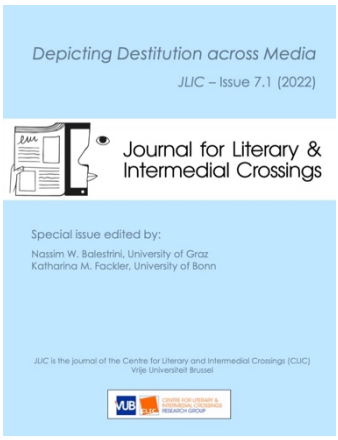

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Longing for Appalachia: Poverty, Whiteness, and the Aesthetics of Nostalgia in *Hillbilly Elegy*

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Introduction

For a consideration of representations of destitution across media, narratives and images of Appalachia appear particularly fruitful and significant because, in the U.S. cultural imaginary, the Appalachian region has long been associated with the problem of (white) poverty, an issue that continues to receive cyclical national attention. Local color writers, fascinated with what they perceived as a quaint and therefore exotic lifestyle, first "discovered" the region in the post-Civil War period (Munn 26). In the 1960s, Appalachia became "the first battlefield" in the Johnson administration's war on poverty (Batteau 7), an endeavor which itself stood in the tradition of progressive era social reform efforts. In recent years, Appalachia has been connected in the public discourse both with the "opioid crisis" and with an allegedly deteriorated white working class. In the (often rather reductive) media narratives that emerged after the 2016 presidential election, the region figures as the home of a nostalgic class of white Americans whose resentment of the Washington political elite has given rise to the populist political leadership of Donald Trump.

J.D. Vance's controversial *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and a Culture in Crisis* (2016) in this respect has served as a go-to resource for both liberals and conservatives seeking a window into the world of "left-behind" Trump voters. Narrating his journey of upward mobility

from a childhood among Appalachian "hillbillies" in Kentucky and Ohio to a Yale Law degree, Vance tells a story which is deeply implicated in longstanding tropes that have represented Appalachia as a "culture in crisis" since the nineteenth century, and he advocates conservative policy proposals in response to that crisis, for which the book has frequently been criticized (see, e.g., Harkins and McCarroll). In 2020, Netflix released a much-anticipated fiction film based on the memoir, directed by Ron Howard and starring Glenn Close and Amy Adams in the roles of Vance's grandmother and mother. This adaptation eliminates most of the book's more overt political musings, but similarly draws on a familiar iconography to visually represent poverty in Appalachia. In this essay, I will scrutinize this cross-medial tradition of representing Appalachia by comparatively reading Vance's memoir and its film adaptation in order to gauge *Hillbilly Elegy*'s contribution to literary and pop-cultural engagement with destitution. I argue that both works make use of established tropes and images in the form of a "nostalgic othering" (Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus 95) that harks back to the nineteenth century: Both crucially rely on a rhetoric and aesthetics of nostalgia in their depiction of Appalachian "hillbillies" who appear simultaneously as representatives of a purer, "authentic" (white) culture located in an inaccessible space and a lost past, and as a degenerated people.

My analysis draws on recent scholarship within cultural studies which has rejected established conceptualizations of nostalgia as a regressive longing for an idealized, golden past (see, e.g., Jameson) and instead describes nostalgia as a productive form of memory which negotiates issues in the present by projecting "an ideal that is not being lived *now* […] into the past" (Hutcheon and Valdés 20) or by imagining a past in which the future was still open (see, e.g., J. Wilson; Sprengler). As Linda Hutcheon notes, "nostalgia makes the idealized (and therefore always absent) past into a site of immediacy, presence, and authenticity," but simultaneously

necessitates "evidence of the past" in the form of "electronic and mechanical reproduction of images of the past" (Hutcheon and Valdés 21). Accordingly, nostalgia must be defined not as a psychological disposition, but as an aesthetic effect produced by media technologies, often through what has been described as "retro aesthetics" and as "a mode of perception that frames our affects and, in this way, impinges on individual, social, and political agency" (Sielke, "Retro Aesthetics"; see also Sielke, "Nostalgie" 12).

My close readings of the *Hillbilly Elegy* memoir and film will carve out how these texts create nostalgic effects across visual and textual media and thereby frame Appalachians for (middle- and upper-class) readers and viewers. In his memoir, Vance harnesses the autobiographical nature of the narrative to advance nostalgic truth claims about Appalachia as a region in decline – claims that appear "authentic" due to the author's status of an insider and his narrative's ability to elicit readers' affective responses to the representation of what appear to be extreme experiences. As a film adaptation of a memoir necessarily entails a shift both in medium and genre, the movie is unable to produce truth claims in the same way. Instead, it transforms the text into an audiovisual drama which operates with two different timelines, thereby incorporating nostalgia into its plot structure and ascribing it to the film's characters, in what amounts to a parodistic use of retro aesthetics. As I argue in my reading, the film's visual and sonic elements serve to situate J.D. and his family within an existing nostalgic imaginary that has depicted Appalachians as "yesterday's people" (Weller).

