'Mortgaged to music': new retro movies in 1990s Hollywood cinema

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The most powerful cultural force operating in the seventies was definitely nostalgia . . . it will be impossible, twenty years hence, to revive the seventies; they have no style of their own.

(James Monaco)¹

History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now.

(Walter Benjamin)²

As every decade passes, so claims about how it will be recalled and re-remembered emerge. Looking back to the past solidifies years into publicly memorialised decades, reconstructing the past as an episodic narrative. This narrative dramatises the relationship between past and present, constructing a memory of the past through the recycling of particular iconography that metonymically comes to represent it. Particular fashions, music and visual images are memorialised, and become subject to reinterpretation in the present. Memories of the 1970s in the 1980s, for example, are quite different from those of the 1990s, as James Monaco's remark above illustrates. Thus, whilst the 1970s has proved a rich source of nostalgia for popular culture in the 1990s, commentators in the 1980s saw the 1970s as a decade obsessively concerned with recycling the past and hence lacking its own historicity. In this chapter I shall argue that the selectiveness and historical contingency of this remembered, memorialised past is increasingly dependent upon, and recycled within, audiovisual representations such as those found in popular film. My aim is to consider how 1990s Hollywood cinema has activated a selective, revised sense of the past, and how memory approaches to film history are able to analyse this. In particular, I will stress how popular cultural memory is drawn upon as an aesthetic and

commercial strategy of Hollywood; that is, how the styles of the past provide a powerful means through which a film can be branded and marketed to audiences. Often ignored in this process is the deployment of film music, and hence this chapter will focus in particular on the use of music as a significant means through which memories of the past may be evoked in the present.

Mediated memory

As many of the chapters in this book make clear, a distinguishing feature of memory approaches to history is their concern with the *process* of memory on historical knowledge, in particular the contingency of the historically remembered past. Thus what we call the past is accessible only through private and publicly articulated memories, narrated through the perspective of the present. David Lowenthal has termed this *memorial knowledge*, knowledge of the past based upon selective and strategic remembering in the present, and suggests that this is made up of a mixture of personal memory and public memories that over time become fused and indistinguishable.³ Not only does it become impossible to discern primary from secondary memories ('remembering things from remembering remembering them' as Lowenthal puts it),⁴ but also that the memories of others are necessary in order to affirm the validity of our own. Strategic remembering, then, transforms the terrain of the past, often eliminating (or in psychoanalytic accounts, repressing) contradictory or unwanted memories and prioritising those more favourable or immediately useful.⁵

In an article identifying what he calls 'new memory', Andrew Hoskins argues that mediated forms of memory increasingly serve to confirm history and structure the memorialising of knowledge. Through mediated memory historical events become memorialised through their media representation – remembered by their mediation and remediation – and this iterative process helps to construct a sense of the past as episodic. The recognisable narrative of the past as a succession of definable decades (such as 'the sixties' and 'seventies') is therefore largely a product of its media articulation. Hoskins' account of new memory describes the influence of such forms of memory thus:

Fundamental to the process of both individual and collective memories is that they are increasingly mediated. In this way our understanding

of the past is 'manufactured' rather than remembered. At the same time, our sense of collective memory or history is also much more of an electronically mediated one, or, rather reconstructed, from the ever more manipulable global image banks of television and film.⁶

Not only, then, have memories become increasingly mediated with the rise of mass media, but they are also more often the memory of a mediated experience in the first place. Hence it is almost impossible to untangle, for instance, memories of seeing a film for the first time from seeing it subsequently. The impact of visual media is often argued to have intensified the process of memory recall through this iterative process. Through repetition the initial experience is continually re-remembered and remade. The recent work on mediated memory therefore offers a useful starting point to examine the memorialisation and recycling of the past in popular cinema. The concept of 'flashbulb memory', originally developed in psychology by Roger Brown and James Kulik, offers an interesting parallel to this argument.⁷ Using the metaphor of the camera, it suggests that flash-bulb memories are those particularly vivid, intensively experienced, memories that are tied to a strong affective and emotional response. Memories of the footage of the assassination of President Kennedy, the death of Princess Diana, or the resignation of Margaret Thatcher are examples of this; through their media circulation and repetition their resonance increases. Disentangling the event from its performance in the media becomes impossible, and its circulation adds to its memorialisation. Thus 'flash-bulb' memories may be strongly related to media memories, or mediated forms of memory.

