Reeling in the years: retrospect and nostalgia in youth movies

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Almost by definition, movies about youth are bound to be retrospective. Of course, young people do make their own films; and while there is a long (and partly hidden) history here, the advent of digital media has significantly extended the opportunities for young film-makers. Yet almost all commercially produced movies about young people – the films that reach cinemas and broadcast television – are produced by adults. As such, they are bound to view the past of youth or childhood from the perspective of the present. Implicitly or explicitly, this kind of retrospection frequently involves a *comparison between* past and present, which takes one or the other as better, or as preferable. We create narratives about the ideals or the freedom we have lost, or the misery and oppression we have escaped. We tell stories of 'coming of age', of the corruption of innocence or the acquisition of knowledge and enlightenment. Retrospect may entail nostalgia – a sense of wistful longing for a lost past – but nostalgia itself may have several dimensions, motivations and consequences, not just personally but also socially and politically. In this essay, I want to engage with this phenomenon through a consideration of six Hollywood films from the past 40 years: perhaps not all of them would be immediately categorised as 'youth movies', but in different ways they all raise questions about this process of retrospection and nostalgia for youth.

The term 'nostalgia' was first used to describe a medical condition. It was coined in 1688 by a Swiss doctor, Johannes Hofer, who had been studying the phenomenon of homesickness among soldiers who had been fighting overseas. The term combined the Greek words 'nostos' (meaning return to the native land) and 'algos' (suffering or grief). If left untreated, Hofer argued, nostalgia could prove debilitating and even fatal, but it was readily cured by returning home. While this *spatial* sense of the term still applies in the case of refugees or exiles, for example, it was gradually displaced during the twentieth century by a *temporal* idea. In this modern sense, nostalgia is not so much about homesickness as about a longing for the past, a 'regretful or wistful memory of an earlier time', as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it; and as such, the focus of nostalgia is often (though not always) on childhood and youth. Contemporary nostalgia is (perhaps surprisingly) less likely to be 'medicalised'; but it is also harder to escape – and indeed, some have seen it as an unavoidable consequence of modernity.

Obviously, looking back to the past – that is, retrospection or memory – need not entail any desire to return to it – that is, nostalgia. Nostalgia entails a sense of loss and regret. It is not caused by past experiences themselves, but by the comparison with things in the present, and by a sense of the discontinuity between them. Typically, nostalgia focuses on the positive elements of the past; and it derives its

emotional force from the assumption that the present is, by and large, worse than the past. However false or illusory such evaluations may be, nostalgia must depend upon personal experience – although some suggest that people can be 'nostalgic' for times that they have never known themselves.

In popular commentary, nostalgia often seems to have the status of a guilty pleasure. Its popular appeal cannot be denied, but it is also frequently dismissed as somehow inauthentic or escapist. This ambivalence is also apparent in academic debates. On the one hand, nostalgia is often seen as politically conservative, or even reactionary. Longing for an idealized version of the past – an imaginary 'Golden Age' – may be pleasurable (or at least 'bitter-sweet'), but it can make it harder to face the realities of the present and the challenges of the future. On the other hand, some argue that nostalgia can represent a critique of the limitations of the present, which has a more subversive or critical edge: far from being merely escapist, it can help people adapt to change, or indeed even to challenge official narratives of progress.

Of course, it is possible that nostalgia may be both of these things at the same time. Politically, for example, it can easily be mobilized in the interests of reactionary political forces, as we have seen in the case of the Brexit campaign in the UK; although the political Left also routinely makes use of nostalgic stories of political struggle or of public welfare provision (for example in views of the British National Health Service). Both socially and personally, nostalgia can serve diverse (and sometimes contradictory) purposes: it may involve a retreat to the past, but it can equally entail a retrieval of elements that should not be forgotten. Nostalgia is inevitably partial: it accentuates the positives of the past, and even idealises them. However, the line between historical objectivity and sentimental nostalgia is not always so easy to maintain. Obviously, much depends upon how we characterize both past and present – and particularly, how we identify and understand the point at which the continuity between them is seen to be broken.

These issues are particularly acute in the debate about nostalgia, but they also apply to memory (or retrospection) more broadly. Here too, this is not just a personal matter. Memory has significant political and sociological dimensions: collective, cultural memory is an important focus of much wider debates, for example about national identity and about the operation of political power. Yet perhaps surprisingly, one aspect that has been less widely addressed here is that of *generational* memory – that is, how people come to see themselves as collectively defined by age, as members of 'generations' that move together through time. As we'll see, this becomes especially significant when we consider how periods of social change (or the breaking of continuity) are defined in generational terms: the transition from the 1950s to the 1960s is one particular moment that I'll consider in some detail here.

Of course, media play a vital role in all this. Memory is partly, perhaps increasingly, mediated. We make sense of our personal life histories in the context of wider representations of historical change, both factual and fictional. Yet the media may also serve diverse and ambivalent functions. They may provide opportunities for collective remembering and the formation of identity, for the recovery of hidden histories of resistance as well as serving as means of political or ideological manipulation. Here again, much of the criticism has focused on the issue of representation. For example, the 'heritage industry' that emerged particularly

strongly in the UK in the 1980s – in the form of high-budget costume dramas on film and television, as well as visitor attractions and merchandising – was widely accused of promoting a sanitised, idealized view of British history. For some critics, 'nostalgia' was merely a cloak for conservative or reactionary politics, and indeed for rampant market economics. Yet for others, 'heritage' offered an opportunity to recover a more genuinely popular, even politically progressive, version of history.

In the US context, critics of postmodernity (most notably Frederic Jameson) saw the apparent 'nostalgia boom' of the 1970s and 1980s as somehow symptomatic of a kind of collective amnesia – a denial or repression of history that was characteristic of the broader 'depthlessness' of postmodern consumer capitalism. Others, such as Fred Davis, interpreted it as a reaction against the progressive social changes of the 1960s. I'll return to these arguments later; but it's worth noting that there have been 'nostalgia booms' in quite different times. For example, the art and literature of mid-Victorian Britain – the pre-Raphaelites, the Gothic Revival, the Romantic fiction of Walter Scott – was arguably suffused with nostalgia for earlier times (which, of course, the artists had not experienced themselves). Nostalgia is by no means a new, or necessarily modern, phenomenon.

Meanwhile, as Paul Grainge suggests, the apparent preoccupation with memory and nostalgia in contemporary media is at least partly a function of economic and technological changes in the media industries. The rise of multi-channel television in the 1990s found executives with hours of schedule time to fill; and re-runs of TV or films from earlier decades offered a relatively inexpensive way of doing this. The new channels were increasingly targeted towards segmented, niche markets; and 'nostalgia' provided a fairly straightforward way of re-packaging existing content to particular age groups. In more recent years, especially via YouTube, we have become used to an enormous media archive being instantly available online, funded only by advertising and the sale of users' personal data. Grainge argues that, as such, the apparent increase in the availability and consumption of media images and objects from the past is not necessarily a symptom of changes in the zeitgeist. Nor indeed, does it necessarily reflect a growing nostalgia, a sense of loss or yearning for the past.

Even so, these changes do seem to promote a changing relationship with the (mediated) past – albeit one that may well be more complex, ambivalent and self-aware than a mere wallowing in nostalgia. Yet even this may not be quite so new. As Simon Reynolds has shown, popular culture (or, in his account, popular music) has always been 'addicted' to reworking its own past. It's possible to look back to 'fifties revivals' in pop music in every decade since that time; and with the recycling and sampling made possible by digital technology, and with the advent of MTV and then YouTube and Spotify, the musical past and the present have become increasingly blurred. The past, it would seem, is no longer lost: it can easily be retrieved at the click of a mouse. Yet whether this amounts to historical amnesia – or rather to its opposite, a kind of obsession with history – is certainly debatable.

In this essay, I explore these broader issues through a discussion of three pairs of Hollywood films. These films all feature youth, and they are all set in the past. Yet the reason I have chosen them from among a myriad of other possibilities is that they all explicitly address questions to do with retrospect and nostalgia. The films

are quite heterogeneous, but they are all to some extent *about* the relationship between the present and the past. In my view, none of them is merely or straightforwardly nostalgic: indeed, in different ways and to different degrees, they seek to question or problematise nostalgia, or explicitly move beyond it.

The first pair consists of two well-known, and quite contrasting, films released within a few months of each other in 1973: George Lucas's *American Graffiti* and Terrence Malick's *Badlands*. Both are set several years earlier, in the late 1950s or early 1960s. The second pair are two time-travel films, in which the characters themselves 'return' from the present to a period in the late 1950s: Francis Coppola's *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986) and Gary Ross's *Pleasantville* (1998). The final two are both directed by Richard Linklater, a director whose work often reflects a preoccupation with the passing of time: *Dazed and Confused* (1993), set in 1976, and the much more recent *Everybody Wants Some!!* (2016), set in 1980.

