

THE GREAT REVIVAL: THE IDEALIZED AMERICAN PORTRAIT FROM THE FIFTIES THROUGH THE EIGHTIES TO THE TRUMP ERA

Anna Ferrari
University of Padova

ABSTRACT

The Fifties have been consolidated in the American ethos as one of the best times in its history. The decade's iconography was vigorously evoked during Reagan's presidency in an attempt to erase the civil rights victories of the Sixties. This paper focuses on the different interpretations of Fifties and Eighties imagery in popular culture, and on their role in shaping the definition of Americanness, highlighting the contrast between the idealized portrait of American society and its underlying tensions. Taking the Eighties as the focal point of the argument, the analysis goes from the 1950s to modern days to deal with the influence the Fifties myth has had on the new 'revival' of the Trump years.

Keywords: Fifties; Eighties; American exceptionalism; Myth; Reaganism.

INTRODUCTION

Among the myths shaped around American exceptionalism, one of the most persistent and pervasive ones has its origins in an idealized image of the Fifties. Still today, this image feeds on and into the very concept of American exceptionalism. After World War II, the United States experienced a time of economic prosperity which set the standard in American imagery for decades to follow, thus transforming into an ideal more than a historical reality. These years forged America's identity for the second half of the 20th century and beyond, shaping the American ethos—the accepted general narrative about the nation's identity and therefore its core values, sentiments, and philosophy—in a way that remains heavily influential to this day. Godfrey Hodgson recognizes this time as the origin of a specific new form of exceptionalism:

A new ideology of exceptionalism was becoming widespread in the 1950s. It defined American exceptionalism, partly in terms of material prosperity and military power, and partly in the name of a contrast between democracy, often assumed to be essentially American, with dictatorship and totalitarian societies, especially, of course, in contrast with the Soviet Union and communism. This

was the new and specialized meaning of freedom, a value that had been cherished by Americans since the Revolution, but whose precise meaning had changed. (Hodgson 2009, 92)

Clearly, the 1950s were not as perfect a decade as its portrait conveyed through popular culture and political discourse suggests—not even close. First of all, economic affluence hardly included those who were not white, and social freedoms and civil rights hardly applied to anyone other than white, straight, cisgender men. This fantasy of prosperity, then, only included a specific segment of the population—however, since it was the dominant segment, the fantasy got consolidated in the American cultural mainstream, permeating public discourse, political rhetoric, and popular culture alike as the decade’s master narrative. Greil Marcus argues that the Fifties represented “an exchange of real life for an idea of normal life” in the American consciousness (Marcus 2000, III, 9). This prevalence of myth over history has made Fifties imagery particularly troublesome in the decades that followed: generally regarded as an innocuous throwback to a positive time, the cultural implications this imagery carries can easily transform it into a dog whistle for the oppression towards women and minorities—up to its most explicit incarnation in 2016, when Donald Trump won the presidency by issuing a call to “Make America Great Again.” In his book *Happy Days and Wonder Years*, Daniel Marcus has argued that this remove from reality is what makes the Fifties such an insidious subject, especially from a political point of view: “because the Fifties always operated at an imaginary level, their norms have been able to maintain a hold on America’s fantasy life, to be resuscitated in conservative discourse and popular culture” (Marcus 2004, 2). Without even needing Trump to pronounce the words out loud, when he launched his presidential campaign his message was clear. Despite the fact that—at least in some instances, particularly on LGBTQ rights—his rhetoric on social issues was not as explicit as it was, for example, on race, the overall message of Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign unequivocally expressed a longing for a time that among its most significant traits had racial segregation, invisibility of gay people and the triumph of the “traditional family” (i.e., the man providing and the woman at home). Therefore, Trump’s campaign rhetoric (sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly) had the same effect as if he was constantly saying, in substance, if not literally, “if you vote for me you will not have

black and brown people in your neighborhoods, no one will attempt to convert you or your children to homosexuality, and this woman [Hillary Rodham Clinton] who is speaking across the stage from me will go back to the kitchen, with all the others, where they belong.¹ You will also have more money”—but the economic argument is, in my view, secondary to the social one. When evoking the Fifties, social anxieties come first, partly because the goal of this political rhetoric is to point to the social gains of minorities to explain away the problems of everyone else: as during the 1960s and 1970s women, African Americans, and LGBTQ people had made steps forward politically,

¹ Trump notoriously launched his campaign by comparing Mexican immigrants to rapists (Jake Miller, “Donald Trump Defends Calling Mexican Immigrants ‘Rapists,’” CBS News, July 2, 2015, accessed May 11, 2022 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/election-2016-donald-trump-defends-calling-mexican-immigrants-rapists/>), and repeatedly perpetuated racist tropes about the African American community, describing black neighborhoods as “ghettos” and “war zones” (Jeremy Diamond, “Trump Refers to ‘Ghettos’ in Discussing African-American Issues,” CNN, October 27, 2016, accessed May 11, 2022 <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/10/27/politics/donald-trump-ghettos-african-americans/index.html>). While positioning himself against marriage equality (“Donald Trump: Opposes Nationwide Marriage Equality,” Human Rights Campaign, accessed May 11, 2022 <https://www.hrc.org/resources/2016republicanfacts-donald-trump>), Trump’s rhetoric on LGBTQ rights was less explicit during the campaign than after he became president (Dan Diamond, “Trump Administration Dismantles LGBT-friendly Policies,” Politico, February 19, 2018, accessed May 11, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/02/19/trump-lgbt-rights-discrimination-353774>; Meghan Keneally, “Donald Trump’s Past Statements about LGBT Rights,” ABC News, July 26, 2017, accessed May 11, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/donald-trumps-past-statements-lgbt-rights/story?id=48858527>). However, the clearest campaign message on what was to come for the gay community was delivered when Mike Pence, a politician with one of the strongest records of oppression of gay rights, was selected as vice-president (Liam Stack, “Mike Pence and ‘Conversion Therapy’: A History,” *The New York Times*, November 30, 2016, accessed May 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/us/politics/mike-pence-and-conversion-therapy-a-history.html>; Amanda Holpuch, “Before He Was Trump’s Running Mate, Mike Pence Led the Anti-LGBT Backlash,” *The Guardian*, October 4, 2016, Accessed May 11, 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/oct/04/mike-pence-led-anti-lgbt-backlash-trump>).

