

***Netflix Nostalgia: Screening the Past on Demand*, edited by Kathryn Pallister.  
Lexington Books, 2019, 260 pp.**

***The Aesthetics of Nostalgia TV: Production Design and the Boomer Era*, by Alex Bevan.  
Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 245 pp.**

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It scarcely needs pointing out that “nostalgia” has become a highly contentious battleground in recent years. Since the European Union referendum and the election of Donald Trump in 2016, a backwards-looking retreat into regressive nationalist mythologies has been widely understood as ideologically symptomatic of liberal democracies still reeling from the economic implosion of 2007–2008. Typically seen as a reactionary tendency of the political Right, the nostalgic amnesia of the progressive Left is equally self-evident in sentimental mourning for both the pro-hegemonic Obama presidency and the UK’s membership of a market-driven European Union. It would be a mistake, however, to understand this brand of nostalgic regress as simply a post-2016 phenomenon. As Simon Reynolds points out in *Retromania*, the “end of history” has heralded a neurotic preoccupation with the past. “Instead of being about itself,” Reynolds muses, “the 2000s have been about every other previous decade happening again all at once: a simultaneity of pop time that abolishes history while nibbling away at the present’s sense of itself as an era with a distinct identity and feel” (x–xi).

As Reynolds suggests, there is a paradox at the heart of twenty-first century nostalgia. Rather than heralding a forward-looking ethos, the digital age seems acutely preoccupied with days gone by. As such, the nostalgic imaginary—the rejection of a dissatisfying present in favour of an idealised past—is manifest in a series of high-profile televisual artefacts. These include successful reruns of analogue-era shows such as *Friends* (1994–2004) on digital platforms; reboots and revivals like *Gilmore Girls: A Day in the Life* (2016), *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017), *The X-Files* (1993–2018), *Roseanne* (1988–2018), *Will and Grace* (1998–) and *The L Word: Generation Q* (2019–); twenty-first century reimaginings of earlier serials—*Lost in Space* (2018–), *One Day at a Time* (2017–), *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018–)—and a swathe of period dramas including *Downton Abbey* (2010–2015), *Peaky Blinders* (2013–), *Halt and Catch Fire* (2014–2017), *The Crown* (2016–), *The Marvellous Mrs Maisel* (2017–) and *The Deuce* (2017–2019). Inevitably bound up in fractious contemporary debates, both these books are deeply informed by contemporary identity politics and the competing shibboleths of the twenty-first century culture wars.

As many of the contributors to *Netflix Nostalgia: Screening the Past on Demand* point out, the contemporary nostalgia economy is a highly lucrative marketing niche. Beginning as a DVD rental service before evolving into an online platform for streaming classic movies, Netflix has nostalgia written into its brand identity. As Kathryn Pallister points out in her introduction, Netflix's business model relies heavily on the emotional potency of nostalgic affect to lure older subscribers. More significant, however, are the cultural, ontological and ideological functions of nostalgia; that is, the political impetus to re-evaluate the past through its juxtaposition with the present. *Netflix Nostalgia's* opening salvo of essays thus frame the company's output within conceptual models of the nostalgic mode. These range from the ubiquitous (Svetlana Boym), the canonical (Frederic Jameson) and on through more recent interventions (Ryan Lizardi; Katharina Niemeyer; Gilad Padva; Michael Pickering and Emily Keightly; William Proctor). Giulia Taurino begins by outlining the industrial logic underpinning the production of nostalgic content. Employing *Scream: The TV Series* (2015–) as a case study, Taurino provocatively underscores Netflix's algorithmic reification of collective memory. In a bleak *mise en abyme* of commercially mediated nostalgia, *Scream* is a serialised reboot of a successful 1990s film franchise that was itself founded upon nostalgia for horror movies from the late 1970s–early 1980s—a series of “slasher” films which were themselves cinematic love letters to earlier genre classics *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960).