The first four films come from different periods, but they all focus, explicitly or implicitly, on a particular moment of change – an apparent break in continuity – between the 1950s and 1960s. In the process, of course, they also reflect the times (in the 70s, 80s or 90s) in which they were made. The final two films are also retrospective, but of a different period; and they provide an opportunity to assess how far some of these broader arguments can be generalized to later generations. At the same time, there are numerous points of connection and comparison across and between these films, not least in terms of their references to other media and popular culture: *Dazed and Confused*, for example, makes a great many references to *American Graffiti*, while both films, along with *Badlands*, refer back to earlier films like *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955). As this implies, memory in these films is highly, and self-consciously, mediated – an issue that is most explicitly and dramatically addressed in *Pleasantville*, which takes its characters back to a rather different television version of the 1950s. Meanwhile, gender emerges as a key dimension here, to some extent reflecting changing gender relations across the historical period they represent, and in which they were made.

American Graffiti

George Lucas's 1973 film *American Graffiti* is routinely described as 'nostalgic' – and indeed as the film that originated a Hollywood cycle of 'youth nostalgia' movies that followed it. In fact, the film was preceded by two other examples of the genre, Robert Mulligan's *Summer of '42* and Peter Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show* (both released in 1971) – although both were set in earlier decades. Lucas's film is nominally set in 1962, although most of its cultural references are drawn from the 1950s: in a sense, it takes place before the changes of the sixties began. Its massive commercial success (worldwide earnings to date are in excess of $140 million) led to a whole series of retrospective film dramas and musicals set in the same period, including *Lords of Flatbush* (1974), *Cooley High* (1975), *Grease* (1978), *The Wanderers* (1979) and *Rumble Fish* (1983), as well as the long-running TV series *Happy Days* (1974-84) and its various spinoffs.

Set in the small town of Modesto, California, *American Graffiti* follows the interwoven narratives of four male characters on the night of their final high school graduation party, before two of them are due to leave town to go to college. All four are 'types', and their respective positions are clearly announced by the form of transportation in which they arrive on the opening set, the parking lot of a diner. Steve drives a '58 Chevrolet Impala, a cool but relatively conventional 1950s automobile; Curt arrives in a somewhat battered Citroen 2CV; Terry (or Toad) rides up on a Vespa-style motor-scooter, which he crashes ineptly into a wall; while John Milner appears revving a '32 Deuce Coupe, customized for racing. As the characters proceed to cruise from place to place around town, Steve breaks up and then reunites with his long-term girlfriend Laurie; Curt pursues an older blonde woman – a 'goddess' – whom he spots driving a white T-Bird, but then becomes caught up with a gang of hoodlums; Toad is allowed to borrow Steve's car, and uses it to pick up a girl, Debbie, with whom he tries and fails to make out; while Milner is lumbered with a feisty younger girl, Carol, and is eventually challenged to a road race, which he wins.

On one level, then, *American Graffiti* is about cars and heterosexual romance, and the relations between them; but it is also explicitly preoccupied with the continuity between the present and the past, and with the passing of time. These concerns are announced in its opening few minutes. The characters are all looking back or looking forward, looking to stay where they are or to move on. The key dilemmas for Curt and Steve are to do with their imminent departure to college. Curt, the more academic type, is getting cold feet, while Steve is ready to abandon Laurie and head off. Steve tells Curt, 'we're finally getting out of this turkey town', and urges him to put his doubts aside: 'you can't stay seventeen for ever'. Yet by the end of the film, their positions are schematically reversed: it is Curt who leaves, while Steve stays in town with Laurie. High school graduation thus represents the end of childhood: there are repeated references in these opening few minutes to the fact that the characters are 'not kids any more', and that they should no longer be interested in 'juvenile' things.

And yet retrospection is a central preoccupation for all of them. Milner, older than the others, is the character who has stayed behind, working as a car mechanic: he talks about 'remembering the good times', and looks back nostalgically to what the town used to be like 'five years ago'. According to him, 'rock-and-roll has been going downhill since Buddy Holly died'. Although he wins the road race, he knows (despite Toad's attempts to reassure him) that his days as the coolest guy in town are numbered. Meanwhile, Laurie constantly reminds Steve of the details of their early romance, most of which he seems to have forgotten – effectively tying their past to what she intends will be their future together. As she tells him, 'it doesn't make sense to leave a home to find a home'. Curt is perhaps most obviously troubled by this tension between past and future. He wanders the school corridors, trying and failing to get access to his old locker; he has an intimate chat with one of his teachers, who went off to college and quickly came back ('Maybe I was just scared', he says); and he briefly takes up with a former girlfriend, recalling the good times. Yet he also has political ambitions (he wants to become a presidential aide, or at least shake hands with Kennedy), and he continues to pursue his fantasy woman, seeing her car from above in the closing shots as his plane takes him off to college. When Curt meets the Wolfman – the enigmatic radio DJ whose music and patter

effectively stitch the narratives together – he is told that 'there's a great big beautiful world out there', and urged to go out and find it.

Ultimately, then, the film's central enigma is to do with the relation between past and future – between who we have been and who we will become. As such, the audience has to be told how things turned out, and this is something the film delivers before its closing credits. Steve, who chose to stay, ends up as an insurance agent in Modesto; Toad is missing in action in Vietnam; Milner is killed by a drunk driver in a road accident; while Curt is a writer in Canada, presumably dodging the draft. In each case, the characters receive a kind of poetic justice: Curt escapes, not just Modesto but the United States, while Steve accepts a conventional suburban life; and Toad and Milner are both effectively denied a future. In line with the film's almost schematic approach, each of these outcomes seems to confirm a judgment on the characters' different positions between past and future.

American Graffiti was famously cited by the theorist Frederic Jameson in his discussion of postmodernism, briefly mentioned above. For Jameson, the film is a primary example of the 'historical amnesia' and 'depthlessness' of contemporary US culture – 'a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history', for which 'the past is forever out of reach'. *American Graffiti* is, he argues, essentially a pastiche of the past, achieved through combining the characteristic artworks and objects of the time: it is a representation composed merely of other representations. Like many other discussions of postmodernism, Jameson's sweeping account raises much broader historical and epistemological questions: aside from anything else, it seems to assume that we could gain some kind of authentic, unmediated access to the past, *outside* of representations.

Even so, Jameson's observations about pastiche do carry some weight. The film is full of iconic period imagery – the streamlined automobiles, the drive-in diner with its neon signs, the girls' flared dresses at the high-school hop. It relies heavily on classic rock-and-roll music, not just to create period atmosphere but also to comment upon and connect the different elements of the narrative (it notably begins with Bill Haley's 'Rock Around the Clock', the tune that also opened one of the original juvenile delinquent films, *Blackboard Jungle*, in 1955). Most of the characters and set pieces seem extremely familiar – the under-age kid attempting to buy liquor, the middle-class guy being inducted into the delinquent gang, the booby trapping of the police car. Yet while *American Graffiti* may have an air of pastiche, it is also the original source of a great many elements that were subsequently pastiched (or at least reworked) in the films that followed it. It's hard to view it today without this element of hindsight (and this may have been the case for Jameson, whose article was based on a talk that was first given almost ten years after the film's release).

However, the film does not merely recycle these elements of the past: it also critiques them. Milner, with his white t-shirt, swept back hair and jeans, is a variant on the James Dean character Jim Stark from *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955) – a reference we will meet again in several of the other films I will discuss. The car race with which the film culminates is a blatant echo of the one in *Rebel*, even if it is bland by comparison. Yet while he is by no means as troubled as Jim Stark, Milner clearly belongs to the past: he knows that he is losing his authority and charisma, and his eventual off-screen death merely confirms the impossibility of his having a future.

Meanwhile, it is Curt, with his 2CV and his plaid hippy-style shirt, who represents the future, and whom we follow at the film's conclusion.

For the critic Barbara Jane Brickman, the film's apparent nostalgia is not merely idealistic and utopian, but positively conservative. The film 'lovingly celebrates an enchanted past', but simultaneously mourns its passing: it expresses a reactionary wish for a world before the social revolutions of the 1960s. One key dimension of this, in Brickman's account, is to do with gender: the 'where are they now?' conclusion pointedly excludes the female characters, and this reflects their more general marginalization or erasure within the film itself.

There is some truth in these arguments, but again they do not tell the whole story. Despite the film's comic set-pieces, there is a sense of aimlessness about the characters as they cruise from one location to the next: when Curt asks his former girlfriend Wendy where she is going, she replies 'nowhere' – and he replies 'you mind if I come along?' These are lives of boredom and confinement, not of glamour and adventure. While Curt escapes, the other characters either remain trapped (Steve) or fail to progress into the future (Milner, Toad). Milner, in some respects the iconic representative of 1950s youth culture, is ultimately seen as a loser. Furthermore, at some stage in the proceedings, all the four male characters are humiliated or manipulated by women. Toad fails to get what he wants from the more sexually experienced Debbie, although she does take pity on him; Milner is impatient with Carol, but she gives a good deal more than she gets; Laurie provokes Steve's jealousy in order to get him back; and Curt is briefly seduced by the impossible dream of the 'goddess' in the white T-bird. Of course, it would be ludicrous to claim that these are feminist images, or even pre-feminist ones (although I might make a case for Carol). Nevertheless, it is possible to detect more than just a conservative regret for the passing of the fifties here: there is also a sense of its inevitability, and even a promise that, in the guru-like words of the Wolfman, there is a 'big, beautiful world' ahead, at least for some.

