

GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Nostalgia in the twenty-first century

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This special issue, “Nostalgia in the Twenty-First Century”, reflects on nostalgia as a shaping cultural force in the contemporary world and makes a unique inter-disciplinary contribution to the existing literature on this subject. It builds on the insights of an ESRC seminar series hosted at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK, throughout 2010 and 2011. Our initial interest in hosting the series was stimulated by our growing awareness that the range of literatures on nostalgia within our respective disciplines – Marketing and English Studies – had rarely been brought into intellectual exchange. Accordingly, the series of six seminars focussed on what we came to identify as key inter-disciplinary themes in current engagements with, and representations of, the past: material cultures (retro, print and media), urban nostalgia, diaspora and sustainability. This issue develops these conversations about the functions of nostalgia and brings together work by scholars and practitioners from a wide range of theoretical perspectives and industry experiences – film, literary criticism, commercial marketing, cultural geography, museum studies – to illuminate twenty-first century dialogues on the uses of nostalgia in contemporary culture.

The concept of “nostalgia” has developed considerably from its origins in the seventeenth century. Deriving from the Greek words *nostos* (homecoming), and *algos* (pain or longing), the word was first used in a 1688 medical thesis by Johannes Hofer, to designate physical suffering produced by absence from one’s native land (Hofer 1688). It was not until the later nineteenth century that definitions of nostalgia shifted from the medical to the cultural realm and from spatial imaginings of a lost place to temporal imaginings of a lost era. In the twentieth century, nostalgia became a universal catchword for looking back to a “Golden Age”. The importance of idealised places persists, as our contributions on urban and diasporic pasts indicate. Yet the extensive body of scholarship on nostalgia has consistently linked the concept to social transformations, such as fearful responses to accelerating urbanisation or mass immigration (Wright 1985; Hewison 1987). However, other commentators have observed that nostalgic sentiment has enabled the democratic celebration of marginalised histories, which often revive earlier rituals and practices (Samuel 1994). Nostalgia, therefore, is inextricably bound up with cherished notions of identity, and with challenges to these notions. Greater self-reflexivity about these processes is achieved in the various typologies of nostalgia that have been constructed. For example, Fred Davis (1979) described the common definition of nostalgia – the belief that things were better in the past – as “first-order” nostalgia. He suggested that “second-order” or reflexive nostalgia entails the critical analysis of versions of history, while individuals who experience “third-order” or interpreted nostalgia question the meaning and purpose of the emotion itself.

More recently, and in the context of post-Cold War rebuilding of cities and nation states, Svetlana Boym, one of the speakers at our seminar on urban nostalgia, has described “restorative nostalgia” which attempts conservatively to reconstruct ‘rituals of homeland’ and “reflective nostalgia” which instead playfully celebrates our piecemeal and fragmented access to the past (Boym 2001). This playfulness is also evident in accounts of the impact of postmodernism on nostalgia (Jameson 1989; Hutton 1998; Brown 2001). Now that the past is instantly available via the internet and various media, and can be purchased through mass-produced merchandise, or imitations of past products, postmodern nostalgia is often populist, ironic, atemporal and lucrative.

These trends also highlight the ubiquitous and rapidly developing role of technology in shaping, disseminating and capitalising on nostalgia, across a broad range of cultural production and consumption. Technological advancements and the digital media environment are producing new dynamics between past and present, and determining relationships between individuals and communities. New technology presents a paradox: on the one hand, it has the capacity to stimulate nostalgia by bringing large numbers of globally diverse people together: for instance, as diasporic communities or as worldwide audiences for bestselling nostalgic films connected via the internet, as Susan Holak's and Andrew Higson's essays in this special issue demonstrate. However, technologies can also create fragmentation and alienation from the present; as David Lowenthal discusses, our increasingly mediated relationship to the material world has led to perceptions of social and moral decline and loss of traditional values. The essays in this volume, then, explore varieties of personal and collective nostalgia, directly experienced nostalgia for a personal past and nostalgia for a shared cultural history beyond personal memory.

