

Retro, faux-vintage, and anachronism: When cinema looks back

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Abstract

This article explores the definition of ‘vintage cinema’ and specifically re-evaluates the fetishism for the past and its regurgitation in the present by providing a taxonomy of the phenomenon in recent film production. Our contribution identifies three aesthetic categories: faux-vintage, retro and anachronistic; by illustrating their overlapping and discrepancies it argues that the past remains a powerful negotiator of meaning for the present and the future. Drawing on studies of memory and digital nostalgia, this article focuses on the latter category: anachronism. It furthermore unravels the persistence of and the filmic fascination for obsolete analogue objects through an analysis of *Only Lovers Left Alive* (Jim Jarmusch, 2013).

Keywords: obsolescence, nostalgia, analogue, anachronism, fetishism, vintage

The vintage style, the reproduction and reclamation of past fashions, original objects, and old looks, is a highly commoditised phenomenon. Though its contemporary meaning developed with the second-hand clothing trend in the late 1980s, vintage has become mainstream in the early 21st century and has expanded beyond the fashion and design industries. Recent scholarship in media and cultural studies has framed this reappropriation of old goods and styles with reference to questions of authenticity and nostalgia and has highlighted the extensive and pervasive presence in the media of this rising phenomenon.¹ The reasons for this trend are multiple. Katharina Niemeyer explains it by arguing that the media’s longing for the past represents ‘a symptom of progress, but also of crisis’.² Niemeyer interprets contemporary nostalgia as a reaction to accelerated times and the impact of digital technologies and as a desire to overcome and cure our

'homesickness' for the past via media itself.³ This nostalgia boom is vast; it is transmedial and transcultural, and presents multiple facets and embodiments. In truth, what can be seen as fetishism for the past and its regurgitation in the present constitutes a significant feature of contemporary film production, exemplified by the plethora of biopics, period dramas, and heritage films currently in circulation.

The aesthetic category of vintage is spurious, and transposing its vocabulary from the sphere of fashion and design, where its current use took prominence, to that of film studies can be beneficial only if its different nuances are properly acknowledged. This article explores possible definitions and characterisations of a 'vintage cinema' by engaging with the ways in which past aesthetics and material retro-cultures are represented and reclaimed in recent film production through a new ecology of their presence. While previous scholarly works have examined the reasons *why* contemporary media (and film cultures) are permeated by nostalgia and concerns for authenticity,⁴ our contribution proposes instead a taxonomy of the vintage phenomenon in cinema, focusing more on *how* films rework the past. This article accordingly identifies different manifestations of the vintage style beyond narrative, offering in this way a prism through which to understand the complexities of the 21st century filmscape. In other words, we will take into account the eclectic assemblage of old and new within recent films and how the longing for the past appears in genres and filmic categories beyond the remakes, homages, parodies, and heritage films.

The need for such a taxonomy derives from the widespread phenomenon of nostalgia for the analogue and the different ways in which, according to Jussi Parikka, vintage today 'is considered better than the new'.⁵ We argue that this reinvention of historic looks works as an attempt to create an appealing 'cuteness' of the image based on contemporary trends and tastes valued by audiences and consumers. In this sense we draw on Rosalind Galt and Sianne Ngai's efforts to legitimise non-canonical aesthetic categories – the 'pretty' and the 'cute' respectively – in order to understand the shifting relationship between art, media, and commodities.⁶ Inspired by Hannah Arendt's *Human Condition*, Ngai invites a reconsideration of the 'irrelevant' and the cuteness of 'small things' because they generate enchantment and protection and help us understand contemporary consumption.⁷

Our work also follows Dominik Schrey's recent discussion of analogue nostalgia and the 'retrospective evaluation of analogue media's malfunctions'.⁸ Against the backdrop of academic studies by Laura Marks, J.D.

Bolter, and Richard Grusin, Schrey maintains that analogue nostalgia ‘embodies a return to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’ fascination with ruins and its fragmentary aesthetics, which eventually led to the construction of artificial ruins’.⁹ By focusing on the fascination for these ‘fragmentary aesthetics’ and the different ways in which contemporary cinema continues to build ‘artificial ruins’ we introduce three categories under the rubric of vintage cinema: retro, faux-vintage, and anachronism. Albeit not fully comprehensive, we argue that they best synthesise different trends in the way we approach the reconstruction and manifestation of the past in contemporary cinema.