Badlands

Terrence Malick's *Badlands* was released within months of *American Graffiti*, but it offers a contrasting take on the issues I am discussing here. It is a very different kind of film: it is intended not as mainstream box office entertainment, but as a kind of art movie. Yet it too can be seen as part of a contemporary Hollywood cycle, in this case of 'couple on the run' movies – including most obviously *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), but also *Sugarland Express*, *Thieves Like Us* and *Dirty Larry, Crazy Mary* (all 1974). The film is loosely based on the true story of Charles Starkweather, a teenage killer who murdered eleven people while on the run in the states of Nebraska and Wyoming in December 1957 and January 1958, accompanied by his fourteen-year-old girlfriend Caril Ann Fugate. (Several details, including the ages of the protagonists, have been changed in the film.)

The film begins in a dead-end town in South Dakota, where fifteen-year-old schoolgirl Holly Sargis is courted by a twenty-five-year old garbage collector, Kit Carruthers. When her father finds out, he tries to keep them apart, and shoots Holly's dog as a punishment. Kit eventually murders him and burns down the family

home. The couple head off towards the badlands of Montana, pursued by law enforcement. They seek shelter in various locations, and Kit kills several other people who come in their way as they do so. Holly eventually decides to give herself up, and separates herself from Kit, although Kit surrenders shortly afterwards. Kit achieves a degree of notoriety in the media, and is eventually executed, while Holly is released on probation and marries the son of her defence attorney.

Despite its relatively simple narrative, *Badlands* is a dense, atmospheric and multi-layered film. The cinematography is rich and lyrical, but also frequently quite surrealistic; and the use of music (much of it by Carl Orff) is unsettling and almost transcendent at times. The film has attracted enormous critical acclaim, and Malick (whose first feature film this was) is generally regarded as one of the distinctive 'visionaries' of American cinema. There is a great deal more that could be said about it, but in this context I want to focus specifically on how it relates to my theme of retrospect and nostalgia.

Like several of Malick's later films, *Badlands* uses first-person voice-over: the story is narrated retrospectively by Holly, speaking in the past tense at some unspecified point in the future (after her trial and her eventual marriage). This future perspective is apparent from some of her opening words: 'little did I know,' she says, 'that what began in that small town would end in the badlands of Montana'. The end of the story is effectively foretold at the outset: as Kit releases a large red balloon bearing his vow of fidelity and some lovers' tokens, Holly tells us that 'something must've told him that we'd never live these days of happiness again, that they were gone forever.' Holly's is not the only perspective that is represented: there are several scenes in which she does not appear, but even here it is her narration that frames them.

However, Holly is not an entirely reliable narrator. There are frequent contradictions between what she says in her voice-over and what she says on screen (which is very little), and between what we hear and what we see. In particular, it is not always easy to square her account of both characters' inner feelings with their actual behaviour. Furthermore, her narration is delivered in a laconic, almost expressionless Texan drawl, which seems at odds with the intensity and urgency of the events she is describing. Her account of events frequently uses clichés that derive from romantic fiction or children's adventure stories: yet here too, there is often a contrast between her words and the accidental and occasionally comical nature of what we see. When she describes Kit as 'trigger happy' or 'the hell-bent type', or notes that 'we had our bad moments, like any couple', it is hard not to laugh at the understatement. Holly is a participant in events, or a witness of them, but it is difficult to know how far she can be trusted.

Several critics have been disturbed by the blankness and opacity of Holly's narration, and of the characters more broadly. Yet as Hannah Patterson suggests, this largely reflects the characters' lack of a clear sense of their *own* identity: Kit in particular does not seem to fully understand why he is doing what he is doing, and for Holly the world seems at times like 'a far away planet'. Their relationship is also curiously disconnected and passionless, despite the romantic clichés of Holly's narration. At some points, Holly claims to know Kit's inner feelings ('he wanted to die with me…') yet at others she claims not to know him at all – 'it goes to show you can know a

person and not really know 'em at the same time' – and speculates about whether 'there's something wrong with his brain'.

If retrospection is not necessarily reliable, neither are the characters' projections of the future. Both have expectations – not just of escape, but of their future lives – that seem wildly unrealistic, at times almost comically so. As they leave the burning house, Kit tells Holly to bring her school books with her; having held up a rich man's house and locked him in his cellar, he gives his captives a list of what they have 'borrowed' and then carefully wipes the door handle for fingerprints; and as the couple dance in the desert to the strains of Nat King Cole on their car radio, Kit muses, 'if I could sing something about how I feel right now, it'd be a hit'. The release of the balloon is only one instance where Kit in particular looks ahead to an imaginary future. While out in the desert, the lovers bury a kind of memory box or time capsule in a bucket; and in the final stages of their pursuit, as the police helicopters circle above, Kit tells her to meet him 'Twelve noon, the Grand Coulee Dam. New Years Day, 1964.' Just before his arrest, Kit constructs a small cairn of stones to mark the spot; and he also records messages for posterity, once in a recording booth just before setting fire to Holly's house, and once into a tape recorder at the rich man's house.

Like those in the very different context of *American Graffiti*, the characters are preoccupied with the relationship between the past and the future. Yet this is not a 'coming of age' movie. In the dream-like sequence where Holly's house burns, we see emblems of her childhood consumed in flames, accompanied by choral music; and she looks out of the window at a couple of younger children playing in the street below, as if forever disconnected from such a possibility. Nevertheless, Holly seems to retain a kind of child-like innocence throughout the events that follow. Kit is significantly older than Holly, and he initiates her into sex; but (despite her gushing commentary about their undying love) she is distinctly underwhelmed – 'Is that all there is to it?' she asks. During their later stay in a forest hide-out, Holly puts on improvised make-up; but for the bulk of the movie, she remains girlish both in her dress and behaviour.

Badlands might conceivably be described as a road movie, but here again there is no obvious progress towards self-knowledge or enlightenment that is often characteristic of such films. Nor is the film really a 'youth rebellion' film. As Neil Campbell points out, the early sequences are full of images of confinement; yet Kit and Holly's apparent freedom on the road is equally limited and constrained. Kit does kill Holly's father, but the framing of these sequences serves to emphasise the similarities between them; and as the narrative proceeds, he takes on an increasingly fatherly role towards Holly. The philosophical musings he records into the rich man's tape recorder are decidedly conservative: 'Listen to your parents and teachers. They got a line on most things, so don't treat them like enemies… Consider the minority opinion, but try to get along with the majority opinion once it's accepted…' Of course, there is an incongruity here between Kit's words and his actions, but Kit and Holly's rebellion nevertheless seems curiously aimless and arbitrary: it goes nowhere, because it has nowhere to go. And ultimately, they are both defeated by the social order: Kit through his execution and Holly through her respectable marriage.

The film is very far from the kind of pastiche condemned by Fredric Jameson, but its references to popular culture of the time are striking. Like John Milner in *American Graffiti*, Kit wears the James Dean outfit of quiff hairstyle, white t-shirt and jeans. The comparison with Dean is one of the first things Holly says about him in her narration, and this recurs at the end, when one of the arresting police officers remarks to his colleague, 'I'll kiss your ass if he don't look like James Dean'. There are also several visual echoes of Dean, both in *Rebel* and in his last film *Giant*. Throughout their period on the run, the couple seem to be well informed about how their actions are being reported in the media (although it's not clear how); and after his arrest, Kit consciously sets about cultivating his own legend. Before his final arrest, he carefully adjusts his hair in the car's rear-view mirror, and then replaces his hat. Later, he leans nonchalantly on the wing of a plane while holding what amounts to a press conference with the assembled soldiers who have come to arrest him. Despite the execution that clearly awaits him, he seems to have achieved his goal of a kind of media celebrity or notoriety: 'I always wanted to be a criminal', he says, as we see him signing his arrest papers and shaking hands with his arresting officers, while offering mementoes to his audience. Nevertheless, this is all suffused with irony: Kit is not a smart, misunderstood kid, or a prototypical rebel, but a deluded loser, and a failure. Like Milner, he dies (or is killed) before he can get old; but the gap between the legend and the reality is evident to all.

Barbara Jane Brickman argues that *Badlands* undercuts what she sees as the conservative fantasies of the youth nostalgia movie. Where *American Graffiti* regresses to the past and evades the present, *Badlands* critiques the past, and undermines the grounds for nostalgia. In my view, *American Graffiti* is more ambivalent and less conservative than she suggests, but I would agree with her view of *Badlands*. Again, a key dimension of this is to do with gender. Holly has been described by some critics as a relatively passive figure, and as a dupe of popular culture – especially of romantic fiction, and of celebrity gossip, which she is seen reading in one scene during their journey. However, as Brickman argues, she is an active agent in the narrative: she uses Kit to achieve a kind of feminist revenge against her father, and to escape from his control. Kit starts out as the object of her desire – 'he was handsomer than anyone I ever saw' – but even at an early stage in their relationship, she mocks and belittles him. As the story proceeds, she consistently undermines his potential as a kind of fantasy lover – albeit more in what she says and does on screen than in her voice-over narration. She increasingly comes to regard him with a kind of ironic detachment, gradually becoming more bored and disaffected: at one point she describes her feelings as being 'like when you're sitting there and all the water's run out of the bathtub'. Kit's masculine authority is thus undermined, not only by his stupidity and his narcissistic approach to fame, but also by Holly's waning interest in him. For much of the time, he (rather than Holly) is the real butt of the irony.