Media reports around the 2016 election often framed Trump's rhetoric and the mindset of his supporters as steeped in nostalgia (see, e.g., Baker; George; Mudde), exemplified by the president's promise to "bring back coal" and thus to revitalize the deteriorated industries of the Appalachian region ("Donald Trump Rally"). This kind of reporting attributes to the white

working class a regressive longing for an idealized golden past, what Svetlana Boym has called "restorative nostalgia," in distinction to a more future-oriented "reflective" form of nostalgia (50). A neat separation between (progressive) "reflective" and (conservative) "restorative" forms of nostalgia, however, appears problematic when applied to the discursive contexts of *Hillbilly Elegy*. Instead, I want to suggest that nostalgia in the memoir and the film needs to be conceptualized as an aesthetic strategy that is "transideological" (Hutcheon and Valdés 22), as it crucially functions as a distancing practice which helps to reproduce dominant discourses and hegemonic relations. The projection of nostalgia onto the white working class ultimately veils its class politics: if the existence of poor whites proves that the American Dream of upward mobility is a lie (Levine-Rasky 112), then nostalgic representations of white Others reinforce the image of the U.S. as a meritocracy and justify neoliberal economic structures. As I have previously argued, an aesthetics of nostalgia in depictions *of* the (white) middle class often portrays protagonists "as victims, rather than benefactors, of consumer culture and thereby legitimizes class privilege" (Knewitz, "White Middle-Class Homelessness" 102). The representation of the poor *for* the middle class, in turn, exoticizes social problems as a quaint lifestyle and thereby legitimizes economic subordination.

Poverty, Nostalgia, and Whiteness: Appalachia in the American Cultural Imaginary

In his 1923 volume of experimental modernist poetry *Spring and All*, William Carlos Williams dedicates one poem to "some Elsie," a fifteen-year-old household help and one of the "pure products of America," the offspring of "mountain folk from Kentucky" who "express[es] with broken // brain the truth about us" (Williams 217-18). The "us" in this verse appears to refer to an American nation on the verge of crisis, as modern consumer culture erodes the values of the past. Acting as a bellwether for the whole nation, the rugged individualism of Appalachia's inhabitants, their "peasant traditions," have given way to false "gauds" (217). Williams thus nostalgically

bemoans the disappearance of "devil-may-care men" and "young slatterns" (217) – a seemingly more authentic, yet also inherently degenerate people. When he wrote the poem in the second decade of the twentieth century, Williams's nostalgic take on Appalachia was already by no means original; it tapped into a representational register established in the nineteenth century which imagined Appalachians as the country's pure, original folk, but simultaneously as the poor white Other, embodied perhaps most prominently in the stereotype of the "hillbilly" (Harkins 4). In Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*, as in Williams's poem, Appalachia's left-behind white working-class inhabitants seem to express an alleged deeper truth about the state of the nation.

Allen Batteau discusses this tradition of representation by tracing the invention of Appalachia as a distinct region to the early nineteenth century and credits regionalist writers such as Mary N. Murfee and John Fox, Jr., as well as the educator William G. Frost with promoting this view. Frost in particular "popularized the idea of the Appalachian Mountain People as a special population with special needs" (Batteau 58) that had to be uplifted from their state of poverty. While picturing Appalachia as a culture degraded by poverty which was thus set apart from mainstream America, Frost simultaneously framed Appalachians as Americans' "contemporary ancestors" (Frost 70), relics of the past who embodied the national pioneer spirit of earlier eras and white racial purity. In a time of considerable racial anxiety over immigration of foreigners deemed non-white and the heyday of Social Darwinist ideas about the hierarchy among different races, he emphasized the mountain folks' Anglo-Saxon pedigree, as the region had allegedly "received no foreign immigration" (Frost 73). Through romanticized images of rugged individualism, Appalachia became an object of longing for "renewal and reinvigoration" for white New Englanders who perceived "an eroding of the moral fiber" of their race (Batteau 85).