After a brief introduction to the nebulous notion of vintage and its application within the context of film studies this article explores the definition of retro, faux-vintage, and anachronism. We then discuss Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013) in relation to contemporary cinema’s depiction of the digital world, paying particular attention to the latter category anachronism by analysing *Only Lovers Left Alive* (Jim Jarmusch, 2014) as an emblematic example of the amalgam of old and new in recent cinema.

1 The problem with vintage

According to the Oxford Dictionary of English vintage denotes ‘the times that something of high quality was produced, especially something representing the best of its kind’.¹⁰ The term is symptomatic of the obsession for authentic artefacts in Western societies and indicates a consumer practice of collecting and using original items at least twenty years old. In her study of second-hand fashion cultures, Heike Jenß defines vintage as a ‘construction of past images and historic looks which can be achieved with original objects as well as new ones that look historic’.¹¹ Generally speaking, fashion and cultural theorists seem to agree that the vintage look is often associated with a nostalgia and concern for high value original items but also includes within this mainstream phenomenon the reproduction of old designs and garments with contemporary material.¹²

From being a label applied mainly to fashion objects, vintage has recently become a new way to define ‘old’ in more appealing terms, or even to denote the reappearance of former styles and tastes. From new clothes based on patterns and prints used in the 1950s to the skeuomorphic design of everyday utensils such as watches and kitchen tools, the terminological confusion between what the fashion/design jargon defines as vintage is widespread. A quick Internet search easily shows how the term is applied

indiscriminately to a multitude of cultural practices (archaism, antique, retro, and even second-hand), thus destabilising its meaning and significance.¹³

The problematic definition of vintage is even more evident if we look at cinema. Considering its original definition, vintage cinema should denote a film made in the past, at least twenty years old, which has reached a canonical status and is deemed of good quality. However, when applied to audio-visual material this interpretation seldom works. By contrast, the label vintage in cinema seems to be used often with reference to filmic products which are fragmented and interstitial or, at least, not canonised. We are thinking of home videos, pornographic films, music videos, scientific/medical films, and educational and industrial films. For instance, the label vintage appears as a tag and a genre category in online porn channels to define pre-1990s material in the catalogue. Overall, these are all products that find more 'space' in documentary filmmaking as archival and home movie 'fillers'; they are more present at the fringe of the long tail of online distribution than in other venues of the entertainment industry.¹⁴

Of course, films made in the past, deemed to be of good quality and of canonical status, play an important role in our time. They return in new versions, restored, screened in their original format at film festivals; or, they can become available in new physical or digital supports, such as blu-rays or new 3D projections, and then hit the exhibition circuit again for a celebratory occurrence (as happened with *Blade Runner* [Ridley Scott, 1982] in March 2015). However, films seem to more easily receive the 'classic' or 'cult' labels than the 'vintage' one. In cinema, vintage is also used as a general appellation for various forms of nostalgic film that recreate a highly aestheticised version of the past. 'Vintage cinema' creates a feeling of the past by convening and recreating easily recognisable stylistic features that are culturally associated with specific decades and historical periods.¹⁵ However, this is an interpretation that goes against the stricter definition of the term vintage, since we are dealing with films produced less than twenty years ago.

Moreover, the association of the label vintage with 'good quality' is increasingly misplaced. Assessing the authenticity of the imperfections and the auratic quality granted to analogue media and old objects is therefore increasingly complicated.¹⁶ Following Walter Benjamin's famous description of the revolutionary power of the 'outmoded', there is certainly a general agreement in granting the analogue object (in particular analogue media) an 'aura', unlike the 'simulation' or its digital counterpart.¹⁷ From plastic film photo cameras to 1970s B-movies, every popular culture pro-

duct has been the protagonist of a sort of comeback and second life, independently from its original perceived quality.

In short, there are three interconnected aspects about the function of the term vintage. First, as it happened for other cultural areas, the term has lost part of its original meaning – to the extent that it often functions as synonymous with the nostalgia/period film. Every film that fetishises the past has been indiscriminately labelled with one of the two terms. Only in a few isolated cases does the term vintage refer to the authenticity of the filmic object in question, mainly films in Super-8 or 16mm for private home viewing.

Second, because of the distance between the everyday use of the term and its etymology, and the plethora of different meanings associated with it, there is the need for film studies to scrutinise the cultural subtleties of this phenomenon in relation to cinematic themes, genres, and *mise en scène*. Finally, instead of trying to add new possible definitions to the term vintage when referring to films, we propose to focus on the different ways a visual ‘vintage fragmented aesthetic’ manifests itself in cinema. As nostalgia has become so pervasive a feeling in recent media productions as to cease being a meaningful category, we suggest further exploring its filmic presence. This means to put aside the original etymology of the term vintage, also because of its random and unhelpful application, and to instead favour the introduction of a new taxonomy.

