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Marc Prieue

- 1 In his 1986 State of the Union address, the previous actor and then-President Ronald Reagan ends with a quote from the top-grossing block buster movie *Back to the Future*, which had been released a year earlier. Reagan cites Doc Brown's famous closing line from the film, "where we're going, we don't need roads" (*BTTF* 01:51:37), to suggest that the future of the United States looks hopeful, despite some aspects that may need improvement. Ironically, Reagan's optimistic vision of America's future is in part based on its past. As neo-conservatives embraced seemingly American core values such as self-reliance, hard work, and the nuclear family—which supposedly had gotten lost during the 1960s and 70s—the 1950s became the ideal focal point for projecting both the past and the future onto the present U.S. politics, society, and culture. In fact, that President Reagan referenced the movie in his address is but one indication of how *Back to the Future* lends itself for propagating a return to a "simpler" and "better" America of the 1950s that was, at the same time, geared towards a technological future, at least since the Sputnik shock (cf. Justice).
- 2 As research in American history and cultural studies has shown, nostalgia for the 1950s was a widespread cultural phenomenon during the 1980s. Sorchá Fhlainn, for instance, has illustrated how the so-called "Me-decade" was marked by "a desire to return to a mythical past, to reinvigorate narratives which reassert and reify the American Dream," and "to forget the realities of the 1980s: unemployment, class inequality, crime, increased drug use, AIDS, and rising levels of poverty" (5). Cultural productions such as novels, films, records, paintings, photographs or TV series functioned as central locations and locutions for shaping and conveying nostalgic desires for the post-WWII decade during the Reagan years. Michael Dwyer has recently analyzed how pop nostalgia for the 1950s played itself out at the intersections between visual arts and popular music during the 1970s and 80s. He argues that "[t]he retrospective invocation

of the Fifties teen struggling to define her identity or trying to make his way into the world often functioned as a synecdoche for a United States poised on the verge of maturity, at a point in its national history when everything (for better and for worse) began to change” (Dwyer 7). This assumption holds true for a number of 1980s Hollywood movies, but is perhaps best exemplified by *Back to the Future* which enacts a traditional narrative of American exceptionalism rooted in a revised and sanitized vision of the 1950s.

- 3 *Back to the Future* has entered the cultural vocabulary of the United States like few other films of the era. Critics and scholars generally agree that it is also among the most conservative and pro-Reagan movies at the time (Fhlainn 6). Three decades after its release, the movie is being remediated in numerous ways in the digital realm, signaling its continued audience support, and has prompted a number of research projects, especially in cultural studies, musicology, and film studies. One of the main points of interests for scholars has been the ways in which *Back to the Future* and its two franchises released in 1989 and 1990 suggest the possibility of, and necessity for, revising history during the Cold War era. The present article seeks to advance research on the film by investigating the role that sound-image interactions play in the cultural work that scholars have ascribed to the first part of the trilogy. This entails studying the aesthetic employments and ideological functions of sonic elements in *Back to the Future* with a particular emphasis on popular and orchestral music. I argue that the film music serves to underscore a revisionist and conservative view of American culture and society in the 1950s and 1980s by including certain songs and excluding others, as well as by an orchestral score (written by Alan Silvestri) that is firmly rooted in the tradition of Hollywood film music. To support this argument, I will analyze how sourced music, scored music, and sound interact with narrative and visual features throughout the movie and how they function as a cinematic device that embellishes and highlights certain elements of the visual representation, in this case the revisionist aspects of the plot.
- 4 In order to conceptualize the interplays between several distinct semiotic modes in the film, especially between audio and visual codes, Bolter and Grusin’s notion of “remediation” and Werner Wolf’s concept of “intracompositional intermediality” (30) constitute productive lenses because they highlight how media in general, and film in particular, variously reproduces, replaces, and comments on other media. The present article takes theoretical discussions on intermediality and remediation as a springboard from which to engage in a study of sound-image relations that are central to the meaning-endowment in American movies, especially during the 1980s. These discussions have, among others, shed light on the traditionally close symbiosis of film and music as well as on how media have increasingly referenced and absorbed each other in the course of the twentieth century (Straumann). The present case study aims to generate insights into how intermediality and remediation turn into transmedia storytelling by explicating how the narrative of conservatism and individualism in a central movie of the 1980s Hollywood canon is actually spread out across a range of media.
- 5 *Back to the Future* is certainly not the first movie engaged in “cross-platform marketing” or “synergies,” as remediation has often been called in advertising parlances since the 1980s, with the popular music industry. With the rise of MTV in the early 1980s, a new “media player” entered the scene, providing artists, record companies, and advertising

