86] Moynihan, "Props". The series' very own, impressive bicycle racks were also shown in a recent set tour ("Behind the Scenes: Fan Edition | Stranger Things 5 | Netflix", video, posted September 20, 2024, by Stranger Things, YouTube, 7 min., 19 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L51yLUOinU4 , at 1:50).

The bikes not only act as intertextual period markers for 1980s films [...] but they also serve to evoke carefree memories within the viewers where the act of bike riding with friends symbolically represents independence and liberation from adult authority.[87]

What the shows depicts, then, is an exciting – yet scary, dangerous, glamorous, *simpler* – time of adventure that can be remembered fondly and through rose-tinted glasses by those who actually lived those years, while providing those who did not a glimpse of «an entirely strange and novel world of escapism that they wish was possible for them».[88] A time when the world was still a mystery to make sense of through the movies and fantastic stories that populate kids' lives, [89] when wonder and fantasy were still intertwined with the world around us.

Stranger Things provides exactly this contact between fantasy and reality, from the very beginning. The Demogorgon that appeared in the boys' D&D game at the start of Season 1[90] *actually* came to abduct Will right after, just like it would have happened in their campaign due to the kid's low dice roll: «it was a "7"» Will reveals to Mike just before leaving his house, «the Demogorgon, it got me».[91] During the entirety of the show, the two worlds – the boring, suburban Hawkins and the horror movie-inspired Upside Down – intersect and overlap, more and more as the seasons progress, fostering the connection between the series' setting and the paranormal pop culture referenced by the Duffers.

The key to such a reading of the show, then, is in its very title: *Stranger Things*; although, *stranger* than what? The comparative adjective in the name, as pointed out by Jimmy Butts, «naturally sets up a comparison – the eighties is (or was) stranger than now».[92] Already a product of retrotyped imagination, then, the '80s as depicted in the series become a space of fantasy and possibility, where fiction explains reality and not vice versa, and where encountering strange creatures in the dark is still plausible. Why the 1980s though? Because it was «the last analog decade» right before the internet took over our lives,[93] and it seems to be situated at a moment of «profound juncture, or a wrong turn, in recent history»[94] from where the idea of a better future began to be displaced. It is a time which is close enough to be remembered but distant enough to

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[87] Sirianni, "Nostalgic things", 193.

[88] Lu, "Things", 621.

[89] See Mollet, 61

[90] See the famous scene in *Stranger Things*, Season 1, episode 1, "Chapter One: The vanishing of Will Byers", at 2:20.

[91] *Stranger Things*, Season 1, episode 1, "Chapter One: The vanishing of Will Byers", at 4:32.

[92] Jimmy Butts, "The Strangest Thing About *Stranger Things*", in Wetmore, ed., *Uncovering Stranger Things*, 235.

[93] Bartlett, "Rose-coloured", 23

[94] Ni Fhlainn, "Rift", 202.

become a stage wherein the Otherness can take place. The '80s, with their nostalgically constructed sense of simplicity and freedom, are thus idealized by the Present as the *exotic*: a place of mystery and charm that features things that are foreign from our point of observation, but nevertheless exciting and strikingly different from the norm; a place that hence provides the setting for the most strange and bewildering of adventures to happen. An uncannily resurrected space wherein to escape and find shelter from the oppressing, totalizing presence of modern time.

> We fancy an exotic past by contrast with a humdrum or unhappy present, but we forge it with modern tools. The past is a foreign country reshaped by today, its strangeness domesticated by our own modes of caring for its vestiges.[95]

In this context, the Duffers' foundational intertextuality is itself a way to foster that childish belief that fantasy is real and it can shape the world. The whole show is built towards such direction and, to paraphrase Sirianni, is not made to *remember* the 1980s, but rather to *feel* them. The kaleidoscopic recreation of pop classics in their look and narrative – the *pastiche* – is then the very key element to catalyse nostalgia and capture the viewer in the show's world.

> The strength of *Stranger Things* lies within its ability to capture not just the authentic look of the 1980s, but the sensation of watching the films it references *again for the very first time*. [...] it takes us to a place that we long to visit again; albeit for a temporary time, a place of wonder, excitement, fantasy, and adoration; all by the way of nostalgia [...].[96]

Just like childhood, the Past is irretrievable and cannot be lived again. The Classics – movies, songs, television – have already been seen and the sense of wonder that was originally associated with them slightly fades away as the years and decades go by. What *Stranger Things* does is to «re-create 1980s television as we remember it, rather than it actually was»,[97] by combining old styles and tropes from period pop culture with our new taste in televisual products, to allow the illusory retrieval of a gaze lost in time.[98]

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[95] Lowenthal, "The past", 4.

