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Authors	Bayman, Louis
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Retro Quality and Historical Consciousness in Contemporary European Television

Louis Bayman

Abstract: *This article investigates the trend represented by the recent TV series* This Is England 86 *(2010),* Deutschland 83 *(2015) and* 1992 *(2015). It analyses retro in the series as enabling an exhilarating experience of the music, fashions and lifestyles of the past while claiming to offer a serious social history. The article thus takes issue with theories of retro that view it as ahistorical (for example Guffey), to demonstrate how retro in these series enables a particular dramatic conception of the dynamics of national history, whether in post-imperial decline (*This Is England*), a westalgie for the grip of geopolitical conflict (*Deutschland 83*) or the cyclical progression of* trasformismo *(*1992*). The article discusses the series' common visions of the past as characterised by a pleasing youthful naivety, opposed to an implied present of cynical superior knowledge. I argue that these series embody retro's distinct ability to combine irony and fetishism in its recreation of the past, as befits an age in which historical consciousness is increasingly referred to the intimate sphere of the individual self and its uncertain relation to posterity.*

This article identifies a current retro trend represented by the television series *This Is England 86* (2010), *Deutschland 83* (2015) and *1992* (2015). If one were to give a name to this phenomenon it might be "nation-date television", given these series' promise to say something important about their chosen time and place within the format of the television serial drama. Their employment of retro belongs to their categorisation as quality television. *This Is England 86* was commissioned for television as part of a new direction for Channel 4 after the termination of *Big Brother* (2000–2010) (Rolinson and Woods) and is a follow up to the Shane Meadows's 2006 film that secured the reputation of the small British producer Warp Films. *Deutschland 83*, an example of the large-scale historical dramas known as "event television" (Ebbrecht; Bangert), was produced by multinational conglomeration UFA Fiction, while *1992* was produced by the upmarket Murdoch-owned private pay-TV channel *SkyItalia* (Menarini) in the mould of its acclaimed modern adaptations *Romanzo criminale—la serie* (2008–10) and *Gomorra—la serie* (2014–) (Barra and Scaglioni). Rather than through ambitious production and marketing strategies, this article will consider quality via the definition recently provided by Elliott Logan: as the aesthetic achievement of dramas which "strike us as manifesting something of expressive significance, such that they would take up an important place in our lives and culture" (146). Thus, this contribution seeks to investigate what it means when retro is the aesthetic that determines such expressive significance.

Claims to the essential significance of retro may seem incongruous given its characteristic playfulness. Retro encourages enjoyment of works that it portrays as lacking taste, and has

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flourished in our era of cheesy pop, dirty burgers, ironic beards, and guilty pleasures. It is in the nature of retro to dwell on the familiar rather than the canonical, and choose gratification over the improving mission of culture, and in these series retro pleasures include the opportunity to see the characters sing and dance badly, dress worse, have unsatisfying sex, and generally display much the same deficiencies as the presumed home audience. The historical hopes of the series' respective protagonists also betray such retrospectively vain enthusiasm: for the success of England in the World Cup, the triumph of socialism in the East, or the reconstruction of Italian public life on principles of decency and justice in an era that led to the Silvio Berlusconi governments, respectively. Like its near relatives kitsch and camp, we can associate retro with a certain failed seriousness, as it reminds us of what we once found meaningful at the same time as it confirms that we have long since moved on from it. What this article aims to distinguish is how it is this straddling of seriousness and play, novelty and obsolescence, commemoration and transience, engagement and detachment that enables retro to render the past intelligible.

At its simplest, retro is defined as "the recreation of a specific past" (Baschiera and Caoduro). In distinguishing retro from revivalism, Elizabeth Guffey points out that it is also a way of coming "to terms with the modern past" (9), that is, a way of working out one's own relationship to the pastness of (late) modernity itself. These definitions help characterise retro through its interest in the discarded packaging of modern life, and in how the dynamics of change can be conveyed through the music, television shows, hairdos, clothes, technologies, décor, brands and products that were once in fashion. The closeness of the retro past brings it also into the realms of "affective memory" (Bennett) or what Alison Landsberg terms the "prosthetic memory" (146) of a past that media can instil in audiences who have not otherwise experienced it, as well as the "postmemory" produced by family photographs that transmit memory across generations (Hirsch). What the retro production of memory gains in familiarity, however, it may lose in terms of historical validity. The retro focus on the subjective and surface aspects of the past has led Fredric Jameson to assert that in retro "the history of aesthetic styles displaces 'real' history" (19) and Jean Baudrillard to equate retro with a simulation whose divorce from reality produces an undifferentiated mélange of past styles. But, while it is undeniable that "'retro' suggests a fundamental shift in the popular relationship with the past" (Guffey 10), this article will take issue with the conclusion that it is then "a non-historical way of knowing [that] past" (Guffey 20). Retro's interest in lifestyles and mass culture can instead be viewed in terms of its affinities with the postwar turn to write history according to what is ordinary, personal or everyday (see, *inter alia*, Braudel; Thompson; Williams, *Resources*).

