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Formalism in *Unsolved Mysteries*' Reenactments

Abstract: Cultural memory is a result of social formalism, and ongoing reenactments of desired conclusions uphold a status quo. The Netflix reboot of *Unsolved Mysteries* is just such a copy of a copy. After so many layers of repeating what has already been repeated, this formalism constructs a conservative paradigm which suppresses creative innovation for the safety of a relived past. The reenactment becomes a form suitable for cultural memory-making through recurrence of ideologically agreed-upon images. Yet reenactments are fundamentally virtual: discursivity, when fixed, is not materially real but exists as a communicable system whose "message" alone can serve to relate. Narrative, with its fixed beginning, middle, and end, never vanishes into the real—it remains perpetually virtual. A reenactment may be especially useful to powerful institutions because lived memory is personal, owned solely by its physical retainer, while imagined memory necessitates cultural repetition to take mental hold in individuals who weren't present for the original event. Just as a reboot of *Unsolved Mysteries* would be incomplete without filmed reenactment or a paranormal element, its formal identity depends on these recurring components. Like a Freudian screen memory, a reenactment resembles an Event without the trauma. Formalism's interpretive strength is also its weakness: while a structure only becomes durable after many layers stack upon one another, building an identity sturdy by the time it can be seen, this process requires no regulation for success. Cultural memory exceeds individual retention, so mythologies need no longer be exact. Instead, they coalesce via overlapping repetitions—virtually—sustained by the formal logic of their own reiteration.

Key words: reenactment, formalism, narrative, memory, events

Résumé : La mémoire culturelle est le résultat d'un formalisme social, et la répétition constante de conclusions souhaitées contribue à maintenir un statu quo. Le reboot Netflix de *Unsolved Mysteries* n'est rien d'autre qu'une copie d'une copie. Après tant de strates de répétition de ce qui a déjà été répété, ce formalisme construit un paradigme conservateur qui réprime l'innovation créative au nom de la sécurité d'un passé revécu. La reconstitution devient ainsi une forme propice à la fabrication de la mémoire culturelle, grâce à la récurrence d'images idéologiquement consensuelles. Pourtant, les reconstitutions sont fondamentalement virtuelles : la discursivité, une fois fixée, n'est pas matériellement réelle, mais existe comme un système

communicable dont seul le « message » peut servir de relation. Le récit, avec son début, son milieu et sa fin fixés, ne se dissout jamais dans le réel : il demeure perpétuellement virtuel. Une reconstitution peut être particulièrement utile aux institutions puissantes, car la mémoire vécue est personnelle et appartient exclusivement à celui ou celle qui en est le dépositaire physique, tandis que la mémoire imaginée nécessite la répétition culturelle pour s'imprimer mentalement chez des individus qui n'étaient pas présents lors de l'événement originel. De même qu'un reboot d'*Unsolved Mysteries* serait incomplet sans reconstitution filmée ou élément paranormal, son identité formelle dépend de ces composantes récurrentes. À l'instar d'un souvenir-écran freudien, la reconstitution ressemble à un Événement auquel manquerait le traumatisme. La puissance interprétative du formalisme constitue également sa faiblesse : si une structure ne devient durable qu'après que de nombreuses strates se sont superposées, construisant une identité suffisamment solide pour devenir perceptible, ce processus ne nécessite pourtant aucune régulation pour fonctionner. La mémoire culturelle excède la capacité de rétention individuelle ; les mythologies n'ont donc plus besoin d'être exactes. Elles se forment plutôt par la convergence de répétitions qui se chevauchent — virtuellement —, soutenues par la logique formelle de leur propre réitération.

Mots-clés : reenactment, formalisme, narrative, mémoire, événements

Introduction

To remember an event is to affirm that something in particular happened at a specific point in time, and this can be done subjectively. To remember a *memory* of an event, however, is to honor, to commemorate, to memorialize, to reboot, or to engage in various other forms of remembering which cannot be experienced singularly—this is to affirm that a memory has grown beyond the scope of a subjectively remembered event. With collective remembrance, what was once a singular event can now become something else entirely, something that transcends recordable sense data. To illustrate, consider a reinterpretation of a classic philosophical thought experiment: if the tallest tree in the world fell down and only one person witnessed it, that single individual will alone hold the sole ability to remember what it looked and sounded like according to the perspective from which the witness stood in relation to the happening. But if no individuals were around to bear witness to the actual falling of the tree, and yet a memorial was erected at the place where the fallen tree once stood to indicate that it had fallen, the tree may now be remembered collectively, even if an individual who observes the memorial never saw the tree before, let alone saw it fall. Herein one can suitably begin to engage with cultural memory, for the tree has been made collectively memorable by the event of its falling at a particular point in time (that point being, of course, when it was the tallest tree on record, and established by a singular moment when it finally ceased to be).

A problem with remembering a memory in this non-subjective way is how the absence of credible witness testimony may lead to distorted or imagined memories. If the geographical placement of the memorial is not in the place where the tallest tree once stood, but a kilometer away, would that matter? Why or why not? From here it is not illogical to ask whether the tree ever existed at all. Even if millions of people read a memorial plaque commemorating the tallest tree, stating how it lived and fell in the spot they now stand, how can they know for sure when the memorialized tree is not there to prove itself? Collective memories are not always this problematic, oftentimes they simply manifest in external displays of communal pride through recurring traditions, annual parades, state-recognized holidays, unchanging street names, and curated cultural centers. But the same repetition of agreeable veracity which produces collective memories may also become the means of reaffirming norms which do not have any basis in historical data. In other words, answering the question of "what happened?" becomes a group project, rather than an individual experience.

