

THE ROLE OF THE PAST IN «INTERFACE»: NOSTALGIA IN THE DISCOURSE OF CULTURAL CHANGE

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Abstract: *this paper analyzes the animated series «Interface» (2017-2021), created by artist Justin Tomchuk and produced on his YouTube channel. This analysis is made in connection with the tendency to look for changes in culture, which can be described as either postmodern or so-called metamodern. However, such studies do not consider essential aspects of these views of culture, such as a view of the past. The main work is done on interpreting both the visual form (mise-en-scène, transitions, drawing style, color, and sound) and the narrative (storyline and concept) to identify the form of nostalgia, which is shown in the cartoon. To classify nostalgia, I used Svetlana Boym's typology, the different types of which can be traced to the postmodernist and metamodernist conceptions of the state of current culture. The purpose of this analysis is to show the inability of either postmodernist or metamodernist approaches to nostalgia to describe the approach shown in the cartoon fully. Through this connection, we can trace the idea that there is a more complex kind of nostalgia at this point in culture, which combines various elements to varying degrees. In addition, the end of this paper raises the question of creating a new form of nostalgia films, a concept of which Jameson was considering.*

Keywords: *film studies, postmodernism, nostalgia.*

The animation itself was born long before the advent of cinema; however, only Walt Disney, who opened the Disney Brothers Studio in 1923, drew particular attention to it. Thanks to him and his distinctive Disney style, animation was brought to the forefront of the movie market, prompting other studios to open animation divisions. Since then, the animation is going through similar stages of development with the movies; the only difference is that animation is also developing different methods of drawing, in addition to any ideological changes. The next significant stage in the development of animation was the emergence of computer graphics and the development of the Internet. In the YouTube era, many works regained their «attraction» form, which, according to Tom Gunning, was characteristic of early cinema, filled with enthusiasm and a thirst for experimentation, and independent artists gained access to the distribution of their creativity [17].

«Interface» (created by Justin Tomchuk, 2017-2021) is just an example of such animation, which appeared in the era of YouTube development. «Interface» is an animated web series created by Montreal-based artist Justin Tomchuk. On December 9, 2017, the first episode was released on the author's channel called «u m a m i». The plot revolves around two characters: the immortal man Henryk Niebieski and the mystical creature with the face of a clown, Mischief. The central theme is Henryk's attempts to understand his past, on which he is overly fixated. «Interface» combines conceptual cinema and authorial animation, and part of the usual understanding of nostalgia films.

Conceptual cinema was influenced by conceptualism in art, which emerged in the early 1970s in America and Europe. The American artist, Sol LeWitt, describes conceptualism as a style of art in which «the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work» [16, p. 12]. Although conceptualist works are not as focused on form, the idea that an authorial concept can and should be incorporated into the narrative of work has strongly influenced the development of other art forms, including cinema and cartoons. By conceptual cinema, we mean such a form of cinema that is connected with conceptualism in art in one way or another. The aim of this direction is the transmission of the concept, having a social or philosophical nature. The main task of such cinema is to appeal not to emotional perception but to an intellectual reflection.

Trapeznikova wrote about conceptual animation in the age of the Internet [14]. According to her suggestion, it is difficult to judge what authorial digital animation is at the moment, whether it will be something more than a simple spin on animation or will be forgotten with time. Nevertheless, Trapeznikova uses cases of conceptual animation for her analysis, from which she concludes that now authorial conceptual cartoons are based on the metaphorical depiction of banal philosophical and social ideas inherent in the contemporary world. Describing the significance of these cases, she concludes that «network animation is not aimed at the general viewer, but at a small audience that adequately perceives these ironic microfilms about of today» [14, p. 39].

The most important part of the «Interface» concept is nostalgia, as it can be traced both narratively and formally. This aspect is crucial in contemporary discussions of postmodernism and so-called metamodernism. Some researchers, such as Brandon Sitch, have tried to find traces of this discussion in animation [12]. So, on the example of the cartoon «Bojack Horseman» (created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg, 2014-2020), he examines the issues of change in animated sitcoms regarding the appearance of sensuality in them. However, such an approach is insufficient to trace such a discussion because it does not address the more significant differences between the two philosophical ideas, such as the approach to the past.

