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11 On the Cusp: Exploring Male Adolescence and the Underbelly of High School in *Freaks and Geeks*

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Introduction

In the opening scene of the *Freaks and Geeks* (1999–2000) pilot, a cheerleader and her football player boyfriend sit on the bleachers discussing their relationship. Both are stereotypically beautiful, and their lines are rendered with overblown, predictable emotion. Almost immediately, however, the camera proceeds, in a tracking shot, to duck below the bleachers and establish the real focus of the program: the older burn-out “freaks” and, just meters away, the awkward, freshman “geeks.” As Jonathan Gray observes: “In clear fashion, the show’s opening minute ... announces its lack of interest in the sort of saccharine dialogue and clichéd high school stereotypes” typical of many US teen dramas, opting instead to turn its lens on the forgotten, the maligned, and the outcast.¹ It is the first of many negotiations of space with which *Freaks and Geeks* engages, turning its attention to the margins. In doing so, it distinguishes itself from other teen dramas that have, traditionally, dealt in a glossy fondness for these high school years.

This chapter examines *Freaks and Geeks*’ negotiation of space in relation to adolescence, with a focus on the “geeks” of the title: freshmen Sam Weir (John Francis Daley), Neal Schweiber (Samm Levine), and Bill Haverchuck (Martin Starr), whose close friendship is often the only barrier to the bullying, humiliation, and disappointment that high school offers. It will explore the spaces between boyhood and adolescence that these characters occupy, against the backdrop of a program that itself is also on the cusp: of the millennium (in its broadcast), of the 1980s (in its setting), and of nostalgia. Finally, it will consider how the cultural uncertainties of the new millennium are reflected

in the representation of the boys in *Freaks and Geeks*, whose own cultural milieu is similarly fraught with anxiety.

Freaks and Geeks was produced for NBC's 1999–2000 season, appearing on a television landscape where teen-oriented television drama was enjoying a resurgence. After the success of *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990–2000), numerous teen shows found an audience during the decade, including *Boy Meets World* (1993–2000), *My So-Called Life* (1994–1995), and *Party of Five* (1994–2000). Arguably most significant amongst this teen programming are *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and *Dawson's Creek* (1998–2003), both of which were firmly established as smart, successful teen dramas before *Freaks and Geeks* debuted. With one eye on these established programs, however, *Freaks and Geeks* took aim at its less-than-realistic counterparts with the tagline: "This is what high school was like for the rest of us."

Created by Paul Feig and produced by Judd Apatow, *Freaks and Geeks* was cancelled by NBC before the end of the first season and consists of just eighteen episodes (fifteen of which aired in the original run), set during the 1980–1981 school year at William McKinley High School in Chippewa, Michigan. Focusing on mathlete-turned-freak Lindsay Weir (Linda Cardellini) and her younger brother Sam, the show's protagonists are preoccupied with their own individual adolescent transitions, against a backdrop of wider social and political change.

Although *Freaks and Geeks* is often remembered for the "freaks" – Lindsay, Daniel (James Franco), Nick (Jason Segel), Ken (Seth Rogen), and Kim (Busy Phillipps) – whose storylines center around sex, romance, drugs, and alienation, the "geeks" occupy the flip side of the program, the as-yet-innocent underbelly of adolescence. A brief scene in the episode "Tests and Breasts" highlights this in similar style to the pilot's opening scene. Going up the stairs, Daniel and Nick huddle over a stolen math test while, hidden in the stairwell, Sam, Neal, and Bill crowd over the reel of pornographic film that Daniel has smuggled to them. Daniel and Nick's act of theft – and Daniel's intention to cheat – is no big deal to the freaks, already well-versed in transgression. The geeks, however, grimace at the film

in their hands: “What am I supposed to do with a porno?” asks Sam, miserably. In these few seconds, *Freaks and Geeks* demarcates a distinct space for the younger boys who, though they occupy the same school building, are at the opposite end of the adolescent spectrum. Though sympathetic, the program largely avoids a nostalgic impulse. On the brink of adolescence, the geeks routinely experience the confusion, embarrassment, and disappointments of youth.

A Program on the Cusp

As noted, *Freaks and Geeks* is, in many ways, a program on the cusp. It was originally broadcast at the turn of the millennium, beginning on September 25, 1999, and concluding on July 8, 2000, with the episode “Discos and Dragons.”² The millennium brought with it the concurrent hope and disillusionment of a fin de siècle moment. With the twentieth century sometimes dubbed the “American century,” the millennium was a point of disruption in the U.S., as people were compelled to look forward to an uncertain future while looking back at an often mythicized past of power and surety.³ *Freaks and Geeks* emerged during this cultural moment, and it is notable that, with a timeline roughly corresponding to the 1980–1981 school year, its setting also marks a period of significant change. Set on the cusp on the 1980s, *Freaks and Geeks* is well-placed to capture a particular cultural shift in the US. The war in Vietnam could be consigned, on paper, to the previous decade, though its impact on the cultural psyche would endure. The 1980s would become a battleground for women’s rights, family values, and the conservatism of the New Right. In popular cultural terms, the decade would also be the site of blockbuster movie franchises, VCRs, Walkmans, video games, and MTV. Set at the beginning of the decade, *Freaks and Geeks* balances on the precipice of this new era. The freaks are still listening to the rock music of the late 1970s, but the geeks are coveting Ataris and sleeping on *Star Wars* sheets. Through Lindsay, the show addresses the shifting position of women, while the adultery of Neal’s father and Bill’s single parent household are reminders of a changing familial landscape.

