

Book Review

Gilad Padva. 2014. *Queer Nostalgia in Cinema and Pop Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Alyssa Dewees

Gilad Padva's *Queer Nostalgia in Cinema and Pop Culture* (2014) draws a connection between queer theory and nostalgia studies. In discussing a range of contemporary films, such as *Gay Sex in the 70s* (2005), *Another Gay Movie* (2006), and *Were the World Mine* (2008), as well as music videos and animations, Padva positions queerness and nostalgia as connected rather than inherently opposed, in spite of nostalgia's association with more conservative values and interpretations of history. Though Padva describes nostalgia's more conservative functions at length, his argument that nostalgia can be queered is ultimately an optimistic one. Using Alison Blunt's (2003) definition of nostalgia as a longing for temporal rather than physical *home* and Linda Anderson's (2000) claim that nostalgia creates disruptions and discontinuities in our experience of time, Padva argues that nostalgia is capable of creating disruptive, queer narratives of history and fashioning pride and merit in identities, lifestyles, and memories which might otherwise be deemed worthless in the dominant heteronormative culture. He contends, "Although nostalgia is often accused of being too conservative and conformist, manipulated by hegemonic forces for political purposes, it can also be reevaluated as a creative, vital, and dissident force that provokes the established, monochromatic concepts of memory and memorizing" (Padva 2014, 229). As part of its potential as a dissident and creative force, Padva

argues that nostalgia offers subaltern sexual communities a history not constituted solely through narratives of trauma and martyrdom but rather "a glorified past and its mythic playgrounds, role models and halls of fame" (Padva 2014, 8). Moreover, this empowering vision of shared or personal queer history, one that includes the traumatic past but is also inclusive of all the joy of queer experience, has the potential to create empowered queer identities and new dimensions of queer experience.

Padva's intervention in queer theory and nostalgia studies is part of a longstanding and ongoing discussion concerning how to situate queerness and queer identity within history. Because history is constructed through fundamentally heteronormative and patriarchal frameworks, which constitute time in relation to reproduction, queer theory has struggled with the question of how to posit queerness within history or even whether these concepts are fundamentally opposed. Padva references this debate on one occasion by referring to the work of Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009), who argues that because *the protogay child*—a term coined in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1994) *Tendencies*—cannot grow up according to the dominant culture's heteronormative markers of maturity, she must *grow sideways*, a theoretical framing which grants the child a timetable of maturity while it carves out an escape hatch from the narrative of history. By arguing that nostalgia can be queer and that queer

history can be viewed nostalgically, Padva makes an important intervention in a longer debate concerning how to conceive of the queer past and future as well as the relationship of queerness to history.

Moreover, while his book explores the uses of queer nostalgia through a number of multi-media texts, it also seems that the book itself is an attempt to catalogue and create queer nostalgia in what Padva terms “an intimate and highly corrective, healing journey in quest of nostalgia-in-motion” (Padva 2014, viii). Referring to nostalgia as a “creative practice” that allows for the formation of “new fields, dimensions, and perspectives of the queer experience” (8), Padva lovingly weaves together a nostalgic collection of queer cultural artefacts over the course of nine chapters, from 90s musicals to mid-twentieth century travel advertisements to gay bathhouses and pornographic magazines. In choosing his texts, he seems to rely on a sense of what is personally nostalgic as well as significant moments in queer history and queer pop culture. Yet, the sense of capturing nostalgia for the experience of queer youth also runs through book as well. For example, in chapter two, which analyzes the film *Beefcake* (1998) and the conventions of mid-twentieth century male physique magazines, Padva also conveys the feeling of being steeped in nostalgic memories of steeling away with these magazines as a gay youth. He writes of a 12-year-old Texan who “found it very intimidating to buy this magazine at the local newsstand” and would hide the magazine inside a comic book (36–37). While looking at the smiling body builders, he knew he was not alone (37). By *nostalgizing* these clandestine and somewhat sweet moments, Padva (in this and other chapters more overtly focused on nostalgic memories of queer youth) attempts to create a vision of queer childhood which includes the comedy and beauty that are often neglected in favor of more tragic queer coming-of-age narratives. However, in addition to claiming that nostalgia has the power to creatively recast queer childhood, Padva also discusses how the nostalgic vision of *Beefcake* allows the film to revitalize and historicize the world of homoerotic physique magazines. In “celebrat[ing] the male body all the way,” with “muscles, torsos, buttocks, and penises, semi or fully exposed in authentic AMG footage and in the semi-fictionalized

scenes,” the film not only documents the significance of these queer cultural artefacts but also gives them new life, creating “a counter-cultural homoerotic memory and heritage with its own brand of visibility” (54). Nostalgia allows these texts to be claimed in a narrative of collective queer history and renewed as objects of queer pride.