The mediation of memory by television has not been without criticism for controversial tendencies towards revisionism. The success of the German television series *Heimat: A Chronicle of Germany* (*Heimat—Eine deutsche Chronik,* 1984), celebrated in West Germany in 1984 for coming to terms with German history, offers a case in point. The initial eleven-part series covers the lifespan of its character Maria Simon (Marita Breuer) from 1919–1982 in a rural Germany to which the main events of history remain marginal, opening itself up to accusations of an "apolitical and undoubtedly trivializing attitude" towards Nazism (Kaes 188) and of exculpating the common person from association with larger historical events (Santner). More recently, however, television studies has sought to re-evaluate televisual methods of working out a shared attitude to history (Ebbrecht; Holdsworth) which can draw attention instead to the value of feeling in period drama. Glen Creeber has pointed out how the television drama

serial involves "taking our personal lives seriously", since the domestic position of television fosters an intimacy conducive to a "history of the everyday", interweaving "micro-personal" and "macro-social" levels ("Taking" 442), in a manner reminiscent of the kind of grand interlocking narratives found in the nineteenth-century novel. According to Creeber, television serial dramas such as *Heimat* open history up to multiple voices, posing questions about how we may have acted under such circumstances ("Taking" 442). Considering the BBC drama *Our Friends in the North* (1996), Creeber points out that the drama serial "is able to exploit its audience's intense involvement with its characters' lives so that wider issues surrounding British politics, history and economics are gradually revealed over a 30-year span" ("Taking" 443).

The "nation-date series" discussed here represent a different understanding of history to that of *Heimat*, *Our Friends in the North*, and the similarly epic Italian series *The Best of Youth* (*La meglio gioventù*, Marco Tullio Giordana, 2003), which follows the story of a family from 1966 at the cusp of the student movement, through the period of political violence and resettlement. These prior series offer panoramas of a wide generational sweep, while the nation-date series focus instead on the past as recalled at certain flash-points, highlighting their apparent difference from, rather than development into, the present day.[1] They represent epochal change as conflict and rupture rather than as gradual resolution, and one might speculate that, in this, they also speak to the tensions of the post-crisis, fracturing Europe of our contemporary period than to one envisaging an end to history through the apparent global triumph of liberal democracy. More *tableau vivant* than *bildungsroman*, the limited time span of these series replicates the act of glimpsing at an old snapshot or snatching a half-forgotten song, rendering retro as the instantly immersive experience of a singular moment rather than the epic of personal development.

Fetish Irony

The series emphasise then the transformative potential of encounters with the retro product. This emphasis joins the series' underlying visions of popular culture as the motor of social change. *This Is England 86* is a sequel to Shane Meadows's film in which "subcultural youth collectivity is a strategy for filling the voids that Conservative policies had created while countering the Thatcherite ideology of individualism" (Snelson and Sutton 113). *Deutschland 83* equates the West's consumer paradise of music and entertainments with the struggle for political freedom, while *1992* concerns the rise through media celebrity to political power of Silvio Berlusconi after the fall of Italy's First Republic. The importance given to popular media accords with the series' desire to establish their own significance, a goal furthered by the role television plays in the series as the consolidator of civic belonging. In *This Is England*, it is a tragedy for Woody (Joseph Gilgun) to have to listen to the quarter final on the radio instead of as part of the community watching it at the pub; in *1992*, crowds gather to watch as news comes through of the killing of the prominent anti-Mafia judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino; while *Deutschland 83* begins with a news broadcast of Ronald Regan's "evil empire" speech, establishing how television acts as narrator of historical context in the series. Raymond Williams commented how television assumes a relationship already struck in the 1880s and 1890s by Anton Chekhov and Henrik Ibsen, whose characters interact in the privacy of the home, but are positioned within global mobility by the news arriving from "out there" (21). The "out there" is

here provided by television broadcasts, whose live contact with the public sphere adds instantaneity to the retro reliquary.



