Past Perfect(ed): Future Nostalgia and the Fight Against Trump’s America in Netflix’s *Hollywood*

Jennifer Cowe

Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/18287
DOI: 10.4000/ejas.18287
ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher
European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference
Jennifer Cowe, “Past Perfect(ed): Future Nostalgia and the Fight Against Trump’s America in Netflix’s *Hollywood*”, *European journal of American studies* [Online], 17-2 | 2022, Online since 05 July 2022, connection on 07 July 2022. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/18287 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.18287

This text was automatically generated on 7 July 2022.

Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International - CC BY-NC 4.0
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/
The presidency of Donald Trump has led to many Americans reevaluating the kind of country they thought they lived in. For some, this has been a positive experience in which the values, customs and institutions they believe in are the very foundations of American Exceptionalism which are once again being celebrated and upheld by a president with conviction and authority. For many others, specifically those who fall within the political category of liberal/progressive, the election of Trump has led to a fundamental shaking of who they thought their fellow Americans to be. The veneer of incremental societal progress on issues of minority rights has been stripped away to expose a country deeply divided along entrenched racial and class lines. These lines for many have been clear to see as lived experience, but for some they have been papered over by affirmative action, media minority representation and an African American president. For progressives Trump’s election not only led to a questioning of what the immediate future might look like, but also a questioning of the past. How does a country that has arguably done the hard yards on social justice elect a president who clearly sees the culture wars of the last fifty years as having been detrimental to American society? The cognitive dissonance that afflicted liberals in the immediate aftermath of Trump’s election has gradually been replaced by a realization that the dismantling of perceived privilege and the evening out of racial equality has been, at best, a very uneven and incomplete process. The lasting fissures exposed by Trump’s presidency persist even after his loss to Joe Biden, and Trumpism remains a potent political force in American political life and media. As reported by The New York Times, Trump started 2022 with $122 million in his “campaign” coffers, double that of the RNC. The allegedly imminent overturning of Roe v Wade by a Supreme Court heavily swayed by Trump appointees speaks to the ongoing influence of the man himself.
The cultural influence of the social justice movement, and intersectionality as an analytical tool, has been immense both on university campuses and as the *bête noire* of many a Fox News anchor. This influence may have led to a comforting sense that continued progress was something that was generally attainable but had still to be fought for. The neo-liberal myth of steady material and social improvement over successive generations, bolstered by a visually more diverse media along with a dialogue punctuated with the lexicon of intersectionality could be argued to have led to a misplaced complacency in relation to battles won. For progressives, Trump’s election and the accompanying reactionary reevaluation of liberal cultural and political milestones in social justice (affirmative action, same-sex marriage, the EPA, the Civil Rights Act, Roe v. Wade, the Dream Act) are indicators of national decline by a socially and economically conservative administration and associated media sites. It has illustrated clearly that rights that have been secured, and are thought of as a part of the historical narrative of just and progressive change can very easily be chipped away at, if not completely replaced. The surety of historical and chronological progress is not at all stable as an ideologically hostile Supreme Court, a politicized judiciary, and an increasingly militarized police force “threaten” to take rights away.

The Netflix miniseries *Hollywood* (2020) explores a very different vision of post-WW2 America in which the film industry was a leader in progressive social justice and envisions a very different future in which the struggles of BLM, LGBTQ rights and #MeToo are started in 1947 rather than 2020. This article will explore these visions of a future unfulfilled through contextualizing the show firstly through the fundamental shock that Trump’s election was, the perceived threat to liberal values unleashed by it, and framing it within the concepts of “progressive” and “future” nostalgia.

1. Meaning Maintenance Model

I believe that the shock experienced by progressives at this juncture is best explored through the Meaning Maintenance Model (MMM) (Heine, Proulx and Vohs 2006). MMM is often closely related to Terror Management Theory (TMT) in that our cultural frameworks, worldviews and self-esteem mitigate, or serve as a buffer, to the awareness of our mortality salience (Burke, Martens and Faucher 2010). MMM argues that humans have a need to find meaning within their lives and often find it within social frameworks that reinforce pre-existing notions of social behavior. These frameworks often revolve around abstract concepts such as living a good life, being a good parent, hard work equaling financial reward and being an upstanding citizen. One would tend to think of these as intrinsically individualized notions, however, they are supported and re-enforced by the social actors around us. Our sense of self is often a reflection of the image others have of us and the ensuing interaction between ourselves and others is built upon a hundred unspoken assumptions regarding the type of person you are perceived to be. On an individual level this is why we are often disproportionately upset by being treated unfairly by strangers, as they have not reinforced our view of ourselves as the deserving recipients of certain considerations.