Conversely, Matthias Stephan argues that Netflix's nostalgic output provides an affirmative psychical bulwark against bleak postmillennial realities. “Netflix Originals presents the streaming service an opportunity to root its programming in a highly affective and emotional frame, connecting viewers longing for the perceived stability of the past with the Netflix brand” (26). Stephan views *Riverdale* (2017–) and *GLOW* (2017–) as forms of televisual self-care, an empathic reading which becomes increasingly shaky in its straight-faced understanding of kitsch reimaginations of the 1980s as a psycho-therapeutic “safe space”. Similarly preoccupied with representations of that decade, Phillippe Gauthier's examination of Boym's critically exhausted “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgic modes in *GLOW* is somewhat underwhelming, but his lucid rejection of nostalgia as a political monolith underscores *Netflix Nostalgia's* critical strengths. “Nostalgia, by virtue of its chaotic and multiple nature, cannot convey a single vision of the world,” Gauthier notes shrewdly (85).

This embrace of nostalgia as a polyvocal phenomenon is also illustrated by various engagements with *Stranger Things* (2016–), a 1980s-set telefantasy which has gained near-totemic status in discussions of digital-age nostalgia. Matthias Stephan, for example, finds progressive respite in *Stranger Things's* benign combination of 1980s intertextuality and retrofitted cultural politics. Similarly, Joseph M. Sirianni understands *Stranger Things's* evocative period aesthetic as benignly reassuring. Noting that nostalgic populism is a symptom of social, political and economic crisis, Sirianni counterintuitively valorises the affective seductions of the Duffer brothers' period phantasmagoria:

If *Stranger Things* and other nostalgic television programmes can work to generate positive feelings within the present, provide a temporary safe haven from current troubles, and serve as a source of aspiration for the future then ... *that* is good nostalgic television. (196–7)

It is perhaps indicative of the broader limitations of *Netflix Nostalgia* that this politically insipid endorsement of *Stranger Things* so closely echoes—but ideologically inverts—Andrew Britton's key points in his seminal critique of Reaganite entertainment. However, this reduction

of the fractious 1980s to a largely apolitical safety blanket is challenged by Heather Freeman. Contrasting the ongoing success of *Stranger Things* with the premature cancellation of 1990s-set teen comedy *Everything Sucks!* (2018), Freeman places the two serials on opposing ends of a political spectrum. While *Everything Sucks!* is praised for its “capacious, queer-centered, antipatriarchal nostalgia”, in Freeman’s view *Stranger Things* resurrects an insidious Reaganite agenda which chimes with Trump-era political regress (103). My issue here is not necessarily that Freeman is wrong in her assessment of the conservative gender/sexual politics of *Stranger Things*, but more that this reductive brand of *Buzzfeed*-citing critique is practically algorithmic in its rhetorical trajectory. Indeed, I was reminded here of Theresa L. Geller’s work on 1980s-set horror film *It* (Andy Muschietti, 2017). Interpreting the film as a Trumpian parable of transphobic disgust, Geller’s intervention is best understood—like Freeman’s—less as screen criticism and more as ideologically opportunist sophistry from the frontlines of the culture wars.

There is little of this modishly woke rhetoric in John C. Murray’s combative critique of corporate hegemony, “The Consumer Has Been Added to Your Video Queue”. Unapologetically citing an array of deeply unfashionable thinkers—Lyotard, Adorno, Debord, Lacan, Derrida, Horkheimer—Murray’s polemic is straight out of the Frankfurt School. “[T]he growing demand for intuitive and multiplatform services, such as Netflix, have nurtured a synthetic culture of passive voyeurs,” he writes with anachronistic fervour. “[C]onsumers are misdirected by affiliational thinking, and fall prey to a metanarrative of mass populism as the new form of anticritical intellectual banality” (57–8). As much a critical evisceration of postmaterialist scholarly orthodoxy as it is a condemnation of consumer “choice”, Murray’s essay is a self-conscious reminder of a time before lexical banalities (“problematic”, “negotiation”) came to dominate film and television scholarship. Politically intransigent and resolutely out of time, Murray’s prose is unmistakably imbued with the profound homesickness of nostalgia.

