

Article

# Retro Aesthetics, Affect, and Nostalgia Effects in Recent US-American Cinema: The Cases of *La La Land* (2016) and *The Shape of Water* (2017)

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**Abstract:** Nostalgia and retro are phenomena of modernism and modernization that are currently booming. This goes for political decision-making processes as much as for popular culture where retro aesthetics is the dominant mode of design: Both appear driven by ‘longings for a time that never was.’ While research on nostalgia and retro abound, nostalgia still remains a vague and undertheorized concept seemingly identical with retro. Engaging the ways in which Damien Chazelle’s 2016 movie *La La Land* and Guillermo del Toro’s *The Shape of Water* of 2017 produce and interrogate affects, this essay shows how film allows us to make distinctions that the proliferating research on nostalgia and retro often fail to deliver. As we zoom in on how both films reference iconic moments in film history, it becomes evident that retro aesthetics operates in distinctively diverse manners. While *La La Land* interrogates cinema’s “nostalgia for nostalgia”, *The Shape of Water* reclaims nostalgia as a mode of social bonding. In this way, both movies foreground how the dynamics of nostalgia, at best, moves forward, not back. Film studies, in turn, can shed considerable light on how both nostalgia and retro work—and why they sell so well.

**Keywords:** cinema; nostalgia; affect; *La La Land*; *The Shape of Water*

## 1. Introduction

Nostalgia and retro are phenomena of modernization that are currently booming. This goes for popular culture, where retro aesthetics is the dominant mode of design and media formats, as much as for political decision-making processes which, like Brexit or Trump’s style of politics, are driven by a ‘longing for a time that never was.’ Even our taste buds are sent off to time travel. With serial repetition McDonald’s, for instance, serves its customers around the globe a ‘limited edition’ of the “1955 Burger”, sometimes accompanied by a Coke in a retro glass, and thus delivers a nostalgically retrospective view of the fast food company’s own history which took off in 1955. Similarly, in Germany, the politically incorrect “Sarotti Mohr”—the logo of a more or less average chocolate company—returned from the undead a few years ago, calling for new attention with a design that showcases the ‘good old days’ of colonialism, while the globally-operating discount supermarket Aldi holds in store a “Nostalgie-Tüte”, a nostalgia bag with sweets in old-fashioned candy store style, thus recalling a long-gone economy. No surprise, therefore, that Damien Chazelle’s nostalgic musical film *La La Land* (2016)—a homage to Hollywood and Bollywood—broke all records winning seven awards during the Golden Globes and six more at the Oscars (out of seven and fourteen nominations) in January and February 2017, respectively. Likewise, in 2017, Guillermo del Toro’s *The Shape of Water* (2017) was hailed as the “most sentimental fish romance” of that year (Robinson 2017), as a “50s-style creature feature” (Hornaday 2017), and as “nostalgia done right” (Crump 2017). This, of course, raises the question whether nostalgia can be done wrong and, if so, when and where this might be the case. I would like to suggest that *La La Land* and *The Shape of Water* allow us to make distinctions that the proliferating research on nostalgia and retro

has so far failed to deliver, and that film studies can shed considerable light on how both nostalgia and retro actually work.

This is quite a claim, for, apart from popular consumer culture, nostalgia and retro also boom in recent scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and social psychology. However, this scholarship has, so far, fallen short of successfully tracing a history of nostalgia, though there are several attempts and versions of such a history; nor has it sharpened our sense of what nostalgia means and how it works. Quite the opposite: While research on nostalgia and retro abounds, nostalgia has remained a vague and undertheorized concept, often seemingly identical with retro. Likewise, nostalgia is a trendy and recurrent term in cinema studies, which we can trace from Jameson (1991) much-debated engagement of the “nostalgia film” to more recent explorations, such as Dika (2003) take on the “uses of nostalgia” in contemporary film or Sprengler (2009) study *Screening Nostalgia*, which convincingly shows how film studies have shaped notions of nostalgia. I would like to suggest, though, that in fact it is retro aesthetics that proliferates and (too) often gets conceptualized as nostalgia. Recent film studies, then, have mainly contributed to a more thorough understanding of nostalgia effects. So how does nostalgia work? What are its cultural functions and effects? Why does retro sell so well? How do nostalgia and retro differ, how do they relate? How and when do time-spaces we label ‘nostalgic’ emerge? How do retro aesthetics shape affects? What role do media of reproduction and simulation play for the close affinity of nostalgia and consumption? And, how can nostalgia be distinguished from other modes of memory?

These are some of the crucial questions that remain to be solved, and my essay can offer no more than partial answers and limited perspectives. By zooming in on recent cinema, I do make the attempt, though, to shine some light on the interrelation between retro aesthetics, affect, and commodification. Their interplay, I argue, may or may not result in nostalgia effects, depending on both cinematic ‘syntax’ and its cultural framing and on the viewer, even as “nostalgia has permeated all facets of the cinema” (Sprengler 2009, p. 68). For, like trauma, nostalgia is both a cultural and an individual phenomenon. Yet, unlike trauma, I hold, nostalgia is first of all culturally embedded before it becomes individually experienced, which is why we may long for a time we never lived in. This in turn suggests that, like emotions, affects evolve from and get shaped by their surrounding cultural environment and media ecology.<sup>1</sup>

My following argument unfolds in three steps: In step one, I take a closer look at how nostalgia and retro figure in the reception of *La Land Land* and *The Shape of Water*. Reviews have relied on these terms, yet often employ them as if they are self-explanatory and identical (which they are not). By engaging these accounts, throughout this essay, I interrogate the common—and somewhat misleading—take on nostalgia as a longing for a lost past. In a second step, I aim to render nostalgia and retro more transparent, presenting a conceptual framework that assesses how nostalgia and retro do their cultural work in times of (supposed) acceleration and multiply motivated cultural anxieties. This part of my essay builds on the results of a collaborative project pursued at the Zentrum für Kulturwissenschaft/Cultural Studies of the University of Bonn; in the course of this research, we—a group of scholars whose expertise ranges from literary, cultural, and media studies to musicology to anthropology and cultural geography—came to define nostalgia as an affective mode of perception that aligns imagined time-spaces, mediated in retro aesthetics, with processes of commodification.<sup>2</sup> In my third and final step, I return to the reception of *La Land Land* and *The Shape of Water* and readdress how the films’ visuality and soundscape produce and interrogate nostalgia and affect by way of retro aesthetics.