Research has been conducted looking at how humans react when their MMM is undermined or attacked. We have developed self-referential models which trigger and then re-enforce types of behavior which elicit positive responses depending upon the audience, falling within Goffman’s Dramaturgical Model (Goffman 1956). People
respond to these threats in a number of ways, specifically with self-justification theory (Jost, Banarjee and Nosek 2004) and self-affirmation theory (Sherman and Cohen 2006). These studies have shown that, for the most part, we have a strong desire to be seen as and believe ourselves to be virtuous and empathetic. Whatever end of the political spectrum we find ourselves on, humans rarely see themselves as a part of the problem.

This brief overview of MMM is in no way a comprehensive representation of the many factors which can be taken into consideration in relation to the triggering of threats or the myriad human responses to them. It is crucial to acknowledge that threats happen on macro and micro levels and lead to overlapping and mutually reenforcing states of awareness. An example of this would be the election of Trump (macro) alongside a growing sense of white privilege in everyday life (micro). For progressives this has led to a layering effect of threats. As these threats have become more apparent and harder to ignore or control, progressives have sought to compensate for a lack of control in one area (arguably mainstream politics) with control in other areas (identity politics, social media and alternative historical narratives):

Disruptions to meaning frameworks lead people to reaffirm alternative frameworks. Notably, these efforts need not be directed at the specific domain of meaning that has been jeopardized. The MMM thus proposes a fluid compensation model... where by people whose meaning frameworks have been disrupted react by bolstering or reaffirming other meaning frameworks that remain intact. Meaning is sought in domains that are most easily recruited, rather than solely in the domain under threat. (Heine, Proulx and Vohs 90).

Reactions to threats can be conscious or unconscious, and at a proximal level MMM argues that threats stimulate unpleasant arousal. Feelings of uncertainty and threats to self-identity are mitigated by the desire to achieve some kind of control through two main reactions: affirmation and adaptation (Proulx and Heine 2009). Affirmation involves re-working the framework, finding a way to contain and neutralize the threat whilst re-focusing the primacy of the framework. This would be a prime example of the fluid compensation model (FCM), finding manageable domains in which to reassert control. For progressives this might well include being more active on social media in relation to social justice issues or joining a protest movement like BLM or the 2017 Women’s March. Adaptation may be required when the FCM is not so easily activated and may include building an alternative or “abstract” framework, for example contextualizing American history as purely one of mainstream white/settler/heterosexual supremacy that erases the voices of POC and other minorities. The 1619 Project would be a perfect example of this in that it proposes an alternative narrative of American history born in the concept of slavery as the “original American sin” and contextualizes subsequent history through this racialized lens. Alternative frameworks grow out of a sense of powerlessness in relation to the one that exists, which is the failure of mainstream U.S politics to offer “continuous” progress and meaningful protection from the reactionary policies of the Trump administration. This has led to a reevaluation of what it means/meant to be politically progressive in Trump’s America, but also a looking backwards to try and understand how we are where we are now.

2. The Politics of Nostalgia

When nostalgia is used as a concept through which to understand political ideology and rhetoric it is often split into “reactionary nostalgia” and “progressive nostalgia”:
What we see as ‘progressive nostalgia’ is a particular and unashamedly overtly emotional way of remembering that actively and self-consciously aims to use the past to contextualise the achievements and gains of present day living and working conditions and to set a politically progressive agenda for the future. This process of remembering contains not simply an understanding that the past was not perfect, but rather an explicit understanding that it was hard, difficult and inequitable. (Smith and Campbell 613).

Whilst the authors acknowledge that such a clear differentiation between the two supposedly incompatible forms of nostalgia is too neat to offer much elucidation on complex patterns of memory and commemoration, I would argue that so much of how both academics and laymen understand manifestations of nostalgia within politics is still very much seen through this binary context. “Reactionary nostalgia” is the realm of the political Right, steeped in romanticized visions of a more peaceful time in which different communities were content in their place and the most important thing was that everyone was happy to be American without any additional hyphens. This vision of America as a heterogeneous melting pot of meritocracy and opportunity lends itself very easily to Trump’s nebulous “Make America Great Again” slogan, uncritically triggering barely fleshed out historical shadow shows of post-WW2 America and the collective certainty of the 1950s. However, to simplify reactionary nostalgia purely as one of restorative nostalgia (Boym 2001) rather misses the nuance of this phenomenon.

