

Introduction: Transcending Time

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Nostalgia is] looking backwards [...] because you want ideas for how to move forward,” as Clay Routledge, director of the Human Flourishing Lab at Archbridge Institute, puts it succinctly (Coleman). Delving into our fourth year past the dawn of the COVID-19 pandemic, mental, physical, and political exhaustion weighs heavily on society, and nostalgia fuels public discourse as well as media consumption (Coleman). US American society looks into a future deeply affected by the last four years—reaching, more often than not, for the comfort of the past.

In the seventeenth issue of *aspeers*, the first and so far only graduate US American studies print journal in Europe, submissions unfold through the lens of our theme—time. Open to its widest possible interpretations, this theme covers the temporal landscape of the United States, exploring the interplay of past, present, and future. This issue’s articles explore the realms of nostalgia and escapism, partly challenged by modes of crisis, uncovering the ways individuals deal with the passage of time while grappling with their sense of Americanness. From nostalgic emotions to national identity, from visions of Afrofuturism to the pastoral aesthetics of cottagecore, this issue tackles the temporal dimensions of the US American experience, where emotions and cultural expressions intersect with the inexorable ticking of the clock.

AESTHETICS OF THE PAST

In 2023, in response to a pervasive sense of unease, US Americans increasingly turned to escapist practices and nostalgic pursuits as a means of temporarily escaping the harsh realities of their daily lives. The demand for live entertainment and social activities increased significantly, as people sought to reestablish their connections with their friends and enjoy the experiences they had missed during the pandemic:

“[M]ore than half of all U.S. consumers ages 15–69 anticipate going to a concert in the next 12 months, which is higher than the 36% who have attended in the past 12 months or the 41% who went in 2019” (Wallenstein). The nation sought to connect with what it remembers as simpler times in an idealized past, “a place (and time) that never was” (Ravizza 162). This can be heard in the disco-inspired hits that have stayed on top of the charts since the beginning of the decade: “Disco in the 21st century is not just a cool aesthetic, a signifier stripped of its political energy. [...] It is comforting music that helps people during unpredictable times” (Rees 37). This affection toward a nostalgic sound and the need to revisit a past just distant enough can be seen in the massive success of the aptly titled Eras Tour by Taylor Swift, which became the highest-grossing concert tour of all time, thanks to its nostalgic setlist spanning forty-four songs (Gensler). In this context, the popularity of Swift’s critically acclaimed twin albums *Folklore* and *Evermore*, which were released amid the pandemic and celebrate the aesthetic of cottagecore, also come about as a “reaction to turmoil, offering the comfort of an imagined past, a tangible tactility, and a reconnection with the ‘old ways,’ with nature, and the wild” (McGrath 70).

The rise of cottagecore, a cultural aesthetic and lifestyle that romanticizes rural living, self-sufficiency, and a harmonious connection with nature, can be seen as a reflection of the growing escapist and nostalgic tendencies among US Americans today. Amid a backdrop of economic uncertainty, social unrest, political turmoil, and psychological strain, many individuals have sought solace in idealized representations of the past, particularly those that embody a simpler, more wholesome way of life. Cottagecore’s idealized vision of a rural idyll offers a sanctuary from the complexities and pressures of modern life with an emphasis on self-sufficiency, manual labor, and a connection with nature that resonates with a yearning for a more grounded and authentic existence. It represents a longing for a time when life seemed less hectic, more connected to nature, and imbued with a sense of community and shared values.

In Louisa Bücken’s contribution “Seeking Refuge in Nature: Escapism and the Contemporary Pastoral Impulse in Cottagecore,” the way cottagecore as a trending social media aesthetic uses pastoral impulses to allow users to escape into an idealized version of nature and rural living is situated in the context of COVID-19 lockdown protocols. By examining the pastoral impulse described by literary critics Don Scheese, Leo Marx, and Raymond Williams as the longing for wilderness and nature as a source of inspiration and tranquility emerging during drastic socioecological changes, the author draws parallels to Virgil and Henry David Thoreau’s evocation of the countryside as an Arcadian garden for an increasingly urbanized society during times of industrialization. Analyzing a TikTok video with the help of tools typically used in film studies, the author then argues that cottagecore is the contemporary manifestation of the pastoral impulse in digital storytelling and art,

offering a virtual alternative to contemporary social and political realities. Ultimately, the article explains that cottagecore content, which surged in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, expresses a longing for an imagined past as a pastoral refuge. However, such content fails to promote an actual return to nature; instead, it emerges as a product of digital storytelling and artistic expression amid a time of crisis. Furthermore, the article critically engages with cottagecore's authenticity and performativity, revealing its entanglement with the capitalist, digital reality of the twenty-first-century US.