«Interface» shows a particular approach to nostalgia, which can be both postmodern ideas and, at the same time, contradict them. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the use of several types of nostalgia can change the meaning or role of each other and how this trend allows for a different perspective on existing postmodern and

metamodern views of the past, using audio-visual (*mise-en-scène*, cinematography, style and sounds) and narrative (storyline, subtext) analyses of «Interface». This paper also raises the topic of changing the form of nostalgia films, which is likely to more accurately analyze and demonstrate the phenomenon of nostalgia, rather than simply following it.

THE DISCOURSE OF CULTURAL CHANGE

Before discussing the differences of nostalgia in these two philosophical movements, they must be considered a whole. Postmodernism is a crucial stage in history, which were started in the middle of the 20th century. The first person to put forward the postmodern concept was Jean-François Lyotard, in his work «The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge» (1979). According to him, the main problem of the modernism era was the existence of global metanarratives [9]. There will be no such narratives in the postmodern world, but the interconnected presence of small ideological groups of people whose narratives will not be universal, but just «little narratives» [9, p. 61]. A landmark work for postmodernism as well as Lyotard's idea of the death of metanarratives is Nietzsche's «The Gay Science» (1882). Nietzsche writes: «God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him» [10, p. 120]. According to Nietzsche, the death of God should be seen as a moral crisis of humanity, with its characteristic loss of faith in the absolutism of moral laws. Thus, these words best describe the postmodern period, namely the death of myths or metanarratives.

The term metamodernism was developed by the Dutch philosopher Robin van den Acker and the Norwegian media theorist Timotheus Vermeulen in their essay «Notes on Metamodernism» [15]. Metamodernism is the description of the current state of the culture from the 1990s to the present. It combines postmodernism and modernism, becoming not so much a subsequent stage as an intermediate one.

The authors in their paper describe it as follows:

«Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern» [15, p. 5–6].

Thus, metamodernism is only a collective image that most clearly reflects the fact that a radical separation of eras in our time is simply not possible. Nevertheless, these philosophical currents have different attitudes to their past, which can be seen in the differences in the types of nostalgia.

Fredric Jameson first wrote about nostalgia similarly as used in this work in his book «Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism» (1991). Following Fredrik Jameson's position, the nostalgic trends in contemporary culture are, to some extent, a consequence of the creative crisis of postmodernism [7]. The concept of nostalgia is formed in his work when discussing the phenomenon that Jameson calls nostalgia film. Despite the fact that the term nostalgia films first appears in «Theory Number Five: Anatomy of Nostalgia Films» by Marc Le Sueur [13], Jameson linked this notion with the postmodernist approach to nostalgia. According to Jameson, nostalgia films are characterized by imitating the styles of the past and any references to it, without the idea of creating something new, but only by recombining old elements [7, гл. Culture: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism]. Also, these films do not disassemble the very concept of nostalgia but follow its flow. According to Svetlana Boym's typology [3], this type of nostalgia can be categorized as reflective nostalgia. Such nostalgia emphasizes the memory as such, without trying to create something new in it. However, metamodernism is characterized by another type of nostalgia, namely restorative nostalgia [15]. This type of nostalgia sets as its main task the restoration or creation of the object of nostalgia in modern conditions. In turn, both types of nostalgia can be traced in the cartoon «Interface», which can be traced in the analysis of the cartoon series. However, the cartoon itself follows nostalgia in form and touches on the very theme of the importance of the role of the past.

NOSTALGIA AS AN IDEAL

In episode 23, «An Unconscious Conscience», the last episode of the animated series, we see a scene of a meeting between the main character Henryk and the character Mr. Greetings, in which there is an interesting play with composition. A train slowly pulls up to the station, and then we are taken to a scene with a general view of the station, with Henryk standing in the center and Mr. Greetings slowly approaching. Once the characters are in front of each other, Greetings extends his hand in greeting. We are then immediately transported inside the train, where we see Greetings sitting and tell Henryk that he is sitting facing the back of the train, which means he will not see his future, but his past. We are shown a close-up of Henryk, who does not react in any way to these words. From the next shot of Mr. Greetings smirking, we understand that he has made a wordless decision. In fact, this episode reflects us the direction of the story's narrative. In movies, and cartoons, in particular, the past is often the motivation for the characters to do certain things. Elements such as flashbacks and disrupted temporal narrative logic help us understand why a character acts the way he or she does. In «Interface», however, we do not care as much about what is happening now as we do about what happened in the past.

