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*The Wonder Years: Televised Nostalgia*

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## 24

# *The Wonder Years*

## Televised Nostalgia

DANIEL MARCUS

**Abstract:** One of the cultural functions of television is to serve as a site of social memory, constructing visions of the past for multiple generations. Daniel Marcus analyzes how the popular 1980s sitcom *The Wonder Years* remembers the 1960s, creating both nostalgia for and political commentary about a formative and controversial moment in American history.

*The Wonder Years* (ABC, 1988–1993) recounts the adolescence of Kevin Arnold and his friends as they confront school bullies, early romance, and social tumult in middle-class suburbia of the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>1</sup> The intermittently serious comedy was part of a reevaluation of “the Sixties” that occurred after the conservative electoral success of the Reagan era and its call for a return to “Fifties” values.<sup>2</sup> The production was the first television series to find popularity by reaching back to the late 1960s as a historical touchstone and relied on viewers’ knowledge of events of that time in telling its stories. *The Wonder Years* can be seen as part of a generational effort to understand the relationship between two controversial eras in recent American history, the late 1960s and the 1980s, presented from the perspective of a fictional secondary participant in the social changes of the 1960s. Developing parallels between the shock of adolescence and the trauma of the Vietnam War and rapid social change, the show brings these strands together in its portrayals of the generation gap and family loss.

The vivid 1960s popular culture, however, also provides a context for personal experimentation and growth for its young characters. The series illustrates the various ways that entertainment media invoke, adapt, and organize memories and images of the past, creating fictional archives for public commemoration and discussion. By depicting private lives embroiled in the public issues of a controversial era, *The Wonder Years* uses nostalgia for childhood experiences to appeal

to key demographic groups, even as it universalizes situations specific to a time and place to forge a wider-ranging audience.

By locating its story in early adolescence, the series can appeal to viewers whose childhood occurred during the depicted era, and to a younger generation of audience members grappling with issues of youth in the 1980s. This construction of a shared perspective on the Sixties as a time of adolescent development created a large enough audience to make *The Wonder Years* commercially viable, and its nostalgic framing defused some of the controversy surrounding highly charged historical events. The series' sentimental, appreciative, and mainly comic vision of the era confronted more critical evaluations made by political and cultural conservatives. The perspective on the recent past asserted by the producers, shaped by industry needs, and affirmed by commercial popularity, competed to become the dominant cultural memory of the Sixties in American society.

American culture experienced a succession of nostalgia waves beginning in the late 1960s. Nostalgia is an emotion triggered by a sense of loss from changes in location or the passage of time. In temporal nostalgia, feelings of longing are triggered by the impossibility of going back to the past, except through fantasies purveyed in entertainment or politics, or the consumption of unchanged media from the previous era. Fans of nostalgic entertainment wish to look back to previous eras for what they have since lost, either personally or as members of a group. Nostalgia can be for a particular period in one's own life, such as early childhood or the senior year of high school, or for a historical period like the 1950s, or 1960s, or 1980s. Because these eras are documented in media and discussed through the recollections of participants, even individuals who were not alive during these times may want to "go back" to a previous era. When media productions invoke a nostalgia that speaks to both individual and collective loss or dislocation, they have the potential to have both deep and broad appeal.<sup>3</sup>

In the late 1960s, during a time widely perceived as experiencing rapid and sometimes traumatic social change, the youth counterculture embraced a re-appreciation for Fifties youth culture, from early rock and roll to such TV figures as Howdy Doody (a puppet who starred on a children's show.) This renewed embrace of Fifties themes spread to other segments of society in the 1970s and found expression in films such as *American Graffiti* (1973) and *Grease* (1978), and the television series *Happy Days* (ABC, 1974–1984). With the ascendancy of Ronald Reagan and the conservative movement in 1980, nostalgia for the period moved from the cultural realm to the political one. Conservatives touted the 1950s as a time of stable family structures, American military strength, and economic growth. Correspondingly, they criticized the 1960s, particularly the late 1960s, as a time of social chaos and violence, attacks on American patriotism, and increasing threats to the nuclear family which ranged from teenage drug use to

feminism. Reagan and other conservatives proclaimed the 1980s as a time to return to American greatness, calling for repeal or reduction of many of the social programs created or expanded in the 1960s, and suppressing the demands made by groups associated with the era, such as civil rights and feminist organizations. Those whose memories corresponded to this constructed conservative narrative of greatness, decline, and renewal could place themselves on the right side of history; those whose recollections clashed with the conservative vision were defined as out of step with mainstream thought.<sup>4</sup>

While 1980s Democrats provided no answer to the political narrative of nostalgia for the 1950s and condemnation of the 1960s, cultural producers did try to counter the conservative offensive. Television responded in the late 1980s with *thirtysomething* (ABC, 1987–1991), about 1980s yuppies haunted by the less materialistic values of the Sixties, and *The Wonder Years*, which retold the story of 1960s youth by focusing on the younger siblings and cousins of the famous hippies and anti-Vietnam War protesters of myth and lore. *The Wonder Years* chose to highlight facets of 1960s experience through newly adolescent eyes, a perspective that had previously been ignored in the culture wars over the significance of the Sixties.

