

# **The Return of the 1920s: An Examination of the Twenty First Century Revival**

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in Cultural Studies

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## **Statement of Originality**

I hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision. The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made.

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Dirk Gibb

## Abstract

This thesis presents, frames, and analyses a corpus of films and television programs set in the 1920s, all of which have been produced in the last decade. It posits these texts as the latest in a long line of ‘returns’ to prominence of this storied decade within popular culture. It questions why such a twenty-first century resurgence of interest in the 1920s has come about, arguing that we have much to learn from these representations in seeking to grasp key origins of our ever-later modernity’s founding mass media and consumer age. In so doing, it apprehends the 1920s as a ‘protean’ decade, and this for its future-oriented energy, unfinished nature, uncontrollable generativity, diverse potential, and ongoing relevance. In the process, it seeks to discover what makes this latest return of the 1920s distinctive and in what ways it repeats overdetermined tropes that date back as far as the decade itself. In both respects, the thesis argues that the 1920s accumulatively appear to us on screen in a manner that comprises dense intertextual, audiovisual, literary, and historical layers in a state of constant realignment.

In allegorical terms, it is argued that our twenty-first century present is rearticulated and questioned through this audiovisual revival of the 1920s, and that the story of our times is made more palatable, and less traumatic, by the filter of the past through the setting of what is by general consensus a key nodal point in the history of Western modernity. At the same time, the 1920s themselves were already a protean multimedia decade, forward looking and intrinsically adaptable to subsequent allegorisation, and radically open to diverse, contradictory possibilities.

In order to address productively such complex historical, textual, and conceptual terrain, the thesis engages a number of academic disciplines, notably History, Film and Television Studies, and Literary Studies, drawing on and combining them in distinctive ways. It thereby seeks to demonstrate the degrees to which the audiovisual texts of the current revival reconstruct and remain faithful to, and/or distort and adapt, the historical events of the 1920s, and how previous iterations are updated by these films and television programs. In this sense, it aims to provide a work of historical

accompaniment for the present day consumer of this 1920s revival, while at the same time reading the latter as a phenomenon of and for our times that seeks to understand a central chapter in the genealogy of its ever-expanding modernity as played out on screen.

## Acknowledgements

This project of mine had its true genesis in my friendship with a fellow student, Sarah Kauter. Although my interest in the history and popular culture of the decade of the 1920s dated back to my childhood, it was when I met Sarah in 2010, the final year of my undergraduate degree at the University of Newcastle, that I truly appreciated the hold that the Roaring Twenties still held on my generation. Sarah was a fan of Ruth Etting, and her portrayal by Doris Day in the 1955 biographical motion picture *Love Me Or Leave Me*. Many were the afternoons and evenings that we would listen to recordings of Etting singing such songs as “You Made Me Love You”, or watch clips from *Love Me Or Leave Me*, on Youtube. It was extremely enjoyable to revisit this fabled era with a peer through the capabilities of contemporary, electronic technology. YouTube, alongside allowing us to follow fads and fancies of the start of a new decade, also provided a conduit for nostalgia. Sadly, Sarah passed away from cancer in 2012, but I will always remember with fondness our shared interests and companionship.

I will start off by thanking my supervisors, all from the Faculty of Education and Arts in the University of Newcastle’s School of Humanities and Social Sciences: Dr. Hamish Ford (Discipline of Film, Media and Cultural Studies), Dr. James Bennett (Discipline of History) and Associate Professor Alistair Rolls (Discipline of French). Drs Ford and Bennett were present at the start of my Ph.D journey, in February 2013, and Assoc. Prof. Rolls came on board, thereby forming my triumvirate of supervision, in September 2013. All three scholars put me on a course of greater depth and scope for my postgraduate research, encouraging me to expand my research from a comparative study of *Boardwalk Empire* and *Underbelly: Razor* to a general overview and study of the return of the Jazz Age in twenty first century popular culture. They have provided invaluable advice, counselled restraint and alternate approaches during my more unfocused moments of candidature and weathered personal issues and requirements for family leave, on my part, with

understanding and great patience. These gentlemen have my admiration and sincere gratitude.

