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# There's No Nostalgia Like Hollywood Nostalgia

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**Abstract:** This essay argues that the complexities of the nostalgic impulse in Hollywood cinema are inadequately described by Svetlana Boym's particular description of Hollywood as "both induc[ing] nostalgia and offer[ing] a tranquilizer" and her highly influential general distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Instead, it contends that Hollywood departs in important ways from the models of both the restorative nostalgia established by the heritage cinema and Great Britain and the reflective nostalgia commonly found in American literature. Using a wide range of examples from American cinema, American literature, and American culture, it considers the reasons why nostalgia occupies a different place and seeks different kinds of expressions in American culture than it does in other national cultures, examines the leading Hollywood genres in which restorative nostalgia appears and the distinctive ways those genres inflect it, and concludes by urging a closer analysis of the more complex, multi-laminated nostalgia Hollywood films offer as an alternative to Boym's highly influential categorical dichotomy.

**Keywords:** American literature; heritage cinema; Hollywood; reflective nostalgia; restorative nostalgia

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Hollywood nostalgia deserves more respect. According to Svetlana Boym, the leading contemporary theorist of nostalgia: "Popular culture made in Hollywood, the vessel for national myths that America exports abroad, both induces nostalgia and offers a tranquilizer; instead of disquieting ambivalence and paradoxical dialectic of past, present, and future, it provides a total restoration of extinct creatures and a conflict resolution" (Boym 2001, p. 33). This dismissive characterization is rooted in Boym's highly influential discussion of nostalgia, which she defines as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life" (Boym 2001, pp. xiii–xiv). Boym distinguishes between two types of nostalgia:

Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance. The first category of nostalgics do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about truth. This kind of nostalgia characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping conspiracy theories. Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time. (Boym 2001, p. 41)

Considering Hollywood nostalgia in the broader context of American cultural nostalgia challenges Boym's dismissal of Hollywood nostalgia, reveals illuminating contrasts between the nostalgia of

American cinema and the nostalgia of American literature, and complicates the distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia in rewarding ways.

To speak of American cultural nostalgia already implies, as Boym acknowledges, that different national cultures and their cinemas are shaped by very different kinds of nostalgia. The most frequently discussed of these nostalgic cinemas, the so-called heritage cinema of Great Britain, began in the 1980s with movies like *Chariots of Fire* (1981) and *A Room with a View* (1985) that expressed what Cairns Craig called “the crisis of identity which England passed through during the Thatcher years” through sustained images of “film as conspicuous consumption, the country houses, the paneled interiors, the clothes which have provided a good business for New York fashion houses selling English country style to rich Americans” (Craig 2001, p. 3). The Britain of heritage films was rich, powerful, and untroubled, its citizens uniformly clean-cut, well-dressed, and good-looking, and the problems that drove their stories largely limited to private questions of morality, romance, or sexual identity with cautiously nationalistic overtones. Heritage films employed a “museum aesthetic” (Vincendeau 2001, p. xviii) combining exterior shots of spacious estates and stately homes with interiors marked by close attention to historically accurate furnishings, fashions, and music. The effect was to stage often intense interpersonal psychological and social conflicts against a placidly idealized Britain of day-before-yesteryear in which contemporary audiences could find comfort and refuge from the shocks and disappointments of the present.

An important aspect of the heritage aesthetic was its new focus on television miniseries set in the past, often, though not always, based on classic English novels, and decorated with a finicky attention to visual and auditory detail quite new to the small screen. This aesthetic made British heritage cinema unusually distinctive. France, for example, has no comparable tradition of movies and television programs celebrating an idealized historical past. Films like Jean Renoir’s *La Marseillaise* (1938) are relatively rare, and no discernible pattern or general attitude toward the nation’s past emerges from the Gérard Depardieu department of history, which includes *Le dernier métro* (1980), *Le retour de Martin Guerre* (1982), *Danton* (1983), *Camille Claudel* (1988), *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1990), *Tous les matins du monde* (1991), *Colonel Chabert* (1994), and the 1998 miniseries *Le Comte de Monte Cristo*. Germany has a tradition of *Heimat* (“homeland”) cinema, but although the English word “nostalgia” represents Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer’s attempt in 1688 to translate the German word *Heimweh*, Eckart Voigts-Virchow has shown that “the term *Heimat* has different shades of meaning to the term ‘heritage’ in England” (Voigts-Virchow 2007, p. 126). To these different flavors of nostalgia, Primož Krašovec has added Yugonostalgia. Yugonostalgia, the remnants that survive “the process of depoliticization of the collective memory of socialism [ . . . ] is a form of popular memory that has been washed clean of all traces of political demands for social equality, workers’ participation in the production process, and internationalism, as well as [ . . . ] the antifascism, anti-imperialism, and anti-chauvinism that constituted the core of the revolutionary politics of socialism” (Krašovec 2011). Looking further east, Japanese cinema has a long and honorable tradition of *jidai-geki*, films about government officials and samurai warriors who ply their trades during their country’s Edo period, as opposed to the *gendai-geki* set in modern Japan. But no one would call *Rashomon* (1950) or *Gate of Hell* (1953) a heritage film, for the past they present as an alternative to the contemporary reality of postwar Japan is just as troubled, and in its way just as brutal, as the world of *Ikiru* (1952) or *Tokyo Story* (1953). The worlds of the *Heimat* film and the *jidai-geki* may be sources of nostalgia and national pride, but like French historical films, they do not offer visually idealized refuges of the same sort that British cinema finds in Jane Austen or *Brideshead Revisited* (1981).

