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Analogue Video in the Age of Retrospectacle: Aesthetics, Technology, Subculture

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Abstract: *This article explores the various manifestations of analogue video in digital culture. Introducing the framing concept of an aesthetics of remanence, it argues that the "society of the spectacle" (Debord) has entered an age of retrospectacle, a dominant signifier of which is the remediation and/or simulation of analogue videography. The concept of remanence connects the material conditions of magnetic tape with analogue video's aesthetic expressions, and the cultural situation in which analogue video finds itself today. By looking at three different cases related to retro gaming, contemporary hip hop, and "old skool" rave, the article shows how the aesthetics of remanence remains highly susceptible to subcultural sensibilities—while it also functions as their shared visual variable. The short film* Kung Fury *(David Sandberg, 2015) is a playfully post-ironic recuperation of failed media technologies. The music video "Fromdatomb$" (David M. Helman, 2012) is a complex exploration of the idea(l) of the historical real. And the work of video art* Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore *(Mark Leckey, 1999) is a creative treatment of nostalgia which invites us to reconsider the medical origins of the term.*

On the brink of the new millennium, 35-year-old artist Mark Leckey produced *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* (1999), a compilation of old videotape footage re-edited and processed with digital software. The video manifested Leckey's profoundly nostalgic sentiment for the bygone days of the British club scene, from 1970s Northern Soul to early 1990s rave parties. As Charlotte Higgins recently wrote, "In its sampling—and deeply skilful editing—of found film sequences, it anticipated the YouTube generation's easy manipulation of digital sources. It activated a painful yearning for a recent past just out of reach, rendered almost touchable by the tantalising immediacy of the footage." Posted on Leckey's YouTube channel more than two decades later, in 2011, *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore*'s life as a proto-YouTube phenomenon seems to have come full circle. It has transformed from a singular work of gallery art into another nodal point in a by-now vast digital network of once-analogue video images. This article will propose a new conceptual frame for this specific moment in time, in which the cultural triumph of digital technology has converged with a fixation with the analogue past. It will focus on a particular video aesthetics that, I argue, is a dominant signifier of today, one that transcends subcultural boundaries, while nevertheless remaining inherently heterogeneous and susceptible to the nostalgic sensibilities of different subcultures.[1]

Simon Reynolds has provided poignant reflections on how, in the first decade of the new millennium,

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> the sheer mass of past accumulating behind the music began to exert a kind of gravitational pull. The sensation of movement, of going somewhere, could be satisfied as easily (in fact, *more* easily) by going backwards within that vast past than by going forwards. It was still an exploratory impulse, but now it took the form of archaeology. (xx)

By calling this cultural condition "retromania" Reynolds, whose focus is primarily on the music industry, emphasises its pathological implications. By introducing the concept of "retrospectacle", conversely, I intend not only to shift the attention to the realm of contemporary visual media, but also to invite a more plural understanding of the nostalgic sensibilities manifested therein. Taking up on Katharina Niemeyer's suggestion that "it might be more useful to grant nostalgia its plural meanings by using the notion of *nostalgias*; especially when it comes to the question of media, where different nostalgias interact" (6), I will pluralise the concept of nostalgia by way of subcultural specification. After providing a general outline of the "age of retrospectacle" and of the "aesthetics of remanence" that characterise it, I will take a closer look at three works, each of which exemplifies a different kind of media object, subculture, and nostalgic sensibility. *Kung Fury* (David Sandberg, 2015) is a short Swedish action comedy whose clear appeal to the retro-gaming community engenders a playful recuperation of previously failed media technologies. Rapper Joey Bada$$'s "Fromdatomb$" is an American music video (directed by David M. Helman) whose "realist" nostalgia for hip-hop's "realest" era manifests itself in a complex configuration of analogue and digital videography. Finally, the previously-mentioned *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* as uploaded on YouTube will be read in the light of the so called "old skool rave video" phenomenon (amateur or semi-professional video footage from early 1990s rave parties now resurfacing on YouTube), inviting us to revisit the profoundly affective origins of the term "nostalgia" itself. Furthermore, and in accordance with what Reynolds identifies as the "exploratory impulse" of our time, I will myself engage in a form of archaeology. As Jussi Parikka points out, media archaeology is a theoretically informed form of historiography, "a way to investigate the new media cultures through insights from past new media" (2). It is the premise of this article that in order to grasp contemporary media culture it is necessary to explore how analogue video as a distinct technology continues to shape media culture's images and imaginaries.

The Aesthetics of Remanence in the Age of Retrospectacle

In early 2015, Yale University Library acquired thousands of obscure films on VHS in order to preserve and make accessible the "cultural id of an era" (David Gary qtd. in Kitroeff). Elsewhere, countless artists, developers, filmmakers and music video producers were exploring and exploiting the remanent possibilities of analogue video. With a rare tape like *Black Devil Doll from Hell* (Chester Novell Turner, 1984) sold on eBay for nearly 700 US dollars in May 2011, the VHS collector's market seemed to be booming (Rothman). Meanwhile, YouTube was invaded by an army of nostalgics carrying the VHS standard onto digital territory.

