Pleasures of Nostalgia, Problems of Authenticity: 1970s America in Crowe's *Almost Famous*, Linklater's *Dazed and Confused*, and Scorsese's *The Last Waltz*

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Introduction

By looking comparatively at the nostalgic elements of three American 1970s-based films, we can better understand the period's history, both imagined and re-imagined. The three films each variously promote a nostalgic interpretation of their events which disturb their would-be authenticity, in the process distorting their own value as insights on the period. Two of the films, Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* and Cameron Crowe's *Almost Famous*, are fictionalized memoirs of their authors' 70s youths, while the third, Martin Scorsese's *The Last Waltz* , is a documentary film of a concert produced in that decade. All three films aim to make the audience feel sentimental, in particular about its youth. In delivering pleasant nostalgia, these films complicate (sometimes knowingly, sometimes not) the audience's understanding of "real history." These works at times present the past in ways that neatly match our expected cultural stereotypes of the past, reminding us of Jameson's critique that nostalgia films cause an estrangement from history. Indeed, cinema's mediation of the past raises issues of provenance, authority, and authenticity, which, in its "pastiche of the stereotypical past"[i] can encourage an ahistorical reading of what went before. By placing the memoirs next to the documentary in this study, it is hoped the foregrounded nostalgic elements of the films will enable us to better assess the authenticity of the narratives being portrayed while still enjoying the films as spectacles of pleasure.

Background on Films

Dazed and *Almost* are period pieces; The *Last Waltz* is a document of reworked provenance, some of whose altered construction is on display. *Dazed*, through impressionistic, short scenes, follows several teens through a day and night on the last day of school in an unnamed American city, in May 1976. Set in 1973, *Almost Famous* is a more traditional and sentimental coming of age story following William, a precocious fifteen year-old boy who gets hired to write an article on an up-and-coming band for *Rolling Stone* magazine, and follows his efforts to stay true to journalistic integrity in the face of the awe he feels towards rock stars and their scene. *The Last Waltz,* released in 1978, is a concert film of The Band's last public performance, in late 1976, interspersed with interviews with band members filmed after the event. It's a nostalgic celebration of a bygone era, namely the 60s youth of the Baby Boom generation, while serving as a revisionist, gatekeeping narrative of The Band's historical significance.

Problematising nostalgia's relationship to history

Jameson has written that "[n]ostalgia films restructure the whole issue of pastiche and project it onto a collective and social level."[ii] Accordingly, historicity has been replaced by a new aesthetic 'nostalgia mode.' This nostalgia mode satisfies a desperate craving for history while reinforcing and replacing the past as a "fashionable and glossy *pastness*".[iii] Writing of *American Graffiti*, Jameson claims it "set out to

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recapture" the "mesmerizing lost reality" of a bygone era.[iv] The films under discussion here are likewise intent on recapturing and recreating a naïve and mesmerizing past, able to rely on the mass appeal of a re-imagined past. Plasketes argues that, "[s]ince the 1980s, 'Re' has been the predominant cultural mode. This condition is an endless lifestyle loop of repeating, retrieving, rewinding, recycling, reciting, redesigning and reprocessing."[v] In this cultural mode we have been "infatuated with the familiar," a familiarity which filmmakers like Crowe and Linklater here can rely on as they construct their pastiche of repurposed and retrieved impressionistic images and sounds. This familiarity prepares the audience to slip into a stance of expecting and receiving the pleasurable, without too much critical thought.

The Pleasures of Nostalgia

These films each invite us into their individual nostalgic modes in different ways, though focusing on our youth makes all three of these films particularly ripe for the pull of nostalgia. Crowe and Linklater directly tell stories of (more or less) adolescent good times, where teens are front and centre, with, in Crowe's case, a number of twenty-somethings along for the carefree adolescent life rock and roll stardom offers. Linklater presents an ensemble of teenagers spending their time with no particular focus or ambition. Scorsese, in an overtly commemorative way, invites the boomer generation, now in its adulthood in 1978, to revisit its shared youth with a central agent in their generation's popular music and political sensibilities of protest, social justice, and change, as embodied by The Band's lyrics, folk instrumentation, and affiliations with the regent of this particular folk world, Bob Dylan.

In Crowe's fictionalized memoir, he provides a sense of safe haven in a knowable past of stereotypes and light pastiche of music, clothes, and props evoking a lighthearted "remembrance" of the past. The film is at times affecting, comic, and sentimental. Boym claims Hollywood cinema, generally, "both induces nostalgia and offers a tranquilizer."[vi] Certainly *Almost Famous* induces in us this almost catatonic nostalgia, a seamless, easy ride into a glossy past where no one really gets hurt and is generally a feel-good life.

