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BACHELOR'S THESIS

Addicted to Past:

How endless remakes, sequels and commodified nostalgia

made us unable to enter 21st century

Kacper Senkowski

Thesis / Dissertation supervisor: Mgr. Josef Ledvina, Ph.D
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BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Závislý na minulosti:

Jak nekonečné remaky, sequele a zkomodifikovaná nostalgie

znemožnili nám vstoupit do 21. století

Kacper Senkowski

Praha, Duben 2023

Declaration

I declare that I have elaborated the Bachelor's/Master's thesis or doctoral dissertation entitled

Addicted to Past

independently, under the expert supervision of my thesis/dissertation supervisor, and using only the literature and sources cited therein, and that the thesis/dissertation was not used within the scope of a different university programme of study or to obtain the same degree or a different degree. I consent to the publication of the thesis/dissertation in accordance with legislation and with AMU internal regulations.

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse how modern Western culture became fixated on its immediate past. As a result of their growing sense of confusion and discontent with life brought on by capitalism and technological advancement, people began to gradually substitute reality with its simulations. This progressive detachment from reality has made contemporary culture unable to articulate the present and, coupled with the end of the Cold War and the triumph of capitalism, caused historicity to decline dramatically. As Western civilization sought consolation and solutions, it started to fetishize its past, which is demonstrated by the current deluge of remakes and sequels as well as the enormous popularity of retro aesthetics.

Abstract

Cílem této práce je analyzovat, jak se moderní západní kultura zafixovala na svou bezprostřední minulost. V důsledku rostoucího pocitu zmatku a nespokojenosti se životem, který přinesl kapitalismus a technologický pokrok, začali lidé postupně nahrazovat realitu jejími simulacemi. Toto progresivní odtržení od reality způsobilo, že současná kultura nebyla schopna artikulovat současnost a ve spojení s koncem Studené války a triumfem kapitalismu způsobila dramatický úpadek historicity. Jak západní civilizace hledala útěchu a řešení, začala fetišovat svou minulost, což dokazuje současná záplava remaků a sequelů i obrovská obliba retro estetiky.

Contents

INTRODUCTION

With the longest running American sitcom '*The Simpsons*' being renewed for another few seasons, Harry Styles' 1980s synth pop influenced single '*As It Was*' becoming fourth-longest-running number one in the Billboard Hot 100 chart's history and the announcement of the classic 1970s British sitcom '*Fawlty Towers*' reboot, it seems that in 2023 Western culture is, as Mark Fisher put it in his '*Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*', still "trapped in the 20th century"[1]. And it does not look like it will change in the nearest future.

Despite the 21st century abounding with multiple significant events that could be described as historic, such as the September 11 attacks, Arab Spring, COVID-19 pandemic and most recently the war in Ukraine, there is a pervasive feeling that historicity is waning or even already lost. It is accompanied by the decline of strong referentials and results in contemporary Western culture, confused and unwilling to accept the loss, constantly turning towards the past, attempting to resurrect the time when "at least there was history"[2].

The waning of historicity was caused by both the end of the Cold War, and thus ultimate triumph of capitalism, hailed as "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution"[3], and by the advent of the digital/internet age. The progressing digitalization coupled with the invention of social media and extended/augmented reality technologies has led to overstimulation, death of evanescence, progressive detachment from the outside world (or its replacement with more gratifying simulations of it) and thereby further erosion of the notions of authenticity and originality. Solutions and consolation seem to reside in a seemingly simpler and more comprehensible past. This fetishization of the past is perpetuated by digitalization and capitalism, which have themselves paradoxically contributed to the loss of historicity. Gradually becoming the dominant economic system around the world, capitalism has assumed almost full control over the mass culture, turning it into what Theodor Adorno described as culture industry. It has proved its immense effectiveness and indestructibility by recuperating all potential threats, including nostalgia for historicity, and turning them into its own agents.

As a result, despite the galloping technological progress and thus enormous amount of possibilities 21st century abounds with, the innovation, while still being very much cherished and desired, is being obscured by society's obsession with its own immediate past which expresses itself through the pandemic of remakes, reboots and spin-offs, as well as prequels,

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[1] Mark Fisher, "Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures", 2014, p. 18

[2] Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulation", 1981, p. 31

[3] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?", 1989, p. 1

midquels, sequels and the resurgence in popularity of the retro aesthetics in almost every area of life. This work is an attempt to examine why and how our civilization has found itself unable to move forward after probably the most innovative and dynamic century in its history, as well as how this phenomenon is manifesting itself.

