



Editorial

Nostalgia Makes Us All Tick: A Special Issue on Contemporary Nostalgia

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Introduction

Nostalgia makes us all tick: It engages. We live in societies oriented towards the now and the tomorrow, in a world obsessed with a complex and protean present seemingly impervious to historical continuity. The many tomorrows inherent in every new technology, product, and digitally mediated event drive us further away from our collective histories. Yet the present seems stubbornly rooted in the past, as Zygmunt Bauman so convincingly argues in his final work *Retrotopia* (Bauman 2017). This occurs both politically, as in the repeated re-ignition of history's buried fires, ranging from the emergence of ISIS as an ultranostalgic force to the re-emergence of a nostalgic hard-right in European politics, and culturally, as in the persistent return of cultural production and consumption to a number of key points in our history in a restless and always unsatisfied attempt to reinterpret, reuse, or replay that which is seemingly vanished. It appears in the most pressing issue of our times, climate change, and the discourse of the Anthropocene. This retrospective orientation is observable in all major contemporary media forms, aesthetic and social practices. Romantic inclination towards the past might seem irrational, but our emotional connections to our own biographies, as well as a collective solidarity with our childhoods, traditions, imaginations, anticipations, and dreams may also be a rational response to modern instability. Nostalgia, then, appears increasingly to be a modality of its own with major potential for understanding how our now is shaped by our then, both individually and collectively.

Whether we are inclined, personally, to be nostalgic or we are somehow bound up in the external and contextual nostalgic webs, nostalgia dictates our lives. Beyond the intimate bittersweet immersions of nostalgia, conjured by aging, remembrance, death, time, childhood, loss, recovery, and melancholia, we are influenced by such things as retro shops, local produce, concepts of national states, xenophobia, communities, technology advancement, migration, and the climate crisis. The world we inhabit is just constantly shaped by private and public nostalgias. One way to make sense of the complex flux of emotions and temporalities on our planet in modern, contemporary times is to investigate and scrutinize the role nostalgia has on our daily lives, in politics, equality, sociology, psychology, history, art, philosophy. These examinations are truly interdisciplinary.

The purpose of this editorial is not to introduce each essay in this collection (the abstracts will do just fine here), neither is it to survey the history of nostalgia. My ambition, albeit limited in scope here, is to frame and problematize the works in this collection within the emerging field of nostalgia studies and reiterate some of my previous views on nostalgia as an emotional experience and an aesthetic modality. Nostalgia studies have the past decade gained interest and importance in a variety of disciplines, often in a complex interaction between different disciplines such as art, history, literary studies, aesthetics, film and media studies, communication studies, intermedial studies, sociology, psychology, neuroscience, history of ideas, and colonial and postcolonial studies. Although nostalgia studies have not yet formulated a theoretical framework for its practice and methods, researchers within this field investigate nostalgia as a complex set of emotions and how these emotions interact

with different contexts. A post-colonialist, for example, would be exploring the role of nostalgia in both the project of colonization, the processes in postcolonial development, and contemporary desire and fascination for colonial times as expressed through film and TV series such as *Poirot* or heritage tourism. In communication and media studies, researchers would be interested in how nostalgia is used in news, fake news, advertisements, and political propaganda. Sociologists and psychologists would be engaged in the importance of nostalgia in identity, belonging, interpretative communities, and ethnical groups. A literary scholar might investigate how a national literature thematically relates to migration and the constructions of home. Finally, a historian would explore how Hitler used nostalgia in his overarching Germanic project. Hence, nostalgia studies are occupied with very diverse topics where nostalgia is sometimes used as an instigator for human, social behavior, or as a method for reading the times. In the latter case, nostalgia studies are really a complex philosophy of time and clearly distinct from more conventional memory studies.