As such, Crowe most neatly fits Jameson's preoccupation on the way nostalgia films risk delivering the "'past' through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image and [specific eras] by the attributes of fashion."[vii] However, Crowe's film is nonetheless able to deliver a pleasurable and particularly poignant film by hewing closely to a nostalgic coming-of-age text. Leslie Speed states that "the nostalgic or rites-of-passage teen film is set in the past and structured around the protagonist's acquisition of greater maturity….The acquisition of maturity is equated with greater understanding of past events, and a new capacity to face the future."[viii] *Almost Famous* certainly fits this coming of age, rites of passage pattern. We are drawn nostalgically to the film's setting (the rock and roll world of early 70s America) but we also grow nostalgic for our own youth, our own coming of age. Youth is ultimately what this film represents, the growth through knowledge experienced in some form or another by all the film's significant characters. By portraying this growth in a sort of temporal vacuum of nostalgia for a reimagined past, like a fantasy world of fun-loving rock and roll, the audience is invited to project its own wistful feelings for its own youth.

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However, *Almost Famous* suffers, in its pastiche, from what Shumway calls the "postmodern image-society, in which images are supposed to replace any more substantial understanding of past or present."[ix] In addition to glossy scenes of showy exemplars of period dress, Crowe's use of music, while one of its main charms, risks replacing substantial descriptions or explanations of historical context and general narrative. Through their lyrics and/or mood, the songs on the film's soundtrack often act as descriptive short-hand to move the story along. Indeed, famous music adorns the film in virtually every scene, acting as a guiding agent in the establishment of emotional tone the audience is to feel for the given moment in the film. For instance, Crowe uses music to demonstrate the shared love of music held in common by the characters and how it will conquer all, including conflict. In one particular scene, the main characters are moved to communally join in singing a famous Elton John song, in the process overcoming a band rift. Crowe uses feel-good music rather than dialogue to demonstrate this emotional arc.

The past that comes down to us through films like these is the past that has survived a cultural popularity filter, which can exclude and leave behind other historical attributes that for whatever reason did not make the "final cut." Early on in the film, the protagonist as a young boy is given his older sister's record collection, being advised by her that they will set him free. We watch him flipping through a series of well established rock and roll classic albums, signifying to us a shared and pre-established cultural experience with all these masterpieces of rock music. Tied to these and other cultural stereotypes and Hollywood formula, Crowe is able to deliver a historically-set film that is completely knowable by an audience of thirty years detached from the setting. This past is familiar to us, as it confirms what has since been glamorized from the era.

The nostalgia here is a more fantastical one than in, say, Linklater's film. In *Almost*, the events in the characters' lives are truly significant ones, as if the protagonist is entering a dream world of invitations and intimate opportunities not available to other people like him. *Dazed*, on the other hand, is all about the mundane, the idle, the typical exploits and moments of American teen life. It is from this collective, shared sense of experiences that *Dazed's* nostalgia truly emanates. Linklater couches this more nuanced film within the concerns in a day in the life of a typical small town American kid: school hijinks, sports, and partying.

Linklater's text appeals to our sense of nostalgia for youth also along the lines of Davis' point that there is a particular nostalgic fondness for the teen years. This is an almost liminal point in our lives, he argues, before we are forced to take on the anxiety of the unknown and the responsibilities of adulthood obligations of career, family, and advanced education. This later period of development and experience is unsettling, as it involves the new and unfamiliar, often in relatively quick succession.[x] Thus the teen period is appealing as a safe return to a simpler time (both in an understanding of the world and in our contributions in it). Thus the idleness of Linklater's characters' lives appeals to us as both a familiar and carefree time in our lives.

In *The Last Waltz*, the nostalgia is directly tied to the portrayal of the concert and film as marking the end of an era. The Band had always traded on folk traditions in both its lyrics and anti-rock star, rural

associations in lifestyle (for instance often posing in pastoral settings in promotional photos), folk instruments, and dress, as well as the bygone era of 50s rock and roll. Scorsese feeds on this old-time association to reinforce the nostalgic mode of his film. The Band's concert performance and retelling of stories in interviews is nostalgia for them but also for a generation who identifies and grew up with them. Scorsese starts the film with the concert's final encore before "flashing back" to other songs, thus animating and reinforcing the backward gaze the film is to have. Indeed, the concert can even be seen as elegiac, the end of an era which The Band has "gathered to bury," while the band members seem "morose, exhausted, played out."[xi] Thus the audience is also made to feel nostalgic for the end of its own youth.

Authenticity

One of the most authentic aspects of all these films is the subtle display of social interaction among the characters in *Dazed and Confused*. They are morally ambiguous - one character can be both ugly and good in the film—real, in a sense. We see the main characters who we are meant to empathize with quietly distance themselves from less pleasant characters, using subtle shifts of characters exiting scenes at crucial moments to remove them from an upcoming unappealing event. As such, Linklater is effective at deploying an impressionistic style to capture and convey the individual moments in the characters' lives akin to snippets of memory we might keep of our own lived experiences. Linklater has characters come in and out of scenes, sometimes as leading players in a given scene, sometimes as incidental characters, in a deft reflection of a teen's rise and fall within a fluid social hierarchy. These very subtle status indicators showing us who's who in the pecking order is one of the main strengths of the film. Thus the film is very ambiguous in its portrayal of the social ladder, that crucial element of high school life. It is always there on display, but not emphasized. One of the film's great and unique strengths is that Linklater does not pass judgment on any of the characters. He does allow us glimpses of how a given character's peers judge him or her, but even these moments, though telling and incisive, are understated, such as when the older high school drop-out repels two-thirds of a trio of smart friends while at the same time found attractive by the third.