“Progressive nostalgia” would seem to point towards a reckoning with the past in all its complexity, reminiscent of Boym’s reflective nostalgia (Boym 2001), eschewing romanticized constructions and replacing them with a forward-thinking critical engagement with the good and bad:

Aspects of experience and social values are identified as worth remembering and reaffirming for both the present and future. That which is remembered is done so with a sense of loss tempered with overt pride, empathy and gratitude, which is in turn underlined by a desire to assert a sense of communal belonging and sense of place in the context of social change. It is also often about valuing the achievements of the past in terms of a set of political and social values that are seen to have underpinned those achievements—habitually a sense of hard work, collective action and progressive politics. These values are ones that are frequently defined as important in envisaging a possible future. In doing so, the nostalgic are explicitly offering a nostalgia for the future in which their descendants are envisaged as not only carrying on, but also, and more importantly, developing upon the achievements realised in the past. (Smith and Campbell 613).

It is in moments of collective trauma or perceived historical ruptures that cultural memory can become tribal and ideologically fraught on both ends of the political spectrum. This has often been reduced to a reactionary looking backwards into a glorious past for a historical model of national greatness by conservatives, cloaked in the language of civic values, tradition and manifest destiny. Likewise, for liberals this can bring about a tension between the past as a no man’s land of intolerance, and simultaneously, as an opportunity to instigate change in the present; to attempt to right historical injustices and build upon the progressive social movements of the past. This article does not see these forms of nostalgia as exclusive to their respective groups, but rather as existing and overlapping in both.
3. Future Nostalgia

Future nostalgia or retrofuturism as it is also called is nostalgia for a past that never came to be. It is probably best understood visually through the genre of Sci-Fi TV shows that include many of the tropes viewers expect to see in a certain vision of the future including advanced technology/A.I., harmonious human/robot (if not alien) relationships, smart cars, and spaceships. It is crucial to this article to understand the ways in which the medium of TV is integral to the construction of memory, but also the ways in which history is (re)created as a collective response to the present. As noted by Vivian Sobchack:

Furthermore, by virtue of their increasing representational immediacy, these new twentieth century technologies of representation and narration (most significantly, television) have increasingly collapsed the temporal distance between present, past, and future that structured our previously conceived notion of the temporal dimensions of what we call history (as the latter is differentiated from experience). That is, event and its representation, immediacy and its mediation, have moved increasingly toward simultaneity. (Sobchack, 4-5)

This compression of historical time and the sense of the future as something that is already here leads to a heightened sense of the present or the historical moment. However, I would argue that rather than providing a sense of nostalgic safety through recognizable tropes and set design, Hollywood provokes a sense of danger and anger at squandered opportunities. The vision of the future that never came to be as explored within Hollywood serves as a castigation to current audiences and a warning as to what can be taken away. The viewer is offered a parallel universe in which inclusivity and diversity are mainstream social issues in 1947. Issues that if they had been tackled at that time would surely have prevented the election of Trump and the dismantling of liberal America. Hollywood uses future nostalgia to engage with current political concerns whilst reinforcing fluid compensation models. I will now examine the ways in which this was done by exploring the areas of age, sex, race, class and sexuality. I will consider how they are used to reinforce the historical overlap of “progressive nostalgia” and “future nostalgia.”

4. Ageism

Ageism is mainly explored through the character of Avis Amberg. She is the character that most personifies the power imbalance within Hollywood during its formative years and as the lightning rod for progressive justice as the show explores what an earlier righting of historical wrongs might have looked like. Avis is the wife of Ace Amberg, the head of Ace Studios. We first meet her as she pulls her luxury car into Ernie West’s “gas station” Golden Tip Gasoline which is in fact a front for a male prostitution ring servicing both gay and straight customers. She is a long-time patron of the establishment and after driving off with the newest recruit proceeds to a suite at The Beverly Hills Hotel. Before getting what she paid for, she gives her companion some background information on the reality of power in Hollywood. Amberg had been a moderately successful actress in the silent era, but was in her own words considered “too Jewy” for the talkies. Sensing that her career was at an end she met and married a low-level studio executive, the man who would become Ace Amberg. I will examine how Avis serves to illustrate the plight of many middle-aged women and the notion of
“allyship.” It is clear during this first scene that she is deeply dissatisfied with her life, she is married to one of the most powerful men in Hollywood, but has no power herself, has no career or outlet for her talents. She is invisible to both her husband, with whom she has an antagonistic relationship devoid of love, and the wider world. She inhibits a world where everything is governed by youth and/or power, both of which she lacks. She poignantly informs the much younger male prostitute that she is “still alive,” and this in many ways sums up Amberg’s regeneration throughout the show, both sexually and professionally. She speaks to the invisibility of middle-aged actresses in Hollywood to this day with little having changed in subsequent decades. Many A-List actresses peak professionally at 30 years old whilst that number rises to 46 for their male counterparts.