2 Taxonomy

Before proceeding with the classification there are some important premises that need to be considered. First of all, we conceive the three categories as not mutually exclusive but, in some cases, as overlapping. In fact they are deeply interconnected and often work together; they function more as techniques than as rigid categories, as they entail approaches to the visual recreation of a nostalgic past or feeling. This is particularly true of the categories of faux-vintage and retro, which are differentiated only by the ways in which the past is technically represented. Second, we envisage such categorisation to map different trends in the representation and re-appropriation of past objects in the contemporary filmscape, but this partition may also work with other media. Third, the thematic elements associated with the past (the story told, the era, etc.) are the main distinguishing elements of the anachronistic category, although it permeates all of

them, given that the underlying theme of this taxonomy is the nostalgia for the analogue.

2.1 Faux-vintage

Used within fashion, design, and photography jargon, the adjective ‘faux-vintage’ refers to present-day products that are created to resemble an artefact of the past but that can meet the demands of contemporary consumers (in terms of size, cost, and durability). For the purpose of this essay, we believe it is important to stress the subtle difference between genuinely old products (vintage) and accurate reproductions (faux-vintage).¹⁸ Here we are borrowing the term faux-vintage in its most recent application: the pursuit of authenticity through the imitation of a style from the recent past. This is the primary characteristic of photo filter applications such as Instagram that emulate the look and the imperfections of analogue photography.¹⁹

As far as cinema is concerned, we define faux-vintage as the creation of a conscious visual archaism which can be the fruit of a digital intervention or obtained thorough the employment of analogue technologies such as videotapes and 8mm films. The filmic texts belonging to this category mimic the imperfection of analogue media and try to hide their digital status, pretending to be from a different decade. Features of faux-vintage films include the deliberate creation of all the glitches and imperfections (the indexes) of the analogue: cigarette burns, visible grain, gritty images, scratches, vignettes, and so on.

In *Screening Nostalgia*, Christine Sprengler draws on Marc LeSueur’s concepts of ‘surface realism’ and ‘deliberate archaism’ to consider the role of props and digital intervention in creating ‘new-old films’, such as *The Aviator* (Martin Scorsese, 2004) and *The Good German* (Steven Soderbergh, 2006).²⁰ While a veneer of authenticity is conveyed through the use of iconic objects from the historical period represented, deliberate archaism is best understood as ‘the imitation of past media forms’.²¹ Sprengler’s interpretation is similar to the concept of pastiche, defined by Richard Dyer as ‘a kind of imitation that you are meant to know is an imitation’.²² However, Sprengler acknowledges this and distinguishes the two terms, pointing out that deliberate archaism is ‘a form of pastiche that involves self-conscious simulations as well as reinterpretations of past visual styles’.²³ We expand Sprengler’s definition and interpret faux-vintage films in broader terms. We include in this category the recent production of fake B-films²⁴ such as *Hobo with a Shotgun* (Jason Eisener, 2011) and *Black Dynamite* (Scott Sander, 2009), and those films that employ ‘out-

dated' analogue techniques instead of modern CGI to create a nostalgic effect, for instance Michel Gondry's *The Science of Sleep* (2006).²⁵ *Black Dynamite*, in particular, looks and sounds like a 1970s blaxploitation film; shot in Super 16 with high contrast and an oversaturated colour scheme, the faux-vintage aesthetic emerges also from the smash cuts and errors typical of those low-budget 1970s films.

As mentioned before, these effects are usually created by digital manipulation, but it is not unusual that they are obtained through the adoption of old technologies. This is the case of films shot partially or entirely with old camcorders or on 16mm, for instance Andrew Bujalski's *Computer Chess* (2013), a period comedy about a chess tournament for computer programmers shot with a Sony AVC-3260, an archaic tube video camera used in the 1970s. Pablo Larraín's *No* (2013) is another interesting example. Described in *Sight and Sound* as 'a vintage piece of challenging agitprop',²⁶ the docudrama on the advertising campaign to reject Pinochet's rule in 1988 Chile was shot in the U-matic video format to give its dramatic material a further layer of authenticity.



Fig. 1: Advertising executive René Saavedra (Gael García Bernal) in *No*.