In this article I will investigate the ways in which cultural memory is a result of social formalism, and how constant reenactments of desired conclusions (whatever they may be) uphold a status quo, especially in modern American culture. The lens through which I will be deciphering this phenomenon is best summed up by John Durham Peters in his 2001 essay, "Witnessing," when he states, "The past, in some sense, is safe. The present, in contrast, is catastrophic, subject to radical alterations."¹ My main source material for this investigation is the 2020 Netflix reboot of *Unsolved Mysteries* which is itself a copy of a copy (the original series first aired in 1987) and I will critique how it utilizes reenactment in dramatic form. The show intrinsically asks, "what happened?" and leaves it not only to actual witnesses, law enforcement, media and producers to look for the answer, but puts it to the group, the mass audience who looks backwards, often with nostalgia and selective memories, to become a primary determinant of what could be considered the solution to the unknown answer. After so many layers of repeating what has already been repeated, this formalism constructs a broad, culturally conservative paradigm which suppresses creative innovation in exchange for the safety and comfort of a relived/unlived past.

The Virtuality of Narrative

The communicable virtuality of reenactment can be best understood through narrative theory. According to Paul Ricœur, a communication ecosystem should not be understood as real in a material sense, but rather as *virtual*—this is because if a conception of discourse is “fixed,” like the alphabet, for example, then what must follow is a characterization of a communication ecosystem as objectively “nondialectical.”² What is real, however, is what happens with the *message* in relational discourse. So, narrative ought to be understood as a constituent of the virtual because it is always a fixed system determined by a beginning, middle, and end, which never “vanishes.”³ However, via fictionality, a metaphor “tells us something new about reality.”⁴ A metaphor does not merely give something a quality of narrativity,

¹ John Durham Peters, "Witnessing," *Media, Culture & Society* 23, no. 6 (2001): 707.

² Paul Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 27.

³ Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory*, 9.

⁴ Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory*, 53.

because a metaphor may be just as impactful (if not more so) in a poem, but herein lies the reason why a reenactment should not be interpreted as a metaphor but rather as a sort of allegory. An allegory is fixed as a narrative form and also “tells us something new about reality” as an extended, narrativized, metaphor. Nevertheless, allegory too is rhetorical as a didactic device.

Following from the basis of how narrative may be understood as a virtuality, another key narratological concept should now be considered. Dialogism refers to discourse in a text that emphasizes the way language itself is a matter of relating, as one does when in conversation.⁵ Heteroglossia branches from dialogism as any reference within a single text that addresses a multiplicity or diversity of language which “embodies an endless ‘historical becoming.’”⁶ Take Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of *The Metamorphosis* who has been transformed into a bug, as a non-human who no longer has a human voice with which he can communicate with his family, thereby alienating him from the other characters in the story.⁷ As readers, we are able to understand the plight of Gregor, as any person alienated under capitalism understands the lack of power to change economic or sociocultural circumstances through one’s individual voice, and this results in a double-voiced discourse. Gregor’s voice is clear to the reader but comes across to the human characters in the story as noise, which communicates something different to his family than what readers are able to glean—they are repulsed by Gregor, but we feel sympathy towards him. When this sort of doubling manifests as it does in Kafka’s novella, Bakhtin calls it radical, as it points to “the fundamental liberation of cultural-semantic and emotional intentions from the hegemony of a single and unitary language”⁸ which is only possible under sociohistorical (i.e., material) conditions that allow the production of such a complex form of discourse.

Dialogism occurs in another way in *The Metamorphosis* after Gregor dies and the narrative voice carries on. Since Gregor’s dilemma is ever-present from the beginning when he wakes up as a bug, the reader comes to expect the narrative voice to be representative of

⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 326.

⁶ Ken Hirschkop, *The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 90.

⁷ Franz Kafka, *Selected Short Stories of Franz Kafka*, translated by Willa Muir, Edwin Muir, and Philip Rahv (New York: The Modern Library, 1952), 19-89.

⁸ Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” 367.

Gregor's, even if in third person. When he dies and the story continues, this shift produces another contradiction of dialogism. Whose voice concludes the story? Analyzing the text for heteroglossia enables one to read it not only as a metaphor for the alienation that occurs when one is subjected to wage labor to support a family under capitalism, but also, more crucially, to see the reality of a crisis as not so easily resolved by a narrative's formal conclusion.

