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Backward glances: The cultural and industrial uses of nostalgia in 2010s Hollywood cinema

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Backward Glances:

The Cultural and Industrial Uses of Nostalgia in 2010s Hollywood Cinema

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Dedication

For the certainty that has never been. And for those who long for it all the same.

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

Over the course of the 2010s, one identifiable trend in Hollywood cinema was the significant presence of nostalgia films. These films stage idealized recollections of the past, appealing to affective longing for its perceived comforts and stability. This thesis utilizes an interdisciplinary approach to present a historical narrative of recent Hollywood cinema and its intersection with broader American culture and society. I argue that the most recent cinematic "nostalgia wave" is attributable to the broad, epochal conditions of modernity and late modernity, specific historical events and trends of the 2010s, and Hollywood-specific technological and industrial discontinuities. In an attempt to weather this multitude of discontinuities, the contemporary American film industry can be seen to have internalized the logic of cultural nostalgia in a plea for continuity. This nostalgic outlook is also positioned alongside simultaneous attempts to contend with social progress in recent Hollywood cinema. Nostalgia is thus theorized as a potentially productive way of negotiating past and future, providing a narrative and industrial model for processing social change during a period of widespread uncertainty.

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Chapter One: Introduction

It would seem that, with the benefit of hindsight, 2017 was an emblematic year for the

Hollywood cinema of the previous decade, the shining example of the film industry operating in

its idealized form, cognizant of commercial realities but negotiating them deftly with artistic

sensibilities. For a changing theatrical marketplace held up ever more precariously by studio

tentpoles, it was refreshing to see that many of the biggest blockbusters fared exceptionally well

against critical scrutiny, multiple acclaimed low- to mid-budget original films were widely

embraced by general audiences, and plenty of each seemed responsive to increasing demands for

improved demographic representation and conscious of the burgeoning political climate of the

United States. As the year faded into the rearview mirror, entertainment news outlets circulated

that the three highest earners at the domestic box office each featured women protagonists. It was

surely a sign—however relative—of commercial, political, and industrial progress if there ever

was one.[1]

But reality is never so simple, and even a year of apparent industrial harmony is not

removed from the wider uncertainties, conflicts, and anxieties that plagued Hollywood

throughout the 2010s. The initial impression of gender inclusion on-screen in three of 2017's

most successful films, for instance, is quickly complicated by the recognition that each film was

something of a known entity: the eighth chapter in one of the most influential and commercially

successful pop culture franchises in history; the live-action remake of a beloved animated film,

itself a retelling of a fairy tale dating back centuries; and the solo film debut of one of the most

iconic comic book superheroes. Whatever social progress the success of *Star Wars: The Last*

Jedi (Johnson, 2017), *Beauty and the Beast* (Condon, 2017), and *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017)

implies, while not altogether negated, is nonetheless challenged by this investment in the familiar

and the known. The rest of the domestic top 10, also populated by sequels and adaptations, tells a similar story of an industry enormously reliant on the recognizability of past forms and experiences even as it simultaneously seeks to reinvent itself amidst rapidly changing industrial and cultural climates.[2] And 2017 was not unique in that respect, as even the most cursory glance at box office figures preceding and succeeding it makes immediately clear. The obvious conclusion is that contemporary Hollywood cinema turns most eagerly to nostalgia for its primary source of power, its audiences trading the 3-D glasses of the famous J. R. Eyerman photograph for rose-colored spectacles.

At first, that might seem like an entirely unremarkable observation. After all, it is Hollywood we're talking about, what Robert Sklar once described as "a triumph of formula."[3] Even in the classical era, the American film industry was no stranger to the prescriptive comforts of genre and the commercial dependability of adaptations and remakes. Then the nostalgia film as a distinct form and recognizable trend was clearly identified in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with scholars like Fred Davis and Fredric Jameson singling out examples of cinematic nostalgia *par excellence* like *American Graffiti* (Lucas, 1973), *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977), *Body Heat* (Kasdan, 1981), and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg, 1981). For Davis and Jameson, these films corresponded to cultural anxieties of the preceding era (the social upheavals of the 1960s) and wider postmodern crises of historicity and changes in representational forms.[4] In the decades since, so-called nostalgia waves might have ebbed and flowed, but the multiple book-length examinations of nostalgia films published in the aughts suggest an enduring presence on cinema screens.[5] It should therefore be hardly surprising to see a continued interest in various manifestations of the past by filmmakers and moviegoers alike.

If the industry has always peddled in one form of repetition or another, then what is really remarkable about Hollywood in the 2010s? While not without precedent, what has changed is that the nostalgia film has gone from a recurring curio in annual studio lineups to Hollywood's primary output. In an attempt to weather a multitude of historical, cultural, technological, and industrial discontinuities, Hollywood as an industry has come to internalize the logic of nostalgia in a plea for continuity. These most recent indulgences in the familiar are often better described as *franchise* nostalgia films, broadening the scope of the nostalgia film beyond concerns with the past as exclusively a spatiotemporal historical period. For the franchise nostalgia film, it is the recognizability of intellectual property, the continuation or revitalization of narrative threads, and the viewer's prior encounters with them that constitute the film's primary appeal.

Anyone who has even casually followed popular American cinema over the last decade has likely noticed the plethora of nostalgia films (perhaps colloquially and mockingly referring to them as "nostalgic cash grabs"). From live-action remakes of animated classics, revivals of once dormant franchises like *Star Wars* and *Jurassic Park*, and stylish Hollywood love letters like *The Artist* (Hazanavicius, 2011) and *La La Land* (Chazelle, 2016), nostalgia films in their varying forms regularly fill multiplexes, top box office charts, and sweep annual awards ceremonies. Major studios like Disney, for instance, have annual lineups grounded almost entirely in adaptation, remake, and revival, drawing audiences with more of what they came to love during their childhoods. In short, the industry has effectively subsumed the responsibilities of what historian Jacques Le Goff once passingly referred to as "nostalgia merchants."[6] Over the course of the past decade, nostalgia has become the beating heart of many contemporary Hollywood films, informing industrial decision making, the narrative and aesthetic choices of the filmic texts themselves, and eventual audience reception.

At the same time so much of mainstream American cinema looks backward, however, many factors also push it forward. Propelled by a wider progressive shift in American culture, the 2010s saw Hollywood contend with its representational shortcomings in front of and behind the camera. Facilitated by the ubiquity of social media, the #OscarsSoWhite and #MeToo movements drew mainstream attention to longstanding exclusion, discrimination, and abuse in the industry's treatment of women and people of color. These conversations spanned studio boardrooms, online forums, and the wider public sphere, but they ultimately played out onscreen as many popular films attempted to improve gender and racial representation. Not to be confused with modernity's doctrine of technological progress (though not altogether unrelated), social progress emerges from wider discourses of social justice as a moral imperative for improved representation of historically underrepresented groups, representation in both quantity—more reflective of the country's actual demographics—and quality—eschewing problematic stereotypes and better attending to lived experiences. While the lengths to which these films actually go to achieve a more progressive and inclusive cinema can be debated, future-oriented social progress has nonetheless been a significant concern for Hollywood over the course of the last decade.

The coexistence of these two trends—nostalgia and social progress—raises interesting and challenging questions about the influence of the past in the ongoing negotiation of the present and future. And this tension is also not limited to Hollywood; American society in general also continues to explore the appeals of nostalgia amidst various general and period-specific anxieties and discontinuities (which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Two). For late-modern subjects, this requires weathering, as the late sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes it, "an age of disruptions and discrepancies, a kind of age in which everything – or almost – may

happen, while nothing – or almost – can be undertaken with self-assurance and with certainty to see it through."[7] And such a description omits the smaller, more immediate discontinuities of the contemporary period: recession, demographic shifts, erosion of democratic structures and norms, and pandemic.

In both mediated and unmediated forms, the experience of nostalgia exemplifies a certain adoration of the past in the face of the uncertainties of the present and future. In the sense that nostalgia finds it source in the political, economic, and cultural discontinuities of a given period and informs our attitudes on any number of potential issues, cultural nostalgia—even when limited to a particular artistic and entertainment medium—ultimately has widespread implications. Working backward, nostalgia can help us to identify broader sources of individual and cultural anxiety, the investigation of which can help characterize particular historical periods. In the reciprocal process of reflecting and producing wider discourses, film stands out as both a discrete and more widely representative arena of culture with much to tell us about this most recent period and its complicated temporal relations.

Cultural Nostalgia

At its most basic, nostalgia is a sentimental longing for an irretrievable past—one that is often idealized or even imagined—and it is sparked by some form of dissatisfaction with the present. While nostalgia is always experienced at the individual level due to the essential subjectivity of personal experience, it often takes on a communal character. In situations where large numbers of people experience nostalgia simultaneously, both generally and directed at the same object of nostalgia, the term "cultural nostalgia" becomes most appropriate. For Fred Davis, one of the first scholars to examine cultural nostalgia at great length, all nostalgia possesses two "special qualities": (1) it renders the past in an almost exclusively favorable light,

emphasizing feelings of happiness, joy, and comfort; and (2) it considers this favorable past to be superior to the present moment in which the nostalgia is experienced.[8] Fredric Jameson has similarly suggested that nostalgia prioritizes the positive aspects of the past while excluding or deemphasizing the negative or less than ideal.[9] In short, nostalgia turns to the comforts of the known and selectively remembered past, and it is the perceived ontological security of the past that gives nostalgia its core appeal, particularly when compared to the perceived ontological *in*security of the present and future.

Nostalgia therefore reveals a great deal more about the present moment than it does the past that it longs for—it is in the present that it is experienced, and it is the conditions of the present that prompt it.[10] Further, it is in the present that the remembered past is created and maintained, conceptualized and negotiated. As Walter Benjamin wrote, "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again."[11] Many scholars have thus observed that the nostalgic rendering of the past is employed in an attempt to seek continuity in times of significant change and unease; in Davis's words, nostalgia "thrives on transition, on the subjective discontinuities that engender our yearning for continuity."[12] By extension, nostalgia will likely emerge at a larger scale and in collective forms in times of wider societal transitions that are likely to affect many people simultaneously. The transitional phases of the individual lifecycle may generate sufficient motivation, but as has been pointed out in many historical and sociological studies of nostalgia, so do war, revolution and regime change, depression, natural disaster, mass involuntary migration, and social (re)development.[13] We can theorize that contemporary conditions in which masses of people feel uneasy, uncertain, and anxious about the present and future will trigger widespread yearning for the perceived stability and security of the past. The

same applies more sweepingly to entire epochs, with the perpetual changes and disruptions of modernity and late modernity perpetuating a cultural climate where nostalgia becomes commonplace.

It is in this context that cultural nostalgia is often deemed regressive and criticized accordingly as an impediment to social change. In modernity, where ardent dedication to progress was the norm, nostalgia was often characterized this way, for any backward glance could be perceived as an opposition to the modernist project and its faith in the possibilities of the future. As Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering describe it, "It was then as if nostalgia arose in compensation for refusal to invest hope in the horizon of expectation, as if it could only exist as a safe haven from the steady destruction of manifestations of the past in the name of progress."[14] Understood this way, nostalgia and its backward longing become questionably defined as the binary opposite to progress and subsequently deemed incompatible with it. Similarly, perhaps it is telling that the two ideological ends of our political spectrum are labeled progressivism and conservatism. But although nostalgia is often more common in the rhetoric of the political right, this vastly oversimplifies the matter. Nostalgia has its place on both sides; it is too pervasive, both individually and culturally, to ever be above or beyond entirely. Even as we discuss cultural nostalgia as something with sociopolitical implications, it is important to remember that these effects are not *always* reducible to clear ideological viewpoints. Rather, they are more constitutive of the general ways in which people perceive time and change.

It is along these lines that there has been a noticeable shift in more recent nostalgia theory that pushes back against the common modernist critiques and contends that nostalgia may not shut down all potential for an active and constructive relationship with the past, one that utilizes backward glances for more than simple consolation. Simply put, just because nostalgia is

regularly turned to in response to constant change does not necessarily mean that it seeks to reject that change; rather, it may often be a way of simply coping with and processing it. Pickering and Keightley point out a shortcoming in some of the major works on cultural nostalgia, where serious discussion of nostalgia's potentially therapeutic uses in response to change is given little attention. They suggest that "we should perhaps reconfigure [nostalgia] in terms of a distinction between the desire to return to an earlier state or idealized past, and the desire not to return but to recognize aspects of the past as the basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future. Nostalgia can then be seen as not only a search for ontological security in the past, but also as a means of taking one's bearings for the road ahead in the uncertainties of the present."[15] We unduly cast scorn on nostalgia as an exclusively conservative emotion and consequently neglect to consider the extent to which it might be used not to deny or reject change, but to productively cope with the transitions of a given period.

Of course, this is not to say that nostalgia is not often used indulgently and in support of reactionary positions with varying degrees of toxicity—as John Bloom has noted, "the past imagined through nostalgia can also secure dominant ideologies, such as those surrounding gender and race."[16] However, it is ample reason to think not in terms of nostalgia, but *nostalgias*.[17] Svetlana Boym, for instance, acknowledges that unreflective nostalgia can have monstrous consequences, but she reminds us that "Nostalgia can be both a social disease and a creative emotion, a poison and a cure."[18] In the realm of politics, Jameson once argued that "if nostalgia as a political motivation is most frequently associated with fascism, there is no reason why a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude, cannot furnish as adequate a revolutionary stimulus as any other."[19] Likewise, in media, David Pierson identifies "a mode that employs nostalgia as an

indelible resource for present-day cultural critique, and as a means of inspiration for social resistance and action against existing hegemonic domains of power in society."[20] Again, none of this is to say that nostalgia is not also used just as regularly to avoid change or to thwart it altogether, but it should inspire us to be especially attentive to potentially productive and critical—or even just neutral—uses of it.

Returning then to the issue of nostalgia and social progress in contemporary cinema, a new complication emerges. Traditionally we might generalize nostalgia as an entirely backward-oriented force, whereas social progress might be considered entirely forward-oriented. One looks to the past and imagines what once was, the other looks to the future and imagines what can or should be. Yet in Hollywood cinema of the 2010s, nostalgia and progress don't just coexist in wider industrial trends; they often coexist within the same films. That coexistence is made manifest in a variety of complex ways that often challenge traditional conceptions of nostalgia. Perhaps cinematic nostalgia might be used productively after all.

Overview

This thesis attempts to situate twenty-first century Hollywood cinema within the established conceptual logic of cultural nostalgia. It contextualizes recent commercial, narrative, thematic, and aesthetic choices in popular American films (i.e., which films get made, what they're about, and what forms they take) as both conscious and unconscious responses to a multitude of changes, discontinuities, and anxious undercurrents in Hollywood and the United States at large. Roughly, this is attributable to broad, epochal cultural conditions; specific social, political, and cultural events and trends; and technological and industrial shifts in mainstream commercial filmmaking. This thesis then seeks to make sense of the current Hollywood nostalgia wave as it simultaneously collides with trends that initially appear to run counter to nostalgia's

backward gaze. On the contrary, past, present, and future interact in complex ways that elude such reductive conclusions and illustrate nostalgia's range of potential uses. I demonstrate how the trend toward more inclusive on-screen representation within nostalgic narratives necessarily complicates nostalgia as it has often been understood historically, examining how several films have managed to use the past for future-oriented social progress.

In examining Hollywood in the 2010s, this thesis furthers the body of literature on nostalgia as a complex individual and collective response to moments of social change. It offers an outline of the historical conditions of this period to contextualize its focused application of nostalgia theory to a particular industry and artistic medium. Any attempt to analyze nostalgia and its representational forms removed from the cultural contexts in which they are constructed and experienced will prove shortsighted. After all, it is these contexts that produce nostalgic longing and determine the object(s) of that longing in the first place. I consider three broad areas from which the ongoing nostalgia boom stems. First, it can be viewed as a broad, uniquely modern cultural response to the perpetual change and discontinuity of a Baumanian liquid world and characteristic of a postmodern or late modern memory crisis. Second, it is a response to more specific historical discontinuities in contemporary American society, including demographic and social shifts, continued economic anxiety, and intense political polarization and instability. Third, within Hollywood in particular, it is a general strategic reaction to the rise in subscription video-on-demand—or streaming—services and the related shifts in audience preferences and habits that see film studios turning to recognizable and fondly remembered franchises as a metaphorical lifejacket as they struggle to maintain their relevancy. These simultaneous phenomena are collectively symptomatic of a much larger American identity crisis.

I argue that these areas of origin collide in complex ways and, when taken together, are deeply intertwined and have caused and/or facilitated the recent proliferation of cultural nostalgia. These are not so much links in one long chain of definitive causality, and we must be careful to avoid what Jim Collins has referred to as a "*Zeitgeist* model" of theorizing cultural change.[21] Of course, there was not, nor will there ever be, some period of stable, cohesive national identity that is suddenly and completely fragmented. Nonetheless, the 2010s saw a remarkable clash of identities in which what—and who—America was, is, and will be was regularly contested. Hand in hand, industry and nation process and deal with these tensions in generalizable (if complex and inconsistent) ways. How and why we choose to view and engage with the past and future are paramount concerns, and these are questions that are considered as much through the movies that filmmakers create and audiences choose to watch as they are on the national political stage.

The consideration of the wider cultural contexts in which my examination of 2010s Hollywood cinema plays out is one of the distinguishing features of this project. It is not dissimilar in this sense to Marshall Berman's "broad and open" approach to modernism, which he argues "enables us to see all sorts of artistic, intellectual, religious and political activities as one dialectical process, and to develop creative interplay among them."[22] My approach is decidedly interdisciplinary and in so doing draws implicit links between different aspects of society and culture. When dealing with something as ubiquitous and theoretically slippery as cultural nostalgia—its causes, its character, and its effects and implications—a range of fields and methodologies must inevitably be invoked and implied. I draw from several disciplines, including media and cinema studies proper, broader cultural studies, sociology, and social psychology. My primary theoretical orientation is grounded in the burgeoning field of memory

studies and its conceptions of cultural nostalgia. In examining Hollywood itself, I mainly focus

on the political economy of the industry alongside textual analysis; that said, audience reception

is also considered, thus meeting the standards of the critical cultural studies advocated by

Douglas Kellner.[23]

In suggesting that Hollywood has internalized the logic of cultural nostalgia as an

industrial strategy, however, this thesis is primarily historical in nature, for it identifies particular

filmmaking trends and theorizes their origins. I add to the ongoing development of contemporary

American film history by offering cultural nostalgia as one lens through which Hollywood can

be better theorized and understood. Thus far, academic studies of the contemporary American

film industry have largely explored issues such as media franchising, globalization and corporate

conglomeration, transmedia storytelling, and fandom and participatory convergence culture. By

identifying cultural discontinuities in both contemporary American society and Hollywood itself,

I provide a new perspective and historical narrative to better understand the various cinematic

trends of 2010s Hollywood cinema. This focus on nostalgia is not intended to be the only way to

understand recent cinematic and cultural trends, but I argue that it is nonetheless one valid and

important way.

Throughout this thesis, I offer an overview of many films from this period and utilize

several in-depth case studies to explore the characteristics and functions of nostalgia (primarily),

as well as the ways in which it often intersects with social progress to negotiate demographic

representational shifts (secondarily). Chapter Two begins by providing a more detailed

theoretical overview of cultural nostalgia's origins in conjunction with modernity and the

implications therein. In doing so, I complicate traditional models of nostalgia as an exclusively

regressive force and argue for its potentially productive uses as a psychological and sociological

mechanism for dealing with changes, uncertainties, and anxieties in the immediate present and future. The chapter considers the period in question and traces broader cultural discontinuities that have contributed to the proliferation of nostalgia, pointing to both the major cultural conditions of modernity and late modernity and the specific historical, political, and cultural developments, events, and trends of the twenty-first century as factors that contribute to nostalgia's perpetual appeal.

Chapter Three returns to the field of cinema studies and examines the nostalgia film, reviewing some of the ways in which nostalgia functions in contemporary cinema at narrative and aesthetic levels. Rather than limiting nostalgia's relevancy to period films, I offer a broader vision that applies to popular contemporary Hollywood fare such as franchise sequels, remakes, and reboots and other adaptations of preexisting intellectual property that all locate their core appeal in the previous experiences of viewers and the familiar comforts found therein. The chapter concludes with case studies of *Once Upon a Time… in Hollywood* (Tarantino, 2019) and *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo and Russo, 2019) to illustrate several of the common features of contemporary nostalgia films and to examine both productive and regressive uses of nostalgia in conjunction with social progress.

Chapter Four continues this focus and pays specific attention to the industrial functions of nostalgia in contemporary American cinema. Rather than assuming that it is only found at the level of the text and the audience's encounter with it, I argue that cultural nostalgia is an equally applicable analytical lens for understanding the industrial logic of Hollywood itself. This chapter outlines the industrial origins of Hollywood's current nostalgia wave, locating them within recent developments in technologies of exhibition and distribution. Understood this way, Hollywood itself turns to the ontological security of its own past in an attempt to deal with the

anxieties of its unknown future. This chapter then offers a case study of the Disney live-action remake as an example of franchises nostalgia's strategic use as a reliable industrial model.

In Chapter Five, I provide an extensive case study of the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy that considers the varied functions of nostalgia and its relationship to social progress. I outline the trilogy's production, offer detailed readings of each entry, and examine its (often contentious) reception. These three films exemplify the tensions and trends discussed throughout this thesis and, on different occasions, speak to both the productive potential of nostalgia and its frequent obstruction of social progress.

Finally, Chapter Six offers concluding thoughts and contemplates the future of Hollywood nostalgia. Conveniently, the technical end of the decade corresponds with a significant historical bookend—the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. COVID represents an extreme cultural discontinuity for both Hollywood and the larger world. It will be some time before we will be able to properly analyze its long-term effects, but here I offer some initial thoughts and predictions by illustrating the ways in which COVID's impact has seemingly just exacerbated the existing issues discussed throughout this thesis. As we move forward into the 2020s, it is likely that nostalgia will continue to have a pervasive presence on our screens and in our hearts and minds.

Chapter Two: Nostalgia in an Age of Uncertainty

It has been repeatedly observed that nostalgia first originated in relation to space, not time. Coined in the late seventeenth century by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer from the Greek *nostos* (return home) and *algia* (painful condition), nostalgia was first understood as a very literal homesickness in soldiers who had been away from home for far too long. Nostalgia was thus initially a condition stemming from primarily physical dislocation, with a return home prescribed as its optimal treatment. Come modernity, the spatial dimension of nostalgia receded in favor of the temporal dimension that is more familiar to us today, while its status as medical ailment faded as it became conceptualized as a more metaphorical sensation of loss and longing.[1] This is not all that surprising—there is an important temporal dimension to space, just as there is a spatial dimension to time. Leaving one behind often involves leaving the other (e.g., childhood *and* the house one grew up in). The term nostalgia firmly entered into popular speech by the 1950s and by the twenty-first century, as Svetlana Boym argues, it had become "the incurable modern condition."[2]

Concomitant to nostalgia's change in meaning was its shift in scale. Again, its original ties to space make sense here. Modernization severed the workplace from the home; rather than remaining bound to a single family homestead for the duration of one's life, people became regularly dislodged from sociogeographic space, be it a specific locality or an entire country of origin.[3] This has, of course, only become more pervasive due to globalization—today, "home" rarely stays the same for long.[4] Thus, as nostalgia gradually came to be associated with time, many of the conditions that prompted it also came to be experienced by many more than Swiss soldiers away at war.

This shift in how people associated with geographic space is only one feature of modern life that contributed to nostalgia's prominence, but home is a useful entry point into the larger discussion of nostalgia's relationship to modernity. As a historical emotion, nostalgia "is not necessarily opposed to modernity and individual responsibility. Rather it is coeval with modernity itself."[5] In order to better understand our contemporary nostalgia wave, we must begin by retracing the factors that led to nostalgia becoming Boym's "incurable modern condition" and that continue to explain its ubiquity today. This chapter lays the historical and theoretical foundation for the remainder of this project. It draws from several sociological models of cultural nostalgia, modernity, and late modernity in order to clearly establish the necessary cultural conditions and trends needed to make sense of our ongoing nostalgia wave. While not suggesting any claims of definitive causality, this chapter argues that the 2010s were a period of chronic uncertainty and that nostalgia was regularly turned to in response. The especially nostalgic American public emerging from this may then be eager to consume nostalgic media of the kind Hollywood is more than willing to provide. While these same conditions may very well also motivate some of the industrial and filmmaking decisions that have resulted in the prevalence of nostalgia films, that is more definitively explained by the specific industrial discontinuities discussed in Chapter Four.

In characterizing a period of rampant nostalgia, I do not mean to cast undue scorn upon it. As I established in the previous chapter, nostalgia is not regressive or reactionary in all cases; it is merely one response to change, neither inherently good nor bad. Although nostalgia emerges as a common response to modern progress, this is not the same as saying that it opposes or resists that progress in all instances. Rather, nostalgia is deployed in a variety of ways, made manifest in a variety of forms, and put to use toward a variety of ends. This much should become clear in my

discussion of the specific social and political events and trends that characterize the 2010s, which closes this chapter.

Modernity and Nostalgia

Although its exact start and end point in history are continually debated, the characterization of modernity as a landscape "capable of everything except solidity and stability" is unquestioned.[6] We can roughly attribute this description to two major cultural breaks. The first, the Enlightenment, emphasized rationality and scientific discovery. While promising certainty by dispelling the illogical and unquestionable assertions of faith and fanaticism, it ironically ushered in a perpetual uncertainty due to the impossibility of total knowledge. Science can provide answers of increasing accuracy, but this is predicated on the realization that its answers are always at risk of being overturned by some discovery or theory that is *more* accurate, not to mention that every answer tends to carry even more questions. Knowledge is never complete; certainty is a fallacy. The second break, modernization via industrial capitalism and technological progress, was enabled by the first and was profoundly consequential for every social and cultural domain. It is beyond my scope here to describe this in detail, but it includes new mobility of people and products due to urbanization, migration, and communication and transportation technologies; newfound individualism; and an abundance of sensory stimuli.[7] As Ben Singer summarizes it, "The result was a prevalent conception of modernity as an epoch of ceaseless change, instability, fragmentation, complexity, and chaos."[8]

The general temperament of modernity was well captured early on in a famous passage from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels that continues to hold relevance today: "Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones… All fixed, fast-

frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept

away; all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into

air, all that is holy is profaned."[9] In modernity, the only certainty is uncertainty, and the only

constant is change. Perhaps this is both a blessing and a curse. As Berman describes it, modern

subjects are both willed to change (themselves *and* their world) while also living in terror of

disorientation and the disintegration of familiar ways of living.[10] Life is both thrilling and

petrifying, a fragmentary experience in marked contrast to the alleged (might we even say

nostalgically recalled?) comforts and stabilities of premodern life.

For my purposes here, modernity's doctrine of progress is its most relevant component.

Progress looked forward and directed human energies toward improvement in the future, not

reflection in the past. The positive conception of progress, as promulgated by the modernists,

was dependent on an open-ended future that was pursued with velocity and vigor regardless of

however many time-honored structures and habits needed to be melted in order to get there.[11]

Thus modern time was conceptualized as irreversible—any open-ended future could not be

shackled to what had happened in the past—and modern progress accordingly entailed

substantial loss. As Pickering and Keightley describe, "The experience of loss is endemic to

living in modernity, regardless of whatever version of it applies in any particular time or

place."[12] The more things change, the more things are left behind—a world with clear borders

and values, a life of quietude, a period of alleged social cohesion.

It is the combination of that loss and the perpetual uncertainty and discontinuity of

modern life that makes nostalgia such a pervasive individual and collective response. If

modernity offers few certainties, at least one of them is that it will produce no shortage of

material to become tomorrow's objects of nostalgia; time's relentless forward march leaves

plenty of detritus in its wake. It is only logical that a period of chronic uncertainty and discontinuity would also become a period of chronic nostalgia. As Davis reminds us, nostalgia is, after all, about "the search for continuity amid threats of discontinuity."[13] In both its individual and collective forms, it attempts to render identity continuous, to protect it from the threat of perpetual fragmentation.[14]

That said, it is not particularly difficult to understand why nostalgia would also become castigated. For the modernists, nostalgia's longing for the past represented a loss of faith in the future they were so invested in, and it is true that the nostalgic questions the inherent value of the temporary and the transient and finds dissatisfaction and anxiety in the present. Yet it is a mistake to assume that this is analogous to an outright repudiation of progress in all instances. For Keightley and Pickering, "Nostalgia is both existentially and socially valuable as a way of trying to understand change, to reconcile it with the remembered past and relate it to particular strands of continuity in the present."[15] A response to change does not in all cases entail an automatic rejection of it, at least in theory, if not always in practice. As they note later, "the politics of nostalgia are realised in its applications rather than being inherent in the affective phenomenon itself."[16] At its core, that affective phenomenon is merely one way of coping with the perpetual discontinuities that modern life throws at us.

Utopia Lost, Paradise Remembered: From Modernity to Late Modernity

If modernity ushered in a period of more-or-less endless change, discontinuity, instability, and uncertainty over two centuries ago and nostalgia was regularly deployed to cope with it, then what makes today's nostalgia worth distinguishing? What is so remarkable about the late modern life that we find ourselves living today that it might create fertile ground for a contemporary nostalgia wave observable in addition to nostalgia as the more routine, "incurable

modern condition" discussed above? Any disagreements that may encircle the characterization of the general period and composition of modernity are dwarfed by those surrounding its successor (including, of course, whether anything succeeds it all). Nevertheless, in the contemporary period there is an overall shift in how we now understand and perceive present and future that, while similar to modernity, contains some key distinctions.

I have made the conscious choice here to adopt the term "late modernity" for the element of continuity that it implies. Whereas postmodernity suggests a cleaner break between modern and postmodern conditions, late modernity carries a stronger semantic implication of similarity that works well for the analysis of cultural nostalgia as emergent from particular epochal conditions. Late modernity allows me to carry nostalgia's complicated relationship to modern progress into the contemporary moment while also distinguishing unique features that have come to affect the pervasiveness of cultural nostalgia. This is no place to resolve longstanding debates over the supremacy of terms such as postmodernity, second modernity, surmodernity, and the like, and in acknowledging this I hope to also establish a certain flexibility in my usage of terminology. When appropriate for the scholar being discussed or in reference to postmodernism as a distinct aesthetic project (and not necessarily an epoch), I occasionally make use of that term instead.