When it comes to women, Trump has a long history of chauvinism and misogynistic comments. In the Republican primary, Trump stirred controversy by insulting fellow candidate Carly Fiorina and journalist Megyn Kelly. This record was obviously boosted by the fact that he was running against a woman (Tamara Keith, “Sexism Is Out In The Open In The 2016 Campaign. That May Have Been Inevitable,” October 23, 2016, accessed May 11, 2022 <https://www.npr.org/2016/10/23/498878356/sexism-is-out-in-the-open-in-the-2016-campaign-that-may-have-been-inevitable>). After winning the nomination he made several remarks about Clinton, saying (among other things) that “she screams, it drives me crazy” and that despite all her professional accomplishments, “the only card she has is the woman’s card” (Stephen Collinson, “Donald Trump Has a Woman Problem—3 of Them,” CNN, May 26, 2016, accessed May 11, 2022 <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/05/13/politics/trump-women-2016-campaign/index.html>). He notoriously referred to her as a “nasty woman” during the October 19, 2016 debate and encouraged his supporters’ “Lock Her Up” chant at his rallies (Jeremy Diamond, “Trump on ‘Lock Her Up’ Chant: ‘I’m Starting to Agree,’” CNN, July 30, 2016, accessed May 11, 2022 <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/29/politics/donald-trump-lock-her-up/index.html>) even after winning the presidency. Yet, apart from personal attacks made during the campaign, Trump also made other derogatory statements many women across the country considered threats: in particular, his stance on women deserving to be punished for having an abortion (MSNBC Town Hall, March 30, 2016) and, in the last month of the campaign, his characterization of sexual assault as “locker-room talk” (NBC Presidential Debate, October 9, 2016). Despite his scornful rhetoric, some of the people in these groups (particularly white women) still supported him. This, however, does not alter the nostalgic implications his campaign message conveyed, nor does it lessen its oppressive connotations.

socially, and economically, these victories became an easy scapegoat for any struggle experienced by the only group that had until then held power—straight, white, cisgender men. However, using the Fifties as a dog whistle for inequality was not invented by Donald Trump. Because of its powerful place in the American ethos as an ideal time, not only do the Fifties play a steady role in US rhetoric, but they have also preponderantly occupied the political discourse in at least two occasions in the last few decades: during the 1980s, when a revival of the Fifties became a central theme in Ronald Reagan’s presidential campaign, and in a less explicit, but equally effective form in the past decade. Both times, the Fifties myth permeated political discourse as well as pop culture by shaping a dominant narrative around nostalgia, a generic nostalgia for an idealized past that does not have to explicitly clarify what we should be feeling nostalgic about or why—a “group memory,” to borrow the term used by Daniel Marcus to define the sense of a collective “shared experience and identity” (Marcus 2004, 4). This idealized and reassuring portrait of the decade consolidated a vision of American identity that in a way became for many US citizens more real than historical reality.

Referring to the way public narratives and images shape both personal and collective consciousness, Lauren Berlant argued that “nations provoke fantasy” (Berlant 1991, 1). Berlant defines the cluster resulting from the intersection of the nation’s different identities (political, linguistic, genetic, etc.) as the “National Symbolic” (5), meaning the force that shapes this fantasy. In the case of the US, particularly 1950s America, this fantasy has been appropriated by Reagan and shaped into a form we could call mythical: “the middle-class suburban lifestyle, heterosexual nuclear family, and technocratic-corporate culture” (Marcus 2004, 68), are values that were often promoted through popular culture, especially on screen. John Archer has formulated a definition of myth that is useful here:

Myth establishes a framework and sets the terms by which people encounter, comprehend and shape social relations and the space around them. By their very nature, myths are frequently, and in large measure, political [...]. In this sense, the crucial role of myth is often to sustain the relationship between the citizen, the broader culture, and social and political institutions. (Archer 2014, 7-8)

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By carrying out an analysis of the dynamics through which Fifties imagery is employed in the 1980s, my argument revolves around the impact of the Fifties myth on political discourse as well as popular culture (which, we will see, often overlap during this time), to reflect on the significance of this myth reaffirming its political nature in different decades. Considering the Eighties as the focal point of the argument, I will focus on a few visual texts, mainly movies, observing how the cultural production evoking the Fifties ethos powerfully shapes public discourse. We will see how the evolution of that ethos presents itself in a renewed form during the 2010s in popular culture, and what implications the stark contrast between the idealized portrait of American society and the tension beneath the surface has for the hegemonic, mainstream idea of Americanness.

FROM THE FIFTIES TO RONALD REAGAN

The historical events of the decade should make it more difficult not to consider it a controversial time, from the Red Scare to racial segregation, from gender discrimination to homophobia. Despite this, as we have seen, the Fifties are generally remembered as an idealized time, “a prosperous, peaceful, and optimistic period in American history after World War II but before the Kennedy assassination” (Dwyer 2015, 3). The cultural, political, and social dynamics at play in this decade, however, are decidedly more complex. During the Fifties the United States consolidated their position as the greatest superpower in the world, and as the indispensable nation, opposed to the Soviet Union. The Fifties also represent a time when this comforting, idealized narrative only applied to a specific segment of the population. If you were a woman or belonged to any kind of minority, chances were that you would not benefit from as many opportunities as white men would, or from any opportunity at all, for that matter. Nevertheless, the Fifties “turned out to be prototypes for what would become mainstream American life” (Andersen 2017, Chap. 21), thus shaping a myth that, at least on paper, was carved out

of a universal narrative. Following Jameson's distinction² between the historical period and the cultural myth (Jameson 1991, Chap. 9), I will henceforth refer to the decade as 'the 1950s', and to the myth as 'the Fifties'.

