

Back To The Present

Nostalgia for the 60s stalks the 90s. But **Charlotte du Cann** sees the 'return to the 60s' as no simple nostalgia trip: it represents something much more fundamental



'You think they want two cars and a house. But you are wrong. What they want is something sacred.'

(Jim Morrison in Oliver Stone's *The Doors*)

Nostalgia in its modern meaning is a trick. A trick devised and brilliantly manipulated by advertising and the whole circus of commerce. Since the 70s, it has sold us every decade neatly packaged, from a Laura Ashley pinafore to a neo-Georgian door knocker. In our longing for a refuge, for a simpler, sweeter life, we have been sold a slick vision of a past that bears no relation to its reality.

The 80s was mostly built on a nostalgia for the 50s. The decade was celebrated for 'realist' hard-working materialism, for its *Picture Post* cleanliness and good American values. It encapsulated every concern of the last few years: work, money and cold-war paranoia. Now, however, we live in a different time, where the feared wars (both hot and cold) are over, and there is less work and even less money, and the nostalgia that founded the shopping decade has changed. To one that has nothing to do with security or puritan ethics.

The American magazine *House And Garden* predicted a throwback to the 60s as long as three years ago. The 60s will be to the 90s, the editorial declared, what the 50s were to the 80s, and listed what would be in and out. And every style journalist or consumer pundit has been noting the phenomenon ever since... the daisy earrings, Jimi Hendrix on the Wrangler ads, a rethink about plastic furniture, the Cardin exhibition, the Happy Mondays, the war, occultism, rediscovery of India and the desert as holiday locations, new theories about whales. It was assumed, as before, that the choice of the 60s simply indicated a yearning for something new. That its retrospective interest was in its clean-cut lines of modernism, for its innocence, optimism and its sense of fun - it meant just another wacky party.

And now as the 60s look is all around us (every fashion model in a baby-doll frock, and every rock poet revived), it is of course possible to dismiss this nostalgia switch as a fad, a symptom of a tired record industry and an ever tireder fashion industry (if in doubt, recycle the 60s). Except that it is in fact signaling something far more interesting.

The 60s is being sought out because it provides a costume and tune for another melting down. For the 60s does not simply denote fun and flowers, it signifies a major cultural shift, a breakdown of class barriers and sexual stereotyping, and searching for individual freedom; something the consumer industry in their nervousness call 'attitude'. And we seek a recognisable historical precedent because a similar shift is occurring now. Only its form is not in revolution or in conflict, but in dissolve.

There is a dissolving of boundaries throughout the western world. Borders



that were assumed to be fixed are now fast disappearing. Not only are geopolitical borders falling down (the Common Market, eastern Europe) and outsider 'ethnic' cultures assimilated into post-industrial ones ('world' music, alternative medicine) but the very paradigm of our society is changing from one based on 18th-century rationality and a mechanistic view of the world, to one that is based on modern physics and ancient philosophy; ie, perpetual change. This dissolve demands the sacrifice of old safe houses, which many fear to leave.

The popularity of 'ego-less' dance music and 'holistic' scientific philosophy, such as chaos theory, systems analysis or Lovelock's Gaia principle, are so far the only 'provable' manifestations that this paradigm shift is occurring. But no matter how much the fashion models in their shocking pink shifts keep smiling through the recession, no matter how many Doors albums are sold on the back of Oliver Stone's new film, this deep undercurrent of change cannot be controlled by the old structures: capitalist, consumerist, intellectual, moral or otherwise. 'Nothing has the passion, the poetry or the power of the 60s', said a vox pop interviewee excitedly on the *Media Show*. This decade is not seeking out the 60s for its lifestyle, but for its barrier-breaking



'The real hero of the 90s is not the rock-star-as-shaman but the doctor as entertainer'



thus could be not to vote Green but not to vote at all.

This is not as apocalyptic as it sounds... Already our perception of an England governed by 'nostalgic' Victorian values and feudal laws has altered dramatically. Such systems are already breaking up. The public's belief in the integrity of such sturdy institutions as the Royal Family and the medical profession has already disappeared in a matter of years. Prince Charles is seen more as a global PR than an heir to an unshakeable throne. Western doctors are constantly challenged by the patient's own knowledge of Oriental healing arts.

And yet the media, the mirror by which we see our lives, still continues to reflect the country as if it were the same dear old Empire. Though trends and differences may be written about the language in which it is expressed, judged and understood has not altered. Though a newspaper such as *The Independent* may wish to reflect the modern world, it cannot, because it is founded on 50s meritocracy and Edwardian gentlemanly eccentricity. Its structure is not built to express change but stasis. It is a search for a language and an aesthetic that will express the present confusion that now sends us scrabbling about in 60s pop archaeology, if not to borrow its lexicon then at least for the courage to change the cultural grammar.

Because it is only the finding of a means of expression beyond consumerism that will make the shift visible. Present 'high' art only reflects a fear of change. Publishing houses still churn out novels as if we live in the 19th century, orchestras play 18th century favourites to fill their expensive seats. Until the medium itself shifts, the thoughts and feelings of the new wave will remain silent. Though many may have wished for peace during the war, there were few voices heard calling for it, because the only medium for protest was an old order peace march, where everyone shouted and screamed confrontational abuse and went under separate banners. How can you promote peace using the language of war?

'How many of you people are really alive?' screams the rock legend Jim Morrison in *The Doors*. This is a question that the film makers, in all their reverence for the star and their excitement in being so hip, so perfectly-timed in their nostalgia, do not address. In being so concerned with period style, they forget the real content of such words. But it is the reason that we are watching it in spite of its lack of psychological depth and its embarrassing dialogue ('Jim, what is a shaman?') The movie may not offer one anything sacred. No soul's thirst will be slaked by watching this clumsy bio-pic. Nevertheless, its very existence does denote a kind of spiritual homesickness, a desire to live a kind of life that does not end by being buried up to one's neck in mortgage payments.

Aliveness is better addressed in another film. One that has no truck with nostalgia in its modern sense but everything in its real sense. *Awakenings* deals with the major concern of the decade - waking up after a long sleep. The patients who suffer from this sleeping sickness have been denied a present, having been frozen in time for 20 years or more. Though each patient reacts quite differently to the enlivening drug L-Dopa, the main emotion expressed on 'awakening', in spite of every difficulty, is a joy for life that has nothing to do with sex, status or salary. It is a fitting film for now. Because the real hero of the 90s is not the rock-star-as-shaman but the doctor-as-entertainer, the healer who voyages into the underworld and brings men's broken souls back with him and remembers them for the present. *Awakenings* doesn't deal so much with death, but with resurrection. This is not the end that Morrison so wildly invited but another kind of beginning. It is this desire to risk living in a dangerous but real present, and not a rewritten past or a promised future, that the 60s are reminding us is possible. If a nostalgic culture, to paraphrase Wilde, is a culture that has a history without paying for it, we are now about to pay the debt.O

Charlotte du Cann is a freelance writer.