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Contents

About the Author

Tasos Giapoutzis [Yia-pou-tzis] is a filmmaker and Lecturer in Film at the University of Essex, UK. He holds a doctorate in Film by Creative Practice from the University of York (2023). His work as both a researcher and filmmaker centres on the filmmaking process and the aesthetic, spatial, and temporal dimensions of cinema, with a particular focus on memory, nostalgia, place, and displacement. His practice-based research has been published in esteemed journals including *Screenworks* and the *Journal of Anthropological Films.* Alongside his academic work, Tasos is an internationally exhibited director and alumnus of the Go Short Talent Campus in Nijmegen, the Talent Development Campus in Cork, and the Reykjavik Talent Lab.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract This introductory chapter sets the stage for an exploration of nostalgia and displacement in contemporary European cinema. It traces how nostalgia has developed from its early understanding as homesickness to a broader cultural and political force, showing its dual capacity to sustain identity and belonging while also enabling distortion or retreat into imagined pasts. Drawing on theoretical debates around restorative and reflective nostalgia, the chapter highlights their relevance for contemporary Europe, where migration, nationalism, and cultural change continually reshape experiences of home and memory. Cinema is presented as a privileged medium for articulating these tensions, offering aesthetic forms through which longing, memory, and identity are negotiated. The chapter also outlines the case studies that structure the book—*The Edge of Heaven (2007)*, *Tabu (2012)*, *Extinction (2018)*, *Nostalgia (2022)*, *and Limbo (2020)*—each of which offers distinct perspectives on how nostalgia and displacement intertwine. By situating these films within broader cultural and political contexts, the introduction establishes the framework for the analyses that follow and clarifies the book's central aim: to show how European cinema reflects and reimagines the complex relationships between past and present, home and exile.

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Contemporary discourse often traces the notion of nostalgia back to one of Western literature's oldest tales of homecoming. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the hero Odysseus spends 10 arduous years longing to return to his island home after the Trojan War. Despite temptations of comfort and even immortality offered by the nymph Calypso, Odysseus's heart remains with Ithaca and his wife Penelope. He famously declares, "Nevertheless, it is she whom I daily desire and pine for. Therefore, I long for my home and to see the day of returning" (Homer 1921, 78–79). This ancient tale provides a mythic template for *nostalgia*, a term later coined from the Greek *nostos* (homecoming) and *algos* (pain) to denote the aching desire to return to one's home or past. The word *nostalgia* itself is only "nostalgically Greek" (Boym 2001, 3) and was first introduced in 1688 by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer, who observed a "homesick" malaise afflicting mercenary soldiers far from their native land. In Hofer's medical diagnosis, nostalgia was a literal sickness for home—a cerebrophysical ailment believed to be caused by "the vibration of animal spirits" clinging to memories of the Fatherland (1688/1934, 384). While this early understanding cast nostalgia as a curable illness of displacement, the concept has vastly expanded and evolved over time.

By the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nostalgia's meaning had shifted from a specific homesickness to a broader psychological condition. Physicians and psychologists noticed that returning to one's homeland did not always cure the longing in patients (Sedikides et al. 2004). Gradually, nostalgia came to be seen not merely as a geographical yearning but as a temporal and emotional one—a longing for a lost time, childhood, or personal past. Contemporary scholars define nostalgia as a *yearning for an idealised past*—a past that may include but is not limited to one's homeland, encompassing bygone events, beloved persons, or familiar sights (Ibid., 202). In other words, what was once considered a provincial homesickness has been reconceptualised as a more universal sentimental longing for the past. Empirical research in the last few decades supports the universality of this emotion: nostalgia is experienced across age groups

and cultures, not only by exiles or the elderly but by virtually everyone at some point (Batcho 1995, 1998; Mills and Coleman 1994). As Kaplan observed, "There is no one who at one time or another has not experienced nostalgia" (1987, 465). Far from a rare pathology, nostalgia is now understood as a common, even fundamental, human experience.

A Multifaceted Emotion: Psychological, Social, and Spatial Dimensions

Importantly, contemporary perspectives highlight that nostalgia is a complex, multifaceted emotional condition with significant psychological and social functions. Rather than dismissing nostalgia as mere wistful sentimentality, researchers have found that it plays a meaningful role in how we interpret our lives and maintain our identities (Kleiner 1977). Nostalgic reminiscence can solidify one's sense of identity and continuity by providing a reassuring link between past and present selves. By reminiscing about "the good old days"—perhaps an idealised childhood or a time of personal success—individuals often reaffirm core values and derive self-esteem in the present (Leary and Baumeister 2000). Nostalgia also serves a social function: it is intrinsically linked with belonging and connection. Longing recollections frequently bring to mind loved ones and communal experiences; as a result, nostalgia can "bolster our connection with others" (Giapoutzis 2021) by reviving feelings of being loved and supported. When someone experiences a nostalgic reverie, memories of distant friends and family often become vividly present in their thoughts, helping to fulfil the innate need for social connection and easing feelings of isolation (Hertz 1990, 195). This social aspect helps explain why nostalgia tends to be triggered by experiences of dislocation or isolation—it is a resource that people subconsciously use to restore a sense of connectedness and meaning. Some scholars even characterise nostalgia as an existential coping mechanism: a source of identity uncertainty-reduction that helps individuals navigate times of transition or crisis by anchoring them to a stable narrative of the past (Cavanaugh 1989). In short, feeling nostalgic can be deeply therapeutic—it mitigates loneliness, fortifies identity, and imbues life with a sense of continuity in the face of change.

Alongside its temporal and emotional dimensions, nostalgia is also profoundly spatial. Experiences of displacement necessarily involve movement across, and separation from, meaningful spaces: the space left behind, the

new space inhabited, the transit spaces in-between, and the imagined or remembered spaces that persist even when physical return is impossible. As Alastair Bonnett argues, contemporary "nostalgias" increasingly reflect shifts in the geographies of everyday life, shaping how individuals relate to places that have been lost, altered, or rendered inaccessible (2015). This spatial axis is especially salient for displaced subjects, whose memories are inseparable from the landscapes, neighbourhoods, domestic settings, and sensory environments that once anchored their identities. While this book's analytical focus rests primarily on affect, narrative, and aesthetics, each chapter also implicitly attends to these spatial negotiations, showing how contemporary films visualise the complex relationship between longing and place—between here and there, then and now.

Between Escapism and Engagement: Critical Debates on Nostalgia

Despite nostalgia's benefits, its reputation has not always been positive. There remains a lingering popular notion that nostalgia is a *naively romantic* or even regressive attitude—a glossy sentimentality that prefers living in the past to facing present realities. Indeed, throughout the twentieth century, some critics and intellectuals treated nostalgia with suspicion, seeing it as a form of escapism or a distorting lens on history. The charge that nostalgic yearning is inherently conservative or escapist is exemplified in debates over historical films. For instance, certain heritage dramas have been accused of indulging the viewer in a visually compelling past with no connection with the contemporary whatsoever, thus offering a fantasy of history stripped of its hardships (Craig 2001). Writing in the late 1980s, Fredric Jameson famously coined the term "nostalgia film" to criticise a wave of movies that he argued *recycle* the styles of earlier decades in an effort to evoke a prefab past feeling. Jameson pointed to films like *American Graffiti* (George Lucas 1973) and *Star Wars* (George Lucas 1977) as examples of postmodern pastiche—glossy recreations of 1950s Americana or 1930s adventure serials—which, in his view, "cannibalize" the past and reflect a society "incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of its own current experience" (1988, 20). From this perspective, nostalgia in mass culture was seen as a *dehistoricising* force: it turns history into a style playground, sugar-coating or outright ignoring the real conflicts of the past.

Such critiques raise valid concerns, yet they overlook the productive dimensions of nostalgia. More recent scholarship has pushed back against the idea that nostalgia is *inherently* reactionary or false. Film theorist Pam Cook, for example, argues that even highly stylised nostalgic films can tell us a great deal about "our relationship to the past, about the connections between past and present, and our affective responses" to history (2005, 2). In her view, what some call "falsified" memories may function as sincere expressions of how people *feel* about history, and thus they have cultural value beyond factual accuracy. Cook suggests that modern cinematic nostalgia, rather than simply duping audiences with rose-tinted history, often provides "a way of coming to terms with the past, enabling it to be exorcised in order that society, and individuals, can move on" (2005, 3). In this formulation, engaging with nostalgia becomes a means of working through collective trauma or personal loss—a process of acknowledging and then letting go. We see, then, a key debate: whether nostalgia imprisons us in an idealised yesterday, or whether it actually helps us negotiate the relationship between yesterday and today. This book approaches nostalgia with the latter understanding in mind, treating it as a *dialogue* between past and present rather than a one-way escape. Nostalgia is not viewed here as simple escapism or mere yearning for a bygone era, but as a complex mode of experience that can be both critically reflective and emotionally significant.

Nostalgia Amid Contemporary Patterns of Displacement

The urgency of examining nostalgia in tandem with displacement becomes particularly clear in the context of contemporary Europe. In recent years, Europe has been marked by intense socio-political transformations—from surges in cross-border migration to the resurgence of nationalist ideologies—which have profoundly shaped public consciousness and cultural production. We live in a time when questions of home, identity, and belonging have become especially fraught. The early twenty-first century has witnessed large-scale migration flows into and within Europe: war, political upheaval, and economic disparities have driven people from Syria, Afghanistan, Africa, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere to seek new homes across the continent. This has created a sizable population of *displaced individuals*—immigrants, refugees, diaspora communities—who are, in a

sense, living embodiments of nostalgia's classic scenario (being physically separated from one's home). For many such people, nostalgic longing for home is not a trivial pastime but a natural response to alienation. High flows of people facing displacement from "home" are often forced to find a new sense of identity. Their personal or collective biographies seem to be increasingly irrelevant as societies force them to look with urgency into the present and the future. That nostalgic remembrance of childhoods, cultural traditions, and aspirations might provide an answer to this modern instability. In other words, for migrants and exiles, recollections of *home*—be it the literal homeland or simply a symbolic idea of origin—can serve as an anchor of stability amid the upheaval of resettlement. Nostalgia, in this context, becomes a strategy for coping with the disorientation of displacement: it offers continuity when one's environment, language, and social ties have radically changed. Throughout European cities today, one can find evidence of this phenomenon in the proliferation of cultural clubs, community centres, food shops, and media from "back home"—all nurturing a connection to a past place in order to sustain identity in a new one.

This relationship between nostalgia, reconfiguration of identity, and spatial rupture resonates with Bonnett's observation that nostalgia is increasingly shaped by the pressures of global modernity and accelerated mobility. In contexts of displacement, he suggests, nostalgia becomes a way to stabilise one's sense of self amid shifting geographies, creating an imaginative link to places that feel lost, inaccessible, or transformed beyond recognition. This spatial dimension strengthens the argument that nostalgia is not merely an inward emotional state but an active negotiation between people and the environments that once shaped them.

At the same time, nostalgia is playing a conspicuous role in Europe's political arena, often in troubling ways. A wave of restorative nostalgia has accompanied the rise of populist nationalism in various countries. Svetlana Boym's influential study *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) draws a distinction between *restorative* and *reflective* nostalgia that is illuminating here. Restorative nostalgia is orientated towards *nostos*—the return home—and strives to *recreate* the lost home, truth, or tradition. It is not always recognised as nostalgia by its purveyors; instead it often manifests as an ideology that insists on "restoring" a nation's former greatness or reviving allegedly timeless values. Boym observes that restorative nostalgia tends to "characterize national and nationalist revivals all over the world," fuelling anti-modern myths by invoking a return to symbols and myths of a golden age (2001, 41). One sees this in European contexts ranging from Brexit-era

Britain—with slogans implicitly harking back to an imperial or post-war heyday—to the rhetoric of right-wing movements in Hungary, Poland, or Italy, which often refer to an idealised pre-globalisation past of cultural purity and sovereign control. Such movements leverage nostalgia as a political tool: by painting the present as a fallen state and the past as a source of authenticity and strength, they rally popular emotions in favour of reactionary change. The danger, of course, is that this form of nostalgia "does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition" (Ibid., xviii). It can therefore become a self-righteous force, intolerant of nuance, and prone to "othering" those who do not fit the nostalgic ideal. In recent European politics, one can observe how restorative nostalgia feeds into exclusionary narratives: migrants, minorities, or even cosmopolitan elites are cast as threats to the imagined rebirth of the true nation.

Counterposed to this is reflective nostalgia, which Boym describes as dwelling in longing and loss itself, rather than seeking a literal restoration of the past. Reflective nostalgia thrives on the bittersweet *algia*—the longing and the awareness of irretrievability. It is an introspective mood that savours shattered memories and paradoxes, often with irony or gentle melancholy. Rather than rebuilding the mythical old country, reflective nostalgia lingers among "ruins, […] in the dreams of another place and another time", conscious that the past cannot be fully reclaimed (Ibid., 41). This mode is more likely to be found in personal storytelling, art, and, indeed, cinema. It is the nostalgia of the displaced person who knows that home is gone—or perhaps never existed as imagined—yet finds value in remembering and reflecting. In contemporary Europe, reflective nostalgia might manifest in a migrant's fond recollections shared with their children, tempered by acknowledgement of change, or in an artist's work that memorialises a lost community without pretending to literally restore it. Boym's categories help to clarify why nostalgia is such a relevant and contested topic today: Europe is experiencing both a surge of restorative nostalgia (with significant political consequences) and a flowering of reflective nostalgia in literature, film, and everyday life as people grapple with displacement and rapid change. The intersection of nostalgia with displacement is therefore a critical area for study, as it can illuminate the emotional undercurrents of phenomena like diaspora identity formation, transnational cultural memory, and nationalist populism. Comparable experiences of longing shaped by displacement appear across diverse historical and

cultural contexts—whether expressed through *banzo*[1] in Afro-Atlantic histories of forced removal, *saudade*[2] in Lusophone traditions, *tizita*[3] in Ethiopian memory practices, or *karot*[4] in Armenian diasporic life—illustrating the breadth of nostalgia's global emotional vocabulary, even as this book centres its analysis on contemporary European cinema.

Scope, Approach, and Case Studies

Against this backdrop, the central argument of this book is that nostalgia is a complex, dynamic emotion that is profoundly shaped by experiences of displacement, and that cinema provides a uniquely revealing medium through which to examine this interplay. Put simply, when people move—voluntarily or involuntarily—their relationship to the past and to *home* changes, and this is powerfully reflected in the stories we tell on screen. Nostalgia is not a single or uniform emotion but a constellation of "nostalgias" shaped by differing attachments to past places, by the scale of one's displacement, and by the political or cultural forces that reconfigure the meaning of home (Bonnett 2015). Nostalgia, rather than a static longing for yesterday, emerges as an active process of meaning-making in response to the dislocations of migration, exile, and diaspora. Conversely, the condition of displacement (whether geographic or psychological) often heightens nostalgia or inflects it in new ways: the emigrant remembers home differently from the native who never left; the refugee's nostalgia may be tinged with trauma or political loss; the second-generation

[1] The term *banzo*, of Bantu origin, refers to the profound melancholy, grief, and emotional rupture experienced by enslaved Africans forcibly transported across the Atlantic. Historically described as a homesickness so severe it could lead to withdrawal or death, banzo encapsulates the affective violence of displacement under enslavement.

[2] The Lusophone concept of *saudade*, rooted in medieval Galician-Portuguese and shaped by Arabic influences, denotes a bittersweet longing for someone or something absent. Historically associated with maritime journeys, emigration, and colonial movement, it expresses a melancholic attachment to what is distant, lost, or unreachable.

[3] In Ethiopian musical and cultural tradition, *tizita* signifies a mood of yearning, remembrance, and soulful melancholy, often associated with songs performed in the tizita scale. The term encompasses both personal longing and collective memory, particularly within contexts of migration and historical rupture.

[4] In Armenian cultural and diasporic contexts, *karot* refers to an intense longing or aching desire for absent loved ones, lost homelands, or past ways of life. Deeply tied to Armenian histories of displacement and dispersal, it expresses both sorrowful yearning and enduring attachment across distance.

migrant might feel nostalgic for a place they have never been, through inherited memories. This book contends that European cinema of the twenty-first century offers a rich corpus through which to explore these nuances. Filmmakers have increasingly turned to themes of migration, border-crossing, and diaspora, often foregrounding nostalgia as a key emotional and aesthetic motif. By analysing contemporary films that explicitly or implicitly link nostalgia with displacement, we can better understand how feelings of longing for the past are mediated by movement through space, and how identity is negotiated between *here* and *there*, *now* and *then*. The urgency of this analysis lies in its contemporary relevance: as Europe grapples with unprecedented mobility and its attendant social challenges, narratives of nostalgia (whether personal or collective) hold a mirror to the hopes and anxieties of our moment. This study aims to show that nostalgia in film is not a passive indulgence in memory, but an active site where cultural identities are contested, where historical understanding is sought, and where emotional solace or insight is achieved.

From a scholarly perspective, this work is situated at the crossroads of film studies, memory studies, and cultural studies. It seeks to contribute to each of these fields by examining how cinematic texts engage with nostalgia as both content and form. In film studies, the analysis will shed light on narrative and stylistic techniques used to evoke the past and portray experiences of exile or migration—for example, the use of flashbacks, voice-over reminiscence, archival footage, or music to trigger nostalgic affect. It will also consider questions of genre and mode (How do, say, an arthouse narrative film and an experimental documentary differ in treating nostalgic themes?). In memory studies, this book offers case studies of *cultural memory in motion*: it illuminates how films act as carriers of memory (e.g. remembering traumatic historical events or lost ways of life) and how they may cultivate communal nostalgia among audiences. The selected films for analysis in this study often deliberately play with memory's fragility and persistence, thereby intersecting with theoretical debates on post-memory, collective memory, and the role of media in shaping what society remembers or forgets. Finally, in cultural studies, the project addresses broader issues of identity, globalisation, and transnationalism. Nostalgia, as we have seen, can be deeply political and cultural; by observing its manifestations in European cinema, we gain insight into contemporary negotiations of national identity, post-colonial reflections, and the personal toll of geopolitical change. The book's interdisciplinary approach—drawing on psychology, sociology, and history as

needed—reflects the multifaceted nature of nostalgia itself, a phenomenon that resonates from the individual psyche to the collective imagination. In navigating these complex intersections, this study heeds the critical injunction to "understand media, nostalgia, memory and history as intrinsically related components without intermingling them arbitrarily" (Niemeyer 2014, 4). This approach ensures that while acknowledging the profound connections between cinematic representations, cultural memory, and historical narratives, we maintain analytical precision, exploring how films construct and engage with the past in ways that are both emotionally resonant and historically informed.

Methodologically, the study combines close textual analysis of films with contextual research. The focus is on five selected films, each from a different cinematic and national background, in order to explore a range of expressions of nostalgia and displacement in contemporary European cinema. These case studies have been chosen to represent diverse facets of the topic: different regions of Europe (and beyond), different historical reference points, and different filmmaking styles. What unites them is that each film, in its own way, foregrounds a condition of displacement (whether through migration, exile, or estrangement in one's own land) and each offers a meditation on nostalgia as an emotional response to that condition. Before delving into each case in later chapters, a brief overview of the films and their thematic contributions is in order.

The Edge of Heaven (2007)—Directed by Fatih Akin, this transnational drama links the lives of six characters between Germany and Turkey. The film explores how migration and cross-cultural entanglements reshape its characters' sense of home and belonging. Notably, Akin subverts a simplistic nostalgia-for-homeland narrative: one storyline follows a German-born professor of Turkish descent, Nejat, who travels to Istanbul (his father's birthplace) only to discover that he feels more nostalgic for Germany—the country of his upbringing—than for an ancestral homeland he never personally knew. At the same time, a grieving German mother, Susanne, travels to Turkey and finds herself retracing her deceased daughter's footsteps—walking the same streets, sleeping in her daughter's rented room—as if the foreign land offers a last tangible connection to her lost child. These crossings produce a poignant reversal: the Turkish-German man longs for Germany while the German woman finds solace in Turkey. Such moments illustrate the film's central idea that a *new place* can trigger nostalgia just as powerfully as one's homeland. Visually and structurally, *The Edge of Heaven* reflects the disjointed, multi-directional nature of

contemporary migration. Its narrative is divided into three chapters and multiple interlocking journeys, jumping back and forth in time and between countries. This non-linearity serves to mirror the characters' emotional state of betweenness and to challenge the classical romanticised desire for a return to the homeland. In Akin's hands, nostalgia is not a monolithic yearning for a single home; it is an evolving feeling that can attach to unexpected places and people as one's life path crosses borders. The film ultimately suggests a more complex, cosmopolitan understanding of nostalgia—one that accommodates hybridity and the forging of new homes.

Tabu (2012)—Miguel Gomes's acclaimed film offers a very different exploration of nostalgia, one that intertwines personal memory with Portugal's colonial legacy. *Tabu* is structurally and stylistically daring: it is split into two halves, titled *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise*. The first half is set in contemporary Lisbon, following an elderly woman, Aurora, who is steeped in melancholy and fading memories. The second half of the film suddenly transports us to Aurora's youth in Africa (in an unnamed Portuguese colony, reminiscent of Mozambique) where we witness her passionate, illicit romance with a man named Gian Luca. This entire *Paradise* segment is presented in the style of a silent-era film: it is shot in luminous black-and-white 35 mm, with no spoken dialogue (only music and Gian Luca's voice-over narrating the story). By adopting this antiquated cinematic form, Gomes plunges the viewer into a kind of collective nostalgia for cinema itself, invoking the early days of film as a metaphor for the remoteness of the remembered past. The film's very title, *Tabu*, nods to F. W. Murnau's 1931 colonial-set film *Tabu*, acknowledging an intertext of exoticised nostalgia even as Gomes critiques it. Thematically, *Tabu* delves into *post-imperial nostalgia*: the narration of Aurora and Gian Luca's tragic love affair forces a confrontation with a past that Portugal as a nation struggles to talk about. By rendering the colonial memory as simultaneously enchanting and deeply melancholic, Gomes illustrates the double-edged nature of nostalgia. The film dwells on the divide between memory and reality—both individual and shared—prompting reflection on how societies construct historical memory and how people navigate the tension between personal yearning and collective accountability. *Tabu*'s nostalgic artistry is thus layered: it seduces us with the aesthetics of nostalgia even as it asks us to interrogate the content of that nostalgia.