The real outlier among national cinemas is that of the United States, which for all the glories of Hollywood has never developed anything remotely comparable to heritage cinema. Heritage cinema has never taken root in the United States because so many factors combine to make it difficult for Americans—that is, for the purposes of this essay, citizens of the United States—to wax equally nostalgic over their own nation’s history, particularly as it is presented in the movies. Heritage cinema’s restorative nostalgia, which dreams ardently of an idealized home in an idealized past, has no clear

counterpart in American culture, which “didn’t succumb to the nostalgic vice until the American Civil War” (Boym 2001, p. 6). Boym cites letter-perfect Civil War enactments and the CGI dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park* (1993) as characteristically American examples of restorative nostalgia that propose “a heroic American national identity” (Boym 2001, p. 34). But attempts to invoke this national identity through American nostalgia are complicated by several factors.

For one thing, the unofficial culture of the United States is almost obsessively future-oriented, not past-oriented. Americans are famous for living in the present and dreaming of the future rather than the past. They are less rooted in their extended families than the English, or Europeans generally. They are more likely to move away from their birthplaces, and when they do move, they can move much further away without leaving their country. Americans are much less focused, less likely to define themselves, in terms of where they came from than in terms of where they see themselves going. Any nostalgic longing for the past has a strictly limited place in such a resolutely future-oriented world.

This is true not only for Americans as individuals but for American culture in general. When they are not celebrating Independence Day on the Fourth of July—or, more recently and revealingly, on the first Monday in July, a holiday of convenience whose most notable trademark is the display of fireworks, an entertainment form notable for its glorification of evanescent spectacle—citizens of the United States display remarkably little investment in their shared country’s past. The continuing debates over the propriety of monuments to the heroes of the Confederacy during the Civil War dramatize the extent to which Americans define themselves in terms of local or regional rather than national ties.

Nor does American history lend itself readily to restorative nostalgia. The epochal events prominently displayed in the textbooks through which American schoolchildren learn their nation’s history are largely disruptive and destructive. When Abraham Lincoln announced in the Gettysburg Address that the strife-torn United States had originally been “conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” (Lincoln 1989, p. 536), he was rooting the national project in philosophical ideals Americans have felt obliged to enact in the present instead of celebrating their currency in the past, where they would be much more likely to regard them critically or reflectively.

America lacks the primary motive behind Britain’s restorative nostalgia because although the United States may have given up the Panama Canal, it has not yet lost an empire. The Thatcherite cultural conservatism behind British heritage cinema was a reaction to the fear that the United Kingdom’s greatest days might have been behind it. Until very recently, it has been hard to get a critical mass of citizens of the United States to take the analogous proposition about their own country seriously. Most American Presidents have been widely identified as leaders of the free world. Flush with undiminished power, Americans have no need to take refuge in an idealized past.

Even so, America has generated a widely acknowledged brand of nostalgia-based not so much of “the restoration of origins” Boym identifies as one of the “two main narrative plots” of restorative nostalgia but on the other plot: “the conspiracy theory, characteristic of the most extreme cases of contemporary nationalism fed on right-wing popular culture,” that proposes “a Manichean battle of good and evil and the inevitable scapegoating of the mythical enemy” (Boym 2001, p. 43). This myth of American supremacy, at once self-congratulatory and paranoid, has most recently been marketed by Donald Trump. In capitalizing on and amplifying a nostalgic undercurrent long dormant in the American public, Trump has ushered in a new era of restorative nostalgia. Under the revealing slogan Make America Great Again, he has campaigned and governed on the basis of an assumption that the United States is in decline and, as he told the Republican National Convention in accepting the party’s Presidential nomination in July 2016, “I alone can fix it.” Trump’s presidency has focused on rolling back federal regulations and protections, cutting taxes and government programs, withdrawing from foreign treaties, squeezing long-standing allies for more advantageous trade deals, promising to build an impermeable wall on the border between the United States and Mexico, appointing conservative federal judges and a remarkable number of Cabinet secretaries openly hostile to the mandates of the departments they have been chosen to head, defunding and suppressing initiatives designed to reduce unwanted pregnancies and climate change, and demonizing dissenters and opponents in an

endless series of vituperative ad hominem tweets, all in the name of restoring a greatness America has presumably lost.

Trump's programs and policies are fueled by an unmistakably restorative nostalgia for an America that kept immigrants at bay, shunned political correctness and self-anointed East Coast elites, condemned political extremists on the left but not the right, prized individual initiative above paternalistic collective action, and promoted the promise of untrammelled material success to everyone lucky enough to grab the brass ring. Trump's brand of MAGA nostalgia differs from heritage nostalgia not in being less restorative but in being more actively restorative. The idealized past the BBC dreams of finds its counterpart in an idealized American past, floating free of any limiting identification with a particular time or place, for whose return millions of Americans do not simply long but ardently work and pray.

The emergence of MAGA should have come as no great surprise, for despite its self-avowed progressivism and its founding devotion to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—the last of these already an aspirational goal rather than a retrospective ideal—the United States has long found room within its culture for restorative nostalgia. But celebrations of this brand of nostalgia have rarely entered its literature because so many of these celebrations focus on artifacts rather than narratives. In accord with Boym's observation that restorative nostalgia "gravitates toward collective pictorial symbols and oral culture" (Boym 2001, p. 49), American calls to restorative nostalgia are less closely associated with stories about America that with the icons, artifacts, and rituals revealingly labeled *Americana*, a term so common that a Google search for it reveals 300 million hits, though none at all for "Englishana" or "Britishana." Giovanni Russonello roots the label for the late-twentieth-century music he discusses as "Americana" in an earlier history represented by "the comforting, middle-class ephemera at your average antique store—things like needle-pointed pillows, Civil War daguerreotypes, and engraved silverware sets" (Russonello 2013). This brand of Americana is familiar from American television series like *The Waltons*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, *Happy Days*, and *That '70s Show*.