Associate Professor Rosalind Smith, hailing from the same school and faculty as the aforementioned academics (Discipline of English and Writing) was my initial third, and primary, supervisor from the commencement of my thesis until August 2013. Regrettably, Assoc. Prof. Smith had to step down due to an overextended workload. Before this change in my candidature, however, Assoc. Prof. Smith encouraged me to consider how my texts could be understood through the prism of true crime literature and crime fiction. This aided me considerably, especially during the early days of the narrowed focus of my writing, and I am indebted to Assoc. Prof. Smith and her period of supervision.

At my institution, the process of Confirmation, after approximately the initial year of candidature, sharpens the skills of provisional candidates in formulating a detailed plan and literature review for their Ph.D projects, before they are allowed to progress further. Over the course of two Confirmation meetings, in February and June 2014, I underwent a defence of my project. The two attempts were necessary because of the complexity of my project, and alterations that needed to be made to my argument. Nevertheless, this step was worthwhile and intellectually stimulating, thanks to the challenging, probing questions and constructive criticism of my panels. They were comprised of Professor Victoria Haskins (Discipline of History), Dr. Trisha Pender (Discipline of English and Writing), Dr. Michael Sala (Discipline of English and Writing) and Dr. Steven Threadgold (Discipline of Sociology and Anthropology).

Undertaking a Ph.D needn't be a solitary endeavour, and the camaraderie and support found in the Postgraduate Room in the McMullin Building on the Callaghan Campus of the University of Newcastle was great for morale. My fellow postgrad researchers, Bryce Abraham, Laurence Allen, Dael Allison, Samuel Ariong, Markos Carelos, Jude Conway, Honae Cuffe, Alan Duncan, Ian Eckford, Robert Elliott, Jeff Green, Susan Grimes, Ann Hardy, Peter Hooker, Robert Kear, Michael Kilmister,

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Conferences are a fantastic opportunity for presenting one's own research and networking, so my next shout out goes to all of the organising bodies for conferences where, over the years, I was privileged either to present at or spectate. The conferences I merely attended were, in chronological order; the NewMac Conference in 2013 at the Callaghan Campus of the University of Newcastle, the RHD Symposium in 2013 at Callaghan, the "Tethering the Past" conference in 2013 at the University of Sydney, the "Cinema's Realisms - 5<sup>th</sup> Cinematic Thinking Workshop" conference in 2014 at the University of New South Wales, the "AMSN2: Transnational Modernisms" conference in 2014 at the University of Sydney, the "First World War: Local, Global and Imperial Perspectives" conference in 2015 at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Newcastle, the RHD Symposium in 2015 at Callaghan and the Australasian Humour Studies Network's 22<sup>nd</sup> Conference, on "Unfunny: The Limits Of Humour", in 2016 at the Women's College, University of Sydney and the RHD Symposium in 2016 at Callaghan.

As for the conferences where I presented, these were, chronologically; the Australasian Humour Studies Network's 19<sup>th</sup> Colloquium, on "Humour and Creativity", in 2013 at the City Campus of the University of Newcastle, where I presented a paper entitled, "'Oh He Could Grind My Coffee': Female Bawdy and the 'Hokum' Tradition in Pre-War Blues", the Staff and Students Talking About Research (SSTAR) Conference in 2013 at Callaghan, where I presented a paper entitled, "'You Can't Be Half A Gangster Anymore, Nuck': The Law, The Underworld and the vices in *Boardwalk Empire* and *Underbelly: Razor*," the School

of Humanities and Social Science's Research Higher Degree (RHD) Symposium in 2013 at Callaghan, where I presented a paper entitled, "The Boys Light Up For Revisionist History: Musical Performance in *Boardwalk Empire* and *Underbelly: Razor*", the RHD Symposium in 2014 at Callaghan, where I presented a paper entitled, "Why the 1920s? The Protean Decade's Return as Ongoing Text in Recent Film and TV", the "Histories Past, History's Future" conference in 2014 at the University of Sydney, where I presented a reworked version of "Why the 1920s: The Protean Decade's Return as Ongoing Text in Recent Film and TV", the "New Directions in Screen Studies" Conference in 2015 at Monash University, where I presented a paper entitled, "Magic in the Midnight Moonlight: Woody Allen's Fantastical Return To The 1920s In *Midnight In Paris* and *Magic in the Moonlight*", and the XVIIth Film and History Association of Australia and New Zealand (FHAANZ) Conference in 2015 at the Queensland University of Technology, where I presented a paper entitled, "Don't Be 'Blinders' By The Underbelly of the Style: History as Opening Credits in *Underbelly: Razor* and *Peaky Blinders*."