Culture Industry

The main villain in this story is the culture industry. The term was coined by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their 1947 book '*Dialectic of Enlightenment*'. It refers to the idea that mass culture, with the advent of reproducibility, mass media and globalisation, began to resemble a factory producing standardized cultural goods. Although coined in 1947, the first symptoms of it could be visible ever since the idea of popular culture emerged. Its emergence is connected both to the increase in literacy and leisure time among the masses as well as the advances in reproduction technologies in the 19th century.

The introduction of the free time to masses has resulted in the "identification of life with nonworking time, with inactivity"[4], and thus, has allowed them to actively participate in the cultural life for the first time. The resulting mass culture was basically the opposite of the high culture. While the high culture is inherently elitist and thus designed for only a fraction of society, mass culture's aim is to reach as many people as possible. And interestingly, the culture identified with the factory workers, began to resemble the factory they worked in.

Leisure time, perceived by many as a liberation from work and the only area of life still unconquered by capitalism, is in fact, as described by Guy Debord, "itself one of the products of that system"[5] and thus is being organised by it. It is during that time and through referring to it that the culture industry indoctrinates people the most. Furthermore, the advances in technology and the resulting gradual disappearance of the border between working and non-working time have led to products of culture industry becoming increasingly ubiquitous and inescapable.

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[4] Guy Debord, "The Society of the Spectacle", 1967, p. 9
[5] Guy Debord, "The Society of the Spectacle", 1967, p. 10

Eternal Sameness

The unification and standardization are the natural consequences of the culture industry attempting to reach everyone. In order to do so, the cultural goods need to relate to the universal, comprehensible to everyone, therefore standardized skeletons, ethos. In order to create such foundations, the culture industry had to merge together the elements of high and low art, the old and the new, however resulting in an artificial, fake mixture, "a reconciliation which damages them both"[6]. The increasing emphasis on standardization, efficiency and instant profit favours monopolies/oligopolies and results in the "eternal sameness"[7] - the same thing being offered to everybody, as well as the gradual "liquidation of the individual"[8] while at the same time praising it. The pursuit of immediate profit prevents risk-taking, as the financial losses are unacceptable, and therefore leads to prevalence of shallow, sensational high concept works and an endless recycling of already established ideas, stories, aesthetics, etc. Furthermore, this "eternal sameness" also manipulates the taste – being offered only almost identical products, people's preference begins to depend "merely on biographical details or on the situation in which things are"[9] first 'consumed'. The popularity and thus familiarity of the piece becomes "a surrogate for the quality ascribed to it"[10]. Hence, nostalgia becomes an increasingly important criterion in the reception of cultural goods.

Disney remakes

Great illustration of how nostalgia manipulates the reception of the work is the case of The Walt Disney Company. In the system that favours monopolies/oligopolies, the sole fact of being one of the most powerful culture industry companies grants it indestructibility and makes its products highly profitable regardless of the quality. Despite being widely criticised for their quality, the recent wave of CGI/live action remakes of Disney animated classics is a rather huge box office success with '*The Lion King'* becoming the highest-grossing animated film ever and the remakes of '*Alladin*' and '*Beauty and the Beast*' both grossing over 1 billion dollars worldwide. Their success was not a result of the quality of the remakes but rather of the status the original movies possess and nostalgia they evoke. Disney has built its position mostly through creating animated movies for children. Therefore, the cultural goods it produces are

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[6] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture", 1991, p. 20

[7] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture", 1991, p. 100

[8] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture", 1991, p. 35

[9] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture", 1991, p. 30

[10] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture", 1991, p. 30

shaping people's beliefs and creating their desires from their early childhood. However, more important than the indoctrination itself is the fact that Disney movies at the same time instil/engrave the nostalgia that acts just like an antibody, awakening when the viewers grow older and effectively securing Disney's renown. Disney movies feed young people with the expectations for life that will never be met. The disillusionment when, for example, the actual high school experience turns out to be completely different from what the '*High School Musical*' movies promised it would look like pushes them, paradoxically, into the arms of other Disney products which remind them of a time when the illusion was still real. Should a person ever see through the lies they have been fed as a child, nostalgia shall prevent them from fully rejecting the products.