TIMELESS REFUGE

Just as the past, may it be real or imagined, can offer a welcome escape from contemporary existence, so can the entertainment we once enjoyed. Whether it is a beloved childhood toy, a game, or a TV show we used to discuss with our friends, the media we consume and interact with become part of our identities, providing us with joyful distraction when needed. As such, 2023 saw a massive rise in the popularity of nostalgic media, i.e., such cultural artifacts that reference or continue past trends and franchises (Coleman). In the gaming world, this meant the release of *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*, the long anticipated next installment in the ongoing series of *The Legend of Zelda* games, as well as the cinematic adaptation of the *Super Mario Bros.* franchise into a movie that set the “new record for the biggest opening weekend of an animated movie in history” (Coleman). In 2023, the cinematic landscape witnessed the debut of *Barbie*, the first live-action filmic interpretation of the legacy around the renowned fashion dolls of the same name. Its release broke many records, including the ones for highest-grossing film by a solo female director, highest-grossing live-action comedy film of all time, and highest-grossing film of the year (Thompson). Perhaps most notably, the release of *Barbie* provoked an audience reaction unparalleled by any other movie in recent years: Costume parties and world-wide fashion trends centered around a hot pink color palette in the style of *Barbie*'s wardrobe were direct results of the movie's popularity (Coleman). On top of that, the 2024 Oscar nominations feature *Barbie* a total of seven times, among others for Best Screenplay and Best Film (Gonzalez). *Barbie* clearly struck a nerve with the audience, critics, and beyond, cleverly shaping the originally already rebellious spirit of the Mattel doll into a playful yet mature critique of the patriarchy, misogyny, and the rigidity of traditional gender roles. *Barbie*'s spirit is hence timeless in its applicability to contemporary discourse.

Similarly, right at the end of 2022, Netflix released its new hit series *Wednesday*, borrowing its famous title character from the *The Addams Family* franchise. The resulting TikTok trend sparked by Wednesday Addams's dance in the Netflix series,

which, in turn, was inspired by Wednesday's dancing in the previous *The Addams Family* series, spanned several months of 2023 and enjoyed immense popularity, further fanning the flames of an ongoing goth revival. Just like *Barbie* and *Super Mario Bros.*, *The Addams Family* is an established, well-loved franchise whose subculture tropes, Gothic themes, and monstrous characters appear continuously renewable to modern standards—timeless entertainment as a refuge of safe 'comfort media' (Luo). *Wednesday* has sparked the revival of earlier interpretations of the franchise, which draws scholarly attention to past versions of *The Addams Family*. In her paper "The Parody Within: The Employment of the Parodic Mode in *The Addams Family* (1991)," Anne I. Bertram analyzes the subversive use of the parodic mode in Barry Sonnenfeld's film *The Addams Family* (1991), one of the earlier interpretations of the franchise. Bertram argues that the film subjects conservative US American middle-class suburban family values like the concept of the nuclear family to the parodic mode, portraying an impactful social commentary by confronting viewers' ideas of the 'normal' and the 'abnormal,' urging them to reflect on their own values. Throughout the article, the author demonstrates that the Addams family, with their upper-middle-class lifestyle of leisure and their Gothic aesthetic, are seemingly positioned above the concerns of common US class ideologies within the movie. They subsequently appear to be placed outside of the US class system but also outside of time. It is not least because of this characteristic that *The Addams Family* works so productively as a refuge in comfort media, representing a timelessly reproducible relic of the US American popular canon.

ANXIETIES OF THE PRESENT

The year 2023 witnessed a confluence of events that contributed to a growing sense of disillusionment and uncertainty among US Americans, as is typical in times of crisis. The political landscape became increasingly polarized, with deep divisions along partisan lines evident in debates surrounding issues such as gun control, abortion, and immigration. The ongoing investigation into former President Donald Trump's role in the January 6 Capitol riot continued to dominate headlines, provoking unprecedented public distrust in government institutions ("Public Trust"). The post-pandemic recovery was not evenly distributed, with the income gap widening and inflation rising (Saphir). The cost of living increased significantly, as "consumers' daily routines have largely returned to their pre-pandemic normal, but the cost of living has not" (Pickert et al.). The tragedy of 658 mass shootings and forty-one mass murders cast a pall over US American society in 2023 ("Past Summary Ledgers"). This time of social turmoil and fragmentation contributed to a sense of hopelessness and alienation among many US Americans: Even for those who are not directly affected, "there is evidence that such events lead

to at least short-term increases in fears and declines in perceived safety” (Lowe and Galea 62). These factors, along with growing concerns about climate change, social inequality, and the erosion of trust in institutions, created an atmosphere of heightened anxiety and uncertainty.