American Graffiti and *Badlands* are self-evidently very different, but they share a preoccupation with the relationship between the past, the present and the future, and with questions of retrospect and memory. While both are set in the past, neither can easily be accused of wallowing in nostalgia. Although *American Graffiti* might permit such a response, it remains ambivalent about it; while *Badlands* provides a more troubling and more directly critical perspective. The next two films I'll

consider take up this theme of the relation between the present and the past much more explicitly.

Travelling in time

Badlands and *American Graffiti* were made at the end of the 'long 1960s': they look back to a time before the social and cultural changes of that decade had set in, but from a vantage point where many of those changes had exhausted themselves, or begun to turn sour. The very different atmosphere of the US in the early 1970s – the fag end of the Vietnam war, the corruption revealed by Watergate, and the broader disillusionment of the counter-culture – is marginally evident in the closing caption of *American Graffiti,* and perhaps also in the fatalistic, disaffected tone of *Badlands*.

The next pair of films I'll consider here also reflect the changing perspectives of the times in which they were made: the mid-1980s and the late 1990s respectively. Both use the trope of time travel to explore the relationship between the past and the present, and between youth and adulthood. They are not just personal narratives, but also generational ones, which reflect on wider perceptions of historical change – and in particular, like my first pair of films, on the transition from the 1950s to the 1960s. However, their own historical vantage points are also very different.

The first film, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, tells the story from the perspective of the 1980s, and has been seen by some to reflect the conservative values – and particularly the conservative sexual politics – of the Reagan era. By contrast, the second film, *Pleasantville,* could be seen to offer a more liberal account of historical change, reflecting the political values of Clinton's America. As I'll suggest, both films are more complex and ambivalent than this would suggest; but they do undoubtedly respond to the changing values of the times in which they were made, as well as those in which they are set.

Peggy Sue Got Married

Released in 1986, *Peggy Sue Got Married* was directed by Francis Ford Coppola. It seems that the film was not a particularly personal project for Coppola: he was brought in at a relatively late stage when others dropped out, and seems to have accepted largely because he was short of money after the expensive failure of his previous feature, *The Cotton Club* (1984). As a light romantic comedy, it was not, he reportedly said, 'the kind of film that I would normally want to do'. Critical opinion on the film was rather divided, with some accusing it of sentimentality; yet somewhat to Coppola's embarrassment, it was a considerable commercial success, becoming his highest grossing film of the decade (it brought in $22 million in its first three weeks).

Briefly, the film tells the story of Peggy Sue Bodell, a 43-year-old woman (played by Kathleen Turner) who is catapulted back to her senior year at high school. The story begins as she prepares – in the company of her teenage daughter Beth – to attend her 25-year high school reunion. We learn that Peggy is in the process of divorcing from her unfaithful husband Charlie (Nicolas Cage). Once Peggy's high school

sweetheart, Charlie has failed to fulfill his dream of becoming a pop singer, and become a crass television salesman, 'Crazy Charlie, the appliance king'. At the reunion, Peggy connects with her old school friends, but after she is proclaimed reunion queen, she faints and wakes to find herself back in 1960. She retains the knowledge and experience (and the body) of her adult self, but she is treated by the other characters as an 18-year-old.

As she tries to figure out how she really feels about Charlie, Peggy also explores the possibilities of romantic liaisons with two alternative men – the geeky Richard Norvik, who has since become a billionaire inventor, and the sexy beatnik poet Michael Fitzsimmons. She also relives her early relationship with Charlie, rediscovering some of his appeal, but also (from her adult vantage point) being painfully aware of his immaturity and inadequacy. Peggy seems unwilling to accept any of the available alternatives, and resolves to return to the present; but before she does so, she takes one last journey to visit her grandparents. At her request, her grandfather attempts to project her back to the present through a bizarre Masonic ritual; but in the course of this, she is kidnapped by Charlie. Charlie tells her that he has given up singing and taken a share in his father's business: he proposes to her, and as they make love, (re-)conceiving their daughter Beth, Peggy is magically transported back to the present. In the closing scene, in her hospital room, she shows tentative signs of being reconciled with the adult Charlie.

Production on *Peggy Sue Got Married* began some time before the release of George Lucas's *Back to the Future*, although it followed in its wake into cinemas. As with that film, part of its appeal lies in its recovery of the iconography and music of the 1950s; and in this respect it might well be classified, in Fredric Jameson's terms, as a 'nostalgia film'. As in *American Graffiti*, the cinematography emphasizes pastel colours, adding what some critics felt was a 'nostalgic glow'. In the course of the film, Peggy rediscovers the forgotten pleasures, not only of her own childhood, but also of the era more broadly. As she returns to her suburban childhood home, she embraces her disconcerted mother and sister, marvels lovingly over her childhood possessions, and sits down to family breakfast with unfamiliar enthusiasm.

Yet there is also a considerable degree of irony here. In the classroom at school, she sings 'God Bless America' with a fervour that startles her classmates. As in *Back to the Future*, there is also the ironic benefit of hindsight in some of the period details – not least at the expense of most of the male characters. For example, Peggy bursts into laughter on discovering that her father has bought a Ford Edsel, an infamous failure of the period. She offers advice to Richard Norvik based on her retrospective understanding of how technology has evolved, from the moon landings to the development of panti-hose – advice that, we infer, he eventually uses to make his fortune as an inventor. Meanwhile, Michael Fitzsimmons is a more charismatic and desirable option. Peggy makes love with him under an artificially starry sky, although his beatnik persona (black turtleneck, smouldering looks and ludicrously pretentious poetry) is also a focus for irony – and when he proposes to take her to Iowa, where she and another girlfriend will support his writing career, she quickly demurs. Meanwhile, her dealings with Charlie reflect not just her adult sexual maturity, but also the perspectives of the so-called 'sexual revolution': when she takes the initiative, and refuses to be the obedient, asexual teenage girl, he is horrified and escapes as fast as he can, calling her a 'humiliator'. The past that Peggy discovers is

far from idyllic, and after some pleasurable rediscoveries, she quickly decides that she does not want to stay.

Peggy Sue is thus an ironic commentary on the 1950s, albeit a fairly affectionate one, rather than merely a work of nostalgia. However, it is also a romantic comedy. It tells a familiar story about a couple who overcome a sequence of obstacles and misunderstandings in order to become united (or in this case, reunited). The return to the past adds an additional twist here: in the present, Peggy's dilemma is whether or not to divorce Charlie; but in the past, it is why she would ever want to marry him in the first place. The basic rom-com narrative (will they – won't they?) is re-run from the perspective of the future: rather than the romantic union being the end of the narrative, our knowledge of what has happened since (what happened *after* Peggy Sue got married) throws it all into doubt.

As a rom-com, the film has been accused of complicity with patriarchal ideas about romantic love – a charge that was laid by several contemporary reviewers such as Marsha Kinder, Roberta Pearson and Bob Bartosch. Peggy, they argue, seems to learn nothing from her journey to the past. Unlike Marty McFly in *Back to the Future*, there is nothing she can do to change the future – although there is a certain ambivalence about whether her 'return' has actually happened at all (the billionaire Richard Norvik may have learnt from her descriptions of future inventions, and Michael Fitzsimmons later dedicates a book to 'Peggy Sue and a starry night', suggesting that it was more than just a dream). Yet rather than rejecting patriarchy and its romantic myths, Peggy ultimately gives up her freedom: she is contained and recuperated. At the high-school reunion, she observes to her friends, 'if I knew then what I know now, I'd do lots of things differently' – and yet ultimately, she does not.

Even so, it's hard to see the film as offering any kind of endorsement of the male romantic hero. We view the teenage Charlie almost exclusively through the eyes of the mature adult Peggy – with the notable exception of one scene, in which we learn of the frustration of his musical ambitions as he is turned down by a music industry executive. Cage's performance – and especially his adoption of a mannered, nasal voice – attracted criticism at the time, not least from Kathleen Turner. However, as she later acknowledged, this reinforced Peggy's 'disillusionment with the past': 'the way I saw it was, yeah, he *was* that asshole.' As Peter Cowie suggests, Charlie is a character for whom youth itself seems to be a kind of act: his narcissistic persona is a way of covering up his gaucheness and vulnerability. To an even greater extent than Milner in *American Graffiti* or Kit in *Badlands*, he might be seen as a kind of parody of the James Dean type, with his snarl and his elaborate quiff. At one point, Michael refers to him as 'trouble without a cause'. Yet part of what Peggy comes to realize is that Charlie is by no means as cool and self-assured as he might have appeared to her at the time: the resentment she felt at the outset ultimately turns to pity.