Faux-vintage films are generally set in the recent past and pretend to be contemporary to the historical setting of their narratives by using outdated technologies. Contemporary period films set in the recent past often include television archival material and original vintage newsreels to anchor their narrative to a specific historical time and moments of collective memory. Hyper-authenticity in the fictional parts of these films is achieved not only

by relying on an attentive reconstruction of the era but also through colour matching in the photography. Rainer Klausmann, the cinematographer of the German blockbuster *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* (Uli Edel, 2008) explained the digitally-modified grainy effects and his decision to fit the film within the collective memory of 1970s television footage as follows:

the color matching of the film was influenced by what we used because our movie had to fit with the real stuff; we avoided strong reds, blues or greens and we de-saturated the image of the DI. Otherwise it would have looked like two different movies, and that's not good.²⁷

Overall, the faux-vintage film focuses on key aspects of the analogue nostalgia phenomenon: the yearning for indexicality, and the question of degradation and ranging of the glitches.²⁸ In particular, Schrey argues for a parallel to be drawn between this condition and the artificial ruins built in the 17th and 18th centuries, claiming that

the purpose of this digitally simulated analogue decay seems to be the signification of presence: as it simulates exactly the life or 'soul' that the digital was always accused of lacking.²⁹

The more the digitalisation of media advances, the more this analogue nostalgia emerges. The faux-vintage, as the first facet of vintage cinema, focuses exactly on this attempt to look at the past and recreate its analogue 'soul'.

2.2 Retro

While the products belonging to the faux-vintage category try to disguise their age and show a nostalgia for the idealistic indexicality of the analogue through visual manipulation, what we define as retro films are those focused on the recreation of a specific past in front of the camera. Filmic products belonging to this category do not aim to reach a deliberate archaism by playing with the ontological status of the medium but instead, they fetishise the past through a particular attention to the profilmic with its props, costumes, and set design.

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard pessimistically criticised the 'retro-fashion' of nostalgic 1970s films and concluded that this fad demythologises the past and empties history of meaning.³⁰ Rather than reading retro in the context of a postmodern loss of historical reality, retro should best be understood as a two-faced category. Elizabeth Guffey argues, in fact, that

[a]t best, retro recall revisits the past with acute ironic awareness [...]. At its worst, retro pillages history with little regard for moral imperatives or nuanced implications.³¹

Films belonging to this category are set in the past but their style does not try to be contemporary to the narrated story. Conversely, they often present a very glossy and striking perfection in the image without any sign of decay.³² We think here of films such as *Populaire* (Régis Roinsard, 2012), *American Hustle* (David O. Russell, 2013) and *The Great Gatsby* (Baz Luhrmann, 2013), among the many period comedies and dramas set in the recent past.³³ In the former the retro style is best exemplified by ‘the aesthetic of display’, what Andrew Higson describes as a pivotal feature of heritage films.³⁴ Typing machines, 1970s disco fashion, and Art Deco design objects are ‘on display’, meticulously arranged to offer pleasure to the audience. These films not only dwell on the sonic and visual heritage of the time, creating a beautiful, clean, and highly fetishised depiction of a particular era, they also manage to include a series of links to and reminders of the different paratextual retro-trends and fads of the contemporary Western societies which they inform and are informed by. For example, the hit television show *Mad Men* (2007-2015) had a profound influence on the fashion industry, including special capsule collections created by costume designer Janie Bryant, which were released by Banana Republic.



Fig. 2: Speed typing competition in *Populaire*.

As previously mentioned, the categories of faux-vintage and retro are overlapping – with faux-vintage cinema necessarily featuring a certain attention for a profilmic past, albeit not of the same degree as the retro film. Our distinction is not intended to create further subdivisions; rather, it highlights different tendencies that can occur in the same text. However, the third and final category works in a distinct way and represents the aspect of contemporary vintage aesthetic upon which we would now like to dwell.

2.3 Anachronistic

In this classification of vintage cinema the category ‘anachronism’ applies to those films where the characters engage with obsolete technology, or what Parikka defines as ‘zombie media’. These films are set in a time when the technology in question is clearly outdated and its presence in the profilmic is recurring and goes beyond the occasional appearance in the frame. Different from faux-vintage and retro, it is the anachronism of the technological device (and, more generally, of the media culture it alludes to) that clearly differentiates this category.

However, films that can be featured in this category are found across Western cinematic productions, and in particular, as we shall discuss later, in indie works by auteurs such as Wes Anderson, Aki Kaurismäki, Terry Gilliam, and Jim Jarmusch. Anachronistic films offer a representation and depiction of media archaeology. They show retro media consumption practices and manifest the fact that ‘old media never left us’,³⁵ demonstrating the contemporary co-existence of technologies and media practices and challenging the idea (perpetuated also by cinema) of a hegemonic linearity of media (and technological) development.

