

Threads

AUSTIN
IVERS

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Looping in Time Cathy Sweeney

It is 1985. I live in the suburbs and go to the local school with my friends. In the summer I play tennis and swim in the sea. In winter I go to the cinema and to teenage discos where I dance with boys who are shorter than me. I watch *Top of the Pops* and *Neighbours* on TV and buy magazines with pictures of pop stars in them. The money I earn from babysitting I spend on fashion and make-up. I have a cassette player in my bedroom and tape songs off the radio and listen to them over and over again. One of the songs I tape is *Nikita* by Elton John. It is not my favourite but it's easy to sing along to. If you don't know it goes like this:

*Oh Nikita you will never know,
anything about my home
I'll never know how good it feels to hold you
Nikita I need you so*



Joy Division



In the song Elton John is in love with an East German security guard called Nikita, but they can't be together because of the Cold War. The accompanying video opens with a long shot of grey-coated soldiers marching along the Berlin Wall. There is snow on the ground. Cut to Elton John sitting in an open-top red sports car, watching the soldiers and taking photographs. He is wearing a straw boater with a red ribbon, sunglasses and a baseball jacket. Through his camera lens we see a female border guard inspecting the troops. A close-up reveals a woman in a fur hat with piercing eyes and pale lips. It is Nikita.

In 1986 I turn 16. Vincent Hanley, the presenter on MTV, begins to lose weight and look unwell. A year later he dies from AIDS related illness. In April an accident occurs at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the Soviet Socialist Republic. Reports trickle out: casualties, rivers full of dead fish, deformed babies, ghost cities. I stop playing tennis and swimming in the sea. I still go to the cinema, but I despise teenage discos and boys my own age. I no longer tape songs from the radio. In December HMV opens on Grafton Street and I start to hang out there on Saturdays. The world is changing. There are choices to be made: Joy Division or Sting, books or Xtra-vision, alcohol or drugs, casual sex or a boyfriend, Arts or Commerce, the past or the future. By the time I've done my Leaving Cert and am off to London for the summer, my friends and I have made different choices. I have chosen black-and-white and they have chosen colour. It's cold on the ferry, even in June, and I wear a double-breasted military coat I'd bought in an army surplus shop. I pair it with diamante jewellery and black eyeliner and adopt a brooding look.

Thirty something years go by. I am 49. I am surfing the internet thinking about the Cold War and its influence on my teenage years. In history class in the 1980s we studied everything in terms of cause/course/results. It made the world seem manageable. Cause of Cold War: Ideological divisions between USSR and the West after World War Two.

Course: Berlin Wall, Korea, Cuban Missile Crisis, then Glasnost and Perestroika (so lovely to pronounce) and the fall of the wall when I was eighteen. Results: Blank. I type things into Google like *Threads* TV Drama or Billy Bragg – but nothing rings a bell. Then I come across the music video of *Nikita* by Elton John on YouTube and out of curiosity I watch it again.

After the opening sequence it cuts back to Elton John. He is in the back seat of the sports car. A chauffeur is driving. The car comes to a checkpoint and Nikita examines his passport. His passport photo shows a man in a straw boater and sunglasses. She suppresses a smile. She's wearing a double-breasted grey military coat with silver buttons, underneath a white shirt and black tie. She allows him to pass through the checkpoint.

Cut to night-time. Nikita is stationed at a lookout tower. A searchlight picks out Elton John standing beyond a barbed wire fence. He is wearing a check dress coat, with white shirt and red tie. Nikita is pleased to see him.

The next morning Elton John is back at the checkpoint, this time in a black T-shirt and jacket covered in zany designs. Nikita takes his passport. She smiles openly. A superior arrives and dismisses her. He shakes his head at Elton John and the car moves slowly away from the checkpoint. Nikita is disconsolate.

Cut to Elton John and Nikita dancing together with a disco ball in the background. She is wearing a pillar box hat and a dress that is open at the back. Elton John has changed into a black jacket embossed with a red pattern. Nikita has short blonde hair very much like that of Princess Diana. She wears make-up and has large diamante earrings.

Cut to a football stadium. Elton John and Nikita are in the stands watching a match. On the pitch a goal is scored. They cheer wildly, him in a black cape, her in a fawn duffel coat, both sporting the yellow and black colours of Watford FC.

Cut to a silhouette shot of the couple playing chess. Nikita places the Bishop on the brim of Elton John's boater, and they laugh.

Now they are in a bowling alley, him in a patterned silk kimono, her in a red jump suit.

Cut back to Nikita at the wall. The camera is in soft focus. It was all a dream.

I sit at my laptop. Stunned. It's not merely that the video is kitsch. It's that it's so much more kitsch than I could ever have imagined. Up there with lava lamps and cuckoo clocks and Nana Mouskauri and porcelain statues of cherubim children and doilies and Disneyland and those dolls with the knitted skirts that you put over loo rolls, one of which kept an eye on me every time I used the avocado coloured bathroom in a friend's house. And the ironies are fantastical.

Elton John had not come out as gay in 1985 when Nikita was released. Nor had George Michael who sang the backing vocals. And it was Ken Russell who wrote and directed the video. Yes. Ken Russell, who directed the controversial films, *Women in Love* and *The Devils*. The actress who played Nikita, Anya Major, was English and had appeared in the famous 1984 advertisement for Apple computers. Need I go on?

Watching the video again, I start to feel like Truman Burbank in *The Truman Show* when he gradually realises that his entire life is an elaborately constructed ruse. All that time I thought the main influences on me growing up were literature and film and bands like Joy Division, but it turns out a great chunk of my identity was actually formed by a cheesy music video. The experience is less like reliving memory than discovering an implant. I realise that for thirty something years I've been nurturing a secret desire to exist tragically in images of snow-covered Brutalist architecture ... secret ... even to myself. I feel old. But also, ageless. As though I am looping in time. No cause/course/result. No past/present/future. Thirty something years later, I'm still wearing double-breasted coats with diamante brooches on the lapel, worrying about viruses

(this one called COVID-19), listening to Elton John on the radio when I'm on my own in the car. And he's still going strong and probably will be in thirty something years' time, albeit as a hologram.

Perhaps I have simply fallen prey to nostalgia, something that is common in people as they get older. Or perhaps the stuff that has most influence on me is the stuff I hardly notice. Today, not Michael Haneke films and the *Guardian* newspaper but Twitter posts and my surreptitious viewing of *Keeping up with the Kardashians*. And back in 1985, not films by Andrei Tarkovsky or

Frankie Goes to Hollywood singles, but a music video which ends with a cut to Elton John sitting in a high-backed leather armchair watching images of Nikita beamed onto a screen through a slide projector. Click, click, click. He is still wearing the silk kimono but has matched it with a fez hat in velvet burgundy complete with tassel. The heat from the slide projector rises like smoke in the darkness. Cut back to opening shot of soldiers marching in the snow. Then fade to black. Perhaps I'm walking around haunted by an invisible past. Perhaps we are all walking around haunted by invisible pasts.



Austin Ivers, *Threads*