In *Postmodernism*, Jameson devotes several pages to the phenomenon of the canonization of the Fifties. The central dynamic of this process, he argues, lies in how pop culture representation has shaped the role of the Fifties in American imagery through "a list of stereotypes, of ideas of facts and historical realities" (Jameson 1991, chap. 9). From cinema to television, an idealized portrait of this decade took hold of American imagination. The Fifties were characterized as an exceptional decade, an ideal time in American history. Thus, the prototype was not shaped by reality, but rather through imagery the media made available:

Peyton Place, bestsellers, and TV series. And it is indeed just those series—living-room comedies, single-family homes menaced by *Twilight Zone* ...—that give us the content of our positive image of the fifties in the first place. If there is "realism" in the 1950s, in other words, it is presumably to be found there, in mass cultural representation, the only kind of art willing (and able) to deal with the stifling Eisenhower realities of the happy family in the small town, of normalcy and nondeviant everyday life. (Jameson 1991, Chap. 9)

From its very inception, the Fifties did not have much to do with reality: the portrait that this myth created had an aura of innocence and undeterred happiness that was difficult to couple with darker, and more problematic, historical facts. Analyzing the origin of myth and fantasy in American imagery, Kurt Andersen reflects on how "a new form of nostalgia emerged as an important tic in Americans' psychology, an imaginary homesickness for places and times the nostalgists had never experienced and that had in some cases never existed" (Andersen 2017, chap. 16). His description perfectly frames how the Fifties were created and employed to shape the National Symbolic.

² In *Postmodernism*, Jameson highlights the "shift from the realities of the 1950s to the representation of that rather different thing, the 'fifties,' a shift which obligates us in addition to underscore the cultural sources of all the attributes with which we have endowed the period, many of which seem very precisely to derive from its own television programs; in other words, its own representation of itself" (Jameson 1991, chap. 9).

Because language has always played a central role in myth-making, it became crucial to analyzing how the Fifties theme has been used in different eras: Jameson argues that “the fifties is a thing, but a thing that we can build, just as the science fiction writer builds his own small-scale model” (Jameson 1991, chap. 9). Jameson thus hints to an *intentional* creation of this narrative which, in the following decades, would become a part of mainstream American collective consciousness, as a “feeble and sentimental nostalgia for the fifties and the Eisenhower era” (Jameson 1991, Chap. 2). The significance of the Fifties, though, assumed much more serious implications when it took a drastic turn in the 1980s. When it comes to the role of the Fifties in American culture, the positive gaze that nostalgia casts upon a certain object transformed the myth into an established historical reality. Hodgson notes how “American history has been encrusted with accretions of self-congratulatory myth” (Hodgson 2009, 14). However, the level reached by American exceptionalism in the Eighties is remarkably and insidiously pervasive. From a political as well as cultural standpoint, particularly in reference to the conservative narrative, “when it came to the Cold War, the 1980s were like the 1950s redux” (Belletto 2018, 310). In this sense, the ethos of the Fifties was weaponized by the political discourse of the Eighties. This political strategy aimed at the erasure of the civil rights victories of the 1960s and 1970s, conveniently forgetting the steps forward made by women, people of color, and the LGBTQ community, in order to promote an unreal portrait of Americanness which did not include minorities. This cultural shift was mainly caused by the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan.

Reagan shaped first his 1980 campaign, and then his presidency, around a revival of traditional values: Barbara Ehrenreich writes that “sometime in the Eighties, Americans had a new set of ‘traditional values’ installed. It was part of what may someday be known as the ‘Reagan renovation’” (Ehrenreich 1990, 3). Ehrenreich contrasts Reagan’s philosophy, arguing that “from the vantage point of the continent’s original residents, or [...] the captive African laborers who made America a great agricultural power, our ‘traditional values’ have always been bigotry, greed, and belligerence, buttressed by wanton appeals to a God of love” (Ehrenreich 1990, 4). The act of evoking traditional values represents a very direct call on Reagan’s part for the

ethos of the Fifties. After two decades of social advancements fostered by women's and minorities' activism, and after the political impasse encountered by the Carter administration, Reagan employed an idealized version of the Fifties in order to offer a reassuring narrative to mainstream America, a strategy that made his political fortune. This approach, as we have said, was largely built upon the employment of dog whistles: Daniel Marcus notes how "conservatives of the Reagan era rarely criticized the civil rights movement directly" (Marcus 2004, 43), although the rhetoric certainly pointed in that direction. Ehrenreich particularly attacks the rhetoric concerning 'family values':

the kindest—though from some angles most perverse—of the era's new values was 'family.' [...] Throughout the eighties, the winning political faction has been aggressively 'profamily.' They have invoked 'the family' when they trample on the rights of those who hold actual families together, that is, women. They have used it to justify racial segregation and the formation of white-only, 'Christian' schools. And they have brought it out, along with flag and faith, to silence any voices they found obscene, offensive, disturbing, or merely different. (Ehrenreich 1990, 4-5)

This rhetorical style had complex consequences: Reagan clearly had a political agenda that he was looking to advance. However, the core feature of his message was not the substance, but rather the vibe—an abstract, yet powerful, shared perception. This entails that the imagery he evoked was central to his rhetoric and therefore to his political message. The narrative Reagan promoted a narrative evocative of a specific era by echoing "the mythic Fifties small-town America depicted in film, television, and other forms of popular media—an America that featured a booming consumer economy, military strength, domestic stability, dominant 'family values,' and national optimism and belief in 'the American Way'" (Dwyer 2015, 1). Marcus goes as far as arguing that, particularly in the 1984 campaign, because Reagan had become the physical embodiment of America, political attacks made at him were perceived by the general public as attacks directed at America itself (Marcus 2004, 86).