Peggy Sue may be a romantic comedy of sorts, but it is not a straightforward or traditional one, or indeed merely nostalgic. 1950s conceptions of gender roles sit alongside – and are seen through the lenses of – more modern feminist ideas. This gives the film a double perspective. Peggy is both a 1950s girl and a 1980s woman: she wants the romantic dream, but she also recognizes that it is just a dream. She may have decided not to follow up on her ambition to become a dancer, but she is a

successful businesswoman, running her own bakery. Meanwhile, Charlie is the romantic hero, the teenage heart-throb and the object of her desire, but he is also pathetic and absurd. His adolescent romanticism is seen as excessive and ludicrous; and, as an adult, he appears to be little more than a grotesque failure. As the critic Bruce Babington suggests, the film offers a 'switchback ride through gender roles and different conceptions of gender relations', which aligns it with the 'nervous' or 'troubled' romantic comedies that followed in the wake of second-wave feminism.

In this respect, the film's ending is also decidedly ambivalent. For some critics, this was a pat, conservative resolution that ultimately served the status quo. What particularly brings the couple together when they finally make love (and conceive their daughter in the process) is not so much Peggy's desire for Charlie, but the fact that he produces a locket containing images of the two of them as children – the same locket that we see in the opening scene, containing images of Beth and their son Scott. In the final scene, back in the present, it appears that Peggy might be reconciled to a future with Charlie. She invites him to dinner, and promises they will eat strudel – a dish that her grandparents had identified as the thing that held their family together. This ending might thus be construed as an endorsement of family (and perhaps of 'family values'), but it is far from an unequivocal endorsement of romance. In the closing shots, Beth is closer to Peggy, while Charlie remains more distanced – although curiously Scott remains absent, as he does throughout.

These final scenes have an air of fatalistic resignation, or at least of disillusioned acceptance, rather than overpowering romantic affirmation. As Babington points out, a great deal is left hanging here. We don't now if Peggy and Charlie will ultimately get back together, or if their new relationship will last. We don't know whether Charlie himself has actually learnt anything, or whether he will give up his philandering ways. The film gives us ample cause to be sceptical about these questions: even if the two are reconciled, it is unlikely that their relationship will be much like that of the idealized grandparents. At the end, Peggy remains knowledgeable and authoritative: she is not subjugated, and she seems unlikely to accept Charlie back on anything other than her own terms.

In the course of the narrative, Peggy does discover more about Charlie – and particularly about the failure of his musical ambitions. She seems to re-evaluate his talents when she encounters him by chance performing at a local bar (significantly, with an all-black band) – suggesting that his potential might go beyond the vanilla doo-wop of his regular (white) neighbourhood group. Unseen by Peggy, Charlie is rejected by the industry manager, but he also gives up his musical career in the interests of settling down with her: he too is arguably contained within the limitations of the family.

To some extent, what Peggy learns from her grandparents could well be aligned with Reaganite ideas about family values. The grandparents live in a kind of small-town pastoral idyll: Peggy arrives just as the sun is setting, and the scene is captured in misty shots of old-fashioned, cosy domestic interiors. The implicit reference here, which was invoked by Coppola in his discussion of the film, is to Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*. As in Wilder's play, and as in *It's a Wonderful Life* (another obvious point of reference), the lead character learns to accept and indeed to treasure the mundane elements of domestic family life. She learns to be content with her lot,

perhaps, but with a considerable degree of ambivalence: after all, her marriage has collapsed, and she is not being expected to embrace some kind of imaginary romantic ideal.

While there might be some nostalgia here for an imaginary version of the 1930s, therefore, there is little nostalgia for the 1950s. If Peggy's grandparents are idealized, her parents undoubtedly are not: her mother in particular seems to be subjugated and deluded, at one point expressing surprise when Peggy suggests that she should sit at the kitchen table rather than continuing with the cooking. Ultimately, the Reaganite dream of a return to family values is shown to be precisely that: a dream that can no longer be translated to reality, if indeed it ever could. Like *American Graffiti*, the film cannot reasonably be accused of simply ignoring or wishing away the social changes of the 1960s. On the contrary, it views the decade before the sixties from the perspective of the years that followed them.

Pleasantville

Gary Ross's film *Pleasantville* (1998) tells a similar time-travelling story, although there are some crucial differences. The 1950s past to which the characters return is not one they themselves have experienced, but rather something they know from television re-runs. Unlike Peggy Sue, they do have the ability to change the future, which they do in spectacular style. *Pleasantville* does not present a flattering picture of the present day; but unlike Coppola's movie, there is little that can be called nostalgic about its portrayal of the past.

The two leading characters, twins David (Tobey Maguire) and Jennifer (Reese Witherspoon) are magically taken back to the world of *Pleasantville*, a black-and-white 1950s sitcom shown on a 'retro' TV channel – a show of which David is a particularly knowledgeable fan. After a quarrel over the remote control and a visit from a mysterious repairman, they are transported into their TV set, and find themselves in the living room of the idyllic *Pleasantville* family, the Parkers. David and Jennifer now have to act the roles of Bud and Mary Sue Parker, while retaining their modern-day attitudes and personalities. The socially awkward David is initially pleased to become the normal, popular Bud, and by his acquisition of a girlfriend; although Jennifer – whose interests mainly extend to sex and her peer group – is dismayed by the constraints of Pleasantville. Bud urges her not to disrupt the fictional world he knows so well, but eventually the twins begin exposing the inhabitants of the town, not just to sex, but also to other personal freedoms, and to art and literature. As they do so, Pleasantville starts to change, as previously black-and-white objects and people burst into rich and vibrant colours.

The teenagers' fictional mother Betty changes into colour as she begins a passionate affair with Bill Johnson, who employs Bud at the local soda shop. Meanwhile, Bill himself discovers a new talent as a painter. Their father George, and the other male leaders of the community, see the changes as eating away at the town's moral values, and remain in black-and-white. Incited by a colourful nude painting of Betty on the window of Bill's soda shop, they begin a reactionary campaign: the window is smashed and the soda shop is destroyed, vigilantes patrol the town, books are burned, and anyone who is 'coloured' is harassed in the streets. The Mayor

introduces a new set of town rules that, among other things, ban the use of coloured paint, and enforce the teaching of a 'non-changeist' view of history. Bud and Bill are arrested and tried for using forbidden colours, but ultimately everyone in the courtroom changes colour and the Mayor leaves in horror when he is exposed as having changed as well. Eventually, the entire town becomes coloured, and the people of Pleasantville are finally introduced to the rest of the world. Televisions in the shop windows now display full-colour images of various scenic vistas, and Main Street, which had previously been a circuit that led back to its beginning again, now leads away to other towns and cities.

Enjoying his new role, David had initially resisted the mysterious repairman's attempts to get him to return home; but he finally does so at the end of the film. Jennifer, having discovered a new interest in literature via the work of D.H. Lawrence (he's 'kinda sexy') chooses to stay behind and attend college in a nearby town. In the final scene, their fictional parents, along with Bill, are seen sitting on a park bench in the sunshine, happily admitting that they don't know what is going to happen next.

Pleasantville tells a highly optimistic story of social change, as the black-and-white conformism and repression of the 1950s gives way to the colourful diversity and self-expression of the 1960s. However, its critique is directed more at *representations* of the 1950s than at the actual reality. The sitcom of the title appears to be an amalgam of the popular family sitcoms of the period – the likes of *Father Knows Best* (1954-63), *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-63) and *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-66). Focusing on the lives of white, suburban, middle-class families, these shows presented what the trailers on David's favourite retro TV channel describe as 'kindler, gentler times'. This is a sanitized world without sex and violence, where political and social conflict – and indeed conflict of any kind – are entirely absent. Gender roles are not questioned, domestic life is safe and predictable, and the characters are entirely conformist and conventional. As David and Jennifer quickly discover, there is no world outside Pleasantville. It never rains, the high-school basketball team always wins, and the fire brigade is only capable of rescuing cats from trees, because no fires ever break out. Its residents sleep in single beds, there are no toilets, and the books have only blank pages.

In the opening scene of the film, the contrast between this imaginary world and that of contemporary America is drawn in highly polarized – and quite stereotypical – terms. David and Jennifer's parents are separated: their father fails to take responsibility for child-care, and their mother is about to leave them alone to spend the weekend with her younger boyfriend. While David is something of a social misfit, Jennifer is preoccupied with the prospect of having sex with one of the most popular 'jocks' in the school. To underline the contrast, there are short sequences where their teachers are shown informing them about economic decline, the spread of HIV and the impact of global climate change.