In delineating the conditions of late modernity, I am indebted to the work of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. Throughout Bauman's later work, he makes distinctions between "heavy" and "light" forms of modernity, or its "solid" and "liquid" phases.[17] Emblematic of the latter state (and befitting of the metaphor) is an increased mobility that in all its forms exudes a flexibility and ambiguity that challenges the modern nation-state and its efforts to legislate order into existence. Strangers (an intentionally broad moniker for otherness), abetted by global and

transnational flows, "exuded uncertainty, where certainty and clarity should have ruled," which complicates traditional markers of identity.[18] In line with this is also an accelerated individualism. For better or for worse, identity becomes a task, something to be achieved rather than ascribed. The individual life-project—privatized and deregulated—frees people from predetermined routes yet simultaneously leaves them terror-stricken by the lack of direction and support of traditional social safety nets. Per Bauman, "such patterns, codes and rules to which one could conform, which one could select as stable orientation points and by which one could subsequently let oneself be guided…are now in increasingly short supply."[19] Whatever structures, patterns, codes, and rules that remain rarely keep their shape for long; they are more liable to change once again before they ever have enough time to settle into a state of permanence.

Of course, the preceding paragraph merely reads as an acceleration of the conditions of modernity, not attributes of a distinct late modern turn.[20] Bauman himself admits that "[t]he society which enters the twenty-first century is no less 'modern' than the society which entered the twentieth; the most one can say is that it is modern in a different way."[21] Modernization, as well as the perpetual change and uncertainty that accompany it, persist. What makes our contemporary form of modernity unique, Bauman argues, is "the gradual collapse and swift decline of early modern illusion: of the belief that there is an end to the road along which we proceed, an attainable *telos* of historical change, a state of perfection to be reached tomorrow, next year or next millennium, some sort of good society, just society and conflict-free society in all or some of its many postulated aspects."[22] Concepts like "development," "career," or "progress" imply a progression *toward* something, a sense of direction and an attainable destination. In late modernity, we are left with a new uncertainty, what the sociologist Gerhard

Schulze describes as not knowing the ends instead of not knowing the means.[23] So while modern

subjects were familiar with a culture of perpetual uncertainty, late modern subjects accept that

this is no longer a temporary state of affairs. Rather, we must, as Bauman phrases it, brace

ourselves "for life under a condition of uncertainty which is permanent and irreducible," or what

Marcus Doel and David Clarke have called an atmosphere of ambient fear.[24]

It is this especially pessimistic diagnosis that promotes an intensified cultural nostalgia in

order to deal with anxious perceptions of present and future (or, more accurately, the perceived

absence of a future). Progress once carried the promise of a better future—modernization was to

use technology to achieve human perfectibility, to recreate Paradise here on Earth. Although

modernity's doctrine of progress supplied the change and uncertainty that nostalgia needed to

flourish, it nonetheless also supplied a theoretical endpoint—vague in practice and impossible to

visualize in concrete terms, it was utopia that served as motivation. Life was meant to continue to

improve with each passing generation, but for the late moderns this is no longer the case.[25] By

Berman's account, the uncertainty of living under modernity was a calculated risk: "To be

modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth,

transformations of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy

everything we have, everything we know, everything we are."[26] But for us today, it is the latter

set of attitudes that dominate, and there is often little faith "that the modernities of tomorrow and

the day after tomorrow [will] heal the wounds that wreck the modern men and women of

today."[27] Ultimately, it is Bauman who says it best: "'Progress,' once the most extreme

manifestation of radical optimism and a promise of universally shared and lasting happiness, has

moved all the way to the opposite, dystopian and fatalistic pole of anticipation: it now stands for

the threat of a relentless and inescapable change that instead of auguring peace and respite

portends nothing but continuous crisis and strain and forbids a moment of rest."[28] Late moderns experience a constant unease, yet are hesitant to believe it will amount to anything; like their forebearers, they turn to nostalgia for respite.

In *Retrotopia*, one of the last books he published before his death in 2017, Bauman updates Walter Benjamin's famous description of the Angel of History to better reflect our contemporary attitude toward past, present, and future.[29] He imagines that the Angel has reversed course—facing the future and fearing it, he is now propelled toward the imagined Paradise of the past. For Bauman, utopia has been replaced by "retrotopias," "visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past."[30] As is to be expected in any nostalgic account, this remembered past is not the past as it genuinely was, but it is nonetheless envisioned as stable and certain where the present is unstable and uncertain. And so it is that the Angel's symbolic turn signifies a change of attitude about the future, from a place of hope and possibility to a harbinger of nightmares.[31] The Angel's nostalgic turn should not come as too much of a surprise; Boym saw this trajectory 20 years ago: "The twentieth century began with a futuristic utopia and ended with nostalgia."[32]

Recent Discontinuities: America in the 2010s

The general conditions of late modern uncertainty form the stage for everyday nostalgic sentiment, but this stage is also littered with more particular historical discontinuities that have regularly left Americans seeking comfort in an idealized past. For Davis, historic events and social changes disrupt the everyday flow of our lives and the typical social and cultural conditions that we become accustomed to. These unanticipated events—and, I would add, more prolonged trends—result in concentrations of anxiety that serve as the ideal atmosphere for nostalgia to flourish.[33] As opposed to more gradual, imperceptible transitions, it is the kind of

social change that registers as startling in some way and for some reason (rightly or wrongly) that is often processed as an individual and collective dislocation of identity: "It is as if at the moment of recognizing the *new* situation or condition we are led to remark to ourselves and to others, 'Hey, isn't this a lot different from what was being seen/said/thought/felt just a few short years ago?'"[34] During such times of collective identity crisis, cultural nostalgia is often deployed in an attempt to restore sociohistorical and cultural continuity.

Such discontinuities, it should be noted, are not necessarily always so drastic in the long run. Studying the present and recent past carries the genuine risk of making mountains out of molehills, of being swept up in the cultural *Zeitgeist* of a given moment and overemphasizing the historical longevity of something that may end up having little lasting impact. I am conscious of these risks, but I maintain that the 2010s carry distinctions that are especially relevant for the study of nostalgia, beyond the simple fact that nostalgia noticeably became the dominant attitude of the right-wing politics of the period. Longevity ultimately matters little; radical change (or, for that matter, the absence of a future in late modernity) need not be a reality, but the widespread *perception* of it still operates as a sufficient impetus for nostalgic longing in the present.

In labeling the period in question here "the 2010s," I fall back on an arbitrary marker of decades. How we conceive of any period is flexible and determined more by moments of significance than calendar chronology. This is why I begin roughly in 2008, and although I end this study at the turn of the decade, there is no reason why we might not later consider the events of the early 2020s to be intertwined.[35] This is also, it should be noted, not a study of definitive causality, but rather a look at the general historical conditions that characterized the 2010s as they were experienced.

We entered the 2010s in recession and exited into political turmoil and pandemic. The late aughts saw the housing market collapse and the election of the first Black U.S. president, Barack Obama. That administration brought a moderate series of socially progressive shifts, including the passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010 and the Supreme Court's legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015. All things considered, these developments were minor, but they were nonetheless presented a slight against the collective identity of a particular portion of the populace, which I will return to momentarily.

For broader trends, the 2010s saw smart phones and social media (produced, as is to be expected under late capitalism, by a few large corporations now referred to as "big tech") take a commanding hold on countless aspects of society. This rapid acceleration of digitality and new media technology, like many preceding components of technological progress, affected ways of living, communicating, and perceiving ourselves, each other, and the wider world. These new technologies arrive at a breakneck pace and function with a relentless forward momentum. Where they bring convenience, they also usher in a new, pervasive source of uncertainty and disruption—Facebook's internal motto, after all, was "Move fast and break things." Then there is the threat of automation, transforming blue- and white-collar jobs alongside a shift to a gig economy befitting of Bauman's sociology of liquidity. For millions of Americans, the ability to earn a living wage was a constant tension, and whatever economic recovery followed the 2008 recession was made laughable by an unprecedented wealth inequality.[36] Amidst such everyday sources of casual instability and discontinuity, it seems only natural that nostalgia would carry a widespread appeal.

If America in the first decade of the twenty-first century was more fixated on the external, on its post-9/11 War on Terror (and many of its most prescient internal matters came in

response), the second decade was more fundamentally focused upon a question of the self. In the contemporary world, mass migration is not a novelty but a constant occurrence, and one that continues to transform the makeup of the U.S. Exacerbated by globalization, as Yosefa Loshitzky has noted in her study of similar trends in Europe, "diaspora and exile constitute domains of political and cultural otherness that challenge the nation-state and its claim to the exclusive representation of some 'essential' collectivity, which manifests a national 'self.'"[37] The nation-state as a defined set of borders and a cohesive national identity has weakened (all of which has also been exacerbated by the Internet, which facilitates a blurring of national boundaries and offers a version, however complex and flawed, of Marshall McLuhan's global village). With the U.S. projected to become majority non-white by 2045, what—or, more accurately, who—is united under the American flag is undeniably in a state of transition.[38] The latter half of the 2010s thus saw a forceful reassertion of hegemonic cultural norms, norms given shape by nostalgia and indicative of a perceived threat to (white, male, heterosexual, Christian) collective identity.

Trumpian rhetoric—"Make America great again"—is fundamentally built upon a nostalgic yearning for an imagined and problematically idealized American past located somewhere vaguely in the postwar era.[39] As outdated ideologies of white supremacy and patriarchal dominance become gradually undermined, MAGA suggests a tragic, insecure, and forceful plea for continued cultural relevance, a nostalgic yearning for a period of time that no longer exists and that continues to fade further into memory. It is emblematic of what Boym has termed "restorative nostalgia," an attempt at "a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home" that "does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather truth and tradition."[40] Predating MAGA by

over a decade, Boym's analysis is so prescient that it is worth repeating in full; for her, restorative nostalgia is composed of two main elements:

> the restoration of origins and the conspiracy theory, characteristic of the most extreme cases of contemporary nationalism fed on right-wing popular culture. The conspiratorial worldview reflects a nostalgia for a transcendental cosmology and a simple premodern conception of good and evil. The conspiratorial worldview is based on a single transhistorical plot, a Manichaean battle of good and evil and the inevitable scapegoating of the mythical enemy. Ambivalence, the complexity of history and the specificity of modern circumstances is thus erased, and modern history is seen as a fulfillment of ancient prophecy. 'Home,' imagine extremist conspiracy theorist adherents, is forever under siege, requiring defense against the plotting enemy.[41]

Trump, the paradigmatic post-truth politician, wielded disinformation accordingly in a narrative of American identity under alleged siege—by Latino immigrants, by Muslims, by Black "thugs," and by a Black president.[42] However modest the cultural discontinuities of the first half of the 2010s were in practice, they nonetheless motivated a surge in right-wing nostalgia that came to define the second.

As I emphasized in Chapter One, however, nostalgia goes beyond partisan lines. If nostalgia on the Right, to the extent that it has been steeped in racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, and nationalist ideologies, was of the especially regressive variety, then nostalgia on the Left was occasionally deployed for its more productive uses. So alarming and anxiety-inducing were the Trump years—between the constant attacks on the press and truth itself, the erosion of democratic processes and structures, at least two notable eruptions of violence at Charlottesville and the U.S. capitol, and two impeachments (to scratch the surface)—that any

successful attempt at an across-the-aisle response could be nothing else than a nostalgic plea for

alleged pre-Trump stability and decency.[43] It was on that short-term nostalgia that President

Biden mounted his campaign, a promised "return to normalcy." At the same time, of course, he

also had to contend with (often legitimate) views that pre-Trump normalcy was not all worth

returning to. Likewise, it was often on the Left that premodern nostalgia was deployed in

response to the encroaching existential threat of climate change. In this sense, as Keightley and

Pickering made note of, "By standing in witness to what time has wrecked, nostalgia may retain

ways of using the past as a paradigm – or, more modestly, a set of exemplars – for the future."[44]

Whether these conditions of chronic uncertainty and the more specific social and political

events and trends described in this chapter constitute novel, authentic cultural discontinuities is,

as I made note of earlier, ultimately beside the point. What matters is that in this period there

have been widespread perceptions of significant discontinuity and a loss of faith in tomorrow.

Often though not always politicized, nostalgia is turned to as a source of comfort, as an attempt

to establish continuity in an idealized past. Nostalgia need not be motivated by forces so

monumental that they shatter the fabric of social reality. If the inevitable progression through the

individual lifecycle is enough to motivate nostalgic yearning, then these conditions are certainly

sufficient. This is not to say that they are direct "causes" that produce the immediate effect of

nostalgia, but they nonetheless, to varying degrees and in varying combinations, create the

sufficient contemporary conditions that make nostalgia a generally appealing individual and

cultural coping mechanism.

Throughout this chapter I have outlined both the more immediate events of the twenty-

first century—in Bauman's words, "an age of persistent instrumental crises"[45]—and the broader

cultural conditions of modernity and late modernity. Our current epoch is one of perpetual

change, one where the past is turned to because of a loss of faith in the utopia-to-be of the future. Yet, one need not even engage with the notion of utopia here. Rather, this becomes a simple sociological calculus: If nostalgia thrives during and after times of great cultural uncertainty and the late modern landscape is defined by a chronic uncertainty, then nostalgia should logically emerge as an equally common individual and cultural response. Neither inherently good nor bad, this frequent nostalgia is an attempt at weathering the constant changes and anxieties posed by a world where all that is solid melts into air.

It is against this cultural backdrop that a market for nostalgia is ripe for the picking. Hollywood, as it has before and as it will continue to do, settles into its position as a preeminent nostalgia merchant, ready to attract audiences eager to soothe their anxieties with more of what they already know. So proceeds something of a cinematic movement. As Janey Place has noted, "Film movements occur in specific historical periods – at times of national stress and focus of energy. They express a consistency of both thematic and formal elements which makes them particularly expressive of those times, and are uniquely able to express the homogeneous hopes…and fears…brought to the fore by, for example, the upheaval of war."[46] If the period described in this chapter has led to the emergence of any kind of film movement, it is the nostalgia film (especially the franchise nostalgia film). Chapter Three now returns to film studies to establish the formal features and narrative concerns of the nostalgia film before turning to an examination of the industrial discontinuities that also explain its recent dominance.

Chapter Three: The Nostalgia Film

The modern and late modern conditions of chronic uncertainty surveyed in the previous chapter make nostalgia an especially appealing individual and collective coping mechanism. There are multiple ways in which that nostalgic sentiment can be prompted, expressed, and experienced. Media—in the broadest sense of the word—regularly plays into this process. If nostalgia is a longing for an irretrievable past, media offers multiple ways to bring a version of that past back to the forefront of cognition. Cinema, that most nostalgic of media, accordingly plays an important role in the larger study of nostalgia, for it possesses many of the symbolic tools needed to take an irretrievable past and stage a mediated retrieval in the present.[1] It does so by engaging feelings directly, without getting hung up on denotation; as a form of representation, it offers a literal re-presentation of events. Instead of vague, illusory images of the past dancing around inside our heads, cinema offers an outlet for concrete audiovisual expression. Simply put, cinema is often memory made visible.

Some of the foundational theoretical formations of cinema play into film's capacity to invoke nostalgia. In his influential essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," André Bazin referred to cinema as "objectivity in time."[2] Bypassing the artist's interpreting hand, celluloid functioned as something of a direct impression of the object(s) in front of the camera. This allowed film to resist the forward flow of time more immediately. As soon as a moment arrives it has already passed, but through film we gained the ability to sever moments from the temporal flow, a process Bazin described as "change mummified as it were."[3] By capturing and recording ephemeral moments, film thus inherently fights against the forward flow of time and works to preserve what might otherwise be lost.[4] Bazin's writings on cinematic realism were the subject of great debate by formalists who sought to exploit cinema's more expressionistic

potential, and of course the selection of objects, their presentation, and their surrounding contexts introduce countless biases that run counter to claims of "objectivity." But Bazin's sense of objectivity is better understood as more akin to a term like "photoreal" or "indexical," whereby the image is something of a direct translation of an object as it appears before the human eye. A film *convinces*, and when it tasks itself with recreating a moment in the past, that depiction can come across as quite authentic.

Another essay with important insights on film's relationship to time is Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Benjamin posited that an original work of art possessed an "aura" created by its unique presence in time and space, an aura that photographic representation disrupted. At the same time, such mechanical forms of reproduction offered newfound proximity, allowing art images to exist in multiple locales simultaneously and be seen by more people than ever before.[5] Benjamin thus identified a fundamental play of presence and absence in the cinema. In this sense, the medium itself mirrors and facilitates the workings of nostalgia, where the past is both present and absent, recalled yet ultimately still irretrievable. In both cases, we experience a version of the object or event remembered or recorded, but the object or event nonetheless remains absent in actuality.

Both Bazin and Benjamin therefore offer us ways of understanding the cinematic medium that imply great nostalgic potential. Of course, these cinematic representations are just as fickle as our personal mental images—selective, partial, frequently distorted, and never how things really "were." Let us not forget that narrative cinema is staged and is subject to the creative decisions of filmmakers who work to reconstruct the past or any of its forms. These filmmakers have the power to influence how the past is understood and depicted, but they are themselves also subject to wider cultural discourses that influence their own understanding of the past. The

magic of the movies, however, is that they convince, and they do so in a way that can be experienced collectively. As Katharina Niemeyer has noted, "media can activate, frame and render memory shareable."[6] It is thus through cinema that large quantities of people can regularly engage with memories both personal and cultural.

Having laid the necessary theoretical and historical foundations in the previous two chapters, I now turn to the cinematic forms that have so often flourished in Hollywood filmmaking throughout the 2010s. This chapter provides an overview of some of the common formal and narrative traits of the nostalgia film. To better reflect the ways in which the past has been engaged in the cinema of this decade, I offer new categories of nostalgia films: historical, backstage, and (most importantly for this period) franchise. This chapter then discusses some of the divergent uses of nostalgia in film, using *Once Upon a Time… in Hollywood* (Tarantino, 2019) and *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo and Russo, 2019) to examine the ways in which nostalgia is used both regressively and productively to respond to historical change and social progress. But first, I must briefly contend with some of the theoretical challenges that have been leveled against nostalgia as I have conceptualized it thus far when applied to mediated forms.

Nostalgia Mood and Nostalgia Mode

Throughout this thesis, I have largely discussed nostalgia as an affective experience, a sense of longing produced by perceived loss and dissatisfaction with the present. Understood this way, nostalgia is a *mood*, but several scholars have also sought to conceptualize nostalgia as a *mode* of representation in mediated imagery and material culture, a common way of communicating pastness in representational forms. For Fred Davis, this mode emerges from the mood: "nostalgia is not only a feeling or mood that is somehow magically evoked by the art object but also a distinctive aesthetic modality in its own right, a kind of code or patterning of

symbolic elements which…serve as a substitute for the feeling or mood it aims to arouse."[7] Here nostalgia is packaged in recognizable forms, but it retains a strong associative link to the nostalgia mood. Contrarily, for Fredric Jameson, the nostalgia mode exists as an art language where the past has become dissociated from firsthand experience (his postmodern crisis of historicity) and been increasingly realized through stylized and consumable forms. For Jameson, the past obeys the logic of the simulacrum and is constructed through images and objects but not authentic memory, a quality of pastness that he considers characteristic of cultural amnesia.[8] Therefore, nostalgia as a commodified style need not have any relation to loss or longing. Paul Grainge has criticized both Davis's and Jameson's accounts. He admits that nostalgia can be understood as both "a feeling *and* a style, as a cultural orientation *and* a representational effect."[9] Yet Grainge is adamant that nostalgia as an aesthetic modality and consumable form has less to do with content that might promote nostalgic longing than it does an "affective economy of pastness" emerging from regimes of taste and technological and industrial developments.[10]

These attempts to divorce nostalgia as an aesthetic modality from nostalgia as an individual and collective experience may have merit if we limit ourselves to material culture and its silo of accumulated aesthetic signifiers. Maybe purchasing a faux-deco clock is just an appreciation of form with no connection to nostalgic longing. But it is frequently too difficult to tease these two apart. Research on the commodification of nostalgia framed through postmodern theory often seems to neglect the continuing importance of the viewer/consumer and the source of their interest. These postmodern debates become so mired in accounting for the detachment of the signifiers of pastness from firsthand experience that they seem to miss a simple truth. While undoubtedly complex, these signifiers still generate an affective longing because, even in the abstract, they are still associated with the past writ large. Perhaps retro aesthetics are often

divorced from firsthand experience or historical memory and may just seem to be appealing because of some vague sense of fetishized "coolness." But this coolness, however constructed or artificial, is cool because it is positioned in opposition to the styles of the present. Indeed, past forms become desirable because they are *not* present ones. An aesthetic of nostalgia can then continue to function as the object of nostalgia because its incarnations are seen as possessing some quality that the artifacts of or more aligned with the present are seen to be lacking. That is, the signifiers of pastness become desirable because of some dissatisfaction with present styles.

Accordingly, I do not separate the consumption of nostalgic media representations from nostalgic yearning.[11] For a nostalgia film to work, the audience must fulfill their end of the bargain. As Michael Dwyer has argued, nostalgia "is not to be found exclusively within the formal or stylistic qualities of texts, or the demographic qualities of audiences, but rather in the affective relationships between audiences and texts."[12] So while nostalgia may be approached as an aesthetic modality, people are still required, both to provide the larger associations that render something evocative of some aspect of the past and to take an interest in it in the first place. Nostalgia films succeed because viewers approach them with an attitude that supposes these intentional revivals of past stories and forms are in some way (at least in the moment) more appealing than novelty. In a world where more media texts are accessible than ever before, watching a nostalgia film is a conscious choice. If that choice is not motivated by an immediate conscious longing for the past represented, it is at the very least indicative of a general, prolonged preference for the forces of the familiar.

The Nostalgia Film

Throughout the 2010s, Hollywood studios regularly released (and audiences eagerly consumed) films that, in multiple ways and to varying degrees, can best be described as nostalgia

films. Although art historian Marc Le Sueur first wrote about the nostalgia film in a 1977 essay, it was Jameson who popularized the term several years later in his essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." The nostalgia film, or *la mode retro*, often focuses on the historical past, with a film like *American Graffiti* recreating 1962 (technically speaking, though its subject is more generally the Fifties) with exacting detail and sentimental gloss. However, Jameson extended the concept to films more concerned with broader affiliations with the past, that is, the past as more than a specific spatiotemporal historical period. He considered films like *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, with their rejuvenation of the style of 1930s and 1940s sci-fi and adventure serials, to be metonymically nostalgia films.[13] As such, nostalgia films can be concerned with revisiting the historical past, but they may also take the form of genre revivals, genre hybrids, remakes, reboots, and pastiche. Nostalgia films do not make up a genre of their own; rather, the label merely describes a particular approach to depicting and interacting with the past cinematically. Pam Cook describes nostalgic memory films as "reconstruct[ing] an idealised past *as a site of pleasurable contemplation and yearning*."[14] If we understand the past broadly, with almost anything as capable of becoming the object of such contemplation and yearning, then we can also rightly understand the nostalgic turn within franchise filmmaking that the 2010s has seen.

That said, it is important to emphasize that not every film that depicts the past or that offers a continuation of existing narratives or generic forms should be classified as nostalgic. In his study of Fifties nostalgia in the popular cinema and music of the 1970s and 80s, Dwyer makes the key distinction that these texts must generate or be invested with affect to fall under the jurisdiction of nostalgia.[15] Objects or signifiers of the past in these films do not merely have an incidental presence; they are often highlighted as core appeals of the text and are framed in

such a way as to engage with the sense of yearning that the audience may exhibit in response. This is accomplished through a variety of formal, aesthetic, and narrative choices. And just as Richard Dyer noted in his study of pastiche—often, though not inherently, an instrument of nostalgia—an entire film may engage with nostalgia, though oftentimes only select portions of a film warrant the description.[16]

What I describe here both is and is not novel. In many respects, the nostalgia film has been around for decades—for instance, Christine Sprengler has convincingly shown that nostalgia had a frequent presence in early American cinema[17]—and the core appeals of yesterday's nostalgia films and today's are not drastically different. At the same time, their prevalence has increased and, through the rise of franchise filmmaking, their makeup has adapted accordingly. It is thus worth revisiting what makes a nostalgia film a nostalgia film before proceeding in Chapter Four to examine the industrial and technological shifts that have seen nostalgia determine the industrial logic of contemporary Hollywood cinema. To sidestep the slippery theoretical slope of postmodern nostalgia modes, this thesis is generally more concerned with the nostalgic functions of film narratives. However, there are still important formal and aesthetic qualities that inform narratives that must also be acknowledged.

Film Form and Aesthetics in the Nostalgia Film

Across the growing body of nostalgia films, there are several representational traits that are repeated and reorganized in identifiable ways. These formal and aesthetic choices cannot ultimately be removed from, in Dwyer's words, the "shifting networks between and among texts, audiences, and contexts."[18] In other words, wider discourses play a role in determining *how* and *why* something is considered nostalgic. The aesthetics of celluloid or the emphasis on particular iconography, for instance, are signifiers of pastness not because they possess some innate

quality, but instead because they have been transformed over time into common cultural codes, pieces in an aesthetic vocabulary of sorts that, while socially constructed and fluid, generally carries similar meanings to many people.

On the visual side, the past is typically recreated and signaled through elements of a film's *mise-en-scène* like costuming, hairstyling, props, and setting.[19] Costuming and hairstyling mine a period for its fashion sensibilities and re-present them on screen, often in exaggerated ways so as to draw attention to their particular historical quality (e.g., the connotation of "Fiftiesness"). Props encompass a large portion of a film's production design, and Sprengler notes that they "tend to be mobilized in conjunction with other cinematic strategies to serve distinct narrative ends, to say something about a place or to convince us of the authenticity of a particular historical period."[20] She uses the term "canonical objects" to describe these, their mere presence becoming synonymous with the mythical constructions of a particular period.[21] Objects such as period vehicles, furniture, technology, and pop culture iconography can occupy both foreground and background and function to communicate time and place, as well as conjure a range of potential associations in the viewer. In more recent nostalgia films, such canonical objects extend to an excess of pop culture iconography. This can be historical, as in the posters for now-iconic 1980s films in the bedrooms of characters in *Super 8* (Abrams, 2011) and *Bumblebee* (Knight, 2018), or rooted in the diegetic space of a film franchise, such as with the obtuse presence of the holochess board from the original *Star Wars* in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (Abrams, 2015). Finally, setting encompasses the use of identifiable locations and their visual characteristics (e.g., common architectural styles). For instance, diners are commonly spotlighted in Fifties nostalgia films, while settings from a previous entry in a film franchise

might be revisited in a franchise reboot in order to tap into the nostalgic associations viewers might hold for it.

The sum of these canonical objects creates what Le Sueur termed a "high degree of surface realism."[22] They figure prominently into a film's overall *mise-en-scène* and carry any number of extratextual interpretive possibilities. Yet it is not simply the mere presence of such objects that renders them nostalgically. That much is accomplished by forceful pleas for attention, as well as through subtler means that are difficult to convey in words, such as particular lighting choices. Writing about twentieth-century painting, for example, Davis suggests that nostalgia could be conveyed "through such devices as a highly filtered quality of light," as well as "a tendency to outline objects sharply so that they stand out 'in memory' perhaps even more clearly than they did in 'real life.'"[23] In other words, prolonged exposure in the foreground of a scene, as well as an overall narrative utility, can transform a period prop into a meaningful symbolic object. In this sense, as Sprengler phrases it, "props arrest narrative continuity in a way that provides viewers with the opportunity to consider the strings of associations attached to them and how these associations might generate additional layers of meaning."[24] It is to that end that a prolonged moment of discussion occurs in *Super 8* over a gas station attendant's Sony Walkman, which has little to no impact on the film's overall plot; instead, it functions as both a reminder of setting (the film takes place in 1979) and as a simple way to evoke the Eightiesness that marks the film's atmosphere and overall appeal. At the same time, a film like *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Gunn, 2014) foregrounds the Walkman for the associations of Eightiesness it likely carries for viewers, but it also factors directly into the film's narrative as a symbol of protagonist Peter Quill's attachment to his deceased mother and former life on Earth. The same can be said of any of the elements of surface realism, which may be

mobilized solely for the presumed yearning they promote in the viewer, but also potentially for highly thematic means that befit a film's overall narrative cohesion.

Aside from surface realism, Le Sueur also identified a tendency in nostalgia films to employ "deliberate archaicism." As he defines it, "This entails the artist's desire to recreate not only the look and feel of the period in question but to give [their] artifact the appearance of art from that distant time," resulting in the creation of "new-old films."[25] Deliberate archaicism plays on a fondness for past media forms by mimicking the aesthetic qualities of films from previous eras of filmmaking. As the German historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch—writing about a very different, though no less modern, topic—noted, "the old appeared 'poetical' only at the very moment when the new technology announced its termination."[26] In moments of technological change, past forms frequently become romanticized and fetishized by virtue of their fading ubiquity. This might entail the use of aspect ratios that have become unconventional in contemporary cinema, such as the 1.37:1 "Academy" ratio used in *The Artist*, which parallels the look of early-twentieth-century silent pictures. Similarly, *La La Land* employed the 2.55:1 "Cinemascope" ratio to evoke the look and feel of widescreen Hollywood musicals from the 1950s. Especially for fans of film history, these formal choices position the contemporary film alongside the historical works that are meant to be nostalgically invoked by the new film.

Another common aspect of deliberate archaicism is the particular use of color or lack thereof. Grainge has argued that black-and-white imagery carries associations with classical Hollywood style, documentary authenticity, and historical memory.[27] It has been culturally and historically constructed to connote pastness, and many nostalgia films, from 1971's *The Last Picture Show* (Bogdanovich) to 2020's *Mank* (Fincher) use it for this exact reason. The strategic use of color can also achieve a similar effect. Sprengler describes a "technicolor aesthetic" as "a

generic descriptor with the ability to call to mind a vibrant palette of bright and slightly artificial-looking colours."[28] Technicolor's historical use in mid-century Hollywood musicals, fantasy epics, and melodramas may thus be invoked by contemporary attempts to mimic the process through artificial (i.e., digital) means. *The Shape of Water* (del Toro, 2017), for example, does not use the actual Technicolor process but features a vibrant, saturated color palette in order to call forward a network of generic and aesthetic Hollywood references. Extending from this, I would also add the use of bright neon, a strategy that Lucas used in *American Graffiti* to connote Fiftiesness and that has been used as recently as 2019 by Quentin Tarantino in *Once Upon a Time… in Hollywood* to connote a vibrant Sixtiesness.