This cultural shift cannot be separated from the concomitant political shift taking place: Democrat Jimmy Carter making way for Republican Ronald Reagan in the White House. As discussed further below, the election of 1980 is part of the series' temporal backdrop, and is particularly interesting in relation to the representation of young boys negotiating their own adolescent masculinity, given the dominant perceptions of Carter as soft and ineffective at the end of his only term in office.

This distinct cultural and political landscape, twenty years removed from its broadcast, contributes to a sense that *Freaks and Geeks* resides somewhere on the brink of nostalgia, engaged in a constant act of looking backwards while resisting the impulse of sentimentality. The sense of disturbance characteristic of a fin de siècle is again evident here, as one era shifted into another, both within the program and during its production and broadcast. With *Freaks and Geeks*, NBC targeted a teen audience already primed for quality US teen dramas, as noted above. However, it also tapped into a renewed fascination with the 1980s as a decade. This fascination is evinced in films such as *Boogie Nights* (Anderson, 1997), *The Wedding Singer* (Coraci, 1998), *Donnie Darko* (Kelly, 2001), *Wet Hot American Summer* (Wain, 2001), and *Never Been Kissed* (Gosnell, 1999), which works through a traumatic 1980s high school experience. Likewise, *Freaks and Geeks* does not shy away from this suggestion of trauma. Its own high school setting is rife with misery, rejection, and uncertainty, and it is primarily through its depiction of the anxieties of adolescence that *Freaks and Geeks* subverts this nostalgic turn.

Boys on the Brink of Adolescence

Sam, Neal, and Bill are fourteen when *Freaks and Geeks* begins and are, as Gray suggests, "socially awkward and normatively unattractive."⁴ Entrenched in contemporary popular culture, particularly science fiction and the comedy of Bill Murray and Steve Martin, they are resolutely unathletic and consistently overlooked by their female classmates, who admire the jocks that the geeks simultaneously deride and envy. Their first appearance in the pilot sees them emerge from behind a

school building, gleefully acting out a scene from *Caddyshack* (Ramis, 1980). Almost immediately they are set upon by bully Alan (Chauncey Leopardi) and his friends. Their unselfconscious playing is immediately replaced with resigned dread as Sam is singled out; Alan will pursue him through the episode and beyond with the familiar refrain, “You’re dead, Weir.” These opening scenes establish the spaces occupied by various segments of the high school population. Sam and his friends, playing behind an outlying classroom block, are rooted at the bottom of the social hierarchy, finding safety only away from the rest of McKinley’s student population.

In this scene, Sam, Neal, and Bill are clearly designated as “boys” in relation to the more ambiguous masculine figures of the freaks below the bleachers, who exude an aura of encroaching adulthood that goes beyond the cigarettes clutched in their fingers. Even Alan and his friends promote a veneer of toughness that complicates their lingering boyhood. In the exchange between Alan and the geeks, it is Lindsay who comes to the rescue, suggesting that the bullies pick on someone “who weighs more than a hundred pounds.” An indignant Sam corrects his sister: “I’m 103 pounds.” These three extra pounds may be important to Sam, but the truth is that he and his friends are still scrawny, defenseless boys teetering on the brink of early adolescence. In “Girlfriends and Boyfriends,” this is underlined by a shot of all three emerging from the bathroom. Behind them, the door swings shut, with “BOYS” stamped over their heads (Figure 11.1).

<COMP: Place Figure 11.1 Here>

This negotiation of adolescence is central to the series. Though the geeks’ physical development is a frequent source of anxiety, as discussed below, the negotiation goes far beyond this. In “Tricks and Treats,” the boys debate whether they are too old to go trick or treating. When Mrs. Weir (Becky Ann Baker) first enquires, Sam protests: “Mom, I’m in 9th grade!” Here, Sam gives the answer he feels is correct, which is that a high school student has no business being interested in a pillowcase full of candy and a silly costume. Yet later, over lunch, the boys discuss the point at which they will become adults. Having been chastised by his English teacher for doing a book report on the

novelization of *Star Wars* (1977) and told “it’s time to grow up,” Sam becomes adamant that they are not yet the young adults they are encouraged to be: “We’re kids until we turn 18.” Neal, who is Jewish, challenges Sam. “When I hit thirteen, I became a man,” he counters, although as Bill is quick to remind him, “Only in your temple, Neal. Not in real life.” Consistently, Neal is determined to establish his worldliness. Dressed like a miniature version of his father, he is prone to knowing, yet naïve, proclamations such as “Girls don’t get horny” and “It’s not a real kiss unless you use your tongue.” Neal reflects that cultural striving for maturity that is reflected in the broader political shift noted above, in which Reagan’s ascendancy can be ascribed in part to the nation’s desire for “a daddy, a king, a god, a hero” in the shape of its president.⁵ This same desire manifests in Neal’s projection of manly worldliness, with the boys reflecting a wider national moment of being on the cusp.