15 We can see numerous examples of actresses playing mothers to “sons” who in real life are barely younger than them. Sally Field as the mother of the 10 years younger Tom Hanks in Forrest Gump (1994) and Melissa Leo’s Oscar winning performance as Mark Wahlberg’s mother in The Fighter (2010) despite being only 11 years older than her “son” are just two of the more egregious examples. Avis Amberg personifies the ongoing struggle for women with experience in the film industry (and wider society) to be taken seriously and the contribution they could make to be valued. She may no longer be the silent era ingénue but her knowledge of the film industry is every bit, if not more so, prescient than that of her husband.

16 The perceived silencing and removal of middle-aged women not only from Hollywood, but more importantly from politics, can be seen as having played a large part in the Pussyhat Project launched after Trump’s election win, or equally, Hillary Clinton’s election loss. The purpose of the Pussyhat Project was to have knitted and distributed one million hats by the time of the Women’s March on January 22nd, 2017, the day after Trump’s inauguration. The objective of the march was to unite women from all backgrounds in opposition to Trump’s overall agenda, with women all over the world joining their American sisters in solidarity over issues including reproductive rights, immigration reform and LGBTQ rights. The hats were a rebuke to Trump’s notorious Access Hollywood recording, but also a project that knowingly played with the stereotypes of the types of women Trump didn’t wish to grab. The Pussyhat Project brought together networks of knitters, crotchetiers and crafters with over one hundred progressive organizations involved in the Women’s March and led to one of the most iconic symbols of resistance against Trump. Against the background of Trump’s win is Clinton’s loss, and I think this is an important point to examine further.

17 It cannot be denied that Hillary Clinton is a controversial figure, on both the right and the left, nor can it be ignored that she was by far one of the most polarizing candidates in American presidential history. Clinton’s singular emphasis upon the intersectional talking points of the DNC in her campaign does beg the question of whether she was even the preferred candidate of the rank-and-file Democratic Party. The separating of class from identity politics was integral to Clinton’s loss but is also clear to see within the dynamic of Hollywood. As I will examine, class inequality is almost always subservient to a contemporary model of intersectionality within the show as opposed to the historical and radical model proposed by Asad Haider in Mistaken Identity (2018). The similarities between Clinton and Amberg, two competent women who spent their lives supporting the careers of their respective husbands, were both publicly cheated upon, were well aware that a sizable minority actively hoped for their failures and were
juggling the act of being the first women to hold such high positions is not lost upon
the viewer.

18 Clinton was the most qualified candidate for president in relation to public service and
experience of the realities of the position. In each presidential debate Clinton came
prepared with policy proposals and a comprehensive understanding of the issues at
hand both domestically and internationally, whilst Trump offered little other than
soundbites and personal attacks upon Clinton and her husband. I believe many
women—whether natural supporters of Clinton or not—could relate to her
predicament during these debates. Trump refused to debate within the accepted
parameters of the occasion, often physically stalking Clinton around the stage and
repeatedly talking over her. Clinton was experiencing what many women, especially
those of a certain age, have experienced in the workplace, and female viewers would
also have known that Clinton’s responses would damn her either way; too aggressive or
too passive, too strong or not up to the job.

19 The loss of a middle-aged, highly competent woman who had spent her life to date
gaining the experience needed for the job was overlooked and minimized by the
country for a man with zero credentials and questionable ethics. Whatever gains liberal
women thought they had made over the last quarter century, and the sense that the
first female president was not only inevitable but here, were painfully exposed with
Clinton’s loss. The MMM surrounding sexual equality was shaken to its very foundation
by Trump’s victory. Clinton’s vision of a socially progressive America was rejected for
the barely fleshed out tweets of a reality TV host, serial adulterer and notorious
bankrupt. This was not just a rejection of Clinton but a repudiation of progressive
values, decency and the future many felt was their long-awaited right.

20 The rejection of Clinton and all that she personifies in relation to the struggle for
gender equality during the last fifty years lends itself to asking how might this
situation have been different if the struggle had started sooner. It is in episode four
“(Screen) Test” that Amberg is tested both in her capacity to lead a studio, but also in
her allyship. Ace Amberg has a heart attack that leaves him incapacitated and the
running of the studio is handed over to his wife. She is immediately asked to decide
whether the film Peg will go into production with the African-American screenwriter
credited, and more importantly, will she cast an African-American actress in the lead.
This episode shows Amberg making day-to-day business decisions, in control in a room
full of men who question her every judgement and decision. More interestingly, it
shows the conflict she feels in being the first woman in control of a studio and the
necessity not to fail because she would be failing for all women. Her need to visibly
succeed within the industry is in direct conflict with her desire to help other
minorities. This conflict is played out in Amberg’s scene with Eleanor Roosevelt in a
rather heavy-handed scene which outlines the responsibility of progressive allyship.

