

Nostalgia



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Abstract

This essay discusses the concept of nostalgia as a paradigm that comes into play in engaged art and particularly in contemporary artistic practices and theories that relate to the global margins. While international art platforms and the museum are increasingly calling for decolonization, inclusion and diversity, issues of remembrance, migration and exile, trauma and loss, fragmentation and restoration, often appear to be negotiated or viewed through the paradigm of nostalgia. Can nostalgia be used as a critical tool to address these problematics? Can the aesthetics of nostalgia activate change or even inspire debate? Or, on the contrary, does nostalgia fix and maintain difference when it comes to gender and racial issues, as well as their intersectionalities? Is there a clear demarcation between the perpetrators of colonial nostalgia and the inheritors of its legacies? This essay intends to address these questions and expand the reflection on nostalgia as an effective term for the field of global art history.



Between Concept and Affect

Although the concept of nostalgia is becoming ever more present in contemporary art practices and discourses, it has not yet been comprehensively analyzed when it comes to engaged art, notably when it is produced by artists belonging to minorities or coming from the so-called global margins. Indeed, the relationship of nostalgia with themes related to (post)colonialism, nation-building, and identity politics deserves to be further examined.¹ One of the convolutions of the term nostalgia that complexifies its investigation, but also broadens its spectrum, lies in its constant oscillation between concept and affect. Interestingly, this unsettled definition of nostalgia, going back and forth between scientific inquiry and sentiment is also what characterizes ethnographic and racial representations that ambiguously fluctuate between powerful discursively constructed scholarly facts and emotion.

1 This essay is based on a research project undertaken at the University of Bern, Switzerland, on nostalgia in modern and contemporary art and architecture in the Middle East and North Africa that resulted in a collection of essays and a scientific article. The project was awarded the “Inspired Teaching” Grant from the University of Bern, Switzerland, in 2021. See Nadia Radwan and Laura Hindelang, eds., “Nostalgia and Belonging in Art and Architecture from the MENA Region. A Collection of Essays,” *Manazir: Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts, Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region*, 2021, <https://manazir.art/blog/nostalgia-and-belonging-art-and-architecture-mena-region>. Nadia Radwan and Laura Hindelang, “Between Affect and Concept: Nostalgia in Modern and Contemporary Art and Architecture from the Middle East and North Africa,” in *Studies in the Arts - Neue Perspektiven auf Forschung über, in und durch Kunst und Design*, eds. Thomas Gartmann and Christina Urchugeia (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, forthcoming 2022).

The term nostalgia (from the Greek *nostos*, return; home, and *algos*, pain) was first coined by the physician Johannes Hofer (1669–1752) to describe the extreme homesickness felt by Swiss mercenaries posted in France and Italy in the late seventeenth century. The symptoms of this affliction included melancholia, insomnia, anorexia, weakness, and anxiety, and, in certain cases, suicidal ideation.² During the nineteenth century, the physiological understandings of nostalgia gradually gave way to an existential but nonetheless incurable condition of romanticism linked to emotion. Nostalgia has since been theorized as a dialectic relationship between past and future across various disciplines in the social sciences and humanities.³

From the mid-2000s onwards, the meaning of nostalgia has been debated in modern and contemporary art and architecture.⁴ This development may be linked to the fact that a growing number of artists have introduced practices for archiving, reimagining, and deconstructing past, present, and future in order to create decolonial and transnational approaches to cultural memory, knowledge production, and politics. Such approaches have been the focus of international exhibitions, centering on the use of photographic archives and documents, and featuring the works of artists such as Tacita Dean, Vivan Sundaram, and Walid Raad, amongst others⁵, while simultaneously entering the semantics of contemporary art discourse.⁶

This “nostalgic turn” has opened up the reflection on ways to examine

2 Janelle L. Wilson, “‘Remember When...’: A Consideration of the Concept of Nostalgia,” *TC: A Review of General Semantics* 56, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 297.

