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Zombie Characters and Hollywood's Second Life – Nostalgia in Contemporary Cinema

Contemporary culture seems to be non-contemporary, mainly because it is plagued by the constant returns of the past. Immersed in incurable melancholy, it still consumes the remnants of past decades, which it is unable to forget, say goodbye to and forget once and for all. Simon Reynolds calls this interesting, obsessive and unprecedented phenomenon retromania[1]. According to him, the lack of originality in contemporary music, the so-called artistic recreativity[2], results from too easy access to the archive, from which we are unable to shake ourselves free. Since today we can cram the entire history of music into our phone and carry it with us in our pockets, no wonder that the past cannot set us free. In a very interesting way Reynolds analyses the musical landscape of the 21st century, which paradoxically does not bring with it the music of the future, completely new and different musical genres. Instead, because of covers, samples and remixes, it is extremely difficult to find out exactly what era we live in. In my text I would like to look at the phenomenon of the return of the past in contemporary popular cinema and try to characterize what nostalgia is like in the field of motion pictures

Returns

Film art has from its very beginning been closely connected with the reality between light and darkness, i.e. sympathizing with shadows and phantoms. It was based primarily on suggestive recalling of the now-defunct

» 1 See S. Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past*, London 2012.

» 2 See http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2012/10/against_recreativity_critics_and_ artists_are_obsessed_ with_remix_culture_.html [accessed: 04.02.2018].

world of the past or on evoking a future that has had no chance to come into existence yet. We probably will not find a space in culture that is more conducive to the return from the afterlife and that allows for the restoration of life to the deceased than cinema. Not without reason, in the 1970s the television set was referred to in the United Kingdom as a ghost box. It makes it possible for us to see on the screen people who are long dead, but who reappear in front of our eyes as very much alive and speaking to us, an uncanny sensation indeed.

Slavoj Žižek claims that the return of the living dead, i.e. a phenomenon which was unthinkable in a world of fulfilled and, above all, rational modernity, today turns out to be one of the most important fantasies of mass culture[3]. Where does this strange, but intense, contemporary expectation that visual culture, or more precisely mainstream cinema, will fulfil our desire to witness our return from the dead come from? The Slovenian philosopher tries to explain this phenomenon on the basis of Lacanian psychoanalysis and believes that the dead return only when we have not buried them properly. In his opinion, the funeral ritual itself is rather ambiguous, as it is primarily meant to ensure that, once buried, the deceased will never return from the afterlife. An appropriately heavy gravestone offers a guarantee of the separation of the world of the living and that of the dead. Not only does the gravestone provide us with indisputable information about who is laid to rest beneath, but also, through its weight, prevents a potential escape of the deceased person. Applying Žižek›s reflections to contemporary culture, we will find that at present we do not have a suitable gravestone which would be able to effectively separate our present from the past and allow us to forget about it. In this context, the present appears to be disappointed with the future, with the utopian visions, promises and projects outlined by modernity[4]. That is why, among other things, it escapes from strong forms of meaning around which it could be established and take on a unique character, thus distinguishing itself and cutting itself off once and for all from the past. In times of consciously chosen weakness, we tend to avoid radical attitudes, which usually commenced and concluded separate eras. We don't want to overcome (Verwindung)[5] what is going away and stays dim on the horizon. In this situation, we are interested more in remembering, archiving and saving the remains, which we do not allow to slip away and completely disappear.

» 3 See S. Žižek, *Patrząc z ukosa: od Lacana przez kulturę popularną*, transl. J. Margański, Warszawa 2003, p. 42.

» 4 See F. Bifo Berardi, *After the Future*, Edinburgh, Oakland 2011.

» 5 See G. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, Baltimore 1991.

The time is out of joint

The melancholy aspect of culture, related to the remnants and traces of the past in our present can be found in Jacques Derrida's later reflections. The French philosopher calls the state of irresoluteness, hesitation or dangling between beginning and end, presence and absence hauntology. Unlike the process of mourning, which facilitates the coming to terms with a loss and a departure from our dead, melancholy helps to constantly brood on and perpetuate in oneself a trace of the other. Derrida shows that the messianic notion of novelty, or something to come to life in the future, is invariably doomed to disappointment. We live in a used-up world, in a second-hand reality, where each life is a continuation and therefore assumes the form of a trace, remain or afterglow. As a consequence, we will never be able to create ex nihilo, and the assumed radical beginning and end are but a fiction.