As we will see, nostalgia depends on retro, while retro works and sells well without nostalgia. In fact, some recent retro productions—such as the TV series *Mad Men*—came along with their own

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of concepts of trauma and the question of whether or not trauma can be represented, see Sielke (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Our collaboration resulted in an edited volume published in the series *Transcription* (with Peter Lang) in 2017: *Nostalgie: Imaginierte Zeit-Räume in globalen Medienkulturen/Nostalgia: Imagined Time-Spaces in Global Media Cultures* (Sielke 2017). See also <http://www.nostalgie-uni-bonn.de>.

merchandise and fashion collection. At the same time, a film's engagement with nostalgia, as Sprengler suggests, is also a source of its critical consciousness (p. 3). This in turn highlights that commodification and critique have long ceased to be at odds. Yet exploring film, as Dika (2003, p. 2) describes it, as a "possible site of resistance" to a "culture-wide pull to the past", we should not ignore that nostalgia's pull may in fact be geared toward the future. For at best, I hold, nostalgia moves us forward, not back.

## 2. Step One. "Nostalgia Done Right" or Wrong? *La La Land* vs. *The Shape of Water*

Critics seem to agree that *La Land Land* and *The Shape of Water* are "deeply nostalgic" films (Golding 2017)—and that nostalgia is not a good thing. The term mushrooms in reviews and articles on both movies: Whereas retro made 'only' 21 appearances in the eighteen reviews I considered, nostalgia was used 95 times—in derogative and imprecise as well as suggestive manners. Let us first consider Guillermo del Toro's magical realist Cold War film noir which stars Sally Hawkins as the deaf laboratory cleaner Elisa and Doug Jones as the strange amphibian creature that Elisa falls in love with and eventually rescues from the film's sadistic villain, Colonel Richard Strickland (Michael Shannon), head of the government research facility that captured him. "Filmed in aqueous greens and blues, its period design dripping with kitschy nostalgia and retro-futurism", Ann Hornaday writes in *The Washington Post*, "'The Shape of Water' takes its cues from Golden Age Hollywood, including musicals, Bible epics and 1950s creature features, as well as the sleekly optimistic advertising imagery of the early 1960s." While the movie's unmistakable echoes of classic Hollywood cinema and the musical (film),<sup>3</sup> seem somewhat embarrassing, associating nostalgia with kitsch and acknowledging the importance of color schemes, the significance of media(tion), and the future-boundedness of retro aesthetics, Hornaday clearly registers how nostalgia comes about. Similarly, Andy Crump's take on how "*Shape of Water* Is Wonder and Nostalgia Done Right" is illuminating, even as the alliance of wonder with nostalgia remains as enigmatic as does the author's very understanding of nostalgia, a term that returns only once as del Toro's film gets compared to *La La Land*:

Del Toro's wonder is his form of honesty; it gives *The Shape of Water's* nostalgia element, borne out by the *Creature from the Black Lagoon* homage and Elisa's and Giles' soft spot for classic musicals, ballast. (The film's multiple musical interludes, culminating in a gorgeous black-and-white number with Hawkins and Jones, feel more authentic to their sources than the whole of last year's *La La Land*, a nostalgia piece built with top-down design.)

Why is wonder a form of honesty? How can it give ballast to nostalgia? What, we may wonder, is *The Shape of Water's* "nostalgia element" that sets it apart from its kin with "top-down design"? Despite their opacity, Crump's approximations and their focus on authenticity effects and mediations via movies and music are evocative. Being "no stranger to" del Toro's work, wonder is particularly central to his latest film, Crump holds, which "more than anything [ . . . ] best captures the experience of observing the otherworldly through lenses of curiosity and amazement." Meeting the amphibian man—an alien other-worldly creature, familiar from Jack Arnold's 1954 film *Creature from the Black Lagoon*—with reverence not fear, the protagonist Elisa displays an affect that anxiety-driven cultures, during the 1950s and now, seem to have lost. As Jacobs (2017) notes in the *Huffington Post*, "[t]he asset", as the amphibian man is called by Strickland, "seems communicative, perhaps even capable of affection." Both Crump (2017) and Jacobs (2017) hint at how the film not only acknowledges affect as a media effect; implicitly, Elisa's desire is an affect for film. *The Shape of Water*, writes Jacobs, "reads as del Toro's homage to cinema's ability to awaken the senses. In a Hollywood landscape saturated with recycled stories, he has gifted us with a testament to the fantastical magic of the big screen and the

<sup>3</sup> A few commentators acknowledge how *La La Land* bows to Bollywood; Khosla (2016), for instance, lists dances on top of vehicles", chance encounters, coloring, as well dance and dream sequences among its "8 most Bollywood things." Since Bollywood has taken its cues from Hollywood and both have been part of a global film industry, this intra- and intermedial exchange certainly needs a closer analysis which goes beyond the scope of my essay.

rarefied sensation of encountering a story that lifts us to new heights” (Jacobs 2017). Taking its main cue from Arnold’s 1954 “creature feature”, however, *The Shape of Water* certainly belongs with the “recycled stories” the critic casts off. Thus, rather than depending on a rare magic, cinema’s power works its effects by way of a technological apparatus that necessarily recycles, as it updates, the medium of film and its generic narratives.

The common ground that *La La Land* and *The Shape of Water* share is the use they make of the musical film which, in its early stage, as Altman (1987, p. 119) explains, “borrowed [its] materials from a more indigenous, lower middle-class theatrical model”. Indeed, the musical (film) and its cultural history tell a complex story of the interaction and competition of media, which gets revisited anew in both *La La Land* and *The Shape of Water*, not least by way of Elisa’s muteness which remembers the era of silent film that, like Elisa, relied on music as a means of communication. During the 1930s, musical films came to focus on “the joy of adolescent coupling” (Altman 1987, p. 119), which both films rehearse in their own manner. Thanks to engaged film aficionados and experts, we find illuminating online records, in both writing and visuals, detailing the many sources both movies cite. While only *The Shape of Water* features the original musical films—remediated on TV, thus showcasing media competition—both films reenact iconic musical scenes. Plus, while they even reference the same cinematic choreographies and settings—in scenes imagined by their female protagonists, for instance, Mia and Elisa sway in black and white under starry skies that call on Fred Astaire and Eleanor Powell’s dance to “Begin the Beguine” in *Broadway Melody of 1940* (1940)—*La La Land* and *The Shape of Water* adapt their source material for significantly different effects: As Sebastian and Mia reenact and, at best, update a (culturally) familiar script, Elisa’s dance with the creature inverts cultural conventions by enacting the foreplay of making love with an alien. Likewise, mimicking Astaire and Ginger Rogers’s “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off” from *Shall We Dance* (1937), Mia and Sebastian tap their feet sitting on a bench in Griffith Park whereas Elisa and Giles (Richard Jenkins) take the act to the sofa, transforming it into a ‘secret’ affair of social bonding.