As adulthood approaches, *Freaks and Geeks* adopts a tone of melancholic comprehension. In “Tricks and Treats,” the vacillation between “child” and “adult” is continually played out amongst the boys. The non-linearity of adolescence is foregrounded in Sam, who may or may not be too old to dress up and trick or treat. The differences in expectation (of his parents, his neighbors, his teachers, and his peers) and his own desire to remain a “kid” proves a tricky negotiation. Though the boys do go trick or treating, their enjoyment is soon ruined by Alan and his friends, who steal their candy, and later Sam is egged from a passing car by the freaks. Sam’s disbelief is palpable as he trudges home, shaking off Mrs. Weir’s attempts to comfort her “baby boy.” Consequently, it is not a triumphant Sam who sheds the accoutrements of childhood (in this case, exchanging *Star Wars* for *Crime and Punishment*) in the final scene, but a downhearted one who has realized that his boyhood is living on borrowed time. Quietly, Sam has resigned himself to submerging a part of his boyhood, yet he remains unconvinced of what manhood may offer him. It seems unlikely that Sam will be able to live up to that heroic, Reagan-era image of masculinity. This limited appeal of adulthood may also be read in the context of late 1990s masculinity and the notion that the promise of manhood had not materialized, as Susan Faludi suggests: “The boy who had been told he was going to be the master of

the universe and all that was in it found himself master of nothing.”⁶ Sam’s reluctance to put down *Star Wars* suggests that he is aware, on some level, that manhood offers no more solid ground than boyhood. If adolescence is the new frontier for Sam, it is one anticipated not with unbridled eagerness but with considerable trepidation.

American Boyhood, American Crisis

Sam, Bill, and Neal are undoubtedly products of their specifically American cultural upbringing. They are products of the US military action in Korea (where Sam’s dad fought) and the Vietnam War of their infancy, which colors the disciplinary outlook of teachers such as Mr. Kowchevski (Steve Bannos) and makes the army a viable – and frightening – career choice for young men like Nick. Their boyhood is further constructed from the building blocks of American popular culture: *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* (1966–1969), *Dallas* (1978–1991), Steve Martin movies, *Ataris*, *The Bionic Woman* (1976–1978). It is augmented by the cultural importance of Halloween, the dominance of the television set, and the suburban streets through which they pedal their bikes.

This image of boyhood is suggestive of an innocence that the advent of adolescence threatens to erode. This innocence is a staple of representations of on-screen boyhood, characterized by curiosity, adventure, and a pre-sexual existence where a belief in the goodness and order of the world remain present, from Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars* to *The Goonies* (1985), the wide-eyed beginnings of Harry Potter and Frodo Baggins in film adaptation, and the boisterous antics of Macaulay Culkin in the *Home Alone* (1990, 1992) series.⁷ Of course, this innocence is commonly constructed only to be destroyed: innocent boyhood exists to be threatened, as these and other films so aptly demonstrate, not least those of Steven Spielberg in the 1980s and beyond.⁸ Coming-of-age narratives seek to dismantle uncomplicated innocence, and the geeks face this same fate.

However, in other ways, Sam, Neal, and Bill subvert the expectations of boyhood. In popular culture, as noted by Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward, boys are often imagined as being brash,

confident, and most at home in nature.⁹ This is in direct opposition to much of the geeks' visible lives. Their suburban existence precludes any true outdoor activity. Instead, they spend time inside watching television and doing homework. Sam and Bill both exhibit limited confidence and are relatively open about their anxieties, many of which relate to how they are perceived by others: their bodies, their clothes, their geekiness, their lack of success with girls. This erosion of confident, energetic boyhood is reflective of a wider cultural mood in which masculinity – specifically, American masculinity – is increasingly problematized. Pomerance and Gateward link this to the “increased unlikelihood that one generation can hand the world over successfully to the next,” and add that “[m]ales are floundering in every direction, hapless boys, while at the same time they struggle to display a masculine prowess their social circumstances do not permit them fully to experience.”¹⁰ In 1980, this particular cycle of perceived masculine crisis had yet to emerge. By 1999, when the program aired, it was firmly rooted in the American cultural psyche. The men in crisis in the late 1990s would conceivably be the boys of Sam's generation. As such, the boys' anxieties cannot be disentangled from this cultural landscape.

Boys and Their Fathers

The geeks' adolescence is shaped and re-shaped by their necessary negotiation of the different images of adult masculinity available to them, primarily through their fathers. All three have distinct paternal relationships. Reflecting the continued American cultural preoccupation with fatherhood and the father's influence on a son's masculine development, these relationships are shown to have a significant impact on the boys.

Bill's own father is absent. Although he seems unfazed by this, there is a suggestion that a father figure may be beneficial to Bill's adolescent development, as seen in “Dead Dogs and Gym Teachers,” in which his mother Gloria (Claudia Christian) begins dating Coach Fredricks (Tom Wilson). Though Bill initially rejects him, there remains potential for Coach to boost Bill's confidence

and guide him towards a less anxious adolescence. He observes that Bill's height may make him a decent basketball player. A bid to appeal to Bill, this also marks the point at which an influential man takes an interest in Bill and singles him out in a positive way, opening up an athletic avenue that had previously been assumed closed.

During the series, Neal's dentist father (Sam McMurray) is revealed as an adulterer. Discovering his father's betrayal causes Neal considerable distress. At first, he refuses to believe Sam's story about seeing Mr. Schweiber with another woman ("The Garage Door"). Later, he struggles to reconcile the knowledge of his father's infidelity with the image of affluent, middle-class family life that greets him around the dinner table. Neal's discovery that his father is fallible marks a moment common to many coming-of-age narratives. It echoes, on an individualized level, the realization of paternal weakness that for Susan Faludi is the crux of masculine crisis, a "layer of paternal betrayal" that emerges as the son realizes the promises made by his father will come to nothing.¹¹ For Faludi, this betrayal underpins much of the masculine anxiety of the late twentieth century, with the success and stability achieved by men such as Mr. Schweiber failing to emerge for their sons. Neal's own confidence stems from the influence of his brash, exuberant father. When this figure is revealed as imperfect, Neal crumbles. At a family party, he performs an embarrassing and emotionally revealing ventriloquist routine that ends in him fleeing the room ("Noshing and Moshing").