Nevertheless, the changes that David and Jennifer precipitate in the black-and-white world of Pleasantville are seen in uniformly positive terms, while those who oppose them are presented as bigots and (in their opposition to the 'coloureds') as racists. The scenes of book burning and the courtroom implicitly recall fascism and McCarthyism. At first, it seems that the change into colour is caused by sex, as Mary

Sue seduces one of the boys at 'Lovers Lane', and the other young people discover its delights. To some extent, it appears to be specifically about the impact of *female* sexual desire: their mother Betty is transformed when (on Mary Sue's suggestion) she masturbates in the bath, causing her to see in colour, and a tree outside to spontaneously combust. In general, the men are slower to change than the women; and it they who seek to defend the established order when their wives refuse to perform their allotted household tasks. 'Something is happening,' the Mayor says, 'and we can all see where it's coming from'. Ultimately, however, it is passion of whatever kind that appears to precipitate the change: Bud eventually changes when he defends his mother against an attack by the vigilantes, and it is the Mayor's anger at Bill and Bud during the courtroom scene that does the same. It is not sex that changes Mary Sue into colour, but her reading, which she eventually comes to prefer to going out with boys and (as she puts it) being a 'slut'.

However, the gradual colourisation of Pleasantville is actually a metaphor for much wider social and cultural changes that began to appear as the 1950s gave way to the 1960s. The residents turn to colour as they discover literary classics (from Mark Twain to D.H. Lawrence) and the history of Western art (and particularly the modernist expressionism of Bill's paintings). Significant moments of change are also signaled by the use of black music on the soundtrack: as Bud tells the other young people the story of *Huckleberry Finn*, the white pseudo-classicism of Dave Brubeck's 'Take Five' gives way to the more open African-American modal jazz of Miles Davis's 'Kind of Blue'; and Bud himself later turns to colour to the accompaniment of Etta James singing 'At Last'. The residents of Pleasantville remain white (albeit now in colour), but the advances of the civil rights movement of the 1960s are implicitly (and perhaps rather coyly) acknowledged.

There is also an element of role reversal here in terms of age. The adult characters are effectively infantilized, and they find any disruption of the world of Pleasantville profoundly unsettling. When Bill's working routines at the soda shop are disturbed, Bud has to explain very carefully what he should do; and it is also Bud who inducts him into the world of art. Meanwhile, Mary Sue has to explain to her mother about sex; and when Betty exclaims in horror that 'your father would never do anything like that', her daughter also inducts her into the fact that there are 'other ways to enjoy yourself'. Their father, meanwhile, is utterly helpless once Betty abandons him.

At the end of the film, a resolution of sorts is achieved. Jennifer has discovered a new identity as a literature student (complete with spectacles), while David returns to the present to find that his mother has decided not to go off with her inappropriate boyfriend. David tells his mother to set aside ideas about how things are 'supposed to be', and she seems surprised by his new-found wisdom. As the final credits play, the Beatles song 'Across the Universe' – with its refrain 'nothing's gonna change my world' – is heard. As Robb McDaniel suggests, this ending might be considered 'maddeningly sit-com'. These final exchanges are just as sententious and trite as those of the 1950s sitcoms that the film parodies: a lesson is learned, an old order is restored, and life carries on. Yet, as in *Peggy Sue Got Married*, there is a kind of resignation, even a degree of fatalism, here: nothing, it seems, will ever be as perfect as we are led to imagine it should be, and it's by no means clear that all will turn out for the best.

Like *Peggy Sue, Pleasantville* does indulge in some of the pleasures of nostalgia. Yet ultimately, it is a critique, not so much of the 1950s suburban family itself, but of the nostalgic *idealization* of it. As Douglas Muzzio and Thomas Halper suggest, the film has much in common with other dystopian movies about suburbia made during the same period, such as *American Beauty* (1999), *The Ice Storm* (1997) and *The Truman Show* (1998). However, like the latter film, the target of *Pleasantville* is not so much the reality but its representation: the world shown in the 1950s family sitcom was, it implies, fundamentally false. As such, the film is not so much a pastiche (in Fredric Jameson's terms) as a parody, or even a satire. Rather than merely recycling previous representations and attempting to pass them off as reality (as Jameson implies is the case in *American Graffiti*), it draws attention to the ways in which such representations are fabricated, and to the gaps between representation and reality.

Ultimately, *Pleasantville* provides an optimistic, gently liberal account of social change that reflects the period in which it was made. There is a risk of being unduly schematic about this, but to some extent we can see this in terms of succeeding decades – or perhaps more accurately, of the values that different decades are often seen to embody and represent. From the perspective of the 1990s – of Bill Clinton's America, and the 'culture wars' of the time – the film critiques the nostalgia of the 1980s, and Reagan's return to 'family values' (a charge that, as we have seen, was made against *Peggy Sue*). It provides a revisionist account of the 1950s, not as a decade of utopia and harmony, but of repression and conformism; and it regards the changes of the 1960s and 1970s not as a matter of social decline but as an opening to new and empowering possibilities. (It's worth noting here that the film's director Gary Ross had been a Democratic speechwriter before moving into the film industry.) *Pleasantville* ends at the point at which the 1960s begin; and as such, it avoids having to address the contradictions and the limitations of the various forms of 'liberation' that ensued. In the world of Donald Trump's America, this itself might be seen as escapist and even sentimental. It may be a false or oversimplified account of history; but it is one that runs against the grain of many contemporary accounts of social change – and as such, it may be one that we currently need.

***Dazed and Confused*: beyond nostalgia**

In this and the final section, I consider two films that offer a rather different perspective on these questions about retrospect and nostalgia. Both are directed by Richard Linklater, and both are set in the past, some decades before they were made. *Dazed and Confused*, released in 1993, is set in 1976; while *Everybody Wants Some!!*, released in 2016, is set in 1980. Linklater has made a very diverse range of films, from documentaries and experimental computer animations through to mainstream Hollywood movies such as *School of Rock* (2003) and the remake of *The Bad News Bears* (2005). However, much of his work reflects a continuing concern with the passing of time. This is perhaps most apparent in *Boyhood* (2014), a story of growing up filmed over a ten-year period; and in the trilogy about an evolving twenty-year relationship, *Before Sunrise* (1995), *Before Sunset* (2004) and *Before Midnight* (2013). It is also apparent in a different way in his films that use digital animation to reflect on the relations between screen time and real time, *Waking Life* (2001) and *A Scanner Darkly* (2006), and in the two films I'm considering here. Both *Dazed and Confused* and *Everybody Wants Some!!* are set at points of transition in

young people's lives – the former on the last day of high school, the latter during the first days before the start of the college term. Both of them are to some extent autobiographical: like his characters, Linklater was at school in Austin, Texas in the 1970s, and at Sam Houston State University playing baseball in the early 1980s. Both films view earlier decades from the perspective of the present: there are elements of affection and irony in their view of the past, but in my view both largely avoid the dangers of mere nostalgia.

Linklater's breakthrough film, his second feature *Slacker* (1990), is structured in a unique and apparently arbitrary way. Set in his home town of Austin, it features an ensemble cast of mostly young, socially marginalized characters, but it never stays with any of them for more than a couple of minutes at a time: in each scene, the film picks up a new character and follows them to a different scene, and never returns. On first viewing, the narrative of *Dazed and Confused*, also set in Austin, might appear similarly arbitrary and meandering, and even chaotic. There is a large ensemble cast (more than twenty younger characters have significant speaking roles), and the narrative constantly cuts between several overlapping storylines. As in *Slacker*, there is a great deal of talk, much of it in the form of rapid-paced banter; and the film is replete with passing detail that seems to bear little relation to character development or plot.

However, on repeated viewings, it becomes clear that – as in *American Graffiti* – there are four main narrative strands. The first, with which the film effectively begins, is to do with end-of-year 'hazing' rituals inflicted by the high school seniors on the incoming freshmen: the older boys beat the younger ones with specially-made paddles, while the older girls humiliate the younger ones by covering them with mustard, ketchup, eggs and breakfast cereal, and forcing them to propose to the older boys. One running strand here is the attempt of a group of middle-school boys to evade their punishment, and inflict revenge on the biggest bully, O'Bannion; although two of the seniors also take a couple of freshmen under their wing. The second storyline concerns the organization of a party: Pickford's plan to hold a party at his house while his parents are away is discovered by his father, and the cast later reconvene at an out-of-town location. The third concerns the school football team, and specifically the coach's requirement that the team members sign a pledge to abstain from drugs and alcohol: one of them, Randall 'Pink' Floyd, is in doubt about whether he wants to do this, and eventually decides that he will not. Finally, the fourth storyline features a group of three school 'intellectuals', Tony, Mike and Cynthia. They provide critical commentary on the events, while simultaneously seeking to overcome their marginal position and engage in what one of them calls 'some good old worthwhile visceral experience' – specifically in the form of sex, drunkenness and violence.

As in *American Graffiti*, these stories are interwoven as the characters drive (often somewhat aimlessly) from one setting to another. They are also linked through the use of music, to announce new scenes or to provide continuity across them, or to stitch together montage sequences. Surrounding these are scenes that (as the 'intellectuals' themselves would put it) offer comic or quasi-anthropological reflections on youth behaviour and the social mores of the time. Just in the opening few minutes, we find the students making bongs in the woodwork shop while their teacher sleeps; a stoner character reflects on a legendary one-hour drum solo by

Led Zeppelin's John Bonham; Tony, one of the 'intellectuals', relates a dream in which he found himself having sex with a woman with the head of Abraham Lincoln; and three of the girls retreat to the bathroom to engage in a debate about feminist perspectives on *Gilligan's Island*. There are also various romantic subplots, which reach various forms of fulfillment in the closing scenes. This is a crowded narrative, not so much about individuals (as in *American Graffiti*), but about a generation.