Though a comprehensive analysis of how the musical (film) configures *La La Land* and *The Shape of Water* exceeds the scope of this essay, I come back to its central function at a later moment. Crucial is that both *The Shape of Water* and *La La Land* are works of remediation in the sense of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin: “Digital visual media can be best understood”, they argue, “through the ways in which they honor, rival, and revise linear-perspective painting, photography, film, television, and print. [ . . . ] What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion old media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media” (Bolter and Grusin 2000, p. 15). If retro is the default mode of now dominant digital visual media, we should not be surprised about its ubiquity. At the same time, this observation calls for more precision and for reflections on effects, including affect. While acknowledging the competition of media—Elisa and Giles live above a movie theater whose owner bemoans a dwindling audience—*The Shape of Water* honors the older medium not for its own sake, but for making us (re-)live what cinema can do to us. *La La Land*, by contrast, remains at an aesthetic distance and rivals, yet also honors, digitization, so it seems, by mimicking older technologies of film-making—as we shall see.

*La La Land*—whose narrative traces the (potential) relationship of (aspiring) actress Mia (Emma Stone) and (struggling) jazz pianist Sebastian (Ryan Gosling) in modern-day Los Angeles, evolving from chance meetings and reencounters—was *the* sensation of the 2017 award season. Reviewers, though, have tended to dismiss Chazelle’s approach as nostalgia done wrong, if they did not consider nostalgia ‘wrong’ to start with. Salisbury (2016), for instance, holds that his “Technicolor triumph is a nostalgia-induced revival of classic Hollywood musicals”, thus identifying retro-aesthetic references with nostalgia. Gleiberman (2017), in contrast, aims to show why the movie “isn’t just a stylized nostalgia trip of champagne montages and harmonizing hearts.” Focused on what the film offers ‘beyond’ nostalgia, Gleiberman likens *La La Land* to Jacques Demy’s musical films *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964) and *The Young Girls of Rochefort* (1967). Similarly, Dan Golding, who perceives nostalgia as an “obsession with the past” and a force of constraint (for protagonist Sebastian), defends the film:

“The tense relationship between past and present evident in *La La Land*”, he holds, “is presented in not just a nostalgic façade”, but takes “delight in lightness”, especially by means of its “clever soundscapes [ . . . ], the film’s strongest formal element.” However, Golding also bemoans the film’s lack of realism—its supposed ignorance of the “true” history of jazz and of LA’s latino origin—and its clashes of temporalities: “‘A Lovely Night’”, he explains, is considered by composer Justin Hurwitz “the film’s most old-fashioned musical number”, sounding “in some places [ . . . ] like a Fred and Ginger song. Yet even this antique fantasy”, Golding adds, “is deliberately interrupted by Mia’s mobile phone, as though Emma Stone has forgotten to put her phone on silent for this alleged cinema of nostalgia.” In fact, though, this scene perfectly underlines that nostalgia “is”, as Hutcheon (2000, p. 199) writes in *Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern*, “what you ‘feel’ when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you and, often, carry considerable emotional weight. In both cases, it is the element of response—of active participation, both intellectual and affective—that makes for the power”. This conjunction of a particular experience of temporality and affect or “emotional weight” seems indeed crucial for an understanding of nostalgia as inextricably tied to modes of mediation. The ring of Mia’s mobile phone is, thus, not an accidental interference into the film’s retro soundscape, but the very condition for the effects of nostalgia and the affect that it allows to form. Keeping this in mind, let us now reconsider the history of the term nostalgia and, more particularly, its close alliance with media history.

### 3. Step Two. Mediating Imagined Time-Spaces: Nostalgia as Aesthetic Experience and Affective Mode

When the term was first employed by the physician Johannes Hofer in his 1688 medical dissertation, nostalgia—from Greek *nóstos* or return (to one’s homeland) and *álgos*, pain was defined as a pathological “homesickness” that befell Swiss soldiers in foreign lands (Hofer 1688). In fact, up until the end of the eighteenth century nostalgia was deemed a deadly illness. In many ways common notions of nostalgia have retained this taint of the pathological, in part because psychology up to the 1950s and 1960s took nostalgia as a—negatively connoted—spatial term associated with a longing to be home. “It was not until the end of the mid-to-late twentieth century”, writes Dwyer (2015, p. 9) in *Back to the 50s: Nostalgia, Hollywood Film, and Popular Music of the Seventies and Eighties*, “that nostalgia became fully associated with the temporal dimension, and removed from the sense of spatial dislocation”.

Our collaborative research, conducted at the Zentrum für Kulturwissenschaft/Cultural Studies in Bonn, is in twofold disagreement with Dwyer’s claim (see Sielke 2017). First, we hold that the transformation of nostalgia from a spatial into a temporal term set off much earlier, namely, in the middle of the eighteenth century. This shift from a spatial to a temporal register is partly driven by the rise of media of technical reproduction, like print. It is moreover aligned with an overall tendency toward an acceleration of life forms and a subsequent temporalization of concepts that scholars, including Reinhart Koselleck and Niklas Luhmann, have identified as characteristic of the so-called “Sattelzeit” (or saddle time) between 1750 and 1850. During the industrialization of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—an era perceived of as increasingly dynamic, just like our own age of digitalization—phenomena of nostalgia emerge that seem to ‘arrest’ time; they counterbalance a speedy present with aesthetic recursions to an idealized time-space, such as a pre-industrial economy or an ‘original’ state of nature untouched by culture, both of which became privileged reference points for Romanticism, for instance. Such phenomena of nostalgia and retro aesthetics, we hold, shapeshifted European culture(s) as well as colonial settings in the Americas and Asia. They have included the ‘invention’ of childhood in the late eighteenth century, the design of garden architecture, museum spaces, and objects of everyday use as much as Victorian and nowadays neo-Victorian fiction, revitalization movements, and vintage computer games (which usher back in Pacman and a soundscape that rings the bells of late 1980s/early 1990s computer culture).