specialists wider access to young, especially white audiences. The producers of *Back to the Future* were able to make artistic and financial use of cross-platform narration that would inadvertently morph into what Henry Jenkins has identified as “transmedia storytelling” in the decades following the release of the film. The initial remediation and intermedial referencing took place between film, music, TV, and video in intricate ways. The movie’s theme song, for instance, is written and performed by the U.S.-based band Huey Lewis and the News, whose MTV video for the song includes Doc Brown and the famous DeLorean time machine; Marty McFly’s actor, Michael J. Fox, also played a famous TV sitcom character named Alex P. Keaton in the successful show *Family Ties* between 1982 and 1989; newspaper clippings are used throughout the trilogy to advance the plot; and images of past TV series and media stars such as Michael Jackson or Max Headroom are recycled and referenced repeatedly.

- 6 The film music for *Back to the Future* is comprised of a composite score, i.e. it uses pre-existing pop songs and an orchestral score to perform central functions of music in film: setting mood, providing commentary, and enhancing identification with characters on the screen (cf. Psujek; Rothbart xv). Huey Lewis and the News is the pop music focal point for the film, contributing two songs to the sonic landscape of the movie: “The Power of Love” and “Back in Time.” The band was already established by the early 1980s with their retro-inspired, yet modern sounding rendition of radio-compatible American Rock. Huey Lewis and the News was a mainstream act that looked to the past for inspiration and one of the first bands to cash in on the emergence of MTV, providing videos for five of the songs from their 1983 album *Sports*. Among them was the hit single “Heart of Rock’n’Roll,” a song which follows a similar narrative as Bob Seger’s song “Old Time Rock’n’Roll” (1978) and also evokes Chuck Berry’s version of “Route 66” (1961), which also performs a search for roots through routes that crisscross the United States. Claiming that “the heart of rock’n’roll is still beating” in various U.S. cities, Huey Lewis conveys a conservative message, one that seeks to continue to locate the present and presence of contemporary music in an American tradition represented by aging white men, despite all the changes in musical tastes and styles since the late 1950s. As a consequence, rock’n’roll is emptied of its teen rebellious content, as well as its historical origin in African-American culture, and given a new meaning, one of stasis, reaction, and continuation of (white) traditions. The message of conservatism is further cemented by Huey Lewis’s 1986 hit single “Hip to be Square,” with which the band was able to cash in on the exposure gained through their involvement in *Back to the Future* the previous year. Changing the popular adage “Be there or be square” to “It’s hip to be square,” the song proposes conformity and rejects the kind of anti-establishment attitude that rock’n’roll claims for itself as a foundational myth and *raison d’être*. As the first-person narrator in Bret Easton Ellis’ novel *American Psycho*, published in 1991, remarks after his third gruesome murder in his typical would-be music journalistic fashion: “Hip to be Square” is “not just about the pleasures of conformity and the importance of trends—it’s also a personal statement about the band itself, though of what I’m not quite sure” (357). What Patrick Bateman fails to realize, or is not willing to admit, is that the title of the song is indeed a personal statement by a band that seems to feel obliged to reconcile the idea of rock’n’roll as non-conformism with mainstream success through the apologetic statement that “being square” is actually desirable.
- 7 Huey Lewis and the News’s song “The Power of Love” was written for *Back to the Future*, released shortly before the opening of the film, and reached number 1 on the U.S.

Billboard charts in August 1985. The MTV video for the song marks a remediation of the movie by including Doc Brown and the iconic DeLorean time machine. Both appear at a concert of the band, apparently after time traveling, and a young couple steals the car for a joyride as Huey Lewis performs its hit song, mimicking a live performance in a small club. The video is part of the afore-mentioned marketing mechanisms introduced during the 1980s, when movies, videos and single releases occurred together to create a marketable brand across an array of media platforms.