Nostalgia can be traced not only at the plot level but also in the elements of intertextuality. The idea of intertextuality refers us to the communicative nature of various forms of text. The main problem with such a phenomenon is that the texts themselves have to coexist in the relationship since otherwise, the meaning of the text referring to the original is lost. Intertextuality is a term that was introduced in the middle of the twentieth century by Julia Kristeva [8], a French researcher of literature and language. Still, it is worth noting the fact that initially, similar ideas were traced by M. Bakhtin [1]. The very essence of intertextuality consists of a dialogue between texts and can be

expressed by quotations, retellings, or ideological references to the primary source. Such a phenomenon is widespread in the literature. It was Bakhtin who originated this idea, but it was only developed in Kristeva's work [8]. After Tynianov's ideas on rethinking the mechanisms of word-formation autofunction — the correlation of elements of one system with aspects of other systems and series — in the theory of intertextuality, going beyond connections of only homogenous texts became more reasonable [6].

Nevertheless, let us return to cinema, or more precisely, to the field of animation. One of the leading products of postmodern animation is «The Simpsons» (created by Matt Groening, 1989-present). In general, sitcoms and comedies of that time rely very heavily on intertextuality, using it in a parodic way for a satirical mood. Jonathan Gray argues that in «The Simpsons», parodies of popular culture occur through a deliberate desire to make references in order to connect with audiences and increase audience engagement with the media space [5]. It is one of the problems with such references in popular culture — they do not carry profound meaning. Like in «The Simpsons», similar elements can also be seen in other such cartoon sitcoms.

«Interface» has no references to authentic pop culture, but primarily only to works in the past [11]. One such intertextual reference is the *mise-en-scène* in one scene in episode 14 in which we are shown Mischief sitting on a chair. The background is entirely black, and the light coming in from above focuses us on the character sitting in the middle of the frame on the chair. Mischief himself sits as a humanoid clown, his arms folded across his chest and his legs slightly apart. In this frame, the exact position of Mischief refers to the painting «Stańczyk» (1862) by Jan Matejko.

Another such example is episode 4, «The Ghost». At the end of the episode, we see a large green hand while there is interference in the background. Another hand, red in color, begins to reach out to this hand. When both hands are frozen in the center, this shot refers us to the artwork «The Creation of Adam» (1512), a fresco by Michelangelo.

Thus, «Interface» builds nostalgia in culture: the animation style plays a certain nostalgic intertext. In addition to the interference and noise characteristic of the VHS style, the drawing itself looks rough and sketchy, despite the work with colors and shadows. This kind of references early animation, creating the illusion of hand-drawn animation. According to Jessica Bowyer, such a trend is common among postmodern animation, as part of a reflective nostalgia [2]. In her work, she attributes this to the idea of more successful sales of such products, as people really want to see something old in a new form. She writes: «These general feelings of nostalgia also resulted in the desire to own pieces of the past» [2, p. 13]. However, «Interface» does not pursue such a goal, as it takes not only a form of nostalgia, but also lays it itself into its concept.

As I wrote above, the plot of the animated series itself moves more in the past than in the present tense. Therefore, the flashbacks themselves stand out stylistically from the main narrative of the animated series. For example, take the way flashbacks are portrayed in episodes 10 and 20. It is worth starting with the fact that the color palette in such flashbacks consists only of red and black colors, which characterizes their painfulness and gloominess for Henryk. There is also music here, but it is more like the music usually played in the animated series itself — bleak and with a lot of distortion. In episode 20, we can also hear the difference in the voice effects. In this episode, the voice of Henryk's daughter, which is constantly in the background as a semi-diegetic sound, is distorted by various sound effects and filled with reverberation, which we do not see in the previous example. Also, the number of close-ups is much smaller in flashbacks like this. For example, in episode 10, we see only wide and medium shots. Close-ups are instead the exception in such flashbacks and often work as a dramaturgical transition to the next scene, such as the close-up of Henryk's face in episode 20, which is an intermediate shot between the moment when the car comes at him and the moment when the car falls off the bridge, trying to avoid a collision. Such flashbacks serve only to reveal the plot in the animated series, but their form may speak to Henryk's feelings about them. Despite their painfulness for Henryk, we return to them again and again.