ER: ‘These past few years I have been traveling all over the country, and what I have
seen going on in the South has positively shaken my faith in this country. Here I
thought we fought a war for freedom, for... basic decency. Then, to see Jim Crow up
close, those... the beatings and the lynchings. I have begun to realize that this
country is actually moving backwards. Now... I understand that... you have the
opportunity to cast a girl of color as the lead in one of your pictures. I am here to
encourage you to do it.’

AA: ‘Okay, I’m sorry. While I greatly admire the bleeding hearts of my dear
colleagues here, if we cast this girl in the lead role, the picture will not run in the
South. Run it in the North. The picture will face a boycott. Production on our slate
of films will grind to a halt. This studio, as well as everyone who works here, will become a target of the Ku Klux Klan. That’s the long and short of it. That’s why we just... We can’t do it.’
ER: ‘Yes, it will be...a big to-do. Think about it, what it might mean to a... to a dirt poor little black girl living in a shanty in some... cotton town where she’s told she’s free, but really her life is no better than that of her grandparents, who were the owned property of another human being. Think about her, what it would mean to... to see herself up there on that screen. Vaunted, dignified... valued. My time in Washington taught me... a lot of things. I used to believe that good government could change the world. Well, I don’t know that I believe that anymore. However, what you do, the three of you, can change the world.’ (Hollywood, Episode 4)

21 The fact that Eleanor Roosevelt is used to deliver this message is very telling. She is one of the titans of twentieth century liberalism and again what is being signaled here is time lost. Amberg “bravely” takes the decision to risk all after the sobering wisdom of Roosevelt. Roosevelt offers a view of America at a crossroads, and she believes it to be heading in the wrong direction. When government is not the answer, and cannot be trusted, it is the responsibility of individual citizens to do the right thing whatever the consequences might be. Amberg finds herself in a position of power with the ability to shape change; she can work within the status quo and protect her own piece of the pie or she can help others to fulfill their promise and gain a seat at the table. Roosevelt’s crossroads is discernible as a contemporary moment in which our current discourse on racial equality finds its historical mirror. Amberg, after some soul searching, recognizes her own privilege and chooses to offer her hand and help pull up others behind her leaving the audience to ponder how different that future America might have been.

22 What we can also see is two highly privileged women deciding to be “allies” and thus bestowing the largesse of equality upon others. This elitist hijacking of restorative justice is perfectly in line with Olúfẹmi O. Táíwò research in Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else) (2022). Elites have co-opted the language and struggle of identity politics whilst ignoring the inherently radical critique of capitalism within it. Class struggle is obscured to make way for the much more lucrative market of media sanctioned “equity.” Amberg wins commercially through her allyship as one could cynically argue Clinton and the DNC tried to do in wooing the progressive elites of the mass media and more hard-line progressive activist movement circling the Democratic Party.

5. Sex and Class

23 Few industries are more saturated in the commodification of sex than the film industry. The notorious Hollywood casting couch is a thing of legend with many a famous career having allegedly benefited from some sexual quid pro quo. Hollywood does not shy away from exploring this rather unsavory side of the business nor is it keen to delve too far into the reality of it either. As previously mentioned, Avis Amberg is a user of young, male prostitutes most of whom are desperately trying to get their first big break in the industry. They know who she is and what she can do for them. She has all the money and power in this situation, and yet the viewer feels sorry for her rather than the men she is exploiting for sex. Likewise, her husband maintains a “relationship” with his mistress Jeanne Crandall which would appear to be based upon her economic reliance upon him as her employer. He could cancel her contract at any time, and she is also afraid that he will replace her with a younger actress both
professionally and sexually. Crandall is played by Mira Sorvino who to her credit does not go for an easy #MeToo moment on professional exploitation. Crandall genuinely seems conflicted about her relationship with Ace, veering from guilt to fear to gratitude. This is all the more interesting as Sorvino was one of the first actresses to speak out against Harvey Weinstein and has been very open about his harassment of her and his blackballing of her career for non-compliance. Crandall makes the viewer consider the historically exploitative framework that is such a part of Hollywood, the deeply ingrained attitudes towards women as disposable and an industry-wide blind spot to the predatory behavior of powerful men. Ace Amberg has kept Crandall in B-movie hell for most of her career perhaps due to his need to limit her through controlling her financially and professionally, and it is not until his wife takes over the studio (another example of allyship) that Crandall is acknowledged as a good actress and given a starring role of consequence.