By inflecting his argument for the revitalizing and restorative potential of nostalgia with an obviously personal investment, Padva does much to create the experience of queer nostalgia for his readers and demonstrate the possibilities present in a joyful interaction with the queer past. However, that same personal investment is also perhaps the source of the book's most obvious flaw: its overwhelming focus on white gay men. In chapter four, “Claiming Lost Gay Youth, Embracing Femininostalgia: Todd Haynes’s *Dottie Gets Spanked* and *Velvet Goldmine*,” Padva cites Eve Sedgwick’s open and encompassing definition of queer as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlays, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituents of anyone’s gender, or anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (8). However, this definition stands in contrast with the fact that queer and gay seem to be used synonymously within the chapter. In discussing *Dottie Gets Spanked* (1993) and *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), two films about gay men’s adolescence, Padva introduces the term *femininostalgia* to refer to gay men’s nostalgia for childhood moments of feminine identification. He asserts that this process invokes positive and healing narratives of self-recognition:

Recognizing and respecting one’s effeminate nostalgia can be a healing process that reflects a gradual coming to terms with one’s early transgression. It is an intimate realization of one’s otherness, which retrospectively precedes the subject’s (homo)sexuality. Femininostalgia is therapeutic because it reconsiders the gay man’s effeminacy and enables him to regard this character not as a stigma, but rather as an inner, integral and intimate part of his personality and self-recognition. (93)

Padva makes a convincing case for the transformational power of valuing one’s early feminine experiences as a gay man. However, the argument

becomes less logical as it is applied to the queer subject in general. Because queer and gay are frequently used interchangeably throughout the chapter, claims such as “femininostalgia enables the queer subject to challenge the powerful gender regime and its imposed heteromascularity and heterofemininity” seem to make the case that femininostalgia is a principle which might be used similarly by all queer subjects (93). If this is part of the argument Padva intends to make, there should be some discussion of how femininostalgia might be used in relation to other queer identities and what this might look like. For example, it is hard to imagine a trans man having the same potential relationship to his early identifications with femininity as that described by Padva regarding gay men. As this example indicates, there are often moments within the text where a more complete and inclusive vision of queer identity would have opened up unexplored areas of complexity. While a study of gay men’s relationship to nostalgia is certainly worthwhile on its own, the book initially proposes a study of the relationship between nostalgia and queerness, and the analysis and textual examples should reflect the broadness of that intended focus.

The afterward, “Queering Nostalgia or Queer Nostalgia?,” praises the “politicized reconstruction of nostalgia” (228), and this is certainly something the book achieves. *Queer Nostalgia in Cinema and Pop Culture* rather bravely dares to be optimistic in its vision of both the queer past and the queer future, which makes the book a joy to read. However, though the overall argument for the potential of queer nostalgia is an important contribution to both queer theory and nostalgia and memory studies, the intermediary chapters lack some of the analysis and discussion that would have allowed Padva to fully work through his claims concerning the potential of queer nostalgia. Some of this absence results from the lack of diverse representations of queerness as stated above, but many chapters also seem to get bogged down in presenting excessive theoretical frameworks or digress into marginally related concerns without ever fully integrating all the information presented. Chapter five, “Boys Want to Have Fun! Carnavalesque Adolescence and Nostalgic Resorts in *Another Gay Movie* and *Another Gay Sequel*,” for example, begins and ends

with a discussion of the raucous gay teen comedies viewed according to Bakhtin’s tenets of carnival, yet the middle of the chapter explores racial fetishization in the gay community, Judith Butler’s analysis of drag in connection to a drag queen master of ceremonies, the politics of sissiness in gay youth hookup culture, and the parody of homophobic evangelists, among other topics and other literary theorists. While nostalgia is briefly referenced in relation to the history of resorts as havens for gay hookups and exclusive gay utopias where intimacy between men might be public, the central argument concerning the restorative potential of nostalgia seems somewhat lost amid so many other topics. Furthermore, in other chapters the excess of references to literary theorists seems to overwhelm the close reading of the central text, and in this way the argument concerning nostalgia in connection with that central text again feels lost.

In spite of these gaps, however, the success of this book is in its hopeful reading of queer nostalgia and its commitment to celebrating queer history. Padva pragmatically states that “nostalgia encourages optimism because it revives the pursuit of happiness and inspires resistance to the horrors of the present” (228). This practical focus on making queer experience more bearable, and hopefully more joyful, by overtly taking up rose-colored glasses makes Padva’s book stand out among more frequent cynicism within queer theory and traumatic visions of the queer past and future. Moreover, his assertion that queer nostalgia offers “a beacon, a ray of light in the darkness” which has the power to redeem “neglected or denied heritages of beauty and glamour” offers a convincing argument that glorifying a shared queer historical vision offers practical betterment to the lives of queer people against the aforementioned vision of queerness as antithetical to history (228).

References

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