

Digitality and Visuality of Nostalgia: Trans-ideology

by Ming Turner

ABSTRACT

Trans-ideology: Nostalgia was a film festival curated by Ming Turner and screened in Berlin in August 2013. It showed a selection of new video works from international artists that covered a wide range of ideas surrounding the concept of nostalgia. Fabio DaSilva and Jim Faught suggested in their article “Nostalgia: A Sphere and Process of Contemporary Ideology” (1982) that nostalgia isolated and mythicised selected objects from the past so that we felt we were enjoying a more tranquil and conflictless past. This nostalgic past was somehow not completely reality, rather, it was ambiguous and purified. DaSilva and Faught indicated that the past was usually perceived as more tranquil than the present. The nostalgic past ignored real material conditions and tensions, and embraced an emotional utopia.

Nostalgia offers a comfort zone where we find a peaceful and conflictless past, and where we escape from the hectic and demanding real life in capitalist society. As nostalgia reduces our critical engagement with the past, history is not entirely real but is selected and mythical. Therefore, nostalgia is based on either dreamy and subjective views of the past or fantasies about the future. The paper introduces the screening, which was created with the ideology of recalling the internal and utopian world of

individuals – either a nostalgic past or a fantasised future. All selected works relate to the ideas of nostalgia in the genres of popular culture, politics, national and local history, personal narratives or the vision for the future.

INTRODUCTION

In August 2013 I curated the film festival *Trans-ideology: Nostalgia* at Supermarkt Creative Resource Center, a hub for digital culture in Berlin, Germany. The curation of this film festival resulted from an invitation from Transart Institute based in New York, following my curation of another film festival, *Inbetweeners of Asia*, in Tanzfabrik Berlin in 2009. The curation of these two film festivals was initially an open call for international lens-based artists; and for the Trans-ideology screening, I received 77 submissions from emerging and established artists from five continents. In this paper I will explore the curatorial concept behind this project, Nostalgia, and will specifically analyse three selected pieces of work.

TRANS-IDEOLOGY

The film festival *Trans-ideology* was curated to visualise my long-term research interests in





Below, stills from *Tales of a Digital Immigrant* (2013) by Dennis Hlynsky, above video, 00:18:08

diasporic studies, which explore the ideas of travelling, nostalgia, memory and issues of identity. It also covers various themes of postcolonialism, including diaspora, the sense of belonging and authenticity. 34 artists were selected to show their animations, videos and documentary films in the project. To explore the curatorial themes, I will examine the concept of the main theoretical concern, nostalgia:

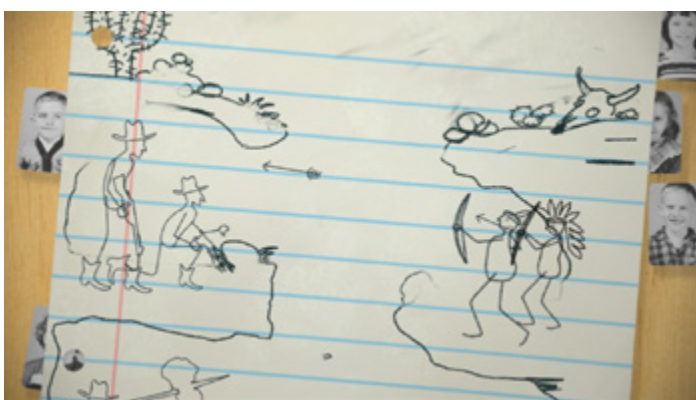
“Myth and symbol as sources of nostalgia appear more real than everyday experience, which itself is beset by ambiguity and flux. The past is compacted into a cohesive, unitary whole that appears as a kind of goodness-in-itself-totality, above reproach and criticism” (Dasilva and Faught 56).

In the article “Nostalgia: A Sphere and Process of Contemporary Ideology” (1982), Fabio DaSilva and Jim Faught suggest that nostalgia isolates and mythologizes selected objects from the past so that we feel we are enjoying a more tranquil and less conflicted past. This nostalgic past is somehow not completely reality; rather, it is an ambiguous

and purified past. Furthermore, they assert that the past is usually perceived as more tranquil than the present. The nostalgic past ignores real material conditions and tensions, and embraces an emotional utopia. Nostalgia offers a comfort zone where we find a peaceful and harmonious past, and where we escape from the hectic and demanding real life of capitalist society.