There have been several attempts to pinpoint the essence of video as an art form and as a medium—from Rosalind Krauss's seminal 1976 essay "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism" to Yvonne Spielmann's more recent book *Video: The Reflexive Medium* (2008). While both constitute important contributions to the history and theory of video, they present limitations with regards to current concerns. Krauss's "narcissism" drew on a specific use

made of video in 1970s art: a closed configuration of artist and camera that created a self-affirming feedback loop. Spielmann's "reflexivity", on the other hand, refers to the unfixed nature of the electronic video signal. Her contribution privileges the creative potentialities of real-time processing over the particularities of video as a storage medium.

Whereas these concepts frame significant phenomena, they nonetheless cannot account for the specific way in which analogue video remains part of media culture today. Consider the jumpy (home) video footage of a half-forgotten 1980s vacation or of an art gallery's blurry copy of a 1970s Vito Acconci performance. We may remember the former from our VCR days, and experience the latter anew at a video art retrospective. But we also see the same image remediated or simulated in everything today, from contemporary films like *The Fourth Kind* (Olatunde Osunsanmi, 2009) and *Paranormal Activity 3* (Henry Joost, Ariel Schulman, 2011), to "VHS style" music videos of different genres.[2] Apps like *Retro VHS Old School Video* by Venn Interactive even encourage the user to recreate a VHS look with his/her smartphone. It thus seems fair to say that the "VHS style" has become a prominent signifier of an obsessively retrospective media culture in which one is more likely to download an app to produce faux-grainy videos with one's iPhone than to watch a film on actual VHS, or to reflect on the technology that gave rise to those grains in the first place.

It is therefore necessary, I claim, to introduce a new term to theorise analogue video aesthetics as they are reframed by digital culture, a term that goes against the grain of the media discourses that repeatedly proclaim video dead (see Chaney; Garrett; Horovitz). The term "remanence" as applied to the medium fuses the specific material conditions of analogue video with the cultural situation in which it finds itself today. Its etymological root is in the Latin word *remanere*, meaning to "remain". Its adjective form, *remanent* in English, is an archaic form that has fallen out of use in the everyday vocabulary. What remain, so to speak, are the specific uses made of the term in modern science and technology. In physics and geology, remanence means the "[m]agnetism that remains after the inducing field is removed" (*OED*). As it happens, this is precisely the material condition for the storing of information on videotape (Wheeler 18). The process whereby videotape loses its magnetic charge is sometimes referred to as "remanence decay": a technical term for the transient nature of magnetically stored information—analogue video's very own form of gradual memory loss. I thus suggest that the audiovisual expressions of analogue video's material conditions can always already be framed as an aesthetics of remanence, but that the concept gains an additional charge of cultural connotations as analogue video faces its own obsolescence.

What, then, are the aesthetic characteristics and cultural connotations of an aesthetics of remanence in what I will call the age of retrospectacle? In the early 2000s Laura U. Marks already noted how digital artists were "importing images of electronic dropout and decay, 'TV snow' and the random colors of unrecorded tape, in a sort of longing for analog physicality" (153). She termed this longing "analog nostalgia, a retrospective fondness for the 'problems' of decay and generational loss" (152). At first sight, Svetlana Boym's influential distinction between restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia sheds light on such aesthetics: "Restorative nostalgia", she writes, "manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time" (41). In other words: restorative nostalgia represses the passing of time, while reflective nostalgia revels in it.

Attempts have been made to apply Boym's conceptual pair onto everything from the reappropriation and remediation of Super 8 film (van der Heijden) to retro variations in game design (Garda). One could also assume that analogue (video) nostalgia, with its celebration of the patina of remanence decay, would fit the reflective frame perfectly. However, this is complicated by a paradox that pertains to analogue nostalgia as a predominantly digital phenomenon. Consider how digital nostalgia is inconceivable for Boym, who writes in the early 2000s: "Computer memory is independent of affect and the vicissitudes of time, politics and history; it has no patina of history, and everything has the same digital texture" (347). Marks, however, whose work is contemporaneous with Boym's, already foresees a tendency to an analogue-digital hybrid aesthetics that will grow into a pop cultural dominant in the course of the decade.

Throughout the 2000s, as digital images will ascend towards ever higher definitions, the homogeneous "digital texture" referred to by Boym will become increasingly transparent. Computers will learn to capture or simulate a variety of analogue images and sounds with increasing fidelity. On a cultural level, the introduction of YouTube will gradually turn digital culture into a magnetic force, acting upon its analogue artefacts, intensifying their force of attraction. "We've become victims of our ever-increasing capacity to store, organise, instantly access, and share vast amounts of cultural data", Reynolds laments. "Not only has there never before been a society so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of its immediate past, but there has never before been a society that is *able* to access the immediate past so easily and so copiously" (xxi). The future of nostalgia that could barely be foreseen at the start of the millennium thus entails the implosion of restoration and reflection under the gravitational pull of an instant supply and insatiable demand for retrospectacle. Significantly, the retrospectacle is fixated not only with the past, but also with the signs of the passing of time. A paradoxical consequence is that deteriorating tapes are transferred to digital code in order to store, not their content, but their signs of deterioration (an aspect I will return to when discussing *Kung Fury* and "Fromdatomb$"). If remanence always already implies decay, and if its aesthetic expression subsequently connotes loss, digitisation grants the signs of loss a cultural permanence.

