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Course: **DT597/3**

Module: **Design History**

Good History/Bad History: discuss the use of "nostalgia" in contemporary graphic design and/or film.

Nothing is original. Steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination. Devour old films, new films, music, books, paintings, photographs, poems, dreams, random conversations, architecture, bridges, street signs, trees, clouds, bodies of water, light and shadows. Select only things to steal from that speak directly to your soul. If you do this, your work (and theft) will be authentic. Authenticity is invaluable; originality is non-existent. And don't bother concealing your thievery - celebrate it if you feel like it. In any case, always remember what Jean-Luc Godard said: "It's not where you take things from - it's where you take them to[1]. Jim Jarmusuch

If current levels of U.S. retro consumption are allowed to continue unchecked, we may run entirely out of past as soon as 2005. U.S. Retro Secretary, as reported in *The Onion*, 1997[2]

Mining history for inspiration and information has been a characteristic of postmodernism since its inception. This essay will examine Frederic Jameson's view that postmodern culture has lost its capacity for invention and that all that is left is to rehash old styles as pastiche. Jameson cites the nostalgia film as a symptom of postmodernism's inability to represent its own present and a symptom of its own cultural amnesia. Nostalgia films are generally understood to be commercial films that recreate the look and feel of films from the past. They tend to stereotype the aesthetic representations of the past, creating the look of a generation—'the fifties', for instance—while retaining only the surface effect of that historical period. This essay takes the view that Jameson's critique is reductive and that even if trawling through history for inspiration popular culture still has the power to offer its own critique. Drawing on the work of Linda Hutcheon the paper will show that films and design which examines the past in an inventive and imaginative way films reflect a desire in postmodernism to understand history. To Tibor Kallman the mortal sin in historicism is de-contextualisation and looking at the movie *Forrest Gump* the paper will explore the effects that de-contextualisation can have. Vera Dika, Paul Grainge and Christine have written extensively about nostalgia and retro in movies and design and the paper aims to show that nostalgic representation can still have critical potential in both film and design.

Jameson identifies pastiche as one of the most significant features of postmodernism, he is very careful to draw a distinction between pastiche and parody. While pastiche and parody

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[1] Jim Jarmusch, "Jim Jarmusch's Golden Rules" in *Movie Maker The Art And Business of Making Movies*,22/1/2004 accessed online at http://www.moviemaker.com/directing/article/jim_jarmusch_2972 accessed on 3/1/2013
[2] [2] Paul Grainge, "Nostalgia and Style in Retro America: Moods, Modes, and Media Recycling", in *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures*, Vol 23 Issue 1, March 2004, 27

both involve the imitation or mimicry of other styles, parody according to Jameson seizes on their idiosyncrasies and uniqueness to produce an imitation which mocks the original. Good parody has to have a secret sympathy for the original, even while mocking the stylistic mannerisms or excesses of the original. Thus there must be some kind of a linguistic norm against which the original can be mocked. However in the world of postmodernism with all its fragmentation Jameson sees no linguistic norm against which to cast ridicule on the original. This is where parody has become impossible and pastiche begins. Pastiche is the imitation of a style, but without parody's other motives, it is blank parody.[3] Modernism is associated with individualism and the idea of an author with an individual style. However in the era of postmodernism, of corporate capitalism, of bureaucracy in business and state, Jameson argues that kind of individualism and personal identity no longer exists. There is also a sense according to Jameson that all the new styles and words have already been invented, that the most unique combinations have already been thought of. "Hence, once again, pastiche: in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum[...] the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past."[4]

According to Jameson this pastiche is exemplified in films of the "nostalgia film" genre which merely consists of films about the past and about specific generational movements of the past. He cites *American Graffiti* as one of the inaugural films of this movement, and he also includes *Chinatown*, *The Conformist*. Also included in his list *as Star Wars* which he considers a pastiche of *Buck Rogers* type TV serials which were so popular in the 30s-50s. According to Jameson *Star Wars* reinvents the cliff-hanger style which children and adolescents can experience the adventure as a simple adventure story, and it satisfies a deeper nostalgic desire among the adult public to return to that older period and experience its aesthetic artefacts again. This is a metonymic nostalgic film in that it doesn't place the movie in the '30s or '40s but rather conveys the period through its own characteristic adventure stories. Jameson uses the movie *Body Heat* as an example of such a nostalgia film. *Body Heat* is a kind of a remake of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and *Double Indemnity*. Although *Body Heat* is situated in a contemporary setting, in a village in

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[3] Frederic Jameson, Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (London: Verso 1991), 113-114.
[4] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 115.