Figure 1: The centrality of television in *This Is England 86* (2010). Warp Films/Channel 4. Screenshot.

The sense of a lived relationship with the past constructed through mass culture is also embodied in the series' employment of a diversity of practices identifiable as that which Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green call "spreadable media". *This is England 86* was produced by the Warp Films subsidiary of Warp Records, each episode of *Deutschland 83* is linked to a Spotify playlist "curated" by independent DJs, and Boosta from Turin-based band Subsonica scored the opening theme for *1992*. Exemplifying the series' invitation to identify a personal connection to the past through such popular media, an interview with Boosta on the launch of the series is titled "Becoming an Adult in the Age of *Mani pulite*" ("'1992'"). Each of the series claims some kind of origin in cinema: *This Is England* was hailed as an opportunity to realise the creative original vision of film director Shane Meadows with the scope of a four-part serial, while a recurrent intertitle in the Italian broadcast of *1992* reminded viewers that it was based on an original idea by international film star Stefano Accorsi, and *Deutschland 83* was previewed at the Berlin Film Festival. The launch of all three series also provided the opportunity to be trailed by newspaper commentaries and debate about culture and the historical events relayed. Sundance launched a digital strategy to promote *Deutschland 83* including visual sliders showing images of the settings "then"—i.e. 1983—and now (Edelsburg). Each of the series gave rise to cult and fan sites where the retro artefacts featured in the series are itemised and discussed. As Marta Boni points out in relation to *Romanzo Criminale* (the 1970s-set *SkyItalia* hit whose success influenced *1992*), such transmedial practices act to disperse storytelling across different media, broadening the presence of the series through networks of convergence and user generation.

From this perspective, even the recurrent online mockery to which *1992* was subject, focusing especially on the apparent conceit of its star and creator Stefano Accorsi and the performance (particularly her attempted Milanese accent) of Sicilian former model Tea Falco, counts as acceptance of the invitation to engage an audience much greater than that suggested by the actual viewing figures of the series itself.





Figure 2 (above): The omnipresent TV screen in *Deutschland 83* (2015). RTL/UFA Fiction. Screenshot.
Figure 3 (below): Politicians in front of a TV set in *1992* (2015). SkyCorp. Screenshot.

The series' spreadable, transmedial aspects help contribute to what Amy Holdsworth has described as the sometimes jumbled processes of remembering to which television is especially

suited through its formal strategies of flow. Such jumble occurs then not only transmedially but also within the texts, most strikingly through the series' set-piece musical montages put to pre-existing pop hits, which often serve at introductory or climactic moments. *This is England 86* begins where the film left off, on a derelict seafront with Combo (Stephen Graham) telling Shaun (Thomas Turgoose) "I let you down, didn't I?" as it begins to rain. The rain continues but the setting cuts to three years later, on Shaun in school uniform entering the hall for his history exam. As he exclaims "Fuck this!", the slow plangent piano of the series' main original theme changes to the sprightly opening notes of Lee Dorsey's "Give It Up". We cut to a close-up of what turns out to be four young women in bed as their alarm goes off—a bride and her bridesmaids on her wedding day. In contrast to the downbeat opening and the literal uniformity of the school, the various participants in the wedding are shown getting dressed in full retro regalia as the music continues to pick up pace, constituting an introduction to the ensemble cast in a series of brief intercutting vignettes.