These films also deal with planned obsolescence, the restricted useful life built into consumer goods, and the condition of late capitalism by associating outdated objects to characters that are cut out from contemporary times. In this case the anachronistic object loses its vintage auratic value because its old status is the consequence of an inability to join the neo-capitalistic modes of consumption (upgrades etc.) more than a loss of a stylistic or sentimental attachment to the past.

In her analysis of Kaurismäki’s *Le Havre* (2011), Laura Rascaroli argues that the film is characterised by the presence of objects and fashions dated from the 1930s to the 1970s:

[t]he retro appearance of the props may be explained by the film’s focus on characters who are at the very bottom of the social ladder. [...] Old objects represent them in that they are salvaged remnants of previous epochs,

unwanted leftovers, used by people who, by choice or necessity, are extraneous to the logic of consumerist society. As such, they are totally devoid of the aura that is normally attached to what is considered retro and vintage.³⁶

Different from the previously mentioned categories of faux-vintage and retro, in anachronistic cinema the outdated element is not necessarily provided with an auratic value. Films belonging to this category feature 'old' objects and technology that may show signs and indexes of their age or, at the opposite, appear as idealised and mint, preserved forever from usage and time decay. This distinction is reminiscent of Svetlana Boym's concepts of restorative and reflective nostalgia, with the former stressing 'total reconstructions' of the past and the latter allowing a gap for irony and critical examination.³⁷ In anachronistic films pristine objects lean towards a more conservative and restorative form of longing for the past, whereas shabby items are concerned with the pensive reflection on historical time. Nonetheless, they all belong to characters who refuse 'to surrender to the irreversibility of time', as Boym would say.³⁸ The latter is often the case with Wes Anderson's objects, which appear displaced in time rather than belonging to a real, specific past. Stefano Baschiera has noted a recurrent trait in his oeuvre:

[c]lothing, technology and artefacts all belong to a past that does not match the diegetic time of the film, contributing alongside the soundtrack to a nostalgic dislocation of the characters from contemporary time.³⁹

Similar to what happens in Anderson's films the screen presence of elements of analogue nostalgia not only works in nostalgic terms but also underlines their 'prettiness' and decorative function in the human environment.

3 Fascinating anachronism and the digital object

According to Schrey, faux-vintage reveals the analogue nostalgia for indexicality and for the 'noises' and imperfections of analogue media. Anachronistic films reveal another facet of this nostalgia: the yearning for media as physical objects.⁴⁰ We argue that the fascination for the representation of old media embodied by anachronistic cinema constitutes a part of a wider attempt to cope with the representation of an everyday life increasingly characterised by the consumption of digital artefacts.

In the post-celluloid phase, where most films are now shot in digital, cinema still has to face the problem of representing a digital 'immaterial' world. This is particularly relevant when we think about representations of social media or, more broadly, digital communication on the screen. Recent films seem to struggle when engaging with the rising number of human interactions that are mediated by screens. Since the first attempts (such as *You've Got Mail* [Nora Ephron, 1998]) cinema has employed several devices, primarily superimposition of captions and voiceover, to account for communication through SMS, email, and chat.

One could provocatively state that a character browsing a collection of vinyl records is more 'cinematographic' than one scrolling through a playlist on iTunes or Spotify. With several media objects now existing digitally and the new miniaturisation of technology there are fewer opportunities to organise the profilmic space using these elements of material culture which, working as synecdoche, can succinctly offer much information about the characters portrayed and the world they inhabit. If the agency of the physical object is something with cinematographic quality, that of the digital object is more complicated to represent. This is even truer with the technological developments of operational systems, which now favour a minimalistic design aimed at the simplification of the user interface. We would therefore suggest that cinema has developed an ontological nostalgia for the analogue, not only with reference to the medium itself as *dispositif* but also to the world that it creates. Therefore, Jeff Scheible is correct when he reads cinema's relationship with digital media through Rudolph Arneheim and his claims for cinema's partial relation to reality:

cinema shares common ground with that other entity, but does not give itself over entirely to it. As such, movies could be understood to offer an ideally distanced engagement through which to reflect on resistance to and affirmation of people's increasingly mediated lives.⁴¹

In fact, cinema seems more comfortable when employing digital technology and CGI to create 'physical objects' (as shown for instance in fantasy cinema) than when representing our everyday relationship with screens and digital life. While representations of it do occur, and while indeed there is a new proliferation of screens and data in films, cinema's relationship with everyday digital materiality is problematic.