A final tendency with deliberate archaicism is to evoke the aesthetics of celluloid, both authentically and artificially. According to Lev Manovich, in contemporary cinema, where advancements in digital filmmaking have displaced analogue film stock, the classic film look acquired "a truly fetishist status."[29] Thus, contemporary films may deliberately select outdated or fading formats, such as 8mm, 16mm, 35mm, or 70mm film stock, which have all become increasingly rare in the digital era. Because these formats are now chosen less frequently by filmmakers (though many still prefer them), they introduce associations of pastness whenever they are used. Even more suggestive are digital simulations of these forms that insert artificial film grain (as in *Mank*) to elicit a nostalgic response. In an ironic turn given the concept's original use, it is as if celluloid has acquired a Benjaminian aura in the age of digital filmmaking, possessing a greater claim to authenticity, both in relation to the objects in front of the camera and to the lineage of narrative cinema itself. A film with a celluloid aesthetic looks the way movies are "supposed" to look.

Alongside visual strategies, nostalgia films commonly use sonic devices. Diegetic sound effects, such as the roar of a car engine or the ring of a rotary telephone, can connote a sense of pastness that adds to a film's perceived historical authenticity and contributes to a film's overall sense of nostalgia. Just as significant is the inclusion of recognizable pop music or musical score (in the case of the former, both diegetically, as when heard through a radio or record player, and nondiegetically). Dwyer argues that "film soundtracks can add information, set atmosphere, or offer commentary on the narrative action of each scene by triggering meaning that can be wholly inaccessible and even unimaginable to a film's production team."[30] Sprengler reinforces this point, noting that "A song can function as a mnemonic prompt by calling to mind experiences from the time it was first heard or the time during which it was most often listened to. Because of music's capacity to stir deeply felt memories of the Proustian variety, films often use well-known tracks deliberately to provoke nostalgic responses at key moments in the narrative."[31] Soundtracks of period pop music hits are frequently released alongside nostalgia films like *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (Gunn, 2017) to tap into the nostalgia that emerges from these highly intentional cinematic mixtapes. Instrumental film scores can function in similar ways. Scores are often heavily codified, so particular musical arrangements can immediately conjure associations with, for instance, classical Westerns. Within franchise films, this is often intensified, with the use of musical cues and motifs from previous films provoking an immediate nostalgic response, as when Rocky Balboa's brassy instrumental theme accompanies the climactic final round in *Creed* (Coogler, 2015).

Narrative in the Nostalgia Film

Nostalgia films need not strictly adhere to particular narrative structures or genres, but there are several general narrative and thematic tendencies that they regularly draw from—

revival, return, and transference. These are not mutually exclusive and often occur simultaneously within contemporary nostalgia films.

Revival is the broadest and most common tendency, and it gets utilized in several ways. Most obviously there is the revival of historical periods for staging new (or new-old) narratives within them. However, the revival of past forms often moves beyond historical periods (or avoids them altogether) and pulls upon genres and former narratives. It is in this sense that *La La Land*, playing with pastiche, depicts a contemporary setting while evoking the styles and conventions of classical Hollywood musicals like *Singin' in the Rain* (Kelly and Donen, 1952) and *An American in Paris* (Minnelli, 1951), imitating the latter's climactic ballet sequence almost verbatim. Likewise, *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (Howard, 2018) mimics Lucas's original approach to the series by creating a genre mashup of western, crime, noir, and war tropes within the fictional *Star Wars* universe. The film scholar Vera Dika has argued that these types of films are distinct from normal genre films because "their use of generic convention is often partial, and in many cases fragmentary. For this reason the nostalgia films are not new examples of old genres in the usual sense. They are reconstructions of dead or dismantled forms, genres that are now returned after a period of absence or destruction. The films are thus better understood as *copies* whose originals are often lost or little known."[32] But this strategy also goes beyond genre and can take the form of more pointed revivals of plot beats and entire narratives, especially within film franchises. Such efforts create narrative palimpsests where ostensibly new stories are told but in a mode in which the traces of the films before them are still clearly (and often intentionally) visible. For example, the recycling of the original *Star Wars*'s plot outline in *The Force Awakens* (discussed in Chapter Five) revives fundamental aspects of the previous film, both for the memories they are sure to activate, but also for creative, reflexive ends. Finally, the

revival tendency applies in the broadest possible sense to the mere selection of the film property itself. While not inherently nostalgic, film remakes, sequels, and reboots are often greenlit because the revival of a recognizable intellectual property is assumed to be a potential trigger of nostalgic yearning in film audiences, although the degree to which the finished films lean in this direction can vary.

A second narrative tendency, return, is a more literal attempt at reviving some element of the past within the diegesis of a film. In Sprengler's brief analysis of film narratives structured by nostalgia, she comments on several films that see protagonists acting on their nostalgic longings by returning to their childhood homes or other sites from their past.[33] This return then acts as a springboard for internal or external contemplation of what has changed and what has been lost to time. A more literal variation of this kind of return can also be found in time travel narratives, where historical revivals are able to be experienced by the characters of a film alongside the viewer. *Back to the Future* (Zemeckis, 1985) is the paradigmatic example here, though a film like *Avengers: Endgame*, discussed in greater detail below, also offers a literal manipulation of time as a narrative conceit to stage a return to various points in the past.

A third tendency in contemporary nostalgia films is a narrative and thematic emphasis on transference. Oftentimes film properties are selected for revival in an industrial attempt to stage a generational transference between parents (who were likely children themselves when they first encountered a text amidst its original release) and their children. This process then becomes literalized in the films themselves. Such nostalgia films thus often exhibit a great attention to the relationships between parents and children—or an older generation and a younger one—and attempt to establish continuity between them. In his book *Star Wars After Lucas*, Dan Golding presents a formula for this model, which he calls the legacy film. For Golding, the legacy film is

designed to mitigate the transition from past to future in both an industrial sense (which I

elaborate upon in Chapter Four) and a narrative sense. He observes five common elements: (1) a

key character from a previous film returns, reprised by their aged actor; (2) a new, younger

character is introduced to eventually take on the mantle of the older character; (3) former

narrative concerns are repeated (or revived) within the new narrative; (4) a handover or passing-

of-the-torch moment occurs between the older and younger characters; and (5) narrative

centrality is finally passed to the younger character.[34] In legacy films, nostalgic elements are

ultimately put in service of this intergenerational transference.

<center>**Variations on the Nostalgia Film**</center>

Reflecting on the cinema of the 2010s, it has become clear that there is enough variation

within the body of nostalgia films to warrant more descriptive classifications. The following

categories are, once again, by no means mutually exclusive—indeed, many contemporary

nostalgia films fall into multiple of them. In making these distinctions, I offer a more expansive

vision of the presence of nostalgia within contemporary Hollywood cinema by emphasizing how

franchise sequels, remakes, and reboots often locate their core appeal in the previous experiences

of viewers and the familiar comforts found therein.

The Historical Nostalgia Film

The historical nostalgia film—what most people likely picture when prompted by the

term nostalgia film—functions by presenting a vision of the historical past that has been inflected

with a high degree of sentiment. The immediate appeal of the historical nostalgia film is its

exacting recreation of period trappings (through many of the techniques of surface realism and

deliberate archaicism described above) or the evocation of historical styles and forms within

contemporary settings. Oftentimes, franchise films (though not necessarily franchise nostalgia films) will differentiate themselves by turning to historical nostalgia as a major or minor component of their narrative. For instance, *X-Men: First Class* (Vaughn, 2011), *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (Singer, 2014), and *X-Men: Apocalypse* (Singer, 2016) set their superhero narratives in, respectively, the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, though the historical trappings largely have minimal effect on the overall story. *Captain Marvel* (Boden and Fleck, 2019) sets itself in the 1990s and momentarily slows narrative progression to linger on distinguishing period features, such as a Blockbuster video store and dial-up internet connection. It further deploys a soundtrack of period pop songs, such as No Doubt's "Just A Girl" and Nirvana's "Come As You Are" to accompany key moments and set pieces. In contemporary settings, *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* continue the latter trend and prominently feature a soundtrack of 1980s pop hits and imbue protagonist Peter Quill's Sony Walkman with intense, affective connotations of both Eightiesness and the character's more innocent childhood on Earth. In the case of either *Captain Marvel* or the *Guardians* films, the emphasis placed on these pop songs, regardless of the setting of the film itself, orients viewers toward the era the songs were initially released in.

Historical nostalgia films also frequently employ the narrative tendency of revival. Although revival is not inherently historical and indeed, as I note below, is common within franchise nostalgia films, it is commonly used within a period setting to produce associations with the films and qualities of films from their respective moment in film history. It is in this sense that *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Johnston, 2011) mimics pulpy World War II adventure serials, while *Super 8* and *Bumblebee* accompany their 1980s settings with Amblin Entertainment-esque coming-of-age sci-fi/fantasy adventures (the former is itself produced by

Steven Spielberg's Amblin production company) and *The Shape of Water* plays on classical Hollywood modes of filmmaking from the late studio era. Because narrative traits and tones are often synonymous with the period from which they were popularized, these nostalgia films lean toward the category of historical nostalgia films, although a film like *La La Land* shows a similar approach but in a non-historical setting.

The Backstage Nostalgia Film

The backstage nostalgia film often has a lot in common with the historical nostalgia film. Indeed, most backstage nostalgia films *are also* historical nostalgia films. However, the number of nostalgia films specifically centered on the history of cinema itself is sizeable enough to deserve its own subcategory. I use the term backstage here as a reference to the backstage musical, which integrates its musical numbers into its diegesis through the production of stage performances. Similarly, backstage nostalgia films focus on the production of motion pictures, typically within the classical studio system. However, backstage nostalgia films can also dwell on topics such as low-budget home moviemaking, as in J.J. Abrams's *Super 8*, or French silent cinema, as in *Hugo* (Scorsese, 2011). Other times these films predate the classical Hollywood studio system—as in *The Artist*'s deliberately archaic depiction of the transition from silent to sound cinema—or follow its decline, as in *Once Upon a Time… in Hollywood*. In most cases, however, backstage nostalgia films like *Mank* and *Hail, Caesar!* (Coen and Coen, 2016) depict the machinations of the studio system.

Compared to the broader historical nostalgia film and the franchise nostalgia film, the backstage nostalgia film caters to a narrower audience segment, with the non-cinephile public typically taking less interest. The reason for these films' existence, however, is not hard to ascertain. For a film industry undergoing substantial (and often quite rapid) changes, filmmakers

and studio executives are liable to long for the "good old days" of Hollywood filmmaking where original productions and artistic freedom were allegedly more readily available. Likewise, those moviegoers in some way dissatisfied with the contemporary American film industry's common output may also find themselves longing for the industry's past and the kinds of films that used to be more common. The next chapter discusses these industrial discontinuities in detail, though I do not explicitly address the issue of backstage nostalgia films there. Implicitly, however, this particular category of nostalgia film can be interpreted as a response to those changing technological, industrial, and commercial conditions.

The Franchise Nostalgia Film

The latest innovation in 2010s nostalgic filmmaking is what I term the franchise nostalgia film. This does not refer to franchise films that also happen to be historical nostalgia films (although they can be), but rather franchise films that are nostalgic for the very franchises they are part of. The nostalgia in these films is no longer about a literal historical past; filmmakers instead play on longing for the film's predecessors, its characters, its stories, and the fondness that the audience carries for their earlier encounters with them. At every turn, the franchise nostalgia film prefers to draw from the iconography of the preestablished over novelty or unfamiliarity. Every scene becomes an opportunity for callbacks, every character role an opportunity to reintroduce a familiar face. These films make good on Davis's assertion that "nostalgia looks backward rather than forward, for the familiar rather than the novel, for certainty rather than discovery."[35]

The franchise nostalgia film frequently relies on the revivalist tendency within their narratives. Many of them reorganize and re-present plot beats, narrative tropes, and lines of dialogue from franchise predecessors while bringing back existing characters (typically played

by the original actor), as in *Terminator: Dark Fate*'s (Miller, 2019) hunter-prey dynamic and its reintroduction of Linda Hamilton's Sarah Connor and Arnold Schwarzenegger's T-800. Films like *Alien: Covenant* (Scott, 2017) and *Jurassic World* (Trevorrow, 2015) rehash the basic narrative structures of the earlier films in their respective franchises, resulting in the creation of narrative palimpsests. In other words, they tell incredibly familiar stories while finding ways to iterate on the established franchise formula. In effect, the old and the new exist simultaneously within these films; indeed, what enjoyment the audience takes from the new film is often dependent upon their knowledge and fondness of the older film. That is exactly how *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, as the quintessential franchise nostalgia film, generates interest and affection from its audience of *Star Wars* fans. (Chapter Five is dedicated to its in-depth analysis alongside the other two films that compose the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy.) In franchise nostalgia films, the past carries a legendary, mythical status. Characters often whisper about the exploits audiences viewed directly in previous films, while the iconography and settings of those films often reenter the current narrative in ways that play upon the double significance shared by character and viewer. It is to that end that the young protagonists of *Jurassic World* uncover the remains of the original visitor center depicted in *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1993). Covered in dirt and reclaimed by vegetation, the encounter is staged as a remarkable moment of discovery. "What occurred here?" the characters wonder. And the audience, smiling, thinks to themselves "we know."

Within the franchise nostalgia film, references, character appearances, and plot recycling promote a sense of familiarity, an "I remember this" response in the viewer that results in a brief moment of affective longing. The present film takes on meaning by resurrecting the iconography of the prior film, mining the past for its range of connotations. New narratives, themes, and

meanings can be created, but they are prefaced on an attachment—indeed, for fans of the franchise, a sentimental idolization—of the elements of the past. This should not be immediately viewed as a sign of creative bankruptcy or cultural stagnation; on the contrary, these strategies can be put in service of highly creative and productive narratives, as we shall see in later examples.

Where postmodern theorists believe nostalgic forms and styles have become separated from nostalgic longing, the franchise nostalgia film offers evidence to the contrary. Whereas the historical nostalgia film might be more historicist and depict periods that viewers have no firsthand experience with, franchise nostalgia films establish a firm affective longing in the memories of the audience. Firsthand experience with franchise films is not fixed in a single moment in time. The encounter of an audience member with the franchise predecessor is variable; seeing an opening weekend showing of *Star Wars* in May of 1977 at the age of 10 or screening a VHS copy of the film for the first time in the early 2000s both create the foundation for strong, sentimental attachments with the *Star Wars* franchise. For both viewers, *The Force Awakens* manages to effectively tap into personal encounters with the object of nostalgia. The widespread availability of media texts thus lends franchise nostalgia potentially ahistorical roots.

Productive and Regressive Uses of Nostalgia

Having provided an overview of the common components of nostalgia films, I want to spend the remainder of this chapter discussing some of the actual narrative uses of nostalgia in the Hollywood cinema of the 2010s. In previous chapters I have emphasized that although nostalgia directs its gaze backward, it should not be immediately and uncritically derided. Instead, we should approach nostalgia films as *potentially* regressive or *potentially* productive,

where the degree of regressiveness or productivity can vary in intensity and where both inclinations can be present in the same films in different ways.

Pickering and Keightley, who have gone to considerable lengths to reclaim nostalgia from undue scorn, have nonetheless recognized that it can be used regressively. They define "regressive nostalgia" as forms that, in their selective utilization of idealized images from the past, only attend to backward longing while ignoring necessary dimensions of lack and loss. For them, it thus "inhibits, and maybe even prevents, effective cross-temporal movement and the active use of the past in a progressive manner within the present."[36] They describe a process called "retrotyping" where elements of the past are selectively recalled that celebrate only certain aspects of the period, while those that would undermine the celebratory process are overlooked. At first this sounds remarkably similar to nostalgia defined generally, but for Pickering and Keightley the distinction is found in retrotyping's use; it neglects the frequently melancholic dimension of nostalgia and offers little use in the present beyond pleasure, without attending to the pain that might motivate it in the first place.[37] In this sense it is not unlike Davis's label of "simple nostalgia," which he applies to those backward glances with an unquestioned assumption of the supremacy of the past, lacking in any consideration of the accuracy of the recalled vision or the source of the longing in the present.[38] Applied to film, we might extend the notion of regressive nostalgia to both text and viewer. A film might merely sentimentalize select aspects of the past without attempting to destabilize its vision or consider the reasons for its appeal, but an attentive viewer may very well interrogate its depictions or the pleasures they derive from watching them (the inverse also seems plausible). All that said, even less critical nostalgia films may not necessarily be regressive in an immediately "harmful" way. But at the same time, when particularly inattentive to those less-than-ideologically-progressive uses of the

past, there may indeed be damage and distortion to individual and collective memory that affects actions and attitudes in the present.

Other times, contemporary Hollywood cinema has utilized nostalgia as a way of abetting and processing transition and change. In this respect, nostalgia can become a narrative tool for overtly progressive ends. This is a potential that a number of scholars writing on nostalgia have theorized in slightly different ways. For Cook, nostalgia might "be perceived as a way of coming to terms with the past, as enabling it to be exorcised in order that society, and individuals, can move on," thus soothing the anxieties of modern progress, as discussed in Chapter Two.[39] Rather than see it at just a coping mechanism, Nancy Martha West also argues that nostalgia "does not necessarily entail retreat, it can equally function as retrieval, as a means of reclaiming the past and even of shaping the future."[40] Finally, Niemeyer suggests that nostalgia's tendency to romanticize can be a creative strength, "a way to transform the past by imagination."[41]

Within these accounts we can therefore locate uses of nostalgia to productively cope with social progress and even facilitate its emergence. Golding's legacy film model does not explicitly engage this theme, but the intergenerational transference that it enables frequently emphasizes a younger generation that is noticeably more diverse than its predecessor. A marked effort is therefore made to not just revive the past or return to it, but also to see it evolve in some capacity. Mirroring real-world generational shifts, the nostalgic reminiscences of *The Force Awakens*, *Creed*, or *Avengers: Endgame* thus function to shift narrative centrality to a new ensemble of characters that tends to prioritize women and people of color in its casting. These films account for social shifts while simultaneously offering ways, for better or for worse, to ease these transitions by utilizing the iconography of the past. Nostalgia is deployed to chart a path into a different demographic future.

Case Study: Nostalgia and Social Progress

This chapter has presented a detailed overview of the common qualities of nostalgia films in contemporary Hollywood cinema and hinted at both potentially regressive and productive uses. To better illustrate these ideas, it is helpful to look at two recent nostalgia films that engage with the past in different, often opposing, ways. *Once Upon a Time… in Hollywood* and *Avengers: Endgame* were both mainstream films released in 2019 within the span of three months, the former a prestige *auteur* film, the latter a massive franchise tentpole that became the second-highest grossing film of all time at the domestic box office.[42] Together, they account for the three variations of nostalgia films (historical, backstage, and franchise) using all the formal, aesthetic, and narrative strategies described above.

Both films feature time travel narratives (one symbolically, the other literally) where the act of traveling back in time supplies the means of correcting the course of history. In doing so, they each utilize nostalgia to deal with loss and change, in the modern sense but also in ways that are deeply human. However, they also diverge in significant ways. While both films revisit the past in attempts to heal significant points of discontinuity, *Once Upon a Time… in Hollywood* alters history in a way that prevents the future that came to pass. In contrast, *Avengers: Endgame* intentionally restores what was lost without erasing that which has changed. Put succinctly, *Once Upon a Time… in Hollywood*'s nostalgia is intensely melancholic; *Endgame*'s is ultimately hopeful. That said, this is not a simple case of "good" versus "bad" nostalgia. *Once Upon a Time… in Hollywood* lends itself to contradictory readings that are at once regressive and productive, while the clearly transitionary nostalgia of *Endgame* is also open to accusations of simplicity in its renderings of the past and its affective appeals. By undertaking narrative

analyses of these two films, we can see how recent Hollywood cinema utilizes nostalgia for a multitude of ends.

Out of Time: *Once Upon a Time… in Hollywood*

Set in Los Angeles across three days in 1969, Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time… in Hollywood* (henceforth *OUTH*) functions as the director's love letter to Hollywood. The film launches an exacting recreation of the period to tell the story of television Western actor Rick Dalton's struggle for relevancy within a rapidly changing industry and cultural climate. Curiously, Tarantino has remarked that he "didn't want [the film] to feel nostalgic."[43] The film itself tells a different story, going to great lengths to present a highly sentimentalized vision of Hollywood's past through the techniques of surface realism and deliberate archaicism. To Tarantino's credit, however, the film's narrative directly contends with the need to embrace change. At the same time, the film culminates in a violent rebuttal of history as the filmmaker prevents the real-life murder of Sharon Tate; this symbolic act is at once a productive attempt to heal a traumatic historic break and, through a problematic ideological conflation of Charles Manson's "family" and the period's wider countercultural movement, a regressive move against the wider social changes time has wrought.

Where *OUTH* is most obviously a nostalgia film (both historical and Hollywood) is in its detailed reconstruction of 1969 Los Angeles and the pop culture iconography of the period.[44] It is admittedly characteristic of general period films to go to great lengths to recreate the past through sets, props, and costuming; *OUTH*, however, frequently disrupts narrative flow to draw attention to these elements and romanticize the period in Hollywood history. As Le Sueur remarked about surface realism, the "verism pertains to surface details only…for what is being enacted on the screen is often a form of wish fulfillment expanded to the magnitude of myth."[45]

It is thus that the film reconstructs its idealized vision of the past *through* material artifacts, or in its case, canonical objects of pop culture, and effectively mythologizes the historical past. *OUTH* makes constant references to the films, television shows, and actors and filmmakers of the day, both in spoken references and in direct depiction. Aside from casting actors as versions of Sharon Tate, Roman Polanski, Steve McQueen, and Bruce Lee, Tarantino regularly spotlights other films within the diegesis, such as with countless movie posters, trailers for *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1969) and *Three in the Attic* (Wilson, 1968), and extended scenes from *The Wrecking Crew* (Karlson, 1968).[46] Much of the same can be said of the film's soundtrack; primarily through LA's 93 KHJ radio station, but also through records and nondiegetic additions, period music regularly accompanies the action in the film as its protagonists go about their lives.[47]

More provocative than the presence of canonical media objects is *OUTH*'s use of deliberate archaicism through fictional films and television shows. In an early scene between Rick and casting director Marvin Schwarz, Schwarz describes watching several of Rick's films the night prior. He places deliberate emphasis on the formats screened, explicitly mentioning *35mm* prints of two films and *16mm* prints of television episodes. Although there may have been some justification for Schwarz to specify that he didn't view these texts on his television set, the film's pre-digital setting would make these specifications redundant. Rather, they're clarified, even fetishized, for the contemporary audience. (*OUTH* itself was filmed on 70mm film— uncommon for 2019—and special 70mm screenings were advertised at select theaters.) Between each of Schwarz's references, Tarantino interjects with a brief clip, assembled for the film but deliberately designed to look like media from the era—a widescreen Western called *Tanner*, a WWII action film called *The 14 Fists of McCluskey*, and the television Western that initially made Rick famous, *Bounty Law* (other Rick Dalton pictures are also glimpsed in a third-act

montage). Later in the film, Tarantino goes a step further and inserts the fictional Rick, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, into existing texts *The Great Escape* (Sturges, 1963) and *The F.B.I.* (1965-1974). Finally, deteriorating home video footage of guests visiting the Tate-Polanski residence is shown. Collectively, these deliberately archaic intrusions to the diegesis of the film promote a longing for past media forms and genres (**Figure 3.1**).
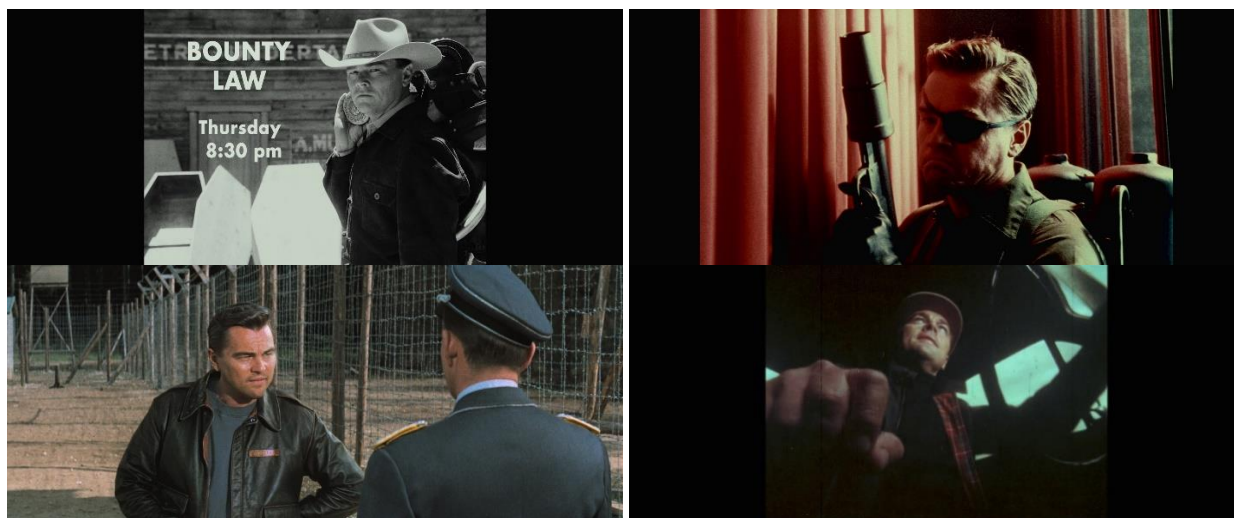
Figure 3.1. Deliberate archaicism in *Once Upon a Time… in Hollywood*. Clockwise from top left: Rick Dalton in *Bounty Law*, *The 14 Fists of McCluskey*, *Operazione Dyn-O-Mite!*, and *The Great Escape*. Photos courtesy of Sony.

OUTH thus goes to great lengths to lovingly recreate the look and feel—indeed, the character—of Hollywood in 1969. In reality, the period depicted was one of precarious, uncertain change. Aside from the broader social shifts of the 1960s, Hollywood was itself in a state of flux, moving from the studio system of Old Hollywood into what is now referred to as New Hollywood. This is a period of film history defined by the encroaching threat of television and the collapse of the Production Code in 1968 (though its influence had been waning for years). Yet it is a period that is nevertheless idealized by the film, between the bevy of film references and the extended sequences set on studio lots. That much becomes clear in an advertisement for the film released as part of its award season campaign that romanticizes this

iteration of Hollywood as something attractive, alluring, and superior to today's (**Figure 3.2**). The ad depicts actress Sharon Tate (portrayed in the film by Margot Robbie) standing in front of a cinema marquee and is accompanied by the caption "Because you love movies." The message here is that the content of the ad—the film—should be directly associated with cinema in general. If you love movies, the ad suggests, then this is exactly what you love. *This* is Hollywood, it beckons—radiant like the wide grin and flowing blonde hair of Robbie-as-Tate emerging from the cinema; radiant like the artificial glow of the theater marquee and its lineup of individual lightbulbs; radiant like the headlights of the cars under the California sunset.
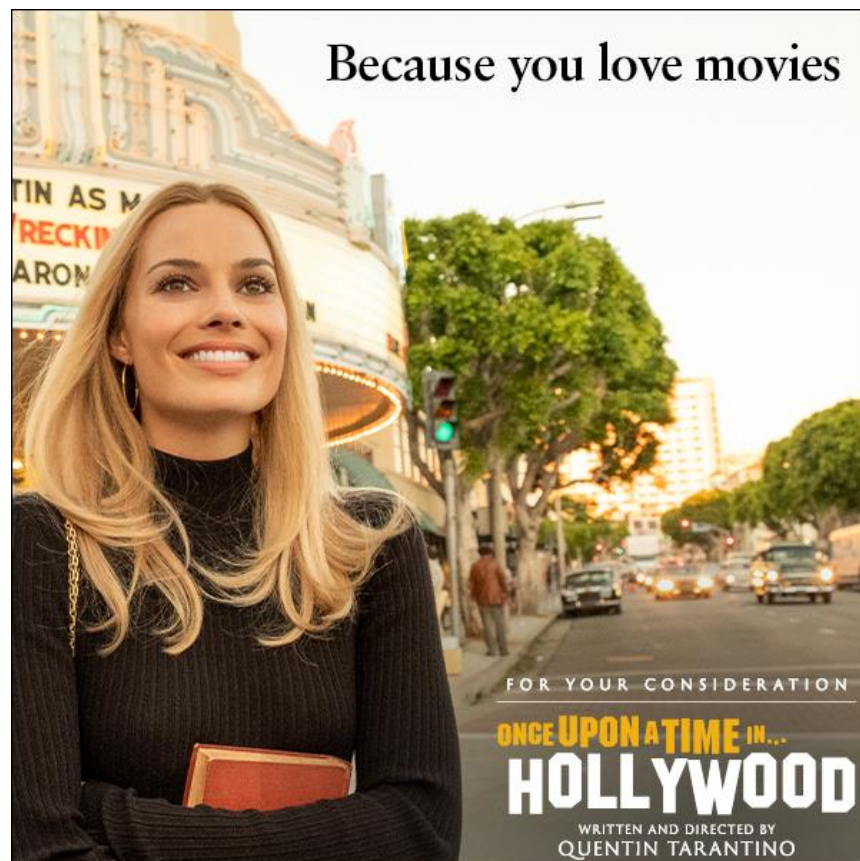
Figure 3.2. An award season campaign advertisement for *Once Upon a Time… in Hollywood*.[48]

Despite this initial gloss, it is in the historically genuine moment of upheaval that we find protagonist Rick Dalton. Rick—once the lead in the popular Western *Bounty Law* before leaving

the show to pursue a career in movies that never took off—has been downgraded to guest roles on other stars' Westerns. Schwarz remarks that this is an old studio trick—once-significant actors are cast as the "Heavy" for new leads to triumph over until their star status is in the gutter. But Schwarz sees potential in Rick and offers to help get him cast as the lead in Italian Spaghetti Westerns. For Rick this conversation is devastating: "It's official old buddy—I'm a has-been," he cries to his best friend and stuntman Cliff Booth outside the restaurant. Rick only knows—or chooses to know—the Westerns of his past. He cannot embrace the possibility of change in the genre, the industry, and his career. As Tarantino characterizes this early scene, "it's gotten across that the culture has changed, and [Rick is] in the outs. You know, it's 1969, and Rick still wears the pompadour. He puts pomade in his hair […] So, that sets him up, he's not of this generation, he's not a New Hollywood type of actor – you don't see him fitting in with Peter Fonda or Jack Nicholson or Donald Sutherland or Elliott Gould or any of these guys. Those are the actors of the time."[49]

Rick is thus a relic of Old Hollywood, and DiCaprio plays him as not just emotionally vulnerable, but also physically degenerate. Arriving on set hungover, Rick wobbles along, hacking up phlegm and unleashing guttural coughs from years of smoking. As the crew breaks for lunch, he finds himself on an empty set with his co-star for an upcoming scene: the eight-year-old Trudi Fraser. Compared to Rick, Trudi is a perfect professional, so dedicated to her craft that she skips lunch to avoid impediments to her performance and prefers to be called by her character name while on set. The two exchange words, and Rick tells her about the paperback Western he is reading, a story of a formerly exceptional bronco buster named Easy Breezy who, after a bad fall, is no longer able to operate at peak performance. Fighting back tears, Rick summarizes, "He's not the best anymore. In fact, far from it. And he's coming to terms with

what it's like to be slightly more…use— [Getting choked up] Slightly more useless each day."