[96] Sirianni, "Nostalgic things", 196-197 (italic not present in the original).

[97] Bartlett, "Rose-coloured", 20.

[98] Bartlett also notices how a show like *Stranger Things*, so focused in emulating the 1980s, could have never existed during that time of simpler television, for its eight-hourlong-episodes form is an expression of modern taste in TV productions (see Bartlett, "Rose-coloured", 20).

This innocent headspace that *Stranger Things* arguably tries to recreate, is very akin to what Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek called «the gaze of the naïve "other"» [99] in relation to another kind of nostalgic movies – namely the American *noir* of the 1940s; however, his analysis is easily transferrable to the object of our current investigation – the 1980s. Žižek notices that when watching an old movie, distance is a constitutive element of the experience.

> It is clear – Žižek writes – that we can no longer identify with it [the American *noir*]. The most dramatic scenes [...] provoke laugher today among spectators, but nevertheless, far from posing a threat to the genre's power of fascination, this kind of distance is its very condition[100]

A similar experience to the one described by Žižek for the *noir* is arguably to watch the original movies from the 1980s whose aesthetics are now so much revered by nostalgic marketing: when doing so, it becomes very evident that these productions are from an another era and thus reflect another taste, through elements like cinematography, timing of the scenes and assumptions that are different from the ones we are used to. The public's taste has changed, the world is not the same, and so did the things that are deemed as believable or plausible of happening in the Present, with the old features becoming increasingly unlikely as time passes by – be them some dated visual effects or getting lost without a constant connection to the world. And yet, quite uncannily, a product like *Stranger Things* tries to take us back to a time when those elements were actually believable, when the world seemed simple enough for them to actually be. Kayla McCarthy, for example, points out that it is quite laughable for an audience used to the most advanced communication technology to see the sense of wonder and excitement felt by Mike, Lucas and Dustin when discovering that their school's radio could reach Australia,[101] but there was a time when this amazement for something now seen as "simple" and expected could *actually* be genuine. The misleading assumption is that such a time must have been *simpler* itself.

«[W]hat fascinates us», Žižek continues,

> is precisely a certain gaze, the gaze of the "other", of the hypothetical, mythic spectator from the '40s who was supposedly still able to identify immediately with the universe of film *noir*. What we really see, when we watch a film *noir*, is this gaze of the other: we are fascinated by the gaze of the mythic

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[99] Slavoj Žižek, "Pornography, Nostalgia, Montage: A Triad of the Gaze", in *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press 1991): 114.

[100] Žižek, "Pornography", 112.

[101] See McCarthy, "Remember Things", 670; referencing *Stranger Things*, Season 1, episode 1, "Chapter One: The vanishing of Will Byers", at 23:26.

"naïve" spectator, the one who was "still able to take it seriously", in other words, the one who "believes in it" for us, in place of us.[102]

What better naïve spectators than a group of young nerds that see traces of their favourite movies and games everywhere they go? Both the protagonists and the retrotyped '80s merge together in the concept of *naivety*, as they both represent times in life and in history where it was possible to believe to the pop artifacts that the Duffers grew up loving and are now referencing.

Why do we need to go back to the Eighties? What have we lost in there?[103] In a world in which new forms of complexity and anxiety are pervasive, where knowledge and interconnection are disembodied and taken for granted, where wonder and escape are seen as less and less feasible and even the future does not seem so bright, in such Present we – the spectators – want to feel the simplicity that is nostalgically projected into the Past and its clunky artifacts: we want the sense of adventure, possibility and agency that is now perceived to be lacking, we want to be able to look at the world with the same sense of awe and fear and naivety that accompanies the Duffers' protagonists; we want *stranger* things to happen.

Stranger Things, as a product, is an attempt to satisfy these desires of the Present, by providing a story of childhood that talks a lot to the adults and which conducts the audience back to a fictional time far away from modern problems, where all these wonderous and terrifying experiences are still possible, where we can get lost and always safely return.[104] We crave our (symbolic) *home* of the '80s, which has something to do with both *homage* and the *unheimlich*,[105] and which is haunted by the Present.[106]

In a way, this desire to go back to the authentic and carefree times of childhood – for how metaphorical this might be – seems to prove Kant's brilliant intuition that we mentioned at the beginning of this journey – that the lost object of nostalgia is actually the time of our youth.[107] As Žižek wrote: «The innocent, naïve gaze of the other that fascinates us in nostalgia is in the last resort always the gaze of a child».[108]

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[102] Žižek, "Pornography", 112.