Extinction (2018)—In this experimental documentary by Portuguese filmmaker Salomé Lamas, nostalgia assumes a geopolitical form, tied to

vanished nations and contested borders. *Extinction* is set in the borderlands of Eastern Europe, primarily in Transnistria—a breakaway region of Moldova that declared itself an independent republic after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but which remains unrecognised by the international community. The protagonist is a young Transnistrian man named Kolya, whom Lamas follows in a quasi-fictional journey across the troubled borders of Transnistria, Moldova, Ukraine, and beyond. The film's style is distinctive: shot in high-contrast black-and-white and blending documentary footage with staged scenes, *Extinction* blurs the line between reality and imagination. At its core, the film examines nostalgia for a country that no longer exists. The title *Extinction* itself evokes the end of a way of life and suggests that Transnistria's quasi-nationhood is a ghostly holdover from a bygone political time. Yet the film does not simply elegise the Soviet past; it also highlights the ambivalence and oppression of the present. *Extinction* delves into a collective, ideological nostalgia—not just a personal longing, but a mourning for the idea of the Soviet Union, the lost *home* of a communist future that never came to pass. By the film's end, as Kolya travels further from home, the audience is left with a visceral sense of what it means to exist in a permanent state of dislocation: to be a citizen of nowhere, clinging to memories of a country rubbed off the map. Lamas's work, through its haunting images and fragmented narrative, thus captures a distinctly political kind of nostalgia—one entwined with national identity, memory, and the trauma of historical erasure.

Nostalgia (2022)—Mario Martone's drama offers a haunting meditation on returning home after a lifetime away. After 40 years abroad, Felice returns to his native Naples and finds himself gripped by an invisible pull, unable to walk away despite the mortal dangers that lurk in his old neighbourhood. Martone immerses us in the decaying yet enchanting beauty of Naples's Rione Sanità district, where every church, street corner, and alleyway seems saturated with memories and haunted by Felice's formative years as well as the city's enduring criminal underbelly. Felice, now a devout Muslim who has built a new life in Egypt, grapples deeply with nostalgia—not merely for places and people, but for the identity he once possessed and left behind. The film's emotional centre revolves around his struggle to bridge the gap between his present self and his former identity, a tension that becomes particularly pronounced when he reunites with Oreste, a childhood companion who has since become a dominant figure in organised crime. Martone's nuanced treatment of nostalgia emphasises its restorative dimensions: Felice's yearning is not purely sentimental but

acts as a compelling force, driving him to reclaim his past and identity. Yet, the film simultaneously acknowledges nostalgia's inherent risks—Felice's idealised memories blind him to present realities and imminent threats. The aesthetics of the film underline this duality: warm, nostalgic hues envelop scenes of Felice's reminiscences, contrasting sharply with the darker, cooler tones used to depict contemporary Naples, rife with corruption and danger. This visual interplay conveys nostalgia as both comforting and perilous. Ultimately, Martone's film serves as a poignant reflection on the complexities of returning home, illustrating how nostalgia can act as both a means of reconnecting with lost identities and a potentially hazardous force that anchors individuals to past illusions.

Limbo (2020)—Directed by Ben Sharrock, *Limbo* shifts the focus to the intimate human scale, depicting the everyday liminal experience of asylum seekers in Europe. Set on a remote wind-swept island in Scotland's Outer Hebrides, the film follows Omar, a young Syrian refugee, and a small group of fellow asylum seekers from Africa and the Middle East who have been temporarily housed there while awaiting decisions on their refugee status. *Limbo* is a deadpan comedy-drama, where quiet absurdist humour runs alongside genuine pathos. In this bleak yet beautiful setting, *Limbo* explores nostalgia in a subdued, lyrical fashion. Omar, once a talented musician, carries with him an oud that belonged to his grandfather. This instrument is the most potent symbol in the film: it embodies Omar's connection to Syria—his family, his cultural heritage, and his lost life as a musician. The film uses small moments to convey the ache of nostalgia: the men arguing over episodes of American TV series or football as a way to fill the void; and most affectingly, Omar calling his mother back in Syria on an old payphone. These gentle, human details illustrate how nostalgia operates as sustenance for those in exile. There is also a broader social commentary: *Limbo* portrays Europe (here represented by a fictional Scottish island) as a place that holds asylum seekers in a state of suspended life—forbidden to work or put down roots. In this purgatorial existence, nostalgia is one of the few comforts and forms of resistance available. It allows Omar and others to assert their identities (through music, stories, humour) in the face of an official system that has rendered them invisible. *Limbo*'s tragicomic lens thus reveals nostalgia as both a burden and a lifeline for displaced persons—a source of pain, yes, but also of profound resilience and hope.

These diverse films illustrate the multifaceted relationship between nostalgia and displacement, as well as the versatility of cinema in expressing

that relationship. Across these case studies, attention is also given—sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly—to the spatial textures of nostalgia: how cinematic narratives evoke lost homes, transformed cityscapes, border zones, and imagined geographies as part of the emotional landscape of displacement. Each film differs in genre and technique—from Akin's transnational migration narrative to Gomes's intertextual pastiche, Lamas's avant-garde essay, Martone's evocative urban elegy, and Sharrock's minimalist tragicomedy. Accordingly, each elicits nostalgia in a different way: through narrative structure (non-linear timelines, flashbacks, voice-over memories), through visual style (black-and-white cinematography, long takes, archival aesthetics), through sound and music (the use of popular songs, traditional music, or strategic silence), and through symbolism (keepsake objects like Omar's oud or evocative settings like communist ruins). What unites them is an understanding of nostalgia not as mere decoration but as an *affective core* of the story—a force that drives characters' motivations, evokes empathy, and often carries broader cultural meaning. By examining these films in depth, the chapters of this book will explore questions such as: How does nostalgia function for displaced characters? When is it comforting, and when is it debilitating? How do filmmakers formally represent subjective memories and longing? How is private nostalgia linked to collective history (e.g. in post-colonial contexts or post-conflict contexts)? And crucially, does nostalgia in these films encourage engagement with the present or escape from it?

Before proceeding to the close analyses, the following chapter will lay a foundation by situating our inquiry within a historical context. The interplay of migration, memory, and cinema did not begin in the 2000s; European cinema has a rich lineage of films about exiles, émigrés, and wanderers stretching back to the silent era. In the next chapter, we turn to historical reflections on migrant experiences in European cinema, tracing how earlier filmmakers have depicted the challenges of diaspora and belonging. This retrospective view—spanning from post-war neorealist films of displaced persons to Cold War exile narratives and beyond—will highlight recurring themes and evolving approaches to on-screen nostalgia. Such a background will not only demonstrate the continuity of certain motifs (like the figure of the longing immigrant) but also underscore what is distinctive about the contemporary moment. With this groundwork, we will then delve into each of the five case study films in detail, exploring how they individually contribute to our understanding of nostalgia shaped by displacement. Through these explorations, the book aims to

demonstrate original insight into the affective and cultural power of cinema as a medium uniquely suited to express nostalgia—not in a vacuum, but as it is lived and felt by people in an age of movement, uprooting, and uncertain belonging.

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CHAPTER 2

Historical Reflections on Migrant Experiences in European Cinema

Abstract This chapter provides a historical overview of the representation of migrant experiences in European cinema from the 1960s to the early twenty-first century. It begins with post-war depictions shaped by social realism and the 'cinema of duty,' in which migrants were often shown as marginalised outsiders defined by alienation and hardship. It then traces the emergence of second-generation and diasporic filmmakers during the 1980s and 1990s, whose works introduced more diverse, hybrid, and genre-inflected narratives that expanded beyond earlier frameworks. The discussion highlights how, by the turn of the millennium, transnational aesthetics came to the fore, reflecting the plural and interconnected realities of migration in an increasingly globalised Europe. Across these shifts, the chapter argues, European cinema's migrant narratives have moved from the periphery to the centre, with nostalgia emerging as a recurring affective thread that links stories of displacement, memory, and belonging. This emphasis on nostalgia provides a thematic bridge to the following chapter, which focuses on Fatih Akin's *The Edge of Heaven*.

Keywords European cinema • Migration • Nostalgia • Diasporic filmmakers • Transnational aesthetics • Cultural identity • Displacement

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Introduction

Transnational mobility and migration are among "the key forces of social transformation in the contemporary world" (Castles 2002, 1144). This is certainly evident in post-war Europe, where successive geopolitical shifts have reshaped population flows and cultural identities. The mid-twentieth century saw large-scale labour migration and post-colonial movements from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean into Europe, followed by the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc and the expansion of the European Union in the 1990s–2000s. These changes, compounded by ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, have produced unprecedented multi-directional migrations into, out of, and within Europe. European governments' responses to these flows gave rise to the notion of "*Fortress Europe*," a metaphor for a continent fortifying its borders against perceived external threats (Petrie 1992, 3). Within these shifting landscapes, migrants often face profound personal and cultural dislocation—an identity crisis wrought by the "discontinuity" between one's past and the strange new environment (Akhtar 1999, 123). As psychoanalyst Salman Akhtar observes, the newcomer is confronted with "strange tasting food, different music, […] cumbersome language, […] and visually unfriendly landscape," all of which clash with the migrant's personal history (Ibid.). Rather than a seamless assimilation, this is an immersion into a new culture that compels a renegotiation of self. In this process, nostalgia often emerges as a crucial coping mechanism—a "constant search for the self" connecting past and present in the migrant's reshaped identity (Ritivoi 2002, 10). Recent work in psychology and memory studies similarly conceptualises nostalgia not as a regressive yearning but as a resource that can restore a sense of continuity of self, strengthen feelings of social connectedness, and provide meaning in situations of rupture (Wildschut et al. 2006). In the context of migration and exile, nostalgia therefore becomes intertwined with displacement: it is one of the key affective and narrative means through which individuals negotiate who they were, who they are, and who they might yet become.

Film offers a unique and imaginative space to explore these migrant experiences and identity negotiations. As novelist Salman Rushdie famously noted, migrants must "make a new imaginative relationship with the world" due to the loss of familiar home, and "the cinema, in which peculiar fusions have always been legitimate, […] may well be the ideal location" for such reimaginings (Rushdie 1991, 125). Cinema's

spatiotemporal language—its ability to juxtapose places and times—closely mirrors the migrant's own negotiation between *place* (homeland and host-land) and *time* (memory and present). Not surprisingly, European filmmakers have long turned to cinematic narratives to grapple with questions of migration, identity, and belonging. Over the decades, these narratives have continually adapted to Europe's changing social realities. Indeed, a growing body of scholarship has examined these films under various rubrics—from Hamid Naficy's notion of "accented cinema" (2001) to theories of diasporic, transnational, and migrant cinema (e.g. Elsaesser 2005; Berghahn and Sternberg 2010; Loshitzky 2010; Mennel 2010; Bayraktar 2016)— attesting to the centrality of migratory aesthetics in contemporary film culture. Building on such work, this chapter offers a historically grounded overview of how migrant experiences have been depicted in European cinema from the post-war period to the early twenty-first century. In doing so, it argues that these portrayals reveal a gradual but decisive shift: from the social-realist and ethnographic depictions of migrants as marginalised "others" in earlier decades towards more reflexive, hybridised, and affectively charged narratives in recent years. European cinema's migrant stories have moved from the margins to the mainstream, evolving from stark tales of alienation into nuanced explorations of cultural hybridity, nostalgia, and displacement. This shift not only reflects broader socio-political changes but also underscores the need for greater attention to how contemporary films express the affective experience of migration—particularly the complex emotion of *nostalgia* in exile.

Post-War Cinematic Depictions of Migration: Alienation and "Cinema of Duty"

The representation of migrant identity is not a new phenomenon in European film—cinematic explorations of migration date back to at least the 1960s. The emergence of films such as Med Hondo's *Oh, Sun* (France/Mauritania, 1967), Franco Brusati's *Bread and Chocolate* (Italy, 1974), and later Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Fear Eats the Soul* (West Germany, 1974) was an indirect consequence of post-World War II labour migration and post-colonial population movements into Europe. At this time, first-generation immigrant and minority filmmakers—often working independently and on low budgets—began to bring migrant experiences to the screen. These early works opened the door to self-representation, albeit

from a position largely outside the European cinematic mainstream. Ousmane Sembène's *Black Girl* (1966) stands as a pioneering example: a Senegalese director's debut feature that narrates the story of a young African woman working as a maid in France, told from the protagonist's own perspective. *Black Girl* earned critical acclaim for its unflinching portrayal of racial alienation and colonial dynamics, making visible the inner life of a migrant domestic worker in a bourgeois French milieu.

Yet for the most part, the prevailing cinematic mode of the 1960s and 1970s cast migrants as flattened, one-dimensional figures—silent *Gastarbeiter* labourers or oppressed women—who appeared as alienated outsiders in inhospitable European societies. Films often positioned these characters as symbols of social crisis or cultural *otherness*, rather than as fully realised individuals. This representational approach, evident across various national cinemas, reinforced a conservative host–guest dichotomy: the migrant's identity was defined in terms of lack or difference from the host society's norm. The thematic emphasis fell on hardship, isolation, and racial or ethnic conflict, aligning with contemporaneous social concerns. For example, British cinema in the 1970s saw a wave of "problem" films about race and immigration; in Germany, the *Gastarbeiter* (guest worker) films of the period often highlighted the estrangement of Turkish migrants in a foreign land. Film scholars later termed this mode a *cinema of duty*—a socially conscious, issue-driven realist cinema that strove to "articulate 'problems' and 'solutions' […] within a framework of centre and margin, white and non-white communities" (Bailey cited in Malik 1996, 203–204). In this cinema of duty, immigrant characters essentially *stood in* for entire communities, bearing the weight of representation on their shoulders. Classic examples include the British films *Pressure* (1975, dir. Horace Ové) and *Step Forward Youth* (1977, dir. Menelik Shabazz), which tackled the challenges faced by West Indian and Black British youths in 1970s London. These works—documentary-inflected in style and earnest in tone—were important in "answering back" to the dominant narratives and stereotypes of migrants, offering an alternative view of the diasporic experience from an insider perspective (Malik 1996). Similarly, in West Germany, filmmakers like Helma Sanders (*Shirins Hochzeit*, 1976) and Tevfik Başer (*40 Square Meters of Germany*, 1986) depicted the claustrophobic lives of Turkish migrants and their families, in line with what Deniz Göktürk (2003) identified as Germany's own *cinema of duty* tradition.

While these early films were often limited by didacticism or a narrow focus on victimisation, they laid crucial groundwork. They brought migrant issues into national consciousness and, significantly, established the migrant protagonist as a legitimate subject of European cinema. Indeed, these early efforts from the 1960s and 1970s—though isolated and marginal at the time—marked a turning point by allowing minority filmmakers, for the first time, to depict their own stories on screen. In doing so, they challenged audiences to acknowledge the presence of "guest workers" and post-colonial immigrants not as faceless masses but as human beings with stories worth telling. The political urgency of this era's migrant films, aligned with anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles, also linked them with broader currents in world cinema. Many of these works shared affinities with what theorists Ella Shohat and Robert Stam termed *Third World cinema* or "diasporic hybrid films" (1994, 28), aligning immigrant narratives in the First World with a larger tradition of counter--hegemonic filmmaking. In short, the post-war decades established a template of socially critical migration cinema—a template defined by realism, ethnographic detail, and a moral imperative to bear witness to migrant struggles. This template would not disappear, but by the 1980s it was on the cusp of significant change as new voices and new narratives began to emerge.

From Diasporic Realism to Hybridity: Rethinking Migration on Screen in the 1980s–1990s

By the 1980s and especially the 1990s, European cinema saw a pronounced shift in how migrant experiences were depicted, coinciding with the rise of second-generation immigrant filmmakers and the increasing visibility of multicultural societies. Whereas earlier films often framed migrants as victims or *perpetual outsiders*, the new wave of films began to explore more complex, and often more optimistic, visions of cultural encounter. Various scholars have noted that from the late twentieth century onward, migrant narratives in Europe shy away from frameworks of cultural purity and binary oppositions, engaging instead with the "pleasures of hybridity" (Malik 1996). In other words, the cinematic lens widened to highlight hybridity, integration, and the transformative impact of diaspora communities on European life, rather than solely their marginalisation.

Several factors underpinned this turn. Crucially, filmmakers of migrant background gained greater access to industry resources in the 1980s, allowing them to move from the margins into more mainstream formats. In Britain, France, and Germany—three key centres of post-war immigration—a "veritable filmmaking renaissance" took place thanks to second-generation directors from minority communities (Elsaesser 2005, 27). Names such as Gurinder Chadha and Udayan Prasad in the UK, Abdellatif Kechiche and Karim Dridi in France, or Fatih Akin and Thomas Arslan in Germany, among many others, exemplify this generation. Their works spoke with an authenticity and insider perspective that was often lacking in earlier outsider depictions. Just as importantly, these filmmakers often embraced popular genres—comedy, drama, romance—and appealing narratives, enhancing the crossover appeal of migrant stories. The feature film format (as opposed to small independent shorts or documentaries) became the dominant vehicle for migrant and diasporic cinema, which helped such films reach wider audiences and enter cinematic discourse as more than niche "ethnic" stories.

The thematic concerns of migration cinema expanded correspondingly. Films in the 1980s–1990s began to celebrate cultural mixing and the agency of migrant characters. For example, the landmark British film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985, dir. Stephen Frears) broke new ground in its portrayal of a British-Pakistani entrepreneur in Thatcherite London, combining issues of racism, class, and even queer identity in a sly, post-colonial comedy-drama. A few years later, Black and Asian British filmmakers like Isaac Julien and Gurinder Chadha were producing works that blended social critique with genre innovation—Julien's *Young Soul Rebels* (1991) channelled the energy of a musical youth film, while Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) used ensemble comedy to depict British-Indian women on a day trip, deftly addressing generational and gender tensions. These films moved beyond the earlier *cinema of duty* by not only countering stereotypes but also asserting the normalcy and *belonging* of diasporic subjects within the fabric of national life. Crucially, they often did so using open, public spaces and cosmopolitan settings—a deliberate contrast to the claustrophobic kitchens and factory dormitories of the 1970s realist films. The city street, the public beach, the shopping mall—such locales became stages where characters of diverse backgrounds interacted, clashed, and bonded, reflecting the everyday reality of multicultural Europe in a more upbeat register.

This pattern was echoed across continental Europe. In France, the children of North African immigrants (the *beur* generation) started making films that blended social realism with youthful verve—e.g. Mehdi Charef's *Tea in the Harem* (1985) —or turned to comedy and romance to depict immigrant life, as seen in Rachid Bouchareb's early work. Italian and Spanish cinemas likewise saw new narratives of migration, often involving intercultural relationships and generational stories. A pan-European trend emerged wherein victimised migrant tropes gave way to protagonists who, while still facing challenges, also acted as agents of change or bridges between cultures. For instance, *Lovers* (1994, dir. Catherine Corsini) in France and *Beautiful People* (1999, dir. Jasmin Dizdar) in Britain/Former Yugoslavia presented ensemble stories of refugees and immigrants whose lives intersect humorously or poignantly with those of locals, revealing the absurdities of prejudice and the possibilities of coexistence. These films underscored the idea that migrants were not permanently stuck in the *periphery* but could occupy central, even transformative roles in society.

In sum, the late twentieth-century migration acknowledged ongoing social inequalities and racism, yet also embraced the creative potential of cultural fusion in an increasingly globalised Europe. As a result, by the end of the 1990s, European screens were populated with far more diverse faces and stories than in the decades prior. Migrant and diasporic narratives, once confined to the fringes, had gained a foothold in European art cinema and popular cinema alike, heralding what Daniela Berghahn and Claudia Sternberg call a "decentred approach" that "enriched and revitalised European cinema" (2010, 4–5). This period set the stage for the new millennium, in which questions of migration would become even more central—and more complex—within European cinematic storytelling.

Transnational Aesthetics in the New Millennium: Mobility, Multiplicity, and Identity

Entering the twenty-first century, European cinema has further intensified its engagement with migration, mirroring the complex realities of globalisation and transnational mobility. The 2000s and 2010s have been marked by unprecedented circulations of people: expanded EU free movement, East-to-West migrations after the fall of communism, and increased arrivals of refugees and asylum seekers from war-torn regions. Filmmakers have responded by crafting narratives that reflect this *plurality* of migratory

routes and the entangled fates of people on the move. Notably, many recent films shift focus away from single protagonist stories to ensemble or intersecting narratives that capture the multi-directional nature of contemporary migration flows. For example, Stephen Frears's *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002, UK) presents a London underbelly populated by immigrants from Nigeria, Turkey, China, and beyond, whose lives converge around an illicit organ trade—a thriller framework that simultaneously humanises the city's undocumented workers. In the Dardenne brothers' *The Silence of Lorna* (2008, Belgium), an Albanian woman's desperate effort to obtain legal status through a fake marriage is portrayed with the Dardennes' characteristically intimate realism, implicating both local and immigrant communities in moral dilemmas. Films like Costa-Gavras's *Eden Is West* (2009, France/Greece) or Haider Rashid's *Europa* (2021, Italy/Iraq) take on the journey of the refugee itself, tracing odysseys across borders and the hostile gauntlet of *Fortress Europe*. These and other works highlight how migrants of vastly different origins—African, Middle Eastern, Eastern European, Latin American—now find their paths intersecting in the cosmopolitan hubs and border zones of Europe. The emphasis is often on *networks* and *crossroads*: Europe as a meeting point of South–North and East–West migrations, not a single unified flow but a web of stories.