Traces of Murray’s neo-Marxist discontent can be found elsewhere, however. Ande Davies’ engaging essay on *The Get Down* (2016–2017) and *Luke Cage* (2016–2018) understands both serials as rejecting the assimilationist impulses of neoliberal postracialism. Cast almost entirely with people of colour, their vibrant fusion of blaxpotation, kung-fu stylings and hip-hop pastiche informs multiple levels of nostalgic—and ethnofuturist—address. Although class struggle remains largely a latent presence in Davies’ analysis, his interest in distinctively racialised aesthetics nevertheless offers an intriguing framework through which to rethink the limits of televisual realism in related Netflix content, such as *Dolemite Is My Name* (Craig Brewer, 2019) and *When They See Us* (Ava DuVernay, 2019). Similarly, Jacinta Yanders’s discussion of Latinx representation in *One Day at a Time* focuses upon the specificities of Cuban-American heritage and socio-cultural experience. Despite its insightful overview of the way the reimagined show combines generic familiarity with antiassimilationist politics, Yanders’s essay is undermined by its somewhat polemical positioning of other 2010s revivals as evidence of white ethno-nationalist backlash. In particular, Yanders’s reductive understanding of the now-toxic *Roseanne*—a groundbreaking sitcom from the Reagan-Bush era about a struggling working-class family headed by a gender nonconforming matriarch—crudely negates that series’ counter-hegemonic innovations. Looking beyond Roseanne Barr’s self-inflicted downfall, “cancel culture” is revealed to be as amnesiac and ideologically self-righteous as the phenomenon of nostalgia itself.

Yanders’s essay also typifies how *Netflix Nostalgia* effectively renders any backward-looking televisual artefact “nostalgic” by default. This persistent conceptual looseness raises

further issues. Is nostalgic affect really triggered by *One Day at a Time* or *Lost in Space* when both shows bear only superficial resemblance to their original incarnations? Can *House of Cards* (2013–2018) be described as “nostalgic” when so few of its viewers will be aware of the BBC original? What nostalgic specificities are elided when essayist Sheri Chinen Biesen draws little distinction between viewers’ affective investments in—to take just a few examples—the quasi-medieval world of *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), the Weimar Germany of *Babylon Berlin* (2017–) or the sprawling historical locales of *The Crown*, *Outlander* (2014–) and *Narcos* (2015–2017)? More pointedly, when Yanders ponders whether reboots of “white” serials with newly-installed Latinx casts—*Charmed* (2018–), *Party of Five* (2020–) and *Roswell, New Mexico* (2019–)—will follow in *One Day at a Time*’s culturally specific footsteps, one has to consider where pre-sold nostalgia ends and the reification of ethnicity begins.

If these sometimes-troubling questions suggest largely discomfiting answers, it is pleasing that two of the most intriguing entries in *Netflix Nostalgia* epitomise the book’s strengths. Keshia McClantoc’s contribution examines the celebrated “San Junipero” (Owen Harris, 2016) episode of *Black Mirror* as a critical interrogation of nostalgic longing itself. Drawing on the work of Gilad Padva, “San Junipero”’s hyperreal rendering of the 1980s is interpreted as a queer-friendly, John Hughes-infused fever-dream in which ageing protagonists Kelly (Gugu Mbatha-Raw) and Yorkie (Mackenzie Davies) are able to digitally rewrite their tragic personal histories. What pulls McClantoc’s essay back from blithely endorsing the political cul-de-sac of simulated utopianism is its alertness to the gothic underside of digital wish-fulfilment. As easily read as a critique of transhuman dystopia as it is a saccharine endorsement of sanitised nostalgia, the episode’s unsettling ambivalence imbues “San Junipero” with lingering, uncanny affect.