- 8 In *Back to the Future* “The Power of Love” serves as a musical and thematic anchor that is used three times: after the opening scene, as an instrumental cover version during the high school audition, and again in minute 00:11:00 when Marty is about to kiss his girlfriend in front of the broken clock tower. The various placements of the song frame a roughly five-minute narrative sequence in which the main conflicts and ideas of the movie are introduced. The interplay between “The Power of Love” and the visual elements prepares the viewer for an intricate love plot that includes questions about time and generational relationships. Initially, the audience hears the song up to the first chorus when Marty is late for school and tailgates on his skateboard through Hill Valley (*BTTF* 00:06:00). Here, the song also functions as the soundtrack for 1980s America as Marty, and the viewers watching him, encounter cultural emblems and name brands associated with the time of the movie’s release: aerobics classes, portable cassette players, skateboards, soft drinks, and sneakers. Throughout this scene/song the audience also hears diegetic sounds of cars and, especially, Marty’s skateboard which adds a sense of realism and, at the same time, of subjective perception of the film’s main character.
- 9 A few minutes later, “The Power of Love” appears as an example of intracompositional intermediality when Marty and his band, The Pinheads, participate in an audition for the school’s battle of the band contest and perform an instrumental rendition of the song (*BTTF* 00:08:00). Marty’s song choice can be read as a sign of identification with the music of Huey Lewis and the conformist message that the band’s music insinuates. Marty’s amateurish cover version of the theme song is, moreover, a tongue-in-cheek comment on time travel and knowledge about music history, because on the film’s diegetic level the song could not have been known. The release of the film and the single “The Power of Love” occurred *after* the fictional events in the movie had been recorded. Huey Lewis’s presence is further jokingly included in the time-travel movie by having him act the part of the main juror. After only a few bars from Marty’s band, he interrupts the performance and tells them, “I am afraid you’re just too darn loud” (*BTTF* 00:08:48), which not only ends Marty’s music career in the film but also jokingly emphasizes the negotiation of the theme of conservatism and of the notion that acceptance of art is dependent on a particular time and place.
- 10 “The Power of Love” is played a final time when Marty and his girlfriend, Jennifer, kiss in front of the broken Hill Valley clock tower (*BTTF* 00:10:57). In contrast to the earlier two employments, in which the music was a dominant feature in the cinematic presentation, the song is slowly faded in, leaving it unclear whether we are hearing sourced or scored music. As Jennifer’s father pulls up in his car and the volume of the music increases, it is suggested that the music originates from the car stereo (Gengaro 115). Moving from the level of underscore to that of score, the song picks up at the end of the first chorus and the frame is established by recurring back to the first placement of “The Power of Love” when Marty is riding his skateboard into town. At the end of

the sequence, Marty secretly tailgates a police car (thus briefly showing his rebellious side) to return to his suburban, conformist world. The song fades out rather abruptly before the second chorus when the camera shifts to the humiliation of George McFly in 1985, which no longer fits the themes of love and time travel suggested by “The Power of Love.”