The case of the Disney remakes also shows how the culture industry, through standardised production of cultural goods, is aiming at offering the same thing to everybody. Instead of creating new products, the culture industry nowadays prefers to update or slightly upgrade the already existing products to reach/suit the new audiences, while at the same time benefiting from the status the original product has. The slight adjustments, updates merely "mask a skeleton"[11] which in fact remains almost unchanged.

The perfect examples of it are the live action 2023 remake of '*The Little Mermaid*' and the 2021 reboot of the classic family sitcom '*The Wonder Years*' both substituting main characters, originally White, for African American while retaining the essence of the original for the sake of the efficiency and in order to minimise the risk.

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[11] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture", 1991, p. 100

Film and Simulations

Reproducibility allowed cultural goods to be mass produced and thus made them more accessible than ever. What ensued was the deluge of images leading to, as Guy Debord described it in his '*The Society of the Spectacle*', modern life becoming "an immense accumulation of spectacles"[12]. The perceptible world has been replaced by "a selection of images which is projected above it"[13]. Images ceased to be merely simulations of reality, they have become rehearsals of real life, training people "in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily"[14] and thus began shaping and gradually replacing the reality they reproduced.

What made people so attracted and reliant on images was the increasing tempo of changes that world was experiencing in the 20th century, which has made them feel that modern life is simply too incomprehensible and unsatisfying, "lacking a rationale conformable to their wants and needs"[15]. The advent of reproducibility has played a major role in it, for it has led to what Walter Benjamin described in '*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*' as the "decay of the aura"[16]. It had killed the myth, mysticism that the culture was hitherto soaked up with and transformed the notion of real, authentic. Therefore, people started searching for a comprehensible "analogous system of delusion"[17] which could at least provide imaginary solace. They found an ally, asylum, paradoxically, in the simulations of reality, with the newly born film turning out to be the most effective. Film proved to be the most appealing medium, for it was essentially a synthesis of all preceding media. Furthermore, while dwelling in and portraying the "empirical world where nothing is valuable in its own right"[18], movies provided a message which was somehow "'metaphysically' meaningful"[19] and comprehensible regardless of people's origin, social status or education. Film therefore, appealed to masses like no other existing medium.

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[12] Guy Debord, "The Society of the Spectacle", 1967, p. 2

[13] Guy Debord, "The Society of the Spectacle", 1967, p. 14

[14] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", 1935, p. 26

[15] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture", 1991, p. 15

[16] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", 1935, p. 23

[17] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture", 1991, p. 15

[18] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture", 1991, p. 15

[19] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture", 1991, p. 15

The Indestructibility of Capitalism and Recuperation

Film's appeal and ability to easily influence people's mood, behaviour, or beliefs regardless of their social status and education has made it the most effective instrument of 20th century's propaganda. Film was exploited by all three main modern ideologies but reached its full potential only while serving capitalism.

Capitalism proved to be more effective than its 20th century ideological opponents, fascism, and communism, through, inter alia, its exploitation of culture industry. While, just like its opponents, it is aiming to persuade people that it is superior to the other systems, it does so in a less conspicuous and more sophisticated way and deceives them into believing they retain free will. This illusory freedom that they are given is what, along with the feeling that there is indeed no alternative, discourages any resistance. Furthermore, even if the resistance does appear, it is almost immediately defused. The power of capitalism could be therefore compared to the power of mythical king Midas, who turned everything he touched into gold. Analogously, capitalism is able to immediately recuperate - repress and integrate any resistance to the "all-embracing unity of the system"[20].

The Simpsons

Mass culture is filled with examples of recuperated works. Perhaps, the most illustrative is the example of '*The Simpsons*'. The animated sitcom premiered in 1989 as essentially a parody of the nuclear family sitcoms that dominated American television ever since the end of World War Two. While traditional family sitcoms aimed at creating a simulation of a perfect American family and indoctrinating the viewers with the ideas of familialism, 'The Simpsons' presented a complete subversion of this model. Its main characters were members of a rather dysfunctional nuclear family, living in a dysfunctional city and surrounded by dysfunctional people and institutions, an image utterly different from the American Dream utopias of '*The Cosby Show*', '*All in the Family*', '*The Wonder Years*' or '*The Flintstones*'. The sitcom was an instant success, with the average number of viewers per season reaching over 20 million for the first four seasons. However, the quality and subversiveness that made '*The Simpsons*' a hit, is widely considered to be in decline starting from the late 1990s. One of the reasons why, is most likely the success of the show itself. It had reached the level of profitability that simply made it impossible for it to fail. Therefore, the quality of the show per se does not matter anymore, it is its popularity that brings profit now. And its popularity, renown now comes from