Digital capitalism’s voracious reification of memory and sociality is also at the heart of Patricia Campbell and Kathryn Pallister’s discussion of *13 Reasons Why* (2017–). Controversially built around the suicide of high-school student Hannah Baker (Katherine Langford), the surviving teenagers in *13 Reasons Why* fetishise obsolete analogue technologies as a psycho-social “coping mechanism” in an age of ubiquitous social media (205). Reading the series as an ambivalent treatise on the ontological investments of “technostalgia”, Campbell and Pallister’s analysis of *13 Reasons Why* is reminiscent of Thomas B. Byers’s insightful work on reactionary nostalgia in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (James Cameron, 1991), suggesting that the cultural anxieties explored in *13 Reasons Why* are as cyclical as they are presentist. Like the similarly themed *Euphoria* (2019–), Campbell and Pallister’s nuanced essay ultimately finds thematic complexity in the way *13 Reasons Why* rebuffs the atomised individualism and compulsory positivity of neoliberal culture, valorising a reflective teen melodrama that is unafraid to explore the contradictions of (post-) modernity.

Sidestepping the theoretical models of nostalgia that underpin much of *Netflix Nostalgia*, the cultural politics of retro production design are the central focus of Alex Bevan’s *The Aesthetics of Nostalgia TV: Production Design and the Boomer Era*. Rejecting “traditional, patriarchal definitions of authorship and high art” (4), Bevan valorises “production studies” as a critically holistic way to understand revisionist serials like *Mad Men* (2007–2015), *Masters of Sex* (2013–2016) and *The Knick* (2014–2015). Bevan adopts a quasi-ethnographic approach which highlights the importance of below-the-line creative labour. “I want to open up the television image to new modes of analysis and interpretation,” she posits. “What stories do coffee tables and wallpaper tell?” (1).

Like *Netflix Nostalgia*, *The Aesthetics of Nostalgia TV* is politically contextualised by the global pre-eminence of the archetypal “boomer”, Donald J. Trump:

[T]he timeliness of a book on US nostalgia in the context of the global rise of ethno-nationalism feels equal parts an opportunity and a burden. The political weight of the these shows about white yesteryear has never felt more important and pressing. (xiv)

To this end, the cover of *The Aesthetic of Nostalgia TV* features a glamorous image of Joan Harris (Christina Hendricks), a character whose confidently stylish appearance functions as bitterly ironic register for the gender, racial and class iniquities of the mid-century “boomer era” as much as it serves as semiotic shorthand for postwar prosperity. As Bevan notes, the iconicity of this period is so inextricably bound up with hegemonic conceptions of US national identity that both the National Museum of American History and the Smithsonian acquired props and costumes from *Mad Men* for permanent display. Uninterested in the verisimilitude of televisual depictions of American history, Bevan’s critical framing of nostalgia TV is unambiguously contemporary. “In this book, nostalgia is defined as the recreation and repurposing of constructed imaginations of a collective past for the political and social purposes of the present,” she states (133).

Organising her book around three core aspects of production design—sets, props, costumes—Bevan’s first case studies engage with serials featuring contemporary settings. Here, Bevan reads the set design of *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012) and *Ugly Betty* (2006–2010) as in reflexive dialogue with generic antecedents. Filmed using recycled sets on the same backlots as *Leave it to Beaver* (1957–1963) and *The Munsters* (1964–1966), the anachronistic production design of *Desperate Housewives* constantly recalls the ideologically overdetermined spectre of mid-century suburbia and the white, middle-class family home. In similar fashion, the structural inequalities of the contemporary workplace are dialectically critiqued via Betty Suarez’s (America Ferrera) garish vintage clothing in *Ugly Betty*. Echoing the likes of *Batman* (1966–1968) and *Get Smart* (1965–1970), *Ugly Betty* comically satirises the pro-hegemonic imperatives of modernist office space, Suarez’s idiosyncratic stylings telling an ideologically dissident story of assimilation, diaspora and the arbitrary precepts of white supremacy.