The special issue opens with an interview by two of the editors with David Lowenthal on the forthcoming edition of his seminal work, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, and asks: why a new edition now? Its publication in 1985 was a key moment in the "heritage wars" of Thatcherite Britain and prompted numerous commentaries on the apparently conservative politics of nostalgia in the 1980s. Now, Lowenthal reflects on how changing attitudes to history and memory, new concepts of nationhood, localism and the global city, and an increasingly participatory educational and media culture have changed the terms of the debate.

The second essay is by Andrew Higson, a key figure in the heritage film debates of the 1990s, which examined the commodification of the past on film in the previous decade. Here, he reflects on the apparent co-existence of modern and post-modern versions of nostalgia in twenty-first century heritage film. Drawing on the examples of *Ladies in Lavender* (2004), *Becoming Jane* (2007), *Brideshead Revisited* (2008) and *An Education* (2009), Higson argues that postmodern nostalgia erases the sense of distance between past and present, and he illustrates this with reference to a range of nostalgia-themed websites. In an age where film viewing is mediated by the internet, the discussion of both websites and films raises questions about whether nostalgia is inherent in the design of cultural products or is provoked by the viewer's response.

Dennis Walder also draws on film to undertake a post-colonial analysis of ways of remembering the past in contemporary South Africa. He outlines the conceptual links between nostalgia and Freud's hysteria to develop the idea of "hysterical nostalgia" as a critical tool for analysing two works by expatriate South Africans: *Coming Home*, a memory-play by Athol Fugard and Neill Blomkamp's dystopian film, *District 9*. Walder demonstrates that nostalgia for the apartheid years draws on imagery of excess and dangerous physicality and that notions of performance – and performativity – are central to these representations.

The essay by Annie Blanchette is also centrally concerned with performance as a means of re-visiting and revising the past. Her work is based on an ethnographic study of North American neo-burlesque communities, focusing on amateur female performers who revive old-time striptease practices and creatively engage with identities considered as "*passé*." Unlike many perspectives on nostalgia which highlight utopian discussions of yesteryear, the neo-burlesque community affords a glimpse of less idealised versions of the past. Drawing on queer scholarship, Blanchette argues that some neo-burlesque practices disrupt the temporal logic of progress and can reinvest non-normative, non-ideal identities and bodies with new meanings. Through its emphasis on queering time, this essay demonstrates how consumers create a more enjoyable or inhabitable present.

The essay by Susan Holak considers the role that food has played in stimulating and maintaining nostalgia among several generations of emigrants from the former Soviet Union. Her analysis returns to the spatial and temporal elements of nostalgic desire and outlines the political, geographical and technological factors that modify their inter-relationship and enable a range of diasporic nostalgias. First, she considers the culinary habits of individuals living in Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States, whose sense of national identity was profoundly altered in the post-Soviet era, despite their continued residence in the same location. Secondly, she explores the effects of migration on the expression of diasporic nostalgia by investigating the gastronomic lives of Russian expatriates in Brighton Beach, New York. Finally, Holak examines a diasporic community that transcends limitations of space and time – in cyberspace – and shows how food blogs and online communities utilise nostalgia to forge a sense of identity and belonging. Overall, then, this approach offers insights into successive waves of diasporic and nostalgic experience.

The final essays address our aim of bridging the gap between theory and practice. Kirsty Devine, a curator from the Riverside Museum of Transport and Travel in Glasgow, offers a practitioner viewpoint and discusses the museum's successful transition to a new building and location. She highlights the roles of nostalgia in the museum's appeal through storytelling and collective memory, but she also problematizes the concept of nostalgia by detailing the museum's efforts to avoid sanitisation of the past. Jafari and Taheri offer an academic response to Devine's piece. They focus on three key themes: how historical representations arouse nostalgic sensations and sensibilities in museum visitors; the role of narratives in visitors' development of their nostalgic experiences; and the importance of user engagement in the creation of nostalgic experiences.

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