Secondly, we refute Dwyer’s claim that by the end of the twentieth century “nostalgia became fully [ . . . ] removed from the sense of spatial dislocation.” Instead, the term nostalgia has become re-associated with displacement, exile, and diaspora, and the terms “home” and “homesickness”



experience a revival, not only in the context of post-colonialism and its critical debates. In Germany, “Heimat”—which resonated with the “Blut und Boden” mentality of Nazi ideology for a long time—has turned presentable again and now functions as a fashionable label for marketing almost anything, from regional foods to furniture to safe futures. Generally, nostalgia appears to have largely divested itself from its bad reputation. Partly due to the work of social psychology, which aims to rehabilitate nostalgia as “a social resource”, the image of the old ‘ailment’ has been upgraded considerably as of late. “If nostalgia was an experience that could generate positive affective states”, muses social psychologist Clay Routledge, for example, “then perhaps it had psychological value” (p. 6). Following this utilitarian logic, social psychology considers nostalgia both as a kind of tool by which marketing impinges upon consumer decisions *and* as a new path to wellbeing. Now deemed a “desired state” (Routledge 2016, p. 7), nostalgia has morphed from a deathly illness to an anodyne if not a universal remedy with multifarious powers: nostalgia “weakens the desire for money” (Lasaleta et al. 2014), “drives donations” (Merchant and Ford 2010) and “empathy” (Zhou et al. 2012), and is an “antidote to boredom” (Van Tilburg et al. 2013), so recent studies claim.<sup>4</sup> In addition, studies of nostalgia as a psychological resource have left their mark in empirical social research: They gave rise to so-called “nostalgia scales”, aimed at explaining, for instance, how nostalgia affects people returning from foreign deployments and inspiring experiments which “induce nostalgia” in order to measure its effects (see Baldwin and Landau 2014; Baldwin et al. 2015).

While many of these empirical approaches are based on a reductive notion of nostalgia as a psychological disposition, they also acknowledge that nostalgia, as our own research suggests, is a mode of perception that frames our affects and, in this way, impinges on individual, social, and political agency. Indeed, the question of how nostalgia works—worldwide—as an effective instrument of politics has become a valid critical concern. Yet, rather than being a kind of attitude, we suggest that nostalgia is first of all a cultural phenomenon of modernization characterized by a convergence of complex processes of temporalization and spatialization and their aesthetic configuration. We, thus, agree, in part, with Hutcheon’s sense that experiencing the convergence of “two different temporal moments, past and present” often involves “considerable emotional weight” (Hutcheon 2000, p. 199). But how do we in fact experience temporality in the first place—and why would that experience register as affect?

The close conjunction of affect and temporality explains why nostalgia evolved alongside, indeed is an effect of modern technologies of reproduction from print to digital modes which have allowed us to experience time in entirely new ways. The invention of photography, for instance, made it possible to freeze, reproduce, and manipulate what the human eye perceives as a fleeting moment in time and turn it into a fixed representation of ‘the past.’ Photography, thus, became the paradigmatic medium of a nostalgic remembrance of a lost world of objects and subjects, a past world that remains visible and thus memorable for us solely by means of technology. Digitalization has affected our sense of time and space in even more radical ways, as it diminishes our sense of linear temporality by what we experience as synchronicity. What is more, digital technologies foreground that nostalgia is, to a large extent, a response to media aesthetics. This becomes perfectly evident, for instance, as we color recent photographs in the sepia tones of yesteryears. Likewise, the seemingly self-made designs of the 1950s and 1960s that resurface in recent ad campaigns by McDonald’s, Marlboro, and Levi’s, or the current renaissance of handwriting in digital typography are signatures of times and technical standards gone by. By perfecting the reproduction of designs inscribed with a past temporality, complex digital technologies seem to reduce the high speed of time they themselves helped to set in motion. In this way, they foster a resistance to the very acceleration they keep on driving.

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<sup>4</sup> As do popular accounts of how nostalgia contributes to our happiness. Rettig (2013) book *Die guten alten Zeiten: Warum Nostalgie glücklich macht*, for instance, explores “the good old times” and aims to explain why nostalgia makes us happy.

Any answer to the question of how media produce affects needs to take into account that phenomena of nostalgia are always part of a—regionally as well as nationally specific—“cultural imaginary” (Fluck 1997) which feeds on a culture’s sense of its own history, its memory culture, and its central images and values as much as it is motivated by individual desires—a desire that from the seventeenth century onward manifests itself in cultural practice. It is in this way that they function as techniques and procedures of directing perception and shaping affects. This concept of nostalgia seems to link up with the original notion of nostalgia as a dimension of an individual’s temperament, prone to homesickness, feelings of loss, and melancholia (cf., among others, Agacinski 2003; Rubenstein 2001; Häfner 1993; Jankélévitch 1974). Yet while this conceptual history shapes both the use of the term and the scholarly investigation of nostalgia phenomena until today, we take nostalgia as neither a psychic disposition nor a characteristic of certain objects. Instead, nostalgia, as we know it now, works by way of techniques of mediation and simulation that steer and channel our perception, model our affects, and create, perpetuate, and permute specific relations between subjects and objects—relations that do not simply follow from “[f]amiliarity”, according to Austin (2007, p. 23) “the primary affect of nostalgia”. And this is why nostalgia so closely interdepends with processes of commodification.

Retro aesthetics create emotional interrelations between people and their environment made up of spaces, things, and media ecologies that operate politically and economically (see Abel 2007, p. 6; Guffey 2006, p. 19) and as a mode of a seemingly immediate and ‘authentic’ self-perception (see Krause 2006, pp. 22–23). “[D]enying or at least degrading the present as it is lived”, Hutcheon underlines, “nostalgia makes the idealized (and therefore always absent) past into the site of immediacy, presence, and authenticity” (Hutcheon 2000, p. 197).<sup>5</sup> Jameson (1989) famously spoke of a “nostalgia for the present.” Whereas affect has generally been understood, by Spinoza, Freud, Bloch, and Deleuze, among others (see also Leys 2011, pp. 435–36), as a form of (pre-)subjective, non-conscious, and spontaneous perception separate from cognitive memory, we understand phenomena of nostalgia as “displays of affect” and part of a “rhetoric of emotion” (Kneale 2006, p. 102; see also Starobinski 1966; Abel 2007; Handwerker-Küchenhoff 2006, p. 28), which make visible the affective moment of processes of memory and spatialization (see Damasio 2000). These discourses relate to what Rousseau, Théodule Ribot, Bergson, and Starobinski, among others, called *mémoire affective* (see Moser 2017) as well as to more recent reflections on “the agency of things” (see, for instance, Böhme 2006; Latour 2005; Brown 2001; Didi-Huberman 1999; Appadurai 1986).