When Bevan hits her critical stride the results can be fascinating, and her understanding of nostalgia as a multilayered and often contradictory cultural phenomenon is often exemplary. Writing about the celebrated period detail in *Mad Men*, for example, Bevan argues that the use of vintage props eludes simple labels of nostalgic regression or escapism, but instead creates a highly reflexive arena. “*Mad Men* is a period piece,” she writes, “but one where the past haunts the present and the present haunts the past” (86). Detailing the series’ fetishistic insistence upon employing authentic period items—1960s bottles of Bayer children’s aspirin, say—Bevan identifies digital-era angst amidst faultless period style. Will production designers continue to fastidiously source original props in the age of 3D printing and seamless CGI? Elsewhere, lively analysis of the diasporic politics registered in *Ugly Betty*’s deft blending of Mexican rasquache with Christian Dior’s postwar “New Look” or *Mad Men*’s resonant cladding of Betty Draper (January Jones) in an iconic 1950s “shirt-dress” more than justify Bevan’s methodological fervour. “The shirt-dress recalls the 1950s suburban housewife,” she notes sharply. “[I]t invokes whiteness; it intimates the oppression of certain publics and the total elision of others” (138).

There are also insightful passages on *Pan Am* (2011) and *Masters of Sex*—the former read as post-recession corporate nostalgia; the latter as an exercise in neo-Foucauldian historicism—but these are frustratingly brief. In many ways, this is symptomatic of *The Aesthetics of Nostalgia TV* more broadly, a volume which often lurches unsteadily between lucid critical precision and woeful self-indulgence. Why does the thoughtful *Masters of Sex* warrant only a few pages when the author spends so much time discussing serials—*Downton Abbey*, *The Americans* (2013–2018), *Westworld* (2016–), *The 1900 House* (1999–2000)—that have nothing to do with the mid-century United States? It is ironic that such an ambitious book devotes so much time to critical meandering, and the trajectory of each chapter soon becomes depressingly familiar: a focused and intelligent opening followed by endlessly repetitive padding. As such, the book’s methodological grandstanding frequently falls flat. Interviews with creative personnel like Janie Bryant (*Mad Men*) and Eduardo Castro (*Ugly Betty*) add little to the author’s own prose, while Bevan’s vaunted “field research”—a quasi-impressionistic account of the author’s visit to the *Mad Men* set, for example—tends toward the anecdotal.

Moreover, the book’s Oedipal posturing and self-defined “emo kid bitterness” (xv) soon begin to grate. The revisionist memory work of *Mad Men*, Bevan contends, “coincides with a generational critique of the excesses of the late-twentieth [and] early-twenty-first parents whose legacy is a global economic recession and irreparable ecological damage” (151). Even allowing for the popular currency of intergenerational snark—the “Ok boomer” meme its briefly popular apogee—Bevan’s rhetoric here is sweeping and painfully oversimplified. Elsewhere, a brusque sideswipe at the “neoliberalist” (178) scholarly work of John Fiske and Henry Jenkins seems similarly motivated by the desublimated fury of the “twittering machine” (Seymour). This incoherent tone is epitomised by the book’s nadir: a worryingly hagiographic endorsement of interviewee Janie Bryant’s vintage fashion range. Lacking even the ambivalence of Netflix’s noughties-nostalgic *Girlboss* (2017)—a deceptively intelligent serial which understands the seductive “neoliberalist” pitfalls of branded selfhood and the retro-economy—in passages like these Bevan undid much of this reader’s critical goodwill.

The celebrated final episode of *Mad Men*, “Person to Person”, concludes with Don Draper (John Hamm) conceiving an iconic Coca-Cola advertisement while meditating at an idyllic coastal retreat. While Bevan dubs this “a hippy commune” (xv), it is more likely that the locale was specifically inspired by the philosophical birthplace of neoliberal selfhood, the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California (Storr). If *Mad Men*’s famous denouement carries the uncanny sting of free market triumphalism, it is perhaps appropriate that neither of these books fully account for the nostalgic dynamic of so much contemporary television. While Bevan and contributors to *Netflix Nostalgia* rail against “presentism”—that is, understanding the past entirely through the lens of present-day values—both these books are marked by the misplaced surety of an identity politics which remain unwittingly in thrall to the neoliberal status quo. As ever, the past has much to teach us about how we always know less than we think—a lesson that these books, for all their undoubted insights, too often fail to heed.

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