The orchestration of sound and image, music and drama, narrative and vignette, through which the retro styles are conveyed, suggests the "collagist" aspect of a memory text (Annette Kuhn, cited in Holdsworth 131). At the same time it supports Baschiera and Caoduro's point that, in recreating the past, retro also fetishises it, as such sequences place a special importance on the apparent powers of the sounds and objects that locate the drama (150). The entry in *This Is England 86* of "Give It Up" coincides with the sun coming out, accompanying the introduction of a community characterised by fun, life and youthful, rebellious or cheeky energy. Unlike the alienated skinheads of the film, the multicultural working-class glamour of the series' soulboy and mod fashions offers escape from the surrounding officialdom and drabness, at the same time as it harks back to the 1960s and beyond national borders to Italy, the U.S. and Jamaica. *Deutschland 83* wields this special power as a quite literal commodity fetishism. On first waking after being drugged and kidnapped in the Western capital Bonn, Martin (Jonas Nay) runs into the busy street, past a pair of uniformed soldiers eating ice creams and into racks of clothes that make up an open market, then to a shopping centre and past a phantasmagoria of shop windows displaying a cacophony of stacked televisions playing a freely critical piece of news footage. This multiplication of forms of market commerce reaches a culmination as he finally comes to rest between the aisles of a supermarket. A mobile camera accompanies Martin situated amidst line after line of colourful, mass-reproduced goods and exotic fruits shown in long takes as "Sweet Dreams" plays over the supermarket's speakers. Alternatively, in *1992* the critique of the intrusion of celebrity into political power presents retro fetishism as specifically sexual. The first set-piece montage, in episode one of *1992*, associates the enjoyment of the retro soundtrack with that of sex itself. The publicity agent at the heart of the series, Notte (Stefano Accorsi), first starts to think about political change after a boring lecture by an old Christian Democrat MP. PM Dawn's "Set Adrift on Memory Bliss" begins as an extreme close-up shows the lights coming up on his car radio, and he undertakes a delirious flirtation through night-time Milan with a woman. Wildly kissing at the threshold of his apartment, he puts his hand up her skirt, only for the music to come to an abrupt end as he turns unexpectedly to see his daughter sat waiting in the hall.

At the same time as such fetishisation, retro also evokes an "acute ironic awareness" (Guffey 19), in the double aspect of play and seriousness I argue is in the nature of retro. The music encourages intense emotional engagement at the same time as it offers a detached commentary: "Give It Up" plays when Shaun leaves his mentor Combo; Annie Lenox is heard

singing "some of them want to use you, some of them want to get used by you" at the moment Martin runs to the supermarket on being abducted into espionage by the state. In the most cynical of the three series, *1992*, this ironic musical commentary reappears most regularly: in the aforementioned *coitus interruptus* of "Memory Bliss", or when Notte has demented visions of his dead former girlfriend to a soundtrack of Adamski & Seal's "Killer" after murdering a blackmailer, or in the playing of "All That She Wants (Is Another Baby)" while aspirant star Veronica (Miriam Leone) first tries out for some auditions and then finds out she is pregnant with a child she will eventually abort in order to save her career.

This double aspect—of fetishistic mystification and ironic awareness—is what distinguishes retro from memory, nostalgia, vintage, heritage, remediation. Historical nudges and winks abound in retro: when Notte tells his boss that Berlusconi has come through as the most popular public figure in his polling, his boss responds "and third was Arnold Schwarzenegger, are you saying Terminator could go into politics?"[2] Such winks help create a skeptical viewer that occupies an implicit position of superior knowledge with respect to the characters in retro drama. In *This Is England 86*, corner-shop owner Mr Sandhu (Kriss Dosanjh) peers looming over an extreme close-up of the plastic casing of a VHS tape assuring Shaun with grinning delight that "this is the future" before he offers Shaun a job renting tapes. Sandhu is both right and wrong; the contemporary audience chuckles at the antiquated technology, and yet Shaun takes to the job with entrepreneurial flair, enacting a little localised shift towards the media sector, distinct from his older friend Woody's dead-end factory job. In *Deutschland 83* Martin uses his smattering of English to bargain with an African immigrant salesman he encounters while on duty in the West over a Walkman. Martin smiles as he puts on the earphones of the portable technology, which takes him to a private world of pop enjoyment. Such sequences highlight our awareness of the objects' obsolescence as they also herald a new society of entertainments on demand and personal devices.

Retro pleasures are affectionate, involving simultaneous enthusiasm and awkwardness—an affection increased in these series by our witnessing of the maturation of the characters at their centre. *This Is England* showcases the maturation of Shaun, played by Tommy Turgoose, who appeared in the film at age 13 and reached 23 by the time of *This Is England 90*. *Deutschland 83*'s Martin is played by Jonas Nay, who was born in 1990 and, as the promotional material points out, was not even alive during the country's division. As well as such futurity though, retro tends to complicate the sense of youth and novelty through unresolved relations to the past. The series each contain the theme of lost fathers, with Shaun's father's death in combat in the Falklands, Martin's father's absence before the action begins and mother's terminal illness, and the suicide of Beatrice's father in *1992*. Retro involves then a combined fetishisation and irony, engagement and detachment, enthusiasm and awkwardness; but it can also express an irresolution between past and future which determines the interweaving of history and memory in each series, as I shall now go on to show.