The show's key themes can be seen in the pilot episode (January 31, 1988). While the series shifted a bit when it changed showrunners in 1989, moving to a greater emphasis on the characters' dating lives and adopting an even more sentimental tone, the dynamics of memory and nostalgia are quite evident from the start. The series begins the summer before Kevin Arnold starts junior high, in what is depicted as a typical American middle-class suburb of 1968. As Kevin moves into adolescence, he must grapple with the challenges of encroaching adulthood, which include establishing a masculine identity to attract girls and repel bullies, evade or stand up to hostile authority figures in his family and school, and negotiate an increasingly complex social scene based on group identity and personal style. He displays ambivalence in meeting all of these challenges, mixing bravado with cowardice, self-confidence with self-deprecation, and sensitivity with cluelessness. The series is a record of his halting steps toward maturity and wisdom, as explicitly framed by a voiceover narration supplied by the adult Kevin of the present day.

From the show's very beginning, the producers offer a specific historical context for Kevin's experiences, even as they present the lessons he learns as almost universally applicable to childhoods across the ages. The opening credits show what looks like home movie footage of Kevin's suburban nuclear family and important friends, playing ball and enjoying cookouts. The next sequence features newsreel footage of some of the momentous public events of 1968, such civil rights marches, anti-war protests, astronaut space walks, and familiar figures

Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, each assassinated that year. Right from the start, the series takes advantage of memories of the specific era in framing its story, using the visual (and musical) archives of the time to stir media memories among its audience.

Just as the family movies in the credits make way for news clips of the great issues of the day, Kevin's entrance into adolescence features the growing encroachment of the larger world into his childhood idyll. After leaving the banally named Hillcrest Elementary School, Kevin enters the seventh grade at the newly renamed Robert F. Kennedy Junior High. The adult Kevin mentions that schools all over the country were being similarly renamed that fall, without explicitly explaining that it was in tribute to the recently slain senator and presidential candidate. The show presumes that viewers will understand the timing, twenty years after the fact. This presumption marks Kennedy's death as a significant event in U.S. history, something that all adult viewers would recognize, and perhaps younger viewers as well. Such offhand references to larger events can flatter viewers by paying tribute to their knowledge of the depicted era, and continue Baby Boomer self-identification with the traumatic events of their childhood—a generation brought together by the shared memory of how they heard that John F. Kennedy had been shot, and experiencing the further dislocations of the King and Robert Kennedy assassinations.

The pilot addresses more than just the political history of 1968. The closer-to-home theme of the generation gap, changes in music, clothing, and language, and the introduction of drugs into suburbia are all depicted in the episode. Kevin's older sister identifies with the youth counterculture, wears hippie-ish clothes, greets her mother with "Peace, Mom, OK," advises her against "bad karma," and announces at the dinner table that she wants to start using birth control, to her parents' dismay. Kevin's own foray into countercultural behavior is characteristically milder, amounting to wanting to wear a psychedelic shirt and flared pants to the first day of junior high, before his mother asserts her authority and he ends up with a more staid and boyish ensemble. Meanwhile, as the family gathers together for dinner and their nightly dose of low-intensity antagonism, televised news reports from Vietnam play in the background.

The personal and the political are conflated in these family scenes, which mix perennial issues of parent-child relations with the specificities of the Sixties generation gap. This combination continues in school scenes, in which teachers and administrators are portrayed as stupid, uptight authority figures who cannot understand the stresses of adolescent life in ways that are in keeping with the verities of both 1980s youth-themed entertainment and Sixties ideology. Kevin rebels by deliberately flouting cafeteria rules in a misguided attempt to impress his peers, and justifies his doing so by claiming the school "had played power games with

me," in an echo of the student protests against administrator prerogatives occurring on college and high school campuses at the time.

Through this continual, mutual reflection between the private, individual travails of childhood and the larger, public controversies of the era, the show appeals to a mix of audiences. Younger viewers can enjoy tracing the changes in American life brought up by the airing of the series, and form their own takes, whether nostalgic or condescending, on both childhood and the famous Sixties. Children uninterested in the issues of that era can be entertained by the dramatization of timeless adolescent experiences—the first day at a new school, facing bullies and antagonistic siblings, getting into trouble with authority figures, and coping with a burgeoning interest in sex.