- 11 Huey Lewis and the News enter the scene one more time towards the end of the movie on a poster in Marty’s bedroom when he wakes up after his return and when “Back in Time” is played on the radio (*BTF* 01:46:45). The song was specifically written for the movie by the band and is also used as a short plot summary underlying the closing credits: “Tell me, doctor / Where are we going this time? / Is this the fifties? / Or nineteen ninety-nine?” This Huey Lewis song again mixes saxophone and a drum beat that reference earlier renditions of rock’n’roll music with modern sounds, represented by synthesizers, the bass sound, and the sonic allusion to Prince’s song “1999” (1982). It is hence important to emphasize how Huey Lewis’s music variously frames Marty’s time travel. “The Power of Love” is first played when the protagonist leaves Doc’s house in 1985. Then, when he is back home, in bed, having returned from his quest and recuperating from time travel, “Back in Time” signals his final home coming in a revised 1985. Despite all the changes that have occurred in Marty’s family—especially that his parents are now successful and happy rather than poor and miserable—the music of Huey Lewis serves to show the consistent setting before and after time travel. In contrast, other songs and sounds are used to indicate the differences in the movie’s temporal settings. Just as “typical” 1950s music (e.g., “Mr. Sandman”) introduces the viewer to a different time, so does pop music with electronic drums and synthesizers on the radio that belongs to a homeless person tell us we are back in the 1980s (*BTF* 01:42:00).
- 12 Sound design is another important component of the movie’s sonic landscape. The film starts in Doc Brown’s laboratory with culminating noise produced by chiming bells, a malfunctioning breakfast robot and, most notably, ticking clocks, which symbolize the thematic engagement with time. The latter sounds are also reminiscent of the introduction to Pink Floyd’s 1973 song “Money,” which, as an intertextual reference, may suggest the underlying, hidden theme of *Back to the Future* since, in the end, the McFlys have become materially successful. In the next scene, still at Doc’s house, the audience watches and hears Marty McFly plugging his electric guitar into a home-built amplifier (presumably by Doc). After he turns up several volume and overdrive knobs, a hum is getting louder. Then, through a visual effect the guitar pick in his hand begins to sparkle with electricity before Marty, wearing coolness-suggesting sunglasses, hits a chord on his electric guitar. Only a dissonant sound is heard that is so loud that it propels him several feet through the air, crashing into furniture. This humorous and fictional “blowback” can be read as an indication of the power of music, but more likely it anticipates the technical expertise of the “mad scientist,” the inventor of powerful guitar amps and time machines alike. Marty is literally blown away and will be even more so figuratively by what he is about to encounter during his time travel that also “takes him back.”
- 13 The sounds of screeching guitars appear at another significant moment in the plot. In order to convince George McFly to ask Elaine out for the high school dance, Marty uses his knowledge of the future and his soon-to-be father’s interest in science fiction to stage a performance comprised of sounds from the 1980s. In the “science fiction

theatre” scene, Marty is dressed up in a pseudo-scifi radiation suit, playing loud guitar and drum music by Van Halen on a Sony Walkman into the ears of sleeping George McFly (*BTF* 01:02:00). His voice distorted, his presence commanding due to his appearance and his sonic “weapon,” Marty injects a vision of the future into George’s mind, who from now on will tell the story that an alien has ordered him to withstand his adversary, admit his love for his future wife, and write science-fiction novels.

- 14 Up to this point, my claim has been that the interplay between sound and vision in *Back to the Future* supports and strengthens the conservative message that the film conveys overall. Another indication that Marty represents yuppie republicanism of the 1980s, aside from the employment of Huey Lewis and the News as sole pop music act in the score, is the “remediation” of Michael J. Fox as an actor in *Back to the Future* and in the famous 1980s NBC sitcom *Family Ties*. For several weeks, Fox played his parts for the television show during the day and those for the movie at night. In the TV show Fox is Alex P. Keaton, who challenges and ridicules his aging ex-hippie parents by propagating the economic policies of Presidents Nixon and Reagan. Keaton is a young, ambitious American eager to excel in the business world and, in doing so, showcases the cultural changes from 1960s rebellion to the embrace of materialism and conservatism in the 1980s. As Dwyer has claimed, the show “positions Sixties radicalism as the outdated establishment and conservatism as hip and rebellious” (37), similar to Huey Lewis’s song “It’s Hip to Be Square.” The political position of Alex P. Keaton seems to concur with that of Marty McFly (and Huey Lewis), who at the end of *Future I* takes pride in his family’s new wealth and social status, represented by a Toyota pick-up truck in the suburban garage. For original audiences of the film and the TV show, the two characters merged transmedially into one and “Marty McKeaton’s” conservative values and allegiance with the Me-generation set the ideological tone for both the movie and the TV series (Dwyer 36–37).
- 15 During the first twenty-seven minutes of the movie, popular music is the only music supporting the action and events on the screen. Classic Hollywood film score is first introduced when Doc Brown injects plutonium into the flux capacitor that powers the DeLorean and is about to embark on the first time travel that the audience witnesses. To amplify tension, classical orchestration is employed, making full use of typical post-WWII Hollywood sounds, timbres, and timings, leading up to Doc being shot by the Libyan terrorists and Marty traveling to 1955. As the DeLorean reaches 88 mph, sending Marty to the past, the rather chaotic orchestral sounds merge into a coherent motif that becomes the second iconic theme song of the movie next to “The Power of Love” (*BTF* 00:31:03). With its employment of classic Hollywood film music, however, the orchestral score as a whole seems a bit “big” or too majestic for a comedic film about time travel and, thus, helps to raise *Back to the Future* into more epic and serious proportions (Gengaro 117).
- 16 Scored and sourced music are used separately throughout the movie, but significantly merge during the Enchantment Under the Sea Dance scene, when Marty’s existence is threatened because his parents do not manage to fall in love. It begins with scored music that creates suspense similar to a Hitchcock or sci-fi movie and thus supports Marty’s anxiety of existence by relating to the past. Then, the band on stage plays a slow dance tune, “Earth Angel,” and as the song progresses, diegetic and extradiegetic musical themes fuse to create a sonic climax that emphasizes the climax of the plot (i.e., George and Lorraine finally kiss and the future, including Marty’s existence, is set