Rick sees a reflection of himself in Easy Breezy; he realizes that he is at a tipping point and must

find a way to change, lest he be left behind entirely. If this eight-year-old is more committed to

his craft than he is, he can no longer afford to coast by as Rick Dalton, former star of *Bounty*

Law.

      If Rick functions in the film as the representative of Hollywood's past, then the future

finds its representatives in Sharon Tate and the Mansons. However, Tate is the vision of the

future sanctioned by the film, whereas the Mansons are positioned as its deviants. As a young

actor with a career starting to take off and a hotshot director as her husband, Tate enters the film

with gravitas, walking through the airport during the opening credits montage as a horde of

paparazzi bombard her and Polanski with photographs. Tarantino crosscuts between this and

Rick and Cliff entering the Musso and Frank Grill for their meeting with Schwarz, yet despite

their Old Hollywood swagger, none of the diners so much as look up from their tables. With a

simple editing choice, the filmmaker paints a clear picture—here is the new on its way up, and

here is the old on the way out. In *OUTH*, Tate—who was tragically murdered at the age of 26 by

the Mansons—is given an angelic glow of beauty and possibility, a halo of idealism and,

perhaps, objectification. As she speeds through the night with Polanski to attend a party,

Tarantino captures her in slow motion as she removes her head scarf and runs her hands through

her hair to the lyrics of Deep Purple's 1968 song "Hush": "I got a certain little girl she's on my

mind / No doubt about it she looks so fine / She's the best girl that I ever had / Sometimes she's

gonna make me feel so bad." Tarantino describes his approach to Tate as twofold. On one hand,

she functions as an ideal and a symbol, "a friendly ghost haunting the movie, but in a lovely

way."[50] On the other hand, she functions outside of the film's larger plot and simply goes

through life casually, accomplishing mundane tasks in her scenes—folding clothes, buying a book, catching a matinee screening of her latest film—so that, in Tarantino's words, we are "just seeing her live life, because that was what was taken from her."[51] On a symbolic level, then, Tate is an idealized vision of a future that was never allowed to come to fruition.

In contrast, the Manson family is a vision of the future that the audience knows. Where Tate is an up-and-coming star, her career grows out of the Hollywood apparatus; the Mansons are antithetically scavengers picking at its scraps. In their introductory scene, Tarantino depicts Manson's young followers dumpster diving for salvageable food outside a grocery store. In single file, they carry their findings past a large mural of James Dean, like ants crawling across the remains of Old Hollywood.[52] Later in the film, when Cliff escorts a Manson family member nicknamed Pussycat back to Spahn Movie Ranch, he finds the once-bustling *Bounty Law* filming location in a state of disrepair, the young cultists living off it like parasites as the ranch's owner, George Spahn, lies blind, withered, and disgruntled. Significantly, Tarantino does little to differentiate the Mansons from the period's wider countercultural movements. In actuality, the Manson cult had a firm grounding in white supremacist ideology as leader Charles Manson preached about the inevitably of a race war and the inherent superiority of white people.[53] Yet in *OUTH*, the only indications we get of their beliefs aligns them with the wider progressive youth movements of the 1960s and 70s, and often in ways that Tarantino stages as almost parodic. For instance, as Cliff picks up Pussycat, the young hippie girl leans toward a passing police car, gives it the middle finger, and screams "Fuck you, you fucking pig!"[54] And while on the ride to Spahn Ranch, she similarly remarks to Cliff that "Real people are being murdered every day in Vietnam," but in a tone that almost seems to invite audience mockery to the anti-war movement. Thus the Mansons, loosely outlined, seem to invite association with the wider range of

countercultural movements of the period, including the Women's Liberation movement and the Civil Rights movement. As far as the film is concerned, the group of stereotypically dressed twenty-year-olds that Rick drives past and derisively calls "fucking hippie motherfuckers" at the beginning of the film and the Mansons, who he refers to as "fucking hippie weirdos" at the end of the film are, in effect, one and the same.

Following his respective conversations with Schwarz and Trudi on February 8 and 9, Rick finally agrees to travel to Rome to star in several Italian films. After a six-month sojourn, he returns home newly married, financially unstable and no longer able to employ Cliff, and unsure whether his latest pictures will be enough to jumpstart his sputtering career. This crossroads of uncertainty, with past on the brink of becoming future, falls on August 8, 1969. Informed viewers will know that this is the day Tate will be murdered, the tragedy that for many marked the symbolic end of the Sixties. Collapsing character journey and cultural climate, the film's narrator commentates, "Both men [Rick and Cliff] know once the plane touches down on El Segundo, it'll be the end of an era for both of them." On this note Tarantino launches into an extended montage set to the 1966 Rolling Stones song "Out of Time." Rick—dressed now in Seventies regalia, his hair longer and free of pompadour for the first time—rounds the airport corner in slow motion, framed identically to Tate's arrival at the beginning of the film, though without the attention of paparazzi. With it go the song's lyrics: "You don't know what's on / You've been away for far too long / You can't come back and think you are still mine / You're out of touch my baby / My poor old-fashioned baby / I said baby, baby, baby, you're out of time." Despite his effort to course correct, it may very well, the song suggests, be too late for Rick Dalton and Old Hollywood. Once Rick arrives home, the film cuts to outside Tate's house as a friend pulls up to the front gate. In small yellow font in the bottom right corner of the screen,

the time fades into view: 12:30. The film has begun counting down. In this final act, Tarantino

begins implying that we are racing toward disaster and, in what he has likened to a true crime

reenactment, he starts recalling the day's events in forensic detail.[55] The film then cuts to Tate—

now nearly nine months pregnant—as the Stones sing "You're obsolete my baby / My poor old-

fashioned baby / I said baby, baby, baby, you're out of time." Tate shows her friend the nursery,

and then sitting outside, she is told "I think you're gonna be a wonderful mother" as the lyrics go

once again, "Baby, baby, baby, you're out of time." Hurtling toward the inevitable, the film takes

the tone of tremendous tragedy. Time's unstoppable passage is to be viewed as nothing more

than impending doom. The montage preemptively, melancholically mourns the discontinuity

about to occur—Tate's murder, as well as the waning of the Sixties and of Old Hollywood.

OUTH becomes sentimental eulogy as it recreates what we know will be a monumental day in

Hollywood's history; nothing can be done to avert the fact that everything, for both the film's

characters and the culture they inhabit, is about to change.

Until it doesn't. As the residents of Cielo Drive settle in for the evening, the Manson

family approaches. But upset by the noise of their car's engine, the fictional Rick angrily

confronts them and chases them away. And just like that, the Mansons select a different victim.

Breaking into Rick's house, however, they encounter Cliff, and Tarantino violently alters the

course of history. Drunk and tripping on acid, Cliff brutally murders the three intruders, which

Tarantino stages with sadistic nuance: Cliff's Pit Bull latches onto one Manson member's crotch;

Cliff hurls an aluminum dog food can into the face of another; and he slams a third's head into

the fireplace mantle, coffee table, and telephone until all that remains is a bloody pulp. The one

surviving member shrieks and convulses in horror and runs through a glass sliding door into

Rick's swimming pool, where Rick finishes her off with a flamethrower.

With this climax, Tarantino effectively prevents the future that we know from ever arriving, for better and for worse. Two simultaneous readings emerge: on one hand, Tarantino has utilized his nostalgia film quite productively as a form of retribution ("metaphorically saving Sharon," as he describes it).[56] In reclaiming nostalgia from sweeping denigration, Dwyer argues that it "can be used in efforts to remake the present, or at least to imagine corrective alternatives to it."[57] Approached this way, *OUTH* deploys nostalgia in an attempt to correct a very real historical and cultural break and avert tragedy; it imaginatively reconstructs continuity where discontinuity initially prompted it. On the other hand, Tarantino's conflation of the Manson intruders with the wider Sixties counterculture invites another implication. With the Mansons characterized as young progressives, *OUTH*'s climax constitutes a metaphorical act of violence against both the passage of time and the more inclusive world that it would (incrementally) bring. The alternative timeline allows Tarantino to wax nostalgically undisturbed as, if only briefly, we are invited to consider what might have been. These readings circulate on top of each other, the murder of the future at once productive fiction and regressive resistance to real-world social progress. Which reading reigns victorious may very well depend on the individual viewer and the ways the audience is able to integrate extratextual meanings (such as a more accurate understanding of the Mansons' ideological leanings to complicate the limited version provided by the film).

OUTH ultimately offers a concise illustration of nostalgia's divergent uses in contemporary cinema. As a simple historical and Hollywood nostalgia film, it constructs a romanticized version of Hollywood in 1969, and in its narrative, it contends with the necessity of change while also directly resisting it in a way that is both potentially therapeutic and seemingly reactionary. Perhaps it is best to let the film have the final word. As the first responders leave the

Cielo Drive crime scene, Tate invites Rick up to her house for a drink. As he passes through her front gate, he enters into some alternative version of a future, but one still rife with the ambiguity of his uncertain career. The two embrace and exit the frame as the film's title appears on screen—*Once Upon a Time… in Hollywood*. It is an invitation to look backward through the lens of fantasy and fairy tale. The song that accompanies it is Maurice Jarre's "Miss Lily Langtry" from the film *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* (Huston, 1972). In that film the song plays alongside a title card: "Maybe this isn't the way it was… it's the way it should have been."

Make Way for Tomorrow: *Avengers: Endgame*

Compared to *OUTH*, *Avengers: Endgame* offers a more clear-cut example of nostalgia being productively used to ease the transition into the uncertainties of the future. *Endgame* is perhaps one of the most industrially significant and unsuspectingly symbolic films of the 2010s, though it does not immediately present itself as a nostalgia film. Indeed, the elements of the historical nostalgia film are quite minimal, but it is a strong example of the franchise nostalgia film. Moreover, its main conflicts and conclusions are all relevant to the larger cultural tensions discussed in this thesis—the shock of present discontinuities and uncertainties, the longing for the assumed continuity of the past, and the inability to move forward without first resolving the tension between the two.

In *Endgame*, the loss and discontinuity that motivate nostalgia have a very literal, tangible source. The film's predecessor, *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo and Russo, 2018), concluded with the antagonist Thanos snapping half of the universe's population out of existence. This loss of trillions of lives marks an immense rupture and serves as the source of tremendous collective trauma for the film's characters. Quite understandably, those who are left standing long for what came before Thanos's snap. Even more pointedly, the three primary

protagonists of the film's ensemble—Steve Rogers/Captain America, Tony Stark/Iron Man, and

Thor—also carry more personal forms of loss that continue to weigh on them, established both in

the immediate film and over the course of the 22 other films that compose the wider "Marvel

Cinematic Universe" franchise. For Steve, it is the temporal displacement of entering hibernation

in the 1940s and waking up 70 years later in the 2010s, leaving behind the world he knew and

the woman he loved (he still takes wistful glances at the photograph he has of her before going

into battle). For Tony, it is his unresolved relationship with his father, Howard, which was

denied closure by the latter's murder. And for Thor, it is the death of his family, the loss of his

home, and the fog of guilt from narrowly failing to prevent Thanos's act of mass murder. For

these reasons, each character longs for aspects of the past.

Endgame's heroes are so scarred by loss that they are largely unable to conceive of a way

to move forward into the future. Steve takes a job running group therapy sessions in an attempt

to help others do just that, but even he sees his hypocrisy: "You know, I keep telling everybody

they should move on. Grow," he confides in Natasha. "Some do. But not us." Such stagnation is

befitting the degree of trauma. As Keightley and Pickering define it, trauma is a condition of

such severe psychic damage that the sufferer is unable to take new experiences and integrate

them into their self-complex.[58] The traumatized individual—and by extension society—cannot

imagine itself whole. An attempt to correct the source of the psychic damage, however, might

chart a new way forward. And so it is that after a five-year period of collective mourning, the

Avengers are presented with an opportunity: travel into the past, collect the six Infinity Stones

that were destroyed by Thanos, and use them to undo his erasure of half the universe. The

specifics of the fantastical scenario are ultimately irrelevant. What matters is the underlying

foundation of such momentous loss that the past becomes a source of safety and opportunity, an

obsession that must be realized. It is a thread that Thanos himself identifies leading into his final confrontation with Steve, Tony, and Thor in the film's third act: "You could not live with your own failure. Where did that bring you? Back to me."

As *Endgame* enters into the "time heist" that occupies its second act, the film's status as a nostalgia film begins to become apparent. The Avengers split off into multiple teams and visit different sites from their own past—the events of *The Avengers* (Whedon, 2012), *Thor: The Dark World* (Taylor, 2013), and *Guardians of the Galaxy*—to collect the Infinity Stone MacGuffins needed to undo Thanos's destructive act. These films are returned to (indeed, revived) as sources of franchise nostalgia. The smash cut into the past launches directly into footage from *The Avengers* of the Avengers assembling for the first time in a now-iconic shot of the original team standing back-to-back. Though each of the films recalled are less than a decade old, these sites are nonetheless mined for the affective associations that Marvel fans carry for them. The Russo brothers enter the contexts of each previous film and play liberally with their iconography and intertextuality. Captain America's detour into an elevator of Hydra agents becomes an opportunity to restage the setup for the elevator action sequence from *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Russo and Russo, 2014), with the added twist of redirecting the setup into a reference to an infamous issue from the Captain America comic books. Likewise, over the course of the time heist, the Avengers encounter countless characters from their—and the audience's—past: *The Winter Soldier*'s Alexander Pierce and Crossbones; *The Dark World*'s Loki, Frigga, and Jane Foster; *Doctor Strange*'s (Derrickson, 2016) the Ancient One; and *Ant-Man*'s (Reed, 2015) Hank Pym (who is also digitally de-aged for his cameo set in 1970). Each cameo appearance is staged to provoke audience longing; although the inclusions make enough

sense within the context of the narrative, they nonetheless halt its flow so that the audience is able to properly react and recall the moment(s) from the series' past being referred back to.

The revivals throughout *Endgame*'s second act often collapse the distinctions between historical and franchise nostalgia. For example, in a bid for nostalgia for the recent past, title cards boldly announcing the diegetic year of the franchise entry being visited also correspond to the year that film was actually released in. A cleverer example, however, is a seemingly simple sound bridge used to transition between scenes. As Thor prepares to leave the Asgard of 2013 and return to the present, Redbone's 1974 song "Come and Get Your Love" begins playing. The film then cuts to 2014's *Guardians of the Galaxy* where the song memorably accompanied the opening credits sequence. As it is used here, the sound bridge takes on an intricate double meaning. In *Guardians*, the song promoted nostalgic longing, but for the song itself and its period of origin (though from the 1970s, that nostalgia was, in essence, for the Eighties). But as it has since become linked to the opening scene from *Guardians*, the song gains new associations in memory. As soon as it begins playing in *Endgame*, it triggers memories of the *Guardians* sequence—the audience knows exactly where the film is about to take them once it cuts away from Thor. There is thus a layering of historical and franchise nostalgia occurring. The Redbone song invokes nostalgia for both a previous film in the franchise *and* the Eighties nostalgia of the song itself.

The return and revival of *Endgame* might draw criticisms for simple nostalgic appeals. And while it is replete with so-called moments of "fan service" (references to and cameos from previous films) and its few historical renderings (a trip to the 1970s and a final scene set vaguely in the 1940s or 50s) are loosely outlined using basic visual touchpoints and pop culture references, from a narrative standpoint the nostalgia here serves a highly productive use. By

returning to various points in their past, Steve, Tony, and Thor are able to have moments of catharsis that allow them to heal from their personal traumas. Steve catches sight of Peggy, his love interest from *Captain America: The First Avenger*, in the 1970s and gets the idea that the film's time travel technology might be a way to heal the fundamental dislocation that gives the character his "man out of time" designation. Tony comes face-to-face with his father, and though he does not reveal his identity to him, the two have an extended conversation about Howard's anxieties over his son's impending birth. In a piece of advice consistent with nostalgia's idealized and selective recollection of the past, Tony recalls his experience with the very man he is talking to: "I thought my dad was tough on me, but looking back, I only remember the good stuff." Tony hugs his dad goodbye, an act of love he neglected to show during their last encounter (as established in a scene from *Captain America: Civil War* [Russo and Russo, 2016]). Lastly, Thor has a healing conversation with his mother, who immediately detects that he is a version of her son from several years in the future. Like Tony, he gets to hug her one last time before returning to the present. And with that, the film's heroes have healed their individual sources of trauma; for them, the journey into the past is therapeutic and useful.

Having gathered the six Infinity Stones, the Avengers are also able to reverse Thanos's actions and bring back the trillions of lives. However, here it is important to make a subtle but crucial distinction between *Endgame*'s reversal of tragedy and *OUTH*'s. Both films travel backward with the intention of healing major historical breaks, but the latter film alters the course of history and prevents the very future that came to pass. In contrast, *Endgame* deliberately restores what was lost without altering the events that actually occurred. The film locates this decision in Tony's individual protest. In the five years between Thanos's snap and the time heist, Tony was one of the few Avengers to benefit, settling down with his partner,

Pepper, and giving birth to a daughter, Morgan. Restoring the universe to its condition at the moment of the snap would thus wipe his daughter's existence from the timeline, as well as the millions of other children who would have been born over the same five-year period. *Endgame* therefore refuses to give the past complete priority; it seeks to process and repair discontinuity without repressing its very existence, bringing back the lives Thanos had eliminated but not changing any of the events of the preceding five years.[59] It is an attitude that multiple characters defend throughout the film. Thor, for example, tries to use his reunion with his mother to warn her of her impending death, but she bravely cuts him off. "You're here to repair your future, not mine," she tells him. In another case, Rhodey and Nebula, two characters who have been mechanically modified over the course of the Marvel series, reflect on and embrace their perhaps imperfect conditions. "I wasn't always like this," Nebula tells him. "Me either," he replies. And in understanding and approval: "But we work with what we got, right?" The film seems to understand that not all change, even when tragic or unappealing, can be avoided; sometimes it must be embraced.

It is to this end that *Endgame* deploys its other significant productive use of nostalgia. Having turned backward to find reconciliation in the past, there is finally a distinctive recognition of the need to make way for a different future. Steve, Tony, and Thor act on their nostalgia and find catharsis, and with that they are finally ready to reach the ends of their respective paths. In its final moments, *Endgame* begins to utilize the narrative tendency of transference and passes its main heroes' mantles onto a new generation of heroes who each depart from white, masculine, and/or heterosexual norms. Tony, for instance, sacrifices his life in the film's final battle to eliminate Thanos and leaves behind the Iron Man mantle for his young daughter to one day assume (or, as the announcement of an *Ironheart* series for the Disney+

streaming platform implies, for Riri Williams, a Black woman character). Thor, embracing a new path for himself, surrenders his title of king of Asgard to Valkyrie, a queer Black woman. Finally, in the film's final scene, Steve passes the Captain America shield to Sam Wilson, a Black man, in a gesture with immense symbolic implication. Steve dismisses Sam's hesitations and endorses this future of greater racial inclusion. "How does it feel?" he asks. "Like it's someone else's," Sam responds. Steve considers this for a moment before reassuring him—"It isn't" (**Figure 3.3**).

Figure 3.3. Handing off narrative centrality. Valkyrie becomes leader of New Asgard (top) and Sam Wilson becomes Captain America (bottom). Photos courtesy of Marvel Studios.

On a narrative level, *Endgame* utilizes nostalgia to better come to terms with the discontinuities of the past, to find peace with it, and to make way for a greater future of social inclusion. As David Pierson reflects, nostalgia can serve as a progressive resource, "an intellectual catalyst for constructing a better tomorrow."[60] For the film, those elements of the past that are so fondly remembered have had their day; it is now time for something new, and nostalgia is but one way to get there. Importantly, this fundamental shift in narrative centrality also extends to Marvel Studios' industrial approach. Looking ahead at Marvel's forthcoming lineup of films—*Black Widow* (Shortland, 2021), *The Eternals* (Zhao, 2021), *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (Cretton, 2021), *Thor: Love and Thunder* (Waititi, 2021), *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (Coogler, 2022), and *The Marvels* (DaCosta, 2022)—and Disney+ series—*Ms. Marvel* (2021), *She-Hulk* (2022), *Moon Knight* (TBA), *Secret Invasion* (TBA), *Ironheart* (TBA), *Armor Wars* (TBA), and an untitled Wakanda series—we can already observe a marked effort to include a wide range of women actors and filmmakers and actors and filmmakers of color. In the few released Marvel productions that have followed *Endgame* (complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic), we can already see this more inclusive future taking form. *WandaVision* (2021) placed Elizabeth Olsen's Wanda Maximoff in the lead role while introducing Teyonah Parris's Monica Rambeau; *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (2021) grappled with the complex political and cultural implications of a Black man taking on the title of Captain America.[61] Therefore, in a genuine industrial sense, the nostalgia of *Endgame* facilitates the closing of one chapter and the beginning of another, far more inclusive one.

Getting to this more progressive future requires putting other aspects of the past to rest. It is thus that *Endgame* closes on Steve returning to his past to live out the rest of his days. As a character, Steve is a very literal embodiment of the idea of temporal dislocation. An icon of

WWII (a period nostalgically reified as a moment of unequivocal heroism and allegedly unified national identity), Steve awakened in the twenty-first century and always sought to return to the one home that was seemingly unobtainable—the past. The loss of his world, the friends he fought alongside, and the woman he loved constantly haunt him and his displacement is one of his defining character traits. With *Endgame*'s fictional time travel technology, a return home finally becomes a real opportunity for Steve. And so he takes the final step of his journey and makes that return. For him, home is white-picket-fence suburbia and the dance he once promised to Peggy and never got to give. With the utmost romanticism—a kiss on the lips between long-lost lovers—the living symbol of America's idealized past is finally given a fitting end.

As the film cuts to black, the Harry James/Kitty Kallen song "It's Been a Long Long Time," a love letter to a soldier returning home from war, launches into its chorus:

> Never thought that you would be
> standing here so close to me
> there's so much I feel that I should say
> but words can wait until some other day
>
> Kiss me once, then kiss me twice
> Then kiss me once again
> It's been a long, long time

But it is not this nostalgic ballad we are left with. Instead, it is an instrumental version of John Debney's "Make Way for Tomorrow Today" (featured in *Iron Man 2* [Favreau, 2010] as an anthem for modernity) that plays over the final credits and takes us to the ultimate fade to black. We might recall the lyrics:

Oh, a bright new morning is dawning

Make way for tomorrow today

Yes a new tomorrow's a morning

To light up a great new day

Oh the future's brimming with promise

And the promise is heading our way

So keep your eyes on that shining horizon

Make way for tomorrow today

***

This chapter offered an overview of the textual dimensions of contemporary nostalgia films, describing common aesthetic and narrative traits and uses. For audiences living in a late modern culture of uncertainty, such films provide alluring comforts in an ideally remembered past. Though many nostalgia films do little more than this, others use their narratives to cinematically heal historical discontinuities or engage with demands for social progress by staging intergenerational transitions. However, potential audience interest here only contends with part of the equation. There is an irreducibly tangled cycle of motivations at work: Audiences with deeply internalized individual and collective wants and needs do not simply will movies into existence, and filmmakers and studios are not solely responsible for creating these demands either. A fulfillment of initial audience demand by making more of what becomes popular is accompanied by an internalized industrial motivation to use nostalgia for studios' own comforts. Chapter Four now considers these industrial origins of contemporary nostalgia films.

Chapter Four: Nostalgia Merchants

At this point we have seen that contemporary cultural conditions are characterized by chronic uncertainty and that nostalgia is often deployed individually and collectively as a coping mechanism. In Chapter Three, I reviewed several of the aesthetic tools and narrative tendencies utilized by recent nostalgia films to promote affective longing in the viewer and demonstrated how these films can stage both productive and regressive engagements with time and change. However, the suggestion that nostalgia films spontaneously emerge to meet the demands of an especially nostalgic moviegoing public would be erroneous. To that end, this chapter traces the wave of nostalgia films in 2010 Hollywood cinema to specific technological and industrial discontinuities. I argue that the industry itself utilizes nostalgia as a way to process these shifts and attempt to reestablish forms of continuity with its own past. Understood this way, the abundance of nostalgia films in recent Hollywood cinema can be attributed to both the yearning of audiences and filmmakers *and* an internalized industrial logic of nostalgia.

In general, Hollywood is no stranger to industrial discontinuity. As André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion emphasize, "cinema's entire history has been punctuated by moments when its media identity has been radically called into question."[1] That said, there have historically been notable turning points where anxieties have been particularly concentrated, such as with the shift from silent to sound films or surrounding the rise of television and the transition from Old Hollywood to New Hollywood. In any case, moments of industrial discontinuity are inevitably ripe for analysis, and it is in one such moment that the industry currently finds itself in. Broadly speaking, as Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko have outlined, Hollywood in the twenty-first century has changed forms through conglomeration, diversification, transnationalization, expansion of distribution avenues, and increasing budgets and event movies. They suggest that,

as a result, the Hollywood film text and industry has been left in a scattered and fragmented state.[2] Indeed, American cinema is hardly grounded in clear local or national contexts anymore, making the continued use of the term "Hollywood" something of an anachronistic misnomer. (I personally use it as a convenient way to refer to mainstream American cinema and, ironically, out of some amount of nostalgia.)

In addition to these complex, widening foundations, the 2010s saw the rapid popularization of subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) streaming, which intensified the threat to theatrical moviegoing that television and home video had been posing for decades. Streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Hulu offered new ways of instantaneously and accessibly distributing existing entertainment media, and the streamers followed suit by acquiring and producing original content in-house as platform exclusives. These developments in distribution and exhibition technology have been both celebrated and maligned by producers, critics, journalists, and cinephiles. For instance, Netflix's rapid ubiquity has been alternatively viewed as an exciting opportunity for widespread distribution and filmmaker autonomy and, as described more ominously by one 2017 *Wall Street Journal* article, "The Monster That's Eating Hollywood."[3] The extent to which Netflix and other streaming platforms pose a genuine existential threat to Hollywood cinema altogether is most likely greatly exaggerated, but their rise can nonetheless be seen as a source of anxiety and transformation that has motivated Hollywood's longing for (perceived) continuity with its past and the texts contained therein.

In this chapter I am less concerned with the small nuances of the changes themselves (i.e., the various ways in which production and distribution have and have not transformed during this period) than with the *effects* of these changes within the film industry. The industrial and technological shifts of the 2010s can be identified as one source of the kinds of nostalgia

films described in Chapter Three (especially the franchise nostalgia film). As with any consumer-producer relationship, nostalgia here is multidirectional: it is perpetuated by audiences nostalgic *en masse* for the content of nostalgia films, and it determines the very industrial logic that sees the production of these films in the first place. In either case, the comforts of the past are positioned to help soothe the anxieties and uncertainties of the present and future. It is thus that we can rightly apply Jacques Le Goff's label "nostalgia merchants" to the industry itself.

Digital Distribution and Industrial Discontinuity in 2010s Hollywood

We can locate a comparable antecedent to the recent disruptions posed by streaming in the initial rise of television. As Robert Sklar noted in his influential history of Hollywood, cinema never recovered from its 1946 peak in popular appeal. The widespread adoption of television had displaced cinema from its position of cultural centrality and film studios scrambled to recover their influence with technological novelties and other forms of product differentiation. But although box-office receipts occasionally rose in the years to come, "basically their direction was down—and the rises in admission prices and in total population only masked the even more precipitous decline on a comparative scale."[4] Indeed, it is easy to see similarities in today's culture of streaming, where although the domestic box office seems to generally rise continuously due to inflation and rising ticket costs, actual attendance has trended downward (**Figure 4.1**). According to data compiled by the National Association of Theatre Owners, average ticket prices in the U.S. have almost doubled over the last two decades, from $5.39 in 2000 to $9.16 in 2019.[5] Alongside this, annual admissions in the U.S. and Canada have fluctuated but trended downward, from 1.339 billion in 2010 to 1.244 billion in 2019.[6]
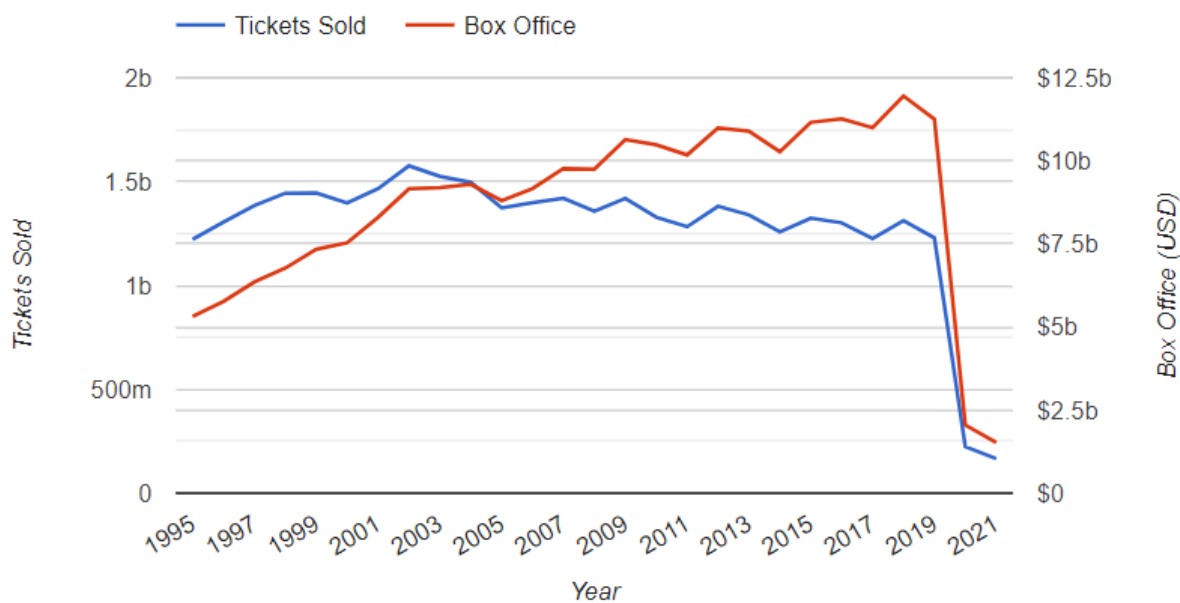
Figure 4.1. Annual ticket sales at the domestic box office between 1995 and early 2021.[7]

Figures like these, in addition to the technological shift from celluloid to digital, have resulted in numerous scholarly treatments with provocative titles like *The End of Cinema?* and *Ends of Cinema* (though the arguments of these books are more nuanced than their titles' emphasis on endings might initially suggest).[8] And though cinema persists, it is true that its form has continuously converged with the small screen. Following television, VCRs and home video rentals ensured that Hollywood films were increasingly viewed in the household rather than in the movie theater. As the journalist Ben Fritz has noted, "Regardless of how movies are intended to be watched, or 'should' be watched, most movies *are* watched on the TV in the living room."[9] But even these home entertainment precursors, which evolved from VHS into cable pay-per-view, DVD, and video-on-demand, did not portend doom for major Hollywood studios. On the contrary, ancillary markets like DVD rentals and sales at one point accounted for almost double theatrical revenues.[10] Eventually, however, digital distribution began to replace physical media, destabilizing the DVD market and causing a decline in revenue from once-profitable ancillary

markets. Video rental stores quickly caved inward, followed by rent-by-mail when Netflix divided its DVD and streaming services in 2011.[11] Subscription streaming services emerged as the predominant platform for film and television viewing and have only continued to grow in popularity.[12] Accordingly, theatrical exhibition has suffered a major blow, leaving the major studios to process their latest incongruous state.