Contemporary expressions of American nostalgia by American politicians, editorialists, and citizens are remote from these incarnations, which they rarely invoke. What is even more remarkable, however, is the estrangement of Hollywood nostalgia from both the MAGA restorative nostalgia so stridently proclaimed by nativist politicians and the severely critical reflective nostalgia of Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*. This estrangement is particularly striking in view of the notorious economic conservatism of the American film industry, which has expressed itself most recently in a wholesale commitment to retro superhero franchises and other sequels and remakes.

There are several reasons why Boym's anodyne portrayal of Hollywood nostalgia as restorative requires complication, and why Hollywood nostalgia, when it does appear, is so distinctive. The first generation of Hollywood moguls were European émigrés who lacked any sense of nostalgia for a racially or ethnically pure United States, and when these moguls retired or died, they were replaced by liberals whose own nostalgia is quite differently oriented from either the BBC or MAGA. The capital-intensiveness of Hollywood filmmaking makes studios and bankers reluctant to gamble on projects they perceive as taking sides and preemptively alienating large portions of the audience. In the immortal injunction variously attributed to Samuel Goldwyn, Ernest Hemingway, Moss Hart, and Humphrey Bogart: "When you want to send a message, use Western Union." Hollywood celebrations of history tend to focus on the history of the American film industry itself, a tendency abundantly on display during annual broadcasts of the Academy Awards ceremonies. This unusually single-minded focus tends to eclipse any traces of reflective nostalgia it finds in American culture or American literature. MAGA nostalgia finds a more ready home in popular music that evokes a favored earlier time either through its own conventions (as in country and western song and the blues) or through the conventions of its return as beloved oldies.

The scarcity of MAGA nostalgia in Hollywood is illuminated by the production history of one film that traffics openly in this brand of nostalgia: *Gabriel Over the White House*, which Gregory La Cava

directed in 1933 from a screenplay by Carey Wilson based on *Rinehard*, a novel by Canadian writer T.F. Tweed. The film focuses on Jud Hammond (Walter Huston), a do-nothing, don't-rock-the-boat politician who has been elected President. Following a near-fatal car accident and a moment of possibly divine intervention, Hammond awakens from his coma suddenly determined to rescue his country from "big-business lackeys." He purges his cabinet, responds to his impeachment by declaring martial law, suspends civil rights, revokes the Constitution, uses demonstrations of military force to blackmail world powers into disarming, and orders the execution of malefactors he personally identifies as "enemies of the people" before he suffers a fatal stroke, again of possibly divine provenance, and is eulogized as one of the greatest American Presidents.

The film, produced by Walter Wanger for Cosmopolitan Pictures, whose head, reactionary newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst, had played an important role in shaping its screenplay, was distributed by MGM. As his biographer Charles Higham recounts, however, studio chief Louis B. Mayer, who had not been consulted during its development, "was appalled when he saw the picture's rough cut" (Higham 1993, p. 196). Realizing that it was a piece of agitprop designed to criticize President Herbert Hoover as timid and ineffective in combatting the ills of the Great Depression and encourage incoming President Franklin D. Roosevelt to assume unilateral powers, he "intervened seriously for the first time over [Irving] Thalberg in the cutting of the picture" (Higham 1993, p. 196). Although contemporaneous reviewers equated Hammond with Mussolini and saw the film as an advance advertisement for home-grown Fascism, *Gabriel Over the White House* was a popular success—but a success that Mayer was so eager to avoid repeating that after buying the rights to *It Can't Happen Here*, Sinclair Lewis's 1935 parable of local resistance to an American Fascist President, before the bestselling novel's publication, he was intimidated by the monitory response of Hollywood censor Joseph I. Breen and the possible reactions of MGM's profitable foreign markets. "Mayer cannot have forgotten *Gabriel Over the White House*; he must have seen the anti-Hooverish elements in even a story summary," notes Higham. "Had he read the novel itself [ . . . ] he would certainly never have embarked on the picture at all" (Higham 1993, p. 250). Despite Lewis's vigorous public protests, *It Can't Happen Here* never went before the cameras. Like *Gabriel over the White House*, it is best remembered as a cautionary example of Hollywood's avoidance of partisan politics.

Apart from the studios' unwillingness to offend large portions of the American audience by releasing more recent MAGA adaptations, Hollywood adaptations of American literature rarely display restorative nostalgia because American literature itself has long shunned restorative nostalgia. Theorists of American literature have frequently contrasted the American Renaissance of the mid-nineteenth century with contemporaneous Victorian literature. Novelists like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville play a less dominant role in the American Renaissance than their English counterparts, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, the Brontë sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot, because so many writers of the American Renaissance were poets or essayists like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, James Russell Lowell, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Although Thackeray's view of the Napoleonic Wars, Dickens's of the Poor Laws, and Eliot's of the Reform Bill of 1832 are quite as jaundiced as Hawthorne's view of the Salem Witch Trials or Harriet Beecher Stowe's view of slavery, the social criticism of the great Victorian novelists from Dickens to Elizabeth Gaskell, Anthony Trollope, and Thomas Hardy is made more palatable by the satiric energy of Dickens and Thackeray and the detailed, integrative, largely sympathetic portraits of Victorian society in Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, Eliot's *Middlemarch*, and Trollope's *The Last Chronicle of Barset*. When American writers of the period turn to the shorter forms of fiction, they produce not Dickens's nostalgic stories "A Christmas Carol," "The Chimes," and "The Cricket on the Hearth," but the gothic horror tales of Edgar Allan Poe.