There is undoubtedly an affectionate irony about the film's period setting, although this is rarely exaggerated or played merely for laughs. The fashion styles of the time – flared and ultra-baggy high-waisted trousers, short shorts, flyaway collars, big hair – are precisely observed. The camera offers loving close-ups of pinball and bar football machines, and the soundtrack contains a range of definitive songs of the era. Yet the movie does not flinch from showing young people's less attractive or endearing qualities. The 'hazing' storyline is essentially about the imposition of age-based hierarchies, and some of the punishment that is inflicted is brutal. Nevertheless, drug-taking, alcohol, causal sex and other forms of risky behaviour pass with very little comment, let alone moral disapproval. There is no punishment or come-uppance, and the adult characters (teachers and parents) are mostly ineffectual or held up for ridicule.

In many respects, *Dazed and Confused* is a self-conscious 'youth movie', which makes explicit links with previous examples of the genre. Indeed, the film was apparently sold to Universal as 'an updated *American Graffiti*'. As in that earlier film, the events are set on the final day of school; much of the action takes place in cars, as the characters cruise around from one location to the next; the four main narratives are similarly interwoven; and there is a central social event (the party or the high-school graduation ball). The older character who hangs around with high-schoolers, Wooderson, is to some extent a re-play of Milner; while the three 'intellectuals' serve a similar function to Curt, as somewhat ambivalent outsiders. The critic Mary Harrod goes so far as to argue that *Dazed and Confused* is a pastiche of *American Graffiti* – a film that, as we have seen, was itself accused of pastiche. She argues that this is manifested, not just in explicit echoes but also in shared themes – for example to do with the instability of memory, or the characters' desire for immediate experience.

However, I would argue that Linklater's film provides a more sardonic, if not entirely cynical, take on this cinematic legacy. It replays some of the tropes and scenes of *American Graffiti,* but with a sarcastic edge. For example, when one of the freshmen is sent to obtain alcohol, his claim to be eighteen years old (despite looking much younger) is blithely accepted by the salesman. Just as Curt hopes to work for President Kennedy, Mike wants to go to law school and become a civil rights lawyer – although an uncomfortable encounter with the unsavoury people he would be seeking to defend gives him cause for doubt about this.

Beyond the period detail, there is little that might be described as fond nostalgia here. There is not much sweetness and innocence, except perhaps in the characters of the incoming freshmen; and many of the characters are made to suffer forms of humiliation, including O'Bannion, the bully. As Pink puts it towards the end of the film, 'if I ever start referring to these as the best years of my life, remind me to kill myself' – suggesting that he doesn't want nostalgia to cloud his memories. His friend

Dawson is more equivocal: 'I just want to look back and say I did the best when I was stuck in that place, I had as much fun as I could when I was stuck in that place…' Shortly afterwards, they are stopped by the police, and Pink is harangued by his sadistic football coach, clearly pointing to the limitations that are placed on their freedom.

The three 'intellectuals' provide a kind of sociological running commentary on events throughout: they describe the hazing rituals as instances of a 'herd mentality', for example, and criticize the 'neo-McCarthyism' of the football coach's pledge. Nevertheless, they are clearly uncomfortable with their position as partial outsiders. In one scene, they debate the view of youth that is implicitly at stake in all this:

> *Cynthia: Do you ever feel like everything we do and everything we've been taught is just to service the future?*
>
> *Tony: Yeah, I know. It's like it's all preparation…*
>
> *Cynthia: Right, but what are we preparing ourselves for?*
>
> *Mike: Death!*
>
> *Tony: Life of the party…*
>
> *Mike: It's true.*
>
> *Cynthia: But that's valid – if we're all going to die anyway, shouldn't we be enjoying ourselves now? You know, I'd like to quit thinking of the present as like, right now, as some minor, insignificant preamble to something else…*

Cynthia's argument reinforces Mike's claim that what the group needs is some 'visceral experience'; although the outcomes of their attempt to find some are uneven. Mike provokes a fight with another boy whom he describes as a 'dominant male monkey motherfucker', hoping that he will be able to land one good punch and then escape when others intervene – although in fact he is soundly beaten. Cynthia, meanwhile, implausibly ends up with the older Wooderson, who is revealed as having a taste for high-school redheads. While the 'intellectuals' do provide a kind of self-aware meta-commentary, therefore, their perspective is not necessarily privileged.

Nevertheless, Cynthia's comments do provide some indication of Linklater's intentions here. Like *American Graffiti*, the film is about a moment of transition; but it's not clear what the characters are transitioning towards. The very ending of the film, as four of them drive down an empty highway to the accompaniment of Foghat's 'Slow Ride', suggests that their destination is open and undecided. Even Pink, who eventually refuses to sign the coach's pledge, leaves the door partly open: he is willing to play football next year, but only if he can do so on his own terms. In general, the characters don't progress, or make big meaningful decisions, or even learn very much. Unlike *American Graffiti*, the film does not provide any moral lessons about their eventual fate; and indeed, for the most part, the characters show very little concern about their own futures. In terms of the sociology of childhood, the

characters are 'beings', not 'becomings': the concern is with their immediate experience in the here-and-now, not with where it might take them in the future. In this sense, as Lesley Speed has argued, the film might be seen as a critique, not only of nostalgia for youth, but also of adult-centred 'coming of age' narratives.

Like the other films I have considered here, *Dazed and Confused* says as much about the time in which it was made as it does about the time in which it is set. Again, we might see this in terms of decades. In a later scene, Cynthia offers one, slightly tongue-in-cheek suggestion about this: 'I'm working on this "every other decade" theory. Okay, the fifties were boring, the sixties rocked. The seventies, oh my god, they obviously suck. So maybe the eighties are going to be radical. I figure we'll be in our twenties, and hey, it can't get any worse.' From the perspective of the nineties, when the film was made, one suspects that such a theory might not hold up (the eighties were, by most estimations, far from radical); although *Dazed and Confused* does display a kind of resistance to authority, a level of cynicism (and even nihilism), and a grunge-y aesthetic that seems to speak more of the 1990s than the 1970s. Either way, Cynthia's comment clearly places the film and its characters at a particular period in time, and provokes wider speculation, not so much about *individual* change, but about *historical and generational* change.

Everybody Wants Some!!

Released in 2016, *Everybody Wants Some!!* is described in its DVD marketing as 'the spiritual sequel to *Dazed and Confused*'. In some respects, this is fairly accurate. Albeit with a gap of a few years, the film seems to begin where its predecessor left off. Both films focus on a point of transition – in this case, an in-between space over four days just before the start of the college term in 1980. This is also an ensemble comedy, and while the main characters are not the same as in the earlier film, they could easily be seen as the next generation. Once again, the group is far from culturally diverse: both films have a single token black character.

However, there are some important differences. *Everybody Wants Some!!* focuses more closely on a single lead character, Jake, who is present in almost every scene. The leading characters are all male: they are all members of the college baseball team, living in what are effectively a couple of fraternity houses. There is only one significant female character, Beverly, who is Jake's love interest. Unlike *Dazed and Confused*, the film also presents a narrative of personal progress: Jake moves on from the sexism of his team-mates and into a more conventional romance.

In the opening scenes, along with the freshman Jake, we are gradually introduced to the team. Across the first three days, the characters are shown hanging out, playing cards and computer games, smoking dope and drinking, going out to discos and gigs, chatting up, dancing and having sex with girls, and eventually taking part in pre-season baseball training. To a greater extent than in *Dazed and Confused*, several of the characters are essentially comic 'types': there is the 'weirdo' who always loses bets, the hippy who expounds on Carl Sagan's theory of the universe, the innocent 'hayseed' who is the butt of everybody's jokes, the psychotic pitcher, and so on. The more central characters are less stereotypical, but each of them is endowed with a fixed set of defining characteristics: one is adept at using feminist lines to chat up

girls, another is an overly competitive 'alpha male', another is conventional and prone to fall asleep at any moment, and so on. Meanwhile, Jake himself seems almost devoid of such defining (and potentially alienating) characteristics.

Like its predecessor, the film is rich in finely observed period detail; although again, it would not be fair to describe it as merely nostalgic. Four years on from *Dazed and Confused*, the ultra-short shorts and flares have become more revealing, and are accompanied (for the males) by loud disco shirts. The hair is bigger and more bouffant, and many of the male characters sport moustaches. In one notable sequence, the team members are seen preening themselves ready for a night out, blow-drying their mullets, trimming their facial hair, slapping on cologne, and admiring their own butts in figure-hugging flares: 'chicks dig this shit', they assure each other. As in *Dazed and Confused*, there are loving close-ups of pinball and now Space Invader machines; and once again the extensive musical soundtrack has been very carefully selected. Through a series of accidents and misfortunes, the team are seen attending first a *Saturday Night Fever*-style disco, then a Country-and-Western bar, and then a punk gig, allowing for some detailed observation of a range of contemporary styles. One early scene features five of the team in the car rapping along to 'Rappers' Delight' by the Sugarhill Gang (in a manner parodied so well in *Wayne's World*); and this is developed in a further rap over the closing credits. As with *Dazed and Confused*, the film combines affectionate nostalgia with knowing irony and gentle ridicule in a way that is stereotypically (and now very predictably) postmodernist.