Derrida makes an interesting shift in the previously valid linear concept of time. according to him, we cannot equate moving forward with progress, but can only refer to the passage of time, which suspends teleology as it does not bring us any closer to the objective we seek. The French philosopher uses Hamlet's observation that "the time is out of joint"[6] to demonstrate that we are no longer able to think about the present through the prism of the immediate, accessible and palpable now, but we should rather see the present as a dynamic interplay of constantly intertwined past and future. According to Derrida, the contemporary proves not to be contemporary and can be likened to a haunted house, a spectre space visited by the decomposing traces of yesterday and by the nebulous promises of tomorrow.

Never-ending story

Both the funeral intuitions of Žižek and the concept of time put forth by Derrida help to at least partly explain why we are unable to answer the question what era we actually live in. They also shed light on the origins of the returns from the cultural afterlife. Let us then take a closer look at what is returning in contemporary mainstream cinema and let's try to characterize the phenomenon of nostalgia present in it. Returns, repetitions and reruns in the case of films are not a particularly new phenomenon, not only because we like to simply watch our favorite movies more than once. Recently, we have observed a much more frequent appearance

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» 6   See J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx:* The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International, transl. Peggy Kamuf, New York 1994.

in cinema of remakes, i.e. new versions of old films, as well as sequels, showing the subsequent life story of already familiar protagonists.

We have the irresistible impression that any breakups and ends of all kinds, at least in the film world rather than in literature, have long since ceased to be possible. Among other things, this is how we can account for the disappearance of the classic inscription "The End", which usually ends all classic film productions. Nowadays, when the promised end of the film approaches, nobody actually believes this promise. On the contrary, each of us, based on the last scenes, imagines how the next part of the film we are watching might look like. We can safely claim that we live in a world of continuity, where a traumatic and worrying end has become impossible, because we want to avoid it at all costs.

Another phenomenon confirming the contemporary love for continuation is the growing popularity of series; what used to be scornfully called "soap operas" has recently become a full-fledged subject of interet of Film Studies. Serial productions, enthusiastically received by film critics, are increasingly present at international film festivals. Interstingly, in 2017 the latest season of *Twin Peaks* by David Lynch was presented at the Cannes Festival. However, probably the most interesting phenomenon in the context of the so-called continuation culture is the very manner of consuming serial episodes. Until recently, amateurs of series eagerly awaited the subsequent episodes of their favourite productions, scrupulously and sparingly aired by television stations. Today, most often already on the day of the premiere we have access to all the episodes of the season, which we can watch in full on a Netflix-type online platform. This is one of the reasons for the binge-watching phenomenon, i.e. the compulsive watching of successive episodes of the series indefinitely, almost till we drop dead. Since the successive episodes play automatically, without the final credits, we actually never have to face the unpleasant awareness of the end, which is effectively postponed or simply replaced.

A nostalgic return to childhood

The nostalgia we encounter in mainstream cinema, usually takes on a romantic form. Until recently, historical and cloak-and-dagger films were unrivalled in the effective triggering of the romanticism, thanks to which we could at least for a moment move to distant and inaccessible times. However, it turns out that it is much harder for us to long e.g. for 17th-century reality, which even if it is presented in an extremely evocative way, will always be too far away, dust-gathering and museum-like to arouse our longing. That is why the greatest nostalgic potential lies in film pro

ductions referring to the immediate past, as they emphasize the inevitable passage of time and refer to familiar, understandable cultural codes.

The success of *Stranger Things* (2016) can be explained, among other things, by the extremely aesthetic and, above all, effective management of the social appetite for nostalgia for the 1980s. The creators of the series, telling the story of the incredible adventures of four young boys (Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Will), make the wrinkled, dusty and faded past suddenly take on colours, be closer to life and thus extremely attractive. The classic motif of a return to childhood, which is frequently used in culture, makes it extremely easy for viewers to succumb to the mood of longing for their own youth (or the idea of youth itself), which can only return due to the colourful illusion of the series.

Svetlana Boym made a distinction between two types of longing for the past, speaking about reflective and restorative nostalgia[7]. In this case, we would be dealing with the latter type, namely an attempt to regain the time lost once and for all, the desire to return to a reality that simply no longer exists.