In both cases, the father's ability to shape the son is acknowledged. In Harold Weir (Joe Flaherty), the show constructs a third type of father: the traditional, quietly masculine patriarch. Harold has structured his life around cultural expectations of masculinity and fatherhood. He is the family's sole provider, the owner of a small sporting goods store, and a Korean War veteran. He is protective of his children, frequently regaling them with apocryphal moral tales ("I had a friend who used to smoke. Know what he's doing now? He's dead") designed to deter them from teenage experimentation. Though Sam's mother is keen for him to be her "baby" for as long as possible, his father is more inclined to guide Sam's masculine development. He is keen for Sam to date and

participate in school events, going so far as to buy a full page of yearbook ads to help Sam impress his long-time crush Cindy Sanders (Natasha Melnick). When Sam begins over-eating in a bid to grow faster, after “Pygmy Geek” is graffitied on his locker, Harold is unalarmed (“Kim Kelly is My Friend”). “He could use a little meat on his bones,” he suggests, glancing at Sam’s slight frame. Harold’s distinct ideas about masculinity, forged in the 1950s and augmented by his war experiences, are absorbed by Sam, although the gulf between Harold’s expectations and the reality of Sam’s existence remains a difficult negotiation. It is this traditional image of manhood, upheld by Mr. Weir, which would be revived in the 1980s under Reagan. In particular, the physicality of this masculine image remains a distinct preoccupation in *Freaks and Geeks*.

Physical Masculinity

As Sam and Neal argue over who is the bigger geek in “Kim Kelly is My Friend,” Neal’s triumph is rooted not in the hidden Tonka trucks but in his defiant observation, “At least I’ve got hair on my pits!” The physicality of the boys’ adolescent masculinity is a source of much anxiety, and the presence – or not – of body hair is a recurrent concern for Sam. In “I’m With the Band,” Coach Fredricks announces mandatory showers after gym class. Sam is notably alarmed by this and encourages Neal and Bill to join him in refusing to “get naked” with their classmates. “Why?” Neal asks. “Because you don’t have any pit hair?”

Although Sam protests, “Hey! I have pit hair!”, later scenes do not bear this out. Body hair has long been a marker of virility and maturity for men, and the absence of body hair coded as feminine.¹² To be hirsute is to meet an implied standard of masculinity, as embodied in stars of the time such as Tom Selleck (who would commence his role as Thomas Magnum in *Magnum P.I.* in 1980), Burt Reynolds, and Sean Connery. Though many of the actors were older than their characters (Starr and Levine, for instance, were both seventeen), John Francis Daley was fourteen – the same age as Sam – when he appeared in *Freaks and Geeks*. As a result, Sam, short and slight, appears authentically on

the wrong side of puberty, and his anxiety is heightened by being surrounded by his developing peers. On seeing Neal in his towel, Sam asks him, with more than a trace of envy: "Since when did you get chest hair?" Though Neal's body hair is negligible, it is enough for Sam to notice and to understand the difference between them.

In this scene, Sam's slow-motion entrance into the locker room is scored with Cream's "White Room," and the scene has the feel of the hero entering the hostile saloon in a Western. When Alan observes that Sam looks like a "flat-chested girl," locking him out of the locker room in his towel, Sam's naked dash through the halls is a retreat, an acknowledgement that he has yet to pose a threat to Alan in any physical sense. The anxiety over soft masculinity, bound up in cultural unease surrounding Jimmy Carter's suitability as president, emerges here. Sam, slight and hairless, embodies a physical softness that is, in the temporal universe of *Freaks and Geeks*, undesirable in a male body.

Concerns over girls, kissing, and sex are the other looming preoccupations of the geeks' adolescence, and again their physical and emotional maturity is called into question. In "Tests and Breasts" Coach Fredricks leads a sex education class. The production of a diagram of the female reproductive system prompts Bill to exclaim, in horror, "What the hell is that?" He and Neal are compelled to recall the chestbuster scene in *Alien* (1979), a sci-fi pop culture reference that acts as a balm to the more alien world of sex. During the class, Sam is humiliated when asked to identify various aspects of female anatomy. Asking Sam to locate the vagina, Coach Fredricks adds, "Basic stuff. Guys know it." Sam, mortified, mumbles, "I don't know." The equation of sexual knowledge with being a "guy" is mirrored in the geeks' failure to understand a sexual joke being passed around the school and suggests that Sam and his friends cannot yet claim a tangible adolescent masculinity (Figure 11.2).