The dynamic of myth-shaping is what made the Eighties the era that birthed the concept of politics as spectacle, a time when popular culture represented a significant contribution to socio-political discourse. Ehrenreich highlights the hypocrisy displayed

by the dominant class while preaching ‘traditional values,’ perfectly exemplified, she argues, by the fact that “the ‘phonies’ came to power on the strength, aptly enough, of a professional actor’s performance” (Ehrenreich 1990, 9). In fairness, Reagan’s past career as an actor played an important role in the socio-political landscape of the Eighties:

after a so-so career playing fictional characters in movies, he became a superstar playing a politician in real life and on the TV news, first as governor of California. His winning presidential campaign in 1980 had policy specifics that jibed with his misty vision of a simpler, happier, more patriotic old-fashioned America [...] As a vacationing president, he wore a cowboy hat and rode a horse at his ranch in southern California. He and his team concocted a brilliant fantasy narrative in which he was the convincing leading character. More than any previous presidential handlers, they staged and crafted his presidential performances specifically to make for entertaining television. (Andersen 2017, Chap. 29)

The close relationship between the Reagan administration and show business is clear when we analyze Reagan’s rhetorical style. Pop culture references were a constant part of his rhetoric. These include *Back to the Future* (a movie where he is referenced, both as actor and as president, and which he would subsequently mention in the 1986 State of the Union Address), and the decision to simplify communication on the Cold War by evoking doom, thus describing the USSR as the ‘evil empire’ and naming his Strategic Defense Initiative the ‘Star Wars Program.’ The strategy, therefore, was not a mere glorification of a return to the Fifties, but rather the employment of the Fifties myth to shape the present. Since “the problem with glorifying the 1950s is that it belies the truth about the era in favor of the Hollywood version of it” (Sparling 2018, 247), the values fostered by that Hollywood version are employed to build today’s world. Reagan’s rhetoric worked: not only did he go down in history as the ‘great communicator,’ he also made conservatism cool, its impact visibly shaping pop culture—from *Risky Business* to the TV show *Family Ties*, where Michael J. Fox plays a conservative teenager raised by two liberal parents—which, in turn, shaped American culture (Ehrenreich 1990, 27). The character of Doc perhaps summarized it best in what could be considered the only explicitly political line of *Back to the Future*: after the famous joke he makes upon discovering who is president in 1985 (“Ronald Reagan? The actor? Then who’s vice

president, Jerry Lewis?”), when 1950s Doc finds out about modern video cameras, he says, “No wonder your president has to be an actor, he has to look good on television.” And wasn’t that the truth.

THE MYTH ON THE SCREEN

Although the impact of Reagan’s figure was visible in many areas of popular culture, cinema is where we can recognize the return to the Fifties he himself theorized. In the 1980s, several movies started to reintroduce Fifties imagery, *i.e.*, the portrayal of small-town America—in some cases merely offering an airbrushed image of an idealized past; in others showing its contrasts and contradictions, the darker and more controversial aspects, with works that went from *Back to the Future* to David Lynch’s productions. This double portrayal is particularly recognizable in the mid-1980s, when the political rhetoric was at its height because of the 1984 presidential campaign. We can observe these works through a lens that Michael Dwyer calls ‘pop nostalgia,’ a specific phenomenon he outlines with three key features: circulation and reception for mass audiences, the ability of being prompted by tropes or symbols without claims for historical accuracy, and the affective relationship between audience and text. This last aspect, in particular, is crucial to Dwyer because “it broadens our focus from the texts themselves, or the biographies of audiences, and toward the historical, cultural, and political conditions that structure the way we collectively ‘feel’ the past” (Dwyer 2015, 4). The idealized portrait of the Fifties is effectively conveyed through cinema thanks to the visual power of the medium. Movies like Robert Zemeckis’s *Back to the Future* (1985) and Rob Reiner’s *Stand by Me* (1986) are two good examples of movies that communicate this nostalgic look cast upon the Fifties. Both films include the idea of returning to the past: *Back to the Future* features Marty, a teenager who travels back in time to the Fifties where he finds himself fixing up his own parents, while *Stand by Me* is structured around the narrator’s long flashback to his last childhood summer, when he and his friends go out on an adventure in search for a corpse they hear has been found outside their town. It is important to notice how none of these films carry an explicit political message: it is the atmosphere, the gaze that counts. Dwyer notes that

“as he ‘fixes’ his own family’s shortcomings in 1955, Marty simultaneously cleanses the Fifties of social agitation, racial oppression, and the other cultural anxieties that actually gripped the decade” (Dwyer 2015, 42). Without mentioning any controversial topic (and, we may even argue, without *meaning* to openly mention anything controversial), Zemeckis manages to whitewash history, with effects that can be paired with Reagan’s rhetoric. In fact, to portray the Fifties in such an unchallenging manner five years after Reagan took office means to embrace the feelings of nostalgia summoned by the president’s dominant narrative. As critic J. Hoberman notes, the film is “conveniently set in 1955, rather than the following year of cultural revolution when Elvis Presley enjoyed his television apotheosis and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King became a national figure” (Hoberman 2019, Chap. 5). Moreover, the Eighties are portrayed as an improved, still idealized version of the Fifties: there is an African American mayor as the lone symbol of social progress, the music is more interesting, the girls are less sexually repressed, and everyone owns at least one TV. The American innocence which, Hoberman notices, may be a direct consequence of Steven Spielberg producing Zemeckis’ film, is preserved at all costs. The suburban or small-town setting, another powerful element of Fifties iconography, is heavily present in both *Back to the Future* and *Stand by Me*, not just as a backdrop, but as an integral element conveying a specific set of values—*traditional* values, as well as nostalgia for a time when those values shaped a simpler and more reassuring world.