With this broadened scope, European migrant cinema has adopted what might be called a transnational aesthetic. Traditional national cinemas have become porous; co-productions across countries are common, and films frequently feature multiple languages and multicultural casts, reflecting the deterritorialised experience of their subjects. Thomas Elsaesser observes that many films of the new Europe offer "remarkably astute, moving and often also very witty" commentaries on "post-nation" identities and communities, often staying ahead of politicians in imagining what a cosmopolitan Europe looks like (2005, 28). He points to titles like *Head-On* (2004, dir. Fatih Akin), a German-Turkish punk love story, or even mainstream successes like *Amélie* (2001, dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet) and *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003, dir. Wolfgang Becker)—films not ostensibly about migration yet deeply concerned with themes of cultural change, identity, and belonging in a new Europe. Such films, Elsaesser argues, can be read as "New European" cinema: they transcend their local or national specificities to speak to pan-European (and global) dynamics of mobility and hybridity, thereby giving new urgency and relevance to European filmmaking in the twenty-first century (2005, 28). In effect, European cinema

has become increasingly transnational in content and in production, eroding the old "us vs. them" binaries of nation and migrant. The notion of a singular national identity is often interrogated or outright rejected; instead, films present identity as relational, fluid, and influenced by multiple cultural referents.

Crucially, migrant and diasporic filmmakers are no longer at the periphery of European cinema—they are at the heart of it. The cultural spaces once occupied by migrants "at the margins" have moved towards the centre of European narratives. This mainstreaming of migrant perspectives has arguably induced what Berghahn and Sternberg term a "World Cinema turn" in European cinema (2010, 5). By this, they refer to European cinema's embrace of themes, aesthetics, and narratives that align it with the global World Cinema movement—a cinema that is less about any single nation's stories and more about border-crossing, hybrid identities, and interconnected histories (Ibid.).

Of course, alongside celebration of hybridity, filmmakers have not abandoned a critical stance. Many films of the 2000s remain deeply engaged with the *politics* of migration: detention centres, xenophobic backlashes, and the personal toll of migration policies are frequent plot elements. The tone, however, often oscillates between hope and despair, reflecting the ambivalent realities of contemporary globalisation. Scholar Will Higbee, writing on French cinema, notes that European film has become "one of the crucial sites of cultural and political engagement" where issues of "immigration, neoliberal globalization, and national and transnational identity formation are expressed, imagined, and contested" (2014, 28). In these cinematic debates, there is awareness of both the promises and the perils of a more mobile world. Mike Wayne has cautioned that if European cinema pursues an overly "affirmative, consensual" vision of unity, it risks becoming uncritical; he argues instead for films that "tease out [...] tensions and contradictions within Europe" (2002, 20). Indeed, some of the most powerful European migrant films of the twenty-first century are those that do not offer easy resolutions. Films like *Mediterranea* (2015, dir. Jonas Carpignano) end on uneasy notes, acknowledging ongoing struggles. Thus, the transnational turn in European cinema is characterised not by naive optimism but by a richer, more layered interrogation of how people coexist amid diversity in modern Europe.

Nostalgia, Memory, and the Cinematic Imagination of Displacement

Beneath the evolving styles and socio-political concerns of migrant cinema runs a persistent undercurrent of *nostalgia*. From early exile narratives to modern transnational dramas, filmmakers have used the language of nostalgia—memory, longing, and the ache of separation—to articulate the emotional reality of displacement. As Svetlana Boym (2001) observed, nostalgia in art is often "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (xiii), a reflection on the past that can be ambivalent and critical rather than merely sentimental. In the context of migration, nostalgia is a coin with a dark flip side: it can be a source of comfort and identity, yet it also underscores irretrievable loss. Studies of nostalgic remembrance have increasingly emphasised this ambivalence. Rather than a simple desire to go back, nostalgia is understood as a way of re-narrating the past in order to make sense of the present, producing a structure of feeling that shapes how history is lived and told (Atia and Davies 2010). For migrants and exiles, whose lives are marked by abrupt discontinuities of place and belonging, this narrative and affective work becomes especially pronounced.

In this sense, nostalgia is inseparable from displacement. As Andreea Ritivoi argues, immigrant nostalgia is fundamentally an identity practice. It reorganises the past in relation to the present and offers a new narrative of the self that can accommodate rupture (2002). When translated into cinematic form, this means that films about migration rarely present nostalgia as a decorative mood alone; instead, they often dramatise how characters actively use the past—its images, sounds, and stories—to negotiate an unsettled present (e.g. Giapoutzis and Kleftakis 2019). In more general media and cultural theory, too, nostalgia is no longer treated solely as a symptom of postmodern escapism; it is increasingly seen as a mode through which subjects critically engage with history, technology, and the experience of time (Niemeyer 2014). European migrant cinema participates in this revaluation by showing how nostalgia structures both the inner lives of displaced characters and the aesthetic strategies through which their stories are told.

This reorientation of nostalgia towards critical engagement also resonates with Bonnett's observation that nostalgic feeling is shaped not only by temporal distance but by changing relationships to place (2015). For displaced subjects, memory is filtered through the landscapes they have

left behind or can no longer recognise, giving nostalgia a distinctly spatial texture. Cinema often translates this spatialised longing into visual form—through images of lost homes, transformed cityscapes, or imagined geographies—which provides a natural bridge to the long-standing European cinematic tradition of reflecting on memory, time, and the experiential weight of place. Seen in this light, the reflective aesthetics developed by earlier European filmmakers offer an important foundation for understanding how contemporary migration cinema visualises longing and displacement.

Before turning to filmmakers who explicitly link nostalgia with experiences of exile and return, it is important to acknowledge that European cinema had already developed a rich vocabulary for representing longing, memory, and temporal rupture. Across the post-war decades, directors such as Agnès Varda, Wim Wenders, Federico Fellini, Giuseppe Tornatore, Krzysztof Kieslowski, and Alexander Sokurov crafted distinctive cinematic idioms of reflection and reminiscence. Varda's essayistic meditations on time and place in films like *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991) and *The Beaches of Agnès* (2008), Wenders's drifting wanderers searching for emotional anchorage in *Alice in the Cities* (1974) and *Paris, Texas* (1984), Fellini's autobiographical reconstructions of childhood in *Amarcord* (1973), Tornatore's cinephilic remembrance in *Cinema Paradiso* (1988), Kieslowski's explorations of parallel lives and fractured temporalities in *The Double Life of Véronique* (1991) and the *Three Colours* trilogy (1993–1994a, 1994b), and Sokurov's historical dreamscapes in *Mother and Son* (1997) and *Russian Ark* (2002) all contributed to shaping a European aesthetics of longing. Although these works do not address migration directly, they established an influential mode of reflective, self-aware nostalgia—attentive to temporal rupture, memory's instability, and the pull of irretrievable pasts. This broader aesthetic tradition forms a crucial backdrop for the migration-focused films discussed below, providing the stylistic and conceptual ground on which later filmmakers would build when articulating nostalgia within explicitly displaced and diasporic contexts.

Yet within this broader constellation, there are filmmakers who explicitly bring nostalgia into dialogue with experiences of exile, return, and migratory rupture. Among them, Theo Angelopoulos and Andrei Tarkovsky stand as the most significant predecessors for contemporary migration cinema. Theo Angelopoulos, the renowned Greek director, built much of his oeuvre around themes of journeying, exile, and the yearning for an elusive home. His films frequently invoke *nostos*—the

Greek concept of homecoming—only to question its possibility. In Angelopoulos's modern Greek history trilogy and beyond, characters traverse borderlands and liminal spaces, suspended between past and present. For instance, *Voyage to Cythera* (1984) follows an exiled Greek communist returning home after decades, only to find he no longer belongs—the homeland of memory has vanished. In *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995), a Greek-American filmmaker wanders through the Balkans in search of lost archival footage (a metaphor for lost history), reflecting a diasporic odyssey wherein personal and collective pasts intertwine. Nostalgia here is not simply a private emotion; it is historical, even political, highlighting the aftermath of wars, migrations, and ideological upheavals for individual souls.

If Angelopoulos's cinema is the elegiac mourning of a nation's lost innocence, Andrei Tarkovsky's work elevates nostalgia to a spiritual plane. Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia* (1983), significantly, was his first film made outside his native Soviet Union—created while he lived in self-imposed exile in Italy. The film itself centres on a Russian poet in Italy who is overwhelmed by homesickness and an undefined melancholy for his motherland. Tarkovsky's signature slow pacing, long takes, and use of nature (wind, fire, water) give *Nostalghia* a transcendental quality, turning the character's personal nostalgia into a universal meditation on *exile*. Beyond *Nostalghia*, Tarkovsky's other works like *Mirror* (1975) and *The Sacrifice* (1986) also deal with memory and loss (the former deeply autobiographical, the latter made in Sweden as he faced mortality), reinforcing his recurrent theme that our sense of self is inextricably linked to the places and times we come from—and that art (cinema, poetry) is the space where those lost places can be preserved, if only fragmentarily, against the flow of time.

The legacy of Angelopoulos and Tarkovsky illustrates how European art cinema has long treated nostalgia not just as a backdrop but as a *subject* in its own right—a lens through which to view the migrant condition. The historical trajectory of migrant representations in European cinema reveals a deepening attention to the interior lives of migrants. Across this evolution, the motif of nostalgia stands out as a poignant through-line, binding the Odyssean voyages of post-war exiles to the multi-stranded journeys of today's global migrants. Understanding how nostalgia has been cinematically articulated—as both a personal longing and a commentary on collective history—enriches our appreciation of contemporary migrant films. It underscores that migration is not only a political or economic phenomenon, but also an affective one: a story of hearts in transit, forever

negotiating the space between home and elsewhere. In the next chapter, we turn our focus to one such contemporary film: Fatih Akin's *The Edge of Heaven* (2007). In Akin's transnational drama, which moves between Germany and Turkey and interweaves multiple characters' fates, we witness a powerful exploration of nostalgia and displacement in a twenty-first-century context. By examining *The Edge of Heaven* in depth, we will see how the historical trends outlined here culminate in a film that epitomises the reflexive, hybridised, and emotionally resonant storytelling that now characterises European cinema's engagement with migration. This case study will allow us to delve further into the interplay of nostalgia and diaspora, illuminating the continued relevance of these themes and setting the stage for a broader discussion of memory, belonging, and identity in contemporary European film culture.

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CHAPTER 3

Nostalgia and Displacement in Fatih Akin's *The Edge of Heaven*

Abstract This chapter analyses Fatih Akin's *The Edge of Heaven* (2007) as a key example of how contemporary European cinema engages with nostalgia and displacement. It explores how the film's transnational framework, spanning Germany and Turkey, reimagines migration not as a fixed trajectory but as a complex negotiation between memory, cultural belonging, and loss. Central to the discussion is the film's articulation of nostalgia as reflective rather than restorative: a critical mode that illuminates the fractures and connections produced by diasporic experience. By situating Akin's work within debates on accented and diasporic cinema, the chapter demonstrates how *The Edge of Heaven* expands beyond conventional "migrant cinema" to articulate broader questions of European identity and hybridity. In doing so, it highlights the role of cinema in mediating between personal histories and collective memory, while pointing to nostalgia as an affective lens through which contemporary displacement can be understood. The chapter thus positions Akin's film as a touchstone for the study of migration and cultural identity in twenty-first-century European cinema.

Keywords Fatih Akin • European cinema • Turkish-German cinema • Nostalgia • Displacement • Transnational identity • Diasporic cinema

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Fatih Akin is a central figure in contemporary European cinema, distinguished by his unique ability to capture complex narratives of identity, belonging, and cultural displacement. Born in Hamburg to Turkish parents, Akin's films reflect his bicultural heritage, weaving together the personal and collective dimensions of migratory experiences that resonate deeply within European socio-cultural contexts. His filmography, which includes the internationally acclaimed *Head-On* (2004) and the documentary *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul* (2005), consistently foregrounds issues of hybrid identities, intergenerational tensions, and the intricate interplay between nostalgia and displacement.

This chapter specifically examines Akin's *The Edge of Heaven* (2007), a film widely praised for its narrative complexity and aesthetic innovation, which garnered numerous accolades including the Best Screenplay award at the Cannes Film Festival and the European Parliament's LUX Prize. In contrast to conventional narratives that simplify migration as a linear journey from homeland to host nation, Akin's film portrays migration as inherently multi-directional, emotionally fraught, and deeply intertwined with nostalgia—not solely for one's place of origin, but also for the spaces and relationships encountered in displacement. The film's treatment of nostalgia is inseparable from its spatial design, mapping longing onto the movements between Hamburg and Turkey, and the shifting urban and domestic environments its characters navigate.

The central argument advanced in this chapter is that *The Edge of Heaven* employs autobiographical filmmaking to critically explore how nostalgia functions within displaced communities, challenging traditional concepts of home and belonging. Drawing from Hamid Naficy's concept of accented cinema (2001), the analysis positions Akin's work within the broader context of exilic and diasporic filmmaking, which is characterised by its multilingual dialogues, border-crossing narratives, and a profound sense of temporal and spatial dislocation. From a German-film vantage, Sabine Hake and Barbara Mennel remind us that "from its inception German cinema has been multicultural, accented, hybrid, and hyphenated; Turkish German cinema is only the latest manifestation" (Hake and Mennel 2012, 12). This longer genealogy resists the reductive "migrant cinema" pigeonhole and situates Akin and *The Edge of Heaven* within a broader national and European film history. Moreover, the chapter highlights how the film's visual and auditory elements—including music, cinematography, and editing—contribute to its evocative portrayal of

nostalgia and longing, enhancing the emotional depth and psychological complexity of its characters.

By placing Akin's personal and cultural experiences at the forefront, the film becomes an exemplar of autobiographical cinema, where personal memories intersect with broader socio-political histories. This chapter explores these intersections in detail, demonstrating how *The Edge of Heaven* creates a textured portrayal of displacement, identity, and cultural memory. Through this analysis, the chapter ultimately aims to demonstrate the broader implications of Akin's cinematic approach for understanding how contemporary European cinema navigates the intricate relationship between nostalgia, displacement, and autobiographical expression.

Contextualising Fatih Akin: Autobiography, Nostalgia, and Cultural Identity

Fatih Akin's unique position as a second-generation Turkish-German filmmaker deeply informs his cinematic exploration of identity, belonging, and cultural hybridity. Born in 1973 in Hamburg to immigrant parents, Akin grew up negotiating the intersections between Turkish traditions and German society, a bicultural experience that permeates his films. Unlike external observers of migration, Akin's work emanates from lived experience, allowing him to portray diasporic lives with authenticity and emotional complexity that transcend stereotypical depictions often associated with migrant cinema (Gueneli 2019). His intimate connection to these themes situates him firmly within the emerging discourse on transnational and diasporic filmmaking, where questions of identity, memory, and nostalgia are central.

From his early features such as *Short Sharp Shock* (1998) and *In July* (2000), Akin established himself as a storyteller concerned with youth caught between cultures, searching for belonging and self-definition. These narratives centre on protagonists whose cultural hybridity presents both conflict and creative possibility, a duality Akin captures through naturalistic dialogue and grounded settings. *Head-On* (2004), a critical milestone in his career, further intensifies this exploration by portraying characters who embody cultural and psychological fragmentation, grappling with self-destructive impulses as they confront the constraints of their dual heritage. Here, Akin's cinematic style—a blend of raw

emotionality, visceral performances, and a soundtrack mixing traditional and contemporary sounds—reflects the fractured identities his characters inhabit.

Akin's documentary *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul* (2005) broadens this investigation by examining Istanbul's vibrant music scene as a metaphor for cultural hybridity and global interconnectedness. This film underscores Akin's interest in how sound and music serve as expressive vehicles for diasporic identity and memory, themes that recur across his oeuvre. It also signals his commitment to portraying cultures not as monolithic entities but as sites of continual transformation and dialogue.

In *The Edge of Heaven* (2007a), Akin refines these thematic preoccupations into a more complex and mature form. The film's tripartite, episodic structure interweaves multiple characters' stories across Germany and Turkey, examining the emotional and psychological effects of migration and displacement on individuals and communities. The narrative resists simplistic binaries—such as homeland versus host-land, or integration versus alienation—in favour of a fluid, multi-directional conception of movement, memory, and identity. This approach reflects contemporary realities of globalised migration, where the notion of *home* is increasingly fragmented and contingent.

Central to Akin's portrayal of these themes is his nuanced treatment of nostalgia. Rather than depicting nostalgia as a sentimental or idealised longing for a lost past, Akin embraces a more reflective and ambivalent conception of the term. As discussed earlier in relation to Boym's (2001) influential framework, the distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia remains particularly illuminating here. While restorative nostalgia seeks to reconstruct an imagined, often mythic, home by attempting to repair historical ruptures and reaffirm a collective identity, reflective nostalgia acknowledges the impossibility of full restoration and lingers in the awareness of loss, ambiguity, and the passage of time. Akin's films clearly align with this latter mode, offering a self-aware nostalgia that questions the coherence of national or cultural identity and highlights the fragmentation intrinsic to diasporic experience.

Katharina Niemeyer (2014) further articulates nostalgia as a cinematic strategy that mediates between personal memory and collective cultural narratives, particularly in contexts of migration and transnationalism. Akin's films, with their intricate narrative structures and interlaced character arcs, exemplify this strategy by weaving individual histories into larger socio-political contexts. In doing so, they challenge fixed notions of

identity and highlight its ongoing, contested construction. The characters in *The Edge of Heaven* exemplify this process: their memories and longings are often contradictory, tied to multiple places and times, and shaped by intergenerational traumas and hopes.

Akin's stylistic choices underscore these thematic concerns. His use of multilingual dialogue, cross-cultural music, and evocative mise-en-scène evokes the hybridity of diasporic identities. These audiovisual elements reflect Hamid Naficy's (2001) notion of *accented cinema*, a concept that identifies a distinctive mode of filmmaking arising from exile and migration. Accented cinema is marked by its aesthetic and narrative strategies that express the disjointed subjectivity of filmmakers who navigate multiple cultural worlds. As Naficy puts it, "Accented films are interstitial […] simultaneously local and global," signifying upon both exile/diaspora and cinema through artisanal modes and hybrid narrative strategies (Ibid., 4). This frame clarifies why Akin's work speaks across cultures while remaining closely attuned to the intimate textures of diasporic life and memory. Akin's recurrent depiction of Hamburg, with its vibrant yet fraught multicultural urban landscape, functions as a liminal space symbolising both home and estrangement, reflecting the complex negotiation of identity faced by diasporic individuals. Naficy itemises the "accented" style as "fragmented, multilingual, epistolary, self-reflexive, and critically juxtaposed" (2001, 4), a description that tracks closely with Akin's episodic, border-crossing design and provides a bridge to the chapter's later discussion of narrative structure.

Moreover, Akin's autobiographical imprint is not limited to thematic content but extends to his engagement with the filmic form itself. His films employ a sophisticated interplay of narrative fragmentation, tonal shifts, and musical layering that evoke the dissonance and fluidity of migrant experiences. This aesthetic approach reinforces the emotional texture of nostalgia and displacement, inviting audiences to engage empathetically with characters' dilemmas.

In this way, Akin's cinema intervenes in wider debates about migration and identity in contemporary Europe. By foregrounding the multiplicity of belonging and the ambivalences of memory, his films complicate dominant narratives of integration and national identity. They offer an inclusive vision of European cultural diversity, one that recognises the tensions and contradictions inherent in transnational lives. This positioning makes Akin's work particularly relevant in the current socio-political climate marked by rising nationalism and contested citizenship. This contextual

foundation is essential for the thematic analysis that follows, which will examine how *The Edge of Heaven* concretely embodies these concerns through its characters and narrative structure.

Transnational Narrative and Episodic Structure

The Edge of Heaven (2007a) explores the intersecting lives of six characters between Germany and Turkey, structured into three episodes focused on cross-cultural encounters and their consequences. In "Yeter's Death," Ali, a Turkish immigrant in Germany, invites Yeter, a Turkish sex worker facing threats, to live with him. Their arrangement leads to tragedy when Ali accidentally kills Yeter, prompting his son Nejat to search for her estranged daughter. In "Lotte's Death," Yeter's daughter Ayten, a political activist fleeing Turkey, finds refuge with Lotte, a German student in Hamburg. Their romance ends tragically when Ayten is deported and Lotte is accidentally killed in Turkey while trying to help her.

The final chapter, "The Edge of Heaven," follows Lotte's grieving mother Susanne and Nejat in Istanbul. Their shared goal of helping Ayten ultimately leads to reconciliation and new connections. The episodic narrative underscores displacement's capacity to intertwine lives unexpectedly, with each loss propelling characters towards cross-cultural empathy and identity exploration. By the conclusion, all threads lead to the Black Sea coast of Turkey, where Nejat waits for Ali—a poignant image of a son seeking reconnection with his father and ancestral home. This sweeping story of crossings sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how displacement shapes each character's identity.