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At home, Sam miserably peruses a book of human anatomy, telling Daniel that Coach humiliated him in front of the class, "Just because I'm a little behind with that sort of stuff." This prompts Daniel, in

a slightly misguided act of altruism, to smuggle Sam a copy of a pornographic movie. It is feasible in 1980 that Sam and his friends would still be largely ignorant of pornography, beyond the *Playboy* magazines that Neal self-consciously references. Michael Kimmel suggests that, until the mainstream availability of the Internet, pornography was largely confined to the “shadowlands” of culture.¹³ In large part this is a result of the Reagan administration’s renewed activism against pornography in the 1980s. Feminist campaign groups and religious conservatives alike lobbied against the availability of hard-core pornographic material, the sale of which had been relaxed in the 1970s.¹⁴ Reagan’s 1986 Commission on Pornography (the Meese Report) sought to emphasize a link between pornography and violence, and the conservative ideology of the New Right provided fertile ground for a wider crackdown on pornography. *Freaks and Geeks* anticipates this shift; while for Daniel sex and pornography is old news, for Sam and his friends it is a source of bewilderment and discomfort. What follows is a montage of the geeks watching the movie, gradually edging their chairs away from each other. However, all three react slightly differently to the situation. Neal remains an avid and interested viewer, but Bill appears unsure. A visibly uncomfortable Sam, meanwhile, declares the film “weird” and cringes away from the screen, averting his eyes.

As part of their sex education class, the students are encouraged to submit anonymous questions that they are too embarrassed to ask in front of their peers. Coach approaches Sam to address some of his queries, prompting Sam to ask how Coach knew they were his questions. Coach tells him, “You were the only one with *Star Trek* notebook paper.” That Sam’s life revolves primarily around his loves of science fiction (his locker is papered with pictures of Darth Vader) and Steve Martin (whose poster has pride of place on the back of Sam’s bedroom door) is testament to his relative innocence. In Sam’s case, the pornographic movie is less an illicit thrill and more an unwelcome reminder of an encroaching adolescence and the pressures of being a teenage boy.

Reflecting Political Change

The geeks' concerns over their physical development reflects wider cultural preoccupations that, in 1980, had a distinct political slant. *Freaks and Geeks* takes place during the shift from a Democratic to Republican presidency. This political sea change saw Ronald Reagan's brand of conservative, New Right politics sweep through the decade. It also brought with it a rearticulation of masculine ideals.¹⁵ To a late 1990s audience, this link between politics and masculinity would be equally pertinent, given the frequent agonizing over President Clinton's own masculine credentials, which coalesced around his relative youth, his lack of war record, and the equation of his personal indiscretions with adolescent irresponsibility. Even when the Lewinsky scandal revealed Clinton's virility, it was bound up with suggestions of immaturity. Like Carter, Clinton's masculinity was characterized as being somehow deficient.

In the pilot, guidance counsellor Jeff Rosso (Dave Gruber Allen) is seen in his office, surrounded by the paraphernalia of a profession – awards, photographs, inspirational statements – and one other prominent item: a distinctive green and white Carter/Mondale campaign poster. Rosso is an ex-Berkeley hippie, prone to peppering his speech with the slang of his youth, and the poster underlines his liberal credentials. There is a certain decadence and naivety associated with the Democratic Party in the eyes of characters such as Harold Weir. "Everyone is a Democrat," he declares, "until they get a little money. Then they come to their senses!" The long-haired, bearded Rosso – "Call me Jeff" – borders on a caricature of the old hippie Democrat. And yet just as Mr. Rosso is himself something of a throwback, the Carter/Mondale poster is a reminder that, in 1980, Carter too would soon be a remnant of a former era.

The poster is just one clue to the current political climate. Another comes in a subsequent scene, where two boys make fun of Eli (Ben Foster), a developmentally disabled student. They attempt to engage him in a political discussion, compelling him to repeat their mocking praise of Carter: "That Jimmy Carter, he's some president, right? He's doing a hell of a job!" Their comments underline Carter's falling popularity and the political change looming on the horizon. Though the pilot is set

two months before the presidential election, the implication is clear: Carter's tenure in office will soon be up.

In the penultimate episode "The Little Things," then-Vice President George H. W. Bush visits the school. Mr. Rosso is summarily ejected from the auditorium after the Secret Service uncover his past as a political activist. Lindsay, meanwhile, finds her submitted questions rejected on the basis of an unspecified unsuitability. By the time *Freaks and Geeks* was broadcast in the 1999–2000 season, not only was Bush Sr. a former president and vice-president, but his son had launched his own ultimately successful bid for the presidency, establishing a circularity between the time on- and off-screen. In opening with Carter and closing with Bush Sr., *Freaks and Geeks* encapsulates a cultural period beset by change.

As noted above, the political backdrop of *Freaks and Geeks* also has ramifications for the representations and expectations of masculinity. The students' jibes at Jimmy Carter spill over into other episodes. In one gym class, the boys must take part in the President's Fitness Test. On hearing this, Alan yells, "Jimmy Carter's a wimp!", to the laughter of the others and a tolerant smile from Coach Fredricks. Research on representations of American masculinity has consistently identified the gulf between Carter and Reagan, with particular regard for their disparate projections of masculine identity. Brenton Malin identifies Carter's "soft-spoken, sensitive maleness" in his analysis of American presidents as a "barometer" of national masculinity.¹⁶ Susan Jeffords' study of Reagan-era "hard-bodied" masculinity lays out these differences at some length. She notes how Reagan's presidency cast Carter as "weak, defeatist, inactive, and feminine," while Reagan himself was constructed as the "decisive, tough, aggressive" man to revolutionize the nation and rescue it from crisis.¹⁷ In these terms, the "soft body" associated with Carter's term in office was countered by the "hard body" of Reagan's, which Jeffords characterizes as a "rearticulation of masculine strength" after the failure of Carter's administration to negotiate the Iranian hostage crisis swiftly and decisively.¹⁸ The subsequent release of the American hostages on the same day as Reagan's