Retro History

The third episode of *This Is England 86* begins on archive footage of combat and wounded soldiers. On the soundtrack left-wing socialist Labour MP Tony Benn is heard

criticising Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's decision to put British troops at risk in the Falklands, followed by a separate recording of Thatcher defending her decision to sink the Belgrano (an Argentine boat torpedoed while retreating), before reverberating out into echoes. Shaun awakes as the solo guitar of The Jam's "English Rose" begins on the soundtrack, and he leaves the house as his mother polishes a photo of his father in military uniform. Shaun goes to the war memorial at the cemetery as two soldiers come round with roses for his mother, and we cut again to archive footage now of military funeral rites. A cut back to Shaun sees him stroke the stone of the memorial and say "Happy birthday dad" as the song comes to an end, while in the background the final words of a funeral oration are spoken. The montage combines retro—the (historically and aurally) distinctive voices of Thatcher and Benn, the archive footage, the music—with both official and personal commemoration. It privileges the commentary provided by popular music over official pronouncements, which functions not to take political sides but simply to give voice to the silent Shaun. The song makes the political grandiloquence feel out of place, as its pop-folk notes the fact of loss in which symbols of England have become irrevocably immersed.



Figure 4: Retro and postcolonial melancholia in *This Is England 86*. Warp Films/Channel 4. Screenshot.

That music and fashion give the characters' lives meaning may suggest that the television series moves past the right-wing militancy of the film towards a New Labour vision of multicultural bricolage beyond the obstacles of class or racial conflict. However, retro vibrancy never drowns out the background of decline, a background which accords with what Paul Gilroy has named Britain's "postcolonial melancholia". The 1982 Falklands War was itself something of a retro harking back to national pretensions to naval dominion. The distance and relative brevity of the war makes Shaun's experience anachronistic, and the pageantry around the

Falklands victory a moment of denial of the vast loss of the Empire. For Paul Gilroy, Britain's "downbeat martial values" express the "aching loss" (92) of long-vanished homogeneity. Such melancholy occurs, for Gilroy, from the inability to articulate the nature of empire.

The combination of voices and media is part of a motif of ironic juxtapositions rather than direct articulation in the series, one which comes to a bleak conclusion. The national pride invested in the 1986 World Cup, in which Argentina ended up knocking England out of the contest, is made clear: during the match with Poland the radio commentary mentions that "England have one last chance to regain their self-respect". What remains beyond articulation is the traumatic nature of loss. It is during the match that Lol's (Vicky McClure) father rapes her friend Trev (Danielle Watson), while the commentator is heard celebrating the moment of "England's joy". Trev tells Lol about it by saying "I dunno how I'm gonna tell ya" before the dialogue mutes and music comes in over the action. Later, Lol's father attacks her and she beats his head in with a hammer, intercut with the group watching England lose, both moments again muted. The intercutting of their muted cries indicates the unspeakable nature of loss and the juxtaposition motif redoubles its presence in both the familial and national arenas. The infamous handball goal, which Argentina's Diego Maradona scored to knock England out of the tournament, is shown in a freeze-frame, as an emblem of defeat over the plucky but unlucky, rule-bound Brits, and a cipher for wider feelings about Britain's humiliation on the world stage. The silence stands out against the brash assertion of the retro subcultures, visualising a moment of impasse between the collision of retro expressivity and declining national tradition.

Deutschland 83

The retro of musical subcultures and the 1986 World Cup Campaign allows moments of escape from the background of decline in *This is England 86*. The retro commodities and cultures in *Deutschland 83* belong to a *Kulturkampf* cleaving the world between East and West. Creator Anna Winger explained the setting of 1983 as the one year that the world was listening to German music, and in a typical retro crossover between popular and official or sacred history, it is mentioned in the series that it is the commemoration of Martin Luther's 500th birthday (Tate). Yet it also falls within the 15-month Yuri Andropov era, between the crushing of Solidarność in Poland and the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev and Perestroika in 1985. This places the protagonists at the centre of a global clash of civilisations at the same time as they reside in the final moment of Eastern Bloc stagnation, the spectator's consideration of their fears of an impending Third World War overlain with our knowledge of the maintenance of peace and the imminence of reunification. Like *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2007), the series fits into the vogue for *ostalgie*, nostalgia for East Germany. It is however distinct from the genre of light entertainment television shows that followed the success of the film *Good Bye, Lenin!* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003) and maintained some fondness for the old fashion, food and products that made up an Eastern identity seeking to protect itself from colonisation by the West (Cooke). *Deutschland 83* was the first foreign-language series ever to play in America (and was broadcast there before it was in Germany), and the series aligns itself definitively with the West, contrasting the dull grey, green, browns of East Germany's dreary impersonal modernism and military regalia to the colourfully imaginative world of Western pop, publicity and pacifist youth protest. The character of Martin enables the series to