The nostalgia of *The Last Waltz* is to a strong degree yearning specifically for social and political relevance, lending it some of *its* authenticity. The Woodstock era, so uniquely and deeply associated with social upheaval, is in a sense coming to a close with this film. The Band came out of the sixties, which valued spontaneity and authenticity, as opposed to the calculated, polished glam of the 70s. There is a sense of authenticity being related to tradition, as a bulwark against change, or commercialism as the case may be in rock music. The Band, in their general attire, their ambivalence to fame, and the historical/traditional themes of their lyrics, exemplified this aspect of authenticity. The Band's physiques, clothing, understated live show, and their mundane-ness in offstage interviews all contribute to The Band's aura of authenticity. In contrast to the sculpted physiques of the actors portraying rock stars in *Almost Famous*, who are buff, good looking guys with good teeth, all requisites of 1990s Hollywood, The Band consists of guys who are pasty and scrawny, with bad teeth, and in many cases near unintelligible due to the knocks and indulgences of rock and roll life.

Problems with authenticity

Scorsese challenges lighthearted nostalgia more than Crowe and Linklater. On one hand Scorsese is providing nostalgia through a representation of an idealized past, and on the other he is providing a documentary that as such is ostensibly revealing a more true representation, which he both provides and questions. By showing not only documentary sounds and images but also drawing attention to their fabrication, Scorsese appears more trustworthy in his present tense, cinematic construction of the elegiac, of nostalgic pastness. This concert is marking the end of 16 years on the road as a touring band. Thus the film is an attempt to solidify the legacy of The Band and close this era on a positive note. As such, the whole enterprise of the *Last Waltz* is an effort in historiography providing general narrative contours for posterity.

Scorsese demonstrates a sort of truth while displaying the artifice of constructing a nostalgic feel in the stop and start of certain interview segments. For example, in the opening interview, as if to alert the audience up front, Scorsese consciously cuts the film in such a way as to demonstrate that choices are being made here in terms of what is included, what is being cut, and what is being said. This fabrication is viewed through the inclusion of a false start on a reply and the re-asking a question in order to challenge the original answer.

Scorsese put such an imprint on the film that it rises beyond simply being an archival document; rather, it transforms into a work of Scorsese art through its artistic, thematic, and aesthetic construction.[xii] For instance Scorsese cuts his film to the almost entire exclusion of audience shots. For a concert film this is rare, if not unique. This technique creates an intimacy for the film audience with the band which certainly isn't there in the original concert hall for the thousands of audience members. In the process, Scorsese is constructing something other than a concert-going experience; he is creating an intimate portrayal of a band in performance, focusing on the experience of the band members undergoing a demanding performance under hot lights while adapting on-on-the-fly to an ever-shifting lineup of guest performers. By focusing the concert footage exclusively on the performers, balanced with the band members' interview footage, Scorsese is bringing to the fore the lives of the band, the life of rock and roll, extending it out beyond simply a loose rock concert film. *The Last Waltz* then becomes a document about this intensely personal life of rock and roll rather than a narrower document of one night's performance.

Conclusion

Each of the three films provides a distinct glimpse into how nostalgia interacts with its counterpart, authenticity, sometimes with more smoothness, sometimes with more friction. Taken together, these three films go some way towards describing the lures and pleasures of nostalgia in mainstream film.

We are able to buy in more easily into the myths, both large and small, offered in these films because, as Boym suggests, past eras are "ideal animals for the nostalgia industry because nobody remembers them."[xiii] Thus America in the 70s, an era for so long defined in short hand as superficial and bland, with its polyester fashions and soulless disco music, can now be seen nostalgically, now that a few decades have past. All three directors are encouraging the audience to "remember" the past for nostalgia's sake, but they are doing so on their own terms.

[i] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991), 21.
[ii] Ibid., 19.
[iii] Paul Grange, "Nostalgia and Style in Retro America: Moods, Modes, and Media Recycling," *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures* 23, no. 1 (2000): 19.
[iv] Jameson, 19.
[v] George Plasketes, "Re-flections on the Cover Age: A Collage of Continuous Coverage in Popular Music," *Popular Music and Society* 28, no. 2 (2005): 137.
[vi] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 33.
[vii] Jameson, 19.
[viii] Lesley Speed, "Tuesday's Gone: The Nostalgic Teen Film," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 26, no. 1 (1998): 25.
[ix] David R. Shumway, "Rock 'n' Roll Sound Tracks and the Production of Nostalgia," *Cinema Journal* 38, no. 2 (1999): 42.
[x] Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 56-58.
[xi] Roger Ebert, *Scorsese by Ebert*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 55-56.
[xii] Annette Wernblad, *The Passion of Martin Scorsese: a Critical Study of the Films* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2011), 128.
[xiii] Boym, 33.