Batteau's genealogy demonstrates that from the moment of its invention as a distinct region, Appalachia has been situated within the opposing notions of (white racial) purity and moral degeneracy, and imagined nostalgically as "the other America" (Eller 3), as a homogenous space with a fixed meaning (Fackler, "*Looking at Appalachia*" 1). Thus, since the early twentieth century, as Will and Krista Kurlinkus convincingly argue, Appalachia has assumed an important function within cultural rhetoric "as a tool to stabilize the rest of the nation in a community of nostalgia" (94). During moments of national crisis such as the Great Depression or the Great Recession, "the racially pure, industrious, bootstrapping mountaineer" has been invoked as "a paragon that deserves to be recovered for the rest of the country" while the degenerate hillbilly or redneck has been represented as a "blight on society" (94). Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus draw attention to the significant tradition of what they call "nostalgic othering" (95) in representations of Appalachia, which they define as based on time rather than race or ethnicity: Appalachians are portrayed as a homogenous people who seemingly live in the past, unlike the audience of (white) middle- and upper-class Americans who live in the present (see, e.g., Weller). This nostalgic mode serves as a distancing strategy which frames the U.S. cultural discourse on poverty and class difference. Both the figure of the hard-working mountaineer, who exemplifies rugged simplicity and modesty, and that of the hillbilly aid the fetishization of poverty as a cultural disposition rather than a socioeconomic condition.[1]

[1] It is important to note that reductive and stereotypical notions about and images of Appalachia have not gone unchallenged. As Harkins and McCarroll note in their edited collection of critical responses to *Hillbilly Elegy,* there is also a long tradition of Appalachians confronting the stereotypes that are imposed on the region (2). They point to Stephen L. Fisher's *Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change* (Temple UP, 1993), Dwight Billings, Gurney Norman and Katherine Ledford's edited volume *Back Talk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes* (UP of Kentucky, 1999), as well as Elizabeth Catte's *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia* (Belt, 2017). See also Katharina Fackler's discussion of the critical intermedial project *Looking at Appalachia.*

Perhaps even more forceful and influential is the visual iconography tied to representations of Appalachia. Referencing the documentary tradition of 1930s Farm Security Administration photography, magazines such as *Life* and *Look* established a nostalgic image of poverty in their visual representations of the 1960s, portraying the poor as inhabiting a world apart from the modern American consumer society while associating them with the cultural myths of white America (Fackler, *Picturing the Poor*, ch. 1). The influential 1964 CBS documentary *Christmas in Appalachia* similarly perpetuated the notion of Appalachia as a foreign land that simultaneously shared a common US cultural heritage with the presumably urban audience watching the program. In one exemplary scene reporter Charles Kuralt introduces Goldie Johnson, a "strong woman" living among "exhausted men" and in an "exhausted land." "When Goldie Johnson speaks of Christmas," Kuralt explains, "it is as if she lived in a country far removed from ours – of course, she does."

As Barbara Ellen Smith notes, this dominant conception of Appalachia has served as "a repository for America's evasions and conflations of race and class" (53). Within the cultural framework of the U.S., poverty has long been associated with black and brown people and been defined as a problem of racialized structures. Superimposing race onto class, traditional representations of Appalachians since the nineteenth century have tended "to racialize the 'southern mountaineer' within an evolving national text as 'almost-white,' a regional 'other' historically bound to pathological, under-class status" (D. Wilson 8). Meredith McCarroll, in her study of cinematic representations, has suggested that films portray "Appalachian figures that are almost exclusively phenotypically white, while relying on tropes long used to depict nonwhites" (5). The identity of the hillbilly, associated with "economic, genetic, and cultural impoverishment" (Harkins 5), thus in derogatory faction has fused race privilege and class disadvantage. As Hutton

notes, the term "hillbilly" tends to be reserved for whites, yet at the same time "implicitly acknowledges an intraracial hierarchy in which, it goes without saying, hillbillies are on the bottom, thanks to their rejection of bourgeois modes of behavior" (28).

The racialization of the hillbilly has thus helped to legitimize inequality and to perpetuate the notion of the U.S. as an egalitarian meritocracy in which – for whites – "class exploitation is literally inconceivable, as one's fate is entirely the product of one's own talent and effort" and impoverishment is explained as due to "one's own shortcomings, or to the putatively intrinsic deficits of an entire group" (B. Smith 46). Stereotypical ideas about Appalachia crucially inform the negotiation of socioeconomic destitution within the American imagination and help contain the threat to the nation's ideological foundations posed by the existence of poverty.