However, the concept of flash-bulb memory also illustrates the prioritisation of the visual field in writing on memory recall. With a few exceptions film theorists examining the relationship between history, memory and film have focused upon visual images. I want to suggest that the photographic metaphor used by 'flash-bulb' memory theorists is problematic in that it presumes the transparency and fixity of the original memory as an *image*, and downplays other strong sensory triggers such as sound or music. Furthermore whilst the concept of flashbulb memory can help to explain the strong response to specific public events or personal experiences, it is less helpful in understanding memory of the past 'in general' (that is, a sense of *duration* that describes the connections between the memorialised past and the present). In this chapter I shall therefore focus in particular on the function of film music, as musical memory seems

to be less specifically tied to space and place than visual images, and more intertwined with issues of affect and audience response. Music is able to index popular memory and nostalgia in ways that are specific to the medium, and quite unlike visual forms. I shall argue that this offers some advantages for Hollywood cinema, which has been concerned with mobilising the commercial potential of memory. In significant cases, this has been achieved through the alternative narration provided by film music, allowing a film to be set visually in the present yet evoke a sense of pastness through its soundtrack. Hollywood cinema has made substantial use of the pop soundtrack to evoke a sense of time past and this is especially the case in the retro film, a cinematic mode that wears stylistic referencing, and pastiche, overtly on its sleeve.

In an article exploring the notion of pastiche, Richard Dyer argues that the very point of pastiche in art is its unapologetic imitation of something else, and that this often involves an affective complicity with its audience.⁸ The pleasure of pastiche is therefore partly in its very ostensiveness. Film music provides an interesting example of this. Dyer examines the film music of Nino Rota (most famously known for the theme of *The Godfather*), suggesting that Rota's use of pastiche sets up a register whereby 'we are allowed to feel the emotional appeal of the music and yet also able to recognise its historical and constructed character'.⁹ Pastiche, then, is based on the memorised knowledge of that which is imitated rather than aiming for any specific historical accuracy. As Dyer comments, 'pastiche imitates wide-spread perceptions of the art to which it refers rather than being an archaeologically precise reproduction of it'.¹⁰ The same might be said of retro art, which selectively draws upon widely received perceptions of the past in the present. By addressing the affective dimensions of the past in the present, embodied by music in the retro film, I want to examine how musical memory can function performatively, transforming the meaning of visual narration. This chapter suggests that Hollywood cinema in the 1990s evoked the past in the present in a number of identifiably different ways. It is first necessary to clarify some terms, however. As such, I present a typology identifying three categories of popular film that activate memorialised knowledge. Focusing on the third of these – what I call the 'retro film' – I shall suggest that Hollywood's fascination with retro perspectives derives from a commercial opportunism based upon nostalgia for selected and revised pasts and their connection to the present.

History/period/retro

Much film criticism makes the assumption that the representation of pastness is measurable against a retrievable original past to which it is to be compared. Thus many Hollywood films are judged to have been unfaithful to this 'actual' past (*Forrest Gump* (1994), *Titanic* (1997), *Pearl Harbor* (2000)) by introducing new themes, conflating historical characters, or presenting historically inaccurate events.¹¹ Both Lowenthal and Hoskins, however, argue that this 'retrieval' model of memory recall is inaccurate, relying as it does upon a notion of an original experience to which it may be compared. Hoskins suggests that there is no 'fixed' moment to recall, only 'a (re)construction of an event, person or place which is ultimately contingent on (or rather, in) the present'.¹² Whilst emphasising the importance of 'process' to memory recall, this does present difficulties in dealing with qualitatively different kinds of memories – those ostensibly of a specific past event and those of a sense of the past (or of duration) in general.

In order to clarify terms and avoid this problem, I wish to make a distinction here between three impulses in contemporary Hollywood cinema's activation of the past: the 'history film', the 'period film' and the 'retro film'. The history film is perhaps the most familiar, often dealing with historical trauma or a famous character, as for instance in a biopic such as *Nixon* (1995) or a film centred on a known event such as that in *Titanic* or *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). As these examples can be taken to suggest, the history film is indexical to a *referential* past, measurable against the memorialised knowledge of a particular event or person and audiovisual recordings and accounts of them. The reconstruction of details of the actual *Titanic*, or the resemblance of Anthony Hopkins' performance to televised footage of Richard Nixon, are key aspects of this impulse.

My second category – the 'period film' – describes a film that is indexical to a *historical* past. Unlike the history film it does not deal with a publicly memorialised event or figure, but instead with the past in general. As such the period film often tends to be typified by reconstruction aesthetics – for instance the lavish reconstruction of New York in *The Age of Innocence* (1993) or Rome in *Gladiator* (2000). Although the historical film will usually also be concerned with the reconstruction of period detail, the referentiality of the period film is the memorialised knowledge of a period rather than a

specific historical event or person. The characters in *Gladiator*, for instance, are recognisable historical types, but the specific events depicted are not indexical to a referential past but to a past 'in general'. Again this is measurable although not to the same specificity – for instance in the authentic detail of the mise-en-scène rather than the events depicted.