Another complementary narratological concept is the theory of possible worlds as proposed by Marie-Laure Ryan. Her work looks to a cognitive framework, as she says in her introduction of *Narratives Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*: "To construct a storyworld is simply to form a mental representation of a narrative text."⁹ What is important here is that there are boundaries in any given storyworld. What is mentally represented in *The Metamorphosis* is something that relates to the real world in some ways, and negates it in other ways, but this cognitive tension is what makes the world of the story unique. Ryan says in *A New Anatomy of Storyworlds* that "narratives with ontological paradoxes construe a world that looks like Swiss cheese, with zones of irrationality clearly delimited from areas accessible to logical inferences, so that they do not throw the entire fictional world into cognitive chaos."¹⁰ This is why a reader can have a basis for accepting the absurdities present in *The Metamorphosis* (e.g., Gregor transformed into a bug): "Certain narratives, such as Kafka's *Metamorphosis* . . . are built around fantastic events that defy understanding, even though their world is consistent in all other respects."¹¹

It is important to distinguish a storyworld from a *setting* and from an *illustration*. A setting is the time and place wherein a story occurs, which says nothing about the logic of *how* things go in this time and place. *The Metamorphosis* is set in an apartment, at what seems to be a "present" time. Nothing indicates that it is a distant past or future. But the storyworld is what makes it possible for a human to suddenly be transformed into a bug. *How* this is possible in this world is not relevant to the setting. Likewise, a storyworld is not the same thing as an illustration, because it needs to still be framed by the *form* of narrative. For example, as Ryan writes about a virtual reality installation that replicated the apartment in *The Metamorphosis*: "it may deepen the experience of people who already know the story, but it cannot replace the text."¹² This virtual illustration allows people to experience the feeling

⁹ Marie-Laure Ryan, "Introduction," in *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 6.

¹⁰ Marie-Laure Ryan, *A New Anatomy of Storyworlds* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2022), 100.

¹¹ Ryan, *New Anatomy*, 100.

¹² Ryan, *New Anatomy*, 176.

of being a big bug trapped in an apartment, but that is all. They cannot reenact the narrative through this illustration. In this regard, a storyworld always follows a narrative logic, and so should be analytically interrogated thusly: how does the logic in this story reflect or contradict the logic of the *real* world?

The Formalism of Reenactment

In Caroline Levine's book, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, she qualifies a *form* according to five affordances:

1. Forms constrain
2. Forms differ (frequency, duration, focalization, description, suspense)
3. Various forms overlap and intersect
4. Forms travel
5. Forms do political work in particular historical contexts¹³

When looking at reenactment as a form, Levine's model provides a useful breakdown of what may be afforded it.

First, the form of reenactment constrains. By virtue of its restrictions, and looking at what *cannot* be a reenactment, this process of elimination helps determine the formation of what *can* be a reenactment. For example, a live sporting event is not a reenactment, and practically cannot ever be reenacted due to its novel and unpredictable nature. A play-by-play replay of a baseball game which exhibited a combination of real-time home runs, breaking balls followed by laser-precise fastballs followed by more breaking balls, batters hit by pitches accidentally, and photo finish calls by umpires declaring a runner "safe!" or "out!" are only a few of the many occurrences that contribute to a single game's technical complexity, resulting in an event that is irreproducible. Not everything can be reenacted, but only certain types of happenings or events which fit into the constraints of the form.

Next, forms differ in frequency, duration, focalization, description, and suspense. This is not contrary to the first point that forms constrain, because difference is needed to determine whether or not something has the ability to hold a structural form. It is again helpful here to

¹³ Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 3-27.

look at what kind of thing *does not* differ in order to see how the form of reenactment *does* differ. For example, a finished recording of a song which broadcasts on a streaming platform such as Spotify *does not* differ in frequency, duration, focalization, description, or suspense, despite it being played in different settings, perhaps to one listener in Berlin, another listener in Chicago, or Hong Kong, New Zealand, and so on. It is the same song for whomever listens to it. But a form of a song can take shape with *covers*, and this is comparable to a reenactment. A cover by another artist, perhaps utilizing different instruments, with a faster tempo, rearranging the prominent parts of a harmony, invoking new sonic elements, and generating listener anticipation in the composition all contributes to the form of a song's structure thanks to the very differences which contrast against the original's similarities. The more covers made of the song, the more structured the form of the song becomes, because it reveals the construction of what makes the song a form unto itself. Keeping music as an example, The Beatles' performance on The Ed Sullivan Show can work as something that can be reenacted because two opposing yet complementary things happen simultaneously: first, the reenactment will look and sound very much like the original event, and second, it will unmistakably be something different than the original event. The foppish haircuts of the performers will almost certainly be remarkably similar to the originals, as will the rendition of the song being performed, and the set design of the stage, and all of these similarities and more will signify *The Beatles' performance on The Ed Sullivan Show*, while obvious differences such as the reenacting performers obviously not being Ringo, Paul, George, or John, or the observable date on the calendar, will all confirm that this is not the original.

This affordance connects to the third point, which is that forms overlap and intersect. For example, a painting is a form of visual art which is broadly defined, but even so is assisted in its being a painting by the existence of other paintings. Francis Bacon put paint onto canvas just as Georgia O'Keefe did, and while their subjects may have often been starkly different (hearkening back to Levine's second point), there is no question that both artists created forms which can indisputably be regarded as paintings. One overlap is in their shared material—paint and canvas. Overlap is perhaps the clearest signifier in a reenactment, since without an overlap it may be uncertain whether or not an event is being reenacted at all. To be able to perceive what is happening in the reenactment as not being the first time it has been expressed is crucial

to its form. This affordance will prove especially relevant to the analysis of *Unsolved Mysteries* in the next section.

Fourth, forms travel. The first three points lead into this one, for a form which constrains, differs, and overlaps will subsequently take a form which cannot sit still. A reenactment does not sit still but expresses something in motion through action; it may traverse a hillside to retell the Battle of Gettysburg, be that hill in Pennsylvania or on a constructed stage in South Africa, or in front of a green screen and digital camera. The form of reenactment, for all its bluster about authenticity and historicity, cannot exist as only one thing in one place. The form becomes recognizable in its spatial transcendence through time.