Florida, it is made in the classic film noir style. Its credits are scripted in '30s Art Deco style, the hero William Hurt is a kind of a Clark Gable style hero, being set in a small town in Florida allows the film to do without the references and signals associated with the contemporary world(high rises etc.). Thus although it is a film set in the 1980's all contemporary references are blurred and it can be received as a movie set in some nostalgic past, Jameson sees this invasion of the style of nostalgia films in contemporary films in contemporary settings as being a symptom of the postmodern world not being capable of representation of its own current experience. The use of pastiche has a big impact on postmodern society's perception of history, and has become so insistent in popular culture that it signals an inability to locate our own time in history. Jameson also notes a sense of surface and a loss of meaning in postmodern culture. He describes this as "schizophrenia", a quality that makes the signifiers of cultural products (the surface of the image, the sounds in music, or the words in literature) dense, so that all that can be understood is surface and the full meaning is unable to be conveyed.[5] This temporal and linguistic density erects a kind of a barrier blocking reference to real things in the world and to history,[6] resulting in a kind of cultural amnesia. In Jameson's view of postmodern culture historicity has been replaced by this new aesthetic nostalgia mode, where the past is realised through stylistic connotations and consumed as pastiche. The historical past is replaced by fashionable and glossy pastness where representations of the past are replaced by our cultural stereotypes of that past.[7] To him it is an indictment of the consumer capitalist society as a society that is incapable of dealing with time and history.[8]

Tibor Kallman argues against what he calls "jive modernism" in design where designers use the style of modernism, which basically extracts a modern design from its context. It substitutes historical references and outright copying for original ideas, and invokes modernism as nostalgia, creating images whose familiarity is comforting, safe and reassuring the opposite of what modernism is all about. It thrives on our collective memories of the past. Echoing Jameson Kallman's view is that bad historicism reduces history to style. He is not against re-using old ideas, but argues that they should be

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[5] Ibid 118-113
[6] Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.
[7] Grainge, *Nostalgia and Style*, 28
[8] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 116-117

reinterpreted, there is nothing wrong with historical references but they should be starting points for new ideas. Good design should be about re-contextualisation and not de-contextualisation. He argues for a good history that presents ideas in a context and a way that teaches more than how things once looked and that acts as a catalyst for new ideas.[9] The dangers of de-contextualization are shown in Christine Spengler's analysis of some scenes in *Forrest Gump*. *Forest Gump* uses a strategy of aural montage where Vietnam combat scenes are accompanied by a sampling of Aretha Franklin's '*Respect*', Bob Dylan's '*Rainy Day Woman*', Jimmy Hendrix's '*All Along the Watchtower*', the Doors' '*Soul Kitchen*', Jefferson Airplane's '*Volunteers*', Credence Clearwater Revival's '*Fortunate Son*' and Buffalo Springfield's *'For What it's Worth'*. Most of these songs are explicitly anti-war and reflect the counterculture influences of the late 1960s and early 1970s. However *Forrest Gump* selects lyrics that, out of context, obscure the political message of the song. Hearing only the first few lines of 'Fortunate Son' while a scene of platoon camaraderie occupy the screen suggests the music reflects rather than criticise the events represented. Given the film's practice of evoking nostalgia for mainstream America while deriding the aims and actions of the counterculture and, given the practise of sampling from a variety of songs, the Vietnam sequence anaesthetizes an appalling episode in American history.[10]

Jameson's view of postmodernism has many critics including Linda Hutcheon who argues that postmodernism still has the capacity for parody and that this parody is 'a value-problematising, de-naturalising form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, politics) of representation.' She argues that films that use parody do not constitute that contemporary society inhabits a 'perpetual present', as Jameson suggests, but instead reflect an obsession with history and a desire to find a way to know the past. While Hutcheon attempts to save parody from Jameson's dismissal of it as nostalgic escapism, she does equate pastiche with nostalgia and labels both pastiche and nostalgia as being impotent in the pursuit of understanding history and our relation to it. While to Hutcheon

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[9] Tibor Kalman, J. Abbott Miller and Karrie Jacobs, "Good History/Bad History", in *Looking Closer 4: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*,Ed Michael Bierut, William Drenttel, and Stephen Heller (New York: Allworth Press, 2002), 25-31.