Stand by Me manages to nostalgically convey another aspect that was revived in the Reagan years by recounting the last adventurous summer of a group of young boys: American masculinity. The 1980s were a time when a certain type of machismo, heir to the ethos of another Fifties icon, John Wayne, also underwent a revival: this is, for example, the decade of *Rambo* (another movie publicly referenced by Reagan³). In *Stand by Me*, Reiner portrays the trip as a rite of passage for these four boys through the nostalgic lens of the Fifties. This lens is highlighted in the last scenes of the movie as we

³ Cf. Andersen 2017, chap. 29.

find out what happened as the boys grew up: apart from the narrator, none of them had a happy ending. In his book *Back to the Fifties*, though, Dwyer seems to suggest that the revival of Fifties imagery in the Eighties sparked the production of different texts, only some idealizing the decade. Although he is correct about this point, Dwyer fails to note that most of the texts that offer a different narrative on the ethos of the Fifties seem to represent a reaction against (sometimes a parody of) the texts that celebrate their idealized version, or at the very least they are texts that focus on the cracks of this polished portrayal of America that dominated in the Eighties. The best example is probably represented by Lynch's works.

Shortly after *Back to the Future* and *Stand by Me* came out, Lynch premiered *Blue Velvet* (1986). The movie's release caused much controversy, including an accusation of pornography.⁴ Unlike *Back to the Future* and *Stand by Me*, *Blue Velvet* does not explicitly mention the year in which the movie is set—the atmosphere, though, is unmistakably that of the Fifties. Lynch also portrays a suburb during the investigation of a mystery carried out by two teenagers, Jeffrey and Sandy, after finding a severed human ear in a field near Jeffrey's house. As the landscape portrayed by Lynch is highly suggestive of the Fifties' ethos, the definition of a specific time and place becomes unnecessary. This fact makes Fifties imagery much more powerful and much more insidious than in Zemeckis' film. Lynch also displays images of nostalgia for the America suburb, as the opening sequence of *Blue Velvet* attests—with the difference that, in the world he conjures, the landscape is haunted. The opening frame of Lynch's movie is a close up of a flowerbed of red roses placed in front of a white picket fence, against a clear blue sky. Not only is this a typical suburban image, but the colors and shapes also evoke the American flag. After giving us an idyllic tracking shot of this postcard neighborhood, Lynch's camera shifts to the ground to show an eerie colony of bugs squirming just under the surface: "are there maggots in the apple pie?" (Hoberman 2019, Chap. 5). While in Lynch's work nostalgic iconography is always portrayed with an affectionate

⁴ Cf. Simon 1986, 54-56.

gaze, the imagery of deconstruction of the American Dream is still pervasive—also in *Blue Velvet*. During his investigation, Jeffrey discovers an underworld of crime, sex, and violence just a few blocks from his home, prompting him, halfway through the movie, to admit to Sandy: “I’m seeing something that was always hidden.” Therefore, Lynch’s portrayal of the Fifties ethos and of the American suburb carries gothic traits a subversion of traditional leitmotifs connected to this imagery: “Blue Velvet subverts, satirizes, and parodies the representations that it targets. Lynch’s film recalls general moods, aesthetic renderings, and indistinct portraits of past representations” (Coughlin 2003, 304). In *Blue Velvet* we can see how Lynch’s interest does not merely lie in a nostalgic portrayal of 1950s America, but rather in a simultaneous celebration and subversion of a *topos*. Quoting Linda Hutcheon, Coughlin argues that

postmodernism ‘is always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic ‘return’ [...] Postmodernist theory allows an analysis of *Blue Velvet* that is expansive and calls into question the ideologies of past representations that are too often recalled as nostalgic ideals despite their inherent limitations. Lynch is parodying and criticizing these representations by reassembling them and then infiltrating them with elements that expose their frameworks as ultimately inadequate. (Coughlin 2003, 305)

While commenting the movie, Coughlin rightfully recognizes that “Lynch, with *Blue Velvet*, seems to be stating a position of anarchy rather than conservatism. His objective is to find fault with the structures and paradigms that are used so often to support the political ideals he is accused of valorizing. [...] with *Blue Velvet* Lynch is not pleading for a ‘return to the fifties’ or deferring to a ‘nostalgia’ of the past” (Coughlin 2003, 310). In his analysis, though, Coughlin argues that Lynch “is actively criticizing the past to facilitate a greater understanding of the limitations of many of its representations. He is opening up possibilities by displaying how some frameworks seek to close down ideas” (310). I would argue that, more than criticizing the past, Lynch criticized an ideal: much of his production beyond *Blue Velvet* revolves around the deconstruction of Fifties imagery, around depicting also the darkness, the cracks in the idyllic portrayal, and most of all around the ambiguity that shapes the American Dream as much as the American Nightmare. In a way, though, despite *and* alongside all the darkness, the

dream (a word that is dear to Lynch) is still very present: Hoberman notices how the film is “a unique blend of raw pathology and icky sweetness, in which innocence is no less perverse than experience” (Hoberman 2019, Chap. 5), a blend that has become a trademark of Lynch’s style.

As he analyzes *Blue Velvet* in *Postmodernism*, Jameson underlines how, just like *Back to the Future* and *Stand by Me*, Lynch’s film also lends itself to an interpretation of American masculinity:

history therefore enters *Blue Velvet* in the form of ideology, if not of myth: the Garden and the Fall, American exceptionalism, a small town [...] lovingly preserved in its details like a simulacrum or Disneyland under glass somewhere [...]. Even a fifties style pop psychoanalysis can be invoked around this fairy tale, since besides a mythic and sociobiological perspective of the violence of nature, the film’s events are also framed by the crisis in the paternal function—the stroke that suspends paternal power and authority in the opening sequence, the recovery of the father and his return from the hospital in the idyllic final scene. That the other father is a police detective lends a certain plausibility to this kind of interpretation, which is also strengthened by the abduction and torture of the third, absent, father, of whom we only see the ear. Nonetheless the message is not particularly patriarchal-authoritarian, particularly since the young hero manages to assume the paternal function very handily [...]. Now the boy without fear of the fairy tale can set out to undo this world of baleful enchantment, free its princess (while marrying another), and kill the magician. (Jameson 1991, Chap. 9)

Lynch’s portrayal of the hero does not reflect traditional depictions of masculinity as one would encounter them in the Eighties: Jeffrey manages to get both women during the movie, but his sex scenes with the *femme fatale* Dorothy Vallens are more awkward than anything else. The antagonist, Frank, on the other hand, is at the same time terrifying and grotesque. Thus, instead of portraying masculinity as the pillar of the American family, Lynch reveals its ambiguities.