Of primary relevance in this context is, thus, not so much the polarized debate about concepts and definitions that has driven the “turn to affect” (Leys 2011) during the last decades. More interesting is to interrogate how phenomena of nostalgia and retro aesthetics guide and thus shape our perception of the world, what kinds of affects they model and produce, and how they, in this way, transform our relation to spaces and things and make desires evolve in the process.<sup>6</sup> Such an approach challenges dominant positions of traditional and recent affect theory from Silvan S. Tomkins to Brian Massumi that deems affects to be “independent” of and antecedent to ideologies and considered “nonsignifying, automatic processes” (Leys 2011, pp. 437–38). Instead it interlinks with recent work on the history of feelings, emotions, and affects (see, for instance, Plamper 2015; Frevert 2011; Illouz 2007). Crucial to this kind of advance are close analyses of modes of representation that inform aesthetics, styles, and spaces with complex notions of temporality and, in this way, generate moods and atmospheres that shift and change our agency. Work on the aesthetics and mediation of nostalgia, therefore, opens methodological paths to pondering the affective dimension of a whole range of day-to-day experiences, including the act of watching a movie.

Now evidently nostalgia and retro challenge our sense of time and space, history and memory; they pave inroads to fundamental processes of modernity as well as to modes of resistance against

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Assmann (2003): “Affect works as magnifier of perception [ . . . ]. Affect memories bear the stain of authenticity [ . . . ]” (p. 29).

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the state of research see Sedikides et al. (2015).

modernization and globalization; and this may in fact be a major reason for their current boom. At the same time, we need to distinguish retro from nostalgia. As Guffey (2006) writes in *Retro: The Culture of Revival*: “Retro does not seek out proud examples of the past; it shuffles instead through history’s unopened closets and unlit corners” (p. 14). And it does so quite literally, as in the case of the retro film genre that makes reference to B-movies rather than to art film—as does Todd Haynes’s *Far from Heaven* (2013), a homage to the movies of Douglas Sirk, most prominently, as Sprengler notes, to his *All that Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Imitation of Life* (1959).

It, thus, seems safe to say that there is no nostalgia without retro, yet plenty of retro without nostalgia; for retro works, and more importantly it sells, without nostalgia. In fact, retro is inextricably entwined with processes of commodification and consumption and often sells particularly well because the ironic attitude is part of its offer; its major goal; however, remains to secure future sales, including the sale of movie tickets at the box office.

#### 4. Step Three. Challenging or Embracing Nostalgia? The Cultural Work of Retro

Now *La La Land* certainly was a box office success, at least in the US where an investment of 30 million dollars brought a revenue of 151 million of the all-in-all 446 million dollars.<sup>7</sup> This makes you wonder if its success at the 2017 Oscar Awards was an act of Hollywood celebrating itself—critics called it “a love letter to Hollywood” (see, e.g., Smith 2016)—or rather a way of mourning its own demise and multiple attempts at revitalization—a question that cannot be answered as the process of nomination and selection is a complicated, quantitative voting affair.<sup>8</sup> American Film Institute (2016) ranked *La La Land* as one of ten “AFI Movies of the Year”, declaring that it “reaches for the Hollywood heavens like a rainbow—glowing incandescent with color, song and dance, and infectious energy that channels a time gone by to inspire today.” Many critics think this is why *La La Land*, “bloated by its references” (Tsiolkas 2016; qtd. in Voeltz 2016), won over other films up for the awards, mostly “hard-edged realist stories that take an unflinching look at life”, as Ken Jaworowski, a staff editor for the *New York Times*, has it (see Abrams et al. 2017). Now how can “a time gone by [ . . . ] inspire today” in the first place?

To my mind, *La La Land* is not so much mourning the loss of happy ends, as Gleiberman (2017) believes, suggesting that the film’s surprise finale “leaves us in a bittersweet swoon over the happy endings we long for that can no longer be, because they’ve all been replaced by the beautiful mess we make.” After all, we have been quite happy cherishing what Roy Grundmann, in his take on Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), calls “the paradox of all great romances”: “the promise of [a] happy-ever-after” that “never comes to pass” (Grundmann 2006, p. 51). Rather, *La La Land* seems to “inspire today” by exposing as much as challenging our “nostalgia for nostalgia.”<sup>9</sup> As Sprengler underlines, “narrative strategies, music, montage sequences, and period casting have all been deployed in the service of nostalgia in popular Hollywood film” (p. 69). Any “love letter to Hollywood”, therefore, acknowledges, appraises, and partly restores, in the sense of Boym (2001) distinction between “restorative” and “reflective nostalgia”, the history of a visual culture steeped in nostalgia. At the same time, *La La Land*’s take on nostalgia is self-reflective rather than reflective, thus dramatizing what Michael Koresky describes as the crucial mark of the musical itself: “Like the Western”, he writes, “the Musical is an inherently self-referential genre, devoted and tied to certain mannerisms and motifs; each new one is a palimpsest, containing traces of those that came before . . . The traditional musical can’t really make room for other forms; it’s both self-sustaining and self-destructive. It is alone in

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=lalaland.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> See Michael Miller’s *People* article “Ballot Lessons!” which “remind[s] us, on 27 February 2017 (that is, one day after the success of *La La Land*), of “How the Oscar Voting System Works After the Best Picture Mix-Up” (Miller 2017). The reference of course is to the remarkable scene when Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway mistakenly announced *La La Land* as winner of the Oscar for “Best Picture” which was actually awarded to Barry Jenkins’s *Moonlight*.

<sup>9</sup> The phrase is used, for instance, by John Hollow in the title of his 1996 essay “That Life, That Death: A Nostalgia for Nostalgia.” (Hollow 1996).



the dark, dancing with itself” (qtd. in Voeltz 2016). Foregrounding how Hollywood musical film has worked its most successful memorable effects (cf. Feuer 1993), *La La Land* creates a tension between affirming, demystifying, and ironizing these strategies, and leaves many a viewer with mixed feelings. As critics bemoaned, for instance, Mia and Sebastian’s dance performance in Griffith Park, though masterfully choreographed by Jerome Robbins, certainly cannot compete with the art of Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. *La La Land* merely takes a bow to its models and hints at the many “oddities” of classic musical films and their cheerful mode of denial. Rather than disseminating nostalgia, Chazelle’s film dissects it by foregrounding its materiality.