Elegy for a Culture in Crisis: J.D. Vance's Memoir

When *Hillbilly Elegy* was first published in 2016, it received positive reviews from both liberal and conservative media outlets. The *New York Times* thus praised the book as "a tough love analysis of the poor who back Trump" (Senior). Rod Dreher, in the *American Conservative*, called it "an extraordinary testimony to the brokenness of the white working class." Popular as well as academic audiences on the political left and right granted Vance's memoir tremendous explanatory power. Following life writing scholar Sidonie Smith's insights, we need to understand Vance's writing as a performative act that produces its autobiographical stance as a position of authority by calling up "culturally pervasive discourses of identity and truthtelling" (18) – i.e., Vance becomes credible as a narrator both because he embodies ideas of upward mobility and because his narrative produces authenticity effects by reaffirming knowledge about Appalachia that is already deeply entrenched in cultural ideas about the region. Much of the allure of *Hillbilly Elegy* stems from the author's privileged subject position as an insider who meanwhile himself has

become a member of the elite or, as he phrases it, a "cultural emigrant" (Vance 252). As a "tourist guide" of sorts, Vance promises the revelation of hidden truths, representing to the reader what appear to be extreme personal experiences that elicit affective responses and may therefore be perceived as "authentic" (Christinidis 39).

Vance wrote *Hillbilly Elegy* in his early thirties, after having graduated from Yale Law School and while working as a venture capitalist in the technology industry. Building on his connections to influential Republican donors and thinkers as well as on the success of his memoir, he has meanwhile begun to pursue political ambitions, such as running for Ohio senator in the 2022 elections. As T.R.C. Hutton explains, Vance's book "follows the Horatio Alger template, extolling the virtues of 'hillbilly culture' while simultaneously scolding it for its flaws" (24). Central to his narrative is his experience of upward mobility, moving from a working-class background into the upper middle class – an achievement he characterizes as "quite ordinary" (1). He claims that he was, like many, a "kid[…] with a grim future," and that he nevertheless made it because he was "rescued" by his personal safety net of "a handful of loving people" (2) as well as because of hard work and self-reliance. Vance thereby portrays himself as exemplifying someone who "live(s) the American Dream" (2). Paradoxically, he becomes credible as a "spokesperson for the white working class" (qtd. in Harkins and McCarroll 5) by virtue of successfully transcending this class status. Throughout the book, Vance moves between the roles of insider and outsider. Interspersing his personal narrative with references to academic research on poverty, he uses the authority of experience and of access to higher education to launch conservative policy proposals.

Lisa Pruitt has suggested that *Hillbilly Elegy* resonated with white elites – both liberals and conservatives – because it reassures them in their attitudes about poor whites and their own class privilege: "Vance's tale confirms the way in which white elites, including those on the left, see

themselves – as products of a meritocracy that levels the playing field for all, or at least for those with white skin" ("What *Hillbilly Elegy* Reveals" 108). In recent years, the term "white working class" has assumed a derogatory meaning in public discourse and, according to George Packer, has come to signify "downwardly mobile, poor, even pathological." As various critics have pointed out, Vance revives the "culture of poverty" thesis, popularized in the 1960s by Oscar Lewis and Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, as he fails to analyze poverty as a politico-economic problem, instead depicting the problems of Appalachia as a "self-perpetuating culture" and holding its inhabitants "morally culpable" for their own situation (Jones 16). In a widely discussed 2013 piece for *National Review*, conservative Kevin Williamson thusly portrayed Appalachia as a "white ghetto" where "the country is beautiful and the society is broken." Instead of attending to structural conditions of socioeconomic destitution as well as the opioid epidemic, Vance similarly posits that the white working class's problem is "a culture that increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it" (7). If Appalachia suffers from the deterioration of its industrial economy, Vance sees individuals "reacting to bad circumstances in the worst way possible" (7), i.e., by relying on welfare rather than on hard work and on assuming responsibility for one's life.

Vance's account in *Hillbilly Elegy* is a nostalgic one in no small part because he romanticizes a specific stereotype of the hillbilly as a rugged individual – a stereotype that he applies to an earlier generation. He distinguishes between two different working classes, the generation of his grandparents, his "Mamaw" and "Papaw" who "embodied one type: old-fashioned, quietly faithful, self-reliant, hardworking," and the generation of his mother and "the entire neighborhood" he grew up in who are "consumerist, isolated, angry, distrustful" (148). While the latter represent Appalachia in its current pathological state, the former represent the noble poor of a more authentic regional culture. Poverty for Vance is the "family tradition" (3) in

the generation of his grandparents, who hailed from Jackson, Kentucky, but migrated to Ohio to make a better life as workers in the steel industry. For Vance, Jackson is the place he connects to his own hillbilly identity, most closely through the men in the Blanton family, his grandmother's siblings, whom he describes as individualists prone to take justice into their own hands and defend family members even by violent means: "The Blanton men [...] were enforcers of hillbilly justice, and to me, that was the very best kind" (17). Never mind that "a few of them left a trail of neglected children, cheated wives, or both" – they "were the living embodiment of the hills of Kentucky" (17).