One of the recent attempts to deal directly with the question of digital consumption and at the same time of mirroring its characteristics and design is Jonze's *Her*. The film tells the story of Theodore, played by Joa-

chim Phoenix, who falls in love with the new operative system in his mobile phone – Samantha, voiced by Scarlett Johansson. The film characterises the profilmic in a way that is similar to the minimalist aesthetics of recent digital developments. In fact, the protagonist lives in a future that resembles, for its minimalism and use of pastel colours, the graphic design of contemporary virtual environments offered in operative systems and smartphone applications. It is an ideal near future where the development of digital technologies clearly leads to an almost extreme de-cluttering of material culture. As a result, Theodore's desk and home appear essential and all the lapels have disappeared from clothes.

Nonetheless, this 'lack of things' instead of being a sign of wellbeing highlights the isolation of the protagonist, the feeling of alienation that eventually leads to a strong emotional attachment towards a bodiless software. A lack of materiality does not reveal a better inner self but instead stresses all the struggles of the impurity of the human body to relate with the perfection of the digital design. Even in a film like *Her* elements of archaism are apparent, showing once again contemporary cinema's need of a temporal coexistence of past and present. In this case the archaism is linked to character development, technology, and old fashions. Theodore (a name from a bygone time) works as a professional letter writer, wears 1940s glasses and high-waisted trousers common at the turn of the twentieth century, and interacts with Samantha via a smartphone device which was modelled on an Art Deco cigarette lighter by production designer K.K. Barrett.⁴²

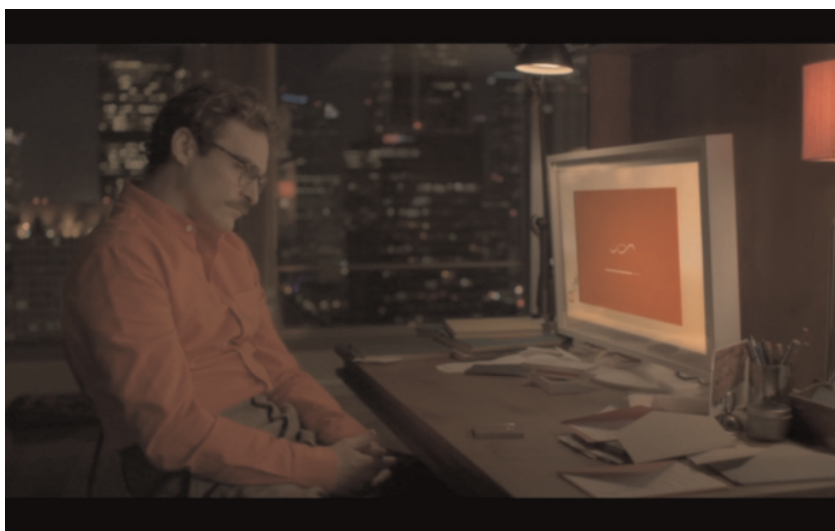


Fig. 3: Retrofuturist elements in Her.

The reasons for this retrofuturist approach can be explained by the necessity to feel reconnected with a past. According to Scheible, *Her*

taps into lingering anxieties nested within established but evolving habits of living with new media that structure everyday experience in the digital age.⁴³

This co-presence of past and future in Jonze's film serves perhaps to placate our contemporary fears of artificial intelligence and the unknown in the future. In this case the imprint of the past is only partial. While *Her* can be rightly seen as an exception in the way contemporary cinema deals with materiality and the archaic object, several films embrace it and show the need to fill the screen with analogue nostalgia.

4 All vampires are anachronistic

It is easy to see a parallel between the renewed fascination in popular culture for undead creatures – zombies and vampires in particular – and the question of anachronism and analogue nostalgia. Pushing the analogy a little further, we can explain why outdated media technologies, fashion garments, and furniture items repopulate our present-day culture. These archaic residues from the past, for instance a collectable old car, can be seen as vampires – perfectly functioning, in almost mint condition, and with a clear aura. Or, if we think of a closed down factory, they can also be soulless zombies – almost completely devoid of their previous function, showing all the symptoms of ageing and decay. Using undead figures for an understanding of our media culture seems a suitable approach to capture the contemporary zeitgeist and an ironic way to rethink the transformative nature of media. Post-apocalyptic films such as Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) and John Hillcoat's *The Road* (2008) often dwell on the idea of making our material culture obsolete and simply useless to the new world that the protagonists inhabit; in a future without electric power there is not much use for mobile devices and other digital technologies.