Finally, forms do political work in particular historical contexts, which is the pinnacle of what a form ultimately can afford a culture. After all the constraining, differing, overlapping, and travelling, the contextual work of a form can be grasped with enough theoretical literacy to begin informing power structures of its potential uses for a society, institution, or government. With reenactment, its political dress often bears a conservative flair, because its form is to reiterate in ephemeral terms an affecting story about an event which has been deemed memorable and worthy of repetition. The reenactment henceforth becomes a form suitable for cultural memory-making through the recurrence of ideologically agreed upon images.

Taking Levine's five affordances of form, consider a common reenactment that occurs around Christmastime in many countries in the Western world: the Nativity. This scene may be presented indoors or outdoors, performed by children or adults, and can range significantly in its production budget, but what makes the Nativity reenactment a classic for the holiday season is its familiarity to even those who have not yet learned to read full sentences. Its meaning is derived from a text (the Bible), but a child aged six may remember seeing the same scene a year earlier when they were five, and before they can even read a paragraph (let alone the Gospel of Matthew) they will understand that some important meaning is conveyed by this visually dramatic expression of the three wise men, shepherds, angels, mother and father huddled around the baby lying in the manger. Did the Nativity really happen the way it is so commonly reenacted, though? The question at the core of cultural memory is, "what happened?" but potential problems arise in the *form* of the answer. There is debate on the birthplace of the historical Jesus, but for religious traditions' sake, the Nativity scenes which are reenacted year after year already faithfully affirm to Christian cultures what happened, historicity notwithstanding. This *form* requires very little historical data when it comes to

imparting factual knowledge, but its potential for mythmaking is strong enough to endure for centuries.

Referring to Appadurai's *Modernity at Large*, Andreas Huyssen states, "Many of the mass-marketed memories we consume are 'imagined memories' to begin with, and thus more easily forgotten than lived memories,"¹⁴ pointing to one reason why a reenactment may be useful to a religion, government, or any other powerful institution in a given culture—a lived memory is personal, owned solely by its physical retainer, while an "imagined memory" necessitates repetition and reiteration in a culture in order for memory to take mental hold in an individual who wasn't there when the original event happened. The Nativity is supposed to have taken place 2000 years ago, so there can never again be a lived memory of this integral event in Christianity; to maintain meaningfulness is to promulgate perpetual conservation of a cultural memory, which requires repetition through traditional expression, lest the event be forgotten forever.

Seeing a reenactment viscerally affects the viewer with a sense that what they are experiencing is something that has *happened* in the past, because the reenacted performance is unquestionably *happening* in the present with real people in real time. In other words, it takes the appearance of something that has happened because a *form* of it is now happening. The *form* itself is a physical representation of an event that has happened, even if this form is not (nor can it ever be) an original happening. A physical familiarity can overlap with an imagined reality, thus imparting mythic meaning without any need for the reading or writing of authoritative texts. In *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*, Simon Reynolds sums up this phenomenon, stating, "No matter how much research and preparation goes into a reenactment, it is doomed to be an absurd ghost, a travesty of the original. Yet the reenactment may still have the power to remind the audience that Events are possible, because they've happened before."¹⁵ The reminder he speaks of is not a personal one, but cultural—a way of restating what is collectively *important*, even if it isn't always *meaningful* at an individual level.

A meaningful personal memory might be a first kiss, which is remembered by an individual without much need for persistent reminders simply because of the emotional weight the event carried. The kiss meant affection, pleasure, connection, and expansion of emotional

¹⁴Andreas Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia," *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000): 27.

¹⁵ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 54.

and physical experience in a way that was until then undiscovered and unknown. But nothing will ever reenact that first kiss in a personally satisfying way, it was the one and only time that this event could have ever happened. Cultural memories are competitive with these sorts of lived memories, insisting that they belong right alongside such personal moments as being recognizably as important as those which require no reminders—cultural memories demand codification through repetition, otherwise they would be discarded into the dustbin of the limbic system as unimportant, trivial, not worth keeping around. Herein lies the need for skepticism of cultural memories that take forms like statues, flags, and various other repeating symbols of power or dominance which may have little if anything to do with the personal identity or humanity of the individual who is subjected to their physical presence.

The outgrowth of this discordance of deciphering meaningful events is nostalgia, for if nothing can reenact that first kiss, the next best thing would be something that is similar to it. Someone who has not yet had a first kiss cannot have nostalgia for a first kiss, they must first experience the seminal event, and only thereafter may nostalgia for that event become possible; maybe a song will be written about it, or a poem, etc. Nostalgia is chiefly concerned with "what happened" and the romanticization of it. In a sense, nostalgia demands a paradox: to repeat that which can never be repeated. It is seen in twenty-first century American pop-culture everywhere, from independent YouTube channels dedicated to the earliest video games and "golden era" movies and music, to big-budget remakes of everything from *Ghostbusters* to *Nosferatu*, the garage rock revival of The Strokes and The White Stripes, and Netflix series after Netflix series of looking back at the past, and remembering the good old days when things were simpler than they are now.

