



REVIVAL

MEMORIES, IDENTITIES, UTOPIAS

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Revival. Memories, Identities, Utopias

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Designed by Jack Hartnell

Cover Image:
Henri De Braekeleer, *The Man in the Chair*, 1876 (detail).
Oil on canvas, 79 x 63 cm, Koninklijk Museum voor
Schone Kunsten, Antwerp.

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PART 1

MEMORIES



NOSTALGIA

MATT LODDER

Nostalgia, the melancholy fondness for the past which seems to characterize much material and cultural revival, was once thought to be pathological—a literal disease, or psychiatric disorder. Swiss soldiers fighting as mercenaries abroad in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were frequently afflicted with bouts of weeping, anorexia and suicidal thoughts, and several physicians sought to explain their malaise through a diagnosis of something approaching homesickness, a severe longing for the familiar. Though initially thought confined to the Swiss (and thought to have been caused, in one account at least, by damage inflicted on the brain by either the difference in atmospheric pressures between Switzerland and the lower countries, or by the constant clanging of cowbells in the Alps!), further studies found nostalgic melancholia in soldiers in the French army and in participants of the American Civil War.¹

Into the twentieth century, the symptoms of nostalgia-homesickness broadened to include anxiety, sadness, sleeplessness and fever, and even in the latter years of the millennium accounts of nostalgia as a psychological disorder persisted, diagnosed as a variant of depression primarily amongst the military, immigrants, and first-year university students. However, as Constantine Sedikides, Tim Wildschut and Denise Baden have explained, our contemporary conception now seems to see nostalgia as divergent from homesickness; a ‘yearning for aspects of one’s past, a yearning that may include but is not limited to one’s homeland ... a universal experience, present and prevalent across the lifespan’.² Crucially for our discussions here, Sedikides et al. also, in common with other psychologists, characterize nostalgia as a positive emotion, ‘an existential exercise in search for identity and meaning, a weapon in internal confrontations with existential dilemmas, and a mechanism for reconnecting with important others’. By this definition, nostalgia becomes a way through which the past becomes a tool for existential self-creation.

This move from dislocated homesickness to active tool of identity creation through revival is at work today in East Berlin. In the former GDR, active recuperation of communist architecture and visual and material culture has coalesced into a recognizable cultural phenomenon of *Ostalgie*—Nostalgia for the East. Tumultuously thrust into the capitalist cultures of the West following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent, painful reunification process, residents of East Germany commonly flocked to use their newly-acquired purchasing power on consumer goods, furniture and clothing from the West. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, reminiscences of daily life under the Communist government were softened by the passing of time (and, frankly, as historical discourse on quotidian experience in the East became necessarily more nuanced as the politically-charged rush of the end of the Cold War abated). A culture of revival of the familiar artefacts, brands and comfort foods of the East began to take hold, including in the establishment of hotels such as the Ostel. At the Ostel, housed in a prefabricated concrete apartment block typical of East Berlin, the aesthetics of Communist culture become ironized, romanticized, and nostalgized. As anthropologist Petra Rethmann writes:

The collection of stationery, panty hose, bottles of shampoo and laundry detergent, wrapped soap bars, matchboxes, biscuit tins, household cleaners, toothpaste, sauce bottles, Rotkäppchen sparkling wine bottles, chocolate bars

and doorknobs displayed behind the glass of shelves and cupboards throughout the hotel looks like a still life in the genre of socialist—if not realism, then jouissance. The glass of the display cases renders the objects as an exhibit, a spectacle to be admired. In the commodity romance image of the GDR, history is severed from memory and objects are lifted into the realm of the aesthetic and fantastic.³

This severance of history from memory, politics from aesthetics in *Ostalgie* should trouble us. Though life in East Berlin was not unremittingly bleak (as its visual culture reveals), *Ostalgie* must necessarily elide the horrors and brutalities of life behind the Wall, including the murders of those fleeing to the West. The contemporary psychological account of nostalgia contends that yearning for the familiar ‘generates positive affect, elevates self-esteem, fosters social connectedness, and alleviates existential threat’, but there are risks in revival.⁴ In March 2015, in another German example, the Coca-Cola corporation caused uproar when it released an advert to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the launch of its orange soda brand, Fanta, promoting a limited run of the drink nostalgically formulated to its old recipe and packaged in an appropriately retro bottle. Whilst this kind of soft-tinted revival has become fairly common recently among brands seeking to anchor their identities to simpler, apparently more authentic moments in their histories, in Coca Cola’s case, the moment in question happened to be the necessity to find new product lines that were not hampered by trade embargoes during the period of Nazi rule. Worse, the chirpy, whimsical advert explicitly claimed to be bringing *die gute alte Zeit zurück*—reviving the good old days of Germany, 1940.⁵

As styles, objects, moods and aesthetics are revived and reproduced, this positive warmth of the nostalgic affect elides the complexities of historical time, context and circumstance. Nostalgia is no longer an illness of dislocation; the longing for the past is not a sickness. Nevertheless, acts of aesthetic revival are always political, even as they may disavow their politics.

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1. Constantine Sedikides, Tim Wildschut and Denise Baden, ‘Nostalgia: Conceptual Issues and Existential Functions’ in Jeff Greenberg, Sander L. Koole, Tom Pyszczynski (eds.), *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology* (New York: Guilford Publications, 2004)

2. Sedikides et. al., ‘Nostalgia: Conceptual Issues’, pp. 200–14.

3. Petra Rethmann, ‘Post-Communist Ironies in an East German Hotel’, *Anthropology Today* 25:1, (February 2009): pp. 21–3.

4. Constantine Sedikides, Tim Wildschut, Jamie Arndt and Clay Routledge, ‘Nostalgia: Past, Present, and Future’, *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 17:6 (2008): pp. 304–7.

5. Jessica Chasmar, ‘Coca-Cola pulls ad suggesting Nazi Germany was ‘Good Old Times’, *The Washington Times*, 3 March 2015, accessed 3 July, 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/mar/3/coca-cola-pulls-ad-suggesting-nazi-germany-was-goo/>.