for good). The literal joining of seemingly opposing musical strands of the film—popular music and classic Hollywood orchestral score—into a postmodern pastiche underlines the resolution of one of the major themes in the movie, namely that the past can be fixed to create a better future (*BTTF* 01:26:10; Gengaro 120–121). The music that the diegetic band, The Starlighters, plays is doo-wop, a pre-rock’n’roll, rather soft African-American music that relies on a recurrent chord progression and on pleasing vocal harmonies. Dwyer observes the significance of this song placement for advancing the revisionist take of the movie, claiming that it

signifies ‘past-ness’ more than a song from a different genre would. Had the Starlighters played another song from 1955 (Bill Haley’s ‘Rock Around the Clock,’ for example), the scene would not have the sonic connotation of a wholly different era, since rock and roll has maintained a central position in popular music since the 1950s. Doo-wop, on the other hand, had by 1985 been long relegated to the oldies circuit. (Dwyer 38–39)

- 17 Music, in other words, here serves to guide the audience’s perception of a specific, romanticized version of the 1950s. The movie has been criticized for leaving out racial tensions, McCarthyism, the Beat Generation, the Sputnik shock, wars in Korea and Vietnam, and the “Feminine Mystique” (Friedan) felt by many women across the country. And indeed, as Marty discovers Hill Valley in 1955, pop songs are strategically placed to highlight certain features of his consciousness and to convey a sanitized social environment of a quintessential U.S. small town in California. Hill Valley epitomizes the notion of American exceptionalism through its titular connection to the Puritan “City upon a Hill” and the motto internalized by its inhabitants that, “if you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything.” Yet, because of its fictionality and oxymoronic name, Hill Valley remains a material impossibility, a non-place, a utopian vision of an ideal community in the past. Rather than striving for historical accuracy, it represents the idyllic American small town that the 1980s wanted or were supposed to remember.
- 18 This nostalgic vision of a 1950s small town is underscored by the musical choices made by Zemeckis and Silvestri. The use of “Mr. Sandman” when Marty first enters 1955 America is a typical remediation of music in film, where the semiotics of the song are used to emphasize parts of the plot. Marty McFly hears the music through loudspeakers in the town square and the song signals that his experiences are just “a dream,” a statement repeatedly voiced throughout the film. In addition, this particular song suggests that the setting itself is a dreamlike fantasy land before the advent of rock’n’roll music and the social disruption it signified and caused. Dwyer has pointed out that this musical choice marks a strategic, ideological move because of what it omits. In the narrative universe of the film, a pop song such as “Mr. Sandman” (and “Earth Angel”) represents the 1950s and not a Jazz, hillbilly, country or rock’n’roll song from the same era such as Bill Haley’s “Rock Around the Clock,” which ranked at number two of the Billboard charts for the year 1955 (Dwyer 19–21). The emphasis on sentimental, comforting, and encouraging music to represent the 1950s to a mid-1980s movie audience is further stressed when Marty sees a poster advertising the latest popular songs in the store window of the record shop, featuring “The Ballad of Davy Crockett” by Fess Parker, “16 tons” by Ernie Ford, and Nat King Cole’s ballad “Unforgettable.” These songs assist Marty’s orientation in the past and also the viewers’ orientation in the present for constructing a specific version of the past. Again, we are introduced to a selective, rather cleaned-up rendition of the 1950s, a

