

Nineties Forever! Pop Culture in the 1990s Poland

Today, the interest in the Polish landscape of the 1990s is experiencing a revival. The transformation that decade witnessed, understood as a change, transition and shift from one reality to another is a buzzword functioning in all sorts of contexts. Most times, we tend to think about the systemic, political and economic transformation, as it affected structures so large that individual and private afterimages became indistinct and irrelevant. Meanwhile, it is the personal manifestations of transformation that may be the key to understanding the 1990s in Poland. That fascinating period was marked by the need to catch up with the West, often in a somewhat homespun and grotesque fashion. That experience was particularly intense among the children and adolescents growing up in the 1990s, as they sought to connect to the bloodstream of Western popular culture.

Parallel to the official transformation, another one was taking place out of sight, in the realm of imagination that became gradually populated by the heroes and heroines of films released on video tapes, by superhero comic book panels, ballads played from cassette tapes or colourful figurines of the characters from TV cartoons. In order to nurture and enrich private transformations, people made walking pilgrimages to new temples, where content from a little known world filled the crude remnants of the bygone era. Basements in blocks of flats turned into VHS rentals, department stores stocked Barbie dolls and plastic effigies of the mighty He-Man, the covers of successive issues of *Batman*, *Spider-Man*, *Bravo* or *Popcorn* displayed in Ruch kiosks had an irresistible appeal, while local cinemas would transport the viewers into increasingly fantastic realms, a journey which they were more than eager to take, just like the protagonists of *Jurassic Park*, the 1990s iconic motion picture.

This exhibition is neither a historical reconstruction nor a critical reckoning with the 1990s. After all, the transformation had quite a few downsides: exacerbating unemployment, difficult confrontations with uncomfortable past or the need for Poles to find their bearings in a new, colourful reality. Our show talks about the 1990s in their pop-cultural guise, from the standpoint of people who grew up in that moment of transition. We will hear both the voice of the curator as well as the multivoice of the participants of those events. This particular picture of the 1990s is exaggerated, somewhat infantile and certainly unrealistic. Even so, we

wish to return to the temples of the 1990s that still endure in the nostalgic recollections of the then young audiences. The so-called Millennials, the witnesses of the last decade of the 20th century, are often tempted to take a trip down their personal memory lane, becoming a target for the ever-growing range of popular products and services offered today.

Svetlana Boym, a nostalgia researcher, describes nostalgia as “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed”. What particular longings and dangers does the mechanism of nostalgia generate on Polish soil? In the exhibition, we look at the issue from the three perspectives of problematized, personalized and commercialized nostalgia. The first explores the intriguing rise of interest in retro aesthetics and themes, which implies a defensive response to the complexity, uncertainty and incomprehensibility of the modern world. Contrary to the optimistic predictions of the “end of history”, we are now at another point of possible epochal watershed. Also, the ubiquitous media burden our perception with further stimuli, forcing us to be constantly up to date. Therefore, returning to a not-so-distant period, where things were diametrically different is a compelling idea. Because of our youth and the less media-infused landscape, we remember it as quieter, slower, more controllable, tucked under a safe quilt of colour magazines and VHS tapes.

The value of the exhibition does not lie in the artefacts themselves, but in the fact that they have survived, manifesting personalized nostalgia. Those who collect and keep them are witnesses to the 1990s: the present-day adults who, as children, grew up in the temples of popular culture. They do constitute material testimonies of that period, even though they tend to be considered insignificant and unworthy of preservation and care. VHS tapes, audio cassettes, comic books, games, toys: insights into the child and youth culture of the 1990s that falls victim to infantilization in many analyses as too vulgar and garish to be included in “mature” discourses.

In the hands of the collectors, a plastic figurine or a yellowed comic book ceases to be a utilitarian object it had originally been. They epitomize taste or generational experience. Once widely available and equally massively disposed of, these items are now displayed with care and pride in collectors’ cabinets. When and why do popular gadgets acquire their exhibitory, nostalgic potential? What makes culture popular culture? Does this popularity stem solely from the item being easily available, or from the unique meaning we impart to it later on?

Finally, the exhibition shows commercialized nostalgia, drawing on the literary and cinematic *Jurassic Park*, one of the seminal texts of global popular culture in the 1990s. In that incredible spectacle, an eccentric millionaire funds a theme park on a remote island. Long-extinct animals are its main attraction, and Jurassic Park itself is a kind of Disneyland, where guests may not only admire the majestic creatures of the past but also buy a T-shirt from the local gift shop. The intentions of the Park's founder seem genuine; after all, he admits in a scene of the 1993 Steven Spielberg picture: "I wanted to show them something that wasn't an illusion. Something that was real. Something they could see and touch", but the result of his actions falls short of the romantic design. The dinosaurs of Jurassic Park are not reptiles from millions of years ago, but artificially bred hybrids that substitute for the real thing. When the combination of a violent storm and a shady employee set the creatures free, they act as their instinct dictates. The predatory replicas begin to hunt down the guests staying at the Park.

Are Spielberg's film and Michael Crichton's novel, on which the cult blockbuster was based, just a fantasy about prehistoric monsters? No. Jurassic Park is rather a story about how (un)safe commercialized nostalgia can be, about the compelling need for retrotopic escape and the even more alluring opportunity for the producers and sellers to exploit nostalgia. The latter continue to supply duplicates of what we used to have, so as to evoke at least a temporary sense of going back in time.

The exhibition could prompt looking for antagonisms between Millennials and the post-1995 generation, along the lines of "Those were the days, now we've got none of that! We had real music back in the day, today that's no music; we used to have great cinema, now it's..." and so on. We want to steer clear of such pitfalls. We would like to encourage the audience to rethink those elements in the popular culturescape of the 1990s which have now been replaced by platforms and algorithms, those which engendered social and physical interaction, with people and objects alike. It is not that the displayed items alone translate into the nostalgic overtone of the exhibition. Their physicality is a crucial component here, the necessary act of being in a particular place, of making a pilgrimage there to obtain a popular product.

The 1990s come to a symbolic end with the launch of Napster, whose download functionality replaced going somewhere to obtain any physical music medium. Later on, this would apply to nearly all available popular culture products. And so, the final question the exhibition asks

is a paraphrase of the words of the rapper known as Vanilla Ice, for whom the 1990s were apparently “the greatest decade ever”, owing to the distinctive styles, timeless popular culture icons, unique modalities of being in culture and an optimistic view of the future. A decade which, in the reality of the Polish attempts to catch up with the West—also in consumerist terms—followed Kurt Cobain’s appeal from “Smells Like Teen Spirit” by Nirvana: “Here we are now, entertain us!”

“Nostalgia exists in the plural,” Svetlana Boym asserts. What is it for you? What do YOU think about when remembering “the last decade”?

Tomasz Żaglewski