

Presentation

According to the Guardian on Saturday, the Christmas number one for 2020 was 'Last Christmas' by Wham as recorded in 1984. It seems that there is an endless appetite for 1980s nostalgia, or rather nostalgia for 1980s pop culture.

Within science fiction we see this expressed in the success of Netflix' 'Stranger Things' and in science fiction film, the popularity over the last decade of new films with 1980s roots, whether prequels, sequels, remakes or reboots. The most recent of these, being 'Wonder Woman 1984' - a film as outstanding for the complete arbitrariness of that date as it is for the shamelessness with which its title parades it's nostalgic wares.

The film 'Ready Player One' differs somewhat from these examples in that it is neither a sequel nor a prequel, neither a remake nor a reboot - but an original film or rather a film based on an original book - and it is one for which 1980s nostalgia defines both the plot and the attraction for audiences - nostalgia here being both affect and theme.

Ready Player One is based on the 2011 book of the same name by Ernest Cline, who also co-wrote the script with Zak Penn.; and directed by Steven Spielberg: The film is set in - a dystopian future when, we are told, everyone has given up on trying to solve problems and now just tries to outlive them. Our hero, Wade Watts, lives in the stacks [- massive, vertically extended trailer park, where people spend most of their time in a virtual world called the OASIS - created and owned by a giant tech company Gregarious Games. James Halliday, The multi-millionaire games designer who owns Gregarious Games, dies - leaving the whole of his fortune and control of the company to whoever can find an Easter-egg he has hidden in the OASIS. Success in the lengthy and convoluted quest depends on knowledge of 1980s pop culture - Halliday's personal obsession. Aspiring egg-hunters - or 'Gunters - must study Halliday's life and likes forensically for clues to the riddles that move the 'game' forward. To help them Halliday has made available a journal (in the book, an almanac; in the film a virtual museum) for them to study. Meanwhile rival tech giant IOI - makers of the hardware through which the OASIS is accessed - are determined to take over the OASIS, charging for access, filling the space with advertising etc. IOI's CEO Nolan Sorrento, is a soulless corporate suit whose ruthless business practices include 'loyalty centres where the company's debtors are locked up and used as indentured labour while they work off their debt. And he is not above ordering the assassination of individuals who get in his way. Almost heinous of all: he does not appreciate 1980s pop culture - but has to employ a team of super-geeks alongside his army of 'sixers' - so called for the numbers on their uniforms, who operate in the virtual world of the OASIS - where they also hunt for the egg. The Gunters quest, is thus elevated from a mere search for personal enrichment to a campaign to save the virtual world from an evil superpower.

The action takes place partly in the virtual world of the OASIS, where the search is led by Parzival, Wade's better looking avatar, Artemis, his love interest and Aech his best friend - and partly in the real world where the real life identities of Wade's friends are gradually revealed - with some surprises. The plot, the dialogue and above all the visual rendition of the OASIS are replete with 1980s pop culture references from Parzival's DeLorean (borrowed from back to the future) to the Mechagodzilla avatar adopted by Sorrento in the final battle, with endless visual, verbal and aural asides scattered along the way.

What is perhaps most interesting about this film is the way in which nostalgia as affect and nostalgia as theme are woven together - folded together if you like in a Deleuzian fashion - to engulf and engage the audience in a way typical of the Neo-baroque text as conceptualised by Angela Ndalians - a text that continually exceeds the boundaries of the frame engulfing its audience in a surprisingly complex web of nostalgia. Thus even in the context of the Hollywood high concept movie, nostalgia proves to be, – in the words of Katherine Niemeyer ‘a liminal, ambiguous phenomenon’.

On one level, *Ready Player One* is a classic example of Paul Grainge’s nostalgic mode — a creation driven by technology and marketing: - and putting one in mind of Mark Fisher’s quip that : ‘those who can’t remember the past are condemned to have it resold to them forever.’ But the nostalgic mood of loss and longing - is also to be found in various guises. In fact there are at least three different kinds of nostalgia thematically portrayed in this film – and echoed in its nostalgic affect.

Firstly there is Halliday’s own nostalgia for the pop culture that provided him with a refuge from his unhappy youth, and for his lost love – undeclared and unrequited. Halliday is a melancholic in the Freudian sense, unable to give up the lost object of desire, mourn and move on. His nostalgia is also narcissistic in the way described by Ryan Lizardi with his concept of the individualised ‘playlist past’. His extraordinary power as the creator of the OASIS and owner of Gregarious Games, enables him to impose his cultural playlist on the rest of humanity. The book hints at the dark side of this potentially abusive relationship – in the film, however, any such suggestion is brushed aside by Mark Rylance’s portrayal of a kindly, if somewhat distracted genius. Halliday’s diegetic nostalgia speaks directly to a mature audience – to those raised, like Ernest Cline, on 1980s pop culture – and indeed those of the generation who created it, like Spielberg – a director who has declared that he ‘lives in nostalgia’.