The magnitude of this situation is what suggests that there is a need to update the key concept of Guy Debord's influential cultural diagnosis. In 1967, Debord described late modern media culture as "an immense accumulation of *spectacles*" (7), commodified images of future leisure time "whose cyclical return we are supposed to look forward to", while "all that is really happening is that the spectacle is displaying and reproducing itself at a higher level of intensity" (89). The much cited first paragraph of *The Society of the Spectacle* was a powerful premonition of postmodern thought: "Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (Debord 7). Postmodern theorists like Fredric Jameson (1991) and Jean Baudrillard (1994) identified an additional problematic tendency towards cultural retrospection. For Baudrillard, films like *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) were proof of the irreversible disappearance of the historical real. Reduced to a "retro scenario" (43), history, he wrote, "made its triumphal entry into cinema, posthumously … Its reinjection has no value as conscious awareness but only as nostalgia for a lost referential" (44). I will pluralise the problem of historiography in the age of retrospectacle through the case studies.

What the case studies nevertheless seem to suggest is that we no longer buy into images of future leisure time. The future does not sell. The society of the spectacle has entered an age of retrospectacle. The commodified moments to which we most eagerly look forward are no longer manifestations of a prospective imaginary, the utopia of all tomorrow's

parties, but the retrospective joy of yesterday's parties made to look as if they played out decades ago. I will nevertheless also suggest that we can distinguish between two moments, or elements, of the "nostalgizing" (Niemeyer 10) acts that the retrospectacle gives rise to. Any activity that involves looking at images connotative of the past, in order to satisfy a present nostalgic desire, can be defined as nostalgic retrospection (be it playful, empowering, painful, or something else). Nostalgic retrospection nevertheless entails projecting back images of contemporary desires onto an objective past that is subsequently (and accordingly) reimagined. After all, as Boym points out, "One is nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been" (351). This act of nostalgic "retrojection" is neither inherently good nor bad. While it can manifest itself in a (self-)deceptive whitewashing of the past (the flushing out of cavities happens to be its medical denotation), it is also the condition for acts of great creativity, as the three case studies will demonstrate.[3]

Playful Recuperation of Infuriating Failure

A Kickstarter project only gets realised if enough individuals are willing to fund it. Crowdfunding thus requires creating hype around the project and this generally happens with the help of a prospective trailer. The prospect of a hyperbolic 1980s action pastiche through a trailer gave *Kung Fury* quite a kick-start. Launched in 2013, the campaign quickly attracted 17,713 backers who raised 630,020 US dollars—three times the expected figure. Thus, an action retrospectacle by David Sandberg, an unknown Swedish debutant, became the fourteenth most funded Kickstarter film to date on a list of more than 57,000 projects ("Kung Fury").

Set in an imaginary Miami in 1985, *Kung Fury* depicts a world in which violent gangs rule the streets, arcade games turn out to be murderous Transformers, and an action hero can take on an infinite amount of enemies, yet fail to deliver a single good one-liner. The plot is like a concentrated pastiche of every 1980s action film and video game. While fighting a mysterious kung fu master who just killed his partner, a cop is struck by lightning, bit by a cobra, and turned into Kung Fury, master of the eponymous fighting technique. This makes him the target of no other than Adolf Hitler, who in the film's revisionist rendering of history is an evil time-travelling "Kung Führer" seeking to secure the secrets of the legendary technique for himself. With the help of his friend Hackerman, Fury travels back in time to Nazi Germany to kill Hitler—but not before an accidental visit to a prehistoric Viking Age, where warrior princesses with machine guns ride dinosaurs, and Fury finds an unlikely ally in Thor, the Norse god.

The silliness of *Kung Fury*'s blatantly ahistorical plot can hardly be held against it. If Baudrillard complained that "today, the history that is 'given back' to us (precisely because it was taken from us) has no more of a relation to a 'historical real' than neofiguration in painting does to the classical figuration of the real" (45), *Kung Fury* is nothing if not the shameless celebration of historical simulation and promiscuous retro-referentiality. Its referents are not the Second World War, the Viking Age, or even 1985, but the retrojective concentrate of a hyperbolic 1980s imaginary—the way that its intended audience wants to remember the decade. There are plot devices reminiscent of supernatural martial arts films like *The Last Dragon* (Michael Schultz, 1985); an animated sequence evoking series like *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (Lou Scheimer, 1983–1985) and *Thundercats* (Jules Bass and Arthur Rankin Jr., 1985–1989); anachronistic combinations of futurist technology and extinct species bringing 1980s toys like Dino-Riders to mind; and Fury's humanoid

dinosaur partner Triceracop recalling some creature from the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles franchise.

Kung Fury certainly earns the title of a tour de force of referential ingenuity—an oxymoron proper to a retrospectacular "culture industry", in which creativity seems to collapse into "a constant reproduction of the same thing" (Adorno and Horkheimer 134). Most striking is its focus on obsolete media technologies, making it a kind of media archaeology in action that clearly appeals to the "consumed nostalgia" of the retro-gaming community. A term coined by Gary Cross, "consumed nostalgia … is about more than a revival of a style materializing a former era. It is a longing for the goods of the past that came from a personal experience of growing up in the stressful world of fast capitalism" (10). In an attempt to recuperate the concept of nostalgia itself, Cross emphasises the positive experience of replaying childhood moments through an interaction with its objects. "Critics", he writes, "miss how the new consumed nostalgia is liberating and, in fact, often fun" (14). Few goods age faster than media technologies, which is why retro video games have a particular nostalgic appeal. As we will see, however, liberating fun is not necessarily the deciding factor.