Nostalgia offers utopian imaginations of fantasy and myth towards our own stories and the environment in which we live. Nostalgia reduces our critical engagement with the past, where history is not entirely real but is selected and mythical. Therefore, the sense of nostalgia is based on either dreamy and subjective views of the past or fantasies about the future. The inspiration for this film festival came from the ideology of recalling the internal and utopian world of individuals – either a nostalgic past or a fantasised future of the participating artists, the visitors and myself.

Scholars of contemporary culture have critiqued nostalgia’s role in perpetuating our everyday society, which is built upon excessively idealised



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and politically conservative visions of the past. As to nostalgia in a consumer culture, Dalia Kandiyoti argues that “[n]ostalgia is central to identity-for-purchase because it ‘manufactures’ collective history as a bygone, ideal experience of everyday life, community, landscape, and heritage to which the consumer presumably wants to return” (82). The longing for ‘return’ is implied in the very term nostalgia itself: a seventeenth-century doctor combined the words *nostos* (return home) and *algia* (pain) to describe extreme forms of homesickness (Kandiyoti 82). Consequently, nostalgia is the pain that we endure when longing for the ‘good old days’.

The first video to introduce is *Tales of a Digital Immigrant* (2013) created by Dennis Hlynsky, who is a professor at Rhode Island School of Design in the United States. *Tales of a Digital Immigrant* was created based on a series of first-person short narratives that form a portrait of the artist himself: a stranger in a digital land. In this work, Hlynsky reflects on moments of change in society and weaves a tale of himself as an aging American (artist’s statement). This video acknowledges the fact that Hlynsky accepts the notion that the world has changed beyond his recognition, as was the case with his own grandmother who immigrated to America from the Ukraine in the early 1900s.

Regarding the term nostalgia, Ian Duncanson states that “[n]ostalgia may be a symptom of melancholy concerning what has been, or what is considered to have been, and subsequently lost, or it may be a neurotic fear of what either may be lost or of what valued object is likely to be lost” (23). In *Tales of a Digital Immigrant*, Hlynsky aims to express the fact that we live in a perpetually changing world and our digital culture moves with such speed that we often feel left behind. As the world changes so rapidly, we become foreigners by standing still, as if we are immigrants, just like his grandmother. Hlynsky’s nostalgia lies in the loss of objects and memories from the good old days, so this video was created based on his personal recollections. In other words, it was created based on the artist’s real memories. According to Hlynsky, this video began as a series of short stories written for a graphic novel entitled *Drinking Beer with Robots*, but then he shifted to video after being unable to secure a publisher (artist’s statement). Since this video is a collection of his family documentaries and memories, the visual presentation of this piece is illustrative and surreal, which strengthens the mystical characteristics of his sense of nostalgia and crystallises his vague memories.

The Adventures from Sissi and Sissi, 2012 was created by katze und krieg, a performance duo





Below, stills from *The Adventures from Sissi and Sissi* (2012) by Katze und Krieg, above video 00:21:08.

consisting of Katharina Jey and Julia Dick, who have been working together since 2007 and who are currently based in Cologne, Germany. *The Adventures from Sissi and Sissi* is the visualisation of the artists' rediscovery of slowness and simplicity in our current rapid, accelerating and highly complex world, especially in urban spaces (Katze und Krieg, artist's statement). By creating this video, they celebrate very simple actions and glorify the quotidian moments of our everyday lives. Dressed up in elegant traditional ball gowns, Katze und Krieg asked members of the public and fellow passengers to film them enjoying their desire for tranquility and a slower pace of life. The conflict between the nostalgic slow pace of life and the present day encounters with our noisy and busy daily lives is a powerful yet contradictory scenario in this video.

Being completely engaged in tranquillity and peace, Katze und Krieg ignore all their fellow passengers and other members of the public who form a chaotic backdrop to each scene. The artists deliberately mixed the original background noise with soothing and classical music, mirroring the contradiction

between the artists and the real life in which they find themselves. The mixture of the noise from the traffic and people on the street and the classical music also responds to the psychological conflicts between real life and our internal desire towards a nostalgic past, which is long lost and impossible to return to.