Nevertheless, there are not only flashbacks in the narrative of the animated series but also episodes that go in a different chronological order relative to the plot but are different stylistically. Let's take the end of episode 16 called «When Skies Were Still Blue» to analyze this. The moment we need begins with a shot of Henryk standing in front of a shell on which Mischief is sitting in the shape of a frog. Between them on the wall hangs a poster, which blends in heavily with the background, as everything but the two characters is done in gray tones. This shot periodically alternates with close-ups of the characters' faces.

Their expressions remain unchanged throughout the line. An essential element here is the sound. Throughout the cartoon, a soundtrack using classical instruments, particularly the violin, often plays in the background. The motif of this music is most eerie and frightening, but in this scene, there is no music in the background. It is replaced by diegetic sounds of the wind, in an equally eerie form, as well as Mischief's speech with a deliberately distorted voice. At one point, we are shown a close-up of a calendar, which acts as a transition. In the background comes the non-diegetic music, using all the same instruments, but the motif is no longer gloomy but more peaceful with a hint of sadness. Then we are shown Henryk and his daughter cooking dinner. Most of the shots are close-ups of the faces and hands doing the cooking, but during the daughter's account of the day Henryk met his wife, we are shown a scene, which has a very symbolic and minimalist *mise-en-scène*. It shows Henryk parachuting down, with only the sky in the background, which is different from what we see in most of the cartoon: it's done in gentle blue, the color of Henryk's clothes. The music reaches its climax here, symbolizing the drama of this scene and its importance in Henryk's memory. After other similar shots of the cooking, we are taken back to real time, where Henryk is standing in front of a table identical to the one shown in the flashback. In this shot, there is no music, but again the wind replaces it. The only source of light is the orange glow from the sky in the window in the background.

All of this demonstrates the elements of reflective nostalgia typical of postmodern ideas [7]. Even the narrative itself is based on simple memories of the past, without trying to find in them anything appropriate to solve the problems of the present. Besides the story, reflective nostalgia is reflected in the stylistics of the animated series and in the intertextual references. However, this consideration of nostalgia as a concept, rather than just its use, is not typical of postmodernist nostalgia films. Nevertheless, another type of nostalgia can be seen in «Interface», in which the past is not just the past but a significant element that must be interpreted to solve the problems of the present. In addition, the use of restorative nostalgia in the way that the cartoon does changes the perception of the previous type of nostalgia.

PAST AS A SOLUTION

In episode 23, we watch Henryk riding the train with Mr. Greetings. We don't see Mr. Greetings himself, but we hear his voice. During Mr. Greetings' monologue, the shots change from a close-up of Henryk's face to a horse running straight towards the train on which the characters are riding. To the sad music, Mr. Greetings speaks of complicity in war and the advancement of destruction that further alienates humanity from the natural world, a burden carried by a man of the past, and that it is sins that haunt him. Here Mr. Greetings talks about how he and his companies have seen the beginning of the end and are now on the verge of a significant reversal. Here we are transported to footage of Henryk walking through a densely populated city with two tall towers on the horizon. In one of these towers stands KAMI, looking out over the red-painted city through a panoramic window. When we are shown a close-up of her face, she begins to remove her mask, under which we see a blob of so-called cerebral energy. Then we are taken back to the previous frame, where we see a plane flying directly into the tower. After these shots, we head back to the train. As the horse runs past the train, Greetings asks the rhetorical question of why, when we cry out to the Gods, they do not hear us. At these words, we are shown a horse that has wings of cerebral electricity and soars into the air. Greetings answers his own question by saying that the Gods need Henryk, a man from the past. With these words, we are carried from the train into the city. We see that the sky is a gentle blue in this city, and many copies of Henryk float in the air.