Referencing James Newman's 2004 book *Videogames*, Jaakko Suominen writes that that retro games are "advertised as a return to pure, genuine or authentic gaming"; "a return to the origins, where pleasure and playability are attained with simple facts and where the use of capacity is maximized." More generally, however, Suominen acknowledges that "the nostalgic discourse of electronic gaming contains a lot of (self-)critical and (self-)ironic forms of action." It is hardly by way of the former that *Kung Fury* appeals to the retro-gamer. Consider Hackerman's time machine. It is an "imaginary media" hybrid of old MicroBee computers, archaic arcade game graphics, and, not least, the infamous Nintendo Power Glove.[4] Introduced in a shot that references a typical 1980s TV advertisement, with the camera frantically zooming in and out on the glove to a heavy techno soundtrack, the Power Glove becomes the synecdoche for the particular branch of retrospectacle that *Kung Fury* represents: a playfully (self-)ironic recuperation of a technological past neither very pleasurable nor very playable. A NES (Nintendo Entertainment System) controller introduced in 1989, the Power Glove was supposed to revolutionise gaming by its state-of-the-art gesture-based technology. Being the 1980s, the marketing strategy followed the testosterone-filled more-is-more strategy. The campaign promised: "The Power Glove—everything else is child's play" ("Power Glove Commercial")—a slogan suggesting not only that the gadget would satisfy older consumers, but that it signified the introduction of a new, more mature, more serious kind of gaming. It backfired. Not even the most virtuoso video game veteran could figure out how to get the Power Glove to work properly. It lasted less than a year on the market.

The Power Glove, nevertheless, enjoys its own cultural remanence thanks to the retro-gaming subculture. Today there are numerous YouTube clips in which aging retro-gamers either recount their frustrating memories of the glove's notorious lack of precision ("Power Glove") or pretend to be testing it for the first time only to find out the hard way ("NES Power Glove Demonstration"). The way that this community clings on to this device (a tendency mirrored by its recuperation in *Kung Fury*) points to a paradox of "consumed nostalgia": even a negative childhood experience is rendered desirable solely on account of its speedy obsolescence. Certainly, retro-gaming nostalgia "corroborates the fact that videogames are a mature art form, the masterpieces of which evoke reflective longing" (Garda 10). But this longing is evidently irreducible to the masterpieces. While the premature

Power Glove failed at its release, not least due to the slow response of the controller, fast capitalism finally makes it triumph precisely as a tool for slowing down time.

This paradoxical sentiment of joyful frustration is mirrored by *Kung Fury*'s videographic aesthetics. Expectedly, the film's nostalgic orgy of remediated retro-gaming is coated with a patina of remanence decay. Right before the film starts, the 1980s logo for Swedish Public Television flashes by amidst electronic turbulence: a manufactured trace of a previous recording on a faux-VHS tape. As VFX supervisor Cameron Scott explains, Sandberg's core concept was to make the film look as a VHS tape accidentally found in an "old grandma's attic" (Scott qtd. in Bennett). The texture, which is meant to look like an old rental copy played countless times, was primarily achieved through digital software. It is nevertheless worth bearing in mind that the process was not entirely digital: "someone brought their old VHS player into work and we tapped a feed from that into the computer and recorded some of that. We got the rolling bar effect, the dirty head VHS reading head look, and all that kind of stuff" (Scott qtd. in Bennett).



Figure 1: Strategically placed tracking errors in *Kung Fury* (David Sandberg, 2015). Laser Unicorns. Screenshot.

Lest we forget we should think that we are looking at videotape, the image repeatedly goes into an analogue fit at strategically placed moments. It is no coincidence that Fury's first fight, as he takes on the rampaging Transformer-like arcade game, is plagued by serious video dropout. Blocking out key moments of action, these errors mirror the film's (self-)ironic recuperation of the once-failed Power Glove. What would have been a frustrating malfunction in the VHS era now turns into a joyful signifier of the same; an original loss of entertainment value returns as nostalgic surplus.[5] *Kung Fury*'s technological failures finally fill the double function of aesthetic component and narrative device. As Hackerman manoeuvres his time machine to send Fury back to Nazi Germany, something goes wrong, there is a glitch in the system, and an error message on a jumpy computer screen is duly boosted by VHS tracking lines. Fury ends up in Jurassic Asgard, and we end up identifying a

key feature of the retrospectacle: the undermining of medium specificity for the benefit of a hybrid aesthetic—the indiscriminately affectionate alloy of analogue and digital problems.

The Realest Realist Rapping "Fromdatomb$"

Substituting proper historical pathos for playful post-irony, "Fromdatomb$" opens with an uncredited voice delivering a warning: "A lot of people, like Kanye say, you know, stuff like 'That was then, what are you going to do now?' You know, 'Let's not live in nostalgia. Let's not celebrate our history.' People need to be careful when they, you know, say things like that."

Given the thorough critique that nostalgia has been subjected to since the 1970s, including accusations of falsifying history in the service of capitalism and conservative ideology (see Sprengler), warnings in its favour are rare; nostalgics tend to be content with delivering apologies. While it has been argued that hip-hop's materialism contradicts its potential status as a true counterculture (Hazzard-Donald 512), poignantly illustrated by its capacity to embrace a capitalist (perhaps even racist) icon like Donald Trump (Williams), its ethos and aesthetics remain deeply embedded in its roots: a radical subculture born in the segregated 'hoods of New York, home of African Americans and Hispanics. This complicates any straight analogy between nostalgia and reactionary discourse; what Boym, for instance, would identify as the nationalist revivals caused by the restorative drive (Boym 41–5).

