

EDITORIAL: NOSTALGIA

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Nostalgia is a powerful force that shapes our current popular culture as well as our political realities. Recent cinematic trends exemplify this development, evidenced by the revival of superheroes created in the first half of the 20th century, such as Batman and Superman, the reboot of the Star Wars franchise, as well as the reinvention of the 1960's Sci-Fi classic Star-Trek. Dua Lipa, one of the biggest pop singers of the moment, baptised one of her latest albums (2020) and the ensuing world tour (2022) *Future Nostalgia*, wherein musical references from the 1970's and 1980's are recognisable. Following Mark Fisher's analysis of the first decades of the 21st century one might see these nostalgic turns to the past as a continued expression of postmodern *ennui*; the impossibility to imagine truly new futures that leads us to an endless recycling of the past. The present being thus incessantly haunted by the past leaves us with a "nostalgia for the future" – a nostalgia for a time long gone, filled with utopian promises of a different future (Fisher 2022).

Such ghostly presences might, however, have a very real impact in moulding our lives. Recent political and geopolitical realities have been undeniably and very impactfully shaped by nostalgia as a political tool. Several instances might attest to the growing significance of nostalgia in the contemporary world (Campanella and Dassù 2019). These include American ex-president Donald Trump's slogan of making "America Great Again", Xi Jinping's calls for the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese people" and Brexit, which was driven by the idealisation of a bygone era of full sovereignty. Putin comparing himself to Czar Peter the Great in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a more recent example.

It is retrotopian (Bauman 2017) fantasies like these, violently turned into reality and attacking values that many associate with Western progressive achievements, which seem to be cases in point for those to whom nostalgia is an intrinsically dangerous affect, inevitably linked to bad politics. Nostalgia as a reactionary sentiment opposed to modern progress has been part of a persistent discourse of modernity (Natali 2004). However, this seems an overly reductive conceptualisation of nostalgia, which might indeed also be a way for utopian reformulations activated by nostalgic longing, by “the desire not to return but to recognize aspects of the past as the basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future” (Pickering and Keightley 2006).

Independent of how nostalgia is conceptualised, its contemporary pervasiveness is undeniable. Nostalgia’s ubiquity has been linked to modernity and its upheavals (Boym 2001), as a means for providing a sense of stability and escapism. War, climate change, and an ever-increasing number of displaced persons and migrants provoke change and a sense of uprootedness in our crisis-ridden present. Information and transportation technologies are able to rapidly change both our individual and collective senses of time and space. The here suddenly becomes there. The present suddenly becomes the past. Yet, it is paradoxically turning into a “present past” (Huysen 2003) by remaining ubiquitous through its storage in easily accessible individual and collective digital archives, which might in parts account for the strong link between our contemporary modern world and nostalgia. However, nostalgia’s ubiquity in our contemporary, while possibly intensified by modernity itself, could also point to it as a fundamentally human way of dealing with dissatisfaction in the present, loss and the irreversibility of time.

It is the recognition of the centrality of this affective relationship with the past that makes the continued exploration of it in its multifarious forms and functions an ever-relevant task – a task we set out for in the current issue of *Diffractions*.

The cover art by Rita Ravasco, showcasing a seemingly random collection of dysfunctional objects connected by colourful threads, is part of a multimedia art piece with the title *Tempo Sentido* [Time Sensed] exploring the functioning of memory and nostalgia. The human mind is figuratively represented as a sensory archive through these interconnected objects, representing the way memory and nostalgia can be triggered by sensory experience, creating an endless network of memory, longing and affect across time and space. The digital painting on our cover

is interconnected with another digital piece, a video-animation, and a temporary on-site installation at Universidade Católica Portuguesa. Our cover art is in fact a digital sketch and image detail of the installation on site and together with the animation will remain as a digitally archived remnant of the on-site installation. The close communication between the digital and the physical mirror the extension of our very own life and of our memories into digital space. The multilayered piece evokes a myriad of questions connected to the functioning of nostalgia as an affect fusing diverse memories, times and spaces in the human mind as it is triggered by the physical and the digital.