Stranger Things refreshes and rejuvenates the old 1980s and effectively hides Žižek's return of the living dead under the mask of innocuous, charming and cosy childhood. Still, despite its aesthetic frills and whistles and engrossing script, the series turns out a zombie who comes back from the dead or at least from cultural afterlife. A story about a group of kids from the suburbia who hop on their bikes and chase more or less imaginary yet scary monsters is in fact only a pretext for an intertextual game with viewers of an advanced age.

A cursory glance at the *Stranger Things* poster will reveal a borrowing of the stylistic measures originating in the Star Wars trilogy, the movie of the Y generation (or so-called Millennials). Quite deliberately, a veritable Frankenstein of the visual culture, the series is made up of a vast number of references to products of pop culture, i.e. mainly films and games of the 1980s. Therefore, many viewers will enjoy the references to well-known, favourite and canonical movies as: *Ghostbusters* (1984), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *E.T.* (1982), *The Gremlins* (1984) and many other films which the audiences used to enthuse about and spend many a sleepless night with, yet which are too weak and faded to arouse any stronger emotions today.

One should not worry if one feels slightly lost in the overwhelming excess of references to past pop culture works (cultural resurrections). While watching *Stranger Things*, one can have an irresistible impression that the series was made mainly in the imagination of a male group of fans of films, science-fiction literature and video games. When we imagine

» 7   See S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York 2002, p. 41.

the adult protagonists of this series, we will see a group of introverted, pot-bellied but extremely good-natured elderly, balding men who, while spending nights and days in front of a computer, still live under one roof with their parents (*Computer Chess*, 2013, Dir. A. Bujalski). Instead of this slightly disturbing picture, we get a moving and above all sweet story about helpless boys, young outsiders, dreaming about a different world, where they can become superheroes.

A similar procedure, connected with an attempt to rejuvenate the past, was used by the authors of *13 Reasons Why* (2017). The series tells the story of a teenage girl who takes hew own life, and who decides to re-cord her memories on cassette tapes, thus explaining the reasons for her dramatic decision. Here we encounter a typical procedure for restorative nostalgia, namely the revival of the past, in this case analog culture, which is not associated with something dated and defunct, but is inseparably connected with youth, freshness, and even paradoxically with what is in. Contrary to appearances, however, we are never able to return to what has gone away; what returns from the dead is always somehow changed, marked by decay, disintegration and decomposition[8]. It is precisely these ingredients of the return from the past that we are not able to see in the world of resurrected Netflix serial productions, which are appealing in that they offer us the opportunity to meet the impossible, i.e. the rejuvenated past.

Return of the living dead

It once seemed that mainstream cinema was outside time. Hollywood productions were characterized by high conservative power, promising their characters immortality, protecting them from passing away, old age and destructive passage of time. By contrast, the recent returns, resurrections and continuations in cinematography have brought about a completely unexpected turn of events with them. We can still watch our favourite actors on the screens, but now they are old, tired and exhausted of their Hollywood life, long past their prime. In this context one should mention, for example, the unsuccessful attempt to resurrect *X Files*, the canonical US series of the 1990s. In the new series, the fearless FBI agent Fox Mulder does not pretend to be a new, better version of himself, but is aware of his limitations, an aging man who has been here and there. During one of the actions, when he is out of breath climbing a flight of stairs, he does not hide his physical condition from the audience, but admits that he used to do it better and faster. Perhaps it was this amazing, not to say heroic, sin-

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» 8   See J. Castricano, *Cryptomimesis: The Gothic and Jacques Derrida's Ghost Writing*, Montreal 2001, p. 70.

cerity and authenticity of the actors that made the contemporary version of the series little successful.

Very similar reactions could be observed in the case of the long (25 years) expected return of *Twin Peaks*. Most of the faithful viewers, who for years fed themselves with an incredible and idyllic story about the American province, expected a return to the equally idyllic, magical reality of the 1990s. David Lynch disappointed the nostalgia freaks, who expected their favourite series to come back in even better shape and regain its former glory. The director made his audience aware of the painful truth that this time it was not Laura Palmer, but rather Twin Peaks itself that fell victim to the covert killer of time. Lynch again takes us on a sentimental journey, but this one has little in common with the carefree small-town soap opera. It shows well known actors, but most of them have changed beyond recognition. We don't know exactly what happened to them during the time when we, the audience, were still playing back their young, energetic and lively characters. However, the faces of the Twin Peaks people speak for themselves; something terribly disturbing has happened to them and it is definitely difficult for us to explain why.