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[20] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture", 1991, p. 9

merely referring to the show it used to be, to its past, rather than from its quality. The system enabled '*The Simpsons'* to live an extended life – although the show lost its relevance a long time ago, its status and the nostalgia it evokes, sustained its profitability. But that is not to say that the show remained unchanged for over 30 years. Culture industry managed to recuperate the subversiveness of '*The Simpsons*' – the social commentary has been appropriated by the system, reduced to being merely an imitation of a critique. This led to the show, formerly a parody, transforming into what Frederic Jameson describes as a pastiche. Pastiche is a blank parody, lacking "any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter"[21]. '*The Simpsons*' nowadays provide only a 'friendly' critique, a critique that the system needs in order to prove that it is open to being criticised but not a constructive critique that might question and really impact it. However, according to Mark Fisher, nowadays recuperation has ceased to be necessary. It has been replaced by precorporation – a "pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture"[22], which essentially has led to concepts like rebellion and contestation becoming a kind of fashion, integral parts of the system, displacing genuine subversion. Therefore, it could be argued that '*The Simpsons*' were never truly subversive and always served the system. What is however unquestionable is the fact that the show, just like many other pop culture titans from "the time when history existed"[23] has been kept alive for far too long, fuelled by nostalgia and monopolist tendencies of the culture industry, preventing new, more relevant shows from taking over and thus trapping the culture in its past.

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[21] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", 1991, p. 23
[22] Mark Fisher, "Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?", 2009, p. 13
[23] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?", 1989, p. 16

Ironical Distance

Adorno has been widely criticized for his derogatory depiction of the audiences of the culture industry as merely "dupes of mass deception"[24]. In fact, in one of his later essays he admitted that he might have been wrong, and that modern society seems to consume and accept the products of the culture industry with "a kind of reservation"[25]. However, the fact that the contemporary masses do not fully embrace the system and maintain what Slavoj Žižek describes as "ironical distance"[26] does not really mean that they are immune to it and thus are not victims of deception. While the "ironical distance" was indeed used by societies under totalitarian regimes as a way of showing their reluctance and contestation against the system, in contemporary non-totalitarian societies it has become "part of the game"[27]. Its function now is to prevent radicalisation and fanaticism that could lead to violence and totalitarianism. However, "ironical distance" in fact enables capitalism to defuse, recuperate any resistance against it. If the ruling system and its ideology are "not meant to be taken seriously or literally"[28] then why would anyone seriously rebel against them? Furthermore, the compliance is further perpetuated by the ubiquitous feeling that there is no alternative to capitalism. Even though people "know things are bad"[29], more than that they know that "they can't do anything about it"[30]. "Ironical distance" grants them a kind of absolution – they are complying but at least they are not believing in the system they are complying with. In his '*The Sublime Object of Ideology*' Žižek proposes an alteration to Sloterdijk's formula that people "know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it"[31]. He argues that contemporary society consciously decides to blind itself, thinking that the awareness of illusion makes it immune to it, but in fact it only proves that it is not, which also suggests that, as a society, we may still be "far from being a post-ideological society"[32] as argued by Fukuyama.

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[24] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture", 1991, p. 21

[25] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture", 1991, p. 196

[26] Slavoj Žižek , The Sublime Object of Ideology, 1989, p. 30

[27] Slavoj Žižek , The Sublime Object of Ideology, 1989, p. 24

[28] Slavoj Žižek , The Sublime Object of Ideology, 1989, p. 24

[29] Mark Fisher, "Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?", 2009, p. 25

[30] Mark Fisher, "Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?", 2009, p. 25

[31] Slavoj Žižek , The Sublime Object of Ideology, 1989, p. 25

[32] Slavoj Žižek , The Sublime Object of Ideology, 1989, p. 30

Fan Service

The defenders of the culture industry often claim that it is merely responding to people's demands. It seems to be proven by the recent increase of presence of so-called fan service especially in movies and television shows. Originating from the anime and manga fandom, fan service is a practice of appeasing the fandom, fulfilling their wishes by the creators. What is however often overlooked in this case is the fact that fan service is in fact merely a response to demands that were stimulated by the creators in the first place. Culture industry responds only to demands regarding what it already produced, only when it is confident that the response will bring profit.