In light of the history of industrial discontinuities weathered by Hollywood, we must ask what is especially new with streaming, for only then can we properly understand how streaming has had a substantial impact on the output and industrial strategizing of major Hollywood studios. Immediately apparent is the instantaneous access to media content that streaming platforms facilitate alongside their seemingly endless libraries of previous releases. With most platforms offering modest monthly subscription fees, there is a very real economic advantage to viewing at home—the cost of one month's subscription, which opens up access to an entire platform's library for unlimited viewing, is far more cost-effective than renting an equivalent number of DVDs or paying for even a single movie ticket in some regions.[13]

Impacting the actual output of the major studios, however, are the ways in which streaming has facilitated the so-called "golden age" of television (also often referred to as "peak TV") and the ensuing convergence of television and cinema. As Fritz notes in his journalistic study of the contemporary American film industry, the flourishing of original, high-quality serialized television is attributable to many of the specific technological developments recounted above. As he describes, "When a television show could be watched only on the night and at the time a network scheduled it, and only if there was nothing else on that you wanted to watch, it was all but impossible to produce complicated serialized stories."[14] In other words, television was once appointment viewing. The self-contained, episodic nature of most shows was an

attempt to maximize audience comprehension; if an episode's airing was missed, it could possibly be caught as a rerun, but the medium was ultimately limited in the extent to which it could play with intricate, serialized narratives, lest viewers miss out on crucial narrative developments. DVD box sets and DVR later lessened this problem; streaming eradicated it. The former were what Fritz describes as "an exercise in delayed gratitude," as the viewer had to wait for either the DVD release following a season's airing or for episodes to accumulate on the DVR to be able to actually watch multiple episodes in quick succession.[15] The latter, however, enabled this as the default mode of viewing. Especially when Netflix began producing original content and released entire seasons of new shows at once, "binge watching" became a dominant way of consuming television at home and television storytelling could rival film. The "all at once" distribution model ensured that there was no longer a risk of losing your place in a story if you missed a scheduled broadcast, and so producers no longer had to simplify television narratives to accommodate this likelihood. Complex, long-form stories could finally be told without a second thought.

The technological affordances of streaming platforms strengthened the quality of television programming and exacerbated the medium's convergence with cinema. I do not wish to oversimplify the matter, for there are many variations and nuances in recent television history that are beyond the scope of this thesis. Nonetheless, it is worth considering how television has become closer to cinema in the past 10 years and, in doing so, continued to disrupt the latter's primacy in contemporary media culture. The binge model of viewing mirrored the traditional movie viewing experience of a single sitting (or, with streaming, a few extended ones).[16] The technology on both production and consumption sides also approached a relative plateau. TV production quality has quickly closed the gap between television and cinema as digital cameras

have become standardized, streamers liberally approve lavish production budgets, and CGI

effects get more convincing and cheaper to create. On the other end, higher quality and

increasingly affordable home viewing technology (i.e., high-definition television sets, speaker

systems, and fast, reliable internet connections) made screening media at home quite comparable

to the theatrical experience. The movie theater still offered genuine differences, but for ever

more people those differences mattered less and less, especially when coupled with expensive

concessions and the aforementioned rising ticket costs.

The shrinking gap between film and television quality has increasingly blurred the stable

identities of both. Is a limited series—an increasingly popular format for new streaming

content—closer to television or is it more equivalent to an eight-hour film? Likewise, is an

interconnected film franchise like the Marvel Cinematic Universe a collection of distinct films,

or are its machinations more akin to a television series as its characters cross over between films

and each new entry furthers an extended overarching narrative? The fact that both kinds of media

are often viewed on the same platforms in the same living room environment does little to clarify

the matter. While it may seem like an irrelevant technicality, such labels, alongside wider,

transmedia industrial models of "synergy," complicate the very notion of what cinema even is.[17]

As television has risen in quality in the streaming era, it has usurped original, mid-budget

storytelling from Hollywood. Given the advancements in home entertainment, many see little

reason to go to the movies when they can find plenty of high-quality character dramas at home

for much cheaper.[18] As a result, film studios have released fewer films and concentrated their

efforts on franchise fare such as sequels, remakes, and reboots. As streamers like Netflix and

Amazon Prime begin to increasingly produce and distribute their own platform exclusive

releases, more and more *auteur* filmmakers dissatisfied by contemporary Hollywood's emphasis

on franchises turn to streamers to fund and release their projects (just a few notable examples include Netflix's backing of Martin Scorsese's *The Irishman* [2019], Spike Lee's *Da 5 Bloods* [2020], and David Fincher's *Mank*). Films produced by streamers rarely receive theatrical releases, and when they do, they are typically limited to a few major markets and primarily to qualify for prestigious awards nominations; as such, these filmmakers sacrifice their attachment to the theatrical experience in order to get their original films funded. In short, the ancillary markets have encroached upon the former territory of the major Hollywood studios and reconfigured it to better fit their models of at-home streaming.

It is thus that we can observe a weakening of cinema as both a cultural touchstone and a stable set of industrial practices. Amidst these changes, Hollywood has come to understand that certain types of films are better investments than others and has necessarily changed what kinds of films regularly get made. Gone are the days in which mid-budget, adult-oriented films could reliably turn a profit. Gone are the days in which star vehicles composed most of a studio's annual lineup. Instead, franchise filmmaking has become one of the sole dependable models for the major studios.

Collectively, the above shifts have constituted a climate of industrial discontinuity. As Fritz describes, "The industry now is nothing like it was just a few years ago, let alone when the people running studios started their careers ten, twenty, or thirty years ago. These moguls are now struggling to make decisions in a cultural, technological, and business landscape no one can honestly say they fully understand."[19] There is, in short, widespread anxiety as the film industry faces the uncertainty of its unknown future.

The Backward Turn

Chapter Two showed that the progress that was once representative of an optimistic faith in the future today portends little more than doom. This wider cultural attitude is just as applicable to Hollywood studios' recent outlook. As streaming continues to disrupt the theatrical movie business, the studios flail to stay above water but have little sense of what direction they might head in. As they turn to familiar intellectual property to ensure profits, their stance is largely reactive, not proactive.

When television first posed a threat to the financial stability of the American film industry, Hollywood studios turned to cinematic novelties. As Sklar describes, attempts at product differentiation saw studios experiment with and/or permanently adopt color, widescreen formats, and short-lived gimmicks (e.g., 3-D and Smell-o-Vision).[20] When the Production Code Administration weakened and eventually fell, Hollywood also produced films depicting more mature, subversive content that television broadcasters would not air. In contrast, in the streaming era, where film and television have increasingly converged, such opportunities for product differentiation are few and far between. When a Marvel or *Star Wars* Disney+ series looks and feels indistinguishable from its theatrical counterpart and American cinema's finest filmmakers turn to the aid of streamers, there may very well be little left to set theatrical cinema apart.

The broader sociological models of nostalgia that I have outlined in previous chapters are just as relevant in the specific industrial context of contemporary Hollywood cinema. As Pickering and Keightley have argued, "Uncertainty and insecurity in present circumstances create fertile ground for a sentimental longing for the past, or for a past fondly reconstructed out of selectively idealized features," and Boym similarly observes that "Nostalgia inevitably

reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals."[21] It is in this manner that, facing a concentrated moment of industrial discontinuity, the industry itself deploys nostalgia as a defense mechanism, both in clinging to longstanding models of distribution and exhibition and in turning to familiar narrative forms. Theatrical moviegoing is, of course, not dead yet. However, moviegoing as a habitual behavior is no longer commonplace and audiences are more selective in what films they see (i.e., they are less willing to take risks in their film selection). As Sony Picture's Tom Rothman has succinctly commented, "Young people don't go to 'the' movies, they go to 'a' movie."[22] And as Fritz has also noted, "When they do go to the cinema, modern consumers increasingly prefer to know what they're in for, which means a brand-name franchise."[23] Accordingly, film producers need ways to stand out in congested streaming libraries and to persuade audiences to leave their homes to go to the movie theater in the first place. Nostalgic franchise films are the common solution: over the course of the 2010s, the number of nostalgia films among the 50 highest domestic grossers rose steadily, from two in 2010 to 11 in 2019.[24]

Therefore, the recent emphasis on sequels, remakes, and reboots with a distinctly nostalgic disposition is a logical consequence of technological and industrial shifts. Film franchises are complex, multifaceted entities that often span multiple media, but there is a simple logic at their core. The goal of franchising in the broadest sense is to establish a consistent product that can be standardized and easily licensed and reproduced. In the context of filmmaking, franchises are films united by a consistent narrative continuity and/or adherence to a brand name. The ultimate motivation is to minimize studio risk by producing films that have built-in audiences with an established set of expectations for what they will be watching when they take their seat in the theater. In other words, both audiences and film producers are fans of

franchise films because they are familiar, previously successful, and, as a consequence, known. In a period of industrial discontinuity where streaming increasingly cuts into the profits of the major studios, film franchises—and, with growing frequency, franchise nostalgia films in particular—are strategically utilized in an attempt to utilize the familiar to weather an uncertain media landscape. If, as media scholar Daniel Herbert has suggested, "franchising constitutes a major, if not the dominant, business logic currently driving the major Hollywood studios," then we can understand Hollywood's recent production of nostalgia as both figurative and very literal.[25]

The Forward Turn

As Hollywood (and American audiences) are drawn to the past, another significant cultural trend simultaneously urges it forward. Throughout the 2010s (and especially the latter half of the decade), representation of historically underrepresented groups in entertainment became a widely publicized concern in American culture and its cinema.[26] To some extent this can be attributed to the wider Obama-era progressive shifts in the U.S. and the realities of a country with an ever more global and diverse population—new talent and new audiences needed to be taken into account. At the same time, Hollywood's most recent progressive shift stems from a more conscious concern over the politics of representation, in the sense that media representation affects the creation and preservation of structures of power, how those with and without power are perceived, and how group identities are culturally constructed.[27] As Dan Golding describes it, "virtually all of pop culture discourse has been realigned toward questions of identity, inclusion, and representation."[28]

A crucial turning point occurred in 2015 and 2016, when only white actors were nominated in the four acting categories at the Academy Awards. #OscarsSoWhite, the popular

hashtag that spearheaded this movement, foregrounded the issue of on-screen representation for people of color not just within the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, but also throughout the entire American film industry.[29] Similarly, the #MeToo movement that began in 2017 with the *New York Times* and *New Yorker* publications of sexual abuse allegations against movie mogul Harvey Weinstein brought popular awareness to issues of gender inequality and sexual harassment and assault within the film industry. #MeToo also saw the need to overhaul representations of women on screen, their treatment behind camera, and the number of available job opportunities.[30]

These progressive shifts continue to push the American film industry forward with an end goal of a more diverse and inclusive cinema. Alongside industrial discontinuities that have produced a breadth of nostalgia films, we can therefore identify two general temporal orientations in the contemporary American film industry that are both predicated on a shared dissatisfaction with the conditions of the present. This is a tension that must continuously be negotiated and reconciled on an industrial level, just as it is within the narratives of individual nostalgia films (as illustrated by the case study in Chapter Three). The legacy film previously discussed as a narrative model of transference thus serves discrete industrial ends, too. As Golding summarized it in an article co-authored with César Alberto Albarrán-Torres, "the legacy film offered studios a model for redeveloping major properties along contemporary sensibilities, as well as for staging the intergenerational transference of franchise fandom between parents old enough to remember the initial entrants and their children."[31] In this sense, nostalgia films concerned both explicitly and implicitly with the concepts of legacy and intergenerational transference comprise industrial attempts to rely on nostalgia for the iconography of the past while simultaneously contending with the need for social progress. As such, the past is used as

part of an industrial strategy to ease the transition into a less familiar future. Playing off the modernist Ezra Pound's call to "make it new," 2010s Hollywood cinema seeks to take the old and make it new.[32]

Disney: The Ultimate Nostalgia Merchant

As the major film studios struggle to adapt to the changing media landscape of the 2010s, one studio stands above the rest in its mastery of nostalgia as an industrial strategy. The Walt Disney Co. has been remarkably successful and grown in power over the last ten years. It does not take an academic to make this observation—an opinion piece published in the *Washington Post* around the 2019 launch of Disney+ carried the assertive headline "Nostalgia is the Most Powerful Force in American Culture Right Now. No One Can Sell You More of It Than Disney."[33] Fritz observed that between 2013 and 2016, 18 of the 40 highest-grossing films were released by Disney and that its profit margins rose to almost 30 percent compared to most competing studios' 10.[34] The studio is without question, as Fritz refers to it, "the exemplar of our modern franchise film era," as the number of Disney releases cited throughout this thesis—including those by Disney subsidiaries Marvel and Lucasfilm analyzed in Chapter Three and Five, respectively—should make clear.

To some extent, Disney releases have always been characterized by a high degree of nostalgia. For instance, Davis, writing in 1979, referred to the studio in passing as one of the great mass media "myth-makers" responsible for the nostalgic formation of America's mid-century "age of innocence."[35] However, the 2010s saw Disney's live-action division pivot entirely to variations of sequels, recognizable adaptations, and franchise nostalgia films. (Animation, in both Disney and the rest of Hollywood, is one of the sole remaining areas where original narratives are still regularly and reliably told.) The last releases that cannot be linked to a

definitive industrial strategy of franchising were 2016's *The Finest Hours* (Gillespie) and *Queen of Katwe* (Nair).[36] Otherwise, Disney's release slate in the latter half of the decade relies almost entirely on live-action remakes of the studio's animated classics.

The Disney live-action remake often offers little in the way of change, relying on audience nostalgia for each animated original, as well as an ongoing fondness for the larger Disney brand. Films like *Cinderella* (Branagh, 2015), *The Jungle Book* (Favreau, 2016), and *Dumbo* (Burton, 2019) largely recycle the plot beats and iconography of their twentieth-century predecessors. When the remakes do change, alterations largely consist of updating them for modern sensibilities (e.g., omitting colonialist undercurrents from *The Jungle Book* and racist caricatures from *Dumbo*) and the live-action format, which effectively serves as the justification for the film's remaking. In other cases, the live-action remakes contend with legacy models of franchise filmmaking and Hollywood's attempts at social progress in their casting. 2019's *Aladdin* (Ritchie) distinguishes itself from 1992's *Aladdin* (Clements and Musker) by casting actors of color where the original whitewashed its characters in its voice casting. The film also makes an effort to expand the role of Princess Jasmine, one of the film's sole woman characters, to give her greater agency in the narrative. Similarly, 2019's *The Lion King* (Favreau) leans into 1994's *The Lion King*'s (Minkoff and Allers) vague gesturing at being a story of African pride by casting primarily Black voice actors in roles that were originally voiced by white actors.

The Disney live-action remake forwards its animated original as the object of nostalgia that the viewer should yearn for. In cases where the original itself is an adaptation (such as the timeless fairy tale roots of *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast*), audience and studio nostalgia is predicated on the clear recall of the Disney version, on the iconography unique to the animated classic and not the story's ultimate origin. In other words, these films should be understood as

examples of franchise nostalgia films. That is why so many Disney live-action remakes are *direct* remakes—they don't just tell the same story in a new way, they oftentimes go to significant lengths to tell the same story *in the same way*. And rarely does the shift to live action constitute a sufficient distinction in practice when it is the elements of the familiar that serve as each film's primary appeal.

In a few cases, the live-action remake is slightly more ambiguous in its retreading while nonetheless drawing upon similar industrial and audience impulses. For instance, *Christopher Robin* (Forster, 2018) does not directly retell any previous Winnie-the-Pooh narratives (although it makes numerous references to them). Instead, it tells a new story featuring an adult Christopher Robin who must confront and reclaim his lost childhood innocence and, in the process, initiate an intergenerational transference of the Hundred Acre Woods between himself and his young daughter. Where the more direct live-action remakes implicitly play on this dynamic of nostalgia, legacy, and intergenerational transference, *Christopher Robin* (and, to point to another similar film, *Mary Poppins Returns* [Marshall, 2018]) is a literalized interpretation of Davis's claim that "what returns as nostalgia for the parental generation constitutes a kind of new experience for the young generation, notwithstanding the latter's probable awareness that what it was witnessing has been around 'at least once before.'"[37]

Ultimately, Disney's most recent live-action releases suggest that it has fully embraced its power as the preeminent nostalgia merchant in an industry full of them. The Disney live-action remake functions at an industrial level as a very simple, effective way of mining the studio's own past and nostalgically reviving it for equally nostalgic audiences. The films' consistency is indicative of a remarkably reliable industrial model of using nostalgia to ensure box-office success. Eventually the studio will run out of material to remake, but for the time

being it is able to safely overcome the decline in theatrical moviegoing by giving audiences more

of what they already know and remember fondly. Indeed, even as critical perspectives on these

films have fluctuated based largely on the degree of repetition, *Aladdin* was the eighth-highest-

grossing film at the domestic box office in 2019; *The Lion King*, which adhered even closer to its

predecessor to the extent that it is at times an almost shot-for-shot remake, was the second. As

Disney enters the streaming marketplace with Disney+, a handful of live-action films not

operating on nostalgia, such as *Togo* (Core, 2019) and *Noelle* (Lawrence, 2019), have returned as

platform exclusives alongside more expected nostalgic fare like a live-action *Lady and the*

Tramp (Bean, 2019) remake. When it comes to facing the theatrical marketplace, however,

Disney still seems to have little faith that anything other than franchise nostalgia will attract

contemporary audiences.

Because, as Herbert has argued, film remakes can be traced back to the beginning of

cinema, it is helpful to examine two brief examples of Disney live-action remakes positioning

themselves explicitly as franchise nostalgia films.[38] Although case studies of entire films would

suffice, it is equally revealing to look at the initial trailers for *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion*

King in order to see how these films were specifically marketed to future moviegoers.

For example, the teaser trailer for 2017's *Beauty and the Beast* is significant for how

much information it *does not* offer the viewer. Running for a minute and a half, the trailer

advances through exterior and interior shots of the Beast's snowy, run-down, empty castle as

piano music reprises familiar refrains from Disney's 1991 animated version. The montage ends

just as Emma Watson's Belle walks through the castle's towering front doors. The trailer then

cuts to an extreme close-up of a red rose (which viewers will recognize for its plot significance

in the animated film) that tracks out to fully reveal Watson's live-action incarnation of the

Disney Princess as the melody of the original film's Oscar-winning song "Beauty and the Beast" is slowly chimed on a piano. The image cuts away not to an expected title card, but to the words "Be Our Guest" above the film's release date. In incredibly compact form, the trailer communicates exactly what the film is by drawing upon iconography and affective recall of the material being remade; it assumes that the viewer's memory of the lyrics for "Beauty and the Beast" and "Be Our Guest" (another iconic song from the original) is so strong that there is no need to even overtly state the title of the immediate film being advertised. Instead, the trailer provides material to be taken up by the viewer as the object of nostalgic longing—it sells the film on memory alone.

The teaser trailer for 2019's *The Lion King* functions similarly but engages memory recall even more directly. Of all the Disney live-action remakes, *The Lion King* would go on to be the most criticized for its unyielding dedication to its animated predecessor while simultaneously becoming the most commercially successful for that exact reason. The trailer largely plays out as a condensed version of the 1994 film's opening musical number, "The Circle of Life," rendered in exacting photorealistic animation to precisely recreate the content and composition of individual shots (**Figure 4.2**). As the animals of the African savannah journey to their gathering place, James Earl Jones—returning from the original film to play the same role— narrates as Mufasa, reciting lines of dialogue identical to the ones he once recorded decades prior: "Everything the light touches is our kingdom. But a king's time as ruler rises and falls like the sun. One day the sun will set on my time here and will rise with you as the new king." It is thus that the trailer plays off the original film's themes of legacy and intergenerational transference. A shot of the young Simba stepping into his father's much larger pawprint resonates doubly as a signifier of the lineage that the future king must live up to and of the

shadow that the beloved original film casts over this new incarnation. Having successfully

activated the audience's memories of the 1994 film, the trailer then smash cuts to the title card,

followed by slides announcing the new voice cast, each name emphasized with a resounding

smash of drums on the soundtrack: Donald Glover, Seth Rogen, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Billy Eichner,

John Oliver, Keegan-Michael Key, Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, and James Earl Jones. If

everything that came before was a reminder of the old, this portion of the trailer is an emphasis

on the new, on a cast of Black actors (with the exception of Rogen, Eichner, and Oliver) in an

effort to utilize this franchise nostalgia to also carry the revived text into an industry and culture

in the process of reckoning with racial inequalities.[39] Finally, the trailer follows the title cards

with one final call to action, as Jones's Mufasa authoritatively repeats another line from the 1994

film: "Remember." The trailer ends, in other words, with a commanding assertion of the

remake's primary function.

Figure 4.2. 1994's *The Lion King* (left) and 2019's *The Lion King* (right). Photos courtesy of Disney.

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This chapter has argued that the recent abundance of nostalgia films in mainstream

American cinema can be traced to industrial discontinuities that have destabilized the theatrical

film marketplace. As an internalized industrial logic, nostalgia functions as a way for film studios to weather the uncertainties of the industry's present and future, turning to films from its own past in an attempt to draw audiences away from streaming platforms with recognizable intellectual property that is likely to trigger nostalgic recollections of their prior experiences with it. Disney in particular has proven quite adept at adapting to these contemporary industrial discontinuities and catering to audience interests. With all this laid out, Chapter Five now turns to an extended case study of the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy and discusses its uses of nostalgia at industrial, textual, and reception levels.

Chapter Five: Nostalgia and the *Star Wars* Sequel Trilogy

At this point, it is time to take all of the threads discussed throughout this thesis—the nostalgia of contemporary audiences, texts, and industry—and examine how they overlap and play out in a single, prolonged context. This chapter embarks on an extended case study and considers the various dimensions of nostalgia and their intersection with 2010s social progress in the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy: *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, and *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (Abrams, 2019). These three franchise entries are exemplary objects of study for this period of Hollywood history, and the relative disunity of the trilogy as a whole is exactly what makes it emblematic of the wider cultural tensions discussed thus far.

It is only fitting that the film series that featured so prominently in initial discussions of nostalgia and cinema would today serve as the example *par excellence* of Hollywood's current nostalgia wave. Recall that Jameson cited Lucas's original *Star Wars* as his primary example of the nostalgia film, for "by reinventing the feel and shape of characteristic art objects of an older period (the serials), it [sought] to reawaken a sense of the past associated with those objects."[1] Nostalgia has therefore always been deeply embedded in the DNA of *Star Wars*. Over time, however, the exact nature of that nostalgia changed forms. When Lucas set out to direct his prequel trilogy (*The Phantom Menace* [1999], *Attack of the Clones* [2002], and *Revenge of the Sith* [2005]), enough time had passed since the conclusion of the original trilogy that *Star Wars* nostalgia was less about the original generic influences and more about a fondness for the series itself. As John Seabrook noted in a 1997 *New Yorker* profile of Lucas (surrounding his theatrical rerelease of the original trilogy and two years before the release of *The Phantom Menace*), "A movie that was designed to appeal to a feeling like nostalgia in the first place would be revisited by people seeking to feel nostalgic for *that* experience, in the pursuit of an ever-receding vision

of a mythic past."[2] The prequels, however, would go on to be highly criticized by audiences upon release for a myriad of reasons, many of which involved their perceived departure from the remembered *Star Wars* formula. By the time Disney acquired Lucasfilm in 2012 and announced the development of a new trilogy, audience nostalgia for the original trilogy had only intensified, fueled by the perceived slights of the prequels and their highly digital departure from the look and feel of classic *Star Wars*.

Moreover, the conditions of *Star Wars* fandom often result in incredibly nostalgic fondness for the original films and the consumption experiences associated with them. As *The Last Jedi* director Rian Johnson astutely observed, after the first film was released in 1977, it was largely unseeable until the 1982 VHS release. In that interim, the text itself became highly mythologized by eager fans. As Johnson recalls, "I had the records. I had the storybooks. I had the holiday album. I had anything I could get that had to do with *Star Wars*. But the one thing we didn't have was the movie. Largely, it was talking with your friends about the movie, pooling information and memories of it. And so it was a very strange and very mythological experience of *Star Wars*. It mythologized the films in a very powerful way because, like God's absence, the actual object of your worship was not there!"[3] For fans like Johnson, fondness for *Star Wars* is as much about acts of recalling and celebrating the film as it is the experience of actually watching the films themselves. Even for those fans who grew up with more abundant access to the original filmic texts, the breadth of transmedia texts and paratexts that perpetuate and maintain the larger *Star Wars* franchise ensures that the series occupies a poignant place in the heart that becomes suitable material for a highly affective nostalgic response, and one that may very well be romanticized, fragmented, and distorted due to diverging firsthand experiences and foundational memories of a massive fanbase.

When Disney purchased Lucasfilm and immediately fast-tracked a new *Star Wars* trilogy, the company clearly realized the potential of tapping directly into audience nostalgia. Alongside the Lucasfilm deal came Lucas's story treatments for three new films, which the studio subsequently set aside and ignored in favor of the more familiar, nostalgia-oriented trilogy that made it into theaters. As Lucas recalled in a television interview with Charlie Rose, "They [Disney] wanted to do a retro movie. I don't like that. I like— Every movie I work very hard to make them different. Make them completely different with different planets, with different spaceships. Y'know, to make it new." This is, of course, an ironic point for Lucas to make considering his initial success with *American Graffiti* and *Star Wars*, both of which are certainly "retro movies." However, the filmmaker is correct that the new trilogy would be guided by this underlying nostalgic ethos. With the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy, we find three films that are, fundamentally, about the need to reconcile past, present, and future. This is a trilogy about the burden of legacy, the appeal of nostalgia, and the need to chart new ways forward. And, perhaps unconsciously, it demonstrates how the past can be used both to productively facilitate that forward push in some cases and regressively impede it in others.

At the simplest level, the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy engages with these thematic issues at a textual level, with each film exhibiting differing degrees and uses of nostalgia. These concerns can be located both within the diegesis of the films (i.e., in the narrative conflicts and the internal workings of its characters) and at a metatextual level, in the sense that these same concerns apply to the films *qua* films, with the very notion of what *Star Wars* is—or what it should be—coming under review and contestation. In the analysis that follows, we will see that the forces surrounding the trilogy's production and reception are similarly informed by the tensions between a comforting, nostalgically recalled past and an uncertain but necessary future. The

commercial motivations and behind-the-scenes disorder of the films' production and their later critical reception (from professional film critics, dedicated fans, and casual viewers) both revolved around an uneasy negotiation of past and future. In other words, the extratextual contexts of the trilogy further justify its study within the framework of cultural nostalgia. As such, this case study lends itself to Douglas Kellner's critical cultural studies, which considers the political economy of a text, the text itself, and its audience reception, although I approach audience reception on a broader, more abstract level (future research should more attentively examine fan responses).[4] The degree to which *The Force Awakens*, *The Last Jedi*, and *The Rise of Skywalker* sought to recall the past either for its own sake or in service of a transition into something new reflects many of the same concerns troubling Hollywood and the wider United States during the 2010s; as cultural artifacts and industrial texts, these three films are just as demonstrative of this moment in American film history as their narratives are directly reflective of it.

Because of the evolving nature of the trilogy's production, it is necessary to approach each film as an individual text. Rather than establish a unified, overarching plan for the trilogy from the beginning, three different filmmakers (Abrams, Johnson, and Colin Trevorrow, who would be removed from the project and replaced by Abrams) were to work relatively independently and pass the narrative baton from one to the other. As such, each film in the trilogy is partly produced *in response to* its predecessor, but as the production history will make clear, the third entry would be the only one to consciously course correct in a way that is caught up in reception discourses and highly symbolic of nostalgia's regressive uses. All of this is to say that the stories and themes of each film must be examined as fragmented pieces and not immediately read as a coherent, intentional whole. The account that follows seeks to preserve the

fact that the story *of* the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy is just as much about nostalgia as the stories the trilogy actually tells.

"This Will Begin to Make Things Right": ***The Force Awakens***

As the first live-action *Star Wars* film since 2005 and the first theatrical *Star Wars* project released under the Disney-Lucasfilm banner, *The Force Awakens* was intentionally positioned as a revival of a beloved series. Lucas's prequel trilogy had been widely criticized for, among other things, flat dialogue, wooden performances, and an overreliance on digital technologies (used in place of the practical effects, 35mm film format, and location shooting of the original *Star Wars* trilogy). Therefore, Disney-Lucasfilm needed to inspire confidence by positioning the new trilogy as a return to form without negating the narrative continuity of previous canonical films. As Herbert argues, the film "was intended not to rewrite or undo any of the previous films' stories but rather was burdened with the task of reinstilling widespread popular excitement for the very idea of *Star Wars*, thereby making it possible for Disney to produce additional products based on this intellectual property with confidence."[5] This resulted in *The Force Awakens*'s strategic appeal to audience memories of Lucas's original films through the nostalgic repudiation of his prequels.