Akin's use of an episodic narrative structure in *The Edge of Heaven* is integral to its exploration of transnational displacement. The film's three chapters function almost as standalone stories that gradually interlock, mirroring the disjointed, fragmentary experience of diaspora. This structure disrupts a linear, single-protagonist tale in favour of a mosaic of perspectives, emphasising mobility and coincidence over chronological continuity. The audience is made aware of connections that the characters themselves often miss—a form of dramatic irony that underscores the theme of missed connections in exile. Displacement in the film is thus not a single event but a series of intersecting journeys; the chapter breaks reinforce how each character's fate is shaped by transnational forces beyond any one person's control.

Moreover, the episodic format allows Akin to highlight patterns and contrasts in the displacement experience. Each of the first two chapters concludes with a death that results from a transnational encounter—a Turkish woman dies abroad, then a German woman dies abroad—suggesting a kind of tragic symmetry. The third chapter, titled "The Edge of Heaven" (after the film's German title *Auf der anderen Seite*, literally "On the Other Side"), serves as an elegiac coda where the survivors pick up the pieces across cultures. This structure itself becomes a statement: it conveys that displacement is not a linear journey from A to B, but a web of interconnected stories that transcend borders. The characters' paths are all entangled, and only by viewing all the chapters together can one grasp the full picture of their displacement and identity quests. In this way, form and content work in tandem—the film's structure dramatises the very dislocations, coincidences, and crossings that define its characters' lives.

Ali and Yeter: Generational Displacement and Nostalgia

Ali and Yeter's relationship exemplifies the first-generation immigrant experience, marked by cultural nostalgia and generational tension. Ali is a retiree who left Turkey decades prior; he embodies the classic guest-worker generation in Germany, having assimilated outwardly (he handles everyday life in German) yet still rooted in Turkish traditions. Yeter, for her part, is a middle-aged migrant mother who has sacrificed her life in Turkey (and her reputation) to earn money in Germany for the daughter she left behind. Both characters experience displacement as a source of loneliness and longing. When Ali meets Yeter in a Bremen brothel, a subtle moment reveals how nostalgia for home immediately bridges the gap between them: a Turkish radio song plays in the background, catching Ali's ear. Upon recognising the tune—Neşe Karaböcek's "Son Hatıra"—his demeanour softens. He abruptly abandons speaking German and turns to Yeter, asking if she is Turkish, before continuing in their shared mother tongue. This interaction demonstrates how, in exile, familiar music and language can stir memories of home and create an immediate sense of connection. Akin uses the traditional song as a powerful trigger for recollection, a catalyst that reawakens cultural memory and establishes instant familiarity between two strangers living far from their homeland.

Yeter similarly embodies nostalgia and generational dislocation, especially in her private moments. Having severed contact with her daughter Ayten, Yeter carries quiet guilt and sorrow beneath her stoic exterior. In one telling scene in Nejat's garden, Yeter bites into a ripe tomato and is unexpectedly overcome with emotion, expressing how deeply she misses her daughter. The simple act of tasting the tomato—likely evoking memories of home cooking or daily family rituals—serves as an unassuming but powerful trigger for her buried feelings of longing and regret. This poignant moment underscores how sensory experiences can collapse time and space for migrants, bringing the pain of absent loved ones rushing back. Yeter's nostalgia is tinged with regret: she cannot easily return to Istanbul or undo the choice that separated her from Ayten. In Ali and Yeter's generational dynamic, we thus see two displaced people finding fleeting solace in shared culture even as their pasts haunt them. Ali's old-world habits (like insistence on controlling "his" woman) clash tragically with Yeter's independent sacrifices, resulting in Yeter's death and Ali's imprisonment. Alienated from his adopted country after this incident, Ali is deported back to Turkey—literally displaced again in his old age. The irony of Ali's arc is that the homeland he longed for in music ultimately becomes his only refuge after emigration and his own mistakes forcefully disrupt the course of his life. Generational displacement in *The Edge of Heaven* is thus portrayed with deep ambivalence: nostalgia for one's roots can be comforting, but it cannot entirely heal the dislocations and misunderstandings between an older immigrant like Ali and those around him. Yet, that very nostalgia keeps alive the idea of *home*—a place or time where Ali's and Yeter's true selves might belong, even if fate denies them that return.

Nejat and Ayten: Second-Generation Identity Struggles

Nejat and Ayten represent a younger generation for whom identity is fluid, fragmented, and continually negotiated through displacement. Nejat is Ali's son, a German-born academic of Turkish heritage—effectively a *second-generation* Turk in Germany. At the film's outset, Nejat appears fully assimilated: he is a bookish professor of German literature, more at ease quoting Goethe than singing Turkish folk songs. In fact, Akin draws attention to Nejat's cultural disconnect in a scene set at a gas

station in Turkey. There, a song from the Black Sea region plays—Kazım Koyuncu's "Ben Seni Sevduğumü"—but Nejat does not recognise it. This prompts a local shopkeeper to remark on the song's popularity in the area, pointing out how well known the artist is along the Black Sea Coast. Nejat's discomfort in this moment subtly highlights his internal conflict: although he is ethnically Turkish and speaks the language fluently, his long life in Germany has distanced him from the everyday cultural knowledge and experiences of Turkey. The scene illustrates the nuanced tensions of identity for second-generation migrants.

Earlier in the story, Nejat abandons his prestigious post in Hamburg and moves to Istanbul, ostensibly to find Ayten and fund her education in honour of Yeter, but also implicitly to explore the Turkish side of his identity. In Istanbul, Nejat makes a symbolic choice that encapsulates his dual identity—he purchases a German-language bookshop to run in Turkey. Surrounded by German literature in the land of his father, Nejat has fashioned a hybrid space for himself.

Where Nejat moves by choice, Ayten is *propelled* into exile. As a left--wing activist in Istanbul, Ayten rejects the constraints of her home society—its nationalism, patriarchy, and social norms—to the point of joining a militant resistance group. When a crackdown comes, she must flee Turkey to save herself, hoping to find freedom (and her long-lost mother) in Europe. Ayten's saga in Germany starkly illustrates the identity struggles of an undocumented refugee. The film suggests that even as Ayten rails against her homeland's injustices, she is not immune to nostalgia. Being in exile has intensified her recollection of her mother and reignited a desire for familial connection that she had previously attempted to repress. Ayten's eventual salvation comes via transnational solidarity: Susanne and Nejat work within Turkey to free her from prison, and Ayten, in turn, helps Susanne mourn Lotte. This underscores a hopeful point: by forming human connections across cultural lines, even those as dislocated as Ayten can begin to rebuild an identity and a community.

Lotte and Susanne: Displacement as Cultural Estrangement

Through Lotte and Susanne, Akin explores how displacement can lead to cultural estrangement and unexpected empathy. Unlike the Turkish characters, Lotte is a German native who chooses displacement out of love and

idealism. She encounters Ayten as a stranger in need and, in a gesture of youthful openness, invites this Turkish exile into her home and life. Lotte's decision to shelter Ayten defies her mother Susanne's cautious instincts—a generational clash between cosmopolitan youth and more guarded older adults. When Ayten's situation deteriorates (her asylum claim is rejected and she's arrested), Lotte demonstrates extraordinary courage: she follows Ayten to Istanbul, a foreign land to her, determined to help free her lover. On one hand, Lotte's willingness to immerse herself in another culture leads to meaningful friendships—notably with Nejat, who rents her a room in Istanbul and assists her efforts. On the other hand, Lotte's fate also reflects the hazards of estrangement. In a tragic twist, she becomes a victim of chance violence on Istanbul's streets, shot by children who find Ayten's stashed gun.

Susanne initially appears as the outsider who is least prepared for displacement. A middle-aged German mother and schoolteacher, Susanne leads a comfortable, orderly life—until the loss of Lotte upends her world. Grieving and full of regret over her earlier disapproval of Lotte's choices, Susanne travels to Turkey to carry out her daughter's unfinished mission of helping Ayten. This journey thrusts Susanne into profound cultural estrangement. In Istanbul, she confronts not only the shock of Lotte's absence but also a country utterly unfamiliar to her. Akin uses Susanne's perspective to highlight the disorienting aspects of being far from home: the language sounds unintelligible, local customs are alien, and the city's pace overwhelming. Susanne's initial apprehension gives way to genuine solidarity. She visits Ayten in prison, and instead of anger or blame (which one might expect from a bereaved mother), Susanne offers comfort. By the end, Susanne has forged a bond with Ayten (as a surrogate daughter) and with Nejat (as a friend who shares her grief and hope). In Susanne's arc, displacement evolves from a state of estrangement and loss into an opportunity for understanding and healing. Akin suggests that while cultural estrangement is painful, it can also strip away prejudice and foster human connections. Lotte's and Susanne's journeys illustrate two sides of the same coin: the daughter seeks adventure and love abroad and meets tragedy, while the mother arrives in sorrow yet finds new purpose and friends. Together, they demonstrate that empathy across cultures often sprouts from the shared experience of displacement—even a tragic one.

Nostalgic Aesthetics and Audiovisual Techniques

The Edge of Heaven delves into the complexities of cultural identity and the ways in which personal histories intersect with broader socio-political contexts. The film portrays the characters' struggles with their dual identities and their attempts to reconcile their past with their present. This tension is palpable in the scenes where the characters grapple with their cultural heritage, such as Nejat's decision to seek out Ayten's mother in Turkey. His journey is not just a physical one but also a metaphorical return to his roots, illustrating how nostalgia can drive characters to reconnect with their origins and renegotiate their identities.

Apart from the screenplay and character construction, additional formal features of Akin's film contribute to the expression of the nostalgic condition. For the purpose of this analysis, I will examine two poignant scenes from the film during which Nejat experiences nostalgia, an unspoken nostalgia which nonetheless instigates significant developments to the character as well as the plot.

As mentioned earlier, when Nejat arrives in Turkey he experiences nostalgia for Germany. Up until that point, Nejat is portrayed as a calm, polite, and serious academic. At home, he behaves nicely to his father, who appears to have a very different personality. When Ali asks him a direct question about his current sexual relationships, Nejat politely avoids answering. Even when Yeter moves in to their house, he appears not to be critical of his father's decision to invite a sex worker to live with them. On the contrary, he develops a very warm relationship with her. At work, he delivers a serious lecture on Goethe, which the students do not seem very excited about. Thus overall, his temperament reflects more of a stereotypically German personality rather than Turkish. At the beginning of his search for Yeter's daughter in Istanbul he discloses no personal attachment to the place or the culture. He walks in the streets, he visits Yeter's relatives to find information on Ayten, but there is no emotional connection between the character and the place being implied.

The film therefore avoids conventional routes of characterisation by avoiding a sudden evocation of nostalgia in Nejat for the culture of his country of origin. Nostalgia manifests only when he comes across and enters the German bookshop. As he enters, the soundtrack shifts from the ambient city sounds of Istanbul to the renowned German classical piece

Minuet in G Major by Christian Petzold.[1] This relaxing diegetic score—which presumably is familiar to Nejat—accompanies the entire scene in the bookshop. It is the first element that instigates nostalgic feelings in Nejat. Instead of expressing the character's feelings, the use of music here functions as the cause of an emotional reaction. The camera follows him in a continuous tracking shot as he walks through the bookshop. It observes him while he touches the shelves almost lovingly, looking around in every direction. The actor's subtle performance, including his movement and interaction with the space, indicates an instant emotional connection. Those emotions grow during the scene and reach their peak during his conversation with the German bookshop owner, Markus Obermuller. Markus reveals to Nejat that homesickness is the reason he is selling his shop, the most profound form of nostalgia. He claims that even though the store allows him to be somewhat close to Germany, it functions as little more than a museum. Speaking and hearing the German language is different from being surrounded by it in printed form. This is evident in Markus's behaviour, particularly in the excitement and attentiveness he shows towards Nejat when he utters his first words in German to greet him. The long continuous take at the beginning of the scene, the warm lighting, delicate selection of music, and performances join forces to express the nostalgic condition felt by the characters. It is the uninterrupted projected narrative space that allows the viewer in real time to comprehend and designate meaning to those elements. Once this process is completed, the dialogue between the characters in the second and last part of the scene confirms that the emotional epicentre of this sequence is indeed nostalgia.

Near the end of the film, Nejat silently once again experiences nostalgia, this time for his father and the bygone warm relationship they had before Ali was imprisoned. What triggers Nejat's nostalgia on this occasion is a conversation he has with Susanne by the window of his flat in Istanbul. It is Kurban Bayrami, the Islamic holiday of sacrifice.[2] From the apartment window, Susanne watches masses of people walking. The muezzin is calling Muslims to prayer. Susanne is unaware of that and

[1] The *Minuet in G Major* is included in the *Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach* (1725), originally attributed to Johann Sebastian Bach but now universally recognised as a piece by Christian Petzold.

[2] More commonly known as Eid al-Adha.

wants to know about the Festival of Sacrifice. Nejat explains to her its story and meaning, revealing to her that as the son of a single parent, the story of Ibrahim being asked by God to sacrifice his child always used to scare him. This enables him to bring back the memory of the relationship he had with his father who had reassured him when he was young that he would go even against God's will to protect him. Nejat contemplates this for a moment and decides to leave his bookstore under the supervision of Susanne for a few days and drive to the Black Sea region to find his father. During Nejat and Susanne's conversation, there is no music score. However, the diegetic sound of the muezzin's callings creates a spiritual atmosphere that functions as a backdrop and simultaneously a trigger of the nostalgic condition. In a similar fashion to the bookstore scene, nostalgia is triggered by an initial interaction with the surrounding environment which in turn leads to a conversation between characters. The dialogue includes questions, answers, and eventually unspoken realisations. The development of the narrative that follows both scenes declares the function of nostalgia in the film as reflective (considering Boym's categorisation) and simultaneously progressive. Nejat's longing for the past is painful but leads him to further actions for the future, a mechanism that contributes to the character's self-awareness and the establishment of stability, shying away from conservative melodramatic expressions/response to nostalgia.

Autobiographical Dimensions in *The Edge of Heaven*

The manifestation of the nostalgic condition in several characters' lives in the film reflects the universality of the condition. Ali's generational nostalgia, also for youth and an active sex life, leads him to invite Yeter to live with him, Susanne's nostalgia for her deceased daughter Lotte motivates her to help Ayten, and of course Markus, the bookshop owner, feels nostalgia for Germany and Nejat experiences multifaceted nostalgia. There is arguably one further implicit form of nostalgia in the film: that of the filmmaker Fatih Akin. *The Edge of Heaven* is deeply rooted in autobiographical elements, reflecting the director's personal experiences and cultural background. Naficy argues that "each accented film may be thought of as a performance of its author's identity," with autobiographical inscription (2001, 6). Although it is a work of fiction with an ensemble cast of characters, the film contains numerous parallels to Akin's own life and personal history of cultural displacement. The personal dimension is inscribed

throughout the film's narrative. Many of Akin's characters and story ideas stem from his own biography. Born in 1973 in Hamburg to Turkish immigrant parents, Akin grew up straddling the two cultures—a background strikingly similar to that of Nejat. Nejat is the German-born son of a Turkish "Gastarbeiter" (guest worker) and, like Akin, he is navigating the hyphenated identity of a Turkish-German. The Black Sea region, the homeland of the protagonist in the film, happens to be the land or origin of Akin himself. In the documentary *Fatih Akın: Diary of a Film Traveler* (2007b), he describes the journey he took in July 2005 to his grandfather's village Çamburnu, on the Black Sea, in an attempt to find inspiration to finish writing the screenplay of the film. However, Akin does not express a nostalgic feeling for a return to his roots. Instead, in common with his characters, he uses this feeling to move forward in a productive manner, in his case, seeking inspiration for creative ideas. "Akın's autobiographical relationship to the landscape testifies to the inextricable link between the cinematic representation of the journey [Nejat is taking to the Black Sea] and the region's geographical and historical specificity" (Bayraktar 2016, 49).

Characters are influenced by Akin's own background and experiences as a Turkish-German filmmaker, facing the emotional and psychological impact of displacement, struggling at times with identity, belonging, and memory. Because Akin is effectively writing from within his own cultural experience, the film avoids the exoticism or stereotyping that might plague a less personal diasporic narrative. The film's narrative structure, with its intersecting storylines and multi-directional journeys, mirrors Akin's own life, where his experiences as a second-generation immigrant are woven into the fabric of the story. The film situates Turkish-German transnationalism within historical and contemporary frameworks. It reconfigures paradigms of Eastern and Western relationships, positioning Germany and Turkey within each other's sights/sites. Akin's personal and cultural background allows him to bridge these divides, creating a cinematic tapestry that reflects the fluidity of identity and the negotiation of cultural differences. The film's references to the Koran, the Bible, Turkish and German literature and music, and Turkish history triangulate the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic roots of German and Turkish culture, underscoring the interconnectedness of these seemingly disparate worlds. This reflects Akin's own cultural context and his intention to challenge traditional representations of Turkish–German relationships. He engages with and challenges the cultural and cinematic traditions he inherited. The film references

other works, such as those of Rainer Werner Fassbinder. The narrative setup of *The Edge of Heaven* and creative approach incorporate echoes of Fassbinder films, and in particular of *Fear Eats the Soul* (1974) and *Katzelmacher* (1969) (Landfester 2017). This intertextual relationship allows Akin to situate his own film within a broader tradition of German cinema that grapples with the complexities of cultural identity and displacement.

Non-linear narrative structures are often used to reflect the fragmented nature of memory. Films like Andrei Tarkovsky's *Mirror* (1975) and Terence Davies's *The Long Day Closes* (1992) employ a non-linear approach to storytelling, juxtaposing different time periods and blending personal memories with historical events. This technique mirrors the way memories are recalled in real life—disjointed, overlapping, and non-sequential. By doing so, filmmakers can evoke a sense of nostalgia that resonates with audiences on a subconscious level. In addition to narrative structure, the use of visual motifs and symbolic imagery plays a crucial role in evoking nostalgia. Sound design and music are also integral to evoking nostalgia in autobiographical films. The use of diegetic sounds, such as ambient noises from the filmmaker's past environment, can trigger specific memories for both the director and the audience. In *The Edge of Heaven*, the incorporation of Turkish and German music helps bridge the cultural divide and creates a sense of shared nostalgia between the characters.

The ethical upshot is that *The Edge of Heaven* operates as a dialogic form of autobiography: Akin is not only telling a story to the audience, he is in a sense having a conversation with facets of his own life—his younger self, his parents, his lost friends, his homeland. The film's emotional authenticity stems from this introspective dialogue. For viewers, whether or not they know the biographical facts, the honesty resonates. We sense that the filmmaker *intimately knows* the loneliness of Ali, the confusion of Nejat, the fire of Ayten, and the yearning of Susanne, because these are in part his memories and feelings.

In terms of autobiographical filmmaking's broader implications, Akin's approach in *The Edge of Heaven* exemplifies how personal history can be harnessed to tell multifaceted stories that transcend the purely personal. There is a generous quality to Akin's autobiographical touches—he uses them to illuminate universal themes of belonging, rather than simply to self-mythologise. Akin's German-Turkish background informs the film's exploration of cultural dislocation and the search for identity. By drawing on his own experiences and those of his community, Akin creates a film

that speaks to the universal human experience of longing for a sense of belonging.

In autobiographical filmmaking, the use of real locations and the setting of the story play pivotal roles in expressing nostalgia and authenticity. Real locations serve as tangible connections to the filmmaker's past, grounding the narrative in a physical reality that enhances the emotional resonance of the story. By shooting in actual places that hold personal significance, directors can evoke a sense of place that is imbued with memory and sentiment. This approach not only heightens the authenticity of the film but also allows the audience to experience the (potential) director's nostalgia in a visceral way. The depiction of landscapes can evoke a deep sense of nostalgia, serving as a backdrop that reflects the emotional and psychological states of characters. Going back to Nejat's road trip to the Black Sea region, scenes from the journey are repeated throughout the film. The opening sequence, which preludes the first chapter, shows Nejat in the middle of his journey, stopping for fuel in an unspecified rural place in Turkey. Other scenes from his journey are shown in between the film's chapters, creating a narrative and visual thread that connects all three. But it is only at the end of the third chapter that the audience discovers the purpose and meaning of this journey. The opening sequence is then shown again, becoming the last piece of this complex puzzle screenplay. Having followed the characters' multi-directional journeys to and from Bremen, Hamburg, and Istanbul, the viewer is now able to comprehend the social values attached to the projected landscapes during the driving scenes. Wide-angle shots frame the landscape of rural Turkey, underpinned by the highly nostalgic sound of Kazim Koyuncu and Sevval Sam's "Ben Seni Sevdigimi" playing in Nejat's car. Editing along with the authentic portrayal of these locales not only reinforces nostalgia's episodic nature, but also anchors the narrative in a reality that the audience can connect with emotionally. Once Nejat reaches Trabzon, more than 1000 kilometres away from Istanbul, a succession of static wide shots of the landscapes are depicted. These shots, however, abstain from serving superficially as spectacle. Their short duration of approximately three seconds, the naturalistic lighting, along with valuable information on local life they transmit allow them to attain an influential role in expressing cultural values and elements of identity, personal as well as collective.

In the very last shot of the film, Nejat sits on a sandy seashore in Trabzon, watching the sea while waiting for his father to return from fishing. The shot lasts for more than six minutes, with end titles appearing

over it. The soundtrack is comprised of natural sounds: indistinct dialogue from an unspecified source and the relaxing sound of small waves. Nejat's journey is concluded by patiently looking at the unknown. There is undoubtedly a multiform metaphorical potential for this shot, particularly if examined in combination with the one that precedes it. There is an (uncharacteristic for the film) extreme close-up on Nejat's face as he takes off his dark sunglasses, before looking at the horizon over the sea. It could be said that at that moment Nejat's eyes and vision reflect Akin's own point of view. The protagonist has reached the filmmaker's homeland. The cinematic identity interweaves with that of the artist.