HBO series '*Game of Thrones*' is famous for its excessive use of fan service which eventually led to its downfall. The series gained popularity through its brutal and unpredictable plot, full of twists, and the merciless treatment of its main characters, deprived of plot armor. However, after its fifth season, with the increasing number of viewers and due to running out of the source material (series of novels the show was adapting was not finished at the time), '*Game of Thrones*' started to gradually break its own rules. The main story began to be less complex, stripped almost entirely of its subplots and unexpected plot twists, and thus the show was stripped of its trademarks. Furthermore, later seasons introduced plot armor and a lot of illogical decisions meant to merely appease fans (such as resurrecting popular characters). Although it did not damage show's viewership, which skyrocketed in the final two seasons, reaching 13.61 million live viewers with its final episode (making it the most watched episode of any HBO show ever at the time), it started to be widely criticized, leading even to a fan petition demanding a remake of the last season "with competent writers"[33] signed by almost 2 million people. Despite its unquestionable impact on popular culture, the series' renown was shattered by its finale, considered by many to be one of the worst in television history.

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[33] https://www.change.org/p/hbo-remake-game-of-thrones-season-8-with-competent-writers

The End of History

The end of the Cold War deprived humanity of its historical goal – the victory of one of the doctrines: communism or capitalism, and thus was considered by Francis Fukuyama in his 1989 essay '*The End of History?*' as "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution"[34]. However, it also brought hope, especially to the countries that were just entering the free-market world that with the triumphant capitalism, to which there was now no alternative, humanity would enter the new golden age. However, despite the constant technological and economical progress, "21st century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion"[35], as if our culture, reached its limit, got trapped in the 20th century and was unable to move on.

What caused this cultural stagnation was the culture industry and the waning of historicity. Even before the defeat of communism, the capitalist culture industry had developed a perfect system that granted it indestructibility. In order to reach as many people as possible and avoid financial losses, the culture industry started serving only the dishes based on the already tested, established recipes. It does not need any new recipes or authentic diversity anymore, only profitability matters.

Meanwhile, the drastic waning of historicity – the feeling that history has ended - after the end of the Cold War further deepened the already omnipresent confusion and dissatisfaction with modern life. Disillusioned, unable to adjust to the new reality, feeling they are "living after the gold rush"[36] and haunted by the lost futures - "the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, but which never materialised"[37], people started searching for consolation.

And that is how the "nostalgia for the time when history existed"[38] was born. The past becomes fetishized for it seems to offer strong referentials, historicity and authenticity.

While nostalgia of course has always been an important part of the society, and there have been several eras before that were obsessed with the past, the current situation and the role of nostalgia in it substantially differ. As Simon Reynolds argues in his '*Retromania*' "there has never been a society in human history so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of its own immediate past"[39]. Furthermore, the role of nostalgia in the whole process is much different. Nostalgia usually offers not just a solace, an escape from the disillusionment, confusion, and other troubles of the uncertain present, but it can also inspire people to search for new paths

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[34] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?", 1989, p. 1

[35] Mark Fisher, "Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures", 2014, p. 18

[36] Mark Fisher, "Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures", 2014, p. 18

[37] Mark Fisher, "Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures", 2014, p. 34

[38] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?", 1989, p. 16

[39] Simon Reynolds, "Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past", 2011, p. 13

(as it did in the past) and thus may easily turn people against the current status quo. It may pose a threat to the omnipresent unity and standardization that the culture industry aims at. Therefore, nostalgia, just like other threats to "all-embracing unity of the system", has been subjected to recuperation – neutralization and appropriation. Culture industry uses nostalgia as a bait, luring people with the promise of escape and solace, while retaining full control over it. Thereby, it became perhaps the most powerful instrument in the hands of the culture industry, granting the products exploiting it a kind of invincibility.