society not yet in turmoil over war or equal rights, via the music selection: “The Ballad of Davy Crocket” re-animates the pioneering spirit of the nineteenth century, “16 Tons” the American work ethic (while also conveying an anti-capitalist message), and “Unforgettable” self-referentially points to the continuous creation of memory in and through music and film.

- 19 One of the movie’s rare hints at the social ills of the 1950s is the separation between an all-black band entertaining an all-white audience at the high school dance. The band performing at the dance is led by Marvin Berry, whose last name suggests that they not only know doo-wop but also rock’n’roll. After Berry hurts his hand, Marty is invited onto the stage to replace him, first as a guitar player and then as a singer of The Starlighters. In an act of racial substitution and appropriation, the white teenager becomes the leader of an African-American band and introduces rock’n’roll to the musicians and the audience, self-confidently instructing the band about the key and the chord changes of the song that turns out to be Chuck Berry’s famous song “Johnny B. Goode” (1958).
- 20 As I have indicated, a central idea posited by the film is that the past can be fixed or rather that an “elect few” can return to the past in order to make the present financially and emotionally successful. The movie plays with the theme of changing and revising history in various ways but perhaps at no point as strongly as when Marty is asked to play “something that really cooks” (*BTTF* 01:26:50) by Marvin Berry after his parents have fallen in love during the Enchantment Under the Sea dance. Marty announces “Johnny B. Goode” as a song that “is an oldie where I come from” (*BTTF* 01:27:10) and thus refers to the success of 1980s Golden Oldies and AOR radio stations that relied on the spirit and sound of 1950s rock’n’roll, sometimes interpreted anew by artists such as John Cougar Mellencamp, Bob Seger, George Thorgood or Huey Lewis and the News.
- 21 In *Future I*, Marty omits any tribute to Chuck Berry, which would ruin the joke of Marvin Berry calling his cousin to play him the new sound over the telephone. What only the audience of the film knows is that Marty is able to create music from a canon that is in the past for him and yet the unheard-of future for the audience *in* the film. The writers and producers of the movie chose an ironic reversal of history during which the viewer is playfully taken back to the time when rock’n’roll was invented, pretending that black musicians discovered rock’n’roll after hearing a white teenager play it in 1955. Because of Marty’s re-enactment of appropriating African-American culture, without giving due credit, one might criticize the movie for being too naïve and pseudo-innocent about the troubled history of race in U.S. cultural history (Matterson).
- 22 Marty is not allowed full credit for inventing rock’n’roll, however, because later in the song, the mood of the performance and the audience’s reaction changes abruptly when they are taken into the sonic future (for them). During an extended guitar solo, Marty again attempts to put time travel to his advantage, as in the “science fiction theatre” scene, by copying guitar licks and antics from the 1960s through the 1980s by Pete Townshend, Edward Van Halen, Angus Young, and Jimi Hendrix, including playing behind his back, trashing an amplifier, and mimicking sexual intercourse with his guitar. Soon, the band stops playing and the audience remains in shock and awe at the sounds they are hearing and the performance they are witnessing. Marty ends the scene saying, “I guess you guys aren’t ready for that yet. But your kids are gonna love

it” (*BTTF* 01:30:00), claiming generational allegiance across time. Again, this scene exemplifies how music lends itself particularly well for illustrating the theme of time travel. It is only through the knowledge of music history that Marty has a seeming advantage at this moment in time. The scene thus recurs back to the audition for the battle of the bands, which similarly played with the idea that art is only recognized at a certain time and by a consensus of the audience.