However, *Everybody Wants Some!!* is also a more polished and conventional film than its predecessor. The film cuts rapidly between short scenes, but there is much less of the improvisational feel that *Dazed and Confused* inherited from *Slacker*. Much of the film comes across as a succession of set-piece scenes and quotable lines, most of which are overtly played for laughs. As I've implied, several of the secondary characters seem to have walked out of a TV sit-com; and some of the ensemble sequences (the frat house party, complete with mud-wrestling, the fight at the disco, the practical jokes and hazing rituals) seem to owe a good deal to gross-out comedies like the *Animal House* and *Porkys* franchises. This isn't to say it isn't funny – at times, it is quite hilarious. But it is as if Linklater is trying a little too hard to repeat the success of his earlier film for an audience of cult fans, rather than adding anything new. One might even say that the sardonic retro teen movie has become a kind of formula, for which audiences themselves have become nostalgic. Of course, at least some of the potential audience itself has also got older, along with Linklater himself. *Dazed and Confused* is set just 17 years after its year of release, offering the potential for some of its viewers (thirty-somethings, perhaps) to pick up on its cultural references and to recall their own high-school years. By contrast, in 2016, one would have to be well into one's fifties to have experienced the college life portrayed in its successor.

For contemporary reviewers, the most problematic aspect of *Everybody Wants Some!!* was to do with gender – and here the film picks up a thread that has run throughout all the films I have discussed. As I've noted, all the leading characters (aside from Jake's love interest) are male, and we have little option but to take their perspective: this is evident right from the start, as Jake drives on to campus with the raunchy anthem 'My Sherona' playing on his 8-track, and the point-of-view camera

zooms in on the bodies of the girls he passes. Much of the film's humour derives from typically masculine banter, with its edgy combination of witty put-downs and homophobic competitiveness. The leading British critic Mark Kermode was not alone in expressing his exasperation with the 'jock mentality' on display, arguing that it was both 'creepy' and 'retrograde' in terms of sexual politics. He argues that (unlike many of Linklater's other films), the film fails to offer a strong female perspective, or to critique or 'unpick' the sexism of the male characters; and he suggests that the veneer of retro irony might do little more than provide an alibi for this.

I sympathise with Kermode's argument to some extent: like him, I find it tiresome (and ultimately rather boring) to spend a great deal of time in the company of the kind of people whom I was keen to avoid during my own university years. However, I don't think one can accuse the film of merely wallowing in a time before 'political correctness' – even with the easy cop-out of irony. The film does seem to me to be rather more critical of its leading characters, or at least of their group behaviour, than Kermode suggests. Indeed, one could read the first hour of the film (at least) as a kind of expose of 'hegemonic masculinity'. The characters are variously portrayed, not just as likeable and funny, but also as vain, superficial, stupid and arrogant. Rather than merely endorsing their single-minded pursuit of 'college pussy', the film casts a dispassionate eye on their juvenile obsession with penis size and their pursuit of throwaway sex. Such behaviour is partly excused – one of the team assures Jake, 'this is college, man – the girls can be as big sluts as the guys' – but it is also later contrasted with the more meaningful relationship of Jake and Beverly.

This section of the film culminates in an extended sequence in which the characters are shown hanging out on the day before their first baseball practice. They compete pathologically over everything: not just table-tennis, darts, computer games and 'knuckles', but also their taste in music, their in-depth knowledge of *The Twilight Zone,* and who can inhale the largest toke of weed. True to form for Linklater, this cannot pass without commentary: as one of the characters notes, this kind of competitiveness is difficult for star athletes to avoid – 'you get a bunch of competitors together, and you're addicted to winning'. Once again, the young men's behaviour is to some extent excused, as it is in later comments about the value of 'team play'; but it is none the less observed with a kind of distanced, almost anthropological eye. In the following scene, one of the more stupid members of the team wonders aloud about the meaningless existence of those who go through life 'knowing they'll never play pro ball': the irony is clearly at the athletes' expense.

As this implies, the film might be seen to have its cake and eat it in this respect: it allows us to sympathise with its characters, to see the world through their eyes, but it also distances us from them, and allows the possibility of a more critical, or at least dispassionate view. Where it falters, in my view, is in the romantic storyline that comes to dominate the final half hour. Beverly first appears in an early scene when she talks back to the team's sexist chat-up lines; and Jake later leaves her flowers and a romantic note. Beverly, it emerges, is a Theatre Studies major; and unlike a great many of the characters in these films, she seems to be almost entirely lacking in a sense of irony about herself. She talks enthusiastically about her studies, and Jake seems to accept this at face value. Even when the team later attends a Theatre majors' party, there is little sense that such people are being shown as pretentious

or ridiculous. Jake's romance with Beverly is portrayed as serious and meaningful in a way that the team's earlier hook-ups with party girls are not. He is even shown discussing Greek mythology with her, and talking about how baseball represents a source of meaning in life; and she observes in response, 'it's kind of beautiful… that we get to feel passion in this world'. On the final day, as Jake sits down to his first class, a professor enters and writes on the blackboard: 'frontiers are wherever you find them'. While Jake merely settles down to sleep, one suspects that this kind of trite, sententious message would have received a more robust and cynical response from some of the cast of Linklater's earlier film – although admittedly there are small elements of 'true romance' in *Dazed and Confused* as well.

Everybody Wants Some!! is thus simultaneously a celebration and a retrospective critique of a certain form of masculinity. This is to its credit: Linklater is not only concerned to show the limitations of such behaviour, but also to understand its appeal. It would have been much easier merely to condemn the characters, or make them suffer some kind of punishment or come-uppance for their bad deeds. Yet the film's eventual shift in tone could be seen as a failure of nerve – or at least a capitulation to a much more conventional coming-of-age narrative.

Conclusion

The films I have considered here all feature young people in central roles, but not all of them would necessarily be categorized as 'youth films'. However, this begs the question of how we might determine what a 'youth film' actually is in the first place. Is it a quality of the film itself, or of its intended or actual audience? Not all films that feature young people in central roles are necessarily made exclusively, or even primarily, for a youth audience; nor is 'youth' necessarily the defining quality of such characters, or even a major theme of the films in question. 'Youth films', we might argue, are those which tell us stories specifically about youth itself – and, very often, about the transition from youth to adulthood. However, most of them do so for audiences of both young people *and* adults.

Indeed, it's possible that most films that we perceive as 'youth films' implicitly view youth from the perspective of adulthood. This is the case, I would suggest, not just when it comes to 'classics' such as *American Graffiti* and *Badlands*, but also with allegedly juvenile comedies such as *American Pie* and *Porky's*, which also attract substantial adult audiences. Among the films I've considered here, this adult perspective is most overt in *Peggy Sue Got Married* – where the main character is simultaneously a youth and an adult – but it is also implicit in the retrospective approach of all of them. Even Linklater's films, which might be seen to present young people as 'beings' rather then 'becomings', also observe them from an implicitly adult perspective: they may seek to refrain from moralizing, but they still present transitional moments in time to which we can never return.

For Lesley Speed, this adult perspective – which she argues is particularly prevalent in retrospective 'rites of passage' films such as *American Graffiti* and *Stand By Me* (Rob Reiner, 1986) – represents a means of containing the potential challenge of youth. As such, she argues, it is inevitably conservative. As I hope to have shown, this is by no means always or inevitably the case. Even the apparent conservatism of *American*

Graffiti or *Peggy Sue Got Married* turns out to be much more qualified and ambivalent than some of their critics have suggested.

In different ways, all these films are concerned not just with personal development, but also with historical and generational change. They speak of one era from the perspective of another. The historical setting of the films is not only a means of including some amusing or fondly remembered artefacts from the past – although the pleasure of this cannot be denied. It also provides a way of commenting on the meaning of wider social and cultural changes. Once again, this is of interest not only to young people in the present, but also to those who were young people in the past. As such, these films are bound to be vulnerable to the charge of nostalgia; but as I have argued, this term is all too often used as a form of blanket dismissal. In these instances at least, retrospect and nostalgia are much more ambivalent, and by no means necessarily as conservative, as some critics tend to suggest.

Of course, there are limits to how far we can infer the political consequences of a text from an analysis of the text itself: we have to consider audiences. As Andrew Higson has shown, audience responses to the alleged 'nostalgia' of films that are set in the past may be quite diverse, and even contradictory. Age is one factor in this diversity: young people and adults may interpret 'youth films' in very different ways. Nevertheless, we need to beware of making undue generalizations here. A given film may have multiple audiences – and indeed many 'youth films' may appeal, not only to the adult but also to the youth in us all.

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