[103] Paraphrasing Butts, "The Strangest", 245.

[104] See Landrum, "Nostalgia", 154.

[105] See Butts, "The Strangest", 238.

[106] Landrum, "Nostalgia", 157.

[107] See Chapter 1, paragraph 3.

[108] Žižek, "Pornography", 114.

CONCLUSION

Nostalgia has come a long way since its first inception among the pages of a young student of Medicine. It was born as a brand-new word, forged by merging two much older terms, *nostos* and *algos*, which in turn brought along some much deeper roots. The theme of returning home (*nostos*) is in fact profoundly ingrained in Western culture, as one its founding texts – the *Odyssey* – is perhaps the most famous example of a story about a return. Despite being anchored to a long tradition by virtue of its name, however, the new word came to be from the intuition that times had changed, and a novel term was thus in need to properly express the feelings conjured by the new era. At the very core of nostalgia's birth, then, lies the notion that things move on, and that to keep up with change the production of something new is required.

As a word born to fit a new epoch, "nostalgia" itself did not remain fixed in its meaning but was subject instead to many changes across the centuries, which led it to wander across the most disparate fields of human experience. Throughout this thesis, we tried to follow the internal evolution witnessed by such word and to keep track of the concepts that got attached or removed from it until its contemporary emergence as a defining feature of postmodernity, proving that despite its backward-looking connotation, nostalgia has functioned as an important signifier to understand the Present, its relationship with the Past and, consequently, its connection to the Future.

The first chapter was indeed dedicated to going through the history of nostalgia, to have a clear vision of how it came to assume its current meaning. We saw how nostalgia was born from mobility and how it was thus bound to the idea of a painful longing for a distant, idealized home (or, following Kant's important contribution, for a time gone by). The "mobility disease" was indeed considered a true clinical illness, and even one of the most dangerous ones, as it affected its victims by completely debilitating them, body and mind, to the point of even causing their death. For the longest time, nostalgia was confined to the realm of military medicine, where it also earned a reputation of being potentially epidemiologic, at least until the Romantic era, when the discourse around it started to change. The new attention of the romantics towards feelings was, in fact, a crucial moment for carrying nostalgia outside the sphere of medicine and more in the direction of its

modern meaning. Around the same time, however, nostalgia begun to be affected by technological changes, as the industrial revolutions kickstarted the processes of shrinking of time and space that would have led, in the long run, to the current state of globalization.

With better connections and some significant changes in society, nostalgia soon became rare in the West and lost its deadly edge, to then be absorbed into the field of psychology. During its time within this emerging discipline, nostalgia was finally cleansed from its pathological connotations and begun to be associated with personal experiences, while the concept itself of longed-for home was re-negotiated towards a more symbolical reading. The definitive shift to the modern meaning of the word, however, happened sometime after the end of the Second World War, when many authors registered an increasing presence of nostalgia in the public discourse.

What is interesting to notice from this short historical overview is the consistency of some key elements throughout the many forms that nostalgia has taken across the centuries, namely: the presence of an object of desire ("*home*"), the central experiences of *loss* and *displacement*, and the important role played by space, time and *imagination*.

The second chapter was then devoted to analysing how nostalgia and its features adapted and interacted with the time of supreme redefinition of physical and temporal qualities that is our globalized Postmodernity. Fundamental to the discourse developed in this chapter were the conceptually antithetical couples of *progress - golden age* and *continuity - discontinuity*, from whose tension nostalgia was proven to thrive. In particular, we argued that it is precisely during times of crisis and deep change that modern nostalgia rises to the scene.

A close look at the post-war West, revealed how the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, despite being defined by opposite tendencies, begun to be seen as some idealised times to look back fondly at, from the '70s onwards – arguably when the first post-war global crisis broke out. The oppositional forces that drove the two decades – security and stability in the '50s and freedom and agency in the '60s – were arguably appropriated and "mythologised" by their representations in later popular culture, and thus turned into fuel for nostalgia during a time when uncertainty was predominant.

These examples were useful to then analyse, in comparison, the contemporary Present, whose peculiar traits can be identified in a "crisis of Future" and a disjunction in the experience of temporality. In particular, while featuring a generalized decline of the faith in progress and *agency* due to a series of complex factors (economical, political, environmental), our present is also marked by an unprecedented, *synchronical* presence of the Past – every decade at the same time – thanks to its technological preservation and its popularity in medial culture. We then argued that such a conjunction – the wide availability of the Past contrasted to a lack of perspective on the future – could explain what has been called the "contemporary nostalgia boom".