The leading American novelists who follow the American Renaissance and who might have been expected to provide material for restorative Hollywood nostalgia adopt instead a more critically reflective nostalgia. *Washington Square*, the best-known of Henry James's forays into the historical past, is sharply critical of the mores of the early nineteenth century. So is Edith Wharton's *The Age*

of *Innocence*, which looks back on the later nineteenth century with an equally cold eye fifty years after the fact. Mark Twain's boyhood idyll *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* views growing up in the Midwest of the early nineteenth century through the lens of restorative nostalgia, but its more ambitious sequel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, adopts a much more critically reflective nostalgia in its faux-naïve exposé of the corrosive effects of slavery. Whatever nostalgia appears in *The Red Badge of Courage*, Stephen Crane's 1895 account of an episode from the American Civil War, is reflective rather than restorative. The same is true of the World War I fiction of Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and John Dos Passos. *The Great Gatsby* has so often been filmed as an exercise in period nostalgia that it can be easy to forget that it is not itself a period piece but a sharply, if compassionately, observed portrait of a 1925 American present notable for its unblinking critique of the American dream of progress through individual self-actualization; like the novels F. Scott Fitzgerald revealingly titled *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and Damned*, *Tender Is the Night*, and *The Last Tycoon*, its primary mode is elegiac rather than nostalgic—or, as Boym would say, a mode of reflective rather than restorative nostalgia. And Faulkner, whose anatomy of the catastrophic legacy of racial injustice on Mississippi's Yoknapatawpha County rises to an obsession in novels like *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*, shows that a fixation on the American past does not guarantee anything like restorative nostalgia. Nor does this highly critical attitude toward the past undergo any substantial change in recent novelists from Thomas Pynchon to Philip Roth to Don DeLillo, all of whose excursions into American history could be described as curdled, sometimes withering exercises in reflective nostalgia. Apart from James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* about the relations between British American settlers and Native Americans in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the most distinctive and distinguished American novelists have been not only non-nostalgic but anti-nostalgic. The great American novels from *The House of the Seven Gables* and *Moby-Dick* to *The Plot Against America* and *Underworld* have refused the cultural conservatism of their English counterparts and so left open few possibilities for restorative nostalgia in Hollywood adaptations—unless, like *The Great Gatsby*, they are pressed into service as the basis for period costume dramas.

American literature may be employed as a site of restorative nostalgia in the same ways that any archive can be pressed into similar service, but that is not its own characteristic mode: when writers like Hawthorne and Faulkner and Roth plumb the American past, it is not to celebrate it but to mine it for previsions of contemporary social and cultural problems. If “nostalgia is a psychological mechanism that serves a motivational regulatory function by counteracting avoidance motivation and facilitating approach motivation” (Routledge 2015, p. 117), American literature, in general, facilitates approach motivation only in the most implicit, indirect, highly critical ways. So it is not surprising to find that Hollywood nostalgia, which in Clay Routledge's terms “affirms feelings of belongingness” (Routledge 2015, p. 54), is distinct from both the restorative nostalgia of British heritage cinema and the critically reflective nostalgia of American literature.

For all its enduring infatuation with British literature in general and the Victorian novel in particular as sites of nostalgia, cultural capital, and elitist cachet, Hollywood has had little use for American literature. When it has adapted American literary classics, the results have often been non-nostalgic, even anti-nostalgic. Roland Joffé's *The Scarlet Letter* (1995) includes Demi Moore, Gary Oldman, Robert Duvall, an Indian attack, a hot tub, and a happy ending. The impetus behind Joffé's adaptation, whose departures from Hawthorne's novel Moore assured interviewers could safely be ignored because “it had been a very long time since people had read it” (Rubenstein 2017), was not a painstakingly recreated simulacrum of an idealized historical past but a determined, albeit anachronistic, attempt to improve that past by conferring on Hawthorne's story the enlightened attitudes of the contemporary audience's own beliefs about sex, love, adultery, social opprobrium, and true romance, an attempt, very typical of Hollywood, that ended up fetishizing the present rather than the past.

A further look into Hollywood history reveals not so much a blanket dismissal of classic American novels as a highly discriminating selection of them and a strikingly consistent treatment of the properties that are actually selected. American regionalists like Sarah Orne Jewett, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor are rarely adapted to the screen. Instead, New England is represented by *The Scarlet Letter* and *Peyton Place* and the American South by *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*. Edith Wharton's most notable exercises in nostalgia, the four novella-length prequels to *The Age of Innocence* that she collected in the 1924 volume *Old New York*, have been largely neglected by Hollywood, although the longest of them, "The Old Maid," was filmed as a period vehicle for Bette Davis in 1939, just as *The Age of Innocence* itself has been adapted three times, most recently and memorably by Martin Scorsese in 1993. Perhaps the most striking rejection of a truly nostalgic American author is Hollywood's neglect of the novelist Willa Cather, whose sensitive, monumental Great Plains trilogy—*O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia* (1918)—went unfiled until 1991. Indeed the only two films before 1977 based on Cather's work both adapted *A Lost Lady*, a romance that is the least historically resonant of her major novels, and every one of the ten Cather adaptations from 1977 to the present has been either a short film or a television original.