At the end of chapter 1, Vance affirms: "I am a hill person. So is much of America's white working class" (22). As Douglas Dowland suggests, Vance crucially relies on the rhetorical figure of synecdoche to picture his own "life experience" as

> representative of not just one swath of the nation – the "hillbillies" who migrated to the industrial north in the 1950s – but also their succeeding generations, the struggles of the Rust Belt and blue-collar Americans more generally, their abandonment of progressive politics, and ultimately an entire nation in decline. (117)

What is remarkable here is not only that he sees the culture of Appalachia as a stand-in for the country's whole white working class, but that he also continues to regard himself as a member of this socioeconomic class. Claiming the position of a "cultural emigrant," he distances himself from the privileges of his elite position, nostalgically framing it instead as a kind of exile, a loss of culture rather than a gain in socioeconomic wealth.

Vance proudly appropriates the hillbilly label as an alternative culture, in opposition to the hegemony of middle-class America (Harkins 5-6). At their most positive, Vance claims, this culture is characterized by its sheer persistence as "one of the most distinctive subgroups of America," an "unchanging regional subculture" with "an intense sense of loyalty, a fierce

dedication to family and country" (3). He contrasts this largely nostalgic take on hillbilly identity as a positive ideal, represented by his grandparents, with its contemporary, allegedly degenerate form. In describing the generation of his mother, who struggles with addiction to prescription drugs and heroin, he is focused not on socioeconomic poverty but on moral impoverishment (Dowland 130). Relating anecdotes about individuals who, in his telling, are "immune to hard work" (7), he evokes the pejorative label of the "welfare queen," usually associated with African American welfare recipients, as Vance himself acknowledges, before declaring: "I have known many welfare queens […] and all were white" (8). By applying this stereotypical characterization, Vance portrays these poor whites as not quite white. He thereby taps into a cultural register that presents Appalachians as being in a "precariously constructed position that at once relies on *othering* and erases its racial context" (McCarroll 5). As he asks readers to approach the book "without filtering their views through a racial prism" (8), Vance normalizes whiteness as not a race while at the same time insisting that working class whites are outside the purview of white privilege.

Vance's memoir not only appeared "authentic" to readers because it reconfirmed established narratives about Appalachian mountaineers, but perhaps more crucially so because it also exquisitely fit the elite political discourse around the 2016 election that allegedly self-critically explained the rise of Donald Trump as "the product of a backlash against contempt for white working people" (Coates 345). Downplaying the fact that white people across all economic strata had voted for the Republican candidate, this discourse held that Trump was empowered by a marginalized socioeconomic class. Conservative as well as liberal elites thus conveniently projected Trump's electoral success onto an Other while at the same time nostalgically bemoaning the deterioration of a virtuous class formerly considered the backbone of the country. Like Vance's

memoir, this discourse sought to erase racialization by identifying class membership, rather than racial allegiance, as the decisive indicator to identify the group of Trump supporters.

Poverty as Spectacle: Ron Howard's *Hillbilly Elegy*

Vance's memoir is ultimately nostalgic for a white working class characterized by rugged individualism and envisions a return to past pride by strengthening conservative values and the scrapping of welfare. Ron Howard's Hollywood film adaption of *Hillbilly Elegy* (based on a screenplay by Vanessa Taylor) incorporates this same nostalgic notion into the structure of the narrative. Unlike the memoir, which is told chronologically, the film works with two parallel timelines that provide additional drama: In the present, J.D. is on the brink of "making it" into the upper middle class, about to land a coveted internship with a prestigious law firm, when he has to drive to Ohio just before his final interview to take care of his mother. As the narrative unfolds, the dysfunctional family structures from his past thus threaten to endanger his future. Through its use of flashbacks, the movie invokes childhood as the object of bittersweet nostalgic memories.

Upon its limited release in theaters and its streaming on Netflix in September 2020, the movie received almost universally negative reviews by film critics (see, e.g., Brooks; Sims; Wilkinson); and instead of Academy Awards, its high-profile personnel was handed Golden Raspberry nominations for worst director, worst screenplay, and worst acting. Arguably, much of Vance's conservative cultural critique clashes with the politics of liberal Hollywood, which at least partly explains the removal of the overt political contents of the book (Keegan 33). Another factor may be that by the end of the Trump presidency, "what started as progressive elites' curiosity about the white working class" had given way "to bald disdain and fury" (Pruitt, "The Chattering Classes"). Moreover, and perhaps most crucially, the adaptation cannot produce the same kind of authenticity effects that lured the memoir's readers.

