Dwyer – Abstract - 1

Michael D. Dwyer
Dissertation Abstract

My dissertation, Back to the Fifties: Pop Nostalgia in the Reagan Era, analyzes the ideological function of fifties nostalgia in Hollywood film from 1973-1988. In the years when Ronald Reagan emerged as a political force, “the fifties” became an intensely powerful socio-political concept that signified much more the chronological years of 1950-1959. The formulation of this concept is reflected in the slew of Hollywood films that sought to recreate, reinvoke, or re-imagine fifties youth culture in the Reagan Era. My investigation into this “pop nostalgia” is premised on three central claims.

First, I argue that cold war teenagers were invoked in Reagan Era popular culture as a synecdoche for the nation, creating a mythic frame of reference through which America could understand itself as a nation (both in its present and potential future). Like the teenager poised on the verge of maturity, postwar America is depicted in Reagan-Era popular culture as facing a point in its development when everything (for better or for worse) is about to change. These pop nostalgia texts helped to define the fifties and the nation in retrospect for their viewers. The figure of the fifties teen thus serves as an unstable signifier—its meaning was under intense negotiation and struggle.

Second, I contend that the nostalgia for fifties youth culture that is a fundamental feature of these films was utilized by a range of populations throughout the Reagan Era for diverse and often competing political and ideological purposes. Nascent Reaganites would point to the fifties depicted in Back to the Future as a time of morality and order to which the nation must return. Liberals would identify the fifties in American Graffiti as a time of innocence that was eventually betrayed by the national sins of Watergate and Vietnam. Others would understand the fifties in Grease as a time of naïve and archaic conventions to be mocked and scorned, while still others would attempt to recover the traditions of political activism in the fifties of Hairspray. As these examples suggest, pop nostalgia did not (and does not) have an inherent ideological operation but rather served as sites of contestation over the cultural definition of the fifties. Thus, the fifties that emerged in the films of the Reagan Era is the product of a network of overlapping and competing meanings.

Finally, the dissertation acknowledges the impact of the adjacent texts of promotion, cultural fantasy, academic criticism, and star texts that existing scholarly investigations of the “nostalgia film” have insufficiently considered. Building from the work of Barbara Klinger in reception studies, my dissertation considers the ways in which the meaning of the fifties teen is not only worked out within the narrative border of any particular filmic text, but also negotiated between and among adjacent texts that surround and flow through the films. In isolating these coordinates I argue that the meaning of fifties youth experience is not a matter of historical fact but rather is continually shifting, influenced by the historically and culturally contingent conditions of reception.

The dissertation’s structure stems from its interest in reception studies, with each chapter organized around a particular adjacent text. The first chapter centers upon the implications of the fantasy return to the fifties in the 1985 blockbuster Back to the Future and the political rhetoric of Ronald Reagan. Both the film and Reagan’s rhetoric, I argue, “fix” the fifties on two levels. The fifties are first repaired by eliding the historical tensions and controversies that actually characterized the decade (segregation, the Kinsey reports, Cold War paranoia, etc.) and highlighting the bright, cheery, prosperity of Small Town USA. The fifties are “fixed” again by freezing them in time—creating a monolithic “fifties” that was cut off from the historical, cultural, and political events that surrounded it. This is visible in the most prominent piece of the film’s set: the stopped clock adorning Hill Valley’s town hall. Marty travels back in time to re-start the clock—which not only ensures his prosperity in the 1980s, but also establishes his fantasy version of the past as reality.

In Chapter Two, “History, Memory, Affect: Re-reading American Graffiti” I first examine how the periodization of Hollywood history guides viewer response to the film—though it was produced and originally received as a film of “New Hollywood,” with its attendant values of collaboration, aesthetic experimentation and progressive politics, American Graffiti in retrospect is considered to be one of the first summer blockbusters. I trace this history and recontextualization of the film by considering promotional materials (trailers, posters, video packaging) for the
film’s multiple re-issues on various formats (original release, theatrical re-release, VHS, DVD, Anniversary Editions, etc.). I then turn attention to Richard Dyer’s concept of pastiche to understand the film’s engagement with cultural memory and implicit critique of nostalgia.

Building from the work of Jeff Smith and Theo Cateforis, the third chapter, “Old Time Rock and Roll on Hollywood Soundtracks,” describes how the transformation of fifties rock into ‘golden oldies' in the 1970s and 1980s elided the racial politics of the music’s original production and reception. In it, I examine the emergence of ‘oldies' as a radio format in the 1970s, and the peculiar phenomenon of scenes featuring teenagers lip-synching to oldies songs in films like Risky Business, Pretty in Pink, Adventures in Babysitting, and Ferris Bueller’s Day Off. The chapter closes with an extended reading of the John Waters film Hairspray, which seeks to re-establish the sense of racial and sexual transgression of fifties rock and roll, and problematizes the institutions that obscure or actively exclude its raced (and classed) origins.

Chapter Four, “Star Legacies: Remembering James Dean and Sandra Dee,” is informed by the contribution to star studies by scholars like Christine Gledhill and Michael DeAngelis. This chapter considers how the “rebellion” that each star represented in the fifties is reformulated in the 1980s with the politics of gender and sexuality that shape their cultural legacies. Considering invocations of Dean in the songs of John Mellencamp, films like Footloose and Heathers, and music videos by Morrissey, the chapter reveals how Dean served as a contested signifier of erotic masculinity for both defenders of “traditional” manhood and for homosexual fans. While Dean’s legacy was continually claimed, however, Sandra Dee’s legacy was almost universally rejected, as the song “Look at Me, I’m Sandra Dee” in Grease, and a cover story in People evidence. The chapter closes with the emergence of girl-centric texts like Buffy the Vampire Slayer and the academic establishment of “girl studies” which sought to recover the “California girl” stereotype that Dee came to embody.

In the fifth and concluding chapter, “I Love the Eighties: Nostalgia for Nostalgia on the ‘Net,” I pursue the implications of the re-emergence of 1980s pop nostalgia texts on the Internet. Considering YouTube videos and online fan communities, I speculate upon what new historical meanings that fifties nostalgia may generate in what Henry Jenkins has termed “convergence culture.”

At its theoretical base, this project asks: how do the meanings of texts move through history, and within history? In what way is the cultural memory of a nation’s history shaped by popular culture, and how are those texts re-positioned and re-invoked by diverse populations to serve social, political, and ideological purposes? As a proliferation of new technologies allows greater access to an ever-expanding archive of texts, these questions will increasingly present themselves not only within the fields of film and cultural studies, but also across the humanities and social sciences.