Jean Starobinski (1966), Svetlana Boym (2001), and Karin Johannisson (2001) and André Bolzinger (2007) have all sketched historical overviews of the role nostalgia has played through the history of the Western world within their respective national and ethnical spheres. Boym, the most cited and influential nostalgic critic, is famous for her distinction between restorative (attempts to reconstruct/relive the past) and reflective nostalgia (the melancholic introspection of past) (Boym 2001, p. 41). Notable contemporary works within nostalgia studies and the humanities include Castelnovo-Frigessi and Risso's *A mezza parete. Emigrazione, nostalgia, malattia mentale* (Castelnovo-Frigessi and Risso 1982), Doane and Hodges' *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference: The Resistance to Contemporary Feminism* (Doane and Hodges 1987), Chase and Shaw's (eds) *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* (Shaw and Chase 1989), Grainge's *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Style in Retro America* (Grainge 2002), Dika's *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia* (Dika 2003), Cook's *Screening the Past. Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (2005), Holdsworth's *Television, Memory and Nostalgia* (Holdsworth 2011), Walder's *Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representation, and Memory* (Walder 2011), Arnold-de Simone's *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia* (Arnold-de Simone 2013), Cassin's *La nostalgie. Quand est-on chez soi? Ulysee, Enée, Arendt* (Cassin 2013), Dufays's *El niño en el cine argentino de la postdictadura* (1983–2008) (Dufays 2014), Niemeyer's *Media and Nostalgia* (Niemeyer 2014), Ange and Berliner's *Anthropology and Nostalgia* (Angé and Berliner 2015), Lizardi's *Mediated Nostalgia. Individual Memory and Contemporary Mass Media* (Lizardi 2015), Bonnett's *The Geography of Nostalgia: Global and Local Perspectives on Modernity and Loss* (Bonnett 2015), Cross' *Consumed Nostalgia: Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism* (Cross 2015), Schrey's *Analoge Nostalgie in der digitalen Medienkultur* (Schrey 2017) and Salmose and Sandberg's (eds) *Once Upon a Time: Nostalgic Narratives in Transition* (Salmose and Sandberg 2018), not to mention a vast array of articles and essays on the subject matter. The titles of these books are evidence of the vast scope and interdisciplinary approach of recent nostalgia studies. A majority of them were published within the western world, notably often in English. This is not to state that nostalgia is predominantly a European or US concern, only that within my limited academic horizon, these are works that I am familiar with and can recommend. As stated below, nostalgia is truly a transcultural phenomenon—in that capacity, nostalgia becomes entangled in local and global discourses alike. This collection is testimonial of nostalgia's global potential, investigating nostalgia in such different nations and cultures as Egypt, Nubia, Yugoslavia, the Czech Republic, Korea, Russia, Urdu, and Finland.

Nostalgia is used as a political, commercial, social, and psychological tool in order to either affect, control or alter human behavior as well as a critical, analytical apparatus that provides insights in these very behaviors. Nevertheless, both these strategies operate on the premise that people are inclined toward nostalgic feelings. Hence, all nostalgia studies must imply an individual, passionate, and strong emotion. In its purest sense, nostalgia is clearly personal and intimate. It is a touch of the heart. Nostalgia is a transhistorical, transcultural basic set of human emotions that are described in the earliest human narrative efforts: cave paintings, early creation myths, and in antiquity. Johannes Hofer coined the term nostalgia in 1688, but his nostalgia was medically related to homesickness and

therefore curable. The modern definition of nostalgia becomes emphasized in the end of the 18th Century as a complex emotion of both a revolt against time's progress and a lament of time passed. Nostalgia here is not curable. The essential definition, which separates nostalgia from memory, is how nostalgia involves a recollection or reconstruction of a past time or space that is invested with grief or melancholy. Nostalgia confirms both to the notion that life is short and that we will all vanish.

The alluring power of nostalgia as an emotion is its ambiguity. As Fred Davis states in his monumental *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, everybody knows what nostalgia feels like but still cannot really explain it (Davis 1979, p. 7). Boym refers in *The Future of Nostalgia* to nostalgia as "superimposition of two images" and how nostalgia "is about the repetition of the unrepeatable" (Boym 2001, pp. xiv, xvii). Nostalgia's obscurity is a result of its complexity. The common and oxymoronic definition of it as bittersweet is an echo of how nostalgia is a combination of two very opposing emotional clusters: happiness and sadness.