Cather has fared better on the small screen than the big screen not because her novels are small-scaled themselves but because, like their British heritage counterparts, they use largely domestic settings to focus potentially large-scale cultural conflicts. They can be filmed on a limited budget on Nebraska locations, and their emphasis on strong women struggling to find themselves and their vocations makes them a natural for the Hallmark Channel and the Public Television Network alongside adaptations of Edna Ferber, the younger, Book-of-the-Month Club version of Cather. More important, successful television adaptations emphasize their worlds over their stories. Just as TV series from *I Love Lucy* to *The Simpsons* allow loyal audiences to enjoy their time with familiar characters by putting them every week into new situations that barely take them out of their comfort zone, television adaptations, whether they are miniseries or features, offer one more chance to spend quality time with characters they have already grown to love. Television episodes can be as densely plotted as feature films, but in situation comedies like *All in the Family* or dramas like *Mission: Impossible*, the goal of each episode is not to reach a new ending, but to return to the world as it was at the beginning of the episode. Sarah Cardwell contends that television "interacts with our present lives in a way that film does not. The transmission [ . . . ] of each text is perceived as being 'present,' due to its locus in television's continuous flow. Added to this, our interpretation of the tenseless television image is that it is of the present tense" (Cardwell 2002, p. 87). Despite these insistent tokens of presentness, television, at least until the recent rise of cable miniseries like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Homeland*, has been a nostalgic medium whose characters typically yearn to preserve their world rather than change it.

Restorative nostalgia finds a readier welcome on television because its plots are less threatening, more predictable, more formulaic, and more ritualistic, like the stories parents tell their children at bedtime. Even though most viewers (the word is significant) think of cinema as a more visually oriented medium than television, television is particularly well suited to supplying visuals in a style their audience has already been trained to expect, and it is no coincidence that the great age of the British heritage adaptation was largely driven by television miniseries. More generally, because restorative nostalgia expresses its longing for the past by fixing on particular places and spaces—scenes, moments, situations, and tableaux it freezes and idealizes—rather than on the stories that complicate and disrupt these treasured moments, its natural vehicles are visual rather than narrative. The most characteristically nostalgic stories fall into two categories. The first is tales that have become so familiar that they can be fondly remembered *as stories*, whether the audience that greets their repetition with delight is children hearing the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears one more time or the adult fans watching *Evil Dead II* (1987) one more time. Even though all these audiences know exactly what is going to happen, that knowledge is itself a condition of their pleasure that frees them to savor every moment of the story, confident that it will end by arriving at its accustomed destination. The second kind of stories subject to nostalgia is those that showcase the largest possible

number of privileged moments, lingering over them and inflating them before reluctantly revealing the less readily sentimentalized social forces that lead away from them. Apart from Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!*, restorative nostalgia is not a particularly powerful force in the American theater. No one in the audience pines to return to the landscapes of *The Hairy Ape* or *The Emperor Jones* or *The Glass Menagerie* or *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The one great exception is the American musical theater, which systematically isolates moments of privileged emotional intensity from the rest of the story and then heightens them by embedding them in songs that will linger in the audience's memory long after the final curtain. Broadway musicals that follow a line of descent from Rodgers and Hammerstein to *Jersey Boys* and *Mamma Mia* are repeatedly staged in what are aptly called revivals.

The focus of communal nostalgia in the United States has been visual rather than narrative, spatial rather than temporal, and the American narratives most likely to invite a nostalgic response are those whose stories are ad hoc and ritualistic rather than end-oriented and definitive. Americana is typically envisioned in terms of places like Disneyland that foster or encourage idealized or sentimental dreams and memories rather than journeys into or within the spaces it envisions. The British, of course, have Austenland, incarnated both cinematically in an American movie and virtually in the online Republic of Pemberley, a discursive space revealingly named after a fictional place. Dickensland was the subject of an appreciative book by J.A. Nicklin over a century ago (Nicklin 2012). One factor that helps explain Hollywood's relative neglect of the great American novels, in fact, is how few American authors could reasonably spawn their own lands. It is easy to envision Poeland but hard to imagine Hawthorneland or Melvilleand or Henry Jamesland or Flannery O'Connorland. And although it might be argued that Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, is Faulknerland, it is unlikely that spending time in that actual location would give readers anything like the same subjectively supercharged experience they treasure in reading Faulkner's novels.

Aristotle ruled that plots include a beginning, a middle, and an end that confer their definitive shape. But nostalgic audiences clearly treasure beginnings, endure middles mostly as exercises in deferred gratification, and prefer endings that close the circle by returning to the beginning rather than confirming the brave new world of an Aristotelian ending. If the locus of American nostalgia is indeed visual artifacts rather than stories, then the most nostalgic stories, and the most nostalgic moments in these stories, are those that are organized or crystallized around artifacts, objects endowed with frankly magical powers or objects whose psychological or spiritual magic depends on the rich web of associations the stories build up around them.

Hollywood's disinclination to celebrate any history but its own defines and markets Hollywood history as a series of aesthetic and technological triumphs interspersed with the inevitable losses like those commemorated in the Academy Awards ceremony's annual necrology. But restorative nostalgia still appears in the American cinema, though typically with a distinctive twist. It appears most obviously in musicals, whose programmatic structural distinction between the timeless song-and-dance numbers that convey the characters' deepest emotions, desires, hopes, and fears and the timebound continuity that motivates and separates these numbers makes the genre a natural for restorative nostalgia. But this tendency does not appear in nearly as many musicals as one might think. Film adaptations of the pioneering Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II musical *Show Boat*, like Broadway revivals of the show, are increasingly exercises in restorative nostalgia, but the more reflective nostalgia of the original show comes through in every one. The early twentieth-century revue musicals associated with Florenz Ziegfeld and George and Ira Gershwin are not especially nostalgic. With the exception of *A Connecticut Yankee*, neither are the musicals Richard Rodgers wrote with Lorenz Hart. Not until Hammerstein replaces Hart as Rodgers's collaborator does the team turn to nostalgic musicals like *Oklahoma!* *Carousel*, and *The Sound of Music* and their film adaptations. This tropism toward restorative nostalgia crests in the Hollywood musicals that recycle familiar songbooks instead of emphasizing new music—*Night and Day* (1946), *Till the Clouds Roll By* (1946), *The Jolson Story* (1946), *Three Little Words* (1950), *An American in Paris* (1951), *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), *The Band Wagon* (1953), *The Glenn Miller Story* (1954), *The Benny Goodman Story* (1956)—and

persists in movie musicals from *Guys and Dolls* (1955) to *Grease* (1978), quasi-musicals like *American Graffiti* (1973), and revivals, readaptations, and remakes onstage and onscreen.