We can begin by considering how nostalgia was used to market the film to potential moviegoers. A driving force behind *The Force Awakens*'s aesthetic approach is the desire to return to the perceived authenticity of the original *Star Wars* trilogy. As Rick Carter, the film's production designer, notes, the filmmakers wanted to bring "a real, physical sense of time and place—of history, continuity, and future possibilities. With J.J. [Abrams] in the lead, we decided to film in real locations, and build many physical sets, in order to create actual places that wouldn't only exist in digital form or on a computer."[6] Although Carter does not explicitly

mention the prequels, his comment on digital filmmaking implicitly positions *The Force Awakens* as antithetical to them; the pre-digital techniques of the original *Star Wars* trilogy are romanticized here and become a source of affective longing for both the filmmakers and eventual viewers.

This romanticism becomes even more apparent in a behind-the-scenes promotional video released several months before the film's theatrical release. The "Comic-Con 2015 Reel" opens with a series of establishing shots of several real-world locations and tangible film sets before Luke Skywalker actor Mark Hamill offers initial commentary: "Real sets. Practical effects. You've been here, but you don't know this story. Nothing's changed really… I mean, everything's changed, but nothing's changed. That's the way you want it to be." Shots continue to spotlight animatronic aliens, puppets, physical costumes and props, and sets completely free of green screens as Hamill contemplates, "To see the way the technology has evolved and yet keeping one foot in the pre-digital world…" On the same beat the behind-the-scenes reel lingers on a shot of a 35mm camera as it sputters to life. At other points, actors, extras, and crew members fawn over the excitement of working on something as monumental as *Star Wars* once again (says Chewbacca actor Peter Mayhew: "Getting back to the old days—the old ways of doing things"). In sum, the video seeks to generate excitement for *The Force Awakens* by mobilizing the affective potential of props, costumes, settings, and celluloid. The message is clear—although it is a new film, this is *Star Wars* as you remembered it and as you have longed for it.

Other promotional material for *The Force Awakens* taps more directly into audience nostalgia for the narrative and characters of *Star Wars*. The film's first theatrical trailer, for instance, culminates in the reveal of an aged Han Solo and Chewbacca boarding the Millennium

Falcon. "Chewie, we're home," Han grins as the Wookiee roars in agreement and the trailer cuts to the film's title. Home here carries multiple evocative associations—it is at once a simple reflection on the character's reunion with his prized starship (his literal home), a homecoming for the audience rooted in the general live-action return to the *Star Wars* saga, and an assertion that home here is a more authentic version of *Star Wars*, the *Star Wars* that the audience is likely to remember fondly through the iconography and legacy characters of the original trilogy.[7]

In their calculated recollection of the past, these two promotional examples embody a strategy that Golding (perhaps cynically) refers to as "weaponized nostalgia."[8] The actual film likewise makes use of nostalgia as an overt narrative strategy and one of its core appeals. However, that nostalgia has a genuine function beyond immediate comfort—*The Force Awakens* seeks to revisit the past and bring it into the present in order to better come to terms with the new. Keightley and Pickering have described one use of nostalgia as "trying to find a way to look forwards as well as backwards, or rather a way to see forwards by looking backwards."[9] This productive orientation of nostalgia is uncannily similar to how the filmmakers behind *The Force Awakens* describe their goal. Carter states that the film's design team "discovered that we were going back in order to move forward," while director J.J. Abrams asserts that the film is about "embracing the history that we know to tell a story that is new—to go backwards to go forwards."[10] In other words, while the film is unquestionably nostalgic, it wields that nostalgia with purpose.

The marketing material discussed above gives an initial sense of some of the forms of *The Force Awakens*'s nostalgia, but it only begins to scratch the surface. Beyond deliberate filmmaking choices (shooting on 35mm film and prioritizing practical sets and special effects), the film draws heavily from the diegetic iconography of the original *Star Wars* trilogy. Although

new designs appear throughout the film, the emphasis is on slight variations of recognizable ones—the Millennium Falcon, X-Wings, TIE Fighters, Star Destroyers, and armored Stormtroopers. Likewise, the film brings back familiar faces like Han, Chewbacca, Leia Organa, Luke Skywalker, and C-3PO, all portrayed by their original actors. The interior of Starkiller Base repurposes the pill-shaped wall lights and glossy surfaces of the Death Star while new planets recall the lived-in griminess of Tatooine and Yavin IV. These iconographic signifiers of *Star Wars*'s past are both tangential and central to the immediate film's narrative. For example, in one scene Finn rummages through the Millennium Falcon and examines the training droid used by Luke in the first *Star Wars* for *just* enough time that the viewer can draw associations from it. In contrast, a canonical object like the Skywalker lightsaber wielded in previous films by Anakin and Luke plays directly into the film's narrative as a symbol of the Skywalker legacy and the call to action of a Jedi.

All of this would be enough to classify *The Force Awakens* as a franchise nostalgia film, but nostalgia is equally evoked through the film's narrative. As critics of the film were quick to point out, it deploys a near-identical narrative structure to 1977's *Star Wars*, though this is less a sign of creative bankruptcy than it is an intentional strategy to place the present film in direct conversation with the past. In both films, a young, Force-sensitive orphan on a desert planet is swept up in a galactic civil war after they encounter a droid carrying a vital piece of information. The two find their way onto the Millennium Falcon, where a veteran of a previous war becomes a mentor figure before being struck down by a villainous member of the Skywalker bloodline dressed in all black. A superweapon capable of destroying entire planets threatens the longevity of a group of resistance fighters but it is destroyed at the last second by a skilled pilot in a small one-person starfighter as the rebellion lives to fight another day.[11] None of this to say that *The*

Force Awakens does nothing to differentiate itself from its predecessor (particularly at a character or thematic level), but it does demonstrate that the revival of that predecessor's plot structure is intentionally used as an initial point of interest for this new trilogy. Interestingly, in *The Force Awakens* the intense worship of the past is generally coded as negative. Kylo Ren, the film's antagonist, nostalgically idolizes the charred helmet of his grandfather Darth Vader as he seeks to "finish what [he] started," evidently overlooking Vader's change of heart and sacrifice at the conclusion of *Return of the Jedi* (Marquand, 1983) to make Vader's legacy fit his own needs in the present. Similarly, the overarching conflict of the trilogy is between the *New* Republic's Resistance (protagonists) and the *First* Order (antagonists), the latter a seemingly identical replica of the original trilogy's Galactic Empire, as if the uncertainty of creating a new political order in the galaxy facilitated a return to the familiar fascistic order of the past.

The Force Awakens's aesthetic and narrative revival of the franchise's past is meticulously designed to promote affective longing in the audience. To this end, one particularly insightful moment occurs with the (re)introduction of the Millennium Falcon. The iconic spaceship's appearance does not function as a surprise narrative revelation *per se*, for it featured heavily in the film's marketing materials, and viewers who were at least aware of the film's chronological position relative to the original trilogy would be expecting the Falcon to appear at some point in the film. Yet the film does not open with a shot of the Falcon shooting into frame with little fanfare; rather, the scene is constructed as a dramatic reveal. Directly preceding this entrance is an extended callback to the original *Star Wars*. As Rey and Finn run toward a spaceship to hijack it and flee the First Order, Rey waves off Finn's suggestion of the Falcon (located offscreen). "That one's garbage!" she remarks. But when their target ship is destroyed by a passing TIE Fighter, she abruptly corrects herself—"The garbage will do"—before turning

to run toward the Falcon. Series fans will immediately situate this dialogue alongside similar remarks about the Falcon made in previous *Star Wars* films, such as Luke Skywalker's initial reaction, "What a piece of junk!" The irony that a beloved piece of pop culture iconography is viewed in the diegetic world of the film as a rundown mechanical eyesore is the initial nostalgic trigger of the reveal. As the camera pans to finally show the ship to the audience, it's captured at an angle nearly identical to its first on-screen appearance (**Figure 5.1**). Finally, a brief musical refrain plays over the shot, a variation of a theme used throughout the *Star Wars* series and first heard in the "Imperial Attack" track on John Williams's score for the first film. The burst of melody, alongside the dialogue and parallel framing, carries strong affective associations for the viewer and encourages the recollection of the original *Star Wars* and the viewer's relationship to it.[12]

Figure 5.1. The Millennium Falcon 38 years apart. Screencaps from *Star Wars* (top) and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (bottom). Photos courtesy of Lucasfilm.

The aspects of the film discussed thus far have largely invoked franchise nostalgia in *viewers* of the film, but the legacy of the *Star Wars* of old also weighs heavily upon the film's characters. The youthful new protagonists Rey and Finn burst with excitement when they learn they are aboard *the* Millennium Falcon and are speaking to *the* Han Solo. Within the film's diegesis, the past is mythologized, romanticized, and glimpsed through rose-colored glasses. It is also just as selective, partial, and fluidly constructed in the present as it is in our world: "Han Solo… The rebellion general?" Finn asks. "No, the smuggler!" Rey insists. Most of the film's

main characters are haunted by some form of previous loss or the burden of legacy. Han and Leia

mourn the corruption of their son, Ben, into Kylo Ren, while Kylo struggles to reconcile the

weight and conflicted allegiances of his heritage (i.e., his Sith Lord grandfather, Vader, against

his mother, Leia, and uncle, Luke). For Rey, being abandoned by her parents leaves her longing

for a past that will never return for her. "Dear child, I see your eyes—you already know the truth.

Whoever you're waiting for on Jakku…they're never coming back," Maz consoles her midway

through the film. Maz has to remind Rey: "The belonging you seek is not behind you, it is

ahead." In *The Force Awakens*, there is no better visual metaphor for the lingering presence of

the past than the expansive graveyard of demolished ships on the planet Jakku. Massive Imperial

Star Destroyers pepper the desert landscape, which young scavengers strip bare for parts to trade

for provisions. The graveyard is a constant reminder of what came before, the past haunting the

terrain and all who inhabit it. And in our introduction to Rey, the young woman who is quickly

established as the sequel trilogy's lead, we find that she has repurposed a downed AT-AT walker

as a home (**Figure 5.2**). In a single visual, the film communicates that the new is quite literally

occupying the iconography of the old and seeking ways to make use of it.

Figure 5.2. Rey (sitting against the AT-AT's front leg) inhabits a relic of *Star Wars*'s past. Photo courtesy of Lucasfilm.

But if Abrams intends to use the abundance of nostalgia in *The Force Awakens* to pave a way forward, we have yet to see what is especially new about the film. That quality is embodied by the film's diverse ensemble cast and theme of intergenerational transference. In a departure from the all-white trios that led the original and prequel trilogies, the sequel trilogy is spearheaded by Rey (Daisy Ridley, a white English woman), Finn (John Boyega, a Black English man), and Poe (Oscar Isaac, a Guatemalan-American man). Moreover, a number of supporting characters and background extras are played by women and people of color, especially among Resistance members. Indicative of the film's resulting ideology of multicultural inclusion is the fact that this on-screen diversity is largely concentrated on the side the narrative portrays as unequivocally good. The First Order is almost exclusively comprised of white men, with the exception of Captain Phasma and one other female Stormtrooper (and it should be noted that both wear homogenizing armor that effectively strips them of any femininity). Golding questions the extent to which *The Force Awakens* can truly be claimed as consciously political and argues that what is present is largely due to contemporary casting

practices and circumstantial left-wing politics carried over from Lucas's previous films.[13] While there is likely some merit to this position and he is correct that the Disney-backed film does not advertise its ideological ambitions, Golding mistakes intentionality for ultimate effect and overlooks the inherently political implications of casting women and actors of color in a genre, cinema, and society and assumes white men as the normative position. When considered alongside *The Force Awakens*'s preoccupation with the past, the diverse ensemble emboldens the theme of intergenerational transference and the film can rightly be understood as the starting point for a new *Star Wars* trilogy that utilizes nostalgia to ease its transition into a future that is more reflective of the demographics of contemporary audiences.

It is in this sense that *The Force Awakens* functions as not just a franchise nostalgia film, but also a legacy film with both a narrative and industrial interest in the relationship between generations. As Carter observed, "it was clear that we would be embarking on an inter-generational hand-off," and we can assume he is referring to both audience and characters.[14] This ambition is perfectly encapsulated in the climactic moment in which Rey answers the hero's call to action and summons the Skywalker lightsaber into her hand. The scene is telling in several respects. First, it effectively represents a woman seizing narrative centrality for the first time in a franchise that had previously been dominated by white men. Second, the object that symbolizes this centrality is one with a layered history, first belonging to Anakin Skywalker and then Luke. With this in mind, Rey (the new) calls upon a storied object (the old) to put to use in the present moment. Finally, positioned in opposition to Kylo Ren, the grandson of Anakin and nephew of Luke, Rey's seizure of the lightsaber marks the subversion of a kind of nepotism that would have historically favored the relevance of an entitled bloodline. In this moment, just the like the larger film it is embedded in, Rey takes the old and makes it new.[15]

It is along these lines that Golding examines the fugue structure of composer John Williams's "March of the Resistance" and, in an inspired piece of analysis, argues that this musical device is representative of *The Force Awakens* as a whole. A fugue is designed around repetition and evolution: "[it] begins with a statement of a melody and then matches it with its alteration. We hear a new melody in counterpoint, and an old melody return. New, old, new, old, new, old. This is how the fugue works: it is about presenting established material in inventive ways."[16] Similarly, Jonathan Gray has defended the film from accusations of regressive nostalgia and creative bankruptcy by suggesting that "its repetition sets up the capacity for difference, for new valences and meanings."[17] It is thus that *The Force Awakens* is to be understood as a film that intentionally re-presents elements of its past, but it does so to ultimately create something new from it. As a franchise nostalgia film both narratively and industrially, it structures itself on the appeal of the familiar but with the intent of using the comforts located therein in service of moving the series and its viewers in a new, more socially progressive direction.

Interlude: Critical Reception to *The Force Awakens*

Upon release, *The Force Awakens* was a major critical and commercial success. In unadjusted dollars, it remains the highest grossing film at the domestic box office and was once the third highest grossing film worldwide (at the time of writing it is now the fourth). Although the overwhelming impression was that Disney-Lucasfilm's reliance on nostalgia paid off handsomely, the film was also met with criticism by some critics and audience members who felt its adherence to the structure of the original *Star Wars* was too apparent and tiresome. Gray describes these criticisms as "arguing that the film offered 'nothing new' while wringing their hands about a culture of repetition."[18] As I argued above, *The Force Awakens* should be understood as utilizing repetition as a tool for distinct cultural and thematic ends, but the

underlying point here is that, for at least some viewers, the film's nostalgia was perceived as intrusive and deficient.

In the two years between the release of *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi*, however, some fans leaned further into nostalgia in their speculation over several of the former film's unanswered narrative threads—namely, the heritage of Rey and the origins of Supreme Leader Snoke. These fans sought connections to familiar legacy *Star Wars* characters over the ambiguity (and potentially disappointment) of independent and original backstories. Whereas some found *The Force Awakens* too nostalgic, these fans imagined ways of making additional nostalgic connections to the franchise's past. We must therefore acknowledge that film audiences are not homogenous, that franchise nostalgia can be viewed as more or less appealing depending on the individual. More complicated, some of these anti-nostalgic and nostalgic perspectives likely overlapped, meaning they wanted the film to be nostalgic in some ways but not *too* nostalgic in other ways.

In examining the progression of the sequel trilogy, it is crucial to note that the critical response to *The Force Awakens* had little influence over the direction of *The Last Jedi*. Johnson began writing *The Last Jedi* shortly after *The Force Awakens* began filming in May of 2014. By the start of the summer, Johnson was "fully engaged" in the writing process and had the basic story formed by August.[19] *The Force Awakens* wrapped principal photography in November of 2014 but would not be released until December 18, 2015. In the meantime, Johnson finished his first rough draft of the trilogy's second chapter in March 2015, with the shooting script completed in February 2016. Despite this near-finished latter draft arriving two months after *The Force Awakens* was released, all accounts suggest that only minor changes occurred, with nothing impacting the film's larger themes and narrative developments.[20] As *The Last Jedi*

producer Ram Bergman commented, "I'd say the finished film is about 90 percent of the first draft that you [Johnson] wrote 16 months before we started filming [in February 2016]," meaning the most of the final film was shaped before *The Force Awakens* had finished production.[21] Johnson reiterates this elsewhere, commenting that when he was developing *The Last Jedi*, "[*The Force Awakens*] didn't belong to the world yet. Looking back, I'm very thankful for that. For that precious first year when we were visualizing our movie, we didn't have the cultural reaction to *The Force Awakens* to hold it up to, and our only compass was an interior one."[22] The film was, in other words, the work of a filmmaker taking the story in a direction he felt was thematically appropriate based on his knowledge of the trilogy's first entry and largely uninfluenced by audience reception. I mention this to clearly establish that while *The Last Jedi* is responding to *The Force Awakens* at a narrative and thematic (and even cultural) level, it is not a reactionary response to it at a developmental level. As we shall see later, *The Rise of Skywalker* had a markedly different development cycle, which becomes a major explanatory factor in that film's deployment of nostalgia.

"We Are What They Grow Beyond": *The Last Jedi*

Taking the narrative handoff of *The Force Awakens* as its foundation, *The Last Jedi* continues to use nostalgia as a way of actively and critically engaging with the past in order to move even further into the future. Where the former film recalled legacy and sought to repurpose it, the latter film seeks to interrogate, subvert, and transcend it. This is not to say that *The Last Jedi* is without simple appeals to franchise nostalgia. All of the aesthetic revivals used in *The Force Awakens* return here, as do plenty of narrative parallels to previous *Star Wars* films—a young Jedi seeks the counsel of an aged, reclusive Jedi master; a mysterious spiritual vision experienced in a cave foreshadows revelations of heritage; a handful of Rebels infiltrates an

enemy base by repurposing uniforms; an antagonist betrays their superior, a powerful puppet master, to save the life of the main protagonist; and a line of mechanical walkers slowly encroaches on a Rebel base as small speeders fly out to slow its advance. But rather than directly revive the structure of previous *Star Wars* films (*à la The Force Awakens*'s narrative pastiche), *The Last Jedi* deploys these beats as more muted echoes of the past.[23] The film is especially conscious of easy attempts to satisfy nostalgic longing without adequately reflecting on what that past means to the present: "That was a cheap move," an aged Luke Skywalker grumbles to R2-D2 as the droid tries to coax him out of his self-imposed exile by replaying the hologram message of Princess Leia from the original *Star Wars*. Nostalgia is a powerful emotional impulse, the film seems to be saying, but its uses can often be shallow and exploitative. *The Last Jedi* is therefore content to utilize such "cheap moves" so long as it is also pushing beyond them.

The film further leans into *The Force Awakens*'s ideology of multicultural inclusion as representative of the younger generation trying to make sense of the legacy of their forebears. The diversity of the ensemble cast is even greater here, with new supporting characters like Rose Tico (Kelly Marie Tran, a Vietnamese-American woman), Vice-Admiral Holdo (Laura Dern, a white American woman), and DJ (Benicio del Toro, a Puerto Rican man). Moreover, women and people of color have significantly greater presence as featured and background extras.[24] In *The Last Jedi*, the Resistance is effectively coded as a matriarchy, with Leia as general, Holdo taking temporary command, and Amanda Lawrence's character Commander D'Acy as a key advisor to both. (This is contrasted by the patriarchal leadership of the First Order—Snoke, Kylo, and General Hux.) Within the sociopolitical climate of its December 2017 release (i.e., in the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential election), the film's progressive casting dovetails with its wider themes of failure, hope, and continued resistance in the face of authoritarian victory to take

on allegorical significance. In a different kind of progress, Johnson also uses *The Last Jedi* to push the formal and stylistic conventions of the series, employing slow motion, flashbacks, voiceover, and silence.[25] Both forms of progress serve to upend traditional conceptions of *Star Wars* as it once was, albeit in often subtle, unobtrusive ways.

More noticeably, however, *The Last Jedi* takes narrative elements that might have lent themselves to nostalgic pleasure and strategically subverts them. It is in this sense that nostalgia is used quite productively by the film and, within the subject material of a franchise nostalgia film, realizes a potentiality Dika observed in nostalgia films, "a practice that, although referring to the past, destabilizes it in service of the present, and consequently tells stories that are very much our own."[26] For instance, after two years of audience speculation over Rey's parentage, Johnson reveals that she is not the descendant of any preestablished or narratively significant character(s) (as an appeal to the nostalgic comforts of *The Empire Strikes Back* [Kershner, 1980] might do). Rather, she is the child of paupers who sold her into slavery for drinking money: "I'm nobody," she tearfully admits. Similarly, the mysterious "big bad" of the trilogy, Snoke, is not given any backstory and is killed prematurely relative to the Emperor's death at the end of the original trilogy, a move that disrupts the assumed narrative structure of the new trilogy and opened up new possibilities for the third entry (possibilities that, as discussed below, were not realized). In executing Snoke, Kylo does not redeem himself (as Darth Vader did when he betrayed the Emperor to save Luke), but instead takes the throne for himself. In these two narrative developments there is an obvious setup that recognizes what the nostalgic appeal might be (i.e., an "I am your father" revelation and redemption sequence, respectively), but *The Last Jedi* instead uses them to initiate a conversation with the series' past that understands that past should only be invoked if used for something new.

In other cases, *The Last Jedi* goes beyond simply subverting the series' past and more directly interrogates the idealized memories being recalled, demanding that the viewer adjust their perceptions of the original objects of nostalgia. Consider the plot thread in which Poe is demoted by Leia after disobeying her direct orders; he subsequently questions the strategy and authority of Holdo and attempts a mutiny. The scoundrel of the sequel trilogy and an ace pilot, Poe is designed to Parallel Han with his brash, play-by-my-own-rules attitude. However, by putting him in conflict with not just authority, but the authority of women, *The Last Jedi* recontextualizes these familiar heroics and points out the immaturity and toxicity of these behaviors. Accordingly, Poe's arc functions as a critique of a familiar masculine depiction of heroism and encourages the viewer to approach the fondly remembered past differently: If this is true of Poe, was it also true of Han Solo? If *Star Wars* was built around this kind of crowd-pleasing scoundrel, is there a toxic thread woven into the very DNA of the series? *The Last Jedi* ends by giving Poe the opportunity to grow and embrace a more level-headed, collaborative, and mature form of leadership that recognizes the occasional necessity of retreat. In doing so, the film encourages a critical nostalgia in which the idealized past must periodically be stripped of its uncritical romance in order to be put toward self-improvement in the present. This conflict is thus also coded as a generational tension. As Johnson sees it, "[Poe's] brashness is very much a young person's point of view. It would be disingenuous and wrong to have the only perspective that mattered in this movie to be one of youth."[27] In other words, Johnson envisions a proactive dialogue between past and future, where the past retains value in some cases (as in Leia and Holdo's experience and wisdom) but can lead us astray in others (as in the rogue heroics of Han). And so Poe's final act in the film—to recognize the opportunity for retreat and survival when the Resistance is pinned down by the First Order—marks a successful reconciliation of impulses

where the wisdom of the past is drawn from as a lesson for the future. To this end, a successful instance of intergenerational transference occurs: "Don't look at me, follow him," Leia quips when the Resistance soldiers briefly hesitate to follow Poe's command; she has a newfound confidence in the leaders of tomorrow and smiles proudly at Poe's growth.

A similar outlook is found in *The Last Jedi*'s approach to the legacy of the Jedi Order and the legend of Luke Skywalker. At the conclusion of *The Force Awakens*, Rey travels to the first Jedi temple to persuade the reclusive Luke to end his self-imposed exile. Luke had once trained a young Ben Solo before he was turned to the Dark Side and became Kylo Ren, and despite the awe the Skywalker of legend inspires, Luke failed to save his nephew. "Leia blamed Snoke but… It was me," he reflects. "I failed. Because I was Luke Skywalker, Jedi master. A legend." But as Rey pleads in response, "The galaxy may need a legend." Luke initially rejects Rey's insistence on the past's continued relevance. For him, the nostalgia she carries for the heroes of old is misplaced, which is why he tosses his old lightsaber over his shoulder when Rey presents it to him. "Now that they're extinct, the Jedi are romanticized, deified," Luke later explains to her. "But if you strip away the myth and look at the deeds, the legacy of the Jedi is failure. Hypocrisy. Hubris. At the height of their powers, they allowed Darth Sidious to rise, create the Empire, and wipe them out." Luke opposes any attempt to idealize this past, believing its shortcomings invalidate its utility, whereas Rey sees possibility in its reappraisal, in the potential use of the past to inspire hope in a new generation.

Eventually, however, Luke has a change in attitude. Shortly after Rey leaves the island to rejoin the film's central conflict, Luke makes the decision to burn down the island's mystical Force tree, which houses the original Jedi texts. As he approaches, Luke's own former master, Yoda, appears from beyond the grave. "I'm ending all of this," he tells Yoda. "The tree. The

texts. The Jedi. I'm gonna burn it down." But torch in hand, he hesitates. Watching on, Yoda lifts his finger and summons a lightning strike to ignite the ancient tree. Despite his criticism of the Jedi, Luke protests this apparent erasure: "The sacred Jedi texts!" "Read them, have you?" Yoda teases him. Perhaps Luke's blanket criticism of the past was misplaced, overlooking what it could be put in service of. Yoda offers Luke (and the viewer) a final lesson: "Pass on what you have learned. Strength, mastery, but weakness, folly, failure also, yes, failure most of all. The greatest teacher, failure is." The two elders sit quietly and contemplate as the iconography of their past burns into the night (**Figure 5.3**). "Luke," Yoda says to him, "we are what they grow beyond." The past is not without its purpose—rather than erase it or cling to it uncritically, the film suggests a critical approach to nostalgia with an emphasis on its productive use to usher in an improved future.


Figure 5.3. Luke Skywalker and Yoda, legends of a previous generation, watch the iconography of the past burn in order to make way for a new generation of heroes. Photo courtesy of Lucasfilm.

Luke's attitude about the past is only one part of the equation. At the other end of the spectrum Rey navigates throughout the film is Kylo Ren. Kylo advocates a similar rejection of the past, but his is aimed at the potential sanctity of the future. "Let the past die. Kill it if you

have to. That's the only way to become what you were meant to be," Kylo tells Rey.[28] But as Johnson has commented, "if you're cutting off the past, you're fooling yourself, you're just burying it somewhere where it's going to come back. […] The only way forward is where Rey actually lands, which is to build on the past—not necessarily to wallow in it, the way that Luke is doing…but to take what's best from it, build on it and move forward, which is what Rey's path is in the movie."[29] Indeed, in the final moments of the film, we learn that Rey actually took the Jedi texts for herself before the ancient tree housing them was lit aflame. The implication here is that she will not follow them word-for-word but will instead take their best elements and use them in the creation of something new. It is, in other words, the knowledge of the past that she keeps, not the shrine idolizing it. As Johnson has also commented, "If you think you are throwing away the past, you are fooling yourself. The only way to go forward is to embrace the past, figure out what is good and what is not good about it. But it's never going to not be a part of who we are. And that includes Rey, who grew up hearing the legends about the Jedi. So the notion of, 'Nope, toss this all away and find something new,' is not really a valid choice, I think."[30]

Rey's optimism that a younger generation of heroes can build something better with the mythology of the past ultimately inspires Luke. He ends his journey not by remaining in isolation, but by projecting himself through the Force halfway across the galaxy to face down the entire First Order, giving the Resistance the necessary time to escape (**Figure 5.4**). By embracing a certain larger-than-life sense of heroism, Luke presents a legend to the galaxy that, as the final scene in the film confirms, will go on to inspire new heroes. As Johnson reflects, "Luke is frustrated that it's the legend of Luke Skywalker that people worship, but the truth is that legend serves a real purpose. That legend inspires so much good. That legend, at the end of the day, is what the galaxy needs."[31] This does not necessarily entail the denial of the past's flaws; rather, it

is a strategic reworking of a collective nostalgia to be given to a younger generation, an

invitation to take the best parts of the past and use them to inspire something powerfully new.
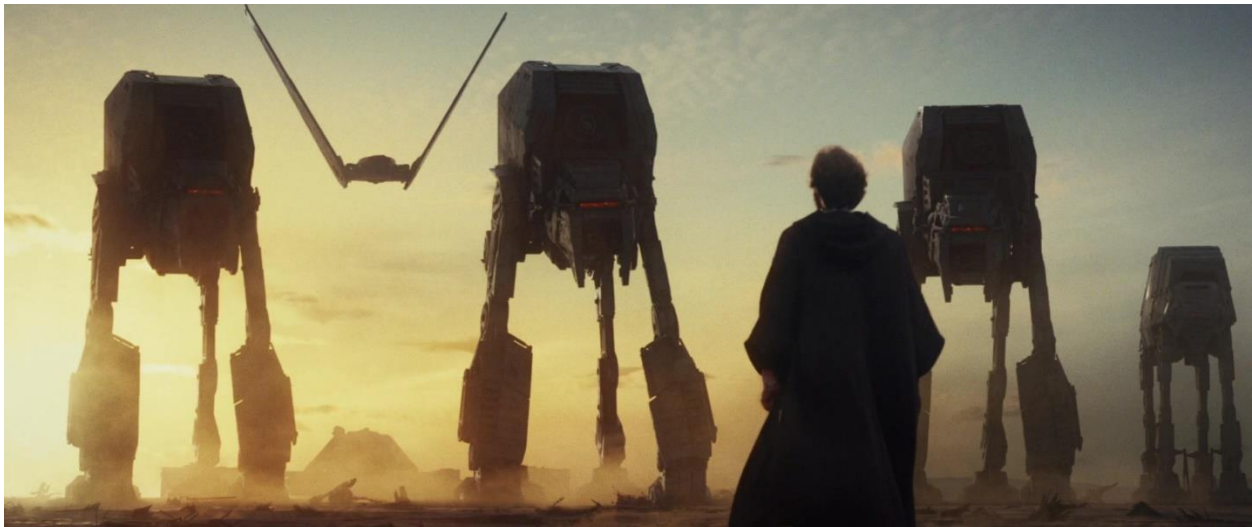
Figure 5.4. The last Jedi embraces the power of legend. Photo courtesy of Lucasfilm.