The third category to be defined is what I call the 'retro film'. The 'retro film' mobilises particular codes that have come to connote a past sensibility as it is selectively re-remembered in the present (i.e. 'the seventies' or 'the sixties') as a structure of feeling, and these codes function *metonymically*, standing in for the entire decade. As such, the retro film is less concerned with historical accuracy than with a playful deployment of codes that connote pastness. Such a formulation of the 'retro film' shares similarities with Fredric Jameson's formulation of the 'nostalgia film' in that it refers to those films that evoke the past through previously mediated representations and stereotypes of the past. However, I use the term 'nostalgia' to describe the mode of engagement between film performance and audience rather than as a descriptive category for the film texts themselves. The past in the retro film has less to do with the reconstruction of the past (as in the period film) or a historical event (as in the history film) than with its memorialisation and re-imagining in the present. I should make clear that these categories are not mutually exclusive. Films can often occupy more than one category and I use these categories primarily for their heuristic usefulness. For instance both *Titanic* and *Saving Private Ryan* also focus on individual fictionalised stories as well as publicly known events, thus moving between the first two categories. Indeed, entwining the collective and the individual is often a strategy for making history 'accessible' to contemporary audiences, usually through the narration of events that appear to unfold on screen as if in the present.

The past as a style

In his book, *The Seventies Now*, Stephen Paul Miller remarks that upon watching the film *Pulp Fiction* (1994) he wondered whether it was set in the 1970s. Noting that virtually all the music, cars and cultural references were from the 1970s or before, he relates that his awareness of the presentness of the film's setting was only provoked

by flashbacks to the 1970s as part of the film's diegesis. This timelessness – a fusion of past and present – is the essence of the retro film. Thus, in Miller's words, 'the present seemed like the Seventies, and the film conveyed an impression of a past and a present entangled in that decade'.¹³ Retro cultural objects deploy codes that operate as catalysts for recollection, and stand in for a historical 'feeling'. Thus the exact ways in which this film, or the retro films that I shall go on to discuss, evoke the past are difficult to pin down precisely. Retro films play on a fascination with fusing past and present, and retro styles are only retrospective because they involve looking back knowingly from the present time. Retro, then, is both a playful and knowing deployment of the past in the present, and frequently involves irony. For instance, writing on retro fashion in the *New York Times* in 1975, Kennedy Fraser suggests that, 'retro represents the desire to find style, *but obliquely*, and splendour, *but tackily*, and so to put an ironic distance between the wearers and the fashionableness of their clothes'.¹⁴ Finding political potential in retro fashion, Kaja Silverman argues that it 'avoids the pitfalls of a naïve referentiality, by putting quotation marks around the garments it revitalizes'.¹⁵ This suggests that the knowing use of selective signifiers from the past (fashion, music, intertextual references) in the retro film ostends its signification, creating a shared discourse with the audience through their awareness of the film's avoidance of direct referentiality.

However, as Stuart Tannock has noted, the politics of nostalgia has sharply divided critics. Jameson, for instance, largely takes a negative view, arguing that nostalgia and the popularity of retro is symptomatic of the problem of defining the current historical period and its distinctness.¹⁶ His well-known argument is that the current period is experiencing a crisis in its sense of the present and therefore its relation to the historical past – a result of what he calls a 'waning of historicity'.¹⁷ Instead he argues that nostalgia substitutes a memory of history with a memory of the *idea* of history. The nostalgia film operates as a 'bad object' for Jameson, as Richard Dyer points out, functioning as a way of regulating and commodifying the past.¹⁸ It is not concerned with representing/critiquing history but with evoking the past through selective stylistic iconography such as fashion and music, in ways in which I have described. Thus, argues Jameson, it empties history of politics, reducing it to a recombination of stereotypes of the past.

There is insufficient space here to fully discuss the debate that Jameson's work has provoked. Linda Hutcheon, in particular, questions Jameson's negative theorisation of nostalgia by pointing out the possibilities of revising history through irony and play, rather as Silverman has argued that retro clothing recuperates the past in a political form.¹⁹ Nostalgia, then, may be used to characterise a number of quite different and even contradictory impulses. It can be conceptualised as conveying a knowing and reflexive relationship with the past, as a yearning for a better but irretrievable past, or, in more sceptical accounts, as emblematic of an engrossing but ultimately fabricated approximation of the past. As such, the term needs to be deployed with care. In his article examining nostalgia as a cultural style, Paul Grainge suggests that it is useful to map a distinction between articulations of nostalgia as a 'mood' and as a 'mode'.²⁰ He argues that discussions of nostalgia as a mood orientate themselves around affective and experiential discourses of nostalgia as a form of yearning. However, Grainge questions the reduction of nostalgia critiques to this single formulation, suggesting as it does the loss of a past authenticity. Instead he suggests that nostalgia also operates quite removed from this concept of loss, as evidenced by the popularity of retro objects that are less about articulating a connectedness to a lost 'authentic' past than with consuming objects whose signification has become loaded with connotative markers of taste in the present. The fashionability of retro objects as markers of style in the present complicates any totalising theorisation of nostalgia as embodying a sense of loss. Articulations of nostalgia as a 'mode', on the other hand, Grainge argues, may overemphasise nostalgia as an 'empty' style at the expense of understanding the complex configurations of consumption through which retro objects gain their signification. As this argument suggests, there is a need to conceptualise nostalgia as encompassing affective, stylistic and historical dimensions, and for the cultural and discursive specificity of nostalgia to be fully historicised.