recall when the simple fact that the West had pop music and a well-stocked supermarket was justification to consider it a paradise, experiencing his "delicious" first tastes of a milkshake and burger ("full of chemicals", his Eastern handler tells him). Retro technology also differentiates the social systems. The East Germans are unable to play an American floppy disk because they refuse to upgrade to the latest IBM computer. Their stubborn dogmatism shows up the limitations of the image of what Jürgen Habermas referred to as the "tentacled" Stasi monster (cited in Clarke 117): while the Americans have Pershing II missiles, the Germans have the wrong computer. The East Germans are often stuck to immobile technological devices but the Americans deploy invisible, mobile and, crucially, effective technology from long-range missiles to Sony Walkmans, indicating the importance of speed that Paul Virilio has analysed in modern warfare and intimating the coming of personal mobile technology. The East is monolithic while Western capitalism enables reproducibility, multiplicity, abundance, aligning the West with a valuation of feeling, youth and identity and with a sense of inevitable progress.



Figure 5 (above): Prophetically portable retro technology. Figure 6 (below): Obsolescently immobile retro technology. *Deutschland 83*. RTL/UFA Fiction. Screenshots.

To this extent, the show is an example of what Andrew Plowman describes as *westalgie*, a counterpart to *ostalgie* and attempt at creating a similar sense of nostalgic identity to the post-Unification West (as it also recalls the recent memory of national weakness for a contemporary moment of renewed fears at the dominance of Germany in Europe). While revisionist historical drama in Germany, as mentioned, risks humanising the great criminals of history, what *Deutschland 83* adds is to align feeling itself with Western democratic liberties and consumer capitalism. It is not that the large political events of the modern world are relegated to the margins, as in *Heimat*'s rural community, but that attention to individual feeling is itself at the forefront of political change. East Germany is portrayed as prizing nation above family, duty above personal fulfilment, rational calculation above fellow feeling. The West instead allows private satisfaction and personal gratification, which come to be coterminous with the idea of freedom, and an assurance of the progress to come that will dismantle the limitations of the protagonists' historical position.

1992

Uniquely of the three series, *1992* concerns actual historical events in the fall of the Italian political system amidst the wide-sweeping *mani pulite* ("clean hands") corruption investigations in 1992. Stefano Accorsi stars as Leo Notte, a marketing consultant for tycoon Silvio Berlusconi's company Publitalia, as he grows in his conviction of the potential for public relations to take over where traditional political campaigning has been discredited, eventually arguing for a party modelled on a sports club, to be named Forza Italia!, and the candidacy of his charismatic boss, Silvio Berlusconi. Through Notte a historical linkage is formed between early 1990s Italian televisual culture and a new political morality. Notte advises that the concurrent anti-corruption trials are an opportunity for TV advertisers since viewing figures will increase, content that the economic crisis (which continues in Italy today) will cause more Italians to stay in and watch television. Notte shows his colleagues the (Berlusconi-owned) Canale 5 show *Non è la RAI* (1991–5), which features teenagers performing to pop songs, and when they object, states that "the people out there are horrible, juvenile exploitation will be popular and the girls involved are desperate to be famous showing their bodies to men." The exploitativeness of television becomes prostitution as embodied in the character of Veronica, who is willing to sleep her way to a spot on the long-running Sunday evening magazine show *Domenica In* (1976–), and is responsible for forcing her naïve Lega Nord MP fiancé to abandon his political principles in her attempt to get preference as a presenter. In a culmination of TV's all-consuming corruption, Notte's daughter (at school with Berlusconi's daughter) declares to her father her ambition to appear on *Non è la RAI*.