Additionally, data suggests a general decline in trust when it comes to mainstream media coverage, not only in the context of the 2020 election but in general (Brenan). While former President Trump’s online behavior certainly had a major impact on the delegitimization of legacy media, the increase of social media’s popularity as a basis for a growing counterculture supported by reactionary political commentators like Tucker Carlson is not to be underestimated. Carlson’s seemingly simple messages appeal to nostalgia and traditional values, and his effective use of fearmongering has resonated with a disillusioned audience, providing them with a scapegoat for their grievances and a sense of belonging in a rapidly changing world. In his paper “Feeling American: Affect and Notions of (In)Security in Tucker Carlson’s Coverage of Derek Chauvin’s Trial,” Christoph Friedrich Nostitz provides a comprehensive analysis of a segment from *Tucker Carlson Tonight* aired on March 11, 2021, which focuses on the framing of the trial of Derek Chauvin, the police officer who killed George Floyd. Through the use of affect theory, feeling rules, and framing rules, the article argues that Carlson constructs two distinct emotional communities in America. According to Nostitz, one community empathizes with Chauvin and fears the loss of US American values, while the other empathizes with Floyd and demands justice and equity. By substituting Chauvin for the United States as the object of patriotic love, Carlson suggests that feeling American means feeling for Chauvin. This offers his viewers a way to cope with the cognitive dissonance of loving the US while its institutions fail to protect the lives of people of color and to overcome grief and guilt as negative affects that would otherwise disrupt their affective bond with the nation. Nostitz’s paper ultimately illustrates how cultural and political divisions within times of crisis in the United States are shaped by different experiences of ‘feeling American’ and how news media influence these affective structures.

VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

To avoid dwelling on the present, one has to move on toward the future—in art, perhaps, via futurism. Characterized by a rejection of tradition, futurism is a global movement that originated in twentieth-century Italy, embracing a fearless future of speed, technology, as well as polyphony in art, literature, and culture (Marinetti 19-24). As social commentary, futurism criticizes current issues yet also serves as an optimistic escape into an imagined future. In visual art, futurism is often set in a utopia or dystopia contingent on technological development, marked by

disruptions in our linear perception of time through time travel or the complete neglect of (Western) temporal norms.

While the COVID-19 lockdown has already altered our perceptions of time by shattering our “illusory assumptions that the future is knowable, controllable, and guaranteed” (Holman and Grisham 63), the post-pandemic world now presents a fascinating blend of new realities and enduring principles. As we navigate the novelty of remote work, enhanced online presence, and restructured social interactions, we also hold onto the fundamental values of human connection, adaptability, and well-being. In this dynamic landscape, innovation and tradition intertwine, shaping our perception of the future and our role within it.

Another perspective through which this issue of *aspeers* tackles the concept of time is Afrofuturism: an artistic movement at the intersection of African diaspora, science fiction, and technology that creates a space to reclaim histories and identities that have been distorted by colonialism and oppression in order to challenge dominant narratives of the past and to “[reclaim] the history of the future” (Yazsek 47). Richard Aude’s article “Lines of Flight: Baseball as Afrofuturist Becoming in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*” draws from Black feminist scholar Denise Ferreira da Silva’s “temporalizing of forms” and Mark Fisher’s writings on Afrofuturism, discussing the use of baseball and the portrayal of Blackness in the science-fiction TV series *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine (DS9)*. Exploring the character of Benjamin Sisko, a Black human captain who uses baseball as a metaphor for linear time while appreciating the diversity of all possible outcomes, the article analyzes political as well as philosophical dimensions of the show. By examining Sisko’s interactions with the alien ‘Prophets,’ who perceive time differently, and his connection to the legacy of Black baseball, the paper argues that *DS9* represents transformative processes of ‘Becoming’ that are based on time rather than identity. Richard Aude thus offers an analysis of an alternative reading of time that proves productive not only in *DS9* but also in navigating these post-pandemic times. *DS9*’s multifaceted future offers viewers a version of the tomorrow that holds endless possibilities for them, functioning as a productive philosophical attempt at understanding their continued anxieties concerning post-pandemic perspectives and an unstable political climate.

PROFESSORIAL VOICE

On the theme of “Transcending Time” in this year’s issue of *aspeers*, we are honored and pleased to feature the perspective of a scholar from a country that had not yet been represented in our past issues. Dr. Olena Boylu is a research assistant in the Department of American Culture and Literature at Ege University in İzmir, Türkiye. After earning both her Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in American

Culture and Literature, she continued her academic journey by successfully completing her doctorate in the same field in 2020. Her research interests span US culture, contemporary literature, and history, which she examined in her 2022 monograph titled *Politics, Satire, and Historical Consciousness in Contemporary American Novel*.

In “Discussing Time Through Literature,” Dr. Olena Boylu explores how literature can enrich our understanding of the complex concept of time. She traces the philosophical debates on time from St. Augustine and Einstein to more contemporary authors. Jason Mott’s *Hell of a Book*, Louise Erdrich’s *The Night Watchman*, Paul Auster’s *Man in the Dark*, and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* all offer unique and different perspectives on time through various temporal concepts and themes, such as memory, trauma, history, identity, and alternative realities. Dr. Boylu invites readers to participate in a discussion about how literature has the potential to present a diverse tapestry of human experiences and offer invaluable perspectives on fundamental elements of our lives, including identity, culture, and love.

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