My own position on nostalgia is informed by a notion of collective play rather than yearning or historical blockage; I am inclined to look positively at nostalgia as a mode that can actively renegotiate and reconfigure the past in the present. Whilst I accept some of Jameson's central observations on nostalgia, I inflect them somewhat differently, less concerned with a theorisation of waning historicity than with offering attention to the stylisation of the past in

retro-cinema. In considering this point, Jameson's argument remains significant. Indeed, an important aspect of his formulation of the nostalgia film is its strategy of selective re-remembering; evoking the past through the deployment of a limited iconography that erases contradictions in the past in favour of a coherency of style. Jameson argues that films evoke particular historical periods through their repeated citation of generic conventions, cultural stereotypes, and symbolic objects of the period, especially style/fashion objects. His analysis of *American Graffiti* (1973) suggests that its evocation of the early 1960s (through diners, rock 'n' roll, Elvis, short hair, domestication but also teenage rebellion) is one rooted in a 1970s selective revisioning of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Rather than accept his final conclusions about pastiche as 'blank parody', however, I am persuaded by Dyer's argument that the importance of pastiche might be in its obviousness, rearticulating the signifiers of the past in an ostensive rather than blank or necessarily self-reflexive way.

Jameson's provocative comments, along with the more recent insights offered by writers on memory and culture, provide a useful basis for analysing the popularity of retro-cinema in the 1990s. Hollywood uses retro perspectives for aesthetic and commercial purposes, as both a stylistic and marketing strategy. The aspects identifiable in 1990s Hollywood retro-cinema are: a) the selective mobilisation of iconography of the past becoming fused with the present, b) the accentuation of pastness as a stylistic feature, and c) the commodification of pastness and its market exploitation. In order to give my argument some specificity I now wish to focus on two 1990s Hollywood films that I shall argue exemplify the 'new retro' movie in 1990s Hollywood: *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and *Jackie Brown* (1997). Both these films are set contemporarily in the 1990s yet, I argue, evoke an earlier period – in *Jackie Brown* a 1970s blaxploitation aesthetic and in *Sleepless in Seattle* the classical Hollywood romantic comedy of the 1930s to 1950s.

Mortgaged to music: retro perspectives in *Jackie Brown* and *Sleepless in Seattle*

Jackie Brown was the long-awaited follow-up to director Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. The film stars blaxploitation movie icon Pam Grier and 1970s television and movie star, Robert Forster, as

well as Samuel L. Jackson. Most of the critical reviews of the film pointed out the obvious positioning of Grier in *Jackie Brown* as a product of Tarantino's enduring fandom of 1970s blaxploitation movies, in particular her key roles in *Foxy Brown* and *Coffy* in the early 1970s. The marketing of the film emphasised Tarantino's re-statement of Pam Grier as an icon, and his efforts to produce a homage to her earlier films, as well as his boldness in casting a forty-something black woman and fifty-something white man as the love story in the film.

What is particularly interesting about *Jackie Brown*, like *Pulp Fiction* before it, is that it feels like a 1970s film despite being set in 1995. Sharon Willis, writing on the relationship between Tarantino as an auteur and the cult status of his work, argues that his films 'embody a nostalgia for 70s that is continually circulating in television, video, and radio'.²¹ Highlighting the mediated recycling of retro culture, she suggests that 'later appropriations of the products of the 70s recycle them as a kind of nostalgia to the second degree – nostalgia for nostalgia'.²² According to the typology I outlined earlier, *Jackie Brown* is neither a historical film (based on historical event) nor a period film (recreating a historical moment). It is, I suggest, a good example of the retro film, evoking a nostalgic and metonymic historicity through its steady deployment of 1970s iconography. The film may be set in the 1990s, with predominantly 1990s mise-en-scène, but it insistently invokes the 1970s. It simultaneously has both a 'presentness' and 'pastness', set in the present but evoking a 1970s 'structure of feeling'. Raymond Williams coined this phrase to describe the affective sense that the past continues to hold over the present, what he called 'social experiences in solution', whereby the constituent parts become inseparable, the past and present dissolved together.²³ A number of elements therefore combine to contribute to the retro feel of *Jackie Brown*. Most obviously there is the casting of two 1970s stars – Pam Grier as Jackie Brown and Robert Forster as Max Cherry. The narrative centres on their growing relationship which itself functions as a mediation on time and memory (both in terms of their star images and the characters that they play). The mise-en-scène too harks back to this period, with the bail-bond office and Jackie's flat, in particular, exuding signifiers of seventies-ness, evident in the brown décor, the prominence of her vinyl record collection full of 1970s music, as well as the clothing of the principal characters.