Metamodernism, in its ideology, relies heavily on restorative nostalgia, which manifests itself in this philosophical movement in ideas of finding uses for elements of the past to solve or demonstrate problems of the present. One such element is the return of metanarratives, namely religious metanarratives, about whose death Lyotard and Nietzsche wrote. Following Brendan Dempsey, in metamodernism, these ideas take on new meaning but are still crucial for the perception of reality [4]. In his article «[Re]construction: Metamodern 'Transcendence' and the Return of Myth», he writes: «Indeed, when most potently expressed, one sees a kind of metamodern mythopoeia at work - that is, the construction of entirely new paradigmatic models, which, because knowingly created, seem to operate as much as works of art as myth» [4, ч. under Metamodern Mythmaking]. Nevertheless, it is the classical concept of the savior god that is evident in «Interface», which permeates the very concept of the cartoon. In the cartoon world, as I described above, only the approaches of the past can solve the chaos of the present, which according to some characters, is insanity rather than the ordinary course of things.

However, let us return to the cartoon's plot to prove the idea I wrote above. An essential element and starting point in our analysis is the Philadelphia Experiment, which is an urban legend in real life, but the cartoon's reality plays a key role. In episode 21, we are shown what was happening during this experiment on the ship that was involved in this experiment through fast-changing footage. We are shown this as if it were on behalf of one of the key characters, namely Mr. Greetings, although his face is also flashed in one of the frames. At this point, electronic music plays, which is combined with distorted screams of people and noises as we are shown these people. Everyone but Greetings became part of the ship while dying. Everything shown is not delivered dynamically; all the shots are static and just replace each other. The only thing that moves in the frame is the white and black particles of cerebral energy, which is also essential for my analysis. After demonstrating the events on the ship, we are shown Earth with a view from space. To the same music, the planet is enveloped in cerebral energy, after which it turns orange-red. Cerebral energy in the cartoon refers to a specific substance that has always been in our world, but it was discovered only after the Philadelphia experiment in 1943. At the end of this moment, Mischief, who was also a member of the ship's crew, falling from the sky, and the color palette of the sky is depicted in the usual orange-red palette of the animated series, since this event takes place after the experiment, which affected the state of the world. Mischief himself is depicted not in the usual form of a clown but in the form of a human silhouette, whose texture is wholly filled with a semblance of white noise. In the background plays calm and sad non-diegetic music with ambient elements. The wings that appear for a moment in the silhouette of Mischief add to the symbolism of this scene, which may refer to Lucifer's fall from heaven.

Even though life continues after this disaster, Mr. Greetings has an opinion on the matter. It is shown to us in the same episode. An interview is conducted on TV in the bar. When the shot is entirely close to the TV, we see Greetings sitting against the interviewer while quiet non-diegetic music plays in the background. Here we need to focus our attention on what the character is talking about in his interview. His main idea is that the discovery of cerebral electricity was inevitable, but it can also destroy us. Also, in his words is the main idea that his company's goal now is to return to what it was before because the world in its present state is a nightmare. Periodic shots of the interview alternate with New York City images, judging by the Statue of Liberty, at the very beginning of the Philadelphia experiment, which we understand by the shots of the ship still intact and by the only occasional bits of cerebral electricity that appear.

To solve this problem, Greetings Robotics, a Mr. Greetings company, creates a robot in collaboration with the United Nations in episode 3. The main task that this robot is aimed at is to counteract other creatures that use cerebral

electricity in one way or another. In this episode, she is first shown to us, appearing at the end of the episode to loud applause from the audience and an eerie industrial ambient. She is shown statically; the shots alternate, showing this robot from different angles. When we are shown her from the back, we see the Japanese symbol «神», which is deliberately highlighted in color with cerebral electricity. This symbol can be translated as a «god».

Returning to the question of intertextuality and divine narrative, let's look at the scene of KAMI taking off over the city in episode 21. We see KAMI in the center of the frame, in a static position with her arms outstretched to the side. With melancholic, tranquil non-diegetic electronic music playing in the background, we see the sun, painted in black tones, begin to glow with cerebral electricity in the background, creating an aura of light around KAMI. It refers to the portrayal of God in Enlightenment-era paintings.