In certain cases, however, the presence of traditional Fifties imagery in American cinema can even affect the subversive narratives of the time. In an article published in *The New York Times* in 1984, critic Michiko Kakutani notes how many 1980s teenage movies “use conventions borrowed from pictures made in an earlier era,” as the rebel

iconography of James Dean and Marlon Brando, only to turn them into innocuous and entertaining narratives. Kakutani argues how

frequently, they are models employed in ways that purvey attitudes more conservative than those in the original films. In the process, our sense of the past—and in this case, of teenagers in earlier eras - also undergoes a revision. [...] The car culture of the day, with its drive-in theaters and fast-food joints; class tensions between greasers and their social betters; and romances between ‘nice’ girls and more disreputable boys have become insistently regular features on the screen. [...] today's youth films imply that the 80's, rather than resembling that earlier era, may well turn out to be far more conformity-conscious and success-oriented than the Eisenhower era ever was (Kakutani 1984).

Therefore, the effects of the Fifties ethos are even more pervasive than expected, sometimes even making Fifties themes tamer than they were in portrayals of the time such as *Rebel Without a Cause* or *On the Waterfront*. This diluting dynamic returned in more recent times, with the Eighties—another era marked by stark contrasts—definitely seeing a polished revival in 2010s cultural productions.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER 2015

Dwyer argues that “the Fifties [were] not only important in American popular culture but central to American self-understanding in the Reagan era” (Dwyer 2015, 6). If Dwyer’s argument is true, then the Fifties are also crucial to understanding the Eighties’ influence on different texts from 2015 and following years—a time when the Eighties revival (and its spectacle) made also a return in American politics, as the intersection between politics and entertainment reached unprecedented levels with Donald Trump’s candidacy.⁵ Although we can recognize several points of contact between the Trump era and the Eighties, particularly in their way of evoking the Fifties ethos and in the way Trump appropriated Reagan’s 1980 slogan ‘Make America Great Again’, J. Hoberman’s observations are punctual in noticing significant differences between the two figures:

⁵ Cf. Andersen 2017, chap. 46.

“Reagan was Hollywood incarnate, a true believer in movie magic, the embodiment of happy endings and uncomplicated emotions, amusing anecdotes and conspicuous consumption, cornball patriotism and bombastic anti-Communism, cheerful bromides and a built-in production code designed to suppress any uncomfortable truth. Trump is something else” (Hoberman 2019, epil.). Although Hoberman engages in a rather generous description of Reagan’s figure, suppressing uncomfortable truths can have, and has had, very real consequences on people’s lives, as it happened with his silence on the AIDS epidemic and its deadly consequences for thousands of Americans. It is still true, however, that Reagan embodied these traditional values by portraying a classic, reassuring Fifties man. Trump never carried himself in an old-fashioned or comforting way (his reference to “American carnage” in his inaugural speech would be an example), but nevertheless served as “a beneficiary of Reagan-nostalgia, which is to say, a nostalgia that is nostalgic for nostalgia itself” (Hoberman 2019, epil.). In recent years, the iconography and ethos of Eighties America has also returned in various movies, series, and books. Not only does this new production offer a specific, polished portrait of America in the Eighties, but it also enacts a second revival of Fifties imagery pervasively present in Eighties movies, and therefore associated with that decade as well. Here, nostalgic gazes are cast upon two different eras at the same time. As I have mentioned above, apart from the hopeful atmosphere surrounding the decade, the Eighties were also a time of tensions and contrasts. However, these have not remained in the collective memory as vividly as the idealized image has. The Reagan era is generally regarded as one of expansion, wealth, and a peak moment for American exceptionalism, although reality was more complicated: from Cold War tensions, to the AIDS epidemic, to the discrimination against minorities, this is also a time of heavy ambiguities that are often swept under the proverbial rug in pursuit of a perfect image of Americanness. Jeremy Sierra and Shaun McQuitty argue that “nostalgia contributes to individual identity based on shared heritage and memories with group members” (Sierra-McQuitty 2007, 99): in this case, the shared memories of the Eighties are to be considered as distorted as the nostalgic memory of the Fifties was. Yet, this idealized version survives, once again, in pop culture. In today’s case, though, the nostalgia

toward the American suburb is also affected by the influence of figures like Lynch, whose idealization of small-town America is juxtaposed with a haunted environment. A similar dynamic is at play in *Stranger Things* (2016). The Netflix series created by the Duffer Brothers has the declared intention of functioning as a vault of nostalgic references. Accordingly, we can recognize images and situations that are intended to explicitly quote Eighties classics such as *Stand by Me* (most obviously, but not exclusively, with the walk on the train tracks), as well as works by Lynch: the woods surrounding Hawkins, for example, remind us of *Twin Peaks*. Set in 1984 in small-town Indiana, the story features a group of boys looking for their friend Will, who has disappeared at the beginning of the first episode. The presence of a supernatural element in Will's disappearance is felt early on, and the boys' investigation generates another mystery: while searching for Will in the woods, the group finds Eleven, a strange girl with a shaved head, who helps them look for Will through her telepathic powers. In an interview to *Wired*, the Duffer Brothers described the series as a "tale of two Stevens"⁶—meaning Steven Spielberg and Stephen King, perhaps the two most influential voices in American pop culture in the Eighties. *Stranger Things* also presents another feature of the Eighties narrative: even though the dark element is present, in this case in the form of a monster, the sociopolitical frame of the era is missing once again.