The opening of the film immediately signals its retro intentions. The first scene introduces us to Jackie, whilst the soundtrack plays Bobby Womack's 1970s soul classic 'Across 110th Street', a key song that both starts and ends the film. This establishes a retro frame of reference, as Womack's song is the eponymous title music for a 1972 film, *Across 110th Street*. Referring to the opening of the film, where Grier as Jackie strides through an airport, Tarantino described one of his aims as to achieve the best Pam Grier walk ever put on celluloid, clearly harking back to her earlier blaxploitation roles.²⁴ In the opening shot, Jackie stands immobile on a moving walkway at the right of the frame. The colour and style of her uniform evokes a seventies-ness, complimented by the colours of the mosaic tiles behind her. Even the film titles deliberately evoke the 1970s through their typeface: the unfurling of the bubble-like characters and two tone colour look out of place in the contemporary era of digital imaging and matting. The credits, and the retro font of the film title, work to frame the film by selectively drawing upon 1970s iconography, signalling its retro mode.²⁵

My main point of interest however is the use of music in the film. Little work on memory has been concerned with music, although Lowenthal does note that music is often a means of activating memory, and Jameson tantalisingly comments that the nostalgia film is 'mortgaged to music'.²⁶ Most discussions of memory and film tend to prioritise visual memory over musical memory, thus downplaying the significance of music and the soundtrack.²⁷ However, it is the work of the soundtrack and the memorialised knowledge it conveys that particularly helps to establish the retro feel to the film, and the deliberate deployment of musical memory is therefore an important aspect of the aesthetic and commercial strategy of 1990s Hollywood retro-cinema. In particular, the use of period songs re-key narrative events, evoking an associational structure of feeling of the period, even where the narrative events are taking place contemporarily. Thus in the opening scene of *Jackie Brown* the credits and movement of the film title are all timed to appear in pace with the structure of the song. As the scene progresses, Jackie/Grier starts to walk through the airport, the low camera angle emphasises the timing of her gait with the rhythm of the song, as if her movement is motivated by the music.

In his book on the soundtrack, Jeff Smith has suggested that the pop score operates what he calls a 'juke-box narrative'.²⁸ He argues

that whilst the pop song may be used in a conventional way to reinforce or comment upon a character or their emotions, it always retains an autonomous identity and resists full integration into narrative. This means that recognition of songs by audiences will influence interpretation of narrative events, most obviously where lyrics are used to comment on the action or music is used as an ironic counterpoint to action onscreen. The pop music soundtrack creates a relationship between sound and image that is layered, where music plays an active role in the construction of narrative through its partial autonomy. In *Jackie Brown*, songs are often deployed as a narrational device, most notably in the function of The Delfonics' 'Didn't I (Blow Your Mind This Time)', a 1970s song that narrates the emotions of the characters through the film. This takes on a symbolic function in establishing the relationships between characters and their nostalgia for the past. When Jackie plays the song to Max it is supposed to indicate her investment in the past (and in vinyl). His subsequent purchase of a Delfonics tape endows the song with a specific narrative function, conveying a sense of emotional connectedness between characters never made explicit in their conversation. The music is used internally and self-consciously – the characters comment upon the music, and it is passed between them symbolically.

One reviewer of the film – Erik Bauer, writing in *Sight and Sound* – found this use of music objectionable, suggesting that 'the emotion of the songs is often used as a lazy prod towards what the inscrutable Jackie might be feeling at any moment'.²⁹ His pejorative tone is interesting – of course the same accusation could be levelled at the use of the visual close-up as a signifier of character interiority, or such other cinematic conventions as elliptical editing, point-of-view shots and more. However, here music is foregrounded; it articulates a complex language for emotion that lacks visual cognisance and enunciates a nostalgic feeling of duration rather than presentness. The use of music from the 1970s and earlier (including Bobby Womack, The Delfonics, Brothers Johnson, Randy Crawford and Bill Withers) evokes a historicity in the film that is located less in the reconstruction of a historical period than in a 1970s structure of feeling.