Their parents and other Baby Boomers can be flattered that an era that marked them with a generational identity is being recapitulated twenty years later, and can compare their youthful perspectives from the time with a more mature take on its issues and crises, both personal and political. Their perspectives as adults are reaffirmed by the narration, as the adult Kevin sometimes draws these comparisons as well, while mostly explaining the thoughts of the younger Kevin with a combination of empathy and irony. All viewers can share the narrator's superior knowledge of looking back on the past from the vantage point of the 1980s—they know how the story of the nation, if not of Kevin personally, turns out. Indeed, viewers of all ages can enjoy trying to deduce the facts of Kevin's post-1960s life (which are disclosed only late in the series) while maintaining a more knowing historical position than the young Kevin on the screen. Shared enjoyment of the series can comfort viewers that the infamous generation gap of the Sixties has been bridged in the 1980s, while constructing a family hour audience for ABC.

In contemporary society, personal memories mix with media representations to create collective senses of the past, because so much of what we learn and know about the world comes through contact with media. For younger viewers curious about the Sixties, *The Wonder Years* can function as an accessible archive of the era. The series not only provides information about the 1960s; it also prompts those with memories counter to the conservative interpretation of the era to reactivate their feelings about the period. In 1988, a wave of articles appeared in the media comparing the present with the late 1960s, as the twentieth anniversaries of King's and Robert Kennedy's deaths inspired writers to wonder how the martyrs' visions of the direction of the country contrasted with the Reagan America of the 1980s. The felt difference between the 1960s, often seen as dominated by developments on the political and cultural left, and the conservative 1980s, led to discussions of the vagaries of history and the trajectory of American history. *The Wonder Years* could contribute to the effort to trace the changes in society without agreeing to the conservative narrative of greatness, decline, and renewal.

Nostalgia is often seen as inherently conservative, in wanting to reverse the progress of history. In an era permeated by conservative nostalgia for the Fifties, however, nostalgia for the Sixties could serve as a rallying point for opponents of the conservative movement. For some fans, the series may have been just a comforting fantasy of the way things used to be; for others, however, it could be the basis for reclaiming earlier ideals, especially as Americans started to re-examine Reagan's policies in light of scandals and policy failures. Progressives who regretted some of the missteps of the Left in the 1960s could adopt the series' attitude toward its hero's youthful mistakes—admitting to imperfection while asserting that their experiences and attitudes could serve as a foundation for future insight and success, rather than be simply rejected as worthless or too damaging.

The pilot episode culminates with the ultimate convergence of the personal and political in the series. Winnie Cooper, Kevin's old neighborhood pal and newfound romantic interest, loses her older brother in Vietnam, and while Kevin comforts her, they each experience their first kiss. The scene is constructed to show Kevin's first major step toward adulthood, as he takes on the role of comforter and romantic partner—as someone who can grasp, however fumblingly, human tragedy and loss and respond appropriately. The national and personal trauma of the era becomes the catalyst for Kevin's maturation. Throughout the episode, the adult Kevin has ruefully argued that, despite appearances, the conformist suburbs of the American middle-class contain stories of real value and depth, and this final, wrenching, but momentous scene confirms his view, as he reflects that his suburban childhood was replete with such “moments . . . of sorrow and wonder.”

*The Wonder Years'* depiction of the traumas of the late 1960s through the experiences of the relatively innocent Kevin works to redefine the era away from the conservatives' vision of it as the nadir of American history and the source of most of the nation's contemporary problems. Baby Boomers were closely identified with Sixties politics and culture, but it was the older Boomers, born in the 1940s and early 1950s, who were seen as full participants in its tumult, from fighting in Vietnam to protesting the war at home. In *The Wonder Years*, the Baby Boomer frame shifts from the perspectives of the early Boomers to the viewpoints of those born from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s—thus to those who were more witnesses than participants in the issues of the time, and consequently had less directly at stake.

The series does not shy away from society's convulsions. Rather, it does so in a convincingly comic mode, as the adult Kevin expresses his appreciation for what he gained through his intermittently painful experiences. Indeed, the late 1960s seems to have prepared him well for life in later periods. The series invokes the



FIGURE 24.1.

While comforting Winnie after her brother's death in Vietnam, Kevin experiences his first kiss.

memories of middle-class, suburban late Boomers to answer the conservative demonization of the time and the denunciation of the youth culture that was its most colorful artifact. In doing so, these memories bid to become a central component of the nation's shared memory of the 1960s, partially displacing though not wholly replacing the more traumatic memories of other groups. Nostalgic feelings for childhood are affixed to an era that had been defined as antithetical to fond remembrance or feelings of longing by the dominant political movement of the 1980s.