In summary, the autobiographical dimensions of *The Edge of Heaven*—from mirrored characters and generational stories drawn from Akin's life, to the film's thematic preoccupations with hybrid identity and home—serve to deepen its exploration of nostalgia and displacement. Akin's personal stake in the material yields a film that is heartfelt and credible; it speaks from an insider perspective about what it means to live between worlds. The ethical and emotional authenticity achieved here demonstrates how autobiographical filmmaking, when handled with care as Akin does, can powerfully represent not just one individual's sense of loss and longing, but also those of a broader community. In doing so, Akin turns his personal nostalgia into a creative force that bridges personal memory and collective experience—a hallmark of his accent as a diasporic auteur.

Conclusion

Akin's sophisticated blend of aesthetic techniques, autobiographical inflection, and historical context creates a film that operates on multiple levels—as an intimate human drama and as a commentary on the diasporic condition. The German press heralded *The Edge of Heaven* as a plea for a Europe "growing together," casting Akin as "representative of a globalized cinema" (Machtans et al. 2012, 156–157). Nostalgia is more than a longing glance backward; it is portrayed as a *process*—a way to negotiate one's displaced identity amid intersecting histories. The characters' personal memories continually collide with historical realities: whether it's Nejat's childhood memory of a religious tale set against the modern diaspora experience, or Ayten's nostalgic love for her mother entangled with Turkey's political turmoil. By bringing these elements together, Akin's film underscores a key insight: for diasporic individuals, personal nostalgia is never purely personal; it is always interwoven with collective narratives

of movement, loss, and change. Visually and sonically, Akin evokes nostalgia by carefully balancing distances and proximities: expansive landscapes and lingering tracking shots give the audience space to reflect, while poignant diegetic music and quiet moments draw us into the characters' inner worlds. These artistic choices enhance our emotional engagement, allowing us to *feel* the characters' longing as they traverse between homes and cultures. Structurally, the film's use of chaptered narrative and mirrored stories of loss imbues it with a melancholic rhythm, reinforcing the themes of inevitable separation and hoped-for reunion that often accompany diasporic nostalgia. The result is a form of reflective nostalgia—one that does not simply yearn for a return to the past, but encourages contemplation of the past's meaning in the present.

Through its nuanced portrayal of personal and collective memory, *The Edge of Heaven* exemplifies how autobiographical elements in films can evoke a deep sense of nostalgia. The film's fragmented narrative, rich in cultural references and real locations, allows viewers to engage with the characters' emotional landscapes and reflect on their own experiences of displacement and belonging. By weaving personal stories with historical and cultural contexts, Akin's film not only strengthens the cinematic identity of its protagonists but also invites viewers to explore their own nostalgic connections to the past. In this way, autobiographical films like *The Edge of Heaven* serve as powerful mediums for expressing and exploring the intricate layers of nostalgia. Through the interplay of narrative, setting, and character, these films capture the essence of nostalgia, transforming it into a universal experience that resonates across cultures and generations. The emotional authenticity born of this approach demonstrates the power of autobiographical cinema—when a filmmaker channels private truths into art, it can illuminate the human condition in ways that are deeply relatable. In Akin's case, his self-reflexive method brings a palpable sincerity to the representation of nostalgia and displacement, suggesting that telling one's own story (even indirectly) can be a profound act of both self-understanding and cultural testimony.

In conclusion, *The Edge of Heaven* emerges from this analysis as a richly layered cinematic expression of nostalgia and displacement. It is a progressive treatment of nostalgia, causing characters to act in a constructive fashion in their lives instead of passively going through the condition. For instance, Nejat finding purpose in Turkey can be seen as him writing himself into the ongoing story of Turkish–German exchange—an acceptance

that his life, like his father's, straddles two places and that this in-between state can be fruitful rather than purely painful

The Edge of Heaven harnesses the specificity of lived experience to shed light on universal themes of home, identity, loss, and reconciliation. The broader implication of Akin's approach is that film—with its capacity to blend images, sounds, and storytelling—is uniquely suited to capture the texture of diasporic nostalgia, which is at once visual, auditory, emotional, and narrative. By understanding how *The Edge of Heaven* crafts a dialogue between the individual and history, between longing and belonging, we equip ourselves to recognise similar patterns in other works and cultural settings. In doing so, we continue to unravel how cinema not only reflects personal and collective pasts but also helps to shape the ongoing narrative of identity in our globalised, migratory world.

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CHAPTER 4

Reflective Nostalgia in Miguel Gomes's *Tabu*

Abstract This chapter explores Miguel Gomes's *Tabu* (2012) as a film that reconfigures nostalgia through a critical engagement with colonial memory. It argues that the film offers a striking example of reflective nostalgia, foregrounding the impossibility of returning to an idealised past while simultaneously evoking longing for vanished cinematic traditions. By juxtaposing contemporary Lisbon with the stylised recollections of colonial Mozambique, the film exposes the contradictions of imperial nostalgia and the fragility of personal memory. Its evocation of early cinema aesthetics—particularly through its monochrome images and silent-era intertitles—situates *Tabu* within a self-reflexive European art cinema tradition, one that uses form itself as a vehicle for interrogating history. The chapter demonstrates how Gomes mobilises nostalgia not as a retreat into the past but as a mode of critique that unsettles the myths of colonialism and invites audiences to reflect on cinema's role in shaping collective memory. In this way, *Tabu* exemplifies how nostalgia can function both as an aesthetic strategy and as a political intervention in the context of postcolonial European cinema.

Keywords Miguel Gomes • European cinema • Reflective nostalgia • Colonial memory • Postcolonial cinema • Film aesthetics • Cinematic memory

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Building on the theoretical foundations laid earlier in this book, this chapter turns to *Tabu* (Miguel Gomes 2012) as a prism through which to scrutinise the politics of longing in contemporary European cinema. Premiering during Portugal's austerity malaise, the film condenses national introspection into a beguiling tale of empire and aftermath, thus offering an ideal case study for this book's wider investigation of nostalgia as both an affect and a critical method. As Kisukidi reorients nostalgia away from mere regression, she proposes "the construction of an experience of nostalgia that is more than a simple affective experience of recollection, but also becomes a discursive and ethical proposal" (2014, 192). This perspective deepens our understanding of the critical potential inherent in examining longing for the past. Cinema, historically, has "helped forge political consensus […] offering domestic audiences the pleasure of colonization," and post-colonial historiography now "unpacks their visual codes […] Nostalgia, memory, amnesia, trauma, denial, repression, guilt […] [haunt] the present" (Ponzanesi and Waller 2012, 11–12). It is against this backdrop that Tabu's engagement with colonial memory gains particular relevance.

To elucidate that dual impulse I, once again, borrow Svetlana Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia seeks to reconstruct an unbroken past, often through heritage spectacle; reflective nostalgia dwells on ruins, gaps, and doubt, foregrounding the instability of memory itself (2001). *Tabu* appears, at first glance, to indulge a restorative fantasy—lush monochrome images, melodramatic voice-over, and an exoticised Africa evoke the comfort of a finished story. Yet those very textures are undermined by Gomes's strategic use of asynchronous sound, anachronistic pop, and peripheral African viewpoints, converting sensuous allure into a critique of colonial amnesia (Pereira 2016).

Tabu unfolds in a bifurcated narrative structure, split between a present-day Lisbon segment and a colonial-era flashback set in mid-twentieth-century Mozambique. The first part, titled "Paradise Lost," follows Pilar, a kind-hearted but solitary middle-aged woman, as she watches over her eccentric elderly neighbour, Aurora, and Aurora's quiet maid, Santa, in contemporary Lisbon. As Aurora's health declines, she implores Pilar to track down Ventura, a long-lost acquaintance from her youth. Ventura's arrival triggers the film's second chapter, "Paradise," a shift to the early 1960s in which his voice-over narrates the forbidden romance he once shared with a young Aurora at the foot of Mount Tabu in colonial Mozambique. Presented in the style of a silent-era adventure (with

minimal dialogue and a nostalgic black-and-white palette), this flashback romanticises Aurora's past even as it subtly foregrounds the era's social and political blind spots. Here, nostalgia unfolds through spatial contrasts—between Lisbon's present-day melancholy and the remembered, idealised colonial landscapes —revealing how place shapes the texture of reflective longing. Through this diptych form, *Tabu* deftly intertwines personal memory with the haunting legacies of Portugal's colonial history, allowing themes of nostalgia, loss, and desire to resonate beneath an ostensibly simple love story.

Accordingly, the chapter advances a clear claim: Gomes mobilises reflective nostalgia to seduce viewers with the sensory pleasures of Portugal's imperial past only to expose the ideological violence that sustained it, thereby revealing how that unfinished history continues to inflect contemporary Portuguese identity. The argument unfolds through a close reading of the hinge-like edit that carries the spectator from rain-slicked Lisbon balconies to a sun-bleached Mozambican plantation. By tracing how image, sound, and narration choreograph that passage, I demonstrate the film's capacity to make nostalgia simultaneously affective and analytic—a post-imperial after-image typical of twenty-first-century European cinema (de Medeiros 2016).

Miguel Gomes: Influences and Stylistic Traits

Miguel Gomes arrived at feature filmmaking after a decade of cine-essayistic shorts made at Lisbon's Film School, and that lineage of playful scholarship still shapes his work. From *The Face You Deserve* (2004) through *Our Beloved Month of August* (2008) to *Arabian Nights* (2015) and more recently *Grand Tour* (2024), Gomes treats cinema less as a transparent window than as an exuberant collage of screen memories. Genre borders are therefore porous: musical numbers blossom inside quasi-documentary ethnography; melodrama mutates into travelogue; a realist chronicle of austerity suddenly opens onto Arabian fantasy. Critics have linked this hybridity to the director's voracious cinephilia—his open quotation of Murnau, Renoir, and the Portuguese studio classics (Overhoff Ferreira 2014).

Central to these hybrid surfaces is Gomes's fascination with *voice*. Rarely satisfied with synchronous dialogue, he layers disembodied narration, on-set ramblings, and reflective voice-over so that sound and image run on slightly different clocks. In *Tabu* the elderly Gian-Luca narrates

1960s Mozambique while the images move as silent-film tableaux; the words we hear often contradict what we see, forcing spectators to oscillate between immersion and distance. Such anachronistic sound/image relations, already rehearsed in the karaoke sequences of *Our Beloved Month of August*, betray the influence of Manoel de Oliveira's late cinema, which likewise toys with dubbing and off-screen commentary to foreground the artifice of memory (Rosenbaum 2011).

Recurring Thematic Preoccupations

If form is restless, the emotional motor remains remarkably consistent: *saudade*, the Portuguese mood of pleasurable sorrow. Gomes's characters wander through forests, karaoke bars, or crumbling colonial houses haunted by earlier, happier selves. Yet saudade in his films is never purely private. From the father-son masquerade in *The Face You Deserve* to the unemployed storytellers of *Arabian Nights*, individual longing intersects with the unfinished business of empire and economic dependency. Scholars have interpreted this pattern in Gomes's work as a lingering post-imperial trace—one that reflects a bittersweet attraction to colonial allure coupled with a lucid critique of its violence (de Medeiros 2016). *Tabu* concentrates that tension: Aurora, Pilar, and Santa embody three uneven positions in Portugal's colonial legacy, and their interactions pivot on lapses of memory, mistranslation, and wilful oblivion.

Gomes's films therefore function as historiographic laboratories. By recycling amateur footage, newsreel fragments, or pop songs long detached from their origins, he dramatises the labour through which nations remember—and forget. Ana Cristina Pereira (2016) notes that his foregrounding of African "otherness" in *Tabu* depends on strategic ellipsis: the African workers appear at the edge of the frame, forcing the spectator to confront whose memories are being staged and whose are sidelined. This insistence on absence situates Gomes within a wider Lusophone current—Pedro Costa, João Ribeiro, Ivo M. Ferreira—that interrogates Portugal's imperial remains while refusing the consolations of heroic restoration.

Situating *Tabu*

Shot in 2011 and premiered at Berlin in January 2012, *Tabu* emerged during Portugal's deep recession, when public discourse swung between nostalgia for pre-EU certainties and anger at international creditors. Gomes responded with a film that is simultaneously a love letter to silent-era aesthetics and a disquieting allegory of unpaid historical debts. Produced by Lisbon-based O Som e a Fúria on a modest €1.4 million budget, the project relied on 35 mm stock for the Lisbon part and grainy 16 mm for Africa, underscoring its temporal bifurcation. Critically, *Tabu* was hailed as a revelation: it won the FIPRESCI Prize in Berlin and appeared on year-end lists from *Cahiers du cinéma* to *The New Yorker* (MUBI Notebook 2012; Brody 2012a). Reviewers praised its "defiant insights" into colonial complicity even as they succumbed to its exquisite melancholy (Brody 2012b). Such responses place Gomes in dialogue with a tradition of Portuguese filmmaking cultivated by Manoel de Oliveira and João Botelho—directors who mined Portugal's imperial archive to expose, rather than to celebrate, the myths of discovery and Lusotropical harmony. Yet where Oliveira's late films often adopt a contemplative remove, Gomes amplifies sensuous pleasure—pop ballads, jungle foliage, melodramatic confession—only to puncture it with reminders of silence, labour, and loss.

By mapping these stylistic habits, thematic fixations, and institutional contexts, we begin to grasp how *Tabu* can wield nostalgia both as aesthetic seduction and as political critique. The next step is to anchor those observations within a broader theoretical frame, clarifying how reflective nostalgia, post-colonial memory, and heritage discourse intersect in contemporary scholarship. Such conceptual groundwork will allow the close scene analysis that follows to resonate beyond Portuguese cinema, illuminating the wider European negotiation with its colonial past.

Reflective Nostalgia and Post-Colonial Memory

When Svetlana Boym first distinguished between *restorative* and *reflective* nostalgia she was concerned with how modern subjects negotiate ruptures in collective memory (2001). Restorative nostalgia tries to mend those ruptures by rebuilding a lost home; reflective nostalgia dwells in the fissures themselves, relishing ambiguity and incongruity. *Tabu* inhabits the second mode. Its bifurcated structure insists that colonial Africa is gone,

yet its textures—grainy film stock, torch-song melodies—make that absence palpably seductive. This oscillation resonates with Paul Gilroy's notion of post-colonial melancholia, the lingering sense of loss that emerges when imperial narratives collapse but new, inclusive identities remain unrealised (Gilroy 2005). Melancholia, for Gilroy, is not mere sorrow; it is an unworked grief that resurfaces in cultural forms as apparently innocent as costume drama or, in Gomes's case, a tale of doomed lovers. *Tabu* stages this melancholia twice over. Pilar's Lisbon feels paralysed by a history nobody will name, while Ventura's voice-over converts Mozambique into a dreamspace that can be visited only in memory.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory helps clarify why such grief often appears second-hand. Hirsch argues that later generations "remember" the traumas of their forebears not through direct experience but through imaginative investment in stories, photographs, and films (Hirsch 1997). *Tabu* stages precisely this mediated act: Pilar and the audience encounter colonial Mozambique only through Gian-Luca's voice-over and the spectral images that accompany it. Gomes literalises post-memory by making us encounter colonialism solely through a recited anecdote and silent tableaux. This aligns with what Ponzanesi and Waller describe as a grammar of spectrality in post-colonial cinema, where films offer "recursiveness, porosity, intrusion, and haunting," and "diaries, wills, ruins, shipwrecks, and shadows take on agency as rationalism and mastery lose their persuasiveness" (2012, 9). This approach, as Walder notes,[1] cultivates a "wariness about totalising discourses," focusing instead on how identities are constructed "through picking up the baggage of memory, rather than history" (2011, 15). *Tabu* exemplifies this by resisting grand, definitive historical narratives of colonialism, choosing instead to explore the fragmented, subjective, and often haunting echoes of the past as experienced through individual and collective memory. This allows the film to confront colonial residues not as a fixed, complete historical account, but as an ongoing, lived, and sometimes elusive presence. Reflective nostalgia, post-colonial melancholia, and post-memory thus converge to produce a sensibility that is affectively potent yet permanently estranged from its ostensible object.

[1] In the original source, Walder is reflecting on Edward Said's foundational critique of Orientalism.

Heritage Cinema as Counterpoint

Because reflective nostalgia complicates rather than confirms mythical pasts, it stands in productive tension with the heritage film tradition. Andrew Higson (1996, 2003, 2014) shows that British period dramas of the 1980s–1990s translate historic buildings and fine costumes into reassuring tourist vistas. These works practise restorative nostalgia: they invite viewers to consume the past as tasteful décor, softening conflict in favour of continuity. Claire Monk reveals the genre's continuing appeal to consumers of comfort, whose online fan cultures celebrate elegance while side-stepping social conflict (2011). A comparable logic surfaces in *Tabu*'s part two (Paradise) that mobilises the "tropes and motifs of Hollywood's colonial adventure narratives," invoking exotic spectacle and romance that effectively obscure the underlying violence and exploitation of empire (Harvey 2016, 152). However, *Tabu* borrows the *look* of heritage—lush monochrome, operatic romance—only to subvert its politics. By withholding synchronous dialogue in the Africa segment, Gomes frustrates the heritage film's promise of transparent access; by letting servants hover at the frame's edge he reminds us whose labour props up the European idyll. The result is a *self-reflexive pastiche*: we are lured by familiar pleasures yet continually reminded that those pleasures are built on erasure.

Harvey calls this manoeuvre pleasure deployed as critique, arguing that Gomes harnesses the "undeniable pleasures" of Eurocentric media precisely to expose their blind spots (Ibid., 151–152). This manoeuvre matters because heritage cinema's global circulation shapes popular understandings of colonial history. When *Tabu* destabilises the genre's visual grammar, it exposes the ideological labour that turns plantations into picture postcards. In other words, *Tabu* turns the heritage grammar inside-out: sensory enchantment becomes a Trojan horse for ethical unease. Gomes uses reflective nostalgia to interrogate restorative nostalgia from within, demonstrating that affect and critique need not be mutually exclusive.

Cinematic Techniques of Temporal Dislocation

The film's critical force depends on formal choices that convert theory into sensation. As Niemeyer succinctly frames the triad media–memory–nostalgia, "Media can activate, frame and render memory shareable […]. Nostalgia […] engages and becomes entangled with memory and media

in specific, ambivalent and intriguing ways" (2014, 4–5). Building outward from that, Niemeyer, drawing on François Hartog, further notes how "presentism" reshapes historical experience: "…the present would like to be regarded as being historical while it occurs," with media understood as "platforms on which events are experienced as historical ones" (Niemeyer 2014, 4, referencing Carr 2010; Niemeyer 2011). *Tabu* powerfully exemplifies this entanglement and media's role in rendering experiences as historical through its deliberate deployment of cinematic techniques. Importantly, this chapter understands nostalgia not merely as a "mood" or sentiment, but as a deliberate "mode" or cultural style, as theorised by Grainge, detached from any necessary experience of loss (Grainge 2002, 16–22). First, the split between 35 mm black-and-white for Lisbon and softer 16 mm for Africa literalises temporal disjunction: present-day images appear crisp, while colonial memories tremble with archival volatility. In this context, the film's black-and-white aesthetic, far from being mere postmodern pastiche, functions as a powerful tool: as Grainge argues, "…aestheticized modes of nostalgia need not be judged in terms of postmodern depthlessness"; rather, black-and-white "cannot be reduced" to generalised longing but must be read within concrete identity and memory politics (Ibid., 18).

Second, silent-era intertitles in the Africa section recall early ethnographic travelogues, evoking a moment when cinema itself was a tool of imperial mapping. Yet Gomes pairs these intertitles with *asynchronous foley*—a Ronettes[2] cover bleeds across scenes—so that sound and image refuse to stabilise each other. This form of anachronic layering exemplifies *reflective nostalgia*, which "cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space" rather than attempting to rebuild a stable historical narrative (Boym 2001, 49); T*abu* forces spectators to negotiate multiple temporal registers simultaneously.

Finally, Gomes's deployment of voice-over as unreliable guide accentuates the gap between narration and event. Gian-Luca's wistful commentary omits anti-colonial struggle; the camera, however, occasionally drifts

[2] The version of "Be My Baby" featured in *Tabu* is not the original by The Ronettes from 1963, but a Spanish-language cover titled "Tu Serás Mi Baby" performed by Les Surfs—a Yé-yé-style pop group from Madagascar. Les Surfs gained prominence in the 1960s by covering English-language hits in various languages, a practice that, in this context, subverts earlier scenes in the film where colonial musicians perform Western songs in their original form. This musical choice adds another layer to the film's commentary on colonialism, highlighting the complexities of cultural exchange and the lingering effects of colonial dynamics.

towards African servants whose silent labour contradicts his romance. Form here becomes theory: by engineering slippages between sound, image, and story, Gomes enacts the epistemic instability that reflective nostalgia celebrates. The spectator is never allowed to forget that memory is partial, mediated—and political.

The cumulative effect of these strategies is not merely aesthetic; it is epistemological. *Tabu* teaches its audience how to *watch* nostalgia: seduction and suspicion become concurrent modes of engagement. Understanding this dialectic is essential before turning to the film's pivotal Lisbon-to-Africa transition, where all three conceptual strands—reflective nostalgia, post-colonial melancholia, and the critique of heritage form—converge in a single splice.