Sharon Willis also objects to the ostensive signalling of the retro film, suggesting that 'the same cinematic moves that figure history as cultural waste, as trash to be collected and recombined, allow for the production of false social anchors in, say, images drawn from blaxploitation films'.³⁰ However the ahistoricism of retro-cinema seems

to me to be precisely the point, and its stylistic appropriation of the past marks out something that is also dynamic about cultural recycling. Retro films such as *Jackie Brown* are not reducible to questions about falsifying the historical past, as I have outlined above, but need to be placed within patterns of consumption and cultural taste. The ways in which history is reconfigured in the retro film, and retextualised through music, are complex, involving an affective address that marks out the pastness in the retro film as stylish or 'cool', hence the particular appeal of retro objects to youth or style-driven markets. Thus the ways in which retro-cinema functions as a commercial strategy need to be explored if we are to make sense of popular commercial cinema. The accentuation of pastness in the retro film operates simultaneously as a stylistic feature and a means of marketing the film and its ancillary products. Thus the soundtrack to *Jackie Brown*, available on release of the film, not only included songs from the film but also quotable dialogue, creating a hybrid product where film and soundtrack are mutually reinforcing, appealing to those who may invest in and recycle styles of the past as markers of taste in the present.

I now want to consider a very different 1990s retro film, the romantic comedy *Sleepless in Seattle*. This attracted a largely female audience compared with the significant male audience for *Jackie Brown*. *Sleepless in Seattle* was released in 1993 and although it is not as easily classifiable as retro as *Jackie Brown*, was nonetheless perceived as following in the retro-romantic comedy tradition of *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), *Pretty Woman* (1990) and *Ghost* (1990). These films were substantial box-office hits and were seen as reinvigorating the romantic comedy genre, mobilising, as Peter Krämer has noted, an audience traditionally neglected by Hollywood: the female audience aged over twenty-five.³¹ The average age of cinema-goers in the US domestic market rose in the 1990s, and older audiences began to displace the industry's prime focus on the youth market. By the start of the 1990s, according to Krämer, the 25–49 year old age group made up 46 per cent of all admissions, whereas the 12–24 year-old age group – Hollywood's traditional audience – had declined to 44 per cent. According to MPAA figures, the overall composition of cinema-goers changed in the 1990s, with those in the 40+ age group accounting for 40 per cent of total cinema-goers in 2000, compared to only 32 per cent in 1990.³² A more substantial, and significantly older, female audience was a facet

of this shift, beginning to form a growing percentage of Hollywood's potential market in the 1990s. This fact accounts in part for increased attention to genres traditionally deemed 'female-oriented'. 'Sleeper' hits such as *Sleepless in Seattle* and *Pretty Woman* represented lower risks than blockbuster productions due to their relatively low production costs. The films also created a cluster of stars (Meg Ryan, Sandra Bullock, Tom Hanks, amongst others) whose images differed from dominant gender representations of the previous decade, and gradually permeated across other Hollywood genres through the 1990s. No doubt this renewed interest was driven by Hollywood's commercial imperatives. As a number of high-budget action films failed to recoup their massive investments, the studios took notice of sleeper hits. Costing only \$21m, *Sleepless in Seattle* was a huge box-office hit, grossing \$228m in worldwide theatrical receipts alone, and proving extremely successful as a video and soundtrack album.

On its release, many of the reviewers noted *Sleepless in Seattle*'s emphasis on 'retro-romance', seeing it as a nostalgic revisiting of the classical Hollywood romantic comedy.³³ The trajectory of the film works gradually towards bringing the two protagonists, Sam (Tom Hanks) and Annie (Meg Ryan), together as a 'magical' encounter. This involves them negotiating obstacles encountered in the present day. For instance, Sam has to rediscover the rules of dating after fifteen years and manage single parenthood, and Annie has to cast off an existing partner in favour of Sam. The film does indeed evoke the classical romantic comedy both explicitly, through its showcasing of period 'standards' on the soundtrack, and implicitly, through its non-cynical investment in a narrative centred around romantic love, observing such time-honoured conventions as keeping the two lovers apart until the finale of the film, making all other partners absurdly unsuitable and invoking the classical 'magic' of romantic love. The inclusion of intertexts within the film, particularly *An Affair to Remember* (1957) and *Casablanca* (1943), have the effect of emphasising a nostalgic yearning for a past innocence, particularly in the re-visiting of the former film's key symbolic site (the observation deck of the Empire State Building) and the inclusion of the song 'As Time Goes By', made famous in the latter. This intertextual referencing plays on the impossibility of a golden past – as represented by the classical Hollywood romance – even as characters yearn for its simplicity. Indeed, much of the comedy in the film

focuses on the difficulty of conducting romance in the present, or the need to adopt romantic clichés whilst at the same time distancing oneself from them by deploying them knowingly. Thus the scene where the female characters sob at *An Affair to Remember* (reprised when the male characters discuss *The Dirty Dozen* (1967)) is comic because it pokes oblique fun at their sense of nostalgia for how things used to be in the movies, rather than in life.