In short, *The Last Jedi* is not free of nostalgia, but its nostalgia functions as more than a

source of simple comfort. The film asks its viewers (and its characters) to interrogate their

memory of the past, advocating an active and constructive relationship with what came before it.

While developing the film, Johnson asked, "What is the value of the myths you grew up with?

What is the value of throwing those away and doing something new and fresh?" But he

acknowledges that "There's also a sin in venerating the past so much that you're enslaved to it.

For me, it's not just a meta thing of talking about *Star Wars*—how much do you copy what came

before versus throwing it away. It's very much a huge thing in life that I've spent a lot of time

thinking about. It felt very germane, something very interesting and prudent to explore right

now."[32] *The Last Jedi* concludes that while the past should not be blindly idealized, parts of it

can be reclaimed and repurposed in the present through the kind of productive nostalgia that sees

periods of transition made more palatable.

Interlude: Toxic Nostalgia, *The Last Jedi* Backlash, and the Other Episode IX

Although *The Last Jedi* was critically acclaimed and commercially successful, the film proved divisive in many corners of the *Star Wars* fandom. Post-release discourse tended to be contentious, even if the most intense criticisms seemed to come from a vocal minority. Criticisms were founded on a variety of points, many of which were predicated on nostalgic attachments to what audiences perceived as their idealized version of *Star Wars*. An early example saw an organized effort to "review bomb" the review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes to weigh down the film's user review score.[33] Other instances include several fan petitions directed at Disney-Lucasfilm to wipe *The Last Jedi* from canon and remake it. The less innocuous criticisms targeted (both explicitly and implicitly) the increased representation of women and people of color in the film—one widely publicized "de-feminized" fan edit of the film removed all female characters.[34] The film's cast and crew were also targeted with regular criticism and online harassment, with the worst leveled against Kelly Marie Tran, the first woman of color to portray a lead character in the franchise. Tran was subjected to enough racist and misogynistic harassment that she fled social media.[35]

Many criticisms of the film took issue with the more subversive narrative elements described in the previous section. The revelation that Rey was not a legacy character but was instead being used to send a more egalitarian message about who gets to be a powerful Jedi hero in the *Star Wars* franchise upset many who had spent two years brainstorming fan theories. This was either founded on a general disappointment that a potential source of franchise continuity was passed over or, more insidiously, because familiar heritage could have justified Rey's power for those viewers who perpetuated the implicitly misogynistic "Mary Sue" criticism of the character that questioned her competence and abilities.[36] Snoke's unexpected death likewise

disappointed some who were waiting for additional legacy ties to be drawn (*The Last Jedi* gives no indications of the mysterious character's origins, treating him as a mere foil for Kylo). And finally, many took issue with the fact that Luke Skywalker was not the same iconic hero that had been ingrained in their memory. These critiques suggested that Luke's characterization should have remained static despite 30 years of aging, demonstrating a resistance to character change. Moreover, those who expressed disappointment that *The Last Jedi*'s Luke was a defeated hermit in self-imposed exile and not an optimistic, valiant hero seemed to overlook Luke's struggle to resist the pull to the Dark Side in *Return of the Jedi*; their vision of Luke was selectively recalled and incomplete, imposing a belief that overcoming darkness is a one-and-done achievement and not a life-long struggle.

Generally speaking, *The Last Jedi* backlash was predicated on the film doing too much to subvert the established *Star Wars* formula, even as the film very much used the past as its springboard into the future. (This is an especially ironic trend given that the main criticism leveled against *The Force Awakens* was that it was *too* nostalgic.) Admittedly, the scope of these demands for greater continuity with *Star Wars*'s past, whether representationally or narratively, have perhaps been exaggerated in the aftermath of *The Last Jedi*'s release. William Procter argues that, while racist and misogynistic criticism were very real, much of it originated in an extremely vocal minority that was amplified by popular press coverage that mischaracterized its extensiveness.[37] Likewise, the researcher Morten Bay reports that a substantial portion of Twitter users leveling critiques at director Rian Johnson were bots, trolls and political activists seeking to sow political polarization and support extreme right-wing causes.[38] That being said, the actual scope of the backlash matters little; the resulting *perception* of it, however, does matter, particularly in how it influenced *The Rise of Skywalker*'s narrative choices, many of which

intentionally reverse *The Last Jedi*'s subversions in order to offer simpler, uncritical nostalgic pleasures and appease upset fans.

In order to better characterize the way *The Rise of Skywalker* was impacted by the nostalgia-inflected criticisms and perceived franchise discontinuities of *The Last Jedi*, it is helpful to briefly consider the film that *might* have been made. Initially, *Jurassic World* director Colin Trevorrow was announced to direct and co-write (with writing partner Derek Connolly) Episode IX in August 2015, several months before *The Force Awakens* was released in theaters. Trevorrow would later leave the project in September 2017, with *The Force Awakens* director J.J. Abrams announced as his replacement a week later. Before that, however, Trevorrow and Connolly delivered several drafts to Lucasfilm president Kathleen Kennedy, one of which was leaked online in early 2020, shortly after *The Rise of Skywalker* was released. Titled *Duel of the Fates*, the unused draft is dated December 16, 2016 and suggests a markedly different direction than the Episode IX that was actually made, one that leans into *The Last Jedi*'s forward push and concludes the trilogy by fully embracing the agency and independence of the younger generation. Although it may seem peculiar to spend time discussing a film that was never actually made, it is helpful to see where the trilogy could have been headed had the divisive reaction to *The Last Jedi* not resulted in a reactionary response by Lucasfilm while Abrams was developing *The Rise of Skywalker*.

The *Duel of the Fates* screenplay has its share of moments clearly designed to invoke nostalgia (namely a return to the abandoned Jedi Temple on Coruscant and a scene where R2-D2 plays a hologram montage of scenes from the original *Star Wars* trilogy); however, it largely focuses on concluding the narrative handoffs of *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi*. The screenplay leans further into the trilogy's progressive multicultural politics with an emphasis on

class inequality and citizen revolution. One moment sees Finn persuade a group of Stormtroopers to turn against the First Order, and when they remove their helmets, the screenplay describes "Diverse faces with a new purpose."[39] After two films of tension between old and new generations, *Duel of the Fates* sees the new definitively take command. At one point, Poe protests Leia's hesitancy to launch a final assault on the First Order capitol. He pleads to her, "The Rebels fought the Empire and won. You showed us it could be done. But that was your war. This one's ours. Let us fight it." In response, "Leia looks out at the Resistance Fleet. Young. Ready."[40] *The Rise of Skywalker* would go on to pay lip service to these themes, but never in such explicit terms.

One of the biggest differences between *Duel of the Fates* and *The Rise of Skywalker* is that Connolly and Trevorrow keep Johnson's revelation that Rey's parents were "nobody." In this development, *Duel of the Fates* sees an opportunity for Rey to define herself on her own terms, independent of the legacies of Jedi before her. As Leia reminds her early in the film, "You're not like my father. Or my brother. You're *new*. Whatever happens, remember: the Force chose <u>you</u>, Rey. Your story isn't written by anyone else."[41] Rey's arc in the film is thus coming to terms with having to forge her own path, or in Leia's terms, to write her own story. Where Rey once pled to Luke in *The Last Jedi* "I need someone to show me my place in all this," *Duel of the Fates* grants her the agency to accomplish that task herself. She begins the film by sullenly admitting "I'm no one," but triumphs in her final duel with Kylo Ren by proudly declaring "No one is no one."[42] And in his last breaths, Kylo gives her closure, telling her about the family name she longed for: Rey Solana, a name all her own.

Finally, *Duel of the Fates* attempts to reclaim the flawed legacy of the Jedi Order by applying a younger generation's insights. Rey sees a fundamental flaw in the centuries-old

conflict between Jedi and Sith. "Balance," she questions, "Dark suffocates the light. Light extinguishes the dark. Over and over. How is that balance?" Luke cautions her against this line of inquiry, but Rey persists: "So says my master. And his master before him. A thousand masters, so eager to tell us how to live."[43] And so Rey fulfills the trilogy's promise of reclaiming the past to create something new. She finds a way to improve upon the flawed philosophy of the Jedi: "Our Masters were wrong," she tells Kylo. "I will not deny my anger. And I will not reject my love."[44] The trilogy concludes with the past yielding to the wisdom of the future. "Taught us much, you have," Yoda admits to Rey. "Succeeded where we have failed. Narrow was our point of view." Luke agrees: "You chose to embrace the Dark Side and the Light. To find balance within." Yoda finishes: "Co-exist they must, as such feelings do in all of us."[45] If the sequel trilogy was to use nostalgia to facilitate progress, *Duel of the Fates* sees its realization.

Of course, *Duel of the Fates* is not the Episode IX that Lucasfilm ended up making. And even if Trevorrow had not been removed from the project, the final film may very well have also taken a different form—Trevorrow left in September 2017, but the leaked screenplay is dated December 2016. In that interim, a new writer (Jack Thorne) was briefly brought on by Lucasfilm one month before Abrams would take over.[46] Nonetheless, some of the biggest differences between *Duel of the Fates* and *The Rise of Skywalker* (for the latter, the resurrection of the Emperor and the reversal of *The Last Jedi*'s reveal of Rey's parentage) are so fundamental that it seems quite likely that they were not introduced until after *The Last Jedi* had been released. Turning now to the production history of *The Rise of Skywalker*, we can see how the comforts of nostalgia were subsequently deployed to appeal to the anxiety of having to bring the trilogy to a close without legacy characters while contending with the backlash to *The Last Jedi* described above.

"You're Haunted": *The Rise of Skywalker*

Unlike *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi*, *The Rise of Skywalker* had the added pressures of a tight production schedule, the significant developmental discontinuity of Leia actress Carrie Fisher's death, and knowledge of the audience reception to the first two entries in the sequel trilogy. The final film was not an artistically fulfilling and cathartic conclusion that continued the thematic progression of the trilogy (a subjective judgment to be sure, but one also supported by mixed-to-negative critical reception compared to the first two films' primarily positive reception). However, the film is no less demonstrative of the trilogy's larger themes as a kind of reactionary and regressive nostalgic narrative. As a cultural artifact, *The Rise of Skywalker* is illustrative of a film that leaned into nostalgia because of the crippling anxiety of narrative uncertainty and the need to reconcile opposing emphases on past and future. Nostalgia here is treated as a crutch for a narrative that might have otherwise staged a decisive triumph over the specter of the past. By situating it within divisive production and reception contexts, we can identify a film unsure of how to proceed under the weight of its own legacy.

On the production end, Abrams was brought on to replace Trevorrow in September 2017, just three months before *The Last Jedi* was released. Abrams pitched an initial story to Kennedy and Disney CEO Bob Iger on December 15, but returned to work after the New Year (which also means after *The Last Jedi*'s opening) with what Phil Szostak describes as "major shifts to *Star Wars:* Episode IX's story."[47] Abrams and co-writer Chris Terrio did not complete a draft of the film's shooting script until July 25, 2018, seven months after the release of *The Last Jedi*.[48] The development of *The Rise of Skywalker* was hurried, with Abrams only having two years and three months to write and direct the film. In contrast, Johnson had almost three and a half years to write and direct *The Last Jedi*, a process producer Ram Bergman described as "so smooth,

with no issues and no dramas production-wise."[49] *The Rise of Skywalker* was anything but: "I've never rewritten a film as much as this one," commented Terrio. "It's like the tide. There's a new script every morning, but we just keep going at it and going at it, loosely thinking that it's not good enough. It's never good enough."[50]

In addition to an accelerated and unsteady production process, Abrams and Terrio also faced a major writing challenge with the death of Carrie Fisher. Fisher, who passed unexpectedly on December 27, 2016, was originally going to have a "really significant" role in the final film, according to Kennedy.[51] Since Leia was so integral to the structure and characters of the sequel trilogy, this meant that there was a significant discontinuity to contend with in production and narrative. Abrams opted to use unused footage of Fisher from *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi* and write new scenes around them, with Industrial Light and Magic digitally altering the footage to update her appearance and place her in different settings. Though this gave Leia a role in *The Rise of Skywalker*, it also placed limitations on what the rest of the film could be, while quite literally limiting the character's presence to her actor's past).

The relative restraints of the production process alongside the criticisms leveled against *The Last Jedi* (as described in the previous section) seemed to lead Abrams and Terrio to look backward while developing *The Rise of Skywalker*. As Terrio has commented, "The most-criticized thing about the new trilogy is that it's too derivative or too backward-looking. But what if you double down on that? It's not backward-looking; it's all the same story."[52] It is as if the uncertainty of needing to carry the trilogy forward following the first two entries was great enough to make the filmmakers seek the nostalgic comforts of familiar narrative touchstones, even if they contradicted what had come before in *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi*. *The Rise of Skywalker*'s two major new narrative developments can be seen as reactionary responses

to the more subversive elements of *The Last Jedi*. The title crawl opens with the abrupt

declaration that "The dead speak!"—the original trilogy's Emperor has risen from the dead

(which is given no explanation in the film) and been retroactively established as the architect of

the events of the first two films of the sequel trilogy. A vat of Snoke clones glimpsed by Kylo as

he approaches the Emperor's throne in the film's opening sequence suggests that the Emperor

was the puppet master of the puppet master, but it more pointedly indicates that Johnson's choice

to subvert the series' "big bad" convention by eliminating Snoke was perhaps *too* subversive for

his successors. Abrams and Terrio seemingly could not conceive of *Star Wars* without a "big

bad" to confront in the final chapter of the trilogy and, regardless of narrative cohesion, saw the

nostalgic appeal of the Emperor's return as too great to resist.

The second narrative development is the reveal that Rey is not actually a protagonist with

no connections to any legacy characters, but rather the granddaughter of the Emperor, a

descendent of the Palpatine bloodline. This change seems especially predicated on the backlash

to *The Last Jedi*, for all accounts suggest that Rey Palpatine was not considered until Abrams

and Terrio began working on the film and not locked in until right before production began. Not

only is "Rey from nowhere" the thread pursued in the *Duel of the Fates* screenplay, it was also

something discussed early in the sequel trilogy's development. Szostak notes that Abrams and

his co-writers on *The Force Awakens* "recognized that a new 'nobody' was needed. Young films

audiences would need fresh and relatable heroes to emulate—and those heroes would have their

own paths to follow."[53] Similarly, the thematic import of Rey being a "nobody" was discussed in

a 2014 meeting of Lucasfilm's Intellectual Property Development Group, only one week after

The Force Awakens began filming. As Lucasfilm Story Group member Kiri Hart observed,

"[Rey] can still matter, be valuable and have a contribution to make, even though she started her

life living on a junk pile. It is cool to think about how that character is then pulled in and sort of adopted by the Skywalkers. But she doesn't have to be a Skywalker. People can have resonance and a role to play no matter where they start out."[54] Daisy Ridley herself describes the final twist on Rey's parentage as last minute, noting that even after Abrams pitched her the Palpatine connection he continued to go back and forth on the decision, to the point that she was not certain when *The Rise of Skywalker* began filming.[55] Accordingly, this narrative choice seems predicated not on continuity with *The Force Awakens* and *The Rise of Skywalker*, but rather on continuity with the original trilogy. Where *The Last Jedi* subverted any expectation of an *Empire Strikes Back*-style revelation, *The Rise of Skywalker* restores it, reaching backward for an "I am your father" twist to appease the most vocal critics its predecessor.

As a result, *The Rise of Skywalker* should be understood as a film overly attached to its own past. When faced with present discontinuities and discomforts, it turns to nostalgia as an easy source of comfort but does little to push beyond it. There is still an emphasis on social progress, but nostalgia is never used to ease a transition. *The Rise of Skywalker* brings back legacy character Lando Calrissian (Billy Dee Williams, a Black American man) and introduces Jannah (Naomi Ackie, a Black English woman) and Zorii Bliss (Keri Russell, a white American woman). The presence of women and people of color in featured and background extra roles is likewise increased again, yet the film refrains from categorizing these roles (as *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi* largely did, thus giving the impression that the First Order was analogous to a white supremacist paramilitary group). *The Rise of Skywalker* also features the series' first same-sex kiss in a denouement celebration montage, but the moment is so brief and inconsequential that it leaves little impression. This inclusion is especially soured by the

avoidance of a romantic relationship between Finn and Poe, despite clear chemistry and the suggestive comments of actors John Boyega and Oscar Isaac.[56]

At face value then, *The Rise of Skywalker* appears to continue the sequel trilogy's theme of generational transference and the struggle to move beyond the shadow of the past. Independent of the previous two entries, Rey's story becomes a rejection of one legacy and the claiming of another—"Some things are stronger than blood," Luke tells her when she tries to remove herself from the film's conflict out of fear of her family's history with the Dark Side. But there is a tension between what the film presents itself as about and what the viewer understands it is actually happening, having seen the trajectory of *The Force Awakens* and *The Rise of Skywalker*. The Emperor's decaying, zombified corpse, suspended by a mechanized arm to artificially prolong his life, thus functions as a symbol of the past's refusal to accept progress within both the film's diegesis and its actual industrial contexts (**Figure 5.5**). The Emperor at one point sucks the lifeforce from Rey and a redeemed Ben Solo to heal himself—the old feeding off the new. The Emperor and his forces are of course defeated by *The Rise of Skywalker*'s conclusion, but the film as a whole never overcomes the burden of the franchise's legacy.

Figure 5.5. The Emperor's life is unnaturally prolonged, a symbol of a past resistant to the passage of time and the change it brings. Photo courtesy of Lucasfilm.

In *The Rise of Skywalker*'s final moment, it becomes clear that even if the past is symbolically defeated, the new is never given space to define itself on its own. Rey returns to the former Skywalker homestead on Tatooine to bury the lightsabers of Luke and Leia when a lone wanderer approaches her and asks for her name. Rey contemplates, scanning the horizon and seeing the ghosts of Luke and Leia watching over her before replying not "just Rey," not "Rey Palpatine" or "Rey Solana," but "Rey Skywalker." Rey coopts the identity of the Skywalkers rather than forging a unique identity of her own (she even flies into the final battle in Luke's old X-Wing and is referred to by his callsign, Red Five). While this choice does mark a repurposing of the past by a figure of the present and future, it also prolongs the influence of the past in a moment of possibility that might have otherwise been dedicated to the creation of a distinctly new vision. Presented with a final, decisive opportunity to chart her own future, Rey—or, we should say, Abrams and Terrio—choose the comforts of the familiar and the established. Perhaps Rey will go on to learn from the mistakes of the Skywalker legacy and transform it, but we will never know. As the final film in the sequel trilogy, *The Rise of Skywalker* only offers (yet again)

the promise of something new, not the realization of it. In the film's final shot, Rey turns to look out at Tatooine's binary sunset, a horizon of possibilities never to be realized.

Postlude

By tracing the development of the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy from film to film, we can clearly observe a trilogy that is just as concerned with the negotiation of past and future in its production and reception as it is on a textual level. *The Force Awakens* began the trilogy by using nostalgia to reactivate the dormant *Star Wars* franchise and ease into the new stories of a young, diverse cast of heroes. *The Last Jedi* took that narrative handoff and used it to further interrogate the value of nostalgia, finding ways to critically reclaim the past to the benefit of the future. Seeing how these efforts were contested in the critical reception to *The Force Awakens* and (especially) *The Last Jedi*, *The Rise of Skywalker* returned to the simple appeals of the past, ending the trilogy not by forging a new legacy for the younger generation to claim as their own, but by only suggesting the possibility of one.

Viewed abstractly, the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy thus functions as an example of the wider trends discussed throughout this thesis. From an industrial perspective, nostalgia was used by Disney-Lucasfilm as a reliable way of attracting audiences with the promise of the familiar. As texts, the three films engaged with nostalgia and social progress in different ways, some more productive and others more regressive. In response, audiences expressed divergent attitudes toward the revival and transcendence of *Star Wars*'s past. Taken collectively, the sequel trilogy therefore represents a complex, often contradictory attempt to process memory and change cinematically, encapsulating the same struggle weathered by Hollywood and American culture writ large throughout the 2010s.

Chapter Six: Epilogue

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that contemporary Hollywood cinema has been defined by the prevalence of nostalgia. Hollywood's most recent nostalgia wave can be traced to several points of origin: the cultural conditions of late modernity that promote chronic, widespread nostalgic longing; the political and cultural anxieties that America faced during the 2010s; and technological and industrial discontinuities within the mainstream American film industry. Contemporary nostalgia films function both culturally and industrially as ways of responding to these recent uncertainties, offering perceived continuity in idealized renderings of the past. These nostalgia films also demonstrate multiple complex ways of processing historical and social change. In many, nostalgia coincides with Hollywood's attempts at more inclusive on-screen representations, which often complicates traditional conceptions of nostalgia as an entirely regressive, backward-oriented force. Rather than dismiss nostalgia as a binary opposite to progress, many of the films discussed throughout this thesis have managed to utilize nostalgia productively to pave a way forward during a period of widespread societal uncertainty. There is ultimately no singular way in which Hollywood accomplishes this; nostalgia is manifested in a variety of ways and is employed for a variety of ends.

Svetlana Boym is one of many scholars who has argued that nostalgia says more about the present moment than it does the past being recalled. This recollection subsequently carries significant implications for the future. For Boym, "Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on the realities of the future."[1] How and why we engage with the past ultimately has a substantial impact on the realization of tomorrow, both for better and for worse. Nostalgia itself is value-neutral—whether it facilitates or impedes social progress is up to us.

In the previous five chapters, I approached Hollywood in the 2010s as a historical phenomenon, a discrete object for critical study. However, time does not sit idly while scholars contemplate the conditions of the recent past; it continues to march forward, both continuing recognizable social and cultural trends and heralding new ones. 2020 saw a significant historical breaking point with the COVID-19 pandemic, an extreme source of discontinuity and uncertainty for both Hollywood and the larger world. At the time of writing, we are just beginning to be able to envision a return to pre-pandemic ways of living. While there is still much that we cannot foresee, in the remainder of this chapter I briefly consider some of the ways the pandemic represents a continuation of the cultural and industrial trends described throughout this thesis, drawing from popular press articles and industry trade journals to demonstrate the mainstream recognition of these anxieties.

New Uncertainties: COVID-19 and the Summer of #BlackLivesMatter

The World Health Organization declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020. In the U.S., lockdowns were rapidly implemented in late March, giving millions of Americans a new source of anxiety and uncertainty. If life under late modernity is characterized by a prolonged skepticism of the efficacy of the future (and, therefore, a perpetual sense of confusion and dread in the present), COVID intensified this dynamic at a micro-level. Particularly in the first months of the pandemic, imagining a future proved immensely challenging. With little sense of how long the pandemic would last, people were trapped in a perpetual present, unable to practically look more than a few days or weeks ahead.

Throughout the pandemic, there was therefore a widespread acknowledgement of the struggles of uncertainty. Articles in major newspapers frequently carried headlines such as "How to Cope When Everything Keeps Changing" and "Uncertainty Fuels Anxiety."[2] As the

sociological and psychological models of individual and collective nostalgia outlined in Chapter

One and Chapter Two might forecast, nostalgia was thus turned to *en masse* in an attempt to seek

comfort in the perceived continuity of the past. (In fairness, the severity of the pandemic rather

justifies the conceptualization of the recent past as superior to the present.) Just as the uncertainty

of the moment was acknowledged in the popular press, so too was the ubiquity of nostalgia

described in columns like "Why We Reach for Nostalgia in Times of Crisis" and "This Year Has

Taught Me a Lot About Nostalgia."[3] Amidst this wider moment of uncertainty, nostalgia films

(in this case, both intentional nostalgia films and classic films being nostalgically revisited)

continued to serve as one mediated form of accessing the comforts of the past. A *New York*

Times review of the 2020 remake of *The Secret Garden* (Munden), for example, explicitly

mentions that the film's familiarity was "fine for this uncertain moment," its predictability a

welcome change of pace "[i]n a year defined by surprise."[4] In this sense, the same dynamic of an

uncertain present resulting in widespread nostalgia that was seen throughout the 2010s still

applied during the pandemic, just in an especially concentrated form.

    At the same time that the pandemic brought an intensified continuation of cultural

nostalgia, other recent discontinuities suggest a more substantial forward turn committed to

social progress and a better future. The experience of cultural nostalgia is not monolithic; on the

contrary, nostalgia is often a privileged emotion. Though nostalgia finds ways to view any past

in favorable ways, it generally assumes that the nostalgic's past is superior to their present.

Those with histories of oppression are unlikely to find much solace in the remembered historical

past when that oppression was even worse than its contemporary forms. The police murder of

George Floyd in May 2020 sparked a prolonged movement of racial reckoning. The Black Lives

Matter movement (a presence throughout the 2010s, but receiving mainstream support following

Floyd's death) functions as a fundamentally future-oriented call to action. In every discussion of nostalgia, there should be an implicit question of "nostalgic for whom?" Rather than look to the past for comfort, the Black Lives Matter movement accordingly forces a reexamination of the cultural myths and iconography that have distorted (white) America's recollection of its own history and identity. Likewise, its demands for structural change—be it police reform, defunding, or abolition—are founded upon the necessity of progress and the possibilities of a better tomorrow. This most recent forward push does not negate the broader wave of American cultural nostalgia (if anything, it exacerbates the response on the Right), but it nonetheless continues to question the sanctity of the past in ways that American society has increasingly been unable to ignore.[5]

I cannot say how the U.S. will continue to negotiate the tensions and potential compatibilities between nostalgia and social progress as it continues into the 2020s. Only time will tell if the most recent demands for progress successfully initiate a substantial change in late modern attitudes and persuade enough people to find renewed hope in the future. Put differently, it remains to be seen if Benjamin's Angel of History can once again reverse course.

The Future of (Hollywood) Nostalgia

As American society processes these major anxieties and discontinuities, Hollywood itself has had to contend with its own internal crisis due to COVID. The pandemic forced movie theaters to close their doors for months, putting an already precarious theatrical film business in a state of panic. Although these closures intensified industrial discontinuity for the major Hollywood studios, these discontinuities are largely consonant with those described in Chapter Four. While theatrical releases are slowly beginning to bounce back with moderate commercial successes like *Godzilla vs. Kong* (Wingard, 2021) and *A Quiet Place Part II* (Krasinski, 2021),

the future of Hollywood increasingly seems to rest on what *New Yorker* film critic Anthony Lane jokingly described as "California Streamin.'"[6]

With movie theaters closed (and those that reopened often lacking new releases to populate screens with), streaming became the assumed mode of watching movies in 2020. Studios increasingly searched for ways to adapt to this new reality. Near the beginning of the pandemic, Universal struck an agreement with AMC (the world's biggest theater chain) to shorten the window of theatrical exclusivity from 90 days to 17 days after initially upsetting exhibitors by releasing *Trolls World Tour* (Dohrn, 2020) on premium VOD rental.[7] With its live-action remake of *Mulan* (Caro, 2020), Disney similarly attempted to release the film theatrically and on Disney+ for a $30 premium rental fee at the same time. A more substantial shift occurred in December 2020 when Warner Bros. abruptly announced that it would release its entire 2021 film slate simultaneously in theaters and on the HBO Max streaming platform with no additional charge for subscribers.[8] Whether this shift will apply beyond Warner Bros.' 2021 films or have permanent adverse effects on the viability of theatrical exhibition has yet to be seen; however, the announcement immediately induced a state of panic in studio executives, producers, and filmmakers. As technology writer Kara Swisher suggested in the *New York Times*, the HBO Max decision assumed "that Warner's future lies primarily in making its streaming service the center of the action. And that means making the studio's reliance on big theatrical releases a thing of the past."[9] In *Variety*, film journalists predicted that "The box office returns for those films will certainly be adversely affected by the decision to move forward with a hybrid distribution strategy."[10] Quoted in that trade article is also a foreboding prediction from an anonymous film executive that "If Disney follows this template in any capacity, movie theaters are done."[11] The

industry senses that the change it has been fighting for a decade is fast approaching and fears that its favored distribution and exhibition model is about to go away for good.

At an Investor Day presentation one week after the HBO Max decision, Disney quietly implied that it was moving in such a direction. Though the studio still plans to continue to release films theatrically (with a reduced 45-day theatrical exclusivity window for two forthcoming Marvel films), the presentation emphasized at least 22 forthcoming Disney+ series from Lucasfilm and Marvel, two of the most successful franchise operators in contemporary Hollywood.[12] This is not to say that Disney will not produce plenty of theatrical Marvel and *Star Wars* films in the years to come, but it does suggest a diversification of content in order to invest in a future of streaming. And regardless of how cinephiles view the prospect, it is a strategy that will likely pay off—Disney stock rose to an all-time high following the investor presentation.[13]

Though the theatrical movie business will undoubtedly survive in some form, the pandemic has made it clear that streaming will remain a fundamental part of Hollywood's future, a change that film historian Mark Harris has described as "the first real redefinition of 'Hollywood' away from the studios in the century since they were founded."[14] And as theater chains like Alamo Drafthouse Cinema file for bankruptcy and Arclight Cinemas close permanently, there is substantial uncertainty within Hollywood as it enters the 2020s.[15] It will not be for some time that we will see the effects of these most recent industrial discontinuities (not to mention wider pandemic-era cultural discontinuities) take shape—countless delayed films were produced *before* COVID, meaning many of the films that will be released in the year following the return of movie theaters were informed by those previous cultural conditions. If the general strategy of Hollywood throughout the 2010s is any indication, however, it is reasonable to expect that pandemic-induced industrial discontinuities will lead major studios to continue to utilize

nostalgia in its various forms unless it stops serving as an effective way of drawing audiences away from their streaming devices and into theater seats. (Indeed, Amazon's recent acquisition of MGM was motivated by the studio's catalogue of intellectual property.)[16] The past may be all that remains in Hollywood's future; but it is audiences that will have to decide whether theatrical moviegoing remains appealing as they view the latest nostalgia film, sitting in the dark, alone together.

Notes

CHAPTER ONE

[1] Jeremy Fuster, "2017's 3 Top-Grossing Movies Had Female Leads for First Time in Nearly 60 Years," *The Wrap*, December 31, 2017, https://www.thewrap.com/female-lead-films-top-2017-box-office. All domestic box office information used throughout was obtained from boxofficemojo.com.

[2] 2017's highest grossing film not based on existing intellectual property was *Coco* (Unkrich and Molina) in the number 13 slot, though it is arguably an entry in a branded "franchise" of Pixar animated films.

[3] Robert Sklar, *Move-Made America: A Social History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975), 280.