1992 displays a more critical attitude to the retro artefacts it showcases than the other series, as indicated in its repeated tendency of bringing the musical montages back down to earth with a crash. This happens in the *coitus interruptus* of "Memory Bliss" mentioned above, and even more cynically as a culmination to episode eight. Ace of Base's "All That She Wants" plays as the various compromises or betrayals of the main players are intercut, but the music becomes suddenly distorted and tinny as we see its source on a radio that Veronica listens to whilst on the toilet. Looking at her positive pregnancy test kit, she throws the radio to the ground. Further, *1992* expresses a common perception in Italy of national history as a series of

failed opportunities to progress, whether in 1992, 1968, post-war Reconstruction, the Risorgimento, or the Counter-Reformation, in each of which established power interests consigned the nation to *trasformismo*, the habit of elites to transform themselves from one epoch to the next (also known as "gattopardismo", summed up by Prince Tancredi in Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Leopard* that "For things to remain the same, everything must change" (41)). The first scene of the series opens on a young member of the anti-corruption squad, Pastore (Domenico Diele), participating in a sting. The victim hurriedly flushes his banknotes down the toilet, before being apprehended. The characters leave, but we cut to a 100,000 lira banknote bobbing back up to the surface, gazing at an obsolete currency given the introduction of the euro, and a sign that in Italian life, the past, through the peculiar power of dirty money, will always resurface. Notte is obsessed with the future, and lives overlooking the Milan skyline of neon and skyscrapers. But this vision of capitalist progress gives way to the predominance of Rome, panoramas of which variously place the Roman Colosseum, the Vatican, the medieval Castel Sant'Angelo, or the Parliament centre screen. The Lega MP, a representative of the hopes of the common people, gives into the parliamentary system of patronage; Pastore the campaigning investigator loses faith, informed by a veteran MP that the second republic will only be the "leftovers discarded from the first." After killing a blackmailer and burying him in a construction site, Notte is called on his new mobile phone by his daughter asking him to translate a Latin phrase, which he does not understand. The citation from Lucan means that "even the ruins have perished". Retro thus becomes return.



Figure 7: Retro return in *1992*. SkyCorp. Screenshot.

Retro is employed in each of the series to dramatise particular historical dynamics, whether Italy in a cyclical return, England in post-imperial decline, or Germany in a Hegelian clash of antagonistic forces. The attitude to retro items differs in each, from critical debasement in *1992* to political freedom in *Deutschland 83* to escapist relief in *This is England 86*. But common to each is that our retrospective awareness accompanies at all times a reminder of how it felt when the now retro item still elicited the novelty of hope.

Future Past

The retro series bear some comparison with heritage, a term that originated to describe the British period dramas of the 1980s which display the lifestyles of the upper orders as the declining aristocracy slowly gives way to a newly vigorous bourgeoisie (see for example Higson; Vidal). Like 1980s heritage, these retro series recount historical progress as the supersession of a certain class-based lifestyle, whether the homogenising community of the English industrial working class, the ideological uniformity of German state socialism, or the popular democratic settlements of the First Italian Republic. Such heritage has in Germany been connected to what Johannes von Moltke has termed a new "feeling for history" and, like heritage, retro imagines history through the personal sphere, and the individual as subject to, but not in control of, historical events (a position emphasised in *Deutschland 83*'s location of an East Germany caught between Moscow and Washington). *1992* is thus perhaps less close to the heritage genre, a term whose Italian translations—*patrimonio*, *beni culturali*—indicate a national cultural legacy dating back to ancient Rome (Alan O'Leary has applied the notion of "tainted heritage" to describe Italian films that deal with the country's years of political violence, suggesting a more problematic relationship to the time period being appropriated). One may compare *1992* to the historical novel, dealing as it does with history as seen from the perspective of the person in the middle ranks, a position emphasised by the occasional appearance in the series of Silvio Berlusconi as a character, but who we only ever glance, like the sun, indirectly.