The second kind of nostalgia portrayed in the film is the Gunters’ emotional investment in a past they have never known. For them 1980s is a myth rather than a memory. Indeed we might call their experience ‘post-nostalgia’ after Hirsch’s concept of ‘post-memory. This second-order nostalgia, as Hutcheon says, no longer has to rely on individual memory or desire, thanks to technology but ‘can be fed forever by quick access to an infinitely recyclable past.’ (3) Of course the Gunters are more or less obliged to obsess over 1980s pop culture by the terms of Halliday’s will – but it is made clear that those worthy of the prize are genuine fans, revelling in their own knowledge as well as the artefacts themselves. In this they are closely aligned with the main target audience for the film – the 15 to 20-somethings for whom (as the plethora of web sites devoted to these things demonstrate) - a key pleasure on offer is pop culture bingo - the geeky pleasure in arcane and useless knowledge and in iconography associated with an bygone age.

This leads me to another level on which the film addresses the theme of, and exploits the affects of nostalgia: the OASIS itself. In coining the term ‘nostalgia’ Boyer described a frequently fatal form of homesickness - the difficulty for the physician being that a return home did not cure the patient. This was because the longing described by nostalgia was not in fact a longing for a place, but longing for an earlier time - and given that time, unlike space is unidirectional and irreversible, a cure was elusive. I would suggest that the OASIS in ‘Ready Player One’ represents the displacement of time in that sense, back onto place. The Gunters and indeed the rest of the population it seems, escape to the OASIS from their daily lives because it is a place of wish-fulfilment. And from what we see of it in the film - notwithstanding passing references to less wholesome pursuits - it is a childlike place, a place of simplicity - a place where monsters can be clearly identified and duly slain, a place where life is reduced to a quest in

which one *can* find lost object of desire, as well as reliably scoring points for one's successes, and being properly rewarded for one's valiant deeds. The longing satisfied by the OASIS is in that respect the longing for a half-remembered, half-mythical past. For the films' audience, the OASIS offers a souped-up sword and sandals style of adventure, in common with the space opera and superhero movies that have filled our cinema screens for the last two decades, with their quasi-mediaeval battles and their quasi-mediaeval values. It is, moreover a space where science fiction meets fantasy – a space ruled by Arthur C Clarke's third law where technology and magic are largely indistinguishable, and time itself is reversible. In short, it is a space that represents lost childhood.

Needless to say there is a dark side to this self-indulgence – whether Halliday's own, or that of his on-screen and off-screen disciples. This is to some degree explicitly acknowledged within the film, and to some degree haunts the text (as Fisher might have it) in the form of the elisions in the plot, the logic and the moral mapping of the film – in what Pierre Macherey would call the not-said.

I would like to briefly explore three key themes here: the imagined future, the price of escapism and the operations of capitalist realism. The contradictions here have, I would argue, the flavour – if not all the ingredients, of the tensions between Boym's reflexive and restorative nostalgias.

Critics from Jameson, to Berman to Fisher have been exercised about Science Fictions ability to imagine a future that actually makes sense in terms of the 'present' of its own creation. *Bladerunner 2049*, for example, for all its merits cannot help but commit to a vision of the future predicated on the perspective of 1982. I would argue that 'Ready Player One' – in its depiction of the 'Real world' of 2045 – does successfully imagine a future for which the early twenty-first century represents a viable 'past' - such that it might be said to successfully perform the historicizing role Jameson ascribes to the Science fiction genre.

The film envisages a dystopian future that has seen life as we know it fizzle out not with a bang but with a whimper, succumbing to an incremental burden of pressures and crises, rather than a single apocalyptic event (in the book these include pandemics and virulent flu strains – although the film favours more technologically themed disasters such as 'the band-width wars'). It is a future where people live in tiny boxes and spend all their time in a virtual, online alternative universe [imagine that] ; it is a world where the population's economic role is primarily as consumers rather than producers – and one dominated by large, predatory media companies.

Failure to imagine the future, moreover, is a shortcoming explicitly ascribed to the diegetic population: people have 'given up trying to solve problems and just try to outlive them....' – mainly by hiding away in the OASIS – where the clutter of de-contextualised 1980s iconography, alongside the population of gods and monsters, successfully distracts them from any attempt to fight for a better future in the real world – providing, if not bread, then an infinite supply of circuses, to keep them as effectively enslaved as the inhabitants of IOI's so called 'loyalty centres'.

On the other hand the visual and narrative force of the OASIS overpowers this vision, dominating the tone as well as the plot of the film in a way that supports Fisher and Jameson's pessimistic vision of a degraded culture, recycling the past as blank parody. The 'eighties' in this respect no more designates that actual decade than the 'fifties' represents a real period in time in Philip Dicks' *Time out of joint* 'as discussed by Jameson (back in the

real historical year of 1982.) It is a myth constructed largely of pop cultural references, themselves a kind of partial and unreliable self-portrait of that time. In fact in some respects 'Ready Player One' has taken this kind of 'post-nostalgia' to its logical conclusion: unlike *Stranger Things* or *Wonder Woman :1984* it does not even pretend to engage with the period itself, or to contextualise the cultural references plundered from the historical past. Instead it abstracts and condenses its references to present precisely the glossy sheen of 'pastness' that for Jameson is the opposite of historicity - taken to the extreme in the overwrought sensuality of the OASIS.