This recurrence of the small-town America trope through the decades tends to follow a constant pattern. The main example among the consequences of the use of the myth of the Fifties, shared by Eighties narratives as well as by *Stranger Things*, is the creation of an ethos developed in opposition to the concept of the 'Other': the Fifties rhetoric was shaped, at least in part, around the idea of conformism and against the backdrop of the polarized reality of the Cold War. Being president in a time of renewed Cold War tensions, much of Reagan's rhetoric revolved around the dichotomy 'us' vs. 'them'. The heightened Cold War rhetoric was something that evoked the Red Scare of

⁶ Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGGc1wGmgbM>.

the Fifties, when, for example, Eastern European Jewish people were often looked at with mistrust, and suspected to have ties with the other side of the Iron Curtain, thus creating an atmosphere of paranoia and “hysterical searches for scapegoats and enemies within” (Foertsch 2001, 4). The enemy, of course, is always identified with the Other—and in this time, an ‘other’ that could infiltrate America’s everyday life sounds particularly dangerous: Jacqueline Foertsch makes a comparison between communists in the 1950s and gay people in the 1980s to formulate her argument on the widespread paranoia on the invisibility of the enemy.⁷ Wendy Brown makes a similar argument comparing the dissenter and the enemy, writing that “both threaten the group with disintegration, both reveal the thinness of the membrane binding the nation” (Brown 2005, 32). The Other and the enemy overlapped in the Fifties with the tensions brought by the Cold War, but the perceived threat posed by the Other continued to represent a challenge to mainstream America’s way of life in Fifties narratives throughout the following decades. Brown links the theme of the Other with the image of the American middle class, the category that

signifies the natural and the good between the decadent or the corrupt, on the one side, and the aberrant of the decaying, on the other. Middle class identity is a conservative identity in the sense that it semiotically recurs to a phantasmatic past, an idyllic and uncorrupted historical moment (implicitly located around 1955) when life was good—[...] it embodies the ideal to which nonclass identities refer for proof of their exclusion (Brown 1993, 395).

The opposition to the Other is central to the era’s cultural and political dynamics⁸ with regards to race relations, homophobia, or anti-communism: in a speech in front of the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1947, J. Edgar Hoover had described communism as “a condition akin to disease that spreads like an epidemic; and like an epidemic, a quarantine is necessary to keep it from infecting the nation.”⁹ Such tensions

⁷ Cf. Foertsch 2001, 17.

⁸ Cf. Hodgson 2009, 92.

⁹ Cf. J. Edgar Hoover, “Speech Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities” (26 March 1947). <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/hoover-speech-before-the-house-committee-speech-text/>, accessed on September 7, 2019.

were not necessarily made explicit by the Fifties myth, which tended to convey a more positive imagery (a time of innocence, good values, and simplicity¹⁰), but were nevertheless implied in its use, as a dog whistle. As a result, the theme of the Other is often present in Eighties narratives, but not necessarily in black and white: in *Blue Velvet*, for example, the Other may be embodied by Dorothy Vallens as well as by Frank and his world. Similarly, in *Stranger Things* the Other is simultaneously represented by Eleven and by the monster. This ambiguous presence of the Other allows for the depiction in the narrative of both a world that is scary and dangerous and a world that, to use another word dear to David Lynch, is just strange. If we examine *Stranger Things*'s portrayal of the Eighties through the lens of today's culture, we may notice a few steps forward: a girl is part of the group of the main acting characters, and rather than being a damsel in distress (and despite suffering extreme distress) she is the one who often saves them. Moreover, instead of being an all-white group (another classic feature of American pop culture, particularly until the Eighties) one of the boys is African American. Apart from these two not wildly revolutionary elements of diversity, the gaze of nostalgia is, as it happens with the Fifties, more romanticized than anything else. The world evoked by the Duffer Brothers resembles more a fond childhood memory than a critical portrait.

Therefore, a narrative such as *Stranger Things* does not exactly offer a revised interpretation of the decade even today, past Trump's presidency. The fact that these plots revolve around young characters—almost exclusively teenagers—is integral to the narrative of historical innocence: childhood certainly makes it easier to produce a nostalgic, idealized portrayal of an era. It is interesting, though, how the Eighties ethos (and, by association, the Fifties ethos) returned at the same time on the two sides of the political spectrum in Trump's right-wing rhetoric, and in Hollywood's more liberal-leaning narratives, without developing the complexities of that myth, which include darkness and contradictions. On the other hand, what happened post-2015 is that a few

¹⁰ Cf. D'angelo 2010, 35.

representations on screen started to offer a more nuanced portrayal of the 1950s, with works such as George Clooney's 2017 film *Suburbicon*, and Amazon's 2017 series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. *Suburbicon*, written by the Coen brothers offers a ruthless deconstruction of the middle-class American family, while adding a background of racial tension as the first black family moves into a suburban neighborhood. The family at the center of the plot, though, is a white family destroyed by greed dynamics external to race, which are evocative of Hollywood classics such as *Double Indemnity*, or more recent works such as the Coen's own *Fargo*. The film offers a portrayal of the American suburb which echoes post-Eighties works such as Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands* or Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* and *Revolutionary Road*, particularly as it pertains to the demolition of the American family from within. Conversely, *Mrs. Maisel* is more focused on social themes, particularly women's rights, although the comedy format does not allow for the portrayal of some of the darkest aspects of the era, such as the discrimination suffered by American Jews, particularly during the McCarthy years. Moreover, being set in New York, the series offers a different family portrayal, outside the classic landscape of the American suburb. On the other hand, the background of *Mrs. Maisel* also offers a different incarnation of the Other through the portrayal of the Village counterculture scene, where a figure like Lenny Bruce is a prominent character. The counterculture scene of the 1950s also represents the origin of the movements of the 1960s and 1970s that the Fifties narrative would then try to erase in the Eighties. Similarly, the 1980s also had a vibrant underground cultural scene, an avant-garde composed of diverse, multicultural voices, now often forgotten in favor of more idealized and conformist portrayals, with rare exceptions, such as FX's *Pose*. Perhaps the answer to this lack of nuance in representation lies not in pop culture, but in different kinds of text, maybe not as popular—for example, documentaries or plays which may shape a counterpublic discourse¹¹ in opposition to the mainstream, idealized collective memory.

¹¹ Cf. Warner 2002, 56.