The Israeli-born video art maker and video editor Guli Silberstein created the video *Disturbdance*, 2012, which deals with the political issues and the violent tension which exists between Israel and Palestine. Silberstein picked up a news clip online which portrayed a young woman trying to prevent two armed Israeli Defense Forces soldiers from shooting at a group of Palestinian protesters in the village behind her. *Disturbdance* is a poetic video work, dealing with the pain of the unavoidable violence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The images are digitally processed and slowed down and the soundtrack has been replaced with lyrical music. The scene is removed to an abstract level where the soldiers and the girl seem to be caught in a poetic dance located between a cruel reality and a utopian dream (Silberstein, artist's statement).





Below, stills from *Disturbdance* (2012) by Guli Silberstein, above video, 00:03:20

Silberstein digitally processed the real images into a pixelated landscape and he stripped the clip from its original sound, replacing it with emotive yet suspenseful music. The surreal colours and slightly distorted shapes of the figures and objects in the video suggest a mystification of the reality. For Silberstein, the video is converted from journalistic to allegorical, taking on a poetic dimension, transforming the never-ending political tension into a quasi-dance, a myth (Silberstein, home page). Myths and symbols as sources of nostalgia appear more real than everyday reality. Perhaps, through mystifying the video clip, the diasporic artist Silberstein is longing for a utopian reality and denying real human complexity in his homeland.

Aside from the similarity of the themes of these three pieces, different methods and perspectives have been used in their respective creative processes. *Tales of a Digital Immigrant* deals with rather complex issues. Despite the fact that it was produced based on personal narratives, the rich sources related to American history, popular culture, fashion and even the development of technological innovation were its key references. Hlynsky paralleled family memories and objects with essential social and

cultural events in the United States, with some witty humour and a few surprises for the viewer. It is such a beautifully produced piece with various techniques employed such as digitally manipulated images, historical photographs, drawings, clips of old television programmes/films and acting by people. When recalling memories, they seem to appear in our mind randomly instead of in a chronological order and the events or short stories in *Tales of a Digital Immigrant* also follow this pattern, i.e. they do not seem to connect with each other through any specific order or theme. Rather, there are always a number of hints that appear in certain objects, things or people that become the topic for the next scenario in the video.

Unlike *Tales of a Digital Immigrant*, *The Adventures from Sissi and Sissi* is effectively a record of a performance in which the artists themselves dress up in costumes that express the theme of the video. Inviting members of the public to film them is an interesting strategy, especially when the task is taken on by those who are not familiar with filming. The video demonstrates the discomfort and nervousness of those people being asked to do the filming, and the film makers' dialogue with the artists and their



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lack of skill in filming create rather amusing and unexpected effects. *Disturbdance* was created in a wholly different way than the previous two pieces. The adaptation of a real life video clip in a war zone suggests strong connotative references to reality and to the artist. The manipulation of the original video clip certainly mystifies the tension of the event, transforming it into a beautified yet powerful piece of art. Utilising background music is an important element in both *The Adventures from Sissi and Sissi* and *Disturbdance* as it strengthens the poetic components in the scenarios of the work and dilutes the distance between reality and nostalgic imagination of a homeland and a past that cannot be recovered.

CONCLUSION

DaSilva and Faught note that “[w]ith nostalgia the real time sequence of thought and material production is broken, while abstracted bits and pieces are reordered into an imaginary life context” (58). Hlynsky, Katze und Krieg, and Silberstein’s works indicate this kind of ideology through an unfulfilled search for a utopian world, a longing for

the lost past, personal narratives, or de-materialising the reality of our lives. It is evident that the screening of this festival at this venue created some dialogue between the viewers and the works across cultural and political boundaries.

You can view the films at the following links:

Dennis Hlynsky, *Tales of a Digital Immigrant* (2013), 18 min 8 sec: <http://vimeo.com/63536363>

katze und krieg, *The Adventures from Sissi and Sissi* (2012), 21 min 08 sec: <http://vimeo.com/82086608>

Guli Silberstein, *Disturbdance* (2012), 3 min 20 sec: <http://vimeo.com/36596277>

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