Increased Presence of Past

Furthermore, the infinite replicability and immortality of digital has allowed it to defeat the evanescence and thus deprived us of the "possibility of loss"[40]. The advances in user-friendly technologies joined with the advent of social media has led to overdocumentation and obsessive collecting being almost an integral part of our lives. As Simon Reynolds describes it in his '*Retromania*' once the "cultural data is dematerialised, our capacity to store, sort and access it is vastly increased and enhanced"[41]. The past has become more accessible and therefore its presence in our lives has vastly increased when compared to previous epochs. However, because the incredible availability of archived documentation in the 21st century allows and encourages "precision replication of the old style"[42] it leads to inspiration being gradually supplanted by the replication. The mere fact that replication of the old styles is now easier than ever further perpetuates contemporary society's obsession with the past.

Nostalgia for Authenticity

However, with the arrival of the digital age, nostalgia has gained yet another function. The 21st century is defined by the pervasive "feeling of a digitally upgraded normality – a perverse yet ultra-banal normality, from which all flaws have been erased"[43]. The omnipresent artificiality, reproducibility, beautification, death of evanescence, gradual disappearance of materiality and thus the loss of the possibility of loss, make, now inescapable digital realm, feel inauthentic. The desperate need for authenticity results in a "cultural obsession with decay and a search for an authentic reality in our simulated world"[44]. As Jean Baudrillard put it in his '*Simulacra and Simulation*' - "when the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full

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[40] Mark Fisher, "Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures", 2014, p. 132

[41] Simon Reynolds, "Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past", 2011, p. 56

[42] Simon Reynolds, "Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past", 2011, p. 30

[43] Mark Fisher, "Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures", 2014, p. 158

[44] Nathan Jurgenson, "The Social Photo - On Photography and Social Media-Verso", 2019

meaning"[45]. Therefore, what is considered real, authentic is for most people simply that which used to be considered as such before or at least refers to it – non-digital, analogue, material. But it does not just result in people turning to obsolete, analogue technologies and rejecting the digital. The digital in the developed world has already become inescapable. Therefore, the past has become an instrument to authenticate the digital. An example of that could be the popularity of the faux-vintage photographic filters. Although, as Nathan Jurgenson argues in his '*The Social Photo - On Photography and Social Media*', the peak of their popularity fell for "a short time around 2011"[46], over 10 years later retro filters are still among the most used filters. While most social media filters are meant to make an image simply more attractive, aesthetic or as it is in the case of AR filters more entertaining, faux-vintage filters are much more than that. What elevates them over other filters is that they refer to the analogue and thus conjure "a sense of special realness amid the mass of digital photos"[47]. But their authenticity does not come from the fact that through imitating the material and historical looks, they are able to deceive about the origin or age of the image they have been applied to, and thus alter the reality. The "vintage" in these pictures most of the time does not fool anyone: people are well aware that they have been aged with an app. Therefore, they are "self-aware simulations"[48] of the past. And interestingly the fact that they are merely simulations does not "preclude the photos from conjuring feelings of nostalgia"[49] and appearing authentic. Quite the contrary, it is through evoking nostalgia, that they manage to authenticate themselves. Therefore, the authenticity of the faux-vintage filters comes merely from the fact that they are referring to what is considered authentic (sign value). They become vintage solely through imitating vintage. Furthermore, through accumulating and "exaggerating the qualities of old photographs while also evoking nostalgia without an actual referent in the past"[50] they become more vintage than the real vintage itself.

Simulating Nostalgia

However, this practice, although meant as the "resurrection of the real"[51], in fact leads to the creation of hyperreal and thus paradoxically contributes to the further erosion of the notion of real. Simulations become equally, if not "more real than the real"[52] itself.

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[45] Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulation", 1981, p. 6
[46] Nathan Jurgenson, "The Social Photo - On Photography and Social Media-Verso", 2019
[47] Nathan Jurgenson, "The Social Photo - On Photography and Social Media-Verso", 2019
[48] Nathan Jurgenson, "The Social Photo - On Photography and Social Media-Verso", 2019
[49] Nathan Jurgenson, "The Social Photo - On Photography and Social Media-Verso", 2019
[50] Nathan Jurgenson, "The Social Photo - On Photography and Social Media-Verso", 2019
[51] Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulation", 1981, p. 74
[52] Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulation", 1981, p. 56

As a result, vintage/retro is no longer exclusively what is from the past. Now it is also, if not predominantly, what explicitly refers to the past, imitates it. It is therefore the obsession with regrasping the authenticity that is currently killing it.

Present becomes increasingly deluged with the simulations of the past. Past thereby ceases to be an escape, a solace, being the last bastion of authenticity, it gets incorporated by the system desperately in need of it and is further trivialized until it becomes merely a fashion, trend.