Perhaps even more than with *Jackie Brown*, music plays a key role in establishing the retro perspective of the film. In addition to 'As Time Goes By', the film showcases a number of 'standards' including 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow', 'Stand by Your Man', 'Making Whoopee', 'In the Wee Small Hours' and 'Stardust', all of which musically locate the film in the past. However, the nostalgic evocation of romance associated with these standards is qualified through the deployment of the songs in uncommon versions. For instance the version of 'As Time Goes By', sung by Jimmy Durante, is comic, with his voice straining to reach the high notes. Likewise, the version of 'Making Whoopee', sung by a rasping Dr John rather than a crooning Frank Sinatra, qualifies the romantic sentiment with 'knowing' humour.

Such knowingness is common in retro-cinema. In his article examining the relationship between the pop 'standard' and the narrative in *Sleepless in Seattle*, Ian Garwood points out that this musical strategy, rather than acting as a traditional underscore, puts some distance between song and narrative, suggesting that the estrangement between the two allows the music to commentate as an alternative narrational form to the visual action.³⁴ The point, then, is that retro-romance (and retro-cinema generally) is knowing, often overdeterminedly so, and its evocation of the past is often qualified by its ostensiveness. *Sleepless in Seattle*'s showcasing of recognisable hits not only offers a commentary on the drama at any given point, but also points us determinedly towards the soundtrack section of our nearest music-store, a neat alignment of Hollywood's commercial and aesthetic interests.

The past in these two films, and the retro film more generally, is not about historical truth but rather about mobilising a popular memorialised sense of pastness. Retro aesthetics are a way of commercialising popular memory; their recognition allows them to connect into a public nostalgia for a past derived from earlier representations, such as those shown in the retro-romance of *Sleepless in Seattle* or in the

stylised seventies-ness of *Jackie Brown*. The success of retro films, and period compilation soundtracks in 1990s Hollywood cinema – ably demonstrated by the *Pulp Fiction* soundtrack which sold over four million copies – is significant to the establishment of brand awareness, important in the package-unit mode of production in contemporary Hollywood. By fusing a sense of pastness with the present, the ‘retro’ film (and soundtrack album) commodifies this pastness as a commercial style amenable to product differentiation by the post-Fordist audio-visual industries. The niche marketing of recent ‘retro’ films, particularly those associated with a historical period definable by musical iconography – films such as *Boogie Nights*, *The Last Days of Disco* and *Forrest Gump* – all draw heavily on the commodification of the past through the pop song. Of course, recognising the commercial potential of the past is hardly a recent phenomenon. However the recent opportunities to market retro products through new modes of delivery (the multi-channel television environment, DVD and video) has vastly increased the market for retro products in the last two decades.

Conclusions

Although nostalgia was not in any way new to Hollywood in the 1990s, the nostalgia evoked by 1990s retro-cinema seems to have been specific to this period and was for many critics unimaginable in the 1980s. The comment made by James Monaco that opened this chapter illustrates the perceptual shift that memorialisation can effect. This demonstrates the historical specificity of nostalgia, and the memorialised knowledge of the past that it draws upon. What these observations show is the degree to which our sense of pastness is constructed by mediated forms of memory in the present, such as those evoked in the retro film. Furthermore, if our sense of the past is in part constructed through what Alison Landsberg has called ‘prosthetic memory’ – memories that are not remembered from personal experience, but which intertwine public memorial knowledge with individual memory – then mediated memories have become increasingly important to how we articulate ourselves and our tastes in the present.³⁵ Thus we can be nostalgic about, or invest in, an experience that we have not actually had, or a period never personally experienced.

This chapter has argued that ‘retro’ is a useful concept to consider how history is evoked as a style and feeling in 1990s Hollywood

cinema. My analysis has tried to demonstrate how the retro film *performs* the past, offering a selective knowing deployment of a sense of pastness amenable to Hollywood's commercial aesthetic. Retro, then, both describes a structure of feeling and a commercial strategy adopted by Hollywood to market a sense of the past in the present. The pleasure of retro-cinema is not one of (necessary) self-reflexivity or even recreation of the past, but rather its deployment of signifiers of pastness and its exuberant and inventive recycling of the past in new stylistic combinations. The retro perspectives presented in *Jackie Brown* and *Sleepless in Seattle* were, I have argued, able to index a popular discourse of nostalgia through the significant use of music. The deployment of period pop songs in the retro soundtrack of these films, and in other examples of retro-cinema, perform a knowingness, constructing a shared discourse with its audience and highlighting its avoidance of referentiality. Clearly, then, if the retro film is about memory and nostalgia, then the language of memory in retro-cinema is insistently musical as well as visual.