An audiovisual adaptation of a memoir necessarily entails a significant transformation of the material, not only because of the altered forms of mediation but also because of the shift in generic conventions. In a memoir, author, narrator, and protagonist are perceived as identical by the reader, with the 'narrating I' representing its younger 'narrated I' and delineating remembered events through a retrospective understanding (Smith and Watson 58-61). Moreover, the narrator appears to address an implied reader directly, in what Philip Lejeune has famously described as the "autobiographical pact" between author and reader (Mooney 285-93; see also Lejeune 13-46).[2] Accordingly, the goal of a film adaptation of a memoir cannot be the faithful reproduction of its truth claims, but instead its transformation into an interesting drama. This involves a "move from telling to showing," as "description, narration, and represented thoughts must be transcoded into speech, actions, sounds, and visual images" (Hutcheon 40).

As Hutcheon cautions us, adaptations are often accompanied by a "negative discourse of loss" (37), even though the media change is simultaneously restricting and enabling. If a movie cannot reproduce the presumed authority of Vance's voice as an insider of hillbilly culture, film nevertheless elicits direct audience responses through its interplay of visual and aural elements. In particular, sound elements as well as visual cues can be employed to create nostalgic effects. Nostalgia and retro aesthetics have recently fared prominently in film as well as television and streaming series set in different time periods.[3] These productions are often characterized by what Marc Le Sueur has called "surface realism" (192), employing retro aesthetics to create period

[2] The framework of this article does not allow for a more extensive discussion of Lejeune's complex and much-debated concept of the "autobiographical pact." For a concise overview of Lejeune's development of the idea as well as its critical reception, see, e.g., Missinne.

[3] In contemporary film, TV, and streaming series, the 1980s feature particularly prominently, as exemplified for instance by Netflix series productions such as *Stranger Things* or *Pose*. For an extended discussion of nostalgia in contemporary media culture, see Knewitz, "Reimagining the Cold War," as well as Sielke, "Retro Aesthetics."

authenticity, transporting viewers visually and sonically into a different time period via its musical score, historical visual technologies, or incorporation of distinct objects of material culture. Nostalgia in series such as *Mad Men*, *Stranger Things*, or *The Americans* relies on the pastiche of past styles. By contrast, nostalgia in *Hillbilly Elegy* is often evoked by what could be read as parody: The movie's most distinct retro elements are ascribed to its characters, particularly to J.D.'s mother and grandmother, whose unfashionable haircuts and clothing are both visual cues that mark them as poor and situate them as stuck in a bygone era.

Hillbilly Elegy begins by evoking childhood summers in the mountains as a nostalgic reference point ascribed specifically to J.D., whose point of view is transported through voice-over narration in which he describes "the hill country, Jackson, Kentucky" as "the place where he feels most at home." The movie thus nostalgically remembers childhood as a golden past at its outset, thereby appealing to viewers' positive associations. We first see serene nature imagery, accompanied by soft pathos-filled instrumental string music, and the voice-over of a radio broadcast sermon. The poignant voice of a male preacher expounds:

> It is the year of our Lord 1997, an age of prosperity. The magnificence of God's creation, the bounty of this Earth, the miracle of modern life have never been so resplendent to our eyes. Yet for some of us, the American dream, the singular hope of our people, remains ever out of reach. And though we may feel embittered, want to rail at injustice, even in our God, and though others may scorn our beliefs, let us hold faith not only in that God, but in ourselves and our character. Our ability to rise, yea, to fly, be this flight generations in the making, be it delayed so long our faith is bound. Let that faith never be broken.

As we listen to the sermon, the camera intersperses panorama shots and close-up images of the woods of Jackson with images of the town's inhabitants. The camera pans along houses and vehicles that appear both quaint and shabby, and we see people pursuing mundane tasks in their yards, like pegging out washing on a rotary clothes dryer or piling trash bags onto a pickup truck. The sequence ends with a close-up, first, of the radio which is the technological source of the

sermon, and, second, of the face of J.D.'s great-grandmother "Mamaw Blanton," who devotedly listens to the preacher. The close-up image of the woman on her front porch may remind viewers of photographic portraits taken under the auspices of the FSA, or the interview with Goldie Johnson in the CBS documentary *Christmas in Appalachia*. Yet, unlike in these images, the face we see here appears clean and marked merely by advanced age rather than by destitution.