[10] Christine Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia: Populuxe Props and Technicolor Aesthetics in Contemporary American Film* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 77

parody has a capacity to interrogate our relationship to history, pastiche is little more than an allusion to the past. To both Hutcheon and Jameson nostalgia has no critical potential.[11]

Paul Grainge and Vera Dika explore the critical potential for nostalgic representation. Grainge rejects Jameson's critique that 'amnesia and historicist crisis' necessarily follow the creation of visual pastness. He criticizes Jameson's reductive view on postmodernism for failing to recognize the agency of the audience by reducing them to an unthinking collectivity that passively absorbs the meanings communicated to them via the media, thus denying them a role in meaning-making processes. Grainge critiques Jameson's assumption that postmodern articulations of nostalgia are inherently connected to the so-called crisis of historicity. He goes on to claim that meaningful historical narratives can continue to be produced 'through the recycling and/or hybridisation of past styles.'[12]

Christine Spengler echoes both Grainge and Vera Dika in suggesting that nostalgia films teach us how we consume or use the past for the sake of the present. Using analysis of four films *Sin City, Far From Heaven, The Aviator*, and *The Good German* as examples of how nostalgic films can offer potent critiques of both history and the present. She poses a compelling argument that nostalgia has shifted from being a tool employed in the services of conservative ideology to a tool used in the service of critiques of reactionary politics. She holds that these films reflect a continuing fascination with history, a fascination that that extends beyond the facts, events and people that have been documented to shape the past. The films through their own representational and visual techniques give access to histories usually denigrated and marginalised by the past. *The Good German* is set during the American occupation of post-war Berlin, and was released during the American occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. Being set in the nostalgic past, and the use of allegory provides "a cloak of visual pastness and visual spectacle under which the film plays out it's indictments of corruption and hypocrisy."[13] Providing insight into how periods and cultures imagine themselves, and the myths they construct for themselves, she argues that far from being

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[11] Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*,77
[12] Grainge, *Nostalgia and Style,* 28
[13] Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*,172

depthless (as Jameson espouses) films such as these can offer the potential to critically engage with the past, and thus explore the limits of our "present historical consciousness."[14]

Taking up Jameson's challenge to find a way for postmodernism to resist the logic of consumer capital Vera Dika argues that the postmodern use of nostalgia can also serve a critical function. Using Barthes's idea of unmasking myths and creating fissures in the representation of meaning in images Dika considers the anti-smoking campaign presented by the California Department of Health Services in 1996(Figure 1).The image in this ad depicts two cowboys on horseback set against a sunset and riding towards the camera. Along with this initial reading, the surface of the image is strongly coded to recall the visual surface of the traditional Marlboro cigarette advertisement. The costumes and location of the original ad are reproduced and the image was presented as a billboard display. The resulting image refers to a series of highly identifiable images (including the Western genre). The meaning in this image is created by the opposition of the image to its accompanying written text, and by the cultural memory of the Marlboro ad itself. The expected written text "Marlboro" no longer accompanies the image and the original signification that connotes a mythic American self, along with the importance of a pack of cigarettes, is juxtaposed against a new narrative that reads "I miss my lung, Bob." This montage has ruptured an established coded system, critically opposing past and present, image and narrative through a shifting double exposure between copy and the new context.[15] This is a good example of what Steven Heller calls appropriate historical use involving the application of new ideas rather than recycling of hackneyed techniques.[16]

As Rick Poyner said Jameson's distinction between parody and pastiche hovers over any attempts to examine the ways in which postmodern graphic design has made use of the histories of design and art.[17] The same can be said about modern film which constantly returns to the past for inspiration. Remakes, sequels, and genre films are often a sure-fire way to commercial success. When done in a way which is simply copying or recreating the original this drains the meaning out of the original, resulting in pastiche and nostalgia. There

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[14] Sprengler, 172-173

[15] Dika, *Recycled Culture*, 12-14

[16] Steven Heller, "The Time Machine" in *Looking Closer, Critical Writings on Graphic Design, Volume 1*, ed. Michael Bierut …[et al.] (New York: Allworth Press, 1994), 133.

[17] Rick Poynor, *No more rules: graphic design and postmodernism*(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 70

are, however many ways to revisit the past both in film and design that can offer a critical function and help us to re-examine our perceptions and myths about the past and about thus gain more insight and understanding of the present. It is not as bleak as Jameson's reductive and generalised view of postmodern and contemporary culture would hold.

Fig. 1 "I miss my lung, Bob", *California Department of Health Services anti-smoking ad*, 1996, accessed online at http://www.ads-ngo.com/2011/05/28/marlboro-parody accessed on 3/1/2013

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