It can be especially seen on the example of the 1980s aesthetic whose popularity is surging in recent years. It is however not just the movies or songs of that period that are gaining popularity but the contemporary works that are inspired by the era and imitate its styles. In the last decade there have been plenty of examples of popularity of 1980s revivalism such as one of the most viewed Netflix television series '*Stranger Things*', Oscar winning sequel to Ridley Scott's science fiction classic '*Blade Runner 2049*' or the Weeknd's single '*Blinding Lights*' being the first song ever to hold a spot in the top 10 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart for an entire year. And of course, those works are successful not despite but because they are referring to the past.

What is important to add here is that nostalgia-driven songs and movies are equally enjoyed by the people regardless of age. Nostalgia for the time when history existed turns out to be not just experienced by the people that were born before it ended. The retro aesthetics somehow evoke nostalgia also in people that were born after its initial lifetime. Although young people should theoretically be immune to nostalgia for the times they have not lived in, they are nonetheless as attracted to it as their parents and grandparents, even despite (or because of?) the past being more accessible than ever, thanks to increasing digitalization, allowing to draw clearer comparisons. With whole contemporary Western society regardless of age being obsessed with recapturing, remaking the past without actually taking inspiration from it, the innovation is being obscured, despite society still being very much addicted to it. This obsession is further evolving and resulting in a pandemic of remakes and rising importance of retro aesthetics.

New Hollywood and Neoliberalism

Although the consolidation of the culture industry's position started with the foundations of most important American film production companies like Walt Disney Pictures, Warner Bros. or Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in the 1920s and the subsequent emergence of the television medium, the final triumph of it did not happen until the 1980s. By the time the Baby Boomer generation started to come of age in the 1960s, the culture industry started losing track, unsure how to react to the new audience, much different than its predecessors. As a result, many companies were rapidly losing money and their appeal. In order to save themselves, the culture industry had to transform, open itself to the counterculture and social revolution. One of the most substantial results of the culture industry finally 'listening' to younger generations was a surge in popularity of auteur cinema and the subsequent arrival of The New Hollywood. The movies produced during this period were not only finally relatable and up to date but most importantly auteur, meaning that it was the artist, mostly film director, behind the film that was in charge, rather than the production studio. The fact that the films that kickstarted the movement were also highly profitable led to Hollywood quickly adopting the new means of production. However, by the end of the 1970s, an increasing number of the New Hollywood movies was exceeding the budget and breaking even. Coupled with the crises of 1973 and 1979, and the stagflation, it resulted in the costs of making a movie, "not only production costs, but the cost of expensive TV promotion and wide breaks into thousands of theatres"[53], skyrocketing. The straw that broke the camel's back was the failure of Michael Cimino's '*Heaven's Gate*' which grossed only 3.5 million dollars with a budget of 44 million. What followed was described by Francis Ford Coppola as "a kind of coupe d'état"[54]. The "talent-run companies"[55] were forced out of the business. The remaining studios, now run by the crop of executives who were predominantly businessmen, started retaking control they had lost a decade earlier. The content and artistic quality of the cultural goods ceased to be of great importance, thenceforth the profit was the main goal. Therefore, the studios started avoiding risk like fire, establishing "the mentality of the sequel or the look-alike"[56] and laying foundations for the future domination of the market by the 'high concept' film franchises. With the death of the New Hollywood and arrival of neoliberalism, the culture industry had eventually started resembling every other industry. The defeat of the Communist Bloc and the advent of the internet have led to globalisation and further consolidation of the model of culture industry established in the 1980s.

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[53] Peter Biskind, "Easy Riders, Raging Bulls", 1998
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[55] Peter Biskind, "Easy Riders, Raging Bulls", 1998
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The death of the New Hollywood however did not mean that its achievements were rejected and forgotten. Quite the contrary, the neoliberal culture industry has based its new identity to a large extent on the exploitation of the achievements of its predecessors. The pursuit of maximised profit with minimised risk has resulted in the culture industry immensely recycling already established ideas. Therefore, many of the most successful movies of the New Hollywood such as '*Jaws*' or '*Rocky*' had been turned into franchises. The biggest and most powerful franchise born during the New Hollywood period was '*Star Wars*'.

Star Wars and Nostalgia Franchise

Although it could be argued that almost every contemporary cinematic franchise is heavily relying on nostalgia for the original, '*Star Wars*' saga stands out as a special case, for it is inherently nostalgic.