Present-Day Lisbon: Melancholic Everydayness

The first half of *Tabu* (2012) unfolds in modern Lisbon, depicting the quiet loneliness of its protagonist Pilar and those around her. Pilar is introduced as a devout, middle-aged woman involved in loosely defined charitable activities—volunteering at church, attending film clubs, and looking after her elderly neighbour Aurora. These modest activities define a routine of neighbourly duty and piety, yet they are suffused with saudade—a distinctly Portuguese blend of melancholy and longing for an undefined past. The film's domestic interiors and cityscapes accentuate this mood: Aurora's apartment and Pilar's living spaces are drab and cluttered, conveying an atmosphere of stagnation and solitude. Indeed, the entire Lisbon segment feels enveloped in ennui and post-colonial malaise. The narrative pointedly emphasises "the desolation of old age, the failure of communication, [and] the sordidness of contemporary life in a suburban Portugal traversed by kitsch and where even the sun is missing" (de Medeiros 2016, 206). This subdued, grey everydayness suggests that the present is drained of vitality—a Portugal haunted by absence and loss after the end of empire.

Within this melancholic everyday life, seemingly trivial sensory details become laden with memory. Early on, the soundtrack intermittently lets in faint, distant sounds—a trickling fountain, the rustle of greenery—that intrude upon the quiet of Pilar's world as if echoes from another time. For example, when Pilar, Aurora, and Santa visit a kitschy tropical-themed shopping-centre café (complete with an indoor pond and lush foliage), a low mechanical hum forms the base, steady as breath, as the soft murmur

of conversation, disembodied, hinting at people gathered somewhere beyond the camera's reach. This gentle sound operates as a subtle mnemonic trigger: it foreshadows the flow of recollection that soon overwhelms the narrative. In the diegetic present, Pilar remains unaware of the significance of these sounds, but the film primes the audience for an oneiric leap into the past. The culmination comes when Aurora's old friend Ventura reveals that she once owned a farm in Africa, a revelation that sharpens Pilar's intrigue and encapsulates the film's underlying pull towards nostalgia. In that moment, the everyday soundscape of Lisbon begins to morph: the babble of the café's ambient noise blended with the hushed ripple of unseen voices gives way to an uncanny hush of nocturnal nature (cicadas and crickets), preparing us for the impending journey into memory. Thus, even in its melancholic portrayal of present-day Lisbon, *Tabu* plants auditory seeds of the colonial past, allowing the quotidian reality to be quietly haunted by echoes of another world.

The *Tabu* Title Card and Voice-Over

At the hinge between Lisbon and Africa, Gomes pointedly invokes the language of early cinema to signal a shift into a mythic realm of memory. As Pilar's modern storyline reaches its quiet climax, and the narrative shifts to colonial 1960s Mozambique, the film inserts a stylised title card announcing "part two: PARADISE," hearkening back to the intertitles of silent-era expedition films. In fact, even before the Lisbon narrative begins, *Tabu* opens with a self-contained prologue presented like an old silent movie. In this prologue—set in an unspecified colonial past—an image of a nineteenth-century explorer is shown standing motionless in full colonial garb (pith helmet, water canteen) against the African bush. He strikes a heroic pose reminiscent of a photograph or early travelogue, remaining eerily still until his Indigenous porters enter the frame carrying supplies. As the African servants move around him, the illusion of the frozen colonial tableau is broken and the titles merge seamlessly with the unfolding action on screen. It is here that the film's title "TABU" first appears, emblazoned as an antiquated title card, immediately placing the viewer in a self-consciously *archaic* cinematic space that dialogues with F. W. Murnau's *Tabu: A Story of the South Seas* (1931). This reflexive gesture not only acknowledges Gomes's intertextual inspiration but also imbues the upcoming Africa segment with a sense of entering a tale already elevated to the level of legend or fable.

Crucial to this shift is the introduction of the narrator's voice-over, which assumes a spectral, almost omniscient authority. In the prologue, a disembodied male voice (in fact, voiced by director Miguel Gomes himself) recounts the explorer's tragic fate in a poetic, antiquated register. The narration informs us that the melancholic explorer, burdened by the loss of his wife and trailed by her spectral presence, ultimately throws himself to a crocodile in despair. The calm, sonorous voice imbues this absurd story with a solemn myth-making power, as if relating a piece of colonial folklore. This cinematic voice-of-God deliberately echoes the tone of vintage travelogues and ethnographic documentaries—the kind produced under colonial regimes—which often featured authoritative narration over exotic images. Gomes's narrator speaks in a lofty, archaic Portuguese, lending the prologue a self-consciously dated feel, as if we are watching a dusty reel of film unearthed from an imperial archive. The effect is at once *spectral* (a ghostly voice recounting ghosts of the past) and ironic, since the content of the tale—an explorer eaten by a crocodile—borders on the absurd or fantastical. By adopting this "hybrid form, halfway between documentary and fiction" (Pereira 2016, 338), the film pointedly evokes the mythologising style of colonial-era cinema. Early ethnographic and expedition films often blurred fact and fiction to exoticise their subjects, and Gomes mirrors that technique here to critique it. The explorer's porters, for instance, react to his death by spontaneously performing a ritual dance and even staring back at the camera, as if acknowledging that they are part of a staged spectacle. In these moments, the voice-over's "spectral" authority is undermined by the image itself, which exposes the artifice and ideological framing of such colonial myths. Thus, the insertion of the "TABU" title card and the commencement of the narrator's voice-over work in tandem to shift the film's mode—from realist observation to self-conscious mythologising—announcing that we are entering a story-space of memory and cinematic history. It is a transition that carries the weight of legend, explicitly framing the African chapter to follow later into the film as a kind of reverie drawn from old adventure tales and early film lore.

Match-on-Action/Dissolve to Africa

Gomes executes the temporal leap from Lisbon to colonial Africa with a bravura piece of editing that literalises a psychic jump into nostalgia. After Ventura's revelation about Aurora's past in Africa, Pilar is stunned. The

film matches her outward look with an outward leap in space and time. In a single arresting cut, the camera leaves behind the present-day Lisbon and *plunges* into an African vista: we move from the artificial jungle of the Lisbon wildlife park to the real (albeit memory-conjured) African landscape at the foot of the fictional Mount Tabu. This transition is so seamless and direct that it functions like a match-on-action across decades—the action here being the act of looking and remembering. One moment Ventura is framed against the flora of the shopping mall; the next, a young Aurora appears in luminous reverse close-up under the African sun, "…beautiful, stylish as ever, living on a farm in Africa, at the foot of (the fictional) Mount Tabu" (Harvey 2016, 154). The cut is jarring yet poetic—a "jolting cut" (Ibid.) that nevertheless carries an emotional logic, as if Ventura's memory and Pilar's intense imaginative curiosity willed the past into visible existence. In formal terms, Gomes is deliberately echoing a classic cinematic transition: the sudden transport from a drab reality to an exotic elsewhere, a staple of colonial adventure films. The difference here is that the elsewhere is not simply a fantasy—it is a memory (Ventura's recollection, triggered for Pilar and the audience). By collapsing the distance between Lisbon and Mozambique in an eye blink, the film powerfully externalises an internal, mnemonic leap. We are yanked from the quotidian present into a colonial flashback, not via a gentle fade or explicit flashback framing, but via a bold cut that momentarily disorients yet enthrals the viewer.

This audacious edit also crystallises *Tabu*'s intertextual dialogue with F. W. Murnau's 1931 *Tabu*. Gomes pointedly preserves the two-part structure of Murnau's film—paradise and paradise lost—but inverts it, placing the "Paradise Lost" of contemporary Lisbon before the "Paradise" of the colonial idyll. The transition from Pilar's world to Aurora's world essentially marks the boundary between these two parts, much as Murnau's film shifted from a carefree Polynesian paradise to a tragic fall from grace. By naming "Mount Tabu" and plunging his characters (and audience) into its shadow, Gomes explicitly links his story to Murnau's legacy. The cut to Africa comes with an echo of silent-cinema spectacle—one can almost imagine an old-fashioned intertitle declaring the start of the "Paradise" chapter. In fact, the abruptness of the edit and the immediate appearance of an adventure-romance scenario play on the audience's familiarity with classical Hollywood and colonial film tropes. *Tabu* self-consciously employs conventions associated with classical Hollywood entertainment at this moment, even as it prepares to subvert them. Harvey

calls this as a process of "reconfiguration" of those tropes (2016, 154). The literal jump from the "fake jungle" (de Medeiros 2016, 207) of Lisbon's shopping mall to a supposedly authentic jungle of Africa highlights the film's own artifice. We have left behind documentary-style realism and entered a storybook realm. This match cut/dissolve across continents is both an enchanting flourish—whisking us into Ventura's youthful memories—and a critical one, since the very seamlessness of the transition invites us to question how easily a nostalgic imagination can repaint the past as a living present. In essence, Gomes has made the psychological process of nostalgic recollection manifest through editing. One moment, time and space constrain us; the next, memory conquers them entirely. The viewer, like Pilar, is seduced into this temporal leap, even as the film remains aware of the cinematic illusion it deploys. In the cut to Africa, *Tabu* achieves a kind of movie magic that is deeply tied to its themes: the allure of revisiting a lost time, and the treacherous ease with which one can become lost in that reverie.

Sound as Temporal Seam

Sound plays a crucial role in smoothing (and commenting on) *Tabu*'s leap across time. The transition from Lisbon to colonial Africa is not only visual but also *aural*. As noted above, the ambient noise of the enclosed Lisbon shopping mall—preoccupied with the reverberant sound of distant chatter of people—abruptly cedes to the nocturnal hum of crickets at the very moment the film cuts to the African wilds. This use of sound as a connective tissue allows the past to intrude upon the present even before we see it. In effect, the soundtrack prepares our subconscious for the flashback: our ears arrive in "Africa" a second before our eyes do. This technique blurs diegetic and meta-diegetic levels. The chirping crickets might initially register as just ambient sound (perhaps insects in a Lisbon mall), but they soon reveal themselves as part of the African night into which Aurora's story plunges. The result is a subtle auditory transition—a temporal *seam* that is felt rather than seen, easing the shock of the hard cut.

Once we enter the African segment, *Tabu* continues to employ sound imaginatively to bridge time and convey memory. Gomes made the bold choice to strip the second half of almost all synchronised dialogue. Instead, the soundtrack retains solely environmental noises and music, accompanied by the frequent use of voice-over narration. In other words, we hear the rustle of wind in the banana palms, the calls of animals, the clink of

glasses at colonial cocktail hours—all the atmospheric sonic details that give a sense of place—but we do not hear characters when speaking on screen. Their voices are absent, replaced by the old Ventura's off-screen narration recounting events, as if we are watching a silent film with commentary. This creates a conscious layering of temporalities in the sound design: the diegetic sounds place us in the 1960s African setting, but the voice-over comes from a later perspective, overlaying the past with an adult recollection. It is a sophisticated play with sound's ability to signal different levels of story time simultaneously.

Music, in particular, serves as a bridge between the eras and a carrier of nostalgia. In the African "Paradise" chapter, the characters' lives are oddly accompanied by Western popular music, not by the local soundscape. In one memorable sequence, a wistful pop song swells on the soundtrack—Phil Spector's brand of 1960s rock-'n'-roll romanticism—underscoring a tender moment between young Aurora and Ventura. The song "Baby I Love You," for example, appears (in a version by the Ramones) as a key musical theme during the lovers' secret meetings. Within the narrative, this music is partly diegetic: Ventura and his friends have a band, and they perform imported hits at parties on the colonial estate. Yet the prominence of these tunes in the mix, and their emotive resonance, also makes them operate on a *meta-diegetic* level, as if the film's nostalgic memory is literally scored to the soundtrack of the colonisers' youth. The choice of music is telling—"the 'soundtrack of the lives' of those characters involves nothing African" (Pereira 2016, 344). Instead of drumming or local folk songs, we hear the Ronettes and Mickey Gilley, aligning the lovers' reminiscences with *Western* pop-cultural nostalgia. This creates a poignant irony: the film's recollection of Africa is filtered through songs that have no roots in Africa at all, highlighting the cultural distance between the colonisers and the land they inhabit. At the same time, these golden oldies forge an emotional link across time for the audience. A contemporary viewer might respond to the sentimental pull of a 1960s love song—a feeling of lost innocence—mirroring the characters' own romantic nostalgia. In *Tabu*, such music works as a temporal leveller: it blurs past and present by evoking a collective memory (the 1960s as imagined through its pop songs) that overlays the personal memory being depicted (Aurora's 1960s affair).

Crucially, the film balances this lush musical nostalgia with moments of stark natural silence. There are stretches in the African flashback where only the sound of wind and wildlife accompanies the images, reminding us

that we are in a world with its own reality beyond the lovers' story. The sudden quiet when the music pauses can be jarring—for instance, a romantic scene might cut to a wide shot of the savannah at dusk with nothing but cicadas chirping. These shifts call attention to the act of remembering itself: the soundtrack's ebb and flow mimics how certain details (a song, a sound) stand out vividly in memory while others fall away. By playing with diegetic sound and non-diegetic music in this way, Gomes uses sound as the seam that stitches together two times. The ear guides the heart from one era to another, making the temporal jump not only comprehensible, but deeply felt. In sum, sound in the Lisbon–Africa transition is not merely an accompaniment but a driver of the film's nostalgic journey—it ensures that the past is not a sudden intrusion but a gradually emerging melody that the viewer has been subconsciously humming all along.

Politics in the Periphery of the Frame

While *Tabu*'s colonial-era "Paradise" seduces the viewer with romance and aesthetic nostalgia, the film subtly embeds a critique of colonialism through what it shows at the margins of its frames. Gomes frequently places African characters and servants just out of the spotlight, using their visual presence (or absence) to comment on the power dynamics of the colonial memory being relived. Notably, the African people in Aurora's story rarely occupy the narrative centre—they have almost no dialogue (the film's second half pointedly contains no synchronised speech at all) and are often seen performing labour or traditional roles in the background. This is not an oversight, but a deliberate stylistic strategy to reflect how colonial narratives traditionally marginalised indigenous peoples, and to force the audience to observe that marginalisation with a critical eye.

The transitional sequence from contemporary Lisbon to the Africa flashback exemplifies this approach. We see the young Aurora on her farm engaging in daily leisure activities—strolling on the grounds, drawing in her sketchbook—constantly attended by African servants. Maids and farmhands appear at the "edges" of the frame: tidying the house, carrying supplies, tending animals. In one striking vignette, an African child holds the reins of a donkey for Aurora while she concentrates on drawing the animal. The camera later reveals Aurora's finished sketch, and it pointedly depicts only the donkey, omitting the black child who was right beside it. This moment speaks volumes: in Aurora's colonial imagination (and by extension, in many colonial-era representations), the African "assistant" is

literally erased from the picture, rendered invisible in favour of the picturesque exotic animal. Such a quietly damning detail illustrates how colonial discourse "embellished and disguised" (Pereira 2016, 338) the reality of subservience with a façade of benign pastoral imagery. Aurora is not portrayed as cruel—she even teaches one of her servants to read in another scene of the same sequence—yet her oblivious exclusion of the African child from her artwork is telling. It visualises the deeply ingrained bias of the colonial gaze, which takes the labour and presence of the African "other" for granted while centring its own experience.

Throughout the lovers' story, Gomes ensures that the politics of colonialism persist at the edges of the cinematic frame, even if the characters themselves ignore them. As Ventura's voice-over narrates Aurora and Gian Luca's illicit romance, the images that accompany this "pathetic love story" (Ibid., 344) keep drifting to the African workers who enable the colonials' life of ease. In one sequence, while Ventura reads a love letter aloud, the film shows black plantation labourers harvesting crops under the hot sun. In another, as Aurora and Ventura meet secretly, a servant is visible in the distance carrying out household chores. These visual insertions are never explicitly commented upon by the narrator; instead, they form a kind of silent counter-narrative. The contrast is unmistakable—while the privileged white protagonists indulge in flirtations, adventures, and existential angst, African men and women toil in the background, largely unseen and unheard. This is how *Tabu* embeds its post-colonial critique: through mise-en-scène and cinematography rather than through overt dialogue or preaching. The viewer is subtly prompted to notice the invisibility of the colonised within the colonisers' nostalgic recollections. As Pereira observes, the film "does not shy away from invariably showing black people working" while the melodrama unfolds, thereby underlining "the entire political question" of the colonial relationship (Ibid.). The old romantic Ventura, in narrating his youthful exploits, may not explicitly acknowledge the African presence, but Gomes's camera does—and it does so with increasing insistence.

Gomes extends this strategy of peripheral critique even to the stylistic fabric of the film. The black-and-white cinematography and old-fashioned 16 mm film stock lend the Africa scenes a beguiling, antiquated beauty—reminiscent of classic adventure films—yet within those images lie disruptions. For example, in the prologue, after the explorer is devoured by the crocodile, his porters begin a ritual dance but also break the fourth wall, looking straight at us with impassive faces. It is a brief, disorienting

moment: the "natives" in this ostensibly old film acknowledge the viewer's gaze, as if to remind us that they are performers in someone else's myth. Similarly, in the main Africa story, there are shots where African characters stare towards the camera or stand at the extreme foreground, momentarily asserting their presence. These instances are easy to miss amid the engrossing romance and adventure, but they cumulatively chip away at the nostalgic veneer. They remind us that colonial nostalgia in cinema is constructed, often at the expense of those rendered voiceless. As de Medeiros observes (2016), Gomes foregrounds the construction of the colonial imaginary by showing its artifice—whether through the explorer's posed tableau in the prologue or the constant framing of Africans as background extras in Aurora's tale. By drawing the audience's eye to the edges of the frame, *Tabu* effectively asks us to see what the nostalgic colonist chooses not to see. The film thereby performs a subtle deconstruction of colonial memory: it presents the seductive vision of a lost paradise, yet persistently unsettles that vision with reminders of the unequal, exploitative reality that paradise entailed.

Reflective Versus Restorative Pulls

The Lisbon–Africa transition scene in *Tabu* encapsulates the film's fundamental ambivalence: it pulls the audience between reflective and restorative forms of nostalgia. On one hand, the journey into Aurora's past is undeniably enchanting—a sumptuous romantic adventure rendered in luminous monochrome, inviting us (and Pilar) to immerse ourselves in the fantasy of a "paradise" regained. This is nostalgia's restorative pull: the scene tempts us to *reconstruct* the lost colonial world as if it were alive again, to revel in its aesthetic and emotional pleasures. The editing encourages this immersion by making the temporal leap feel fluid and destined, while the rich sensory details (lush jungle vegetation, stylish period costumes, nostalgic music) stimulate a yearning for the bygone era. In those first moments after the cut to Africa, the film offers an almost uncritical rush of beauty and narrative excitement— the thrill of escape from dull reality into an earlier time when life supposedly had more passion, adventure, and meaning. It is easy to be seduced by the "enchanting exoticism" on display: sunlit mountains, wild animals, youthful lovers carving out their own Eden.

This is the perspective of nostalgia that yearns to *restore* the past, to experience it anew without irony or regret. Indeed, given Portugal's

fraught history, one might detect a temptation here to imaginatively reclaim a "glorious past that never was" (Ibid., 203)—a time of innocence and hope, insulated from the crises of the present. The film pointedly contrasts the "grey and forlorn" Lisbon with a "romanticized, youthful and vital" (Ibid., 209), a binary that risks suggesting that meaning and happiness only existed in the imperial past. In these respects, *Tabu* flirts with the very imperial nostalgia it seeks to examine. It allows viewers to momentarily indulge in a daydream of a past imagined as beautiful, romantic, and full of adventure—a reverie largely "without guilt" (Ibid., 213).

On the other hand, *Tabu* just as insistently infuses this nostalgic voyage with a reflective, critical awareness of history's darkness. Almost as soon as the reverie begins, cracks appear in the paradise. The romantic Africa of Aurora's youth is not presented as an unblemished Eden: the narrative that unfolds is rife with violence, loss, and irreparable consequences. The longer the flashback continues, the more the restorative spell is broken. We learn that Aurora and Ventura's idyllic affair will end in blood and sorrow—Aurora, in a fit of desperation, shoots her friend Mário, and the lovers' attempted escape fails catastrophically. A child is born and promptly taken away; marriages are broken; Ventura and Aurora spend the rest of their lives apart, nursing only memories. This tragic turn of events casts a long shadow back onto the earlier, blissful scenes. It's as if the film is acknowledging that the illusion of "paradise" contains the seeds of its own destruction. The very title *Tabu*, shared with Murnau's film, foreshadows forbidden boundaries that, once crossed, lead to ruin—a pattern that plays out in Aurora's story just as inexorably as it did in Murnau's South Seas fable. The difference is that here the forbidden transgression (the *taboo*) is not only a personal moral one (adultery, betrayal of a friend) but also subtly a colonial one—the film hints that there is something fundamentally damned about this colonial Eden, that the pleasure it offers is inextractable from guilt.

Beyond the plot's events, *Tabu*'s reflective critique is embedded in all the formal strategies discussed: the persistent vision of African suffering at the margins, the anachronistic music revealing the colonisers' cultural insularity, the ghostly narration that distances us from the on-screen romance, and even the prologue's sardonic tone. These elements ensure that even as the film seduces us, it also alienates us slightly, inviting contemplation. Gomes's approach is deeply ambivalent, as if testing the audience's capacity to enjoy the romance while still *seeing through* it. This creates an ethical tension. de Medeiros has argued that *Tabu* "does and

does not criticize European colonialism, allowing audiences to indulge" in the colonial dreamscape while simultaneously providing a vein of irony and critique (Ibid., 213). It is an uneasy balance—"to have one's cake and eat it too," in the words of de Medeiros, by reaping the "undeniable pleasures" (Harvey 2016) of nostalgic cinema even as one nods towards the violence underpinning that nostalgia. *Tabu* never fully resolves this tension, and that seems intentional. The Lisbon–Africa transition scene, in particular, encapsulates this duality: it is both a portal into a seductively beautiful vision of the past *and* a doorway to examining the very construction of that vision. The sequence seduces and estranges in equal measure—we are moved by the sight of Aurora's paradise, yet we are also made aware that it is a paradise lost, impossible to reclaim without acknowledging the trauma and passage of time that separate us from it.