Nevertheless, complementing the concept of restorative nostalgia in the cartoon, the power of KAMI alone is not enough to solve the problem. When Mr. Greetings spoke of the Gods and the man of the past, he explicitly implied that KAMI needed Henryk's energy to fulfill his mission. In doing so, it unites the storylines of these two characters, returning to the idea that not only a religious metanarrative but also a person connected to the past, and not just literally, is needed to solve the current problems, at least the chaos within the cartoon world [18].

Nostalgia in this way presents a different view of the past from the metamodernist one, which lays in its idea of solving the present problems through the prism of the past [4]. In the cartoon, the idea of restorative nostalgia is elevated to an absolute, and it is no longer a solution to the problems of the present but an end in itself. In addition, using restorative nostalgia in this way changes the role of reflective nostalgia, which is dominant in the cartoon, turning elements of reflective nostalgia into a manifestation of restorative nostalgia in another form. Without deep analysis, on the other hand, another situation develops where the idea of the past as a solution is only part of the reflection on the ideal past.

In this way, the cartoon combines two attitudes toward the past that may not correspond directly to typology [3], yet they do so ideologically. The past, which plays an essential role in this cartoon, is idealized, while on the other hand, it is a response to the problems of the present shown in the cartoon. Of course, «Interface's» style and narrative are dominated by a simple view of the past, but it already shows the rudiments of a vision of the past as a solution to problems. These are all different degrees of idealization of the past, which, in addition to the cartoon, can also be seen in the discourse between postmodernism and metamodernism. Nevertheless, this cartoon demonstrates an entirely different approach to the past, which is not addressed in the discourse on the changing state of culture. Thus, the cartoon shows us a new form of nostalgia through the recombination of old ones that were not previously considered in the same case, which should be explored further and traced to similar trends in other works that treat nostalgia as a concept of looking at the past rather than simply using it. Such changes may indicate the emergence in the culture of a new form of nostalgia and another kind of nostalgia films, which focuses on interpreting this phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

In «Interface», nostalgia plays an essential role in all components of the cartoon. It can be seen in the style, in the references, in the story, and even in the subtextual idea. At the same time, two types of nostalgia, according to Svetlana Boym's classification, can be traced in the cartoon — restorative and reflective. The second type of nostalgia still prevails in the cartoon: the plot itself, although it does not describe the past in the broad sense of the word, corresponds to the very idea embedded in this term. It is also this type of nostalgia that also works on an intertextual level. Restorative nostalgia can be traced in the subtext of the cartoon, as the idea of using the past to solve the present problems; however, this form of nostalgia is not dominant.

This combination of types of nostalgia can bring new ideas for cultural change. On the one hand, the nostalgia typical of the postmodern definition of the term is still prevalent in this animated series. Postmodernism and the work of this era are characterized by reflective nostalgia, as Fredric Jameson wrote. Nevertheless, the emergence of elements of restorative nostalgia, not typical of the state of culture, creates a component of a process of change in relation to the past. Nevertheless, following this logic, it isn't easy to talk about the results of the process, as they do now. Thus, the analysis of the cartoon «Interface» raises the question of the role of attitudes toward the past in animation and thus complements the existing problem of cultural change. However, the same analysis suggests that it is too early to talk about any specific theories capable of describing the current state of the culture because the idea of nostalgia in the cartoon does not fully correspond to any existing views.

Moreover, such a combination of types of nostalgia in the cartoon demonstrates a different interpretation of each of them. For example, restorative nostalgia can turn elements of reflection nostalgia into the idea of a complete return to the past. Also, vice versa, reflection nostalgia can show restorative nostalgia simply as a part of the general idea of idealizing the past. Such an idea in a cartoon allows us to take a new look at the role of these types of nostalgia to the content they describe and each other.

Such a change may suggest an entirely new approach to the past, one that cannot be accurately described through the prism of existing ideas. It also signals a difference in the format of nostalgia films, which is no longer just about exploiting nostalgia, but also about analyzing nostalgia and its forms. It is probably achieved through a more conceptual «Interface» approach.

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