[4] Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979); and Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (New York: Verso Books, 2009).

[5] To name just two: Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005); and Christine Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia: Populuxe Props and Technicolor Aesthetics in Contemporary American Film* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009).

[6] Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 95.

[7] Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 153.

[8] Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 13-16.

[9] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 281.

[10] Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 9.

[11] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Shocken Books, 1969), 255.

[12] Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 49.

[13] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*; and Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley, "The Modalities of Nostalgia," *Current Sociology* 54, no. 6 (November 2006): 922, https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392106068458.

[14] Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, *The Mnemonic Imagination: Remembering as Creative Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 126.

[15] Pickering and Keightley, "Modalities of Nostalgia," 921.

[16] John Bloom, "Cardboard Patriarchy: Adult Baseball Card Collecting and the Nostalgia for a Presexual Past," in *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*, ed. Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 67.

[17] Katharina Niemeyer, "Introduction: Media and Nostalgia," in *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 6; and Stuart Tannock, "Nostalgia Critique," *Cultural Studies* 9, no. 3 (1995), https://doi.org/10.1080/09502389500490511.

[18] Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 354.

[19] Fredric Jameson, "Walter Benjamin, or Nostalgia," *Salmagundi* no. 10/11 (Fall 1969-Winter 1970): 68, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40546514. Interestingly, as Keightley and Pickering note,

Jameson's later works on nostalgia often overlook this key potentiality in nostalgia. This is partly why I rely less on Jameson throughout this thesis than might otherwise be expected. See Keightley and Pickering, *Mnemonic Imagination*, 125.

[20] David Pierson, "AMC's *Mad Men* and the Politics of Nostalgia," in *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future*, ed. Katharina Niemeyer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 140.

[21] Jim Collins, *Architecture of Excess: Cultural Life in the Information Age* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 7.

[22] Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 5.

[23] Douglas Kellner, "Toward a Critical Media/Cultural Studies," in *Media/Cultural Studies: Critical Approaches*, ed. Rhonda Hammer and Douglas Kellner (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

CHAPTER TWO

[1] Nostalgia's evolution from a medical condition into a commonplace modern longing for bygone days is already well documented and not worth repeating at great length. See Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 3-18; and Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 1-6.

[2] Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, XIV. The word "modern," as it used here and throughout this thesis, is intended in the formal sense, not as a casual reference to anything that might be current or new.

[3] Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

[4] Jan Willem Duyvendak, *The Politics of Home: Belonging and Nostalgia in Europe and the United States* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[5] Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, XVI.

[6] Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 19.

[7] For an overview of defining elements of modernity, see Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 17-35.

[8] Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 29.

[9] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 83.

[10] Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 13.

[11] Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, *The Mnemonic Imagination: Remembering as Creative Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 116-117.

[12] Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley, "The Modalities of Nostalgia," *Current Sociology* 54, no. 6 (November 2006): 920, https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392106068458.

[13] Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 35.

[14] See Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 39; and Janelle L. Wilson, *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2005).

[15] Keightley and Pickering, *Mnemonic Imagination*, 115.

[16] Keightley and Pickering, *Mnemonic Imagination*, 124.

[17] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

[18] Zygmunt Bauman, "The Making and Unmaking of Strangers," in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multicultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, ed. Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (London: Zed Books, 2015), 47.

[19] Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 7. See also Bauman, "Making and Unmaking," 49-50; and Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 1-4.

[20] Indeed, this is one of Berman's descriptions of modernity: "The maelstrom of modern life has been fed from many sources: great discoveries in the physical sciences, changing our images of the universe and our place in it; the industrialization of production, which transforms scientific knowledge into technology, creates new human environments and destroys old ones, speeds up the whole tempo of life, generates new forms of corporate power and class struggle; immense demographic upheavals, severing millions of people from their ancestral habitats, hurtling them halfway across the world into new lives; rapid and often cataclysmic urban growth; systems of mass communication, dynamic in their development, enveloping and binding together the most diverse people and societies; increasingly powerful national states, bureaucratically structured and operated, constantly striving to expand their powers; mass social movements of people, and peoples, challenging their political and economic rulers, striving to gain some control over their lives; finally, bearing and driving all these people and institutions along, an ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world market." The only portion that registers as out of place today is the power of the nation-state. This is not to say that the nation-state has lost all relevance and power (that is far from the case), but its presumed essentialism seems to increasingly waver, its assumed position as the global unit of political organization. Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 16.

[21] Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 28.

[22] Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 29.

[23] Gerhard Schulze, "From Situations to Subjects: Moral Discourse in Transition," in *Constructing the New Consumer Society*, ed. Pekka Sulkunen, John Holmwood, Hilary Radner, and Gerhard Schulze (New York: Macmillan, 1997), 49.

[24] Bauman, "Making and Unmaking," 50; and Marcus A. Doel and David B. Clarke, "Transpolitical Urbanism: Suburban Anomaly and Ambient Fear," *Space and Culture* 1, no. 2 (1997): https://doi.org/10.1177/120633120000100202.

[25] The sociologist Rutger Bregman has noted that most people in wealthy nations believe children will be worse off than their parents despite, as he notes, more-or-less objective quality of life improvements since premodern times. Bauman similarly notes that Millennials "are the first post-war generation to voice a fear of losing instead of raising, the social standing achieved by their parents; [they] expect their future to bring worsening of their life conditions, instead of paving the way to their future improvements. […] All in all, the vision of unstoppable 'progress' portends the menace of loss instead of auguring new attainments and moving up in the world; it is now associated more with social degradation than with advancement and promotion." See, respectively, Rutger Bregman, *Utopia for Realists: The Case for a Universal Basic Income, Open Borders, and a 15-Hour Workweek*, trans. Elizabeth Manton (Amsterdam: The Correspondent, 2016), 21; and Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 58-59.

[26] Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 15.

[27] Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 23.

[28] Bauman, *Liquid Times*, 10.

[29] From Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Shocken Books, 1969), 257-258: "His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."

[30] Bauman, *Retrotopia*, 5.

[31] Bauman, *Retrotopia*, 6.

[32] Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, XIV.

[33] Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 101-102. For commonly cited examples of such events, see Chapter One.

[34] Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 103.

[35] I suspect that the COVID-19 pandemic, the police murder of George Floyd and subsequent racial reckoning, and the intense disinformation campaign surrounding the 2020 presidential election that culminated in the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. capitol will be perceived as a continuation of the period described here due to the centrality of former U.S. President Donald Trump, whose term began in 2016. The inauguration of President Joe Biden, which also corresponded to a general turn in direction of the pandemic, will likely mark the beginning of whatever else will follow. That said, what the future has in store for us and how it relates to what has recently come before it remains to be seen. For this thesis, which is primarily concerned with the American film industry, the start of the pandemic in early 2020 serves as a bookend at the time of writing due to the closure of movie theaters.

[36] Bauman, *Retrotopia*. See esp. chap. 3, "Back to Inequality."

[37] Yosefa Loshitzky, *Screening Strangers: Migration and Diaspora in Contemporary European Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 7-8.

[38] William H. Frey, "The US Will Become 'Minority White' in 2045, Census Projects," *Brookings Institute*, March 14, 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/03/14/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-census-projects.

[39] An ironic fantasy—and one indicative of nostalgia's preference for a distorted past—is that the 1940s and 50s saw its own period of American identity crisis. Kevin Hagopian notes that "America at war was a stew of changing gender norms, racial and ethnic conflicts, and economic discrimination," which was followed by a prolonged period of postwar uncertainty and disillusionment best characterized by the question "what next?" See Kevin Hagopian, "'How You Fixed for Red Points?': Anecdote and the World War II Home Front in *The Big Sleep* (1946)," in *Film Noir Reader 4*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Proscenium Publishers, 2004), 36-37.

[40] Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, XVIII.

[41] Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 43.

[42] On the latter point, see Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The First White President," *The Atlantic*, October 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/the-first-white-president-ta-nehisi-coates/537909/.

[43] It is telling that during Trump's term there was often a nostalgic reclamation of George W. Bush on the Left, in spite of significant prior criticisms of the former president while he was in office.

[44] Keightley and Pickering, *Mnemonic Imagination*, 123.

[45] Bauman, *Retrotopia*, 153.

[46] Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir," in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1998), 49.

CHAPTER THREE

[1] Here I use the word "cinema" the same way classical film theorists did, so the same can be said of television and other audiovisual forms. Although these various forms have increasingly converged, I limit my scope throughout the rest of this thesis to narrative cinema.

[2] André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What Is Cinema?*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 14.

[3] Bazin, "Ontology," 15.

[4] This is a sentiment shared in several other influential works, such as those by Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes. See, respectively, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977); and *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980).

[5] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Shocken Books, 1969).

[6] Katharina Niemeyer, "Introduction: Media and Nostalgia," in *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 4.

[7] Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 73.

[8] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

[9] Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Style in Retro America* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 35.

[10] Grainge, *Monochrome Memories*, 37, emphasis removed.

[11] In part to account for the described attempts to separate nostalgia modes from moods, Chapter Four also locates the roots of the aesthetics and narratives described in this chapter in the nostalgic longing of Hollywood *qua* industry.

[12] Michael D. Dwyer, *Back to the Fifties: Nostalgia, Hollywood Film, and Popular Music of the Seventies and Eighties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4.

[13] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (New York: Verso Books, 2009).

[14] Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 3, emphasis added.

[15] Dwyer, *Back to the Fifties*, 4.

[16] Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

[17] Christine Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia: Populuxe Props and Technicolor Aesthetics in Contemporary American Film* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 25-26.

[18] Dwyer, *Back to the Fifties*, 14.

[19] My discussion throughout this section is influenced by the analyses of Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*; Dwyer, *Back to the Fifties*; and Marc Le Sueur, "Theory Number Five: Anatomy of Nostalgia Films: Heritage and Methods," *Journal of Popular Film* 6, no. 2 (1977): https://doi.org/10.1080/00472719.1977.10661834.

[20] Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, 96.

[21] Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, 60.

[22] Le Sueur, "Theory Number Five," 192.

[23] Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 83.

[24] Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, 96.

[25] Le Sueur, "Theory Number Five," 193-194.

[26] Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 184.

[27] Grainge, *Monochrome Memories*, 137.

[28] Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, 140.

[29] Lev Manovich, "The Paradoxes of Digital Photography," in *Photography After Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age*, ed. Hubertus von Amelunxen, Stefan Iglhaut, Florian Rötzer (Dresden: GB Arts, 1996), 58. See also Dominik Schrey, "Analogue Nostalgia and the Aesthetics of Digital Remediation," in *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); and Jason Sperb, *Flickers of Film: Nostalgia in the Time of Digital Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016).

[30] Dwyer, *Back to the Fifties*, 78.

[31] Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, 76.

[32] Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 10-11.

[33] Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, 74.

[34] Dan Golding, *Star Wars After Lucas: A Critical Guide to the Future of the Galaxy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 69-83.

[35] Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 107-108.

[36] Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley, "Retrotyping and the Marketing of Nostalgia," in *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future*, ed. Katharina Niemeyer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 88.

[37] Pickering and Keightley, "Retrotyping."

[38] Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 18-24.

[39] Cook, *Screening the Past*, 3.

[40] Nancy Martha West, *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 11.

[41] Niemeyer, "Media and Nostalgia," 10.

[42] Worldwide, it temporarily became the highest grossing movie of all time until a Chinese rerelease of *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009) in early 2021. These rankings do not account for inflation.

[43] Quoted in Kim Morgan, "Tarantino On Hollywood," *New Beverly Cinema*, September 10, 2019, https://thenewbev.com/blog/2019/09/tarantino-on-hollywood/.

[44] Indeed, the film received the Academy Award for Best Production Design.

[45] Le Sueur, "Theory Number Five," 193.

[46] An extensive user-compiled list of *OUTH*'s film and television references and homages can be found at https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7131622/movieconnections/?tab=mc&ref_=tt_trv_cnn.

[47] Between the near-constant pop soundtrack and the amount of screen time dedicated to cruising the streets of LA, the film finds a fitting antecedent in Jameson's inaugural nostalgia film, *American Graffiti*.

[48] Image via Once Upon a Time in Hollywood (@OnceInHollywood), "Because you love movies. Experience Quentin Tarantino's #OnceUponATimeInHollywood – nominated for 10

#Oscars including Best Picture – the way it was meant to be," Tweet, January 30, 2020, https://twitter.com/OnceInHollywood/status/1222950979785482240. A full-page version also appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*.

[49] Morgan, "Tarantino On Hollywood."

[50] Quentin Tarantino, interview with Chris Hewitt, *The Empire Film Podcast*, podcast audio, August 22, 2019, https://www.empireonline.com/movies/news/empire-podcast-once-upon-time-hollywood-spoiler-special-quentin-tarantino/.

[51] Ibid.

[52] I am indebted to Travis Woods, "Still Here: A Journey Through the Funky Fanfare of *Once Upon a Time… in Hollywood*," *Bright Wall/Dark Room* no. 79 (2019): https://www.brightwalldarkroom.com/2020/02/03/once-upon-a-time-in-hollywood-2019/ for this observation.

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[55] Tarantino, interview with Chris Hewitt.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Dwyer, *Back to the Fifties*, 10.

[58] Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, *The Mnemonic Imagination: Remembering as Creative Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 168.

[59] To some extent, Thanos's "I am inevitable line" is an apt expression of the inevitability of historical discontinuity.

[60] David Pierson, "AMC's *Mad Men* and the Politics of Nostalgia," in *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future*, ed. Katharina Niemeyer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 149.

[61] Following the limited series' conclusion, a fourth *Captain America* film was also announced, with showrunner Malcolm Spellman as co-writer. It will presumably also feature Sam Wilson's Captain America.

CHAPTER FOUR

[1] André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, *The End of Cinema?: A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age*, trans. Timothy Barnard (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 2-3, emphasis removed.

[2] Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko, "Introduction: The New Contours of the Industry," in *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, ed. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 4-5.

[3] Joe Flint and Shalini Ramachandran, "Netflix: The Monster That's Eating Hollywood," *Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/netflix-the-monster-thats-eating-hollywood-1490370059.

[4] Robert Sklar, *Move-Made America: A Social History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975), 285.

[5] See "Annual Average U.S. Ticket Price," National Association of Theatre Owners, accessed May 30, 2021, https://www.natoonline.org/data/ticket-price/.

[6] See "Annual U.S./Canada Admissions," National Association of Theatre Owners, accessed May 30, 2021, https://www.natoonline.org/data/admissions/. These numbers do not account for simultaneous increases in population, meaning that attendance as a proportion of overall population has fallen to an even greater degree.

[7] Figure via "Domestic Movie Theatrical Market Summary 1995 to 2021," The Numbers, accessed June 2, 2021, https://www.the-numbers.com/market/. The recent plummet is due to the COVID-19 pandemic; the extent to which attendance will bounce back is yet to be seen.

[8] Gaudreault and Marion, *The End of Cinema?*; and Richard Grusin and Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece, eds., *Ends of Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

[9] Ben Fritz, *The Big Picture: The Fight for the Future of Movies* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 239. See also McDonald and Wasko, "Introduction," 5.

[10] Lucas Hildebrand, "The Art of Distribution: Video on Demand," *Film Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 27, https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2010.64.2.24.

[11] Ethan Smith, "Netflix Separates DVD and Streaming Services," *Wall Street Journal*, September 19, 2011, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424053111904106704576579903892361530.

[12] With the shuttering of theatrical distribution during the COVID-19 pandemic, SVOD streaming subscriptions rose more than 50% in 2020 from 2019. Lillian Rizzo and Drew FitzGerald, "Forget the Streaming Wars—Pandemic-Stricken 2020 Lifted Netflix and Others," *Wall Street Journal*, December 30, 2020, https://www.wsj.com/articles/forget-the-streaming-warspandemic-stricken-2020-lifted-netflix-and-others-11609338780.

[13] Compared to the $9.16 2019 average for a single movie ticket, at the time of writing Netflix's lowest plan costs $8.99/month, Disney+'s $7.99/month, Apple TV+'s $4.99/month, Amazon Prime Video's $8.99/month, Hulu's $5.99/month, and HBO Max's $14.99/month.

[14] Fritz, *The Big Picture*, 128.

[15] Fritz, *The Big Picture*, 129.

[16] Though, interestingly, platforms like Disney+, Hulu, and HBO Max have more recently continued the week-to-week release model, in part because it grants their shows longer shelf lives compared to the brief bursts of virality of many Netflix series.

[17] Neil Archer, *Twenty-First Century Hollywood: Rebooting the System* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 13-14.

[18] Fritz, *The Big Picture*, 23.

[19] Fritz, *The Big Picture*, 245.

[20] Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 285.

[21] Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley, "The Modalities of Nostalgia," *Current Sociology* 54, no. 6 (November 2006): 925, https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392106068458; and Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), XIV.

[22] Kyle Buchanan, "How Will the Movies (As We Know Them) Survive the Next 10 Years," *New York Times*, June 20, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/20/movies/movie-industry-future.html.

[23] Fritz, *Big Picture*, 23.

[24] By my tally, among the 50 highest grossing films at the domestic box office each year there were two nostalgia films in 2010, four in 2011, one in 2012, four in 2013, three in 2014, six in 2015, seven in 2016 and 2017, eight in 2018, and 11 in 2019. This is only accounting for the most obvious historical, backstage, and franchise nostalgia films—the box office also demonstrates an increased saturation of other sequels, remakes, reboots, and adaptations and a reduction in wholly original films as the decade progresses.

[25] Daniel Herbert, *Film Remakes and Franchises* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 86.

[26] Molly Fischer, "The Great Awokening: What Happens to Culture in an Era of Identity Politics?," *The Cut*, January 10, 2018, https://www.thecut.com/2018/01/pop-cultures-great-awokening.html.

[27] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1995).

[28] Golding, *Star Wars After Lucas*, 91.

[29] Brandon Griggs, "Once Again, #OscarsSoWhite," *CNN*, January 14, 2016, https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/14/entertainment/oscars-so-white-protest-nominations-feat; and Cara Buckley, "Oscars 2016: It's a Nearly All-White Nominees' List—Again," *The New York Times*, January 14, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/14/movies/oscars-the-revenant.html.

[30] Nadia Khomami, "#MeToo: How a Hashtag Became a Rallying Cry Against Sexual Harassment," *The Guardian*, October 20, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/20/women-worldwide-use-hashtag-metoo-against-sexual-harassment.

[31] César Alberto Albarrán-Torres and Dan Golding, "*Creed:* Legacy Franchising, Race and Masculinity in Contemporary Boxing Films," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 33, no. 3 (2019): 317, https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2019.1567684.

[32] I owe this turn of phrase to Dan Bashara.

[33] Josh Spiegel, "Nostalgia is the Most Powerful Force in American Culture Right Now. No One Can Sell You More of it than Disney," *Washington Post*, November 13, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/11/13/nostalgia-is-most-powerful-force-american-culture-right-now-no-one-can-sell-you-more-it-than-disney/.

[34] Fritz, *The Big Picture*, 144.

[35] Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 121.

[36] I am not counting Disneynature and Disney India releases as they are, respectively, neither narrative cinema nor U.S. productions. In any case, the number of productions of both has declined over the course of the decade.

[37] Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 61.

[38] Herbert, *Film Remakes and Franchises*.

[39] Additional Black cast members highlighted in later trailers for the film include Alfre Woodard, John Kani, Florence Kasumba, and Eric André.

CHAPTER FIVE

[1] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (New York: Verso Books, 2009), 8.

[2] John Seabrook, "Why Is the Force Still With Us?," *New Yorker*, December 30, 1997, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1997/01/06/why-is-the-force-still-with-us.

[3] Quoted in Phil Szostak, *The Art of Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (New York: Abrams, 2017), 23.

[4] Douglas Kellner, "Toward a Critical Media/Cultural Studies," in *Media/Cultural Studies: Critical Approaches*, ed. Rhonda Hammer and Douglas Kellner (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

[5] Daniel Herbert, *Film Remakes and Franchises* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 13. The very first line spoken in the film—"This will begin to make things right"—makes this goal very clear to the viewer.

[6] Rick Carter, foreword to *The Art of Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, by Phil Szostak (New York: Abrams, 2015), 12.

[7] For more extensive examinations of the use of nostalgia in *The Force Awakens*'s marketing, see Dan Golding, "It Calls to You: Selling *Star Wars* in 2015," chap. 2 in *Star Wars After Lucas: A Critical Guide to the Future of the Galaxy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019); and Dan Hassler-Forest, "Selling *The Force Awakens*: Fan Labor and Brand Management," in *Disney's Star Wars: Forces of Production, Promotion, and Reception*, ed. William Proctor and Richard McCulloch (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019).

[8] Golding, *Star Wars After Lucas*, 50.

[9] Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, *The Mnemonic Imagination: Remembering as Creative Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 132.

[10] Carter, foreword to *The Art of Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, 12; and Graeme McMillan, "J.J. Abrams Responds to 'Rip-Off' Criticism About 'Star Wars: The Force Awakens,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 8, 2016, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/jj-abrams-responds-rip-criticism-853352.

[11] At one point in the film's development, Abrams had the idea to make the opening few shots of the film nearly identical to those of Lucas's *Star Wars*. As concept artist Doug Chiang recalls, "Part of J.J.'s whole riff on this is that he wanted the opening of Episode VII to be very familiar—familiar to the point where it actually mimics the beginning of Episode IV. The setup is that they were parallel, but then you would quickly realize that these are new ships and new villains." Quoted in Phil Szostak, *The Art of Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (New York: Abrams, 2015), 50.

[12] Despite the Falcon's return being heavily promoted in *The Force Awakens*'s marketing material, the affective momentum of this particular moment was enough to make the audience of the opening night screening I attended erupt in audible cheers and applause.

[13] Golding, *Star Wars After Lucas*, 104-107.

[14] Carter, foreword to *The Art of Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, 11.

[15] In another similar moment, Rey settles into the pilot seat of the Millennium Falcon and shares a knowing glance with Chewbacca, both recognizing the narrative handoff that has just occurred following Han's death.

[16] Golding, *Star Wars After Lucas*, 121.

[17] Jonathan Gray, "'Always Two There Are': Repetition, Originality, and *The Force Awakens*," in *Disney's Star Wars: Forces of Production, Promotion, and Reception*, ed. William Proctor and Richard McCulloch (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 158.

[18] Gray, "'Always Two There Are,'" 153. For a good overview of these critiques, see 153-154.

[19] Szostak, *The Art of Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, 76, 91.

[20] Szostak, *The Art of Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, 143, 199.

[21] Rebecca Keegan, "Rian Johnson on His Boldest *Star Wars* Move: Starting *The Last Jedi* with a Joke," *Vanity Fair*, December 16, 2017, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/12/star-wars-last-jedi-rian-johnson-interview.

[22] Rian Johnson, foreword to *The Art of Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, by Phil Szostak (New York: Abrams, 2017), 11.

[23] We might recall Lucas's oft-mocked remark from a behind-the-scenes feature for *The Phantom Menace*: "It's like poetry—it rhymes."

[24] Johnson has avoided commenting directly on the matter but has admitted that he was "gender conscious" while making the film, as quoted in Anne Thompson, "'The Last Jedi' Director Rian Johnson Interview: How He Made a Great Movie By Taking Huge Risks," *IndieWire*, December 22, 2017, https://www.indiewire.com/2017/12/star-wars-the-last-jedi-rian-johnson-1201909461/.

[25] For a more detailed discussion of Johnson's stylistic innovations, see Golding, *Star Wars After Lucas*, 201-202.

[26] Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 21.

[27] Quoted in Szostak, *The Art of Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, 15.

[28] This is a markedly different outlook than Kylo's earlier worship of Vader in *The Force Awakens*. We can attribute it to the deeply conflicted and unstable nature of the character. In *The Last Jedi*, Kylo's change in attitude seems to be predicated on Snoke's recognition that Kylo is vulnerable and hides behind a Vader-esque mask in hope that it will provide a cohesive vision of himself that he is otherwise lacking. After this exposure, Kylo seems to switch to the opposite position—he destroys his mask and tries to cut himself off from all markers of his past.

[29] Rian Johnson, interview with Chris Hewitt, *The Empire Film Podcast*, podcast audio, January 15, 2018, https://www.empireonline.com/movies/news/star-wars-last-jedi-empire-podcast-spoiler-special-rian-johnson.

[30] Quoted in Szostak, *The Art of Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, 69.

[31] Quoted in Phil Szostak, *The Art of Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (New York: Abrams, 2019), 33.

[32] Quoted in Szostak, *The Art of Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, 76-77.

[33] Julia Alexander, "Star Wars: The Last Jedi Is Being Review-Bombed on Rotten Tomatoes," *Polygon*, December 21, 2017, https://www.polygon.com/2017/12/18/16792184/star-wars-the-last-jedi-rotten-tomatoes-review-bomb.

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[35] Dom Nero, "*Star Wars* Fans Fundamentally Misunderstand *Star Wars*," *Esquire*, June 7, 2018, https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a21205523/star-wars-kelly-marie-tran-harassment-controversy/. See also Brandon Katz, "Racism, Misogyny & Death Threats: How Star Wars Fans Turned to the Dark Side," *Observer*, May 16, 2018, https://observer.com/2018/05/star-wars-fandom-toxic-disney-lucasfilm/.

[36] See Michelle Kent, "Rey, Mary Sue, and Phasma Too: Feminism and Fan Responses to *The Force Awakens* Merchandise," in *Disney's Star Wars: Forces of Production, Promotion, and*

Reception, ed. William Proctor and Richard McCulloch (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019).

[37] William Procter, "A New Hate?: The War for Disney's *Star Wars*," in *Disney's Star Wars: Forces of Production, Promotion, and Reception*, ed. William Proctor and Richard McCulloch (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019).

[38] Morten Bay, "Weaponizing the Haters: *The Last Jedi* and the Strategic Politicization of Pop Culture Through Social Media Manipulation," *First Monday* 23, no. 11 (2018): https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v23i11.9388.

[39] Derek Connolly and Colin Trevorrow, "Star Wars: Episode IX" (unpublished screenplay, December 16, 2016), PDF file, 92.

[40] Connolly and Trevorrow, "Episode IX," 93.

[41] Connolly and Trevorrow, "Episode IX," 39.

[42] Connolly and Trevorrow, "Episode IX," 113.

[43] Connolly and Trevorrow, "Episode IX," 29.

[44] Connolly and Trevorrow, "Episode IX," 113.

[45] Connolly and Trevorrow, "Episode IX," 122.

[46] Borys Kit, "'Star Wars: Episode IX' Gets a New Writer," *Hollywood Reporter*, August 1, 2017, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/star-wars-episode-ix-gets-a-new-writer-1026003/. Available accounts suggest that Trevorrow left the project because Lucasfilm president Kathleen Kennedy was unhappy with the multiple drafts being submitted, meaning the screenplay was being constantly tweaked.

[47] Szostak, *The Art of Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, 60.

[48] Szostak, *The Art of Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, 201.

[49] Thompson, "Rian Johnson Interview."

[50] Quoted in Szostak, *The Art of Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, 201.

[51] Quoted in Szostak, *The Art of Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, 34. Indeed, Leia is a key supporting character in the *Duel of the Fates* screenplay dated 11 days before Fisher's death.

[52] Quoted in Szostak, *The Art of Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, 133.

[53] Szostak, *The Art of Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, 15.

[54] Quoted in Szostak, *The Art of Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, 36.

[55] *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, "Guest Host Josh Gad Interviews Daisy Ridley," YouTube video, 6:29, September 9, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ELygTJL8Xg&ab_channel=JimmyKimmelLiveJimmyKimmelLive.

[56] During press for *The Force Awakens*, Isaac noted that he was "playing romance." After *The Rise of Skywalker*, the actor expressed disappointment that the characters were not taken in this direction and noted that he had pushed for it behind-the-scenes. See, respectively, *The Ellen Show*, "The Cast of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* Is Here!," YouTube video, 3:17, December 17, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuAwgmz7jTc; and BreAnna Bell, "Oscar Isaac Reflects on His 'Star Wars' Experience and Chemistry With John Boyega," *Variety*, December 14, 2019, https://variety.com/video/oscar-isaac-star-wars-the-rise-of-skywalker-john-boyega/.

CHAPTER SIX

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[2] See Cindy Lamothe, "How to Cope When Everything Keeps Changing," *New York Times*, September 7, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/07/smarter-living/how-to-cope-when-everything-keeps-changing.html; and Christie Aschwanden, "Uncertainty Fuels Anxiety, Causing Your Mind to Conjure Up Scary Scenarios. The Pandemic Can Magnify the Angst," *Washington Post*, September 12, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/covid-anxiety-how-to-cope-uncertainty/2020/09/11/fae65832-d1b2-11ea-8d32-1ebf4e9d8e0d_story.html.

[3] Danielle Campoamor, "Why We Reach for Nostalgia in Times of Crisis," *New York Times*, July 28, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/28/smarter-living/coronavirus-nostalgia.html; and Leslie Jamison, "This Year Has Taught Me a Lot About Nostalgia," *New York Times*, March 11, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/11/opinion/covid-isolation-narrative.html.

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[5] Even with respect to the Black Lives Matter movement itself, nostalgia finds ways to interject. Debates over strategies of protest often invoked appeals to 1960s Civil Rights Movement activism, appeals that were frequently selective and short-sighted—protesting methods deemed aspirational today were widely criticized by America's white population at the time.

[6] Anthony Lane, "The Movies That Mattered in 2020," *New Yorker*, December 25, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/2020-in-review/the-movies-that-mattered-in-2020.

[7] Brooks Barnes and Nicole Sperling, "Universal's Theatrical Releases Will Quickly Be Available in Homes," *New York Times*, July 28, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/28/business/media/universal-amc-movies-at-home.html.

[8] Brooks Barnes and Nicole Sperling, "Warner Bros. Says All 2021 Films Will Be Streamed Right Away," *New York Times*, December 3, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/03/business/media/warner-brothers-movies-hbo-max.html.

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[10] Matt Donnelly and Rebecca Rubin, "Hollywood, Theater Owners Sound Off on Warner Bros.' Bold HBO Max Move: 'They're Playing with Fire,'" *Variety*, December 4, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/film/news/hbo-max-warner-bros-dune-matrix-4-theater-owners-1234846103/.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Adam B. Vary, "'Star Wars' and Marvel's Futures Now Flow Through Disney Plus," *Variety*, December 10, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/disney-plus-star-wars-marvel-pixar-series-1234850947/. See also Nicole Sperling, "Disney Reorganization Puts a Sharper Focus on Streaming," *New York Times*, October 12, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/12/business/media/disney-streaming-reorganization.html.

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https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/26/business/amazon-MGM.html. In a statement, Amazon
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