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Gary Cross. *Consumed Nostalgia: Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 296 S. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-16758-1.

Michael D. Dwyer. *Back to the Fifties: Nostalgia, Hollywood Film, and Popular Music of the Seventies and Eighties.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 216 S. $35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-935684-3; $99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-935683-6.

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Sammelrez: Nostalgia

On 21 October 2015 people all over the world got together to celebrate the arrival of two time-travellers from the year 1985 â this was the day when Marty McFly and Doc Brown arrived in 2015 in the film âBack to the Future IIâ. As with Orwellâs â1984â and Kubrickâs â2001: A Space Odysseyâ it was another instance of yesterdayâs future turning into the past before the very eyes. In not just a few cases those eyes were doubtlessly glazed over with nostalgia, nostalgia for the time when their owners, then in their teens and twenties, first saw the film.

Ironically, âBack to the Future IIâ foreshadowed this very development. After his arrival in 2015, Marty visited a 1980s-style retro cafÃ© and looked through the shop window of an antiques store, selling such 1980s artefacts as lava lamps, videotapes and a Macintosh 128K. The two scenes neatly linked the film to its prequel, in which Marty travelled from 1985 to 1955. This was no coincidence â the 1950s occupied a central position in the nostalgic imagination of the time: Indeed, it was the revival of 1950s RockânâRoll in the early 1970s that first made nostalgia a household term. It therefore comes as no surprise that nostalgia for the 1950s features heavily in two new books on nostalgia in the United States.

âBack to the Fiftiesâ by Michael Dwyer not only refers to âBack to the Futureâ in its title, it begins with an instructive close reading of the first film of the franchise, paralleling it with the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan (an avowed fan of the film, Reagan referred to it in his 1986 State of the Union address.). Commonly âBack to the Futureâ has been seen as an exemplar of what Dwyer calls âthe âamnesiacâ model of nostalgiaâ (p. 22). Dwyer rejects this interpretation, arguing âthat nostalgia must be understood not as a reduction or denial of history but as a fundamentally productive affective engagement that produces new historical meaning for the past as a way of reckoning with the historical presentâ (p. 22).

Marty travelled back in time not to live in the past but to change it in order to correct the failures made manifest in his present. Reagan similarly rewrote history in his speeches, invoking the 1950s as a moral compass for the present while ignoring everything that would not fit into his picture of the period. In both instances the past was used to change the present with an eye to a better future. Neither âBack to the Futureâ nor Reagan, Dwyer argues, erased history. Rather, they fostered ânostalgic affect prompted by critical reflection on contemporary historical conditionsâ and promoted âselective versions of the past to suit their visions of the futureâ (p. 43). In short, their nostalgia was less about wallowing in the past than creating a future.

The second chapter deals with George Lucasâ 1973 film âAmerican Graffitiâ which, thanks mainly to the lit-

erary critic Fredric Jameson, is considered the progenitor and archetype of the ânostalgia filmâ. It is hard to see how anything new can be said about a film over which so much ink has been spilled but Dwyer does so with panache. He argues that the film, though romanticising the 1950s to some extent, treats nostalgia quite critically. âAmerican Graffitiâ âacknowledges the appeal and value of nostalgia, while simultaneously warning of the dangers of overindulgences in itâ (p. 74). In the end, the filmâs protagonist decides to leave his idyllic hometown â and thereby the 1950s.

Dwyerâs astute analysis of âBack to the Futureâ and âAmerican Graffitiâ raises the question whether they can be seen as examples for nostalgia at all and this is exactly his point: Nostalgia is much more complex than the common cultural critique of the phenomenon allows. âAmerican Graffitiâ has become a ânostalgia filmâ not so much because it idealises the 1950s unreservedly. Rather, its subsequent commercialisation, its role in paving the way for a whole new genre and the critical writing on the film have shaped how it is understood today. Dwyer therefore stresses the âimportance of analyzing the ways films acquire new meaning and associations as they move through timeâ (p. 51) and this is what he does in his book.