24 The #MeToo movement has led to a seismic shift in gender relations in the workplace the likes of which have not been seen since Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Equality in the workplace in relation to pay but also in relation to safety were battles that women had often been taught were won in the past, yet the reality is somewhat different. Yes, Hollywood and the actresses who spoke out pointed to an exaggerated existence that many everyday women found hard to relate to, but it did beg the question that if it could happen to supposedly young, rich and famous women, what was happening to those with none of these “attributes”? Just how toxic a workplace did many women find themselves in and perhaps eventually removed from? #MeToo aimed to highlight many of the intersecting categories which lead to female disempowerment including sexual harassment, low-paid work, prisoners’ rights and the sex trafficking of girls of color. As with the Women’s March, #MeToo became an international movement sparking similar discussions in France (#BalanceTonPorc), China (#YoWeshi), Spain (#YoTambién) and Palestine (#وأنا كمان) and many other countries. Crandall’s situation and its present-day incarnation brings home the fact that little has changed despite the progressive battles and subsequent legislation that have promised women a safe work environment. These battles must be fought once again so as to produce a better future and this strongly speaks to Smith and Campbell’s (2017) earlier point in relation to the intertwining narratives of progressive nostalgia.

25 Nowhere is the relationship between sex and class more apparent than in the representation of the gay community during this period. The illegality of male homosexual sex during this time only adds to the levels of privilege being exploited. This is most keenly explored through the abhorrent “relationship” between the fictional Rock Hudson, his agent Henry Willson and George Cukor’s gay pool parties (Episode 3: “Outlaws.”) Contemporary liberal viewers would struggle not to see both these scenes through the progressive lens of a privileged top 1% living above the laws that apply to mere mortals, safe in the knowledge that they will never be held accountable for their actions due to their wealth and social network.

26 Cukor’s sex parties start with a very civilized dinner party for industry A-Listers (Avis Amberg and Ellen Kincaid are in attendance), however, after dinner the ladies leave as the USC football team arrives alongside the prostitutes from Golden Tip Gasoline to start the real party. A-Listers like Cole Porter and Cukor are free to take their pick from the many much younger men frolicking in the pool. This particular scene has been the focus of much debate in media-based reviews of the show. Some have argued that this
is a stinging critique of the prejudice that existed at the time against gay men and that Cukor’s parties provided a safe space in which gay men in the industry could meet without the possibility of police entrapment or blackmail. This may very well be true, and it has also been suggested that these parties never happened and were invented to besmirch Cukor’s name, but I would suggest that it is hard to overlook the power imbalance between the guests and the “entertainment.” There is absolutely a sense of “gay for pay” which is only really hinted at through Dick Samuel’s discomfort with the whole set-up and his “gift” of Rock Hudson by Henry Willson. Class unambiguously plays a part in that this is a transactional arrangement where older men elicit sex from younger men through the promise of quid pro quo, or because the men have already been paid to be “amenable” to their requests. If this were a group of young women brought in for exactly the same purpose, I am sure that the scene would not be read through such a charitable lens.

If there is room for some ethical prevarication regarding Cukor’s parties, there is none possible in relation to Rock Hudson’s exploitation by his agent, Henry Willson. Willson is a sexual predator in the most open sense and has a track record of sexually abusing his male clients through psychological mistreatment and manipulation. He makes Hudson’s sexual degradation seem like the most normal thing in the world and makes it look like a necessary part of becoming a star; almost a test of how much you really want it. Hudson’s repeated humiliations are reminiscent of Hollywood horror stories from the very beginning of film, actors completely controlled by Svengali like agents, directors and producers, unable to free themselves from the psychological parasites that have attached themselves to their person and career. Hudson encapsulates the unworldly hick that needs a lot of polishing to make it as a star, and this is a romantic motif of Hollywood that persists to this day. What Hollywood does is expose this fantasy for what it so often was and is; exploitation based upon sexual and class inequalities. Hudson does finally free himself from Willson and Willson is forced to face the reality of the pain he has caused others, yet his redemption is only possible because he accepts his guilt and wishes to atone. Many of the big Hollywood names caught up in #MeToo have never accepted their guilt or acknowledged it in anything other than carefully crafted statements written by their lawyers. Careers have undoubtedly been destroyed and resurrected to a point (Kevin Spacey, Bryan Singer and Bill Cosby to name but a few) and of course Weinstein was sentenced to 23 years in prison, but there is a sense that #MeToo is a moment of reckoning for an industry that is just waiting for that moment to pass.