Michael Eric Dyson engages in a critical discussion of hip-hop's ideological tensions, both in relation to "the intraracial class division that has plagued African-American communities for the last thirty years" (63), and "the power and pitfalls associated with the revival of earlier forms of black radicalism, nationalism, and cultural expression" (67). On the one hand, it can raise empowering consciousness in the community. On the other, "it has also led to perspectives that do not provide *critical* reflection on the past. Rather, many rappers attempt to duplicate the past without challenging or expanding it" (67).

"Fromdatomb$"'s univocal celebration of hip-hop's history nevertheless has little to do either with bling-bling or the Black Panthers. If anything, it is invested in the small-scale territorialism that comes with the community's characteristic elevation of its members' respective (and respected) turf. It corroborates Murray Forman's observation that, "[a]lthough hip-hop has always displayed a pronounced spatiality, there has been an ongoing process of transformation, particularly as the identification with localized places and the cultural sphere of 'the hood' have attained greater importance and urgency" ("Introduction" 7).

But this investment is also tightly connected to a particular moment in hip-hop history, its alleged golden age: the 1990s. "Big ups to Brooklyn, home of the realest / Big ups to Brooklyn, home of the era"—the rap song's lyrical hook is thus worth taking a closer look at in the light of the pro-nostalgic prologue. Nowadays primarily connotative of a longing for the past, nostalgia originally meant "homesickness" ("Nostalgia"). As such, it is etymologically rooted in the spatial dimension as well. There is, from this point of view, a complex conception hidden in "Fromdatomb$"'s deceptively simple hook. Home is not only retrojected precisely onto the junction of space and time ("home of the era"), but also reified through what could be called hip-hop's own kind of "realism" ("home of the realest"). As Forman writes:

> Successful acts are expected to maintain connections to the 'hood and to 'keep it real' thematically, rapping about situations, scenes and sites that comprise the lived experience of the 'hood. At issue is the complex question of authenticity as rap posses continually strive to reaffirm their connections to the 'hood in an attempt to mitigate the negative accusations that they have sold out in the event of commercial or crossover success. (Forman, "'Represent'" 207)

Like so many classic East Coast rap videos, "Fromdatomb$" is set in the iconic scenery of an impoverished urban landscape with graffiti-wall backdrops, subway car interiors and public basketball courts. With the exception of the prologue and occasional lines such as the mentioned hook and "Click-clack-boom, resurrecting boom bap from the tombs", the lyrics themselves are less expressive of nostalgia than the samplings and the videographic style.[6] The opening footage of figures ascending from a tunnel has a strange, low-resolution texture to it, evocative of VHS images yet with a distinctly digital touch. The dramatic effect of the prologue's word "careful" is intensified as the video shows signs of remanence decay, destabilising voice and image in a typically analogue manner. As the video cuts to Joey Bada$$ standing in front of a graffiti wall, and the familiar VCR signifier "Play" flashes by in the upper left corner, the first beat kicks in. Incidentally, it is sampled from the soundtrack of a fairly recent videogame.

An exquisite cinematic crime adventure set in 1947 Los Angeles, *L.A. Noire* (Rockstar Games, 2011) is arguably the closest equivalent to the nostalgia film that the game industry has produced to date; a *Chinatown* for the Sony Playstation generation. There is, thus, already in the music, the implication of nostalgia as a form of historical simulation, affirming the retrospectacle as a retrojective layering of the pasts. A newly composed jazz tune for piano and trumpet evokes cinematic memories of melancholy 1940s bars, albeit sampled in a hip-hop track whose own lost historical referential is the genre's own golden age: the 1990s.

Richard Shusterman argues that hip-hop is essentially "a postmodern popular art" (459), with appropriative sampling undermining the dichotomy between original creation and derivative borrowing: "Originality thus loses its absolute originary status and is reconceived so as to include the transfiguring reappropriation and recycling of the old" (461). It thus seems almost paradoxical that the same subculture can give evidence of a realist ethos whose premise is so intensely anti-postmodern—even classicist, one might say. Consider how Joey Bada$$ explicitly distances himself from "vintage" labels, and refuses to reduce his work to postmodern play. Staying true to the hip-hop credo of keepin' it real, his answer to critics who accuse him of only being able to make 1990s-sounding music reveals a clear pattern: "I do real shit, that's it. … People just haven't experienced like real lyricism over like real soulful beats since the 1990s, so they don't have anything else, or any other way to identify real hip-hop or real music" ("Joey Bada$$ x Statik Selektah"). Speaking, thus, like a real(ist) classicist, the 1990s for Joey Bada$$ connote not so much a "retro scenario" as a musical hallmark of cultural quality: "I got sick of class, started making classics", as he raps in "Fromdatomb$". Against Baudrillard, then, Joey Bada$$ seems to claim that it is dangerous for hip-hop *not* to live in nostalgia, *not* to celebrate its history, precisely because history is where the real resides.

If there already is a tension between the music's postmodern composition and the classicist-realist ethos of the rapper, the music video further complicates matters. As mentioned, it has all the characteristics of a worn VHS image: low resolution, dropout,

tracking lines, and a subtle rainbow effect. There is nevertheless a digital touch to it, difficult to pinpoint at first, since it does not look quite like the typical digital "VHS style" filter. It takes a while to realise that the optic confusion stems from a subtle (yet, once it has been discovered, obvious) contrasting effect. Whoever happens to be rapping, he is shown in digital HD, while everything around and behind him has a blurry VHS texture. This contrast is itself blurred by the fact that analogue problems nevertheless affect the whole image, so that it seems to be composed of at least three layers: VHS ground, digital HD figure, and a superimposed surface of VHS noise.