In the three remaining chapters, Dwyer explores the soundtracks of nostalgia films and the invention of the Oldies as a genre, MTV and the âcrossover nostalgiaâ of Michael Jackson as well as the âstar legaciesâ of James Dean and Sandra Dee. While all these chapters are informative, well-argued and convincing they are perhaps not as significant for general historians as the first two. All in all, however, this book is a compelling read for anyone interested in the 1970s and 1980s and their attitudes towards the past. It demonstrates that popular culture was crucial for the perception of the 1950s in the 1980s, and that this perception was far less homogenous than is often claimed. Reagan and the New Rightâs recourse to the 1950s was only one of many ways to use the period.

While cultural, media and fashion studies have produced a number of books on nostalgia recently, the same cannot be said for history. Most historians use the term nostalgia pejoratively to describe an affective, distorting and ultimately false perception of the past. Only a few have deemed the phenomenon worthy of investigation. One of them is Gary Cross. His book âConsumed Nostalgiaâ understands nostalgia as a modern phenomenon that âwas practically absent from our ancestors two centuries agoâ (p. 6). This is certainly true for what Cross calls âconsumed nostalgiaâ, the âlonging for the goods of the past that came from a personal experience of growing up in the stressful world of fast capitalismâ (p. 10).

Unlike most books on nostalgia which concentrate on a single subject, âConsumed Nostalgiaâ explores these assumptions by looking at a wide range of examples. It covers some of the same ground as âBack to the Fiftiesâ â films and TV series (chapter 4), radio and pop music (chapter 5) â but also takes into account the collection of objects such as childhood memorabilia (chapter 1) and cars (chapter 2) as well as sites of nostalgia such as heritage sites (chapter 6) and theme parks (chapter 7). This approach allows for a much wider perspective. On the downside, each aspect cannot be explored in the same detail.

More problematically, it becomes increasingly vague what nostalgia means in this book. Instead of questioning whether the chosen examples are demonstrative of nostalgia, Cross assumes this a priori. While nostalgia may often be a yearning for oneâs childhood, this does not always have to be the case. The nostalgia for the 1950s, for instance, first became a subject of cultural criticism because it infected a younger generation without recollections of the period. Likewise nostalgia may be a driving force for collecting but not every form of collecting can be reduced to nostalgia.

Crossâ hypothesis that nostalgia is a reaction to social acceleration and fast capitalism has a lot going for it. In fact, the sociologist Hartmut Rosa makes the same argument in his theory of social acceleration. According to Rosa every surge of acceleration is followed by nostalgic sentiments. See Hartmut Rosa, Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity. Translated by Jonathan Trejo-Mathys, New York 2013, p. 41. However, Cross neither cites Rosa, nor does he spell out how exactly acceleration and fast capitalism produce nostalgia or how nostalgia helps to cope with their effects. Given the commercial value of nostalgia, his claim that nostalgia âoften has been and remains a subtle protest against consumerismâ (p. 237) does not seem particularly convincing.

Despite these critical objections, âConsumed Nostalgiaâ is an important addition to the growing body of literature on nostalgia. It proves that it is not only possible but instructive to consider different types, forms and examples of nostalgia together to get a broader view of the diversity, complexity and ambivalence of the phenomenon in the twentieth century. âConsumed Nostalgiaâ raises many interesting questions in need of further exploration â not least if its findings are applicable to other consumer societies.

âBack to the Fiftiesâ and âConsumed Nostalgiaâ both point out that the academy has long eschewed nostalgia: It âhas earned the deep scorn of most intellectualsâ (Cross, p. 12) and garnered âscepticism and disdain from many academics and criticsâ (Dwyer, p. 8). Far from defending nostalgia, Cross and Dwyer make a case for taking it seriously as a subject for investigation. Dwyer rightly calls for âthinking â really thinking â about how cultural attitudes toward the past structure our engagements with the present, and how the historical conditions of the present structure our affective engagements with the pastâ (p. 183). Cross emphasises that âthe public understands and uses the past in ways very different from the historian" (p. 13) â and these ways do not have to be bad or inferior. Whatever historians think about real or alleged nostalgic phenomena and practices, they are surely here to stay and they cry out for better understanding and historical contextualisation. Cross and Dwyer demonstrate not only how revealing, useful and necessary such research is, they also show how it can be carried out. This makes both books important beyond their field of study.

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