I have an especially resonant memory of the NewMac Conference, on the topic of "Human/Nonhuman/Inhuman/Posthuman", held at Callaghan in 2014, because I was one of the organising committee, as well as presenting a paper entitled, "Farewell Daddy Blues": The Emotional Use of Soundtrack in *Boardwalk Empire* and *Underbelly: Squizzy*." My thanks, and renewal of academic solidarity, go out to my fellow organisers for that conference.

The Office of Graduate Studies for my university kindly eased my financial situation from 2013-16 through an Australian Postgraduate Award (APA). This scholarship permitted me ample amounts of time in which to write and research. Michelle Allan, the Administrative Assistant for my relevant School and Faculty, tirelessly arranged for the costs of my essential texts and conference fees to be reimbursed under my APA. At the beginning of my candidature, the Faculty of Science and Information Technology at the University of Newcastle also awarded me a Post-Graduate Scholarship, thereby enabling me to attend the Australasian Humour Studies Network's 19<sup>th</sup> Colloquium in 2013. From the beginning of January 2017, I was

transferred to a Research Training Program. This thesis has, as part of this Program, been supported through an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

And now on to everyone else. Firstly, a major crisis reared its ugly head in January 2018, the beginning of my final year in the Ph.D program, when my hard drive, containing all of my valuable research material and writing, became corrupted! Luckily, over the course of the next three months, two talented and diligent businesses on the Central Coast, Buckland IT Solutions (run by Chris Buckland) and Kincumber Computers, were able to retrieve my data, allowing me to finish and present this volume that you now hold in your hands. The patience and technical know how of these respective businesses rescued my family and I from a very bleak period, and my thanks and gratitude are never ending. Hats must also be doffed to the amazing staff at the Auchmuty and Huxley libraries on Callaghan campus for their skilful, diligent and passionate guidance towards onsite references, and their patient and dedicated arranging of resources at external libraries to be transferred to Newcastle through their Bonus and Getit interlibrary loans schemes. The staff at the Newcastle, Wyong and (since July 2018) Armidale public library (and University of New England Dixson Library) services graciously and professionally did the same, both through their main branches and suburban branches. Frequent writing bootcamps were organised by the University of Newcastle and the Newcastle University Postgraduate Student's Association (NUPSA, whose initiative was entitled "Shut Up and Write!") in 2017-18, in the McMullin and Behavioural Science Buildings and at the Bar on the Hill on the Callaghan campus. The Centre for Teaching and Learning, also found on the Callaghan campus, hosted additional writing bootcamps in 2017, and Dr. Lil Hayes, a Learning Adviser for the Centre, offered valuable feedback on improving my topic sentences and integrating theory with my case studies during the last few months of my candidature. To Amanda Hall-Griffin, Research Training Officer for the Faculty of Education and Arts, Assoc. Prof. Rolls, Michelle Allan and Hugh Milligan, the NUPSA Project Officer, go my huzzahs for providing lengthy periods of serenity within which to clear out my mental cobwebs and put either pen to paper, or fingers to keyboards. Through the Student Equity and Support department at the University of Newcastle, Katy

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Lastly, much love, respect and thankfulness goes out to my family. My adorable wife, Sylvia, and my children, Dakota and Stormy-Serenity, have provided a haven from the stresses unavoidable in writing a thesis of this magnitude. Alongside their love and support, however, has been priceless advice, encouragement and feedback from Syl, including the idea to discuss race, immigration and gender in the same chapter – she is undertaking her second degree by correspondence, so our house is a very studious one! My father and mother, Paul and Linda Gibb, and my siblings, Melissa White and Jason Gibb, have checked in with me along the way, and reminded me, along with my immediate family unit, that I am valuable and worthwhile no matter what, and that they are proud of my achievements. My parents also provided invaluable emotional and financial support for my family and I when we moved to Armidale at the end of June 2018, during the final months of the writing of this thesis. Their aid and comfort to us can never be truly repaid. My paternal grandparents, Peter and Julie Gibb, came through for my family and I at a trying time in 2016 with emotional and financial aid, immeasurably aiding my life's

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