Claudia Partac's contribution speaks directly to Ravasco's piece's focus on dysfunctional fragmentary objects that have found a space and use in the archive of the human mind through nostalgic longing. Partac studies the Romanian documentary *Metrobranding* (2010), a documentary film that centres on members of the Romanian working class, who during communism were involved in producing local brands and who lost their livelihood with the downfall of the regime. The documentary is structured around close-ups of the now often useless everyday objects these workers used to produce. It gives space to the nostalgia the protagonists associate with these remnants of the past, an affect that has been suppressed as reactionary by triumphalist official memory discourse celebrating the downfall of the communist regime. Hence, in her analysis Partac shows how such a one-sided framing of nostalgia as merely reactionary fails to grasp its often ambivalent functions; she also points to nostalgia as a way to accommodate and work through unacknowledged grief for what is lost. Ravasco's art and Partac's piece explore nostalgia as an individual yet universal experience.

A closely related approach infuses Hugo Simões' contribution which explores the form and function of this affective relationship with the past in Wodehouse's inimitable classic comic series of books featuring Jeeves and Wooster. His analysis offers a new perspective of nostalgia inchoate in Wodehouse's work, which has been, at times, reductively dismissed as a regressive depoliticised reproduction of the "good old days" of a British late 19th century, early 20th century idle upper class. Simões goes beyond this superficial reading of potentially dangerous restorative nostalgia to lay out how Wodehouse pays tribute to a very specific kind of nostalgia – a deep human longing for being in harmony with one's environment, described by Camus as "nostalgia for unity", and which

might lie at the very core of the human nostalgia for an imagined Edenic golden age that can be found throughout human history.

Nina Heise's contribution on *All the Young Dudes*, a Harry Potter online fanfiction by MsKingBean89, not only encompasses this constant tension between nostalgia as a potential source for reactionary restoration and a source of comfort in fast-moving times but also strikes new territory by exploring nostalgia as a fount of inspiration for potentially instilling progressive values and change into a collectively imagined future. She shows meticulously how the genre of fanfiction is inherently nostalgic through its constant references to a revered source text. By situating *All the Young Dudes* within the moment of its publication in the immediate aftermath of Brexit, Heise shows how it reproduces certain staples of a British nationalist imagination that also had been mobilised during Brexit, while however also pointing to how it transcends its discourses at several points. A longing for selective elements of the past, in this case, a longing for moments of community and mutual support, are staked out as a source of comfort in a divided political reality, but also as a potential source of strength for overcoming the divisive rhetorics and devastation inherently connected to Brexit, itself a phenomenon that stands out as a cautionary tale against the dangers of "restorative nostalgia" (Boym 2001).

A different harkening to relive a past moment lies at the core of Danilova's contribution on Hannah Black's novella *Tuesday or September or the End*. Her analysis provokes several crucial questions concerning both, the functions of nostalgia and nostalgia as a phenomenon of modernity itself. As Danilova shows, the novella as a fictionalised account of the *Black Lives Matter* protests in 2020, is in itself a testament to a nostalgic longing for this historical moment of upheaval, where for many – if only for a moment – change seemed tangible. This might be understood as a particularly interesting form of "restorative nostalgia" (Boym 2001), which by harking back to the past suggests a clearly determined vision of what the future needs to hold. Danilova shows this form of longing as a nostalgia distinctly different from a late capitalist "nostalgia for the future" (Fisher 2022) in the Fisherian sense, which results in a haunting and lifeless echo of what was. The nostalgia present in Hannah Black's work is a radically open longing for a past moment of possibility as a potential driver for future change.

The haunting presence of the past is a leitmotif in Tobias Schädel's analysis which places nostalgia in the "post-truth condition", hence a characteriser that has often been used to circumscribe our contemporary. He examines both, liberalist and populist discourses, which are often pitting their respective "truths" against each other. Thereby he painstakingly shows how both discourses function similarly in that they are both driven by the wish to reinstall an incessantly haunting imagined past. As Schädel shows, looking at the discursive divide between liberal and populist truth cultures through the lens of nostalgia, present on *both* sides, might be a first necessary step towards overcoming the fragmentation that constantly is cemented anew by declaring that one's shared truth has been stabbed to death by those perceived to be on the opposing side.