Director David M. Helman has shared both the technical details of the production and the idea behind the video's complex and compelling look (Gottlieb). An actual combination of digital and analogue technologies, it is analogous to Helman's own set of nostalgic sensibilities. Aware of Bada$$'s 1990s influences, Helman began his creative process by looking at old Wu-Tang Clan and Gang Starr videos. Nostalgic sentiment overcame him; not primarily due to the tunes themselves, but because the videos were all VHS recordings that someone had digitised and uploaded on YouTube. Nostalgic retrospection nevertheless gave way to a retrojective impulse. Helman was perfectly aware of the discourse according to which hip-hop had peaked in the 1990s and had been unable to produce anything superior since. Unwilling to buy into this entirely, yet keen on celebrating the past, he decided to make a hybrid style video that combines authentic VHS texture with contemporary digital elements.



Figure 2: Rapper Chuck Strangers in digital HD against semi-VHS background in "Joey Bada$$ (Feat. Chuck Strangers)—Fromdatomb$ (Official Video)" (2012). Pro Era. Screenshot.

"I knew I didn't want to use an After Effects plugin, or create the analog aesthetic in post [production], because it just looks terrible", Helman has explained; instead,

> We used a capture card that connected to a VCR to record the HD footage onto a VHS tape. Then we took that same VHS and re-captured it back into the computer. The footage comes back in 4x3 so we simply stretched it out to match the 16x9 HD

> frame. In After Effects, we put the HD and VHS layers on top of each other. Then Andrew [Finch] and I rotoscoped/masked out the HD footage with the analog layer exposed underneath and feathered it to make it seem as seamless as possible. (Helman qtd. in Gottlieb)

This technological game of back-and-forth remediation confirms one previous point and points to a new one. I have already argued that analogue nostalgia is predominantly a digital phenomenon that paradoxically engenders playful acts of digital simulation. But "Fromdatomb$" makes explicit what *Kung Fury* merely suggested, namely that the aesthetics of remanence manifests itself in a hybrid image that remains irreducible to processes of simulation. Here and there, something of the referent remains. There is an analogue intervention in the production process that grants these works their particular texture. A virtual trace of an actual VHS image—a digitised grain of analogue realness—allowing the perceptive eye to sense that it is not simply looking at a digital after effect. Marks's suggestion that digital video is untroubled by questions regarding its nature, that it "refuses the doomed search for origins" (152), seems to be challenged by these recent instances of analogue nostalgia. The aesthetics of remanence in the age of retrospectacle remains haunted by a very real analogue ghost—one that finds its own analogue in a hip-hop "realism" resonating "Fromdatomb$".

The Virtual Saint Vitus's Dance of a Technostalgic Body

When Jameson wrote that the "fashion-plate, historicist films" termed nostalgia films "are in no way to be grasped as passionate expressions of that older longing once called nostalgia but rather quite the opposite; they are a depersonalized visual curiosity and a 'return of the repressed' of the twenties and thirties 'without affect'" (xvii), he was detaching the term from an original meaning worth revisiting. Introduced by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer in 1688, nostalgia denoted neither a style nor an action: it was a serious affliction that seemed to collapse the borders between body and mind. It gave evidence of the mind's capacity not only to record, but also to render a memory so desirable that it became physically decapacitating—even deadly. Symptoms included, but were not limited to, propensity to isolation, sadness, insomnia, loss of appetite, stupor, and finally death (Fuentenebro and Valiente 405).

We have yet to hear of someone dying from Hipstamatic overload. The nostalgias in the age of retrospectacle work on somewhat lower intensity levels. They nevertheless display various subcultural sensibilities that are irreducible to affectless depersonalisation. Raising the affective bar to unprecedented levels, the "old skool rave video" phenomenon invites us to rethink contemporary definitions of nostalgia from Hofer's point of view. Tim van der Heijden defines "technostalgia" as "the reminiscence of past media technologies in contemporary memory practices." Putting back the *techno* in technostalgia, I will finally elaborate on this definition in order to frame a very specific subcultural situation: a temporary "technostalgic body" constituted at the intersection of old and new media technology; embodied user and YouTube community; as well as personal and collective memory.

With a major EDM (Electronic Dance Music) act like Chase & Status releasing a music video like "Blind Faith" (Daniel Wolfe, 2011), a confusingly convincing re-enactment of an early 1990s rave night, the retrospectacle has evidently reached this subculture as well. Exploding with the so-called "Second Summer of Love" in Britain in 1988–1989, raves

paved the way for EDM's conquest of the urban nightlife. Gathering up to twenty thousand people in everything from aircraft hangars to open fields, this smiley subculture set the standard for serious clubbing for decades to come.[7] As Reynolds points out, at one point the very idea of nostalgia for rave "would have seemed unthinkable, abominable, a contradiction of everything techno was about. So many of the hardcore rave anthems had titles like 'Living for the Future' or samples that proclaimed 'We Bring You the Future'" (234). By 1996, however, the "old skool" label was already being attached to tracks made only four years earlier. With the 1999 release of Leckey's *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* (perhaps the first video made with the explicit purpose of framing rave retrospectively) there was no longer any doubt: the smiley days were over.