6. Race

The exploration of racial justice within Hollywood is perhaps where we see future nostalgia at its strongest. What we see is a moment in which there is the clearest of overlaps between the future as is and the future that could have been in that the show was released in the same month as the death of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis Police. Through the characters of Camille Washington and Archie Coleman the viewer is able to explore what might have happened if the film industry had openly fought against racial injustice by championing the careers of African Americans. The casting of Washington in the lead role for a film in 1947 and her subsequent Oscar win points to a future in which BLM and #OscarsSoWhite, an online movement to highlight
the lack of diversity within the Academy, would not have been necessary. Washington’s lead actress Oscar comes a full 54 years before Halle Berry’s actual win and Hollywood asks what that might have meant for inclusion and visibility. In the final episode “A Hollywood Ending” we watch as different racial minority groups listen to the radio as the winners are announced and celebrate and cry as they feel validated and hopeful for what this might symbolize for all minorities. Archie Coleman, the screenwriter of Peg not only wins an Oscar, but openly attends the ceremony with his male partner Hudson, in a scene that absolutely hammers home the intersection angle on injustice. Coleman is the character that most clearly inhabits a space that would be recognizable to many people of color today, as he talks about code-switching when he deals with producers over the phone and takes time to realize that his screenplay can have a Black lead without becoming a message film. He wants success as a screenwriter not as a Black screenwriter. Coleman is constantly reminded that he is Black and that is all that most people in the industry see. It is only when he is completely removed from his own screenplay that he decides to fight back. Peg the story of the suicide of Peg Entwistle, the actress who jumped to her death from the Hollywood sign in 1932 becomes Meg a film with a Black lead, interracial romance and no examination of race at all. Coleman believes the script examines the unforgiving and soul-destroying nature of Hollywood, but the casting of Washington becomes color blind. White “Peg” and Black “Meg” have exactly the same experience in Hollywood with the only difference being that Meg chooses not to kill herself after all. It is interesting to consider how this change might be understood by contemporary audiences as it points to a much earlier liberalism that is based upon not seeing color at all. Much of the current dialogue upon race demands that white allies not hide behind the privilege of not seeing color and examine their own racial capital in taking such a position. Coleman and Washington both seek to educate those around them on the realities of their existence (segregation, passing, code-switching), and yet “Meg” remains completely devoid of race. I think if anything this shows just how quickly the discussion around race for progressives has moved on in just one year. The parameters around race, white guilt and allyship have changed exponentially from 2019 to 2020, and I would suggest that this might have handled differently post BLM.

Progressive allyship and the righting of historical injustice is at the forefront of the representation of Chinese-American actress, Anna Mae Wong. MGM notoriously refused to consider Wong for the lead in The Good Earth (1937) because she was actually Chinese-American, and instead gave the role to Luise Rainer in yellow face for which she won the Best Actress Oscar. Wong’s career was a catalogue of B-movie racial stereotypes and she succumbed to alcoholism, although she never became the recluse that she is portrayed as in Hollywood. Raymond Ainsley, the half-Filipino, White passing boyfriend of Washington sets out to right the wrong that was done to Wong. The viewer watches as Ainsley challenges Dick Samuels, the studio executive who knew that Wong was right for the part on accepting the prejudices behind the decision and demanding better of him. Samuels is a closeted gay man and is clearly ashamed of his failure to fight for Wong, and in yet another example of intersectional allyship promises to help Wong resurrect her career. Wong is given a part in Meg by Ainsley for which she wins an Oscar. Ainsley plans to use this project to make Wong the star of his next film thus helping to make her the star she should have always been. The differing levels of intersectionality are clear to see: here and the message is obvious; it is your duty to use whatever privilege you have to help those below you. Ainsley is a success because he...
passes as White (something which is mentioned once hastily) and Samuels is likewise White, male and rich; they are able to assist other minorities because they hide what they truly are. Is the viewer to believe that through allyship they are in fact setting the ground to be open themselves? Perhaps they can best be understood through the progressive belief that there is no equality until all are equal, White privilege is a burden that can only be mitigated through allyship.

7. Conclusion

There is an atmosphere of progressive wish fulfillment apparent within Hollywood, and on the surface this sugar-coated, pastel-colored vision of the past offers little new to our collective understanding of power dynamics in the film industry during the post-war period. As I believe I have shown, it is in breaking down what this exercise in wish fulfillment signals about, and to, the contemporary viewer that is of interest. In the era of Trump, the elevation of intersectional social justice as the plot foundation for a show set in the 1947 is telling. The two subsequent decades could arguably be said to have set the ideological climate that we currently find ourselves in; America is split largely down the middle into factions which, simplistically put, venerate the American values of the 1950s and those who see the 1960s as the beginning of grassroots movements that would bring about progressive societal change. Hollywood promotes the progressive nostalgic vision of equality as an ongoing process with ties to its radical past, its liberal present, and as an imperiled future that must be fought for. Beyond its advancement of an elitist “few good men/women” version of history, it focuses on recognizable intersectional allyship whilst skirting the more complicated questions of class and power. It ignores that exploitation can happen between minorities not just to them, and instead develops a historically fractured form of future nostalgia, one which mourns a future that is every bit a projection of contemporary concerns as the Sci-Fi shows of the 1960s. On one level Hollywood is a palliative to progressive viewers; as long as good people take a stand equality will come, but on the other hand, it offers a collective reminder that the future is nigh in Trump’s America and the question remains as to whose America it will be.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Boym, Svetlana. The Future of Nostalgia. Basic Books, 2008

Burke, Brian, L, Andy Martens, and Erik H. Faucher. “Two decades of terror management theory: A meta-analysis of mortality salience research.” Personality and Social Psychology Review, vol. 14, no. 2, 2010, pp. 155-195.