Like heritage, retro views epochal change through the personalised and intimate aspects of the past, but unlike it, retro concentrates on how they are subject to pop-cultural mediation. Each of the series offers insights into how leisure, entertainments, mass production affect popular understandings of nationhood, present more generally in the respective national cultures whether in the national embrace of loss that Paul Gilroy has noted combines with a violent nationalism in the chant "Two world wars and one world cup", the televised jubilations and rock concerts that marked the falling of the Berlin Wall (Meinhof), or Italy's "Videocracy", the pejorative name given to the unprecedented power of the visual media to which the Berlusconi era testified. If there is a political problem with retro, it is not then that it rejects history, but that it relegates hope to a juvenile, naive thrill more belonging to sensation rather than reason. Such retro cynicism is exemplified in the temporal play that concludes *1992*, after the prosecutors celebrating that they have finally got their main target, leader of the Italian Socialist Party Bettino Craxi. As people demonstrate outside the politician's hotel in Rome before finally fleeing, we cut to see Beatrice and Notte get out of a car in Milan, as they gaze in awe to camera, and Notte assures her that "this is the future". What they are looking at is the unveiled billboard of a new political force, featuring a newborn baby, advertising Forza Italia!. The sequence is a mélange of different temporalities: occurring in the piazza of the Gothic Milan Cathedral while Primal Scream's "Movin' on Up" comes on the soundtrack, a song that sounds like a homage to the Rolling Stones circa *Exile on Main St.*, a group who were themselves pastiching gospel, then we cut to the police who are exhuming the body of the blackmailer Notte killed from the building site where he buried him. The cut to the building works is another ironic wink at the audience, critically recalling Berlusconi (incidentally, an arch rival of Sky-owner Rupert Murdoch), who made his first millions as a building tycoon, while the evangelic-sounding "you made a believer out of me" is sung. This interweaving of temporal markers announces the beginning of an era that more or less comes up to the present as it also associates retro's

transformative properties with religious conversion, inescapably, and characteristically, combining this retro fetishism with the critical detachment provided by hindsight.



Figure 8: Movin' on where? Retro as future posterity in *1992*. SkyCorp. Screenshot.

This ending may seem to support Guffey, Baudrillard and Jameson's diagnoses that retro offers an undifferentiated melange of pastness that lacks a historical basis. Yet the encounter with the retro object is transformative in a way that can also capture historical change as a dynamic process. These series intertwine the personal and the historical through their various emphases on subcultures, consumer identity and celebrity culture. They thus concern some of the central preoccupations of an era whose emergence the series themselves seek to document, one that saw the apparent dismantling of Cold War equilibriums, national borders, class belonging or civic engagement, while witnessing the rise of identity, lifestyle and the intimate sphere to their central places in modern political issues. They also provide evidence that retro can only exist in a society that understands itself not only in relation to the past, but to posterity, an especially important point given their dramatisation of the processes that consolidated the confusion of progress and regress expressed in the terms "neo-liberal" and "post-modern". Guffey points out that retro enacts a loss of hope in the future, while Raphael Samuel suggests that we live in a "historical society", whose increased interest in commemoration comes "perhaps at the collapse of the idea of a national destiny" (39).

The series confirm current interpretations of the 1980s as the watershed moment at the end of postwar stability, remembering the final moment at which one could address the individual nation state before European integration. Increasingly, within the modern European political landscape posterity becomes not just another aspect within our general consciousness, but the defining source of political authority. For such a society, history becomes not something that happened in the past, but a future judgement on today. Tony Blair declares that history will judge him kindly over the false prospectus for waging war on Iraq (Ashley); Angela Merkel calls the migrant crisis as the "historic test" for Europe ("Merkel"). Thus, the historical consciousness which I argue these retro series signify belongs to a new way of understanding the present,

personalising history within the mass-mediated forum of popular culture and changing the idea of the future as a common endeavour towards which we are progressing and into a guarantor and an always-deferred promise to make sense of the present day. The double perception of time in these series, simultaneously fetishistic and ironic, shifts heritage's sense of historical consciousness—the awareness of oneself in relation to past generations—to retro's sense of historical self-consciousness, the awareness of being definable only once our own generation has itself passed into history.

Endnotes

[1] The subsequent production of *This Is England 88* and *90*, *Deutschland 86* and *89* and *1993* and *1994* would seem to put these two temporal alternatives in dialogue.

[2] Schwarzenegger served as the Republican Governor of California 2003–2011 and made known his disappointment at being barred from running for US President due to the law forbidding foreign nationals from standing.

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Louis Bayman is Lecturer in the Department of Film at the University of Southampton. His research specialisms focus on popular genres, especially melodrama, horror and in regards to issues of aesthetics. He is the author of *The Operatic and the Everyday in Postwar Italian Film Melodrama* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014) and is currently co-editing a collection on *Journeys in Film: Theory, Ethics and Aesthetics* with Dr Natalia Pinazza.