In the end, the film leans towards reflective nostalgia, albeit with a wistful smile. Aurora's tale concludes not with a triumphant recreation of a lost world, but with a funeral in the present (Aurora's own) and the belated reconciliation of two elderly survivors of a bygone romance. *Tabu* turns nostalgia into historiographic intervention: it offers pleasure while keeping the wounds of colonial history visible in the grain, the gaps, the missing voices. The past remains a ghost—beautifully rendered, but a ghost nonetheless. The transition scene's fundamental ambivalence—its mix of enchanting exoticism and sober reminders of loss—prepares us to understand *Tabu*'s overarching message: that every nostalgic dream of "paradise" carries within it the shadow of *taboo* things unspoken, be it personal guilt or historical injustice. This richly layered scene thus serves as the emotional and thematic fulcrum of the film. It seduces us into empathising with a nostalgic vision, even as it gently insists that we reflect on what that vision obscures.

Conclusion: Reflective Nostalgia and the Ethics of Looking Back

Representing a fraught colonial past on film is an ethical minefield, raising questions about nostalgia, responsibility, and the viewer's complicity. *Tabu* demonstrates the double valence of Boym's reflective nostalgia. The film cultivates genuine saudade: its grain, pop ballads, and cinephilic quotations invite viewers to luxuriate in the aura of a past world. Simultaneously, its refusal of synchronous dialogue, its conspicuous use of outdated

formats, and its narrative incompletion keep that world under interrogation, exposing colonial romance as a construction and inviting ethical reckoning (Boym 2001). As Ponzanesi and Waller define the post-colonial lens for cinema, "It matters less what a film is thematically about and more about how it engages with history, subjectivity, epistemology, and the political ramifications of all of these" (2012, 1). In *Tabu*, affect and critique operate together rather than cancel each other; pleasure becomes the vehicle for demystification. As Paul Gilroy argues, revisionist reminiscences of empire that idealise or whitewash the past might "salve the national conscience" (2005, 17) but ultimately obstruct any real reckoning with colonial atrocities. Gomes's film is poised on this ethical tightrope: it nostalgically recreates a bygone era's aesthetics even as it pointedly refuses to grant the audience the comfort of full closure or absolution for colonial wrongs. Indeed, as Walder notes, a "community of memory" is sustained by representations that "acknowledge an ethical dimension to the struggle to understand […] identity, identification, and reflective recall prompted by nostalgia" (2011, 18–19).

One of *Tabu*'s striking choices is its refusal of narrative closure regarding Portugal's imperial history. The film's bifurcated structure—a present-day prologue in Lisbon followed by a remembrance of colonial Mozambique—pointedly leaves colonial wrongs in a state of ghostly suspension. The melodramatic romance that unfolds in the African past pointedly keeps Portugal's violent colonial legacy as a "haunting subtext" rather than confronting it head-on. Key historical realities (the brewing war for independence, the exploitation of African lives) remain largely off-screen, unresolved and unspoken. The result is deliberately discomfiting: *Tabu* withholds any neat moral reckoning or clear judgement of its characters' colonial sins. Aurora and Ventura's illicit love story is tinged with guilt and tragedy, yet the film pointedly omits a tribunal for their complicity in an unjust colonial system.

Ultimately, *Tabu* frames looking back at the colonial past as an ethically charged act of reflection rather than resolution. By denying narrative closure, the film resists any temptation to neatly "settle" the colonial account; there is no final catharsis that might absolve historical wrongdoing. Instead, Gomes's work dwells in unresolved nostalgia—beautiful yet uneasy—compelling us to acknowledge the persistence of colonial ghosts. In doing so, *Tabu* becomes what Harvey calls "a striking intervention into the cinematic history of colonial and postcolonial representation," a film "steeped as much in irony as it is nostalgia" that pointedly "poses a

number of questions on the ethics of historical representation" (2016, 151). Those questions remain deliberately open at the film's end. The ethics of looking back, *Tabu* suggests, demand that we live with ambiguity: the pleasure of longing for a lost past goes hand in hand with an acute awareness of that past's injustices. This unresolved tension is not a flaw but the film's very point—a reflective nostalgia that implicates us, troubles us, and refuses to let the sins of colonialism be neatly consigned to history.

This dialectic prepares the ground for the next chapter, where the focus shifts from imperial retrospection to post-imperial displacement in Salomé Lamas's *Extinction* (2018). If *Tabu* visualises the psychic after-images of empire, *Extinction* maps their geopolitical fallout, following a stateless displaced man across the ghost borders of post-Soviet Europe. The move from romantic monochrome to Lamas's digital austerity will allow us to trace how Portuguese cinema retools nostalgia when the lost "home" is not colonial Africa but a futureless Schengen fringe. In both cases, as we shall see, nostalgia functions less as escapist retreat than as a critical optic for collective memory—and future—under pressure.

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CHAPTER 5

Collective Memory and Nostalgia in Salomé Lamas's *Extinction*

Abstract This chapter analyses Salomé Lamas's *Extinction* (2018) as a provocative exploration of nostalgia, memory, and contested identity within the shifting landscapes of post-Soviet Europe. Centred on a protagonist who traverses disputed border zones, the film blurs the lines between documentary and fiction, history and imagination, to evoke the persistence of ideological ghosts in the present. *Extinction* stages nostalgia not as a longing for a stable homeland but as a confrontation with the ruins of political projects and the instability of belonging in contested territories. The chapter highlights how Lamas's hybrid cinematic form—combining interviews, staged performances, and observational footage— interrogates the reliability of historical narratives while foregrounding the emotional resonances of displacement. By situating *Extinction* within broader debates on collective memory and post-communist cinema, the analysis demonstrates how the film questions the very possibility of home in a Europe marked by fragmentation and shifting borders. In doing so, it reveals nostalgia as both a critical lens and a destabilising force, illuminating the complex affective terrain of identity and place in contemporary European cinema.

Keywords Salomé Lamas • European cinema • Nostalgia • Post-Soviet identity • Hybrid documentary • Collective memory • Displacement

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Salomé Lamas's *Extinction* (2018) is an essay film that blurs documentary and fiction, offering a meditative journey through the borderlands of post-communist Europe. Filmed in stark black-and-white, the 80-minute piece follows Kolya, a young Moldovan man who proclaims loyalty to Transnistria—a self-declared republic unrecognised by the international community. Transnistria remains politically liminal and continues to be anchored in communist principles decades after the Soviet Union's collapse. *Extinction* is thus grounded in a setting where history is palpably present: Soviet monuments, abandoned border checkpoints, and eerie relics of Soviet-era progress dot the landscape. In Lamas's entrancing and sonically immersive film, Kolya's crossings of various borders (Moldova, Transnistria, Ukraine) become a vehicle for exploring memory and belonging in a territory that is unacknowledged internationally and officially absent from the map. This unique geopolitical context provides fertile ground for examining collective memory—the shared remembrances and myths of the Soviet past—and nostalgia—the affective longing associated with those memories.

Nostalgia and its contradictions in *Extinction* are immediately invoked through the film's mosaic of past and present, and through its use of spaces marked by absence, ruin, and political borderlands. The film opens with an austere intertitle quoting Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard: "After all, there is nothing but failure." This epigraph sets a tone of disillusionment, implicitly referencing the failed promises of the late Soviet era and its aftermath. As Kolya journeys, he encounters relics of the Soviet collective past and engages in conversations (staged and unstaged) about history, identity, and change. *Extinction* does not present nostalgia in a simplistic or sentimental way; rather, it uses nostalgia as a critical lens to interrogate collective memory, identity, and displacement. This aligns with scholarly approaches that view nostalgia not merely as an affective mood but as a potent analytical tool. Indeed, as Todorova and Gille note—quoting Fredric Jameson—nostalgia "may be a style or design or narrative that serves to comment on how memory works […] Rather than an end reaction to yearning, it is […] a technique for provoking a secondary reaction" (2010, 2). The film's hybrid aesthetic—combining vérité footage with staged performances and blurring the modalities of contemporary film production and aesthetics—reflects an intent to challenge dominant narratives. Lamas

herself describes her practice as "*parafiction*,"[1] embracing "make-believe" and questioning the equation of reality with truth (Lamas 2015). In *Extinction*, this translates into a form of nostalgia that is temporally and politically unsettled, as we shall argue: it is neither restorative nor sentimental, but a reflective engagement with the past that points towards unrealised futures and the fragile instability of historical belonging.

This chapter examines how *Extinction* articulates nostalgia as a multifaceted, critical engagement with collective memory in a post-Soviet border context. Throughout, we maintain that Lamas's hybrid, sensory approach produces *reflective nostalgia*—a critical longing aware of its own ambivalence—yet *Extinction* pushes even beyond this interpretation, portraying nostalgia as an open-ended questioning rather than a yearning for a neatly defined past. In sum, this chapter argues that *Extinction* presents nostalgia not as mere longing for yesterday, but as a reflective and politically charged process that engages collective memory to critique the present and imagine alternative futures.

Collective Memory and Nostalgia

Nostalgia is intricately linked with memory—not only personal autobiographical memory but also collective memory. Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs famously argued that individual memories are always embedded in social frameworks; we remember as members of groups, and each group (family, nation, generation) sustains its own narrative of the past (Halbwachs 1992). Collective memory, as Halbwachs explains, "…endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people," but it is always "individuals as group members who remember. […] Every collective memory requires the support of a group delimited in space and time" (Ibid., 22)—in other words, what societies remember (and forget) in order to construct a sense of identity and continuity. Nostalgia inhabits the intersection of personal and collective memory, translating large-scale historical changes into intimate affects. As Boym observes, "…nostalgia is

[1] Lamas extensively analyses her approach to filmmaking in her published collection of writings *Salomé Lamas: Parafiction* (2016). She says, "'Paraficiton' relates to current trends in contemporary societies where the concept of 'objective truth' is being replaced by concepts such as 'perception' and 'authenticity'. Today we can embrace 'make-believe', 'plausibility' and in particular 'parafiction'. Ultimately, this is about questioning the equation of reality=truth=visible, which is no longer pertinent" (2015).

about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory" (2001, xvi). It bridges the micro and macro levels of remembering, making it what Fred Davis called a "social emotion" (1979, vii).

Because nostalgia connects private feelings to shared pasts, it often surfaces during periods of rapid change or crisis when established collective memories are shaken. Nostalgia, as Davis observes, "…thrives on transition, on the subjective discontinuities that engender our yearning for continuity," and in its collective form it flourishes "on the discontinuities and dislocations wrought by such phenomena as war, depression, civil disturbance, and cataclysmic natural disasters" (Ibid., 49). The late twentieth--century collapse of communism in Eastern Europe gave rise to what scholars term *post-communist nostalgia*—a complex form of yearning shaped by the profound political, economic, and cultural dislocations of the transition period. In this sense, "…nostalgia has become a catch-all notion" (Angé and Berliner 2015, 5); "…it is a cultural practice, not a given content; its forms, meanings, and effects shift with the context' (Stewart in Angé and Berliner 2015, 5). "Nostalgia is not only 'indexical,' but also 'heteroglossic,' a 'dialogical gossamer of idiosyncratic references, interests, and affects'" (Boyer in Angé and Berliner 2015, 5–6). This perspective is ideal for understanding the situated memory practices *Extinction* explores within its specific border geography.

As Todorova and Gille (2010) observe, post-communist nostalgia often reflects "positive recollections of socialism" that articulate critiques of the "negative experiences of postsocialism otherwise silenced in public discourse" (283). While mainstream narratives sometimes dismiss this as reactionary sentiment, the contributors to their volume argue that it encompasses longings for "the promise of well-being, progress, equality, and a strong, sovereign nation-state" (Ibid.). These memories are not necessarily calls to reinstate socialism in its entirety; rather, they express selective remembrance of aspects such as stability, social protections, and a sense of collective dignity that many felt were lost in the upheaval following 1989. Crucially, post-communist nostalgia is not a monolithic desire to reinstate authoritarian regimes; rather, it is often reflective or ironic, mixing "irony as countermemory" and critique of the present with selective affection for aspects of the past (Georgescu 2010, 155). For instance, so-called Yugo-nostalgia in former Yugoslav states involves wistful remembrance of a multiethnic federation and its cultural unity, serving in part as implicit criticism of the nationalist conflicts and economic difficulties that

followed Yugoslavia's breakup (Rosić Ilić and Lazičić 2025). Likewise, *Ostalgie*—"the nostalgia for certain aspects of life in former East Germany (Berdahl 1999; Boyer 2006, as cited in Rosić Ilić and Lazičić 2025, 331)—or nostalgia in Russia for the Soviet era often highlights lost feelings of community or purpose, while acknowledging the past's flaws. In short, nostalgia in post-communist societies is a complex phenomenon that is not necessarily about reviving the socialist past, but often about "making sense of the post-socialist present" (Nadkarni 2010, 192), negotiating between memories of stability and security and the uncertainties of the new socio-economic order. Furthermore, anthropologists Angé and Berliner stress that we "must investigate [nostalgia's] pragmatic conditions and effects […] When used for social and political concerns, [it can] bond diverse categories of actors and constitute a source of mnemonic convergence" (2015, 9). This highlights nostalgia's potential for social efficacy in shaping collective memory formations, particularly relevant for understanding how *Extinction* might resonate within public spheres.

Boym's taxonomy of nostalgia offers a useful framework for understanding *Extinction*'s approach. Restorative nostalgics "do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about truth," clinging to an absolute vision of the past (2001, 41). In contrast, reflective *nostalgia* is aware that the past is past, and plays with fragmentation and irony. Rather than reconstructing the old home, reflective nostalgia "lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time" (Ibid.). It often produces art, philosophy, and ironic commentary, acknowledging that nostalgia itself is an aesthetic and emotional experience, not a literal desire to go back in time. Boym crucially notes that modern nostalgia is "coeval with modernity" (Ibid., xvi)—not a mere reactionary anti-modern feeling, but a product of modern awareness of time and change. The nostalgic yearns for "a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams," essentially "a rebellion against the modern idea of time" that is linear and irreversible (Ibid., xv). "Nostalgic time is that time-out-of-time" (Ibid., xix). In this sense, nostalgia carries an implicit critique of progress narratives. It even has a utopian dimension: although visions of futuristic utopias may have fallen out of favour, "…nostalgia itself has a utopian dimension, only it is no longer directed toward the future" (Ibid., xiv). Sometimes, Boym suggests, nostalgia can be "not directed toward the past either, but rather sideways," to an alternative temporal plane altogether

(Ibid.). This intriguing idea opens the door to understanding nostalgia as a way to imagine *other futures* by reflecting on lost possibilities of the past.

Nostalgia is a central aspect of contemporary life, manifesting in varied forms across different cultures. Recent scholarship has built on Boym's insights to further expand and complicate the concept of nostalgia. Angé and Berliner stress the need to distinguish between "nostalgic dispositions," implying emotional investment, and "nostalgic discursive devices," which are strategic utterances targeting present benefits (2015, 10). Such an approach moves nostalgia beyond the realm of sentimentality, recognising that it can also be prospective. This aligns with the notion of prospective nostalgia or "nostalgia toward the future" (2025). Santa-Cruz proposes the idea of "propositional nostalgia as a creative and active force driven to the future, rather than a passive emotion" (383). In her formulation, even though nostalgia mourns something lost (a time, place, or country), it can transform that loss into a wellspring for reflecting on historical and personal experiences, thereby motivating action towards the future. Nostalgia, in this projective sense, becomes "consciousness of the potentialities of the past" (Ibid., 378)—an awareness of unfinished possibilities that the past contained. This concept is especially pertinent to *Extinction*, which, as we will see, is saturated with a feeling of nostalgia for the future—a wistfulness for the utopian dreams of the Soviet project that never materialised, and an anxiety about a future that remains suspended.

With these theoretical tools—Boym's restorative vs. reflective nostalgia, post-communist nostalgia studies, and the idea of future-oriented nostalgia—we can better understand *Extinction*'s central argument. The film elicits what the director (Lamas) and critic Carmen Gray describe as a more unsettled affect—"a black-and-white elegy for a territory in entropy," a mournful reflection on a place where historical time is fractured (2018, para.13). Lamas herself has "always been fascinated with the ambiguity of border realms, and people living on margins still touched by oppressive power systems" (Ibid.). This is evident in *Extinction*, which investigates the fragile nature of political borders in South Eastern Europe and the effect on personal and national identity. In line with Angé and Berliner's perspective, Lamas treats nostalgia *not* as simple yearning but as a means to critique and question the present political order—in Transnistria's case, an order of unresolved sovereignty and the fragmentation of Europe in the aftermath of war. Nostalgia here becomes what Andreea Ritivoi (2002) calls a "*pharmakon*"—both medicine and poison. It is poisonous if it traps Transnistria's people in the past or fuels chauvinism, but it can be

medicinal if used to draw strength from the past's unrealised potential or to forge a critical identity under adversity. Lamas's *Extinction*, as we will argue, exemplifies this dual nature: it is deeply nostalgic in tone, yet its nostalgia is reflective, self-critical, and ultimately oriented towards questioning the status quo rather than glorifying the past.

The Politics and Poetics of Nostalgic Landscapes

One of *Extinction*'s most striking features is its depiction of landscape as a repository of memory and loss. Shot in high-contrast black-and-white, the film's visuals dwell on border crossings, empty roads, derelict infrastructure, and Soviet-era monuments scattered across Transnistria and its surroundings. These landscapes are not mere backdrops; they are laden with political and poetic significance, serving as what Zoltán Somhegyi calls "par excellence stimulators of nostalgia" (2025, 427). Ruined buildings, abandoned war memorials, and decaying factories—all prominent in *Extinction*—function as material traces of history that evoke the Soviet collective memory. To further categorise and understand the specific nature of these decaying spaces, Somhegyi proposes a mapping of different ruin types: "…*classical ruins,* […] *rubble or debris,* […] *ruins of ruins*, […] *contemporary ruins*, […] *fake ruins* or *follies*" (Ibid., 428). *Extinction* primarily features what could be termed *contemporary ruins*—structures that are still relatively close to their original function but are decaying—and also *ruins of ruins*, which refer to places like abandoned Cold War sites that were themselves once functional but are now relics of a past that has already passed. Yet Lamas's approach to these nostalgic landscapes is not one of romanticisation; rather, it is critical and ambiguous, highlighting both the poetics (aesthetic and emotional resonance) and the politics (power and ideology) embedded in place.

Visually, *Extinction* composes its landscapes with a contemplative, observational style. The camera frequently lingers on wide shots of border outposts, rural fields, relics of socialist brutalist architecture, and Cold War ruins such as the NSA field station in Berlin and the Romanita Collective Housing Tower in Moldova. One sequence finds Kolya standing before a monumental Soviet war memorial—a towering statue of a soldier—which looms over an otherwise empty expanse. In this moment, the monument embodies the weight of collective memory: it is a physical relic keeping the past alive in the present. Kolya's small figure beside the statue underscores a key theme: the individual dwarfed by historical legacies. The poetic

dimension emerges in how Lamas frames this encounter. The monochrome imagery, combined with silence or sparse sound, imbues the scene with elegiac reverence. The term *elegy* used by Gray to describe *Extinction* is apt—the film treats the landscape as mourning something lost (the collapse of a way of life, a country, a utopian dream) yet not entirely gone. However, unlike traditional melancholic ruins, the decaying buildings in *Extinction* often feel disconcerting. As Somhegyi notes, when decaying buildings "are (still) too close to us temporally […] rather than providing peaceful feelings […] they are disturbing, causing anxiety and [a] sinister environment" (Ibid., 433). This observation precisely captures the film's mood, suggesting that *Extinction* aims to induce a critical unease rather than a soft, nostalgic melancholy, prompting viewers to confront the uncomfortable realities of a fragmented past and present.

In shot after shot, we see a landscape of ruins and remnants, conveying the ambivalent sentiment of nostalgia: beauty in decay, and a longing tied to the passing of an era (Somhegyi 2025). However, it is important to acknowledge that the connection between evocative objects like ruins and the concept of nostalgia can often be oversimplified. As Somhegyi cautions, "Let's be honest: somehow it feels that it is too easy […] to connect ruins with the concept of nostalgia […] In other words, it seems as if ruins were automatically primordial examples and illustrations of nostalgic thoughts and approaches" (2025, 427). To move beyond such simplistic associations, we must recognise that "There are '*nostalgias*', i.e., different types, forms, grades and strengths of nostalgia in relation with ruins…. The term ruin is more like an umbrella category… and this diversity… leads to a difference of the character of nostalgia that this very decay generates and provokes" (Ibid.). This nuance is crucial for understanding how Extinction engages with its derelict spaces in a far more ambivalent and complex manner than a mere sentimental longing.