Introducing viewers to a specific time and place, the movie's exposition presents highly aestheticized and nostalgic images that only indirectly provide cues to poverty, e.g., in the radio sermon whose content in fact appears at odds with the beautiful scenery. Unlike *Christmas in Appalachia*'s black-and-white introductory sequence, in which the camera trails reporter Charles Kuralt as he walks along a country road in order to familiarize his audience with the setting of an impoverished Appalachian town, the opening of *Hillbilly Elegy* projects an idealized rustic place. The people are being framed in grainy quality reminiscent of older family photos. We do not see any suffering; despite the preacher's suggestion that these people "may feel embittered" because they do not partake in the prosperity of the age, the faces do not display any negative emotions. Set against the backdrop of a beautiful natural landscape bathed in sunlight and soft string music, their simple lifestyle can be perceived as appealing and idyllic by the viewer, calling up the image of the noble mountaineers.

In its sequence of introductory scenes preceding the opening credits, *Hillbilly Elegy* incorporates several historical Appalachian family photographs, which are built into the film's narrative as J.D.'s family comes together to take a group picture before leaving Kentucky for Ohio after their vacation. The first still image shows a snapshot of J.D.'s extended family, gathered next to the family home; it is followed by six further and – judging from their grainier quality and from the clothing and hairstyles of the people depicted – notably older photographs, each one going

further back through the generations, moving from color shots to black-and-white images, from large gatherings to smaller families in traditional garb and even more rustic houses. The sequence evokes the idea of family lineage while also serving to position the film's family within a cultural tradition and attaching itself to the established iconography of Appalachia, circulated and exhibited for outside viewers since the 1930s. The use of the medium of photography here briefly functions to transcend the movie's narrative and authenticate it as part of a larger cultural imaginary about Appalachia. Arguably, as the family photograph constitutes a key medium of nostalgic remembrance, this sequence also contributes to the movie's nostalgic take on Appalachia.

In the next sequence, nostalgia is specifically ascribed to J.D., who, in a flashback within the flashback, reminisces about the life of his grandmother, who left Kentucky for Ohio as a pregnant child bride, barely older than when J.D.'s recollections of his grandmother were etched into his memory. The string-heavy orchestral soundtrack takes on a somber tone and thus foreshadows a change of visual landscape, as we see the grandparents as a young couple driving to the bustling industrial Middletown, juxtaposed with the same drive several decades later, as they return home from their vacation. In the first image, the sky is thick with vapor from the industrial chimneys, signaling productivity, and the town displays glints of prosperity. In the second image, it is marked by visible decay. As the scene shifts, the camera focuses in close-up on J.D. in the backseat, establishing a parallel between his young grandparents' arrival in Middletown decades earlier and his own in a place that notably has changed for the worse. Thereby, this scene encapsulates now-established narratives of the decline of the rust belt and the white working class.

Like the memoir, the film differentiates between two types of working-class people: It romanticizes the rural community of Jackson, Kentucky, and pathologizes the deteriorated industrial city of Middletown, Ohio. If, as one of the movie's reviewers scathingly remarked, the

movie's lighting is reminiscent of a Dove commercial (Brooks), destitution is visualized in *Hillbilly Elegy* not through socioeconomic suffering but through the characters' display of strong affects and violent, erratic behavior, which appears latent in the rural community and comes most starkly to the fore as the setting shifts to the urban industrial environment of Ohio. As the idyllic nature scenery of Jackson, Kentucky, is replaced by urban destitution in Middletown, Ohio, poverty is increasingly depicted as spectacle, and shouting matches between characters dominate the soundscape instead of the soft string music of the opening scenes. If there are occasional glimpses into socioeconomic deprivation – as when Mamaw shares her meagre meals with J.D. – destitution mostly appears as moral impoverishment in the form of J.D.'s mother, Bev's, abusive behavior. High on drugs, she displays an utter lack of self-control as she roller-skates through the hospital in which she works or creates a scene on the street in which all neighbors appear as passive spectators.

As viewers we are put into a similar spectator position, which is intensified because the characters resemble not individuals but rather caricatures. As Alissa Wilkinson notes in her review of the movie, the actors' performances "feel bizarrely theatrical" as if they performed "as strange creatures they've never encountered before." According to Wilkinson, Glenn Close in an official Q&A about the film referred to her impersonation of Mamaw as a performance in "full drag" comparing the character to other larger-than-life protagonists she played in the past, like the role of Albert Knobbs or the sinister Cruella de Vil of *101 Dalmatians*. To conceive of playing an ordinary poor person as a form of cross-dressing is revealing, as it frames the impersonation as a kind of parody. Instead of rendering an empathetic portrait of the characters, the movie relies on stereotypical symbols that represent lower-class status in a way that is reminiscent of the

phenomenon of "Poor Chic," which appropriates such symbols as fads and fashion for middle-class consumption (Halnon).