Franklin, Sidney, dir. The Good Earth. 1937.

Goffman, Erving. The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Anchor, 2002.

Haider, A. Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump. Verso Books, 2018.
Heine, Steven J, Travis Proulx, and Kathleen. D. Vohs. “The Meaning Maintenance Model: On the Coherence of Social Motivations.” *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2006, pp. 88–110.

*Hollywood*. Episode 3, “Outlaws,” directed by Michael Uppendahl, written by Ryan Murphy and Ian Brennan, featuring Patti LuPone, Jake Picking and Jeremy Pope, aired May 1, 2020, on Netflix.

---. Episode 4, “(Screen) Tests,” directed by Janet Mock, written by Ian Brennan, Janet Mock and Ryan Murphy, featuring Patti LuPone, Jake Picking and Jeremy Pope, aired May 1, 2020, on Netflix.

---. Episode 7, “A Hollywood Ending,” directed by Jessica Yu, written by Ian Brennan and Ryan Murphy, featuring Patti LuPone, Jake Picking and Jeremy Pope, aired May 1, 2020, on Netflix.

Jost, John. T, Mahzarin R. Banaji, and Brian A. Nosek. “A Decade of System Justification Theory: Accumulated Evidence of Conscious and Unconscious Bolstering of the Status Quo.” *Political Psychology*, vol. 25, no. 6, 2004, pp. 881–919.

Russell, David. dir. *The Fighter*. 2010.

Proulx, Travis, and Steven J. Heine. “Connections from Kafka: Exposure to Meaning Threats Improves Implicit Learning of an Artificial Grammar.” *Psychological Science*, vol. 20, no. 9, 2009, pp. 1125–1131.

---. “Death and Black Diamonds: Meaning, Mortality, and the Meaning Maintenance Model.” *Psychological Inquiry*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2006, pp. 309–318.

Sherman, David K, and Geoffrey L. Cohen. “The Psychology of Self-Defense: Self Affirmation Theory.” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 38, 2006: 183–242.

Smith, Laurajane, and Gary Campbell. “Nostalgia for the Future: Memory, Nostalgia and the Politics of Class.” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 23 (7) 2017: 612–627. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1321034

Sobchack, Vivian, editor. *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event*. Routledge, 2014.

Táiwò, O. O. *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)*. Haymarket Books, 2022.

Zemeckis, Robert, dir. *Forrest Gump*. 1994.

NOTES

1. https://time.com/4062700/hollywood-gender-gap/
2. https://www.pussyhatproject.com/our-story
3. “I better use some Tic Tacs just in case I start kissing her. You know I’m automatically attracted to beautiful—I just start kissing them. It’s like a magnet. Just kiss. I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab ’em by the pussy. You can do anything.” Trump’s off-screen comments during an *Access Hollywood* interview circa September, 2005.
4. https://screenrant.com/netflixs-hollywood-george-cukors-gay-pool-parties-really-happened/
5. https://variety.com/2020/film/news/oscarssowhite-nominations-diversity-april-reign-1203467389/
ABSTRACTS

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 precipitated a crisis in national identity amongst liberal Americans leading to the political mobilization of grassroots activists, liberal media, and minority groups as a bulwark against the perception of a reassertion of intolerant conservatism. This article will examine the shared trauma of this historical moment through utilizing the Meaning Maintenance Model as a means to frame why this trauma was felt so deeply and collectively, but also to understand the conjunctions of resistance through direct action, media representations and nostalgia. Through the series Hollywood (2020) future nostalgia will be viewed as a tool by which present day resistance can be galvanized by presenting a fictional portrayal of post-war Hollywood as an era in which progressives fought for equality, exhibited intersectional allyship and potentially changed the social fabric of contemporary America, leading to a country in which Trump would have been unelectable and many ongoing battles for equality would have been won generations ago.

INDEX

Keywords: Future Nostalgia, Hollywood, Liberalism, Meaning Maintenance Model, Representation

AUTHOR

JENNIFER COWE

Jennifer Cowe is a lecturer in the School of Journalism, Writing and Media at the University of British Columbia. She is the author of the monograph Killing the Buddha: Henry Miller’s Long Journey to Satori (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2020). Research interests include nostalgia/memory studies, twentieth century American literature/history and Henry Miller.