The adult figure of Kevin is the program's crucial reappraiser of Sixties experience, and shares general narrative authority with the camera. Occasionally, the camera will show that Kevin's memories are not perfect—he tries to convince viewers that he was a good athlete as a kid, when evidence to the contrary is presented right up on the screen. Mostly, however, the adult Kevin is presented as a reliable and trustworthy narrator, embodying the show's narrative power. It is adult Kevin's choice of memories to share that determines the shape of each episode. Within each scene, the camera is the ultimate denotative authority, presenting irrefutable surface facts, but Kevin's voiceover is the ultimate connotative authority, the definer of the deeper meaning of what viewers see. Whether rueful, nostalgic, bemused, or pedantic, Kevin's voice provides social and historical context, emotional valence, and psychological insight to the scenes that the camera dispassionately reveals.

The heard but unseen adult Kevin comes off as a sensitive man comfortably in touch with his feelings and those of others. The Reagan era had seen a series of hyper-masculine heroes, particularly in spectacular action films, who responded

to feminist and international challenges to masculine American prerogatives with macho attitudes, steroidal physiques, and hyperbolic firepower. The defenders of Sixties values who created *The Wonder Years* and *thirtysomething* posited a different sort of male hero, one who tries to understand his own emotional needs and weaknesses while struggling to create egalitarian relationships with women. These figures served as precursors to the new model of masculinity that Bill Clinton brought to the presidency in 1993; as a child of the Sixties, married to a feminist, Clinton would well up in tears as he felt others' pain. The adult Kevin of *The Wonder Years* is openly sentimental, and implicitly locates his sense of masculinity in his eventual ability to relate to women (along with fantasies about being good at sports). The show presents one legacy of the Sixties as an increased male emotional intelligence and maturity emerging from an earlier masculine archetype of bluster and insensitivity, personified by Kevin's father, who loves his family but rarely understands how to show it.

This move to rewrite history according to the dual perspectives of a twelve-year-old middle-class white boy in 1968 and a seemingly well-adjusted adult man in 1988 may have been crucial for *The Wonder Years'* commercial success, not just in terms of its appeal to progressive audiences, but also in its usually keeping the most controversial or depressing aspects of the late 1960s at arm's-length and thereby attracting a more variegated viewership. Other series that used children as the entry point for discussion of the Sixties, such as *Any Day Now* (Lifetime, 1998–2002) and *American Dreams* (NBC, 2002–2005), achieved some success, particularly when depicting the events of the early 1960s, around which a national consensus supporting John Kennedy and desegregation had developed by the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> Series that attempted to portray the latter half of the decade or used adult experience as their focus, such as *Almost Grown* (CBS, 1988–1989) and *I'll Fly Away* (ABC, 1991–1993), failed to find consistent audiences. Vietnam-themed series, such as *China Beach* (ABC, 1988–1991) and *Tour of Duty* (CBS, 1987–1990), did find some commercial success, but no series that has depicted the American homefront and late 1960s domestic issues from the point of view of anyone older than Kevin Arnold has survived on network television.<sup>6</sup>

*The Wonder Years* depicts one of the most polarizing periods of modern American history through frames of memory and nostalgia, offering multiple avenues for identification by its potential audiences. Providing viewers with a new media representation of the late 1960s, the series traverses the felt distance between past and present in both individual lives and the perceived life of the nation. By redefining the late 1960s through the experiences and memories of later Baby Boomers, the series provides a significant if muted response to conservative narratives of decline and trauma. While acknowledging the tragedies and difficulties of the

period, the series presents it as a time of cultural vitality and innovation, personal growth, and worthwhile challenges to an emotionally constrained status quo, and does so in a way that counters conservative views of the era. The show combines universalized themes with the stylistic and political specificities of the time, and in doing so, created the most commercially successful historical treatment of the late 1960s on American television.

N O T E S

1. The author wishes to thank Jason Loviglio, Alex Russo, and Sonja Williams for comments on a draft of this essay.
2. I use the terms “1950s” and “1960s” to denote the actual years of these decades, and “the Fifties” and “the Sixties” to denote the combinations of cultural elements, political meanings, and other associations that have come to be attached to the temporal periods.
3. For more on cultural nostalgia, see Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: Free Press, 1979).
4. Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).
5. See Faye Woods, “Nostalgia, Music, and the Television Past Revisited in *American Dreams*,” *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 2 (2008): 27–50; and Jennifer Fuller, “Debating the Past through the Present: Representations of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1990s,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, Renee Christine Romano and Leigh Raiford, eds. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006): 167–96.
6. See Albert Auster, “Recollections of the Way Life Used to Be: *Tour of Duty*, *China Beach*, and the Memory of the Sixties,” *Television Quarterly* 24 (1990): 61–69; Daniel Miller, “Primetime Television’s *Tour of Duty*,” and Carolyn Reed Vartanian, “Women Next Door to War,” in *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*, Michael Anderegg, ed., (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991): 166–89 and 190–203, respectively; and Sasha Torres, “War and Remembrance: Televisual Narrative, National Memory, and *China Beach*,” *Camera Obscura* 33–34 (1995): 147–65.

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