Notes

I would like to thank Ian Craven for his helpful comments and suggestions.

- 1 James Monaco, *American Film Now* (New York: New American Library, 1984), p. 283.
- 2 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 252.
- 3 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- 4 Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 196.
- 5 Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 206.
- 6 Andrew Hoskins, 'New Memory: mediating history', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 21: 4 (2001), 336.
- 7 Roger Brown and James Kulik, 'Flashbulb Memories', *Cognition*, 5 (1977), 73–99. For a discussion on the validity of the concept see Daniel Schacter, *Searching for Memory: the Brain, the Mind and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996) and Martin Conway, *Flashbulb Memories* (Hove: Erlbaum, 1994).
- 8 Richard Dyer, 'The Notion of Pastiche', in Jostein Gripsrud (ed.), *The Aesthetics of Popular Art* (Kristiansand/Bergen: Høyskoleforlaget, 2001), p. 82.
- 9 Dyer, 'The Notion of Pastiche', p. 83.
- 10 *Ibid.*

- 11 See, for instance, debates in Kevin S. Sandler and Gaylyn Studlar (eds), *Titanic: Anatomy of a Blockbuster* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1999); Thomas B. Byers, 'History Re-remembered: *Forrest Gump*, Postfeminist Masculinity, and the Burial of the Counterculture', *Modern Fiction Studies* 42: 2 (1996), 41–44; and Jennifer Hyland Wang, "A Struggle of Contending Stories": Race, Gender and Political Memory in *Forrest Gump*', *Cinema Journal* 39: 3 (2000), 92–115.
- 12 Hoskins, 'New Memory', 335.
- 13 Stephen Paul Miller, *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance* (London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 65.
- 14 Kennedy Fraser, quoted in Kaja Silverman, 'Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse', in Tania Modleski (ed.), *Studies in Entertainment* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 150. My italics.
- 15 Silverman, 'Fragments', p. 150.
- 16 See Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in H. Foster, *Postmodern Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1985), pp. 111–25; and 'Nostalgia for the Present', in Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 279–96.
- 17 Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 21.
- 18 Dyer, 'The Notion of Pastiche', p. 82.
- 19 Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
- 20 Paul Grainge, 'Nostalgia and Style in Retro America: Moods, Modes and Media Recycling', *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures*, 23: 1 (2000), 27–34. For a more detailed consideration, see Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Style in Retro America* (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2002).
- 21 Sharon Willis, 'The Father's Watch the Boy's Room', *Camera Obscura*, 32 (1993–94), 48.
- 22 Willis, 'The Father's Watch the Boy's Room', 48.
- 23 Raymond Williams, 'Structures of Feeling', in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 128–35.
- 24 Tarantino in interview at the NFT on 'Jackie Brown: Collector's Edition Enhanced CD-ROM' (*The Guardian*/NFT/Miramax, 1998). Of course the walk also replays the famous opening scene from *The Graduate* (1967).
- 25 It is interesting to note that the UK release of the film played down such retro intentions. Its publicity posters, for instance, replaced the two-tone 1970s lettering with a more contemporary font, and emphasised Tarantino's authorship of the film rather than its blaxploitation intertexts, no doubt reflecting the different cultural capital held by the UK audience.

- 26 Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 288.
- 27 An exception to this is Annette Kuhn, 'Journey Through Memory', in Susannah Radstone (ed.), *Memory and Methodology* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), pp. 179–96.
- 28 Jeff Smith, *The Sounds of Commerce: Marketing Popular Film Music* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
- 29 Erik Bauer, 'The Mouth and The Method', *Sight and Sound*, 8: 3 (1998), 7.
- 30 Willis, 'The Father's Watch the Boy's Room', 67.
- 31 Peter Krämer, 'A Powerful Cinema-going Force? Hollywood and Female Audiences since the 1960s', in Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (eds), *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), pp. 93–108.
- 32 Source: MPAA Motion Picture Attendance Study, 2000 (www.mpaa.org).
- 33 See, for instance, audience reviews of the film on the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com).
- 34 Ian Garwood, 'Must You Remember This?: Orchestrating the "Standard" Pop Song in *Sleepless in Seattle*', *Screen* 41: 3 (2000), 284.
- 35 See Alison Landsberg's chapter in this volume. See also, Landsberg, 'Prosthetic Memory: *Total Recall* and *Bladerunner*', in Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows (eds), *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment* (London: Sage, 1995), pp. 175–89.