The Layers of *Unsolved Mysteries*

In "Berkshires UFO," the fifth episode from the 2020 reboot of *Unsolved Mysteries*, there is a notable scene in which a subject is casually reenacting something that happened to him nearly fifty years earlier, when he was only a little boy. The camera is steadily moving backwards, framing the front of his body from a low angle as he slowly walks forward in a front yard with a cozy house out of focus in the background. He is walking in the exact direction he claims he remembers. "Off to my left, there was a rock, and there was a path, and we were right on the path here, and the rock was just off to my left," he gestures to the left with his arm

as he continues to walk forward. The camera begins to veer off to his side as he continues his story, "And as I turned slowly..." He turns, and the camera continues veering until it is behind him, still framed from below but now filming his back. A vast blue sky is now prominent, and he extends one arm up into the air, "I turned... and a UFO dropped right out of the sky, right in front of me. And a beam came on me." He drops his arm to his side. "And as the light was on me, my hands jerked back, like this." He theatrically puts his arms behind his back and sticks his chest out, "And it's like the air got sucked out of me." At this point there is a cut to another form of reenactment, a child actor with his arms back and a beam of light on his chest. The final shot of the scene is another eyewitness, the former neighbor of the man, corroborating his story.¹⁶

What happened? As the title of the show would have it, it is a redundancy. Not only is it unsolved, but it is a mystery. Not just any mystery, but an unsolved mystery. Irony aside, there is a lot to analyze in even this one short scene. Tommy, the man who is filmed reenacting his story on the very site he claims to have seen the UFO, challenges viewers to, as Huyssen footnotes, "distinguish memories grounded in lived experience from memories pillaged from the archive and mass-marketed for fast consumption."¹⁷ Tommy's story sounds very familiar, like something we have seen or heard before, and that is because Tommy is telling a common folktale about what it's like to have an encounter with a UFO. But is it actually *what happened?*

At this point I want to clarify and stress that debunking UFO sightings or proving them as real or fake is of no use to this article. What is more interesting is the cultural meaning that can be found in a reenactment scene about a UFO sighting. How does it address the question, "what happened?" and how is it best critiqued in the context of cultural memory?

Before exploring the many layers of micro-reenactment in this particular scene with Tommy, it is necessary to contextualize the macro-reenactment that eventually paved the way for a 2020 reboot of *Unsolved Mysteries*. Debuting in 1987, *Unsolved Mysteries* was a one-hour-long network TV program hosted by Robert Stack. Its most popular run was its years on NBC, which was until 1996. From 1997 onward, the show moved to various other networks, including CBS, Lifetime, Spike, and finally its latest edition for Netflix. Production of the series stopped and started at these various points of network moves, so it lacks the legacy panache of a show which has been ongoing like *The Simpsons* or *Saturday Night*

¹⁶ "Berkshires UFO," *Unsolved Mysteries*, season 15, episode 5, Netflix, July 1, 2020.

¹⁷ Huyssen, "Present Pasts," 27.

Live. Unsolved Mysteries' panache comes from its nostalgic value—the time for which it is remembered is the late 1980s and early 1990s, the years it remained on its home network and prominently featured Robert Stack in his infamous trenchcoat, narrating the unsettling stories with his unmistakable baritone and ice-cold stare.

One major clue that the reboot for Netflix is an appeal to nostalgia is the title credit sequence. The new theme music is recognizably the same composition, only now in exchange for the tinny 1980s synths are moodier strings and spookier piano. The graphic design of the title itself, "Unsolved Mysteries," is another updated version of the original, with "Unsolved" in all-caps typeface above the muddily handwritten "Mysteries" below. And most compellingly, a brief but discernible silhouette of Robert Stack himself appears at the conclusion of the title sequence. He is visible for about one and a half seconds, as if only to whisper to the audience, "remember?" The *original* recorded music was not used in the reboot, nor was the *original* title design, and, of course, the *original* Robert Stack was not resurrected from his death to return to the show. All of these choices are reminders of how *Unsolved Mysteries* was something that *happened* in the past, solidifying the form itself through its overlaps of slightly varied (differing) constraints.

The rebooted content itself is true to form as well. In the first seasons of the show, the majority of the episodes focused on criminal cases which had not yet been closed. Murders, frauds, missing persons, prison breaks, and other crime-related topics such as these were the majority then and so too in the 2020 season are five of the six episodes about traumatically violent stories which involve extensive police investigations. The outlier is "Berkshires UFO," but this too is an homage to the original show. Every few episodes, paranormal stories about Bigfoot, aliens, or occultist mind-readers were sprinkled in, and this was the special ingredient that gave the show its distinct flavor. The occasional paranormal investigations separated the show from a competitor like *America's Most Wanted* which only featured hard criminal cases.

Another important overlap between the original with the reboot is the methods of reenactment which are utilized. The reenactments in the reboot are subtle, showing only out-of-focus actors performing narrated actions. In the original series run, the reenactments were blatant, with clear dialogue and on-location filming. This production choice recalls Levine's affordances of form, for what is *Unsolved Mysteries* if not a show that utilizes reenactment in order to ask (and show) *what happened*. To remove reenactment from the structure of the show would be to remove the possibility of it being *Unsolved Mysteries*.