Lynch ends his film career in perfect style, courageously transcends the limitations of his own style, not shunning surprising formal experiments.

Still, despite the artistry of the director of *Mulholland Drive*, it is not him but the cruel time that has the upper hand here. It is time that played the most significant role in the creation of the series protagonists. Watching the remake of *Twin Peaks* we can notice the wrinkled and deformed faces, expressive of a mixture of good spirits and sadness related to the experience of the inevitable passage of time. The movie features actors who literally die before our very eyes, since the moment the director stopped shooting they had been dead. Suffice it to mention FBI agent Albert Rosenfield (Miguel Ferrer), Doctor Will Hayward (Warren Frost) and the legendary Log Lady (Catherine Coulson), whose ominous prophecies, previously incomprehensible, come true and appear to be an existential warning in the protagonist's mouth. This is not all; Lynch is famous for his sophisticated and skilful criticism of the Hollywood lifestyle. Some of the Twin Peaks residents are deformed not only by their unwholesome lifestyles but also by multiple cosmetic surgeries (unsuccessful attempts to stay time), which made their faces literally melt and become monster-like as we watch. It turns out that Lynch's imagination, which seemed eccentric and surrealist, is much closer to life than we had thought.

Film replicants

One of the most longed-after nostalgic premieres of 2017 was no doubt the sequel of *Blade Runner*, the movie that set the murky tone of science-fiction film of the 1980s. *Blade Runner 2049* demands action as the viewers themselves become blade runners. They become liquidators of films pretending to be their own originals and imitate them better and better to become almost better than their original versions. Therefore each viewer must decide if they deal with a replicant (a replica of the original), or with genuine film experience, calorific enough to be able to feed them for the next 35 years at. One can either fall in love with Denis Villeneuve's film and its nostalgic aesthetics or, stressing the movie's secondary character and mediocre script, unscrupulously "send them off to a retirement" like a replicant.

 Blade Runner by Ridley Scott focused on a search for an android more human than the human being, while Blade Runner 2049 is much more of a film than its original version. A search of authenticity, originality and innovation is a dead end. It is more worthwhile to focus on borrowings from other films and celebrate them, watching them assume their own, if repeatable form. We can easily identify references to Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky), Her (Spike Jonze) and first and foremost to the 1980s original. *Blade Runner 2049* is a perfect explication of the mechanism of cinema as it allows us to take part in the darkness that is not ours, dream someone else's dream and experience others' fears, hopes and concerns, believing that we can avoid clichés, conventions and patterns. Therefore, wondering if *Blade Runner 2049* is a bastard or heir apparent, the son/daughter of the original from 35 years before is a waste of time. it makes more sense to observe if the film is capable to act, make an impact and further a human or non-human cause.

 The most intriguing case in the context of protagonists' ageing and dying in movies is that of Harrison Ford (aged 75). He is case not only in *Blade Runner 2049* (Rick Deckard), but also in the remake of *Star Wars* (Han Solo). This experienced actor has played in most of his movies characters who have had to fight for their lives. In his most recent role, however, his efforts assume an existential character and become a struggle to survive. We watch with boundless relief Han Solo finally die in one of the last episodes of *Star Wars – The Force Awakens*. Ever since we can be sure that Harrison Ford, at retirement age, will not need to fight, run or jump fighting off the evil forces of the Empire. This is actually one of the few ends that we witness in films shot after George Lucas's concepts, taken over by the Disney empire. Each episode without exception brings

a promise of a complete and definite destruction of the rebels, which however is as impossible to fulfil as the promise of the apocalypse[9].

It turns out that contemporary cinema in large measure has given up its role of a promoter or guarantor of eternity. On the contrary, it increasingly gives account of mortality, materiality and passage of time. The most intriguing matter in the reflection on the return to the old in the visual culture is an answer to the question why we like or actually have to watch today protagonists weary of life and in a way far from heroic. Far more interesting are films inspired not so much by restorative nostalgia, which desperately tries to restore the long-gone reality, but by reflective nostalgia[10]. The latter form of yearning for the past is both far more creative and closer to human life, but first of all gives account of the transience of life and of motion, indispensable in the context of cinema. ●

» 9 See J. Derrida, *"No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)"*, transl. C. Porter, P. Lewis, [in:] Diacritics, Vol. 14 (2), 1984, p. 20–31.

» 10 See S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York 2002, p. 49.