3 Jean Starobinski and William S. Kemp, “The Idea of Nostalgia,” *Diogenes* 14, no. 54 (1966): 81–103; Fred Davis, “Nostalgia, Identity and the Current Nostalgia Wave,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 11, no. 2 (1977): 414–424; Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

4 Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October*, no. 110 (Autumn 2004): 3–22; Andreas Huyssen, “Nostalgia for Ruins,” *Grey Room*, no. 23 (Spring 2006): 6–21; Claire Bishop, “How did we get so nostalgic for modernism?” *fotomuseum winterthur* (blog), 14 Sep. 2013, <https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/2013/09/14/how-did-we-get-so-nostalgic-for-modernism/>. accessed 15 September 2020.

5 Okwui Enwezor, ed., *Archive Fever. Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (Göttingen: International Center of Photography. Exh. Cat., 2008).

6 Charles Merewether, ed., *The Archive. Document of Contemporary Art Series* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

modernism and the question as to why contemporary artists are drawn to the aesthetics of western modernist experiences as well as its failed utopias. Claire Bishop, in her insightful question “How did we get so nostalgic for Modernism?”, referring to examples such as Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster’s *Chandigarh Book* (1996) or Rirkrit Tiravanija’s *Dom-Ino* (1998), evokes the photogenic quality of Le Corbusier’s projects and the manners in which contemporary artists may have contributed to shaping the nostalgic aesthetics of modernism.⁷ However, modernist ideological endeavors comparable to Le Corbusier’s architectural projects have not only activated critical responses in formerly colonized contexts, whether North Africa, the Middle East or South Asia, but also engendered multiple stories of modernism, as well as contestations.

The artist Kader Attia, in his multimedia installation *The Object’s Interlacing* (2014–2020)⁸, juxtaposes the stories, actors, and genealogies of brutalist concrete modernist North African architecture with vernacular mud brick traditional architecture, thereby unfolding a dialectic between the art historical narrative of universality and cultural authenticity. Nostalgia, in Attia’s *Genealogies*, can be understood as an individual or collective reaction towards the unsettling experiences of modernity, constantly shifting between the hegemony of universalism and the nostalgic desire for new aesthetics resulting from transcultural exchange of knowledge and culture. This ever-changing nature of nostalgia triggers the question of positionality and subjectivity. Which audiences does nostalgia concern? Does the location of the exhibition space or the lived experiences of the viewers change the meaning of nostalgia? And who is entitled to be nostalgic about what?

While nostalgia was understood as a treatable sickness linked to melancholia in the seventeenth century, Svetlana Boym, in her seminal *The Future of Nostalgia*,

7 Claire Bishop, “How did we get so nostalgic for modernism?” *fotomuseum winterthur* (blog), 14 September 2013, <https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/2013/09/14/how-did-we-get-so-nostalgic-for-modernism/>, accessed 15 September 2020.

8 I am referring here to Kader Attia’s installation as it was displayed in the exhibition *Kader Attia: Remembering the Future* at the Kunsthhaus Zurich (21 August – 15 November 2020).

asserts that in the twentieth century it had become an “incurable disease”, given that “nostalgia like progress, is dependent on the modern conception of unrepeatable and irreversible time”⁹. Thus, nostalgia cannot be comprehended as fixed in a temporality or a locality but is, rather, an unstable and ever transforming process that is directed as much to the past as it is to the future. This transgeographic and transhistoric dimension of nostalgia resonates in the politics of belonging, as emphasized by Nira Yuval-Davis, who argues that “even in its most stable ‘primordial’ forms, [...] belonging is always a dynamic process, not a reified fixity, which is only a naturalized construction of a particular hegemonic form of power relations”¹⁰.