While creating the original trilogy, George Lucas aimed at mimicking, recapturing the spirit of "the Saturday afternoon serial of the Buck Rogers type"[57], rather than reinventing the space opera genre. Original '*Star Wars*' films were therefore described by Frederic Jameson in his '*Postmodernism and Consumer Society*' as 'nostalgia films', in spite of not being strictly historical films. They were not intended as a parody but rather as a 'pastiche' that would, through explicit, conspicuous referentiality to its inspirations, satisfy the "nostalgic desire to return to that older period"[58] it referred to. The use of the ground-breaking special effects powdered, camouflaged the nostalgia and contemporized the original '*Star Wars*' movies preventing them from being perceived as merely an imitation of old science fiction serials. The first film of the series, '*A New Hope'*, was therefore a huge success, grossing over 307 million dollars and becoming the highest grossing movie of all time at the time, dethroning Steven Spielberg's '*Jaws*'. The success of its sequel *'Empire Strikes Back'* further cemented the franchise's position as the biggest film franchise. It could however be argued that what really made '*Star Wars*' the hegemon it is today, was its merchandise. By the release of the last movie of the trilogy '*Return of the Jedi'* in 1983, its role in the franchise became so vital that it not only altered the plot of the last movie so that it could spawn more merchandise and encourage higher sales but generally shifted its priorities, replacing the pursuit of reconciliation of art and entertainment with a mere pursuit of profit. '*Star Wars*' expanded to other media, becoming a brand rather than just a movie franchise. The merchandise, together with, inter alia, computer games, comics and re-releases has made it ubiquitous and kept it alive, actualized and thus continuously popular and prospering for 16 years without any new movie, until the arrival of the next film trilogy in 1999. Despite being extremely criticised by both the

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[57] Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", 1983, p. 5
[58] Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", 1983, p. 5

critics and the members of the fandom, the prequel trilogy was a huge financial success. Once again, the success relied heavily on the exploitation of, now self-referential nostalgia and immense sales of the merchandise (most importantly LEGO and Hasbro), which introduced the franchise to younger audiences and simultaneously instilled future nostalgia into them. With the prequels, '*Star Wars*' has established a standard, a key to invincibility that most contemporary film franchises would adapt.

Disney acquired Lucasfilm in 2012, gaining rights to '*Star Wars'*. What ensued was the deluge of remakes, sequels and spin-offs of the series (heavily relying on nostalgia and fan service) released every year starting from 2015. Disney has set out to make '*Star Wars*' a "forever franchise" by releasing a new instalment every year for as long as possible. Along with other franchises such as '*Marvel Cinematic Universe*' or '*Jurassic Park*', '*Star Wars*' has dominated popular culture, blocking and obscuring novelty and innovation and thus further empowering and fixing the oligopoly. The immortality of the culture industry's titans born in the 20th century roots it in the past and makes it more difficult for the culture to move on.

Conclusions

In this work I have attempted to analyse the causes and symptoms of the current obsession of Western culture with its past. The galloping technological progress coupled with increasingly prevalent and indestructible capitalism have resulted in Western society, increasingly confused and dissatisfied with modern life surrounding itself with more comprehensible and gratifying simulations of reality. Therefore, the culture gradually lost "the ability to grasp and articulate the present"[59] which further deepened the waning of historicity, culminating with the end of the Cold War. Desperate to regain the authenticity, historicity and all the lost referentials Western culture became increasingly more addicted to its immediate past. However, it resulted in further erosion of the notion of real and excessive fetishization and revivalism of dead styles, expressed in pandemic of remakes, spin-offs as well as increased number of 'forever franchises' with countless sequels, prequels and reboots, a practice which basically trapped the culture in the 20th century. I have highlighted and discussed the role that the culture industry and digitalization are playing in the process, both causing and perpetuating it, and illustrated it with, in my opinion, the most accurate examples such as the case of faux vintage filters or Disney's live action/CGI remakes.

With the still progressing expansion of capitalism and continuing technological progress it does not seem like the current situation will change soon. All we can do is to hope that eventually, as Francis Fukuyama wrote at the end of his most famous essay, the "prospect of centuries of boredom at the end of history will serve to get history started once again"[60].

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[59] Mark Fisher, "Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures", 2014, p. 19

[60] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?", 1989, p. 16

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