With all of this context in place, an analysis of the scene of Tommy's UFO encounter reenactment can be explored through a lens of formalism and cultural memory. The scene starts with a plea to authenticity by setting the reenactment at the site of the original event. Tommy is not filmed in some random yard, but his former next-door neighbor's yard, and this secures historicity. He recalls an insignificant detail, as if to prove that his memory is still sharp fifty years later; he noticed a rock to the left of the path. This is another plea to authenticity, for even the smallest details are of importance in such a historic moment. The camera angle provides the psychological perspective of a child looking upwards at an adult who has experienced more in life and therefore projects an authoritative air which is reputable and trustworthy. This choice also takes the viewer back to what it felt like to be Tommy the boy, contrasted against the imposing bodily form of Tom the man. The out of focus house in the background is fuzzy like a fading memory, a former place of comfort that has been left behind and can only be returned to in washed out photographs and grainy home videos. It is gone just like childhood, nothing but a memory now. A turn occurred, after which there was no turning back. An event which had never been experienced before suddenly illuminated a boy who could not know what was happening to him, because it was unlike anything that had ever happened to him before. Tom, the man who reenacts what happened to a boy, creates a space where innocence and knowledge collide and battle for dominance over one other. The pain and trauma of encountering new knowledge is pitted against the comforts of the blissful ignorance of youth, and the great visual metaphor is now that of being taken away from yourself--abducted by aliens. If only the change that is inevitable did not have to be. If only one could remain innocent forever. Alas, the closest a grown adult can come to such a fantasy is to try to remember it.

The mythic power of Tommy's story has been reinforced in popular culture in movies, TV, books, and various other forms of media since even before Orson Welles terrified radio listeners with his *War of the Worlds* broadcast in 1938. While a powerfully affecting literary theme, unchecked fear of the unknown can stir societies into delusional panics. The bodily action of hiding under flimsy desks which schoolchildren were required to perform during drills in the Cold War era encouraged a habitus of anxiety which was palpable—regardless of how useless any posture would be in the event of a direct atomic blast, the body communicated that the cowering was warranted in such an uneasy cultural atmosphere. The crouching posture never saw its uselessness put to the test in America, yet the image of hiding under a desk symbolizes fear of nuclear war. Tommy may not have been abducted by aliens from another

planet, yet the image of a boy flinging his arms back while a beam of light from the sky hits his chest symbolizes an encounter with the unknown.

The repetition of mythic symbols and actions can easily become problematic, exploitative, and pernicious, depending on the source of mediation. Shawn Levy and 21 Laps Entertainment, the producers of the Netflix reboot of *Unsolved Mysteries*, also created *Stranger Things*, one of the network's most popular shows. *Stranger Things* is pure nostalgia candy, with homage after homage to horror and sci-fi tropes littering the show from start to finish, constantly reminding viewers that the best horror and sci-fi already happened years ago and *it looked like this*. What the producers failed to regard was how indulging in nostalgia results in the conflation of making *what happened* a mere question of essentialism, and this is especially problematic when a show beckons viewers at the end of each episode to go to the show's website to provide any leads or tips in legitimate murder cases while at the same time providing a platform for a conspiratorial story about a paranormal event, essentially canonizing "the unknown" as a categorical type. Moreover, this nostalgic motivation comes not in the name of justice, but mass entertainment. The episodes about the horrific murders which surround "Berkshires UFO" are tonally all in accordance with it; even if one of the six episodes is about aliens, they are all equally as "unsolved" as any other. The 1980s version of *Unsolved Mysteries* may be memorable because of its diversions into paranormal conspiracy theories, but its novelty does not absolve how problematic these diversions were. That the producers of the reboot banked on a nostalgia factor which disregarded the ethical concern of placing cultural mythology alongside fact-based criminal cases shows a privileging of consumption of media as entertainment over all else. Macro-reenactment is the primary cause of this misstep, because in the same way that a reboot of *Unsolved Mysteries* would not be complete without the inclusion of some *form* of filmed reenactment, likewise the exclusion of some sort of paranormal story would be to unmake what makes *Unsolved Mysteries* the show that it is in *form*.

What is ultimately perpetuated by the nostalgia-fueled *Unsolved Mysteries* in the twenty-first century is a culturally conservative concern with making sure that what was regarded as entertaining in the past remain just as equally entertaining in the present, without consideration for any ethical advances that have been made in media in the few decades since the original aired. In "The Invention of Memory: A Short History of Memory Studies," Astrid Erll references Jan Assmann's *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* on this point, "'Normative texts

codify the norms of social behaviour. *Formative* texts formulate the self-image of the group and the knowledge that secures their identity' (J. Assmann 2006, 104). The former answer the question of 'what should we do?'; the latter that of 'who are we?'¹⁸ The normative and the formative can become obfuscated when a text bows to the whims of nostalgia, because in staying true to the remembrance of a *form* for the sake of identity/identification, the consequence will see to it that the *norm*, or the ethical question ("what should we do?"), be forgotten altogether.

Events vs. Non-events

Simon Reynolds considers the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum in Cleveland, Ohio, to be one of the primary modern examples of how a once radical movement can morph into a toothless archive of nostalgia worship. He writes about the especially egregious example of punk rock reenactments in *Retromania*: "On the face of it, reenactments seem to just feed into the backwards-looking culture that's taking us ever further from the conditions in which such total transformations and singular disruptions were possible."¹⁹ The disruption he speaks of here is that of an Event, a happening that is radical in its difference from all that preceded it. Punk rock was just such a cultural Event, the likes of which had not been seen before. The genre had no distinct form in its beginning, and was only accessible live and in-person at clubs like CBGB in New York City during the 1970s. Reynolds explains that any reenactments of punk scenes from this era cannot help but exude a spirit that is counter to what was expressed by bands like The Sex Pistols and The Ramones due to the canonization of the genre's form. He claims that "reenactment is indebted to and at some level is a response to the rise of heritage: museums, spectacles of 'living history' such as working village or restaged battles, preservation as a cultural ideal."²⁰ But punk was revolting against the preservation of a cultural ideal from its genesis, spurning popular taste and idealized comforts. It did not look backwards or forwards but simply disrupted the present.