Colonial Nostalgia

The close link between nostalgia and belonging has also been underlined by the Palestinian artist, theorist, and critic Kamal Boullata who, in his reflection about belonging and globalization, considers that “affirming one’s *be/ing* through *longing*” has become a touchstone of aesthetic expression throughout Arab culture.¹¹ Hence, spatial geographic distance in the field of global art is often translated by temporal distance and the discourse it produces is often geographically distant from the actual context to which it pertains.¹² Moreover, this distanciation present in nostalgia resonates in the prejudice of timelessness, anachronism, or archaism that has often been projected onto art produced in nonwestern contexts. Therefore, if, as underlined by Timothy Mitchell, “staging the modern has always required the non-modern, the space of colonial difference”¹³,

9 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 7, 13.

10 Nira Yuval-Davis, “Belonging and the Politics of Belonging,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 40, no. 3 (2006): 199.

11 Finbarr Barry Flood, ed., *There Where You Are Not: Selected Writings of Kamal Boullata* (Munich: Hirmer, 2019), 428; Kamal Boullata, *Belonging and Globalisation: Critical Essays in Contemporary Art and Culture* (London: Saqi, 2008).

12 Peter J. Schneemann, “Les paradigmes du regard. La perception de l’art à l’ère globale,” *Diogenes* 3, no. 231 (2010): 154–157.

13 Timothy Mitchell, *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xxvi.

then the relationship of colonial nostalgia to contemporary art practices and theory deserves to be investigated.

Andreas Huyssen has argued that the nostalgic longing for a past “is always also a longing for another place”, a “utopia in reverse”¹⁴. This definition of nostalgia, a yearning for a place that no longer exists or has never existed, links it not only to the remembrance or the desire for what has been lost, such as the sublime of the ruin, but also to the imagined other and remote lands, which have been romanticized from the eighteenth century onwards. In that perspective, notions such as ‘the east’ or ‘the orient’, understood in the sense defined by Edward Said as concepts that have been discursively constructed by western scholarship through a colossal body of knowledge¹⁵, can be linked to the nostalgic desire for a temporality and a spatiality that did not necessarily exist. But then, can nostalgia as a means for engaged art transcend the binaries between local/universal, self/other, here/there in contemporary art practices by involving colonial aesthetics?

The ambiguity of colonial or imperial nostalgia lies precisely in the fact that it operates on two levels: on the one hand, it is used in engaged art dealing with identity politics, issue of gender and race; on the other hand, it can also be triggered by the actual agents of racism and neocolonialism. In both cases, paradoxically, it is expressed as a nostalgia for a place and culture as it was before or during colonization. As Renato Rosaldo underlined, imperialist nostalgia “uses a pose of ‘innocent yearning’ both to capture people’s imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination”¹⁶. William Cunningham Bissell poses a similar question: “How exactly do we come to terms with expressions of colonial nostalgia by the descendants of those who struggled long and hard to overcome the effects of European domination and exploitation?”¹⁷

14 Andreas Huyssen, “Nostalgia for Ruins,” *Grey Room*, no. 23 (2006): 6–21.

15 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

16 Renato Rosaldo, “Imperialist Nostalgia,” *Representations*, Special Issue: *Memory and Counter-Memory*, no. 26 (Spring 1989): 108.

17 William Cunningham Bissell, “Engaging Colonial Nostalgia,” *Cultural Anthropology* 20, no. 2 (2005): 216.

Hence, it appears that these two antinomic manifestations of colonial or imperialist nostalgia happen to intersect or overlap in contemporary artworks that display colonial aesthetics. This ambivalence can be found, for instance, in South African artist and activist Zanele Muholi's powerful large-scale photographic portraits. In the sleek black and white photographs that recall ethnographic clichés that were displayed in the Arsenale during the 58th Venice Biennale held in 2019, the female subjects' gaze is defiantly reversed, directly towards the viewer, thereby exercising what Judith Butler has called "a plural and performative right to appear"¹⁸. In that case, the incorporation of the aesthetics of colonial photography and primitivism are used by Muholi as a critical means to celebrate blackness and queer aesthetics while the ambiguity of nostalgia engages the viewer's emotion, whether desire, repulsion, or both, by calling on his/her/their own relation to such aesthetics.