Also included in this edition is an interview with Roberto Vecchi, Professor for Portuguese and Brazilian literature at the University of Bologna, who throughout his research has engaged with imaginations and memories of colonialism in Portugal. Our conversation explored the presence and extent of colonial nostalgia in Portugal, a sentiment shared in a larger European context. Recognising the embeddedness and European universality of this affective relationship with the colonial past, we also discussed its cultural and historical specificities in Portugal as a country that defines and markets itself as deeply affected by *saudade*, an undefined sentiment of longing, which strongly overlaps with the concept of nostalgia.

Nostalgia's political dimension appears throughout all the contributions of this issue. It is granted pride of place in Von Eschen's "The Paradoxes of Nostalgia" (2022), reviewed by Stanislav Serhienko in this issue. Von Eschen examines nostalgia as a political tool, embedded in specific power structures and historical contexts, essential for the course of U.S. policy and the larger world history of the last decades since the end of the Cold War. Serhienko presents the concepts and ideas brought forward in this book, which explores the politically motivated employment of American Western Triumphalism and its interconnection with nostalgia for the stable worldview the Cold War produced. Serhienko's critical engagement with this expansive work embeds it in a larger body of knowledge and reflections on post-cold-war Western triumphalism, entangled systems of power as well as the emergence of nostalgia (from this position of superiority) for communist

ways of life as retro, hence as a consumer-friendly appropriation of some of its elements, emptied from an actual longing for this past.

Our issue also includes two non-thematic contributions. Thales Alecrim compares and analyses the song “War” in two renditions: its original Reggae version by Bob Marley and the Wailers released in the 1960s, and its cover by the Brazilian Metal band Sepultura, released in the 1990s. Through keen attention to their respective differences in genre, text and musical form, Alecrim shows, how popular music can be an insightful object of analysis for gaining a deeper understanding of the historical conjuncture it emerges in. And while this contribution is a non-thematic one, it dialogues with some of the themes raised in other contributions of this issue and even acts as a complementary counterpiece to explorations of nostalgia through engaging with the presence and absence of utopia in both renditions.

The interview “Traces of Pain: A Critical Reevaluation of Women’s Rights and Labour in the Aftermath of the Kosovo War” is a reflection on the art installation in the Kosovo Pavilion of the 60th edition of the Venice Biennale. For this non-thematic contribution, Dela Mießen, Master Student in Culture Studies at Universidade Católica Portuguesa, interviewed her co-student Renea Behluli, who as Head of the National Gallery of Kosovo’s Steering Committee, was involved in selecting the jury that picked out this year’s artwork. The chosen piece was *The Echoing Silences of Metal and Skin* by Doruntina Kastrati. The interview is a reflection on the installation, which focuses on women’s work and exploitation following the Kosovo War.

We round off this issue with a vignette composed of photographs and text by Alfredo Brant and myself. It is a reflection on the knotted nostalgia that runs through fast-disappearing places in Lisbon. Together we set out to explore a small tavern, an old frame shop and a small supermarket in the former workers’ district of Alcântara. These places have for decades defied the constant changes in the neighbourhood but most likely will have to shutter in the near future, due to the city’s plans to extend the metro line. Through photographic documentation and text this last contribution reflects on the confluences of various nostalgic longings, lives and imaginations, premising and reinforcing a “nostalgia for the present” (Salmose 2019, 3) provoked by the anticipated loss of these places.

The contributions in the present issue reflect on nostalgia in its various forms and functions, sometimes deployed as a deliberate tool to change the present and imagine different futures – reactionary, progressive or just different – sometimes as a human emotion that simply is. Ultimately, in whatever form or function it is experienced and deployed, nostalgia is an inalienable part of the human experience and of our continuing attempts to find meaning in it. Sometimes, meaning is found not in what is but in what we experience as an incompleteness of the present, and the longing that is a measure of it.

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