When discussing conservative rhetoric and the connections between the Fifties, the Eighties, and the Trump era, it is hard not to point to the historical figure that has a bond with all three: Republican lawyer Roy Cohn. A perfect embodiment of the ‘greed is good’ motto of the 1980s, Cohn gained his notoriety through his role during the Rosenberg trial in the 1950s, working as Joe McCarthy’s right hand. Afterwards, he became a prominent, albeit not exactly law-following, New York lawyer, who in the 1980s had the ear of President Reagan. During that time, he also became Donald Trump’s mentor. A closeted gay man, he died of AIDS in 1986. His figure has been immortalized in playwright Tony Kushner’s Pulitzer-winning play *Angels in America* (1991-1993), another text which recurs to the supernatural to portray the Eighties—although in a quite different way. Through Roy’s character celebration, Kushner criticizes the culture of the Reagan era as a time of ruthless individualism and greed:

It's a revolution in Washington, Joe. We have a new agenda and finally a real leader. They got back the Senate but we have the courts. By the nineties the Supreme Court will be block-solid Republican appointees, and the Federal bench—Republican judges like land mines, everywhere, everywhere they turn. Affirmative action? Take it to court. Boom! Land mine. And we'll get our way on just about everything: abortion, defense, Central America, family values, a live investment climate. [...] It's really the end of Liberalism. The end of New Deal Socialism. The end of ipso facto secular humanism. The dawning of a genuinely American political personality. Modeled on Ronald Wilson Reagan. (Kushner 1995, 69)

In *Angels in America*, Roy represents “the embodiment of [...] the corrupted power structure of America” and, by extension, of “Cold War America’s interpretation and reliance on a certain creed of straight masculinity. He is an illustration of the Reagan era’s fascination with the strong, individual, loner” (Nielsen 2008, 44-45). In the play, Kushner deconstructs the myth of American exceptionalism, so celebrated in the Fifties, by putting the ultimate takedown of America in the mouth of Roy’s nemesis, gay black nurse Belize:

I hate America [...]. I hate this country. It's just big ideas, and stories, and people dying, and people like you. The white cracker who wrote the national anthem knew what he was doing. He set the word ‘free’ to a note so high nobody can

reach it. That was deliberate. Nothing on earth sounds less like freedom to me. You come with me to room 1013 over at the hospital, I'll show you America. Terminal, crazy and mean. (Kushner 1995, 228)

Through Belize's monologue, which gains deeper significance as it is pronounced by a black, queer character, Kushner looks behind the curtain of the American fantasy portrayal that had been consolidated by the myth of the Fifties, and finds an unreachable landscape populated by stories (the mainstream American narrative) and dying people (the Others who were not included in Reagan's vision for America). This play has recently been itself the subject of a revival: in the midst of the Trump years, a new production of *Angels in America* was staged on Broadway. Much of the attention the revival got in the press was directed at Cohn's relationship with Trump. Accordingly, the production decided to directly challenge Trump's rhetoric by advertising the play on *The New York Times* with the line "Where's My Roy Cohn? Here."¹² and a picture of Nathan Lane, who interpreted Cohn's character in the revival. The revival of the play is not an isolated case: in the Trump years, Cohn was the subject of countless articles and two documentaries. The renewed attention to figures such as Roy Cohn, as well as more nuanced portrayals of the 1950s, speak to the need of employing non-idyllic imagery to depict American life: the portrayal of the Other has now been extended to the dark side of those decades, which often is admittedly more interesting.

CONCLUSION

Ronald Brunner has argued that "the sustainability of any political system is ultimately a matter of renewing faith in the underlying myth through progress consistent with basic aims and expectations" (Brunner 1994, 3). In this perspective, the myth of the Fifties has been central in American culture and in American politics. In *Fantasyland*, Andersen talks about the fact that from the beginning of the 20th century "nostalgia had been turned back into a pathology" (Andersen 2017, chap. 17). This pathological

¹² A reference to a quote attributed to Donald Trump, crying for a ruthless fixer while in the midst of the Mueller investigation.

tendency has entailed that the myth of American exceptionalism is often not questioned, both left unexplored and reiterated in all its idealized forms, from the Fifties to the Eighties. Reagan's position in American culture is a prime example: while today we may have started to look at the Fifties as a problematic era, at least because of segregation, the Reagan years—and Reagan himself—are still often idealized without question. The lack of a critical gaze toward his legacy and his subsequent idealization (on both sides of the political aisle, interestingly enough) has reached such a point that comedian Bill Maher observed that in 2012 Republicans “tried to elect his haircut”¹³ as the peak of this irrational faith in the rhetoric of the American myth.

Especially in light of the Trump years, a widespread understanding of the dynamics around the myth of American exceptionalism is necessary in order to avoid being dazzled by the American portrait itself during crucial moments where a clarity of vision is required, such as those in the voting booth. It would be necessary, in particular, to *rethink how we think* about the Eighties. In his farewell address in January 1989, Reagan noted how what was known as the ‘Reagan Revolution’ really was, to him, a ‘Great Rediscovery’.¹⁴ He, of course, intended it in the idealized sense, a rediscovery of the traditional values of the Fifties that we had forgotten. Another possibility for a ‘great rediscovery’ of the decade may actually entail new discoveries, as well as the recognition of the cracks in the portrait: the controversies, the dark aspects, the incongruencies, but also the dynamic, diverse, and complex influences that did not have space in the mainstream narrative the first time around.

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¹³ Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imjL8dfJVkA>.

¹⁴ Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjECSv8KFN4>.

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Anna Ferrari holds a PhD in American literature from Sapienza, University of Rome and teaches English at Università di Padova as adjunct professor. Her writing has appeared in *Ácoma. Rivista internazionale di Studi Nordamericani*, *Book 2.0*, *JAm It! Journal of American Studies* in Italy, and *The Polyphony*. Among her research interests are AIDS literature, LGBTQ culture, camp, Jewish humor, and representation of the urban space. Email address: anna.mv.ferrari@gmail.com