One of the most prominent clues Halliday plants in the quest for the Easter-egg is 'escape your past'. In the context of the diegesis, this oddly phrased exhortation seems addressed primarily at Halliday himself rather than the players. They are arguably trapped in Halliday's 'playlist past' by the terms of the quest, unable to escape until all the riddles are solved. On the other hand by foregrounding the concept of escape the film highlights the degree to which the players use the OASIS to escape their present – and indeed their future – in the real world. In the book, Halliday's partner, Ogden Morrow, leaves Gregarious Games because it has become 'a self-imposed prison for humanity....a pleasant place to hide from its problems while human civilization slowly collapses, primarily due to neglect'. The OASIS here is clearly implicated as a contributory cause of the real-life malaise - rather than simply a salve. In the film this suggestion is toned down into a scene within the museum in which Og tries to get Halliday to accept that the OASIS is no longer just a game, and that he now has responsibilities for the impact of his creation – in response to which Halliday, already a melancholy figure even at this early stage in his career, expresses his wish to go backwards – thus both encapsulating a key theme of the film and giving Parzival a critical clue to the quest.

The film nevertheless does make it clear that too much escapism is problematic – indeed Spielberg describes it as 'cautionary tale about leaving us the choice of where we want to exist. Do we want to exist in reality, or do we want to exist in an escapist universe?' , he says, Those themes were so profound for me.' . ' Meanwhile, in the film itself Halliday extolls the virtues of Reality, telling Wade (with a nod to Woody Allen) 'Reality is the only place you can get a decent meal....and, somewhat tautologically, that ' only reality is real'... and indeed the film does offer a ray of hope for the real world in the form of Artemis' rooftop dwelling friends, who call themselves 'the rebellion' and who's restorative credentials are demonstrated by growing vegetables in the midst of urban decay. Nevertheless, the entire impetus of the film is to revel – like the Gunters - in the more visually exciting, dynamically engaging world of the OASIS. One is reminded of Zizek's structure of disavowal whereby, so long as in our hearts we know it is wrong, we can give ourselves permission to participate in a politically and morally bankrupt system.

Which brings us to Mark Fisher's concept of Capitalist Realism and the aphorism ascribed to both Jameson and Franklin that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. I would suggest that it is most certainly easier for the makers of the film, its protagonists and arguably the audience it constructs to imagine the end of the world than a future without capitalism. As is so often the case in Hollywood movies, what we find in 'Ready Player One' is that evil, exploitative capitalism - as represented by Sorrento and the impersonally titled IOI – is contrasted with a benevolent alternative – as represented by Halliday and the friendly sounding Gregarious Games.

IOI's capture of what Sorrento refers to as 'the world's most important economic resource' would be disastrous because it would create a monopoly (no anti-trust laws appear to be in place in 2045) and because excessive monetisation through advertising would destroy the user

experience..... This can only be avoided if Wade and his friends can get financial control of the company instead. There are no other options.

In fact, given the desperate state of affairs in 2045 it is clear that capitalism has in fact failed as a viable system in the 'real' world – however it has simply migrated into the virtual – where everyone now, effectively, lives – their actions defined by and focused on the accumulation of virtual wealth and commodities. Indeed the OASIS can be seen as an allegory for Debord's society of the spectacle, where the drive to accumulate commodities has usurped the drive to survival, and where exchange value has replaced use value almost entirely. When someone is 'killed' in the OASIS they 'zero out' – meaning they lose all they have accumulated in terms of weapons, artifacts etc – and on screen we see them dissolve into a shower of coins.

Contradictory nature of the film's relationship with nostalgia and pop culture is illustrated by the substitution of 'The Shining' for 'Blade Runner' as the location of a key stage in the quest. On the one hand, the substitution supports a general sense of cultural references divorced from context or meaning – the two iconic 1980s films have an equivalent exchange value – even though the exchange in this case means abandoning the original clue, 'continue your quest by taking the test' (meaning Blade Runner's Voight-Kampff test) – and substituting the rather less resonant 'retrace your steps; escape your past'. This does not really have a great deal to do with The Shining – which proves to be red herring within the plot. On the other hand The Shining is the ultimate hauntological text with a great deal to say about the perils of interleaved timelines - but this aspect of the reference is not developed. - Instead it becomes one of the many references which seem, in neo-baroque fashion, to exceed the bounds of the text, hinting at possible interpretations beyond – yet at the same time shrinking from exposing the disturbing under-belly of the film itself. In this case we move swiftly into comedy-horror zombie routine that once again floats free of context.

In much the same way, the inter-relation of past, present and future, of signifier and signified, of reality and fantasy - and the spectres of the unsaid that haunt the film – all slip from the grasp, offering only oxymoron and contradiction to define the structures of nostalgia in and around Ready Player One