Contemporary cinema and television have witnessed a resurgence of interest in vampires and other mythical creatures. Therefore, it is not surprising that some recent independent films adopt this figure to reflect on the idea of anachronism and analogue nostalgia. Different from the plethora of vampire horror and teenage movies, *Only Lovers Left Alive* does not deal with terrifying suspense, supernatural powers, and vampire-human love; rather, it explores the ennui of being ageless and ethical,

almost vegan, vampires. The protagonists of Jarmusch's film are two vampire lovers (ironically named Adam and Eve) who live in different cities (Detroit and Tangier) and prefer to procure fresh untainted blood from secure channels and blood banks rather than feeding directly from humans. Although the film is clearly set in contemporary times both the urban environment and the material culture surrounding the characters are strongly connected with an idea of pastness. The undercurrent of the whole film is not gruesome violence but nostalgic and sorrowful longing and the weariness of inhabiting planet Earth for thousands of years, having acquired endless experiences from culture.

The narrative strongly stresses the feeling of isolation and deterritorialisation in contemporary times. Eve, played by Tilda Swinton, lives in a timeless Tangier which seems the one of William Burrough's exile; she loves being surrounded by old books, exotic fabrics, and lingering with her mentor and friend Christopher Marlow, a vampire himself. Then there is Detroit, once the centre of American industrial production and now an abandoned and empty shell characterised by factories in ruins. Adam, played by Tom Hiddleston, lives in a vast flat surrounded by a deserted industrial area which seems stuck in time, with the electricity provided by a generator and no running water. His nightly car journeys reveal a wasteland of inhospitable peripheries.



Fig. 4: Detroit's ruins in Only Lovers Left Alive.

Both vampires fill their domestic fortresses with collectibles – for Eve it is all about antiques and precious textiles, whereas Adam surrounds himself

with old technologies: musical instruments, recording devices, valve amplifiers, and old television sets. More importantly, he is a user of such technology; he collects guitars and sound technologies to produce and record sad and hypnotic tunes. Although the two vampires communicate via an Apple iPhone and Skype, Adam's media consumption is primarily through old technologies; his home is an exemplar of a media archaeology sensibility, and it is dominated by clutter. In this sense the protagonists seem victims of 'ruinophilia' – an attraction for ruins rather than nostalgia. According to Svetlana Boym,

ruinophilia is less afflicted by the personal story; it is not a longing for home or for identity but more of a material and visceral experience of the irreversibility of time that comes together with care for the world.⁴⁴

Objects, musical instruments, tapes, and pictures of poets and artists are the artificial ruins that fill the rooms and the walls, offering a tangible presence of the past and providing an agency in the story and the life of the characters.

Music is an important component in recreating this longing for the past. The soundtrack features not only contemporary songs, for instance tunes by Moroccan singer Yasmine Hamdan, but also R&B classics such as Denise LaSalle's song 'Trapped in this Thing Called Love'. In this sense it reflects the different musical heritage of Detroit and Tangier. The soundtrack (which also includes tracks from Jarmusch's avant-garde band SQÜRL) was primarily composed by Josef van Wissen, a Dutch musician specialising in lute and guitar. The mix of Gregorian chants, lute tunes, and rock melodies perfectly set the mood of the film and encourage spatial and temporal journeys into the past, the present, and the future.

The digital technologies present in the film, in particular the online conversations between vampires on Skype, seem to be mediated by the old anachronistic tech, again promoting more an idea of coexistence rather than evolution. The physical interaction of the undead body with analogue media is stressed throughout the entire film, manifesting itself in several scenes where they switch or unwrap cables and turn book pages. The opening sequence is particularly interesting in this regard. Accompanied by Wanda Jackson's 'Funnel of Love', the film makes a metaphorical link between Adam, Eve, and analogue media. As a 45 rpm record hypnotically spins, fills the screen, and then dissolves, we see Adam and Eve lying in their respective beds going around in a circle. This motif is successively repeated when the vampires have their daily dose of blood – as soon as

they sip their food they roll their heads back and the rooms start spinning like an old record.

Pastness is an incumbent presence in all the journeys of *Only Lovers Left Alive*.⁴⁵ When Eve travels to the United States Adam brings her to the once-majestic Michigan Theatre, now a contemporary ruin where people just park their cars, but once an admired Detroit cinema. Inhabiting this melancholic environment makes Adam particularly sensitive to the vulgarity that surrounds him. Humans, ironically called zombies by the vampire, trigger his suicidal thoughts. All these objects and spaces feature clear traces of their past and early signs of decay, but as such they offer anachronistic attributes to the characters.



