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Nostalgia

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Nostalgia. Nostalgia is commonly understood to be a condition of mourning or yearning for the past, and a past when things were better, or more certain, or simpler; when, in short, today's nostalgic person would not have been beset by the troubles of the present, and would have been all the more content for it. Nostalgia, as a human condition, presupposes that the past has gone, along with those times and particulars, people and places, mourned and missed. To live in the present as if in the past would be better termed as anachronistic, and gives rise to a melancholy or sentimental disposition; one experiences nostalgia, for better or worse, freely or otherwise, from a later point of one's own narrative. One "looks back" and revisits the past so that one can then look forward again, and take leave of the past. Attempts to undo or "cure" nostalgia through the recreation of the past in the present are made in vain. So recreating your parent's cooking long after leaving home (despite having subsequently lost a taste for it), or flicking through the pages of *Tatler* magazine long after you yourself were a debutant, or attending a religious service (even a service conducted in Latin) long after abandoning the practices of religion, are all enjoyable and harmless nostalgic practices.

Yet the condition of nostalgia, if overindulged, can lead to an unhealthy obsession with this past at the expense of the need to live in the present. Everyone enjoys periods of revelry, a tendency to reminisce and to return to the experiences of and so become reacquainted with one's younger self – in the sense of the ideals, hopes and aspirations from earlier times, even the more carnal and questionable desires, that have since been grown out of or cast aside. To lose touch with one's younger self is considered to be at the root of psychological problems, and often the very foundation of urban alienation, not least in respect of the mass migrations from open rural or semi-urban spaces to the confines of the slum dwellings that proliferate around the

majority of urban conurbations (cf Davis 2007), and the resultant eradication of traces of an earlier existence. The profound psychological impact of being wrenched out of one way of life naturally gives rise to an attempt to deny the trauma of the present, and to focus instead on a time of earlier harmony.

In psychoanalytical terms, the person who denies traumatic events in their own history (the loss of loved ones, sexual assault or the untimely destruction of the family unit, for example), and so suppresses grief through a refusal of nostalgia, becomes open to a “return of the repressed”. The sudden re-emergence of the troubled personal history forces the subject to belatedly deal with difficult reactions and emotions, often in ways detrimental to his or her own interests. The reductive characterization typical in much British television comedy where the class rebel is revealed to be of middle class stock (or the pedantic stickler for the mores and social codes of the bourgeoisie who turns out to be of humble origins) is effectively predicated along the lines advanced by Sigmund Freud in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*: defensive, deceptive behavior indicative of unresolved feelings about, or a failure to come to terms with, the past. Thus grief and grieving can be interpreted as a way of allowing nostalgia to proliferate, not least in respect of the inevitable erosion of the family unit.

The emotional investment in the past, or one’s own past, can be heightened so as to shore up the connections to the familiar, and to a sense of oneself, when the person is besieged by the unfamiliar – the confusions and new paradigms of modern existence. An emotional investment in the past increasingly becoming the foundation for psychological wholeness in a fast-paced, even disappointing, adult world. And nostalgia, rather than a retreat to the past, can be said to find in the past the answers to the present. The perspective that arises from framing the past in the present dissipates

the magnitude of the new. In J M W Turner's celebrated 1838 painting *The Fighting Téméraire tugged to her Berth to be broken up*, the once revered battleship of the Trafalgar campaign is seen approaching the yard where it will be dismantled. The uncouth tug boat, with its dark plume of smoke (the pollution of the ascendant industrial age), cannot detract from the death-bed transfiguration Turner affords the Téméraire: the setting sun lights the greasy London water and low estuary clouds with a golden orange while the Téméraire seems to fade from view, as if a ghost ship, against the diminished horizon of blue sky. For Turner the wreckage of former civilizations casts doubt on the certainties of the new, emergent empires.

Nostalgia and Consumer Culture

Nostalgia is readily subject to a consumer culture that capitalizes on the promises of delivering happiness. The suggested nostalgic properties of a consumer item presents the product as speaking directly to one's memories and emotions rather than, as McCracken argues (1988) from an historical perspective, on the origins of modern consumerism, seeking to shape those memories and emotions for the ends of further commercial exploitation.

Nostalgia has emerged as a pre-eminent, if not the pre-eminent, commercial category. Nostalgia is the goal of market research towards targeted advertising – the way of establishing the language that is most familiar, and most welcome and believable, for the key consumers. Ultimately, for Campbell (1987), a sentimentality pervades the presentation of new commercial products, even at their most modish and novel (that is: those seemingly without nostalgia): their promises are founded on older

notions of enjoyment and fulfillment, and break with a Protestant tradition read as relatively ascetic, comfortless and lacking in the commercial orientation of feelings.

With advances in visual technology comes the opportunity to not only summon up the past, but to summon up the imagined idyll of the past with ever great verisimilitude. Thus Victorian photographers would specialize in touching up photographs of the deceased (rouging the lips, adding pallor to the cheeks), and Ridley Scott's celebrated 1973 television commercial for Hovis bread (a vision of a bygone age in Northern Britain; cobbled streets, flat caps, a boy on a bicycle, a dialect and parochial voice-over) is rendered in a suitably faux-antiquated aesthetic. Scott's images are delivered as black-and-whiteness-in-color: homely and earthly – i.e. organic – browns. This existence may have gone, the advert intimates, but its essential healthiness (specifically, wheat germ) remains available; Hovis bread is still “As good for you today as it's always been”.

The emergence of social networking sites on the Internet enabled and finessed reunification with old school friends, or old friends in general. Access to the Friends Reunited search engine and database was offered for a fee, and with this came the advertised ability to hold back the years and reengage with those very human emotions of actual friendship. However in reality it could be said that Friends Reunited merely offered the chance to live in a state of nostalgia – to renew friendships virtually rather than actually, and to ensure the nostalgia hit remained confined to the email in-box.

A further commercialization of nostalgia has been particularly apparent for the generation born to the baby boomer generation – those who lived to reap the benefits of the favorable economic climate generated by their parents, via higher levels of education and health, the proliferation of consumables, and without (for those in

Western Europe at least) military conscription. Formative cultural experiences, particularly of forms of popular culture, are endlessly recycled: pop groups reform and tour; favorite television shows are released on DVD or are remade; varieties of fondly remembered candies become available once again; “retrogamers” replay old video games; CD compilations of music from recent eras predominate in both homes and (now that this generation are themselves parents) in the restaurants and shops frequented; original albums are digitally restored, repackaged and reissued – that is, are to be re-bought. In the former East Bloc, the phenomenon of “Ostalgie” has occurred – a longing for the life of East Bloc state socialism before the “advances” and freedoms of 1989 and the close of the Cold War.

Nostalgia and Postmodernism

New waves of nostalgic revelry come to form a continuum of nostalgia; the nostalgic discourse replicates itself until – to use semiotic terms – its signifiers comes to exist without a recollection or historical sense of what it was that is actually being signified. A certain aesthetic style speaks of a nostalgia that is, if considered even in passing, entirely ahistorical, and can be consumed independently of any emotional connection to or investment in the times and places to which the style alludes. Such postmodern nostalgia was identified by Jameson (1992) as “The Nostalgia Mode”, as seen in operation in the film *Body Heat* (it can also be said to be visible in the films of David Lynch that fetishise 1950s small town American life). This visual discourse of nostalgia, that ranges freely and ahistorically across any number of periods and fashions, arguably works to construct a shared sense of belonging from scratch, in and for an evermore alienating and depersonalized world.

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