- 23 The Chuck Berry scene, which might be said to feature the actual theme song of the movie (i.e., “Johnny B. Goode” & guitar solo), contradicts at least in part the suggestion put forth by Fhlainn, Dwyer, and other scholars that *Back to the Future* skips over the turbulent and undesired 1960s and 70s (cf. Dwyer 21). When reading the cultural references in Marty’s guitar performance it becomes clear that the film does not simply forget or omit the decades that many 1980s neo-conservatives thought to be harmful and demoralizing for America. Rather, the film seeks to ridicule the values of the decades between the staged past and present as inappropriate for audiences (and voters) in the 1950s and in the 1980s.
- 24 In his analysis of the scene, Dwyer reaches the conclusion that “[w]hen Marty performs ‘Johnny B. Goode’ in *Back to the Future*, it is neither a forgery nor a copy. It is a repetition with a difference, a transparent cover that layers new meanings on top of existing ones” (92). Seen this way, Marty turns his performance of rock’n’roll into an untimely event that surpasses the mere birth of a musical style through appropriation and racial substitution. Extending the song with a guitar solo gone awry, Marty poses repetition with a difference as a central aesthetic principle in 1955 and 1985 which, one might argue, blurs the lines of racial separation by creating musical synergies that consistently connect past, present, and future.
- 25 In conclusion, the choice of scored and sourced music in *Back to the Future* resonates with larger cultural and political attempts at re-making the United States in the cultural image of the 1950s. For Americans living in the 1980s, an expanding repository of media texts and delivery devices enabled them to look both backward in time and inward in character on the individual as well as on the national level. *Back to the Future* provides a means of cultural introspection where the nation can congregate around the movie screen, the VCR, the TV and, increasingly, the computer to laugh and muse about their histories as individuals, families, and as a nation. Moreover, the film is part of an ensemble of cultural narratives which allowed the nation to reassemble and revise the narrative of America, toning and honing further the notions of political and cultural exceptionalism. One might call the movie a popular postmodern jeremiad, since it echoes a number of Puritan values, such as the work ethic, the elect few, the City upon a Hill, predestination (even though the film suggests that one’s destiny can be changed), and the idea that the present is lacking past virtues but that it is not too late to return to the original promise of America. The proposed return to 1950s values is enacted by Marty McFly, the transmedial *doppelgänger* of Alex P. Keaton, who personifies like few other male characters in 1980s Hollywood film the values of individualism, materialism, and conformity.
- 26 In its performance of the 1950s, *Back to the Future* remediates only certain sounds and images of that decade for contemporary audiences and shapes cultural self-perceptions during the 1980s by recycling and rewriting icons and narratives from a sanitized past. During the thirty years since its release, the movie has thoroughly entered American popular culture and has undergone further remediations and media convergences. One

can read about Doc Brown and Marty McFly in a novel, replay scenes from the trilogy and additional time travels on a computer or tablet, watch intertextual and transmedial references to the film in cartoons and comedy shows, or discover digital rewritings and movie scenes posted by global audiences on YouTube. Especially with the “return” of Marty and Doc on October 21, 2015, news shows and the internet witnessed a revival of *Back to the Future*. It is particularly the user-generated, participatory rewritings such as “Brokeback to the Future,” pointing out the special relationship between Marty and Doc, or mockumentaries that claim references to 9/11 in the trilogy, that attest to the ongoing remediation and significance of the film in American popular culture in the present. In most of these renditions, the two theme songs, “The Power of Love” and the orchestral theme, have become iconic musical cues that function as anchors of memory and aid in the re-construction of the 1980s for present and future generations.

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ABSTRACTS

This essay investigates the aesthetic and political functions of the choice and placement of music in *Back to the Future* (1985; dir. Robert Zemeckis). After an overview of the movie’s cultural contexts, the focus shifts to the interplays between sound and cinematic *mise-en-scène*, with a particular emphasis on popular music. I argue that the film employs music strategically in order to convey a nostalgic view of American culture and society in the 1950s by including certain songs and excluding others, as well as by a score that is deeply rooted in the traditions of Hollywood film music. The intermedial use and remediation of music not only amplifies the movie’s quasi-philosophical treatment of time and history in intricate ways, it also resonates with the contemporary sense of American exceptionalism.

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Keywords: *Back to the Future*, intermediality, film music, 1950s nostalgia, cultural conservatism

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