inauguration allowed the new president to take credit for the release that Carter's administration had engineered. As President, Reagan "seemed like the ultimate throwback to an old-fashioned manhood," while Carter's presidency was characterized by a perceived softness.¹⁹ Faludi notes a distinction between Carter's efforts to engage with women's rights and boost the number of women in government, for example, and Reagan's embrace of the New Right and its more traditional gender politics.²⁰ It was Reagan who was perceived to have the power to reignite the U.S.'s positive image of itself, while Carter was damaged by his willingness to posit a "crisis of confidence" in his 1979 televised speech that pointed to an encroaching, empty materialism at the heart of American society. In the changing of the guard from Carter to Reagan, the U.S. underwent a fundamental shift in its image of national masculinity, the echoes of which would resonate far beyond into Clinton's millennial presidency.

Nostalgia

Freaks and Geeks aired in the television season that spanned the turn of the millennium. In the U.S., this millennial fin de siècle prompted a period of intense focus on the future and the promise contained within. On the political front, President Clinton – the first Democrat in office since Carter – had cultivated a persistent image of "build[ing] a bridge" to the future. In his 1997 State of the Union address, Clinton counted down the days to the millennium, claiming it as a new frontier of hope and prosperity: "Tomorrow there will be just over 1000 days until the year 2000; 1000 days to prepare our people; 1000 days to work together; 1000 days to build a bridge to a land of new promise."²¹ This imagery persisted in the latter half of Clinton's presidency. In his 1999 State of the Union speech, he returned to this evocation of futurity. "Barely more than 300 days from now," he suggested, "we will cross that bridge into the new millennium."²² As the leader presiding over this auspicious turn of century, Clinton capitalized on his position, urging the American public to look forward and claim the millennium as their – and the nation's – own.

This political and cultural atmosphere of continued American ascendancy beyond the year 2000 is complicated by the competing cultural notion of the twentieth century as the “American century,” and the implicit suggestion that the twenty-first century may “belong” to another nation entirely.²³ Though the 1990s marked a period of relative peace and prosperity under Clinton, it was also a period of deindustrialization, the emergence of third-wave feminism, and a lack of any war – symbolic or otherwise – as an arena of victory or strength. These elements coalesced in a renewed cycle of perceived masculine crisis. Like Carter, Clinton’s masculinity was often called into question before and during his presidency. Malin suggests that Clinton was “the model of a conflicted masculinity characteristic of the ‘90s” that was often unfavorably seized upon by his opponents.²⁴ Faludi draws a direct line between Reagan and Clinton to suggest that, while Reagan offered an image of “the fantasy elder come to lead the sons in triumphal battle against the Evil Empire,” Clinton could not live up to this mythical ideal of the masculine “elder statesman.”²⁵ On either side of the Reagan/Bush presidencies, Carter and Clinton share this perception of masculine uncertainty that, more widely, characterizes America’s own cultural psyche during these periods.

Paul Grainge suggests that nostalgia is most prone to occur during transitional periods “in response to the yearning for continuity.”²⁶ Rather than a desire to return to a tangible time and place, Grainge characterizes nostalgia as a desire for continuance. In this way, nostalgia becomes a defense against upheaval and uncertainty, the very conditions that are characteristic of a *fin de siècle*. That the adolescents in *Freaks and Geeks* exist in a version of the past that was broadcast during a period of cultural uncertainty is, perhaps, suggestive of this desire. Despite Clinton’s optimistic bridge-crossing rhetoric, there remained a cultural anxiety surrounding the question of the U.S.’s post-millennial identity. Rather than looking forward to this period of uncertainty, *Freaks and Geeks* offers the opportunity to look backwards, to catch a glimpse of the past even as the country raced towards the future.

Vera Dika suggests that nostalgic images in film and television often “[skip] a generation.”²⁷ In the 1970s, films such as *American Graffiti* (Lucas, 1973) and *Grease* (Kleiser, 1978) and television program *Happy Days* (1974–1984) looked back on the 1950s as a mythical era of security and conservative family values, despite the focus on teen culture.²⁸ It was this same uncomplicated, false nostalgia for the 1950s image of suburban family life – apparently untouched by liberalism, feminism, and a faltering trust in authority – that underpinned Reagan’s presidential campaign in 1980.

So perhaps it is inevitable that, by the late 1990s, this nostalgic impulse had skipped another generation and turned to the early 1980s as a period just close enough to be familiar, yet far enough away to “[impart] an indelible connotation of pastness.”²⁹ Yet *Freaks and Geeks* retains a complex relationship with nostalgia. Gray notes that the show was able to “challeng[e] the norms of nostalgic television” by cultivating a mixture of “cynicism” and “heart.”³⁰ Unlike *Happy Days*, it does not present the early 1980s as a halcyon era, an idealized teen landscape free of modern problems. Though *Freaks and Geeks* retains an evident compassion for its characters, this does not translate to a blinkered fondness for the period. In the pilot, Lindsay declares, “I hate high school,” and in subsequent episodes, it becomes clear that she has good reason. As Gray observes,

Freaks and Geeks refuses to sprinkle the 1980s with fairy dust and asks viewers to identify with its titular characters, those who never fit in and who either feel excluded or who actively exclude themselves. Hence, the nostalgia speaks to, of, and for nonconformists and for difference and variety, rather than policing a firm sense of what teens, families, boys and girls *should* look, act, and talk like.³¹

If nostalgia was crucial to Reagan’s political platform, Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan note how, during the same period, Hollywood strove for the “return of the hero,” a narrative compulsion that characterizes that same desire to restore an image of heroic masculinity.³² By the late 1990s, this no longer seemed possible on the same scale. As Hollywood’s action heroes became domesticated

fathers, the traditional hero appeared to be on the decline. *Freaks and Geeks* certainly offers very little in the form of heroism. These are not boys who might one day grow up to save the world; these are boys who are simply trying their best to survive. Here, the program engages with that sense of masculine uncertainty plaguing 1990s men, subverting the nostalgic gaze and disrupting the uncomplicated desire to look to the past for reassurance.