Sprengler herself distinguishes between “narratives structured by nostalgia” and “narratives ostensibly about nostalgia” (Sprengler 2009, p. 74). In this nomenclature, *The Shape of Water* would qualify as the former, *La La Land* as the latter. Yet Sprengler’s discrimination needs precision, for it is not narratives that shape nostalgia; it is their specific media format and aesthetics that, by echoing styles of a dated currency, shape imagined time-spaces and enable such affect. With del Toro’s film we enter such imaginary time-spaces from the very beginning; in *La La Land* they come with borderlines. For instance, as Mia and her husband, by the end of the movie, chance upon one of Sebastian’s piano performances at Seb’s—the jazz club whose name Mia had suggested—the film flashes back and projects an imaginary life that Mia may have lived with the jazz musician. Playing on the return narrative characteristic of nostalgia films (see Sprengler 2009, pp. 74–75), *La La Land* does not so much rewind than fast forward to a time that never was, using two distinct modes of transfer. The first is a “dream come true” multi-media film-in-the-film that stages the successful artist couple’s travel to Paris and around the world, loaded with heavy baggage from media and (musical) film history. Holding balloons, Mia stars in a remake of a scene from *Funny Face* (1957) that recalls Audrey Hepburn posing at the Arc de Triomphe for a photographer played by Fred Astaire. Reducing the arch to a stylized stage setting, *La La Land* at the same time reframes the beginning of the famous ballet scene in *An American in Paris* (1951) in which Gene Kelly dances in front of a drawing of the same landmark (see Harris 2016). In a second take—yet another movie-in-the-movie which the protagonists actually view in a movie theater—Sebastian and Mia star in a “rapid-fire home-movie hallucination” (Grundmann 2006) which envisions their life as a happy family via old super-8 technology (cf. Sapio 2014), projecting images that seem far more conventional than the scenes adapted from musical films. On closer inspection, though, inhabiting a time prior to digitization, the retro mode of these visuals exhibits the “authenticity” of that alternative life as simulation of a past temporality. By making different retro modes and moods clash and interact, *La La Land* operates as a palimpsest whose mixed messages signal what David Sims calls the film’s “uncomfortable relationship with nostalgia.” This discomfort tends to drive a politics of nostalgia as well, as does Sebastian’s passion for jazz. “Jazz is dying because of people like you. [ . . . ] How are you going to be such a revolutionary if you’re such a traditionalist?” Sebastian is asked by his friend Keith (John Legend) who aims to push jazz forward by fusions with pop. Sebastian in turn sees himself as “the ‘white savior’ of black jazz traditions from what he perceives as sell-outs like Keith”, as Voeltz (2016) observes. In part, these exchanges reenact, with some irony, common conflicts and conversations between whites and blacks in the US. Synchronous with the time-spaces of the Hollywood era and the musical films *La La Land* references, jazz; thus, touches, yet does not open up, a field of cultural longing beyond the personal ambitions the film interrogates.

Music is key, of course, for shaping the retro mode of both *La La Land* and *The Shape of Water*, and critics agree that music has the power to generate affects, in general, and nostalgic longings, in particular (see, for instance, Flinn 1992, qtd. in Sprengler 2009, p. 77). However, work on nostalgia reflects how hard it is to account for these processes, as when Sprengler speaks of “scores structured around a musical desire to return to an earlier moment” (Sprengler 2009, p. 77). Desires are not musical, of course; instead, music may trigger desires. Concluding her section on “Music”, Sprengler more appropriately rates Hollywood’s musical scores as “cultural codes”:

The importance of specific soundtracks to particular genres has naturalized their association to the point where a few bars can evoke a type of film or narrative event. This capacity for

certain arrangements to signify (melodramatic) heartbreak or loss, for example, emerged through consistent repetition and thus in a way similar to a genre's iconography or the Fifties canon. This is not to suggest that these signifiers cannot also point to countless and even contradictory meanings or signify nostalgia for the purpose of critique. Rather, when associated with other cues, they are particularly adept at confirming a film's or scene's engagement with nostalgia. (Sprengher 2009, p. 78)

Though I agree with Sprengher's sense of nostalgia as an effect of serial repetition and variation, nostalgia is not "signified" but marks an interrelation between significations and modes of (cultural) reception; it is a particular, culturally-specific reading of the forms and functions music takes in a cinematic framework.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, on closer scrutiny, the ways in which *La La Land* and *The Shape of Water* employ classic Hollywood musical films allows us to assess the interplay between retro and nostalgia as well as to distinguish modes of nostalgia more clearly. For both films' soundscape is not per se nostalgic. While music may serve as a "mnemonic prompt" (Sprengher 2009, p. 74) for individual viewers, its potentially nostalgic effect is produced by an index of time which, if 'cited' (and thus necessarily altered) at a later moment, works as a trace of former cultural practice. What is being exposed in such processes are the cultural functions and effects of earlier technological standards and their ties to specific media; they exhibit media constellations and their material bases which are now obsolete, if not overcome (Uricchio 2010). Imitations of previously state-of-the-art color, camera, and recording techniques by current digital technology are part of current cinema's retro repertoire. Retro, thus, does nostalgia's legwork. Curiously enough, though, the emulation and simulation of older standards necessary to reproduce old soundtracks or to reactivate obsolete and seemingly less elaborated technological solutions often requires, under current conditions, a comparatively high complexity of digital data processing. An acute analysis of media cultures of nostalgia must, therefore, take into account the constitutive hybridity of media aesthetics and affords considerable knowledge of media-specific traditions and methods of analysis, including the history and theory of electronic and visual media.<sup>11</sup>

Given the scope of this essay, we have to make do with a short inroad into distinguishing the affects *La La Land* and *The Shape of Water* create by way of their specific visual quality and musical soundscape. *La La Land*'s opening scene has a traffic jam—filmed on LA's gigantic Judge Harry Peterson Interchange (see Fitzmaurice 2016)—transform into a dance performance; three shots, edited so as to give the illusion of a single take of six minutes, set the stage for the film's retro mode and narrative drive. By that moment, retro has made its appearance in the design of cars and the monochromatic clothes of the drivers as much as in the orchestration and lyrics of Justin Hurwitz's song "Another Day of Sun", which sounds like a cover, but in fact is not. Rather, it is a spoiler, intoning the tale of a woman who, at 17, leaves her sweetheart to do what she "had to do" in order to respond to that "technicolor world made out of music and machine" that "called [her] to be on that screen": "Climb these hills/I'm reaching for the heights/And chasing all the lights that shine"—this is Hollywood reaffirming its own aspirations and anticipating the (quite conventional) story of Mia and Sebastian.

More important than semantics, though, is that the film was shot on location, yet does not look like it due to the film technology employed. Meant to be "a homage to old Hollywood musicals, and the craft of filmmaking, and the craft of making music properly with instruments and not on synthesizers", as the film's cinematographer Linus Sandgren notes, *La La Land* was filmed using a Panavision XL2 camera first released in 2004, with a 35 mm lens, the format employed throughout the

<sup>10</sup> For an earlier take on "Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music", see Flinn (1992) study.