Restorative nostalgia also appears in Westerns, though again not where one might expect. The Western as a genre gravitates toward valedictory, reflective nostalgia rather than restorative nostalgia: it is not aimed at audiences who wish they were battling Indians and searching for signs of drinking water on the prairie. Indeed, as Jane Tompkins has observed, the Native Americans who hover on the fringes of most Westerns function “as props, bits of local color, textural effects. [ . . . ] Indians are repressed in Westerns—there but not there—in the same way women are” (Tompkins 1992, pp. 8, 9). The golden age of the Hollywood Western during the 1950s, when widescreen and Technicolor carried the potential to turn the most routine Western into a visual spectacle, is marked by an increasing focus on the traumas of conquest, miscegenation, and slavery in films like *Broken Arrow* (1950), *Shane* (1953), *The Searchers* (1956), and *Two Rode Together* (1961) before reaching an anti-nostalgic apotheosis in *Little Big Man* (1970). Of more recent Westerns, *The Shootist* (1976) evinces nostalgia for the days of John Wayne’s movie-created youth, stirringly excerpted in the film’s opening sequence; *Silverado* (1985) nostalgia not for the old West, but for old Westerns; and *Unforgiven* (1992) an unblinking summation of the costs of waxing nostalgic about the code of the West. The predominant mode of Westerns from *The Vanishing American* (1925) to *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (1962) is elegiacally reflective nostalgia rather than restorative nostalgia; if the reverse were true, they would all join *Dances with Wolves* (1990) in urging a return to the days when Native American culture flourished.

Restorative nostalgia appears in movies about movies, though again its provenance and valence are unexpectedly complicated. Unlike *The Artist* (2011), which is nostalgic for the days of silent films, *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952) is nostalgic for the transitional period to the talkies, but not for the silents, which it considers primitive and dramatically limited in expressiveness. *Sherlock Jr.*, perhaps the finest movie ever made about the movies, is state-of-the-1924-art rather than nostalgic; *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952) and *Two Weeks in Another Town* (1962) are gimlet-eyed rather than nostalgic; and Norma Desmond’s genuine, deep-seated, and unbridled nostalgia for silent movies in *Sunset Blvd.* (1950) is ultimately pathological and murderous.

Restorative nostalgia appears as well in children’s movies—or, more accurately, in the kinds of family movies represented by *Little Women* (1933, 1949, 1994, 2018), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Johnny Tremain* (1957), and innumerable Disney films from *Treasure Island* (1950) to *Davy Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier* (1955). The past about which these films invite younger audiences to wax nostalgic is not remembered but constructed by films whose aim is as much educational, in Disney’s own particular manner, as nostalgic. Further from Disney, deeper into the world of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971), *Matilda* (1996), and *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (2004), childhood is much less likely to appear as an object of nostalgia.

Finally, restorative nostalgia appears in many of the costume dramas based on novels by Kate Chopin, Henry James, Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway, and even in Todd Haynes’s five-part 2011 television adaptation of James M. Cain’s *Mildred Pierce* (1941). Once again, however, this restorative nostalgia is always tempered and often overwhelmed by far more critical attitudes toward the past that has been so meticulously recreated. A particularly telling example is *The Heiress*, William Wyler’s 1949 adaptation of James’s 1880 novel *Washington Square*. Although the film’s opening credit sequence suggests its sentimental attachment to tokens of a vanished past, the film, whose screenplay is based on Ruth and Augustus Goetz’s 1947 theatrical adaptation of the novel, moves into considerably more brutal territory than James. When James’s heroine Catherine Sloper, romanced for her inheritance by the charming, penniless Morris Townsend, is threatened by her coldly remote father with disinheritance if she marries Morris, she quietly stands up first to her dying father, then to the importunate Morris, and placidly returns to her joyless life. In the film, Catherine is far more outspoken in her relations with both men, bitterly rejecting her unloving father and then tricking Morris into believing that she will elope with him so that the film ends with his standing outside her home in a downpour as she retires to her bedroom with a sardonic smile. Aaron Copland’s celebrated musical

score for the film manages to be both nostalgically classical and unflinchingly modern, and Olivia de Havilland won an Academy Award for playing Catherine, first with restraint, then with an unbridled fury that moved even further than James from restorative nostalgia.