The most adequate way to understand nostalgia is as an experience since that allows us to comprehend the complexity of its emotional configuration and see it as a process. First, there is the motivational phase where something triggers our nostalgia. This something can be our own cognitive will or any kind of sensorial stimulus. Nostalgia of the past is blissful and happy, a "yearning for [. . .] the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams" (Boym 2001, p. xv). In most cases, nostalgia is either a fragment of a biographical past or a condensed collection of a series of private and/or collective memories that make up a particular time and mood of our lives. However, nostalgia (place/time for yearning) either can be entirely impersonal and situate itself in a future-directed time/space, an imaginary, fictive world outside our own temporality, or it can be a past time one has not experienced personally. Nostalgia can also be a complicated combination of all these, but the overall emotional content is of happiness and relief that time travelling, in a Bergsonian sense, somehow is possible. The blissful nostalgia is then at some point interrupted by a revelation that this time travel is indeed impossible due to some physical restraints on time and matter. This introspective and reflective phase concurs sadness and melancholia. It results from what Susan Stewart frames as "sadness without an object" (Stewart 1984, p. 14). The result of the nostalgic experience is thus one of a combination of the conflicting emotions happiness and sadness: bittersweet. The above constructed experiential process is of course arbitrary. There can be other structures and chronologies. What I would title *present nostalgia* is when something not yet in the past is still triggering a nostalgic experience in the present. For example, imaging that a child will grow up might trigger a nostalgia for the present moment situated in the future as well as stressing the mortality and progress of life. Hence, nostalgia does not solely operate in the past but, at least hypothetically, involves all temporalities.

There is some dispute whether nostalgia in a private sense is a positive or negative emotion.¹ Along with Boym's discussion of these polarities as highly contextual and political (Boym 2001, p. xvii), I find such evaluative categorizations poor attempts to frame a particular emotion as either positive or negative. Rather, nostalgia fluctuates between the two opposing emotional spheres, creating a dominance of either happiness or sadness. In some cases, the actual nostalgia is in itself so powerful that not even the notion of its 'lostness' is able to withdraw the pleasure of re-experiencing it. In other cases, the dominating aspect is the universal grief of our lives, that time is irrevocable, and dominates the emotional conclusion.

Before I unleash the Special Issue's inventive nostalgic investigations of contemporary culture, I reiterate. Some of the most pressing contemporary issues (ecological crisis, migration and integration, fragmented worldviews, social media, fake news, extremist politics and terrorism) can be understood more profoundly through how they interact with both individual and collective forces of nostalgia. Nostalgia is politics, but these politics are also interwoven with media and culture. The bottom of it

¹ Nostalgia's positive qualities are supported by Batcho (1995) and Jackson (1986). There are, however, those who consider nostalgia primarily a negative emotional experience: Best and Nelson (1985), Hertz (1990), Holbrook (1993), and Peters (1985).

all, though, is that notwithstanding how nostalgia is used or contextualized in terms of politics and social practices, commodification or personal development, its power is primarily situated within its efficacy as a governing, influential human emotion. The vast and luminous contributions to this Special Issue on contemporary nostalgia are all investigating the role different aesthetic media formats (film, music, literature, computer games) play in nostalgic negotiations with style, history, migration, love, nationalism, diaspora, irony, modernity, colonial and postcolonial discourses, and adoption. Some of them have developed out of the international conference “Nostalgia in Contemporary Culture” that I co-organized with Rune Graulund and Eric Sandberg in Odense 4–5 June 2018 as part of our project on contemporary nostalgia financed by the Swedish Research Council. Other contributions have grown out of dialogues with colleagues or critics of nostalgia or just thankfully ended up in my inbox after the call for paper. Mutually, these essays stand out as important, original, critical contributions to the expanding field of nostalgia studies and offer a valued insight on contemporary issues.

Niklas Salmose, Berlin 2019

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