<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to musicologist and media studies scholar Bettina Schlüter and her contributions to our collaborative project on nostalgia here.

1950s before Hollywood adapted the now common 2.40:1 aspect ratio (see Dugan 2017).<sup>12</sup> According to Patrick Dugan, this technology creates a “shallower depth of field that comes with shooting on film”; it projects frames with soft fields which guide audience attention. “The broader exposure latitude offered by shooting on film”, moreover, allows for “underexposed and overexposed areas [ . . . ] with more detail and richer colors” (Dugan 2017), an effect that mimics what digital technologies have come to achieve. Opting for 1950s visual and sound technology may be a move driven by nostalgic longings; the use Chazelle makes of it; however, does not amount to nostalgia. Nor does it reflect an interest “in an alternate history, where—just like the imagined Hollywood-ending performed for us towards the film’s conclusion—neither jazz nor the glamour of Old Hollywood has gone away”, as Gleiberman (2017) has it. Instead, the movie’s retro aesthetics highlights how Hollywood magic and glamour are driven by yesteryear’s technologies of reproduction; thus, implicitly at least, *La La Land* also honors what digitalization can do.

At the same time, though, Gleiberman comes to an insightful conclusion: “for all its obvious nostalgia”, he writes, “surely the most obviously retro thing about *La La Land* is its general good humour and colour, which despite a melancholic ending is still largely played out as life-affirming.” What figures as retro here—and Gleiberman makes no distinction—may indeed be a mode of targeting the dominant affect driven by current cultural nostalgia, playing out a “life-affirming” good humor that seems out of sync. After all, in an age of climate change, to use Gleiberman’s wording, “[s]linging in the streets—even in the guise of homage—about the sun in Los Angeles seems like wish-fulfilment from another galaxy.” Seen in this ecocritical light, evading traffic jams and the ecological damage done by our increasing global automobility while singing about one’s ‘personal’ dream and dancing in the sun ironically questions current attitudes and life styles. Chazelle’s rehearsal of the large-scale public dance scenes of *Singing in the Rain*—a reference to the 1952 musical film and its take on Hollywood in the 1920s that makes repeated appearances, most evidently perhaps when Gosling, like Fred Astaire, swings around a lamppost at the onset of the “A Lovely Night” scene—thus ultimately plays out more resistant than “life-affirming.” Engaging our nostalgia for nostalgia, *La La Land* in fact questions the current “politics of nostalgia” that bemoans the loss of the American dream, yet reaffirms myths of upward mobility in ways that are ultimately divisive.

*The Shape of Water*, by contrast, is inspired by what Ann Hornaday calls a “longing for connection”, driven, as I like to suggest, by the potentially utopian dimension nostalgia holds in store. This affect unfolds as the movie takes us down less well-travelled and yet retro-designed roads into a multi-levelled unknown, a strange and yet somehow familiar dreamscape stretching from the rituals and idiosyncrasies of our protagonists’ daily lives, from private to political taboo zones existing right next to an imaginary under-water world that transcends boundaries and the laws of physics. In this way *The Shape of Water* shapes a mode of reflexivity that foregrounds how little Hollywood, thriving on cultural fears, is familiar with our odd ‘individual’ longings and that, as a response, accommodates desires denied rather than aiming to restore longings lost.

“If I spoke about it—if I did—what would I tell you?” asks the well-tempered voice of the artist Giles, anticipating “a tale of love and loss—and the monster who tried to destroy it all.” This opening not only hints that the tale ahead is told from a limited perspective; we are also teased into believing that the story ahead is conventional (“love and loss”) and that the alien protagonist is the destructive force. The film’s soundscape and visuality leave little doubt, though, that we are in for a different ride. Inspired by Arnold’s 1950s model, its main strategy is not ironic distance but inversion, as an ingenious “50’s [sic] retro trailer” accessible on YouTube highlights.<sup>13</sup> Adopting the generic mold of Arnold’s movie for del Toro’s film, the latter gets presented as “shocking and suspenseful”, as a

<sup>12</sup> For scenes with close zooms which the 35 mm lens could not accomplish, Panavision also built, we learn, a 40 mm anamorphic lens with a 9 inch close-in focus specifically for Chazelle; capturing Mia and Sebastian watch home movies on a projector was done by a 16 mm anamorphic lens, in 2.55 CinemaScope.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K0UuvEsC6Oo>.

“terrifying science fiction adventure”, ironically foregrounding its inversive approach and liquid temporality. When protagonist Elisa is introduced to us as “the princess without a voice”, we only seem to be in for a fairy tale. No single label fits this surreal take on (film) history, set both in the privacy of Elisa and Giles’s apartments and in a “damp, cavernous research facility in Baltimore where, in Kennedy-era America”, as Hornaday explains, “the U.S. government has brought in a mysterious humanoid amphibian from the Amazon, possessed of powers that may have implications for the space race and Cold War politics.”

*The Shape of Water* suggests that we can be nostalgic for an era to which no one in his or her right mind would like to return, even if, as Robert Putnam suggests in *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (2015), “socioeconomic barriers in America [ . . . ] in the 1950s were at the lowest ebb in more than a century” (p. 1). With all its saturated racism, sexism, and xenophobia, the early 1960s, thus, function as a beginning toward which, according to Michael Rutschky, nostalgia is generally oriented: “A point of origin at which it was unknown how the story was going to go on; when the mere act of wishing was useful—when we could still imagine the future as an ideal state [ . . . ] when all was still hope and expectation” (Rutschky 2005, p. 1057; my translation). Nostalgia necessarily results from processes of misremembering or forgetting: In hindsight, the Cold War world appears a black and white affair with clear lines and boundaries, a time-space in which those at the margins—be they black, gay, or disabled—sympathize with each other and form close alliances that cross cultural barriers and allow the unlikely and impossible to happen.