When an Event occurs, a confliction cuts two ways simultaneously: on one hand, difference makes a direct attack on normative cultural memory, cutting into what always has

¹⁸ Astrid Erll, "The Invention of Memory: A Short History of Memory Studies," in *Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 34.

¹⁹ Reynolds, *Retromania*, 54.

²⁰ Reynolds, *Retromania*, 52.

been and henceforth will no longer ever be the same again; on the other hand, the difference itself becomes susceptible to conformation to cultural memory by inserting its newness into the middle of the very system it is attacking. An example of this is the 2002 debut single by LCD Soundsystem, "Losing My Edge," which satirizes the subcultural existential crisis that emerges from the traumatic nature of experiencing an Event in real-time. A then unknown (nearly a decade before LCD Soundsystem headlined Madison Square Garden) James Murphy sings, "I was there in 1968... I was there at the first CAN show in Cologne... I'm losing my edge to the art-school Brooklynites in little jackets and borrowed nostalgia for the unremembered eighties... But I was there in 1974 at the first Suicide practices in a loft in New York City... I was the first guy playing Daft Punk to the rock kids... I played it at CBGB's... Everybody thought I was crazy."²¹ Murphy is making a valiant case for his cultural capital, all the while knowing that he is playing a losing game by doing so. The only way for Murphy to subvert the old conservative standby of claiming credence through experience is for him to create something different and new. "Losing My Edge" is a successful ouroboros, victorious in its defeat, appropriately cynical and truthfully inauthentic.

The insightfully loaded phrase, "borrowed nostalgia for the unremembered" offers salient perspicacity about what nostalgia can offer those who are unable to say, "I was there" literally, because anyone who *was there* at a real-time Event such as those listed by Murphy has experienced a rupture in normality. The beginning of a *form* embarks at an Event, as this is where initial vulnerabilities are exposed, shields are lowered, difference births newness, and reenactment, remembrance, and return is not possible. Reenactment, remembrance, and return can only be experienced after the Event, not at it. The young Brooklyn art-school kids can cut-and-paste a cultural memory and claim that it is capital which they retain just as much access to as Murphy, regardless of whether or not they were there. Ironically, of course, Murphy himself did this in "Losing My Edge" by claiming to be at events which he definitively could not have been at—he was born in 1970, so being at the first CAN show in Cologne in 1968 is nothing but coyly looted cultural capital. Cut-and-paste nostalgia affords a protection against living through the potentially traumatic disruption that is an Event, so claiming it as culturally remembered after the fact is much safer than physically being there and remembering it organically.

²¹ LCD Soundsystem, "Losing My Edge," *Losing My Edge* (DFA, 2002).

Hindsight is not conceivable at an Event, and it is difficult to predict where and determine how one can safely attend any particular Event which will someday represent a cultural memory for countless masses more than however many were there in-person. A war scene reenactment keeps memories alive for Events of the highest stakes, for in most if not all of these happenings were many casualties confirmed. No actor fears death in a reenactment of a battle, but at the original Event everyone at the battle was facing imminent death. The collective preference to *re-experience* something radical and important which has already happened, while at the same time feeling that maybe this reoccurrence somehow connects an individual to the original Event in a real and meaningful way, is not unreasoned. To be able to say, "I was there," while the only sure way to reap the rewards of a hero, always carries greater risk. A Medal of Honor is not given to a reenactor for the portrayal of a brave soldier, but to actual soldiers who were really there at the original, one and only, bloody Event.

Freud wrote of the psychological inclination to put up screen memories as unconscious placeholders for traumatic experiences which are too unpleasant to be remembered. An example of this may be something to the effect of remembering a particular piece of furniture in a room where abuse was witnessed, rather than remembering the abusive act itself. It can also be applied to repressed desires as well, like that of unrequited love being displaced by the memory of yellow dandelions in a field, simply because yellow was the color of an article of clothing worn by the venerated upon first sight—so rather than vividly recalling the ache of a love which was not reciprocated, a manageable fondness for yellow dandelions replaces it. Freud's development of screen memory still offers some insight on the psychic workings of why a particular memory would come to the forefront rather than another. In 1899, in his first essay on the topic, he asserted that:

[...] falsifications of memory are tendentious—that is, that they serve the purposes of the repression and replacement of objectionable or disagreeable impressions. It follows, therefore, that these falsified memories too, must have originated at a period of life when it has become possible for conflicts of this kind and impulses towards repression to have made a place for themselves in mental life—far later, therefore, than the period to which their content belongs.²²

Conflict is key here, for it is in a moment of conflict that action may be taken towards falsification, delusion, or repression. This is the moment of bargaining that occurs at an Event:

²² Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memories (1899)," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume III (1893-1899): Early Psycho-Analytic Publications*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962), 322.