Svetlana Boym delineates two forms of nostalgia, restorative and reflective.³³ If restorative nostalgia best describes the nostalgia of the 1980s – a desire for redemption and triumph, as characterized by James Scott – then reflective nostalgia opens up a space where a more critical approach can be taken.³⁴ Reflective nostalgia, crucially, does not concern “the recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth”; rather, Boym suggests, it can be “ironic and humorous,” an approach that *Freaks and Geeks* embraces.³⁵ Malgorzata Rymsza-Pawlowska argues that, given television’s postmodern status in relation to time and temporality, it is well-suited to “demonstrate historical development through the individual and the family unit,” as opposed to grand narratives of history, or those “absolute truths” noted by Boym.³⁶ This privileging of personal narrative as a way of highlighting historical and cultural change is pertinent to *Freaks and Geeks*, which remains focused on its characters and their individual lives, much more than the cultural and political backdrop. The audience does not experience Reagan’s re-election, for example, as much as it glimpses it through the characters’ thoughts and actions. Rymsza-Pawlowska suggests that viewers are receptive to the emotional representation of history through the experience of individual characters, but that what is often misunderstood as “nostalgia” is in fact “significantly more complex.”³⁷ For Rymsza-Pawlowska, as for Gray, uncomplicated nostalgia is indicative of a mythical golden age, a televised space whereby the past becomes idealized and sanitized in the service of inspiring fond longing for a simpler, happier time. In the case of *Freaks and Geeks*, the fact that its characters experience significant disappointment, exclusion, or misunderstanding contributes to its complex and ambivalent relationship with nostalgia.

Freaks and Geeks' temporality is demarcated through background politics and the music, films, and television that its characters consume. These elements provide cultural verisimilitude, which gives legitimacy to the snapshot of 1980s suburban teenage life that it strives to provide. This claim to legitimacy is crucial to *Freaks and Geeks'* relationship with nostalgia, embedded in the promise to show adolescence from the perspective of "the rest of us." There is a distinct lack of gloss (as in *Beverly Hills 90210* [1990–2000]), pep (as in *Saved By the Bell* [1989–1993]), gentle morality (as in *8 Simple Rules* [2002–2005]), or fantasy (as in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [1997–2003]) in this image of high school life. If, as Susan Stewart suggests, "Nostalgia is the desire for desire," then nostalgia is in shorter supply here than may be expected.³⁸ By keeping the rough edges of adolescence on display and denying a triumphant resolution for any of its characters, *Freaks and Geeks* actively reveals the limits of nostalgic yearning.

Two examples illuminate this push-and-pull relationship with nostalgia, as the program avoids a neat happy ending for its characters. In "Chokin' and Tokin'," Bill is hospitalized after Alan spikes his lunch with crushed peanuts. Believing Bill is asleep, Alan offers a genuine apology and admits, to the empty room, that he is envious of the geeks. Bill overhears and invites Alan to join them at a sci-fi convention that weekend. The end of the episode sees the boys in costume, waiting for their ride. Alan cycles past, pauses, considers the scene for a moment, and then rides on, out of shot. A more nostalgic take on this scene would surely see Alan join the geeks for the day, and perhaps reflect on his bullying. Instead, he remains on the outside, and his unhappiness remains unresolved.

The relationship between Lindsay and Nick is also denied a neat conclusion. Though Lindsay initiates the first kiss, Nick is keener to pursue a relationship and devastated by their break-up. In "The Garage Door," the freaks attend a light show. The camera pans across Ken and his new girlfriend Amy sharing their first kiss, Kim making out with Daniel, and finally Lindsay and Nick, who remain resolutely separated. Nick's glance across at Lindsay – "I'd be lying if I didn't say this was painful" – lends the scene a wry note. Convention would have Lindsay and Nick reunite at this point. Instead,

Freaks and Geeks remains committed to a messy, unfulfilling ending. Denying its audience the narrative satisfaction of a reformed bully or a rekindled romance acts as a reminder that life is not a movie. For its characters, life is just as likely to be frustrating, mundane, and disappointing.

Freaks and Geeks largely avoids the impulse to impart moral lessons on its implied teenaged audience. That is not to say that its characters do not learn: Sam, for example, realizes that just because a girl is beautiful, it does not necessarily mean she is kind, while Neal must learn that his father is fallible, and Bill must accept his mother's choice of partner. But elsewhere, moral lessons are subverted and go unrealized. The series' final scene is testament to this. Lindsay is accepted at a prestigious summer school, giving her a chance to get her academic future back on track. Dressed conservatively, she is contrite when she tells her mother she wants to "get [her] head straight" and bids her family an emotional goodbye as she boards a bus to the University of Michigan. Here, *Freaks and Geeks* hovers on the promise of an ending that would validate the adults' worldview, only to reverse it as soon as the bus disappears around the corner. Lindsay gets off the bus, dons her trademark army jacket, and is last seen climbing into the back of a van with Kim, ready to follow the Grateful Dead's tour. Just as there is no promise that the world will be kind to them, the characters in *Freaks and Geeks* are not guaranteed to do the right thing.