Discussing the “particular practice of pastiche” he calls the “nostalgia film,” Fredric Jameson identifies *American Graffiti* as “one of the inaugural films in this new ‘genre’ (if that’s what it is)” (Jameson 1983, p. 116). More recently, Vera Dika has announced, “The nostalgia film seems to privilege a 1950s past” (Dika 2003, p. 122), and Christina Sprengler has agreed that “the Fifties” are the “privileged object” (Sprengler 2009, p. 6) of contemporary American films like *Far from Heaven* (2002), *The Aviator* (2004), and *Sin City* (2005). An even more striking example of restorative nostalgia that shows how complex Hollywood nostalgia can be even at its most straightforwardly restorative is *Annie Get Your Gun*, a film released in 1950, at the beginning of Dika’s and Sprengler’s favored decade. It is a costume drama that is also a musical, a Western, and a movie about an entertainer, though not a movie star, that happens to be highly suitable for children even though it was not made for them. The film is a palimpsest of multilayered nostalgia. It invokes nostalgia for its real-life heroine, the sharpshooter and entertainer Annie Oakley, played here by Betty Hutton; nostalgia for her earlier incarnation by Barbara Stanwyck in George Stevens’s 1935 film; nostalgia for the 1947 Irving Berlin Broadway musical on which it was more immediately based—the film that gave its star Ethel Merman her signature song, “There’s No Business Like Show Business”—and nostalgia for hypothetical alternative versions starring Judy Garland, who was originally cast in the role and filmed at least two musical numbers before she was replaced by Hutton, and Frank Morgan, best known for playing the Wizard of Oz, who was replaced by Louis Calhern as Buffalo Bill Cody when he died before shooting began. In addition, an audience watching the film in 2018 will find new layers of nostalgia: nostalgia for the film’s highly selective version of American history; nostalgia for the grand compromise in the battle of the sexes, here represented by the professional rivalry between Annie and sharpshooter Frank Butler, that Annie first rejects, then accepts by deliberately missing a target to throw a shooting match against Frank; nostalgia for the comparatively simple days of first-wave feminism, combined with a certain squirming discomfort at Annie’s compromise; nostalgia for Howard Keel’s debut as a singing star in the role of Frank Butler; nostalgia for musicals made, like this one, by MGM’s fondly remembered Freed Unit; and of course nostalgia for a 68-year-old movie, especially one that waited fifty years for its first video release.

One important lesson of *Annie Get Your Gun* is that nostalgia need not focus on recalling a particular time and place: it can valorize many favored sites, from the Wild West to screen representations of Annie Oakley to the days when the relations between men and women were governed by a narrow range of male-authored scripts women challenged at their peril to a beloved show-stopping number in Irving Berlin’s 1947 musical, without inconsistency or self-contradiction, because the primary energy of even the most determinedly restorative nostalgia is not the celebration of past realities, even imagined past realities, but the refusal to accept present-day realities. Another equally important lesson emerges from the conflict between Annie Oakley and Frank Butler, whose professional status she first threatens, then deliberately retreats from threatening in order to win his heart: a given film can incorporate logically contradictory attitudes toward any given problem, situation, time, or place without compromising its own nostalgia, which is merely complicated rather than undermined by such contradictions.

Effervescently diffuse and often contradictory as it is, *Annie Get Your Gun* is no more typical of Hollywood nostalgia than the homecoming of Odysseus is of European nostalgia. Even though it is generally remote from the elegiacally critical attitude American literature adopts toward the American past, Hollywood nostalgia is less restorative than reflective, less reminiscent of the homecoming of Odysseus than of the returns of Agamemnon and Ajax, stories whose grimness depends not on the perils of their journeys but on the failures of their homes to welcome them properly and confirm their sense of the identities they have forged during their absence. This brand of nostalgia owes less to the Civil War anthem “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” than to its

savagely ironic transformation in the Irish song “Johnny, I Hardly Knew Ye.” The complexities of this reflective nostalgia are found not in *Annie Get Your Gun* but in the Western and non-Western novels of Larry McMurtry and Cormac McCarthy and in their film adaptations: *Hud* (1963), *The Last Picture Show* (1971), *Terms of Endearment* (1983), *Lonesome Dove* (1989), *All the Pretty Horses* (2000), *No Country for Old Men* (2007), and *The Road* (2009). This brand of nostalgia is eminently consistent and indeed codependent on a sharp criticism of the homes from which its heroes are estranged, and often on the whole idea of home in general. It is the driving force behind Hollywood movies as different as *Sunrise* (1927), *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Vertigo* (1958), *Memento* (2000), and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), a final example that deserves a closer look because the relations among its many different modes of nostalgia are so complex.

Denis Villeneuve’s film is not only a sequel to Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) but, like most sequels, an unofficial remake of the original film, a revisiting of Scott’s dystopian world a generation later in a film that was produced a generation after the film that inspired it. Like its own source, Philip K. Dick’s 1968 story “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?” *Blade Runner* is a futuristic meditation on the difficulties of distinguishing the human from the non-human. Although it failed at the box office, it became one of the most highly regarded of all cult films, and the visionary dreariness of its imagined 2019 Los Angeles exteriors inspired a generation of neo-noirs. *Blade Runner 2049*, whose cityscapes are less spectacularly overstimulating but equally rain-soaked and dreary, opens with an explanatory title card that reminds audiences who have seen the earlier film, informs those who haven’t, and brings all of them up to date about its focus on replicants, “bio-engineered humans” who were created as slaves but attempted an abortive revolt in the earlier film. The “new line of replicants who obey,” the film’s opening titles promise, are a distinct improvement over the old “Nexus 8s with open-ended lifespans” of the earlier film. This reassuring news cannot help but make the audience nostalgic for the 1982 *Blade Runner*, whose potentially disobedient replicants promised the narrative complications the audience has come to the cinema to experience.