The idea of the white working class as an exotic Other is also emphasized in the second timeline, set in 2011. Aspiring to land an internship in the course of a networking dinner, J.D. struggles to compete with students of more elite upbringing. As he speaks about his background at the dinner table, one of his interlocutors insinuates that Appalachia, with its "rednecks," is akin to "another planet." Defending his family as "hillbilly royalty," J.D. appears to be caught between two worlds that have nothing in common and that seem to be at odds with each other, his past, and his future. Though the world of the rich here is characterized by ignorance and snobbism in regard to the working-class culture of his youth, the movie ultimately sets up the viewer to root for J.D.'s success in the professional world they represent. In the last fifteen minutes of the movie, he decides to leave his mother behind in a hotel room in order not to squander his career prospects, even at the risk of her overdosing again. In the final sequence, the conflict between the two cultures appears to be resolved. As we see him at his interview, J.D. explains in the voice-over:

> Twice, I've needed to be rescued. The first time it was Mamaw who saved me. The second, it was what she taught me. That where we come from is who we are, but we choose every day who we become. My family is not perfect, but they made me who I am and gave me chances that they never had. My future, whatever it is, is our shared legacy.

In closing, *Hillbilly Elegy* bookends with the preacher's sermon at the beginning, suggesting that J.D. fulfills his family's aspiration by being part of their "generations in the making." The family's suffering comes across as a sacrifice for J.D.'s upward mobility, and J.D. himself has to sacrifice his place of belonging to make it, thus portraying wealth and elite class position in terms of a burden rather than a privilege. In line with the memoir, the film ultimately seeks to reaffirm that the American Dream still works, and that economic success and cultural advancement ultimately

come at the price of the loss of home, which can be nostalgically mourned. Distinguishing between the noble poor and the degenerate poor, it caters to both liberal and conservative ideas about the meaning and sources of white poverty.

In its credit sequence, the movie shifts to a documentary mode by including original Vance family photos and home video footage, with updates about each family member's life. Invoking these memories, the sequence both underwrites the movie's nostalgic take and, even more forcefully than the historical photographs of Appalachian families in the beginning of the film, serves to authenticate it as a "real story" and truthful portrayal, while showcasing the film's visual accuracy in the depiction of the characters. We also get a glimpse of J.D.'s life after the end of the narrative, learning that he has meanwhile married his girlfriend, Usha, and fathered two sons who continue the family lineage. With regard to Bev, the commentary notes that she has "been sober for six years." It thus vindicates J.D.'s mother, who is now allegedly "spending as much time as she can with her grandchildren."

The Intermedial Representation of Poverty in *Hillbilly Elegy*

As I have argued throughout this essay, both the *Hillbilly Elegy* memoir and the film rely on an aesthetics of nostalgia in their portrayal of Appalachia that stands in for the wider white working class. The memoir relies on authenticity effects by establishing the voice of J.D. as a mediator who provides elite audiences access to the allegedly exotic world of Appalachia via the authority of personal experience and thus perpetuates a cultural imaginary which has long been problematized by scholars in Appalachian studies. Claiming to tell the truth about a whole culture, it projects the paradoxical double image of a white working class as both the backbone of American culture and as degenerate. Howard's *Hillbilly Elegy* film draws upon the same register, but it has to rely on different aesthetic and narrative strategies, since the book's truth claims are not available to a

fictional movie in the same way. Incorporating nostalgia into its very narrative structure while presenting white poverty as a spectacle in its use of retro aesthetics, it uneasily shifts between a sentimental image of the virtuous poor and theatricalized ridicule of pathological hillbilly culture.

If the white working class is often attributed with restorative nostalgia for the heyday of rustbelt industrial capitalism, *Hillbilly Elegy* in both its versions prompts us to interrogate the political uses of nostalgia more critically. In both works, nostalgia appears as a distancing strategy which ultimately serves the reproduction of neoliberal capitalist structures. At its core, *Hillbilly Elegy* is a rags-to-riches narrative of upward mobility which reassures conservative and progressive elites alike in their belief in American meritocracy and in the assumption that their own privilege is self-earned. If contemporary liberals and progressives in particular are cynical about the American dream, *Hillbilly Elegy* fosters nostalgia for the values at the heart of American economic liberalism, embodied by a virtuous, hardworking class of white Americans, whose lifestyle now seems anachronistic. The movie ends with the bright promise of J.D.'s future, built on the sacrifice and the "shared legacy" of his family and "culture." Read as a metonymic narrative for American culture as a whole, J.D. represents the progress of a nation that needs to leave its working class behind for the sake of a better future.

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