Above all, the series emphasizes the universality of adolescence. As Kathleen Williams suggests, "Nostalgia functions as a way of placing what seems new – teen culture – in a long-running narrative that is inter-generational."³⁹ If anything is learned from the "past" of *Freaks and Geeks*, it is that, despite the changing social and cultural landscape, adolescence will remain difficult to navigate. In the end, the historical background remains just that. In the foreground are the everyday struggles of high school and, for the geeks, the joy and pain in leaving boyhood behind and relinquishing childhood to the past.

This navigation between boyhood and adolescence reflects universal concerns including peer pressure, bullying, girls, friendships, and physical confidence. Yet *Freaks and Geeks'* representation

of boyhood also raises questions over contemporary masculinity. The opening scene of the pilot dispenses with the conventional masculine hero – the football player – and instead frames three awkward, nerdy boys in his place. Theirs is a boyhood rooted in cultural transition, in shifting perceptions of masculinity, and in a struggle – and disinclination – to envisage their lives as adult men. In its temporality *Freaks and Geeks* may offer an image of high school once removed, but it is also a timely reminder that the anxious boys of the past would, eventually, become the uncertain men of the future. The backdrop of transition accentuates the transitional nature of childhood and emphasizes the ways in which boyhood is, often, neither one thing nor the other. On the cusp of adulthood, the geeks cannot help but look back, just as *Freaks and Geeks* itself does. There is, perhaps, reassurance in what came before, even as these boys are shunted into the future.

Figure 11.1 Sam, Neal, and Bill, emerging from the boys' bathroom, contemplate another anxious day at William McKinley High in *Freaks and Geeks*.

Figure 11.2 In the episode "Tests and Breasts," Sam is humiliated in sex education class as he struggles to label the female reproductive system.

¹ Jonathan Gray, "Freaks and Geeks," in *The Essential Cult TV Reader*, ed. David Lavery (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 122.

² Three additional episodes would eventually air in October, 2000.

³ Harold Evans, *The American Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), xiv.

⁴ Gray, "Freaks and Geeks," 121.

⁵ Robin Lakoff, quoted in Margaret Dowd, "Of Knights and Presidents: Race of Mythic Proportions," *New York Times*, October 10, 1992, accessed March 25, 2017, www.nytimes.com/1992/10/10/us/1992-campaign-political-memo-knights-presidents-race-mythic-proportions.

⁶ Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999), 30.

⁷ Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward, "Introduction," in *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth*, ed. Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 2.

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- ⁸ Adrian Schober, "Introduction," in *Children in the Films of Steven Spielberg*, ed. Adrian Schober and Debbie Olson (Lanham: Lexington, 2016), 1.
- ⁹ Pomerance and Gateward, *Where the Boys Are*, 1–2.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ¹¹ Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999), 598.
- ¹² Merran Toerien and Sue Wilkinson, "Gender and Body Hair: Constructing the Feminine Woman," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 26, no. 4 (2003): 337.
- ¹³ Michael Kimmel, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (New York: Harper, 2008), 170.
- ¹⁴ Jon Shields, "Fighting Liberalism's Excesses: Moral Crusades during the Reagan Revolution," *The Journal of Policy History*, 26, no. 1 (2014): 105–108.
- ¹⁵ Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 10–13.
- ¹⁶ Brenton Malin, *American Masculinity under Clinton: Popular Media and the Nineties' Crisis of Masculinity* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 15.
- ¹⁷ Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 11.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ¹⁹ Faludi, *Stiffed*, 361.
- ²⁰ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 293.
- ²¹ William J. Clinton, "Address before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union," February 4, 1997, accessed August 31, 2017, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=53358.
- ²² William J. Clinton, "Address before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union," January 19, 1999, accessed August 31, 2017, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=57577.
- ²³ Evans, *The American Century*, xiv.
- ²⁴ Malin, *American Masculinity*, 7.
- ²⁵ Faludi, *Stiffed*, 407.
- ²⁶ Paul Grainge, "Nostalgia and Style in Retro America: Moods, Modes and Media Recycling," *Journal of American and Comparative Culture*, 23, no. 1 (2000): 27.
- ²⁷ Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 56.

²⁸ Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 24.

²⁹ Dika, *Recycled Culture*, 56.

³⁰ Gray, "Freaks and Geeks," 125.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 219.

³³ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xviii.

³⁴ James Scott, "The Right Stuff at the Wrong Time: The Space of Nostalgia in the Conservative Ascendancy," *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, 40, no. 1 (2010): 47.

³⁵ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49.

³⁶ Malgorzata Rymza-Pawłowska, "Broadcasting the Past: History Television, 'Nostalgia Culture,' and the Emergence of the Miniseries in the 1970s United States," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 42, no. 2 (2014): 87.

³⁷ Ibid., 84.

³⁸ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1984), 23.

³⁹ Kathleen Williams, "Recut Film Trailers, Nostalgia and the Teen Film," *Fan CULTure: Essays on Participatory Fandom in the 21st Century*, ed. Kristin Barton and Jonathan Lampley (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 54.