The audience, as it turns out, need not worry, for a discovery the replicant blade runner K (Ryan Gosling) makes in the opening sequence raises disturbing new possibilities: the skeleton of a female replicant who died during a caesarean section, demonstrating that replicants can biologically reproduce. K’s boss, Lt. Joshi (Robin Wright), commands him to find and kill the replicant’s child and destroy all traces of the birth in order to head off the possibility of another, more massive rebellion of replicants. But K finds himself increasingly ambivalent about his mission. He identifies the skeleton as that of Rachael, who had been played by Sean Young in *Blade Runner*, and, increasingly convinced that he himself is her child, attempts to track down Rick Deckard, the title character of *Blade Runner*, who vanished soon after the events of the earlier film, and who K believes is his father. K’s trajectory thus neatly inverts the trajectory of the earlier film. Instead of raising the possibility that its hero, a killer of replicants, is himself a replicant, as Scott’s film did, it offers more and more hints that its replicant hero is actually human.

These hints turn out to be red herrings. K is a replicant who only longs to believe he is human, just as Rachael longed to believe she was human back in 1982. Both films tease their characters and their audiences with memories that turn out to have been false or implanted, making them nostalgic for a past they never truly experienced in the first place. But *Blade Runner 2049* puts several new spins on Svetlana Boym’s “longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed.” Like all sequels and remakes, the film is a return-with-a-difference to an earlier film it nostalgically valorizes even as it attempts to revise and improve it by deepening its moral sensitivity to the pathos of replicants like K’s servant Joi, who loves him even though she is only a synthesized voice and a series of holographic images readily available for purchase by millions of other consumers. The casting in both films of Harrison Ford as Deckard both resurrects the emotionally intense hero of the 1982 film, an obvious contrast to the dead-eyed Ryan Gosling, and mourns Deckard’s limited abilities as an action hero thirty-five years later.

Like many other sci-fi sequels and remakes from *Jurassic Park* (1993) to *King Kong* (2005), *Blade Runner 2049* is nostalgic for the future—in this case, the older, more reassuringly stable dystopia of *Blade Runner*. In this it follows *Star Wars* (1977), which Jameson calls “metonymically a historical or nostalgic film: unlike *American Graffiti*, it does not reinvent a picture of the past in its lived totality; rather, by reinventing the feel and shape of characteristic art objects of an older period (the serials [featuring Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers]), it seeks to reawaken a sense of the past associated with those objects” (Jameson 1983, p. 116). But the metonymic nostalgia of *Blade Runner 2049* is far more complex than that of *Star Wars*. Like *Blade Runner*, it is filled with allusions to other films and avatars of pop culture: *Alien* (1979), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Treasure Island* (1950), Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, and of course *Blade Runner* itself. Its most complicated citations, however, are to films and television shows made since the release of *Blade Runner* in 1982. Robin Wright’s performance as Lt. Joshi recalls her role as the brutally calculating First Lady Claire Underwood in the Netflix television series *House of Cards*. The importance of the toy horse K takes as a link between himself and Rachael’s missing child, which already echoes the origami unicorn Deckard had made in *Blade Runner*, is given even greater weight and foreboding for audiences who associate it with the totems the characters in Christopher Nolan’s 2010 film *Inception* used to determine whether or not they were dreaming. And Joi’s attempt to make love to K by entering the body of the human female Mariette (Mackenzie Davis)—a remarkable literalizing of Boym’s observation that “a cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images”—also recalls in uncomfortable detail a remarkably similar scene involving Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix), his operating system Samantha (Scarlett Johansson), and her ad hoc flesh-and-blood surrogate Isabella (Portia Doubleday) in Spike Jonze’s 2013 film *Her*. Citations like these go much further than the multiple nostalgic topoi of *Annie Get Your Gun* and the contradictory attitude that film adapts to professional rivalries, ritual courtship, and gender roles to broaden and deepen the resonance of *Blade Runner 2049* in far more complicated ways by rooting it in a familiar mass-media culture, suggesting that contemporary culture has caught up with and perhaps even surpassed the visionary dystopia of *Blade Runner*, which after all was set in 2019. At the same time, they mark *Blade Runner 2049*’s distance from the earlier film, whose relatively black-and-white view of the differences between humans and replicants becomes the subject, amid increasingly urgent questions raised by the twenty-first century’s embrace of social media and the Internet of Things, of both nostalgia and critical distance.

Despite generally positive and often rapturous reviews, *Blade Runner 2049*, like its predecessor, was a serious disappointment at the box office. Its American grosses totaled \$92 million, less than two-thirds of its production costs. The moral commentators took from its underperformance was that the audience of 12-to-21-year-old males on which mainstream movies depend for their ticket sales were insufficiently invested in the earlier film, and that the cult audience that was invested in it was too small to make the film a success. Even so, the film is invaluable for several reasons. It provides a showcase for the remarkable complexities of reflective nostalgia, the audience’s longing for a past that at some level they know perfectly well never existed. It recreates the reflective nostalgia of the classic American novels, which know this lesson equally well, rather than following British heritage films in imposing a restorative nostalgia on authors like Dickens and Jane Austen who are not particularly nostalgic themselves. Its swooning embrace of a nightmarish dystopia suggests the rewards that Hollywood can reap by turning away from restorative and reflective nostalgia to a more complex, multi-laminated, sharply ambivalent amalgam of the two, even if Columbia Pictures did not reap those rewards this time. Its thematic focus on both the indispensability and the untrustworthiness of the audience’s most treasured memories, including their memories of the original *Blade Runner*, goes far to indicate why reflective nostalgia, so central to the American cultural experience, is so often complicated still further in American cinema. Eluding the categories of both the restorative nostalgia of heritage cinema and the reflective nostalgia of American literature, the film fuses the pleasure and pain of a perceived alienation from a homeland both idealized and dystopian that is at once a mourning of self-alienation and a cautiously reconstructive celebration of a self that may never have existed.

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