either engage with the traumatic difference and newness directly or exchange it for something more familiar and repeatable that can act as a comforting shield against disruption. If the latter occurs, Freud posits that the screen memory will look like something that is close to the Event, albeit more passive and dulling: "There is a common saying among us about shams, that they are not made of gold themselves but have lain beside something that is made of gold. The same simile might well be applied to some of the experiences of childhood which have been retained in the memory."²³

Of course, Freud's work here is not principally on cultural memory, but on organic lived memories and their place in the field of psychology, and so for the purposes of this article should only be relatable as closely analogous to the functioning of nostalgia as a cut-and-paste shortcut to comfort in lieu of radical experience. Nevertheless, his essay correlates to the topic at hand, especially when he quotes Virgil: "It seems, moreover, as though the recollection of the remote past is in itself facilitated by some pleasurable motive: *forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit*."²⁴ Translated to English, the poet says, "Some day, perhaps, it will be a joy to remember even these things." To construct a memory of being there at CBGB, or at the site of the UFO touchdown, or where the tallest tree fell, certainly to have any desire to keep the memory of something alive is to want to keep what happened in life interesting, pleasurable, and worth remembering. Memories such as these cannot be assumed to safely and recurrently spring up out of Events, they must take *form*. Freud ends his essay making precisely this point (emphases the author's):

It may indeed be questioned whether we have any memories at all *from* our childhood: memories *relating to* our childhood may be all that we possess. Our childhood memories show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were aroused. In these periods of arousal, the childhood memories did not, as people are accustomed to say, *emerge*; they were *formed* at that time. And a number of motives, with no concern for historical accuracy, had a part in forming them, as well as in the selection of the memories themselves.²⁵

This suggests a sort of reenactment of imagination itself. Every reenactment has an incentive to reenact, and historical accuracy may or may not inform incentive. Motivation to repeat *what happened* may be equally as motivating as repeating that which did not happen.

²³ Freud, "Screen Memories," 307.

²⁴ Freud, "Screen Memories," 317.

²⁵ Freud, "Screen Memories," 322.

Conclusion

Reenactment has a distinct form, and as a form it contains certain affordances which, as seen in the case of the *Unsolved Mysteries* reboot, reinforce ideologically conservative constructs as opposed to ethically progressive norms or radically different Events. Like a cultural screen memory, a reenactment looks similar to an Event, but without the risk of traumatic experience. Formalism's strength in interpreting cultural meaning is at the same time its weakness, because while a structure (*form*) only becomes durable after many layers have repeatedly stacked one on top the other, building up an identity which is already clearly sturdy by the time it can be seen, this process does not require any regulation for its success. This is not dissimilar to the evolution process in nature—a poisonous frog is most useful unto itself, it would never cease its adaptations to save the lives of an endangered bird. *Unsolved Mysteries* is a cultural rehash that exists thanks to the power of nostalgia. Nothing remarkably new or subversive can be found in this reboot. Its primary meaning is expressed in its reminders of what was at one time considered new and different: the original series. Unfortunately, it was an exploitative show in the 1980s, using real persons' on-camera testimonies of trauma as fodder for mainstream entertainment, and this is what the Netflix reboot rehashed, albeit with updated editing techniques and higher production values.

Regarding cultural memory, Erll writes:

Oral cultures depend on the relatively exact repetition of their myths, since the Cultural Memory is stored in the organic memories of the singers or shamans and any variation could endanger the tradition. Textual coherence, on the other hand, relies on the outsourcing of cultural meaning into the medium of writing. By means of such medial externalization, it becomes possible to transmit more than that which the individual is able to keep in his or her memory.²⁶

This shows that our cultural memory is indeed larger than what any individual has the capacity for, and while mythologies still exist, they are no longer so exact. Now, myths come in forms, coalescing via overlapping repetitions. The latest form of American mythology in the twenty-first century is "Make America Great Again," which is a blatant embrace of nostalgia. It starts with a forceful predicate, a sudden and disruptive event: "Make." The subject is the nation: "America." Next comes a vague euphemism which could stand in for "dominant,"

²⁶ Erll, "The Invention of Memory," 33.

"Christian," "Republican," "white," or any other such cut-and-paste item that a voter might choose for a screen memory: "Great." And finally, the seal of nostalgia: "Again." In short, nostalgia dominates American culture, and subsequently so do conservative norms.

In *Retromania*, Reynolds lists an exhausting number of remakes, reboots, sequels and re-you-name-its that does not even begin to reveal how much media has been re-made in America during the first decade of the century, eventually qualifying his catalogue by stating the obvious: "Hollywood's endless stream of remakes contribute heavily to the culture of replication and redundancy."²⁷ The culture is indeed one of replication and redundancy, a culture with both a very short memory in need of many reminders, as well as a great many screen memories standing in for a brutal, traumatic history (slavery, genocide, dropping atomic bombs, war crimes, etc.) which are not wont to be dealt with. In a culture less obsessed with nostalgia, perhaps *Unsolved Mysteries* would not be rebooted but would be left behind in the 1990s as a reminder of what should not be done again. Representative of the countless forms of popular media which perpetuate the culture of replication and redundancy, the reboot of *Unsolved Mysteries* contends that "what happened?" is a question that doesn't require a conclusive answer, but on the contrary should be asked over and over again—it is a form of reenactment which is dependent on, and thus incentivized to retain, its fundamental lack of knowledge.

²⁷ Reynolds, *Retromania*, 53.

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