Leckey returned with *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* after an almost decade-long absence from the art scene (following his participation in the 1990 ICA's *New Contemporaries* exhibition with Damien Hirst) and it is widely considered to be his breakthrough. The video was first shown as part of the ICA's 1999 *Crash!* exhibition, it was acquired by Tate in 2003, and has been included in numerous exhibitions since then. Higgins points out that "in an art world that could often seem wry, or ironic, or knowing, *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* was different: disarmingly sincere." Sincerity also characterises a recent interview in which Leckey admits that *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* was made as an attempt to escape feelings of nostalgia, for "lost youth, lost Britain" so overwhelming that they were "like a sickness", a "debilitating" condition that could only be "exorcised" by making the video, often while crying, sometimes drunk ("Mark Leckey on *Fiorucci*"). Evidently, it has little in common with what Jameson labelled nostalgia films, and is more akin to a millennial manifestation of the illness discovered by Hofer—albeit treated with an alcohol-infused concoction of analogue-digital videography. As Boym points out, nostalgia "can be both a social disease and a creative emotion, a poison and a cure" (354). *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* treats the illness by making it visible. Contrary to the "fashion plate" look of the nostalgia films, this one wears its symptoms on its electronic skin.



Figure 3: Lost young raver in *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* (Mark Leckey, 1999). Screenshot.

Aesthetically speaking, then, technostalgia's symptoms are severe. Contrary to the convention of music videos, the fusing of fragmented imagery with continuous sound, *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* creates disjunction on all levels. Not only are the images and sounds out of synch, but also the music itself is a fragmented *Fruity Loops*/*Cool Edit Pro* cut-up, disturbing the classical climaxes of electronic dance music.[8] If nostalgia is a "hypochondria of the heart" (Boym 1), technostalgia is perfectly manifested in the acoustic oscillation between rhythm and arrhythmia. At one point the music is even pealed down to a single bleep. This implied electrocardiographic sound is attributed to a wide-eyed young man seemingly stuck in a loop both physical and mental: "I just… The world just… I just…", his inner voice tells us, while a sample of his dance is manipulated to look as if he is endlessly repeating the same bewildered to-and-fro movement.

But the jerky dance moves and the recurrent fades-to-white, the muffled sounds of rave whistles lingering in empty warehouses, these transient traces of all yesterday's parties suggests that the most severe symptom of technostalgia is memory malfunction. "I was trying to make my own past using other people's footage", Leckey confirms. "I was trying to reassemble my memories … So that's what it is to me, it's just me trying to remember stuff with this footage" ("Mark Leckey on *Fiorucci*"). In an ironic twist of fate, all of Leckey's sampled records were lost in a hard drive accident some years after *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore*'s making (see Leckey's comments in "Fiorucci"). Once the video was posted on YouTube in 2011, however, Leckey could reach out to his fans for help to identify the lost source material. As a result, two decades after its release, and in a kind of virtual repetition of the source (re)collection that already constituted the condition for its making, *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* transformed Leckey's YouTube channel into a treatment facility for technostalgic amnesia.

Leckey's answer to Emi Dixon, a YouTube user who writes, "This always make me wish I was born earlier" is surprisingly abrupt considering his heartfelt reflections on his own nostalgia in the quoted interview. He simply writes: "Don't. I felt that about the seventies" ("Fiorucci"). *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore*'s new platform nevertheless makes it part of a subculture whose nostalgic sentimentality is beyond Leckey's control. With close to 650,000 views, a YouTube search for the term "old skool rave video" shows "Shellys Old Skool Rave 1992 E Pill Munching Video" to be the most popular hit at the time of writing. Seemingly shot on a consumer-grade camcorder, it is simply an original piece of early 1990s rave footage posted on YouTube under the new label of "old skool". The camcorder's overtly light-sensitive sensor repeatedly turns heads into grinning light-bulbs, so that we often see no more than blurry flecks of human features. The already low resolution of the analogue source seems to have been rendered even lower by bad digitisation. Jerky slow-motion aside, a cheap ghost effect makes waving limbs leave transparent traces in the air—as if the camcorder itself had been fed a dose of psychedelics.

"Shellys Old Skool Rave 1992 E Pill Munching Video" is, to the outsider, a technically substandard recording of random lightheaded people under heavy influence. For the technostalgic body, however, it is a blurry window right into the sweaty essence of a mythical subculture—forever lost in the repetitive ecstasies of an unrepeatable past. The video has thus generated more than 700 comments. Many of these oscillate between heartfelt reminiscence and painfully sincere judgements passed on the alleged "poverty of the present" (Howard 641–50). What is most surprising is not the resentment so aggressively expressed by some of the self-proclaimed rave veterans, but the amount of rookies, too young to have

experienced those parties first-hand, who enthusiastically buy into the same discourse. I have kept the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the following samples. User Joe Fraser:

> electronic music was so much better back in the 90s, so was the quality of the ecstasy.. nowadays the 'club' electronic music scene has turned into a corporate cock sucking pile of try-hard garbage with no soul, no substance, written by the biggest fucking talentless morons on the planet. we all saw it coming during the 90s: hardcore commercialization and systematic destruction of the rave scene. were you born after 1992? the next time you're waiting in line outside of some bullshit club, dressed and looking exactly the same as everyone else (damn sheep) just remember: your life SUCKS and you missed out on a golden era.