During the analysis conducted in Chapter II, emerged many times the importance of media and specifically of pop culture in promoting postmodern nostalgia. The third chapter was thus focused on the relationship between Past, popular media and their products. Particular attention was dedicated to the aesthetic category of *hauntology* and to the importance of the language of spectrality to describe the way in which the Past (or the very Future that is deemed to be lost) still lingers in the Present, haunting it like a ghost.

Following up, we dwelled in the specific ways in which the Past is resurrected and re-presented in pop culture, especially those filtered by nostalgia. We discussed how the practice of "retrotyping" – the purposeful glamourization of an oversimplified past – interacts with the concepts of utopia and golden age, and how it leads to the establishing of period-specific aesthetic canons that can be exploited to create *ex nihilo* "old" pop products from another time. We then concluded with a dive into the resurgence of the analogue as part of the more generalized retro culture, showing how the categories of *aura* and *loss* can be useful to explain the nostalgic appeal of older forms of technology.

The third chapter marked the end of the theoretical-speculative parts of the dissertation and, being its focus on pop culture, it was a natural outcome for the last chapter to bring everything together into the analysis of one specific product. The choice was *Stranger Things*, because not only it incorporates virtually every element that had been discussed so far, but it also happens to be the very definition of *popular* media – ranking high among Netflix's top shows.

By applying the conceptual tools presented and developed earlier on to specific moments of the series, as well as connecting the already existing literature on the topic, we managed to unearth the many layers of interpretation of a show that would otherwise seem frivolous and lacking in depth at a first glance. We delved into how it represents the Past, analysed its referential structure and questioned what its success could tell us about the Present, which resulted in going full circle by tying up the many threads on nostalgia that we had touched on before.

 Why nostalgia though? The presented analysis offered a wide overview of the many ways and reasons for why nostalgia manifests itself so predominantly in our time. The focus of this particular thesis was specifically on nostalgia in pop culture; however, after the first chapter and a half, the direction of the analysis could have easily been shifted towards other declinations of the once "Swiss disease". We live in a time marked by many *returns*, not only of pop media but also of visions and ideas from other times, and many are the ghosts from the past that have found their way to haunt our present lives. This is particularly evident in the case of politics, which lately have been marked by the return of many ideologies and attitudes that were thought to be dead (at least on a larger scale) and yet they turned out to be still lingering on the doorstep, ready to come back when

the times are ready. The last few years have in fact seen the resurgence of a plethora of far-right extremisms all around the world that thrive on intolerance and on aggressive conservativism, and whose rhetoric relies more often than not on nostalgia for a vaguely recalled Golden Age and on a generalized fear of change. Donald Trump's already once revenant "make America great again" is the most evident of these signs of political haunting – now having even come back for a second time, making it even more spectral – but the rise of "black" tidal waves has been registered pretty much in all of Europe and in other parts of the globe during the most recent elections.

Not only have these extremisms become worryingly loud in the public scene but they seem to be attracting a whole new electoral base that grows by the year, which means that many more people are falling for the false promises of restoring a lost paradise that never was, usually to the detriment of minorities and of the more progressive youth. To understand where nostalgia comes from, how it operates and how it can infiltrate our lives is then something useful to hopefully counter the alluring visions proposed by extremisms of all sorts, as well as to reveal the distortions of history that usually come along with them.

Pop culture and mediality are arguably the keys to the Present, to understand the trends and directions that are at play in a certain moment in time, but also for their ability to actively shape said time. Our analysis on nostalgia in pop culture aimed at understanding one on the biggest phenomena that are currently driving the cultural industry and the media sphere in general. Despite some actual claims on that, it is quite unlikely that a show like *Stranger Things* or the currently charting retro-inspired synth tunes are promoting social conservativism or undermining political progress – although it could perhaps be argued from a creative point of view; however, to be aware of the larger trends that are interesting something so pervasive and powerful like pop, can help tracing more connections and seeing a bigger picture of our time.

We discussed how nostalgia stems from changing times and from displacement; but so do creativity and art, which are important tools to promote innovation and to find ways to envision a better future. In this sense – as exemplified by Svetlana Boym's "reflective" declination[1] – nostalgia does not have to be necessarily a negative and regressive element: it can be a powerful and balanced force to push towards the future, something that looks back for inspiration and, at the same time, mourns the dead, conjuring them away. In the end, what the history of nostalgia has proven is that the only element of certainty that ultimately remains at all times is the unstoppable nature of change: *everything flows*.

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[1] «The only thing the reflective nostalgic knows for sure is that the home is not one; [...] it is either one and a half or less than one. This incomplete measure is the measure of freedom» (Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, 337).

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