Figs 5a, b: The anachronistic objects of Adam and Eve.

5 Conclusion

In this contribution we have suggested the need to go beyond an overall definition of vintage cinema in order to explore different manifestations of the vintage style and sensibility in recent film production; in doing so we have focused on three categories – faux-vintage, retro, and anachronistic – marking distinctions based on the temporal placement of the films in question and on the techniques they adopt to represent the historical period. Although this model lends itself to some generalisation the purpose of such classification is not to provide fixed categories that may be easily applied to films. Instead, it aims to promote a new reflection on the ways contemporary cinema represents and embodies our fascination with the past and the widespread analogue nostalgia that characterises contemporary Western cultures. Our model has problematised the application of the vintage to a film theory context with the ultimate goal of troubling the discursive field of aesthetics.

We also argue that contemporary cinema still struggles to represent the digital dimension of our everyday lives and that, confronted by this difficulty, it finds solace in the interaction of characters with analogue media and in the anachronistic representation of outdated technology. Faux-vintage, retro, and anachronistic are, we argue, some of the techniques employed by contemporary cinema across different film genres to cope with the apparent loss of indexicality.

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Notes

1. See Morreale 2009, Reynolds 2011, Niemeyer 2014, and Lizardi 2015.
2. Niemeyer 2014, p. 2.
3. Ibid.
4. For the relationship between cinema and nostalgia see Dika 2003 and Cook 2004.
5. Parikka 2012, p. 3.
6. Galt 2011 and Ngai 2012.
7. Ngai 2010, p. 951.
8. Schrey 2014, p. 28.
9. Ibid. See also Boym 2011 on ruinophilia, the appreciation of ruins.
10. Oxford Dictionaries, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/vintage?q=vintage> (accessed on 30 June 2015).
11. Jenß 2005, p. 179.
12. Guffey 2006; Veenstra & Kuipers 2013.
13. Baker 2013.
14. See Anderson 2006.
15. Further clarification is necessary. An object which is more than 100 years old is usually considered 'antique', therefore it would not be appropriate to label early films (pre-1915)

as vintage. Vintage items are usually at least twenty years old, and this is connected to the fact that historical periods come back in vogue following cycles of twenty years. Nostalgia binds generations, therefore the revival of the 1960s became prominent in the 1980s because it followed the maturation of those that were children or adolescent at that time. Davis 1979, p. 60.

16. Thorne 2003.
17. Benjamin 2008; Sterne 2007; Schrey 2014.
18. Contemporary reproductions are labelled vintage by Veenstra & Kuipers 2013, for instance.
19. Jurgenson 2011; Caoduro 2014.
20. Sprengler 2009.
21. Ibid, p. 140.
22. Dyer 2007, p. 1.
23. Sprengler 2009, p. 140.
24. On the cycle of nostalgic 'retrosploitation' films see Church 2015.
25. Films such as Ben Affleck's *Argo* (2012) employ similar techniques in terms of showing the grain and the indexicality of the medium, albeit these are not pushed as far as the recent homages to B-movies.
26. Romney 2013, p. 30.
27. Hope-Jones 2009.
28. As discussed by Schrey 2014, Marks 2002, and Rombes 2009.
29. Schrey 2014, p. 36.
30. Baudrillard 1994.
31. Guffey 2006, p. 163.
32. There are examples which celebrate a more shabby-chic aesthetic and destitute materiality, for instance *Goodbye Lenin* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003) and *My Brother Is an Only Child* (Daniele Lucchetti, 2008).
33. Usually, these are the films that most clearly can be associated with Jameson's theorisation of postmodern nostalgia as a superficial depiction of the past (see Jameson 1989). There are also clear assonances with the heritage film genre. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the ideological consequences, progressive or conservative, of these portrayals.
34. Higson 1997, p. 26.
35. Parikka 2012, p. 3.
36. Rascaroli 2013, p. 334.
37. Boym 2001, p. 41.
38. Ibid., p. xv.
39. Baschiera 2011, p. 129.
40. Schrey 2014.
41. Scheible 2014, p. 29.
42. Hill 2014, p. 56.
43. Scheible 2014, p. 23.
44. Boym 2011.
45. The recent American-Iranian film *A Girl Walks Alone at Home at Night* (Ana Lily Amirpour, 2014) also features a narrative centred on vampirism, urban journeys, and an anachronistic approach to vintage. This is another film permeated by the fascination for outdated objects, vinyl records, and a 1957 convertible, but also nostalgic filmic references, including generic references to Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns and David Lynch's atmospheres.