Significantly, notwithstanding the fact that it is a re-enactment shot in 2011, "Blind Faith", which has generated almost 4,7 million views and 4,500 comments, seems to produce very similar technostalgic sentiments. SLIKxBLiiTz:

> i fucking wish i was born for these times im 17 now and id give anything to do this in this atmosphere no gangsters no fighting nothing like that just love for music and dancing to the music everything in the 90's was what made history our parents came from this era and my dads my hero because hes done all this and it all seems so good.

Much could be said about the way that a past which, as other users point out, includes everything from drug abuse to deadly violence, is whitewashed through the collective workings of technostalgic retrojection. There is a poignant affective contrast inherent in the transgenerational technostalgic agreement itself: the veteran's reckless attack on the rookies, and the rookie's enthusiastic affirmation of the veteran's point of view. Most poignantly, however, technostalgia gives evidence of a more intricate temporal relation. If the technostalgic body is transgenerational, it is situated at the junction not just of time and space, but also of two converging timelines. On the one hand, the time of the veterans mourning their own past; times lost. On the other hand, the time of the rookies mourning their present as an unsatisfying future past. Not just the tragedy of a lost time, then, but also the tragedy of a time that never will be theirs to lose. Such are the subcultural sensibilities of technostalgia.

A subculture once "living for the future" recedes, to paraphrase Debord, into a representation of its own futurist past; from "We Bring You the Future" to "I am the man with a heavy heart / And I dare not turn the page" ("Blind Faith"). What happens when the members of a subculture substitute the adoration of their once-rebellious parents for their own future rebellion? It is here that "Fiorucci" finally reveals itself as having anticipated something more profound than the easy manipulation of digital sources. In its treatment of technostalgia, manifested not least in the figure of the lost young raver, it produced a prospective diagnosis of the imminent retrospectacle. "I just… The time just… I just…": there is a paradoxical figure that mirrors this looping raver; the retrospectacle's ideal subject. It is a figure fixated in front of a screen, getting a perpetual fix of decades-old clips of other people partying. A technostalgic body stuck somewhere between a virtual Saint Vitus's Dance and a veritable paralysis.

Conclusion

The specific signs of remanence decay, including tracking lines and dropout, have turned into dominant signifiers of a recent past that it shaping our current media images and imaginaries. Analogue video in the age of retrospectacle thus manifests itself in an aesthetics of remanence whose lowest common denominator is the cultural fixation of analogue problems in digital code. By framing this historical moment as the age of retrospectacle, I have attempted to shift focus from pop culture in general, to its specifically visual manifestations. The aim has been to acknowledge a tendency towards nostalgic retrospection, without reducing it entirely to a cultural and/or (post-)historical pathology (Reynolds; Baudrillard). The retrospectacle is irreducible to the sickly symptoms that nevertheless haunt it—as is poignantly seen in the (self-)deceptive retrojection and subcultural paralysis of the technostalgic body. It also entails acts of great creativity, as is no less evident in Leckey's video work, which treats this very condition.

I have not least attempted to emphasise the tensions within and between various digital works, all of which give evidence of a fixation with/of analogue video images. A playful recuperation of past technological failures in *Kung Fury*; a "realist" celebration of hip-hop's "realest" era in "Fromdatomb$"; and *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore*'s treatment of/for disabling technostalgia: the three examples show the need for a pluralised understanding of the nostalgias of our age. But they also point towards a reciprocal impact, whereby retrospective subcultures have come to share the expressive means of an aesthetics of remanence, while, at the same time, pluralising its connotations through the matrix of their own subcultural sensibilities. As such, this hybrid image of digital video with traces of analogue grain can finally be understood not only as a dominant signifier of the past, but also as the shared visual variable of the present.

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Notes

[1] While "subculture" has been defined as "inherently dissenting, often class-based, forms of (youth) protest against hegemonic conservative forces" (Wilsther 419), this article subscribes

to the more general definition of a "social group exhibiting characteristic patterns of behavior sufficient to distinguish it from others within an embracing culture or society" ("Subculture").

[2] For a discussion of how the videography in *The Fourth Kind* resonates with Gilles Deleuze's theories on Francis Bacon's paintings, see Rozenkrantz. For a list of the "10 Best VHS Style Lo-Fi Music Videos" (including embedded YouTube videos) see Chamberlain.

[3] In medicine, "retrojection" means "[t]he washing out of a cavity by the backward flow of an injected fluid" (Stedman 1487).

[4] Research on "imaginary media" has become increasingly prevalent in media archaeology, and as Eric Kluitenberg points out, "they articulate a highly complex field of signification and determination that tends to blur the boundaries between technological imaginaries and actual technological development" (48).

[5] As Lucas Hilderbrand shows, the retrospective celebration of VHS's technological limitations (including instances of aesthetic simulation) dates back at least to the mid-2000s, coinciding with the premature announcements of VHS's death (2).

[6] "Boom bap" is variously described as: "A style of hip hop signified by a hard bass drum and snapping snare that is often EQed to the forefront of the beat"; "the roots of hip hop, it's the real type shit"; and "the bass drum pattern in the real, oldschool hip-hop tracks" on the Urban Dictionary website ("Boom Bap").

[7] For the political history of the early days of the UK rave scene, see Hill and John.

[8] References to the software used to edit *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore*'s sound can be found among Leckey's own comments to his YouTube video. See "Fiorucci".

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