Archival Obsession

Undoubtedly one of the mediums that most immediately generates the sentiment of nostalgia is photography, which is nostalgic in its essence, as the photograph instantly fixes realities in the past to become the marker of the "what has been"¹⁹. As Susan Sontag remarked, "photographs actively promote nostalgia" and most subjects are "just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos"²⁰. While photography can be considered as an "apparatus of power"²¹ that enables the perpetration of stereotypes through the hegemonic gaze²², when practiced in

18 Judith Butler, "Gender Politics and the Right to Appear," in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 25; see also Alexandra Poulain, "Gazing Back: Decolonial Strategies in Zanele Muholi's 'Faces and Phases,'" *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 2019, <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/1262>.

19 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 79.

20 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 15.

21 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2014), 85.

22 Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

colonial contexts, it can also be a means to reclaim modernity and its ownership through ‘imitation’ as an act of engagement.²³ Such overlapping displays of colonial aesthetics through photography broaden the scope of nostalgia from being solely a marker of othering to a critical tool for reclaiming indigenous agency. The fact that nostalgia operates as a mode of social memory by emphasizing distance and disjuncture may partly explain the widespread use of archival documents in global contemporary art and curatorial practices.²⁴

Svetlana Boym defines *reflective* nostalgia as a notion related to loss, melancholia, and mourning that is signified by the decay of the ruin, the fragment, and a sense of distance and defamiliarization.²⁵ Instances of reflective nostalgia can be found in situations of conflict, war, and the trauma of destruction and exile that resonate in the widespread excavation and the usage of the archive by many artists in the Middle East and North Africa. Indeed, works by artists such as Emily Jacir, Mariam Ghani, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, and Zineb Sedira all engage with textual, photographic, or oral archival documents in their work and address questions of memory, remembrance, and fragmented topographies and histories.²⁶

Thus, the archive and counter-archive²⁷ are often closely linked to the notion of nostalgia. Jacques Derrida has described the “archive fever” (*mal d’archives*) of our times as “a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the

23 Stephen Sheehi, “A Social History of Early Arab Photography or a Prolegomenon to an Archaeology of the Lebanese Imago,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 2 (2007): 178.

24 Hal Foster, “Archives of Modern Art,” *October*, no. 99 (Winter 2002.): 81–95; Beatrice von Bismarck et al., *Interarchive: archivarische Praktiken und Handlungsräume im zeitgenössischen Kunstfeld* (Köln: König, 2002); Okwui Enwezor, ed., *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*.

25 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 55.

26 Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, and John Pedro Schwartz, eds., *Archives, Museums, and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); Anthony Downey, ed., *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

27 Cf. Yvonne Schweizer’s entry on “Counter-Archive” in this volume.

return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement”²⁸. And, along with the archive’s function, classification and ordering, comes archival violence, which one can find, for instance, in colonial repositories. As “the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events”²⁹, the absences, voids, and concealed stories of the archive reveal, in the words of Gayatri Spivak, its “epistemic violence” applied through an “alien ideology established as the only truth, and a set of human sciences busy establishing the ‘native’ as self-consolidating Other”³⁰. Nevertheless, while practices of counter-archives in contemporary art may reveal other stories and discourses from outside the archive’s apparatus of power, the obsessive usage of archival documents also points to their attractive material quality. Therefore, as nostalgia has become so prevalent in the works of contemporary artists when addressing issues of war and the disappearance of cultural memory, one is consequently entitled to ask to what extent it has become constitutive of a canon of global art history. And while being an artist from the global margins has also become an emotional marker, nostalgia may conceal the critical potential of decolonizing approaches as much as it may offer new ways of analyzing the construction of narratives and emotion in contemporary art.

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28 Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 56.

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30 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives (Introduction) 1985/1999,” in *The Archive. Document of Contemporary Art Series*, edited by Charles Merewether (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 165.

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