In this way, the movie seems to drive a political message that, for some critics, “comes through too loud and too clear, as Elisa and her band of outsiders suffer under the yoke of homophobia, racism, intimidation, and self-righteous intolerance” (Hornaday 2017). Of course, the film does engage stereotypes, and its major villain Strickland, misnamed “man of the future”, is as much the stock figure of a monster as the Russians featured are overdrawn, quite deliberately and with a substantial dose of humor and parody. Yet politics is not the movie’s main point, nor is the film’s “longing for connection” simply “a matter of romantic love, but civic virtue”, as Hornaday asserts. Indeed, *The Shape of Water* operates in a “forcefield of melodrama” (Cunningham 2007) which binds the personal inextricably to the political. Circumnavigating a public sphere and social fabric informed by violence on a large scale, Elisa and Giles’s habit of watching musical films remediated on TV is, thus, not an escapist pastime but calls into question this conventional take of movie consumption. In *The Shape of Water*, music and musicals are an essential part of the protagonists’ daily lives without being their way of living. Opening spaces for media interactivity and human interaction, the remediated musical film makes home entertainment a motor of bonding. As Elisa shares Giles’s passion, a community forms that enables the unlikely courageous, concerted action, presented in downright action movie style and plotted by figures who feel marginalized by dominant culture.

For Giles, who finds even *Bonanza* way too violent, the consumption of musical films is a survival strategy, indeed. In a scene with Elisa in front of the TV set, he makes her switch channels when hearing the news report of the 1963 Birmingham race riots, showing black protesters being fire-hosed and attacked by police dogs.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly enough, we now know these iconic images first and foremost from Andy Warhol’s silkscreens *Race Riot* of 1964, just one in a series of remediations of Charles Moore’s famous photographs, published in a photo essay in *Life* magazine in 1963. Having lost his post in advertising—due, as he hints, to his sexual orientation—Giles is unable to watch the footage and applauds Elisa’s switch to the musical channel—a move that suggests a convergence of nostalgia and trauma. Closely intertwined in the 1950s’ ‘hunts’ of blacks and homosexuals, racism and homophobia persist in the 1960s and do so to this very day. Giles unsuccessfully tries to regain his post by updating his work to more recent aesthetic trends, yet remains behind the beat; color drawings, he is informed, have been replaced by photographic images. Feeling stuck in the past, Giles is touched

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<sup>14</sup> This is an anachronism because the film is actually set half a year before the events in Birmingham.

by Elisa's heart-wrenching, eye-opening, forward-directed monologue on how the creature sees her for what she is—and comes around to agree that breaking the law is the right thing to do. Seeing himself in her seeing herself in the creature, he is empathically moved to act out of character, rises to the occasion, and even regrows his hair.

While *La La Land*'s ironic citations rehearse and still reinforce the common tales that musical films toy with, *The Shape of Water* inverts conventions, often with a humorous twist, employing a strategy recurring, for instance, in African American cultural practice. In *La La Land*, Sebastian, like Astaire, just swings around a lamppost, period. Elisa, by contrast, using a broom to imitate Astaire's dance moves, performed with a hat rack in *Royal Wedding* (1951), revitalizes a worn pattern for a tale of wonder, recognition, and "loving the other", as del Toro puts it. Similarly, though modelled on Cocteau's version of *La Belle et La Bête* (1946), this love story does not afford the beloved to transform, as Cocteau's beast did. Instead, Elisa adapts to her beloved's underwater habitat. Accordingly, unlike the creature from the black lagoon, Elisa's beloved submerges while his hunter Strickland dies. In fact, the film abounds with such inversive moves; they make up the core of the movie's multiple "references and homages" (The Take 2018). More than that, though, they mark the significant difference within the serial repetitions of paradigmatic moments in the history of (Hollywood) film which allow new affects to evolve from somewhat familiar molds and visual appeals.

The film's tonality of green, emerald, and teal employs tints close to each other on the color scheme and fashionable in a currently trendy retro palette, while adding hues of copper and rust that ring of steam punk and retrofuturism. Reds are present from the start—as when Elisa, in a moment that bows to *Cinderella*, polishes her shoes—yet intensify as the love story unfolds.<sup>15</sup> Music is key in all this, and the soundtrack is a mix of tunes that ring familiar bells of decades we may or may not have experienced, including "I Know Why (and So Do You)" (Glenn Miller and His Orchestra) and "Chica Chica Bom Chic" (Carmen Miranda) as well as the composition for which Alexandre Desplat won the 2018 Oscar for "Best Original Score." Mind you, there are cover versions, too, such as Madeleine Peyroux's 2014 take on *La Javanaise* which we hear when Elisa disrobes at night in front of the creature (and which was adapted for the trailer). Framing, if not overdetermining the scene with a deeply retro update of a tune originally written by Serge Gainsbourg for Juliette Gréco and first interpreted by both in 1963, the film not only drives its overall effect of shifting perspectives on our memory of the Cold War. It also reemploys a "mnemonic prompt" to more recent film, including Bruno Podalydès's *Dieu seul me voit* (1998), Ron Howard's *Da Vinci Code* (2006), Joann Sfar's *Gainsbourg (Vie héroïque)* (2010), and Pascale Ferran's *Bird People* (2014). Superimposing a song whose lyrics adopt the slang term for a 1920s dance (which references the Indonesian island Java as much as the verb "faire la java", meaning to celebrate<sup>16</sup>) as trope for love making ("En dansant la Javanaise/Nous nous aimions/Le temps d'une chanson", that is: "In dancing the Javanaise/We loved each other for the length of a song"), the film weaves this act into a web of contexts—making the surreal real while also anticipating the short-livedness of this dream-like affair. Projecting the memory of the moment into the future, the film affirms both this wondrous love of the other and the cultural work of nostalgia.

Whereas its rapidly arranged volleys of citation make *La La Land* seem old-fashionedly postmodernist, del Toro explicitly rejects that label and prefers to speak of *The Shape of Water* as "a marriage between the ordinary and the extraordinary" (del Toro 2018). Neither, it seems, captures the complex dynamics that feeds the affects *La La Land* and *The Shape of Water* generate by their distinct retro modes. Engaging past temporalities by way of the aesthetic molds they formed on screen, current film may, like *La La Land*, opt for dissecting film's nostalgia for nostalgia, resulting in double-edged modes of critique and resistance; their reading, like that of irony, remains, at least to a certain degree, in the eye of the beholder and his or her previous exposure to and memory of how technologies of film

<sup>15</sup> For more on how coloration bespeaks the film's "semiotics", see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRCkd9WDgbY>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/french-english/faire-la-java>.



evolved. Recent film may, as does *The Shape of Water*, render transgressively inversive variations on iconic cinematic moments, thus inspiring us by imagining, visualizing, and materializing what could or may be. Both movies may amount to retro “done right.” For both these takes on retro drive a longing not so much for an idealized past than for a potentially ‘better’ future. Seen in comparison, though, they also demonstrate how nostalgia depends on retro, while retro works—and sells—perfectly well without nostalgia. Whether the futures the films envision will materialize is yet another matter.

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