At the same time, these landscapes are deeply political. *Extinction* uses geography to comment on borders and nationhood. The film essay investigates the fragile nature of political borders in this region. Transnistria's border, which Kolya crosses repeatedly, is both real and symbolic. It represents the liminality of a territory "not on the map"—a reminder that nations and identities can be transient constructs. Critic Ben Nicholson noted that *Extinction* powerfully reminds us that "all landscapes we experience are constructed to some extent, and just how precarious these constructions can be" (2018, para.19). In *Extinction*, the border guard posts—some manned, others deserted—underscore the precariousness of

political geographies. A viewer is confronted with checkpoints that seem outmoded or pointless, highlighting the absurdity and arbitrariness of certain borders. This carries an implicit critique: the nostalgia clinging to these borderlands (e.g. Transnistria's clinging to Soviet symbols and autonomy) is born from political failure and fragmentation. This is particularly salient given how "The power of ruins is used and abused for […] political and ideological agendas […] falsely reconstructed (or even constructed) historicising palaces and castles […] with 'using' or 'abusing' the power of nostalgia" (Somhegyi 2025, 438). This observation profoundly underwrites the film's critique of instrumentalised memory and the performative aspects of sovereignty in Transnistria's para-state setting. The landscape politics in *Extinction* speak to a "post-war Europe of disintegration" (Gray 2018, para.13)—the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the patchwork of new states, some of which (like Transnistria) never fully coalesced. Thus, the film's landscapes visually manifest the instability of historical belonging: they are spaces where the notion of homeland is unsettled and memory becomes a battleground between competing futures.

Lamas's poetic treatment of these landscapes prevents the film from becoming a dry political documentary. Instead of didactic narration, she relies on imagery and careful composition to evoke nostalgia's contradictions. For instance, many shots employ long takes with little camera movement, inviting the audience to contemplate the scenery. In one haunting scene, Kolya walks towards and inside the Buzludzha Monument in Bulgaria. The camera watches in a fixed long shot as he walks, a solitary pilgrim in a landscape of memory. The poetics emerge through contrast: a human figure moving through a static environment, suggesting both connection and alienation from the past. By not cutting away quickly, Lamas grants the viewer time to feel the atmosphere—perhaps to let their own memories or associations arise. This technique aligns with Boym's notion of reflective nostalgia, which "lingers on ruins" and invites critical reflection rather than quick resolution (2001, 41).

The film also uses visual metaphor in its landscapes. Roads and car scenes appear throughout *Extinction*, underscoring themes of journey, displacement, and uncertainty. Yet these roads often lead to dilapidated checkpoints or dead ends, symbolising thwarted progress—a nostalgia for journeys that no longer have clear destinations. Lamas's cinematography, with its careful attention to light and texture, further heightens the nostalgic mood. As Grainge argues, nostalgia often works less as a faithful

reconstruction of the past than as an affective register—a mood or cultural sensibility that shapes how images look and feel (2002). In *Extinction*, that sensibility is carried by the monochrome palette, grain, and recursive road sequences, producing a felt temporality of suspension rather than a simple retro citation. The use of black-and-white film stock is itself a conscious aesthetic choice that situates *Extinction* in a kind of atemporal zone. Black-and-white can suggest archive or old footage even when newly shot, thus visually connoting the past. Grainge's analysis of monochrome aesthetics is particularly relevant here, as he notes that black-and-white was employed to confer legitimacy on a collective memory and an archival core, with its temporal and authenticity effects harnessed to render a shared history in aesthetic terms (Ibid.). This observation helps explain how Lamas's choice of black-and-white connects the film's visual style to collective memory and the politics of belonging and claims to territory within Transnistria. The use of monochrome cinematography also abstracts the image, focusing our attention on shapes, contrasts, and tones, which in a way mirrors how memory often retains impressions and contrasts rather than full colour detail.

Notably, *Extinction* resists any temptation to portray these landscapes as purely romantic ruins. There is an austerity to Lamas's poetics. The film could be described, borrowing Lamas's own words, as marked by "minimalism, rawness, and detachment"—yet as Lamas argues, these qualities "are not synonymous with a lack of empathy or compassion" (2016, 125). Indeed, the emotional charge is present but subdued, emerging through the very starkness of the imagery. The landscapes exude what we might term *critical nostalgia*: they are impressive in their decay, but that grandeur is laced with awareness of historical failure and the passage of an era. The film's opening Bernhard quote—"there is nothing but failure" — casts a long shadow over every Soviet monument or Lenin bust that Kolya encounters. Rather than being venerable icons of a proud history, these landmarks appear as melancholy signposts of a grand project (the Soviet Union) that ultimately failed. This awareness steers the viewer away from any naive glorification. In effect, *Extinction*'s landscapes become sites of reflection, where nostalgia is palpable but questioned. They provoke the audience to ask: What exactly is being longed for? Is it the Communist ideology? The sense of order? The cultural identity? Or something less tangible. The film does not answer directly; its poetics lie in raising the question through image and atmosphere. The landscapes convey fluidity in the sense that borders and identities are in flux, and immobility in the

sense that Transnistria seems stuck in time, unable to move fully beyond the Soviet past. This paradox—moving yet frozen—is at the heart of the film's nostalgic vision.

Soundscapes of Memory: Auditory Techniques and Nostalgia

If the landscapes of *Extinction* provide the visual poetry of nostalgia, the film's soundscape creates its immersive atmosphere of memory. Lamas, who notably performed the location sound recording herself, employs inventive auditory techniques to trigger reflection and affect. In many instances, sound in *Extinction* works in counterpoint to image, or even in isolation without image, to evoke the unseen presence of the past. This deliberate use of sound—voices, music, ambient noise, and silence—constructs what we might call soundscapes of memory, enveloping the viewer in an auditory experience that complements the film's themes of dislocation and temporal ambiguity.

One striking strategy Lamas uses is the inclusion of audio-only sequences. At several moments, the screen goes dark blue while we hear recordings of voices—specifically, dialogues between Kolya and border officials at checkpoints. These disembodied conversations immediately create a conspiratorial, almost eerie mood. For example, we hear an exchange where a border guard questions Kolya's (and the crew's) documents and intentions, but we see nothing on screen. The effect is disorienting: denied the visual context, we are thrust into Kolya's subjective experience of uncertainty and tension. The darkness forces us to imagine the scene, arguably making it more universal—it could be any border, any night. This auditory focus triggers collective memory by invoking the familiar Cold War trope of clandestine border crossings and "papers, please" encounters, without showing a specific instance. In essence, Lamas uses sound here to denote the bureaucratic machinery of the past. The viewer's memory (or cultural memory) of Soviet bureaucracy and surveillance may be activated by just the tone of voices and the content. This technique underscores how sound can carry nostalgic resonance. As Fred Davis noted, music or voices from one's past can spontaneously evoke powerful nostalgia (1979). *Extinction* leverages that by incorporating authentic-sounding voices of authority, which serve as auditory triggers for a bygone era's atmosphere. Moreover, by separating sound from image

in these moments, Lamas foregrounds the *act of remembering*. Listening to disembodied voices is akin to recalling a memory fragment without a clear picture—a hazy recollection of words and emotions. It compels active participation from the audience, who must fill in the blanks, thereby engaging their own imaginative memory. This approach aligns with reflective nostalgia's tendency to be fragmentary and participatory, letting audiences project their own longings or anxieties onto the sensory material.

In addition to voice recordings, *Extinction* features an evocative use of music and ambient sound to build its soundscape. The film's score, composed by Andreia Pinto Correia, is modernist and sparse. It does not swell into sentimental melodies; rather, it often consists of droning tones, subtle strings, or abstract piano motifs that underscore a mood of uncertainty. Correia's modernist music, as noted in analysis, works in tandem with recurring radio signals that are heard throughout the film. These sounds of radio static and tuning—the crackle of an empty frequency or the whine of a dial being adjusted—imbue the soundscape with a sense of ghostly presence. It is as if the ether is full of voices from the past trying to come through. The recurring modulated radio signals create an otherworldly feeling which resonates with the science-fiction genre. The resonance of *Extinction*'s sound design with sci-fi traits suggests that the film sonically positions Transnistria as a kind of alternate reality, a temporal anomaly (much like a sci-fi world might be). The static could also be reminiscent of shortwave radio broadcasts—a staple of the Cold War era—now fading into the ether. The result of layering these elements is a soundscape that conveys a liminal space, neither fully in the present nor the past, akin to a twilight zone of history.

Another vital auditory element is silence and ambient sound of the landscapes. In many scenes, natural sounds dominate: the crunch of Kolya's footsteps on snow, the rustling of wind through abandoned buildings, the distant barking of a dog in a village. These ambient sounds, captured on location, ground the film in a tactile reality even as the imagery and narrative are stylised. But Lamas often uses extended silence or very low ambient sound, forcing attention to small details: a drip of water in an empty room or the hum of electricity at a border station. Such moments of quiet can be profoundly reflective for the audience. The scarcity of sound becomes its own statement—as if we are straining to hear the echoes of the past in the stillness.

Lamas's minimalistic approach to dialogue is also notable. Kolya, the protagonist, is almost wordless for much of the film. He rarely speaks on

camera, and when he does, his words are often plain and subdued. Instead, much of the verbal information comes from other sources: a handful of staged monologues delivered by actors he encounters (playing figures who reminisce about the Soviet era), and the aforementioned audio recordings of interviews and border dialogues. The decision to keep Kolya mostly silent has an auditory consequence: it places emphasis on listening over speaking. Kolya becomes the audience's surrogate, hearing the stories of others, absorbing the sounds of the environment. His silence could be interpreted as contemplation—he is listening to the collective memory around him. In turn, the film trains the viewer to listen. This dynamic resonates with ethnographic practice, where listening to voices and observing quietly are crucial. It also reinforces nostalgia's reflective side: to be nostalgic is often to silently ruminate rather than to actively converse. By denying us a chatty protagonist or explanatory voice-over, *Extinction* creates an auditory void that is filled by memory's murmurs—distant radios, echoing footsteps, or the recollections of those Kolya meets.

Critically, the film's use of sound also underlines the politics of memory. The border interrogations on the soundtrack reveal the power dynamics of recognition: Kolya's claim to Transnistrian nationality is met with scepticism or confusion by officials. These verbal exchanges highlight the absurdity and pathos of his identity situation—to insist on a nationality that lacks official recognition. Hearing this conflict, especially without visuals, invites us to focus on the *words* and their implications: phrases like "this country doesn't exist" or "place of birth?" become existential questions about identity. The audio recordings thus do double duty: they add to the film's authenticity (perhaps being real encounters) and amplify the thematic concern with belonging. Nostalgia often intensifies when one's identity is in question; here, the literal denial of one's country can only heighten the longing for recognition and stability. The voices of the border guards become almost symbolic voices of authority negating memory—effectively saying that the collective memory Kolya holds (of Transnistria as a nation) is illegitimate. This tension, communicated through sound, deepens the audience's emotional engagement and sympathy.

Extinction's auditory dimension richly complements its visual nostalgic landscapes. Through strategic use of off-screen sound, sparse dialogue, ambient recordings, and music, Lamas constructs a soundscape of memory that pulls the audience into a reflective space. *Extinction*'s soundscape is ever-shifting and frequently in counterpoint with the image. This

counterpoint means that at times the sound is intentionally giving different or extra information than the image. For example, we might see Kolya's impassive face but hear an emotive piece of music, adding layers to how we interpret his inner state. Or conversely, we see a visually poignant scene of a monument, but on the soundtrack we get a dry conversation about paperwork, which can create irony. Such techniques prevent any one mode (image or sound) from dominating the emotional narrative, instead producing a *polyphonic* experience—much as memory itself is multi-voiced. The combination of experimental, poetic techniques ultimately facilitates a meditation on the search for identity by engaging multiple senses and encouraging the viewer to synthesise them.

By the film's end, even though Kolya has spoken little, we feel we have heard an elegy— composed of silence, noises, fragments of speech, and music—for a place and time. The sound design triggers nostalgia not by bombarding us with sentimental cues, but by quietly unsettling us—letting us hear the ghostly echoes of a past political world and the resonant *silences* of a present that is unmoored. This careful balance of sound and silence reinforces the film's portrayal of nostalgia as a present absence—something felt as much in what is unsaid or unheard as in what is overt.

Temporal Displacements and Nostalgia for the Future

Time in *Extinction* is out of joint. Salomé Lamas deliberately blurs temporal boundaries, creating a cinematic experience where past, present, and future coexist in uneasy tension. This is fitting for a film about Transnistria—a place that may be described as "stuck in time," still bearing the markers of the Soviet era in the twenty-first century. *Extinction* portrays temporal displacements at multiple levels: in its narrative structure, its aesthetic (black-and-white, non-linear sequences), and its themes of historical rupture. Through these displacements, the film explores what we might call *nostalgia for the future*—a paradoxical longing directed towards futures *that never came to pass*. This concept builds on Boym's insight that nostalgia has a utopian element and on recent scholarship suggesting that nostalgia can be prospective (Niemeyer 2014; Landwehr 2018; Santa-Cruz 2025). In *Extinction*, nostalgia is not simply a yearning to return to a bygone Soviet past; rather, it is a reflective yearning for the lost futurities embedded in that past's dreams.

One way *Extinction* conveys temporal displacement is by eschewing a straightforward chronological narrative. The film unfolds as a series of vignettes and encounters rather than a linear story with a clear timeline. We see Kolya in various locations across Transnistria and neighbouring lands, but the film gives few cues as to the sequence of events or the duration of his journey. The editing is poetic and associative. This narrative structure places the viewer in a temporal limbo, much as Transnistria itself is in limbo historically. It reflects Boym's notion of resisting linear, forward-moving time; instead of progressing steadily, *Extinction* loops, pauses, and backtracks, reflecting nostalgia's attempt to "revisit time like space" (2001, xv).

The notion of nostalgia for the past's visions of the future encapsulates the film's temporal complexity. This phrase implies a longing not for what *was*, but for what *could have been*. Under communism, there was an official narrative of the future—the promised utopia of equality, modernity, and brotherhood that the Soviet project was ostensibly working towards. That future never arrived; history took a different turn in 1991 with the Soviet collapse. Yet the idea of that future, however idealised or propagandistic it might have been, still lingers in the collective psyche. *Extinction* taps into this by showing a world (Transnistria) where time paused around 1991.

Kolya himself embodies a temporally dislocated identity. He was born in independent Moldova (as per his passport) yet claims nationality of an internationally unrecognised country. In effect, his personal timeline splits from recorded history. In one of the few direct dialogues, a voice (perhaps the filmmaker's off-screen) asks Kolya if he feels more Moldovan or Transnistrian. He firmly answers Transnistrian. This assertion is a nostalgic act in itself: it affirms loyalty to a historical fiction, a state that is de facto real but de jure a relic of a past political structure (the Moldavian SSR). Kolya's identity is thus pegged to a historical possibility—the possibility that Transnistria could have become a recognised nation, or that the Soviet Union might have survived in some form. The film underscores this when Kolja expresses admiration for Russia's support of Transnistria, suggesting hope that alignment with Moscow will secure the region's future. Here, nostalgia and future hope converge. Kolya's patriotic nostalgia for Soviet times (as represented by Russia/Transnistria solidarity) directly informs his vision for the future (perhaps reuniting or gaining recognition). Yet interestingly, Kolya also shows doubts and anxieties about the future. Despite his professed confidence, his silent contemplation and occasional downcast gaze hint at uncertainty. He appears confused and sceptical about the geopolitical development which instils uncertainty for the

future. This aligns with the idea that nostalgia in *Extinction* is not reassuring or stable; it is an ambivalent emotion that mixes hope and fear. The future looms as both something yearned for (in a nostalgic-utopian sense) and something dreaded (given the "entropy" and stagnation observed).

The concept of "nostalgia for the future" emerges most clearly in the film's treatment of unrealised political projects. Transnistria itself can be seen as an unrealised future: it is a self-proclaimed republic that aspired to a certain future (either rejoining Russia or surviving as a socialist republic) which has not been globally ratified. In a sense, Transnistrians live in a future that the rest of the world did not choose—they continued flying the red flag while others moved on. This gives their society a peculiar "time capsule" quality.

Lamas also hints at *lost futures* through the film's sense of entropy and decay. Shots of crumbling socialist monuments that Kolya visits include skeletal remains of infrastructure—perhaps an unfinished bridge or a derelict power plant. Each ruin is a testament to ambitions that were never fully realised or sustained. These images evoke a poignant nostalgia not for what was, but for what might have been. This registers strongly for audiences aware of Soviet history; for instance, the grand utopian schemes of the USSR—whether economic, architectural, or technological (like the space programme)—often ended abruptly or fell short. *Extinction* captures that sense of a future cut off. It resonates with Boym's notion that the future of nostalgia—"with its many potential pasts and conjectural histories" (2001, 176)—involves understanding how the fantasies of the past shape the future. In fact, Boym asserted that the "fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future" (Ibid., xvi). In *Extinction*, the present need (identity and stability in Transnistria's case) leads to a fantasy drawn from the past (a Soviet-style independent path), which then affects how the future is being approached (with isolation and unresolved status). The film's unsettled temporality cleverly forces viewers to consider how past, present, and future are entangled, especially in post-communist nostalgia.

Another layer of temporal displacement is personal time versus historical time. Kolya, as a relatively young man, did not fully live through the height of the Soviet era—he was likely a child when it ended. His affection—or not—for Soviet times or allegiance to Russia, then, is partly inherited or collective rather than based on lived experience. This reflects a broader phenomenon in post-communist nostalgia: younger generations sometimes adopt nostalgic narratives (through parents or community) for

a time they never directly knew, often as a way to critique or cope with their present (Angé and Berliner 2015). Kolya's sense of self and future is shaped by the collective memory handed down to him. This dynamic points to a nostalgia for a future that perhaps the older generation envisioned for Kolya's generation—a future where the sacrifices of war and socialism would result in a strong, united society. Instead, he grew up in a time of fragmentation and uncertainty. Thus, his sense of displacement and scepticism about the future can be traced to a longing for the fulfilled promise once believed in by his elders.

The temporal play in *Extinction* ultimately challenges the viewer to reflect on the direction of nostalgia: backward or forward? The film seems to answer: both, and neither straightforwardly. It presents nostalgia as "consciousness of the potentialities of the past" (2025, 378), in line with Santa-Cruz's notion, meaning that to be nostalgic is to be aware of how the past could have unfolded differently. For Kolya, those potentialities include a world in which their identity is recognised and secure. For Transnistria and communities in a similar position, the film suggests that nostalgia is not simply about the past; it is intimately tied to future imaginings and existential choices. It portrays nostalgia as a temporal prism through which the past's dreams and the present's dilemmas refract into a spectrum of possible futures (and possible regrets). This reflective, unsettled engagement with time sets *Extinction* apart from simplistic nostalgia narratives. It invites the viewer to inhabit a perspective where longing is less about returning to an old life than about finding a liveable future that honours the truth of one's memories.

Conclusion

Salomé Lamas's *Extinction* demonstrates that nostalgia can be far more than sentimental longing; it can be a reflective and critical engagement with history, identity, and the possibility of alternative futures. In this chapter, we have seen how *Extinction* uses a hybrid aesthetic—part documentary observation, part staged fiction—and a rich sensory vocabulary of images and sounds to articulate a nostalgia that is neither restorative nor naive. Instead of trying to rebuild a lost Soviet home, the film's subtle nostalgia dwells in the ambiguities of memory, holding up a mirror to a community's dreams and disillusionments. This reflective nostalgia allows multiple temporalities to speak: the past (Soviet era and its idealism), the present (post-Soviet limbo), and the future (unrealised utopias and

looming uncertainties) converse throughout the film. In doing so, *Extinction* positions nostalgia as a mode of critical consciousness—a means to question who we are and where we belong when the grand narratives of progress have fractured.

Key to *Extinction*'s approach is its treatment of collective memory. The film situates individual experience (Kolya's journey) within the collective imaginary of the Soviet Union's borderlands. It portrays how personal identity is entangled with shared history. The film visually and aurally invokes that collective memory—through monuments, language—yet it also shows how memory is contested and selective. By engaging with scholarly frameworks (Boym's reflective nostalgia, post-communist nostalgia studies, anthropological perspectives on nostalgia as future-oriented), we discern that *Extinction* embodies what Boym termed the "*off-modern*" approach: it ventures off the straight path of nostalgia-as-regression, exploring side alleys of history and imagination. Lamas's film oscillates between estrangement from the past and scepticism about the future. This results in a profoundly unsettled nostalgia—one that resonates with the instability of Transnistria's existence and, by extension, the instability of all historical belonging in a rapidly changing world.

The aesthetic choices of the film reinforce the idea that nostalgia in *Extinction* is not a passive mood but an active dialogue between senses and memory, between what is seen and what is heard (or unsaid). They also underscore how nostalgia can be simultaneously personal and collective. By collapsing linear time and blending past imagery with present reality, the film's structure gives form to Boym's observation that nostalgia seeks to return to moments in time as if they were physical places, resisting the inevitability of time's one-way flow. In Transnistria's suspended time, we see that refusal made real—clocks seemingly stopped in 1991. However, *Extinction* illuminates the costs of that refusal: stagnation, international isolation, internal confusion. Thus, while the film validates the emotional truth of longing for the past's ideals, it also subtly advocates for a forward-looking nostalgia—one that draws on the past's possibilities to help build a more intentional future. By the film's end, nostalgia is no longer just backward glancing; it becomes a question posed to the future: What do we do with these memories now? Somhegyi stresses that "[w]e should never underestimate the importance of properly scrutinizing [ruins and nostalgia]," as "they have essential influence on our self-interpretation on a personal and socio-cultural level as well" (2025, 438). In this light, the act of engaging with such memories is not mere scholarship but a form of cultural

navigation—steering between remembrance and reinvention, where the way we interpret the past shapes the horizons of what the future can be.

Nostalgia as *pharmakon*. Used reflectively, it can heal, unite, and critique; taken unreflectively, it can deceive, divide, and hinder. Lamas's film tilts towards the reflective side, offering an antidote to toxic nostalgia by exposing its complexities and grounding it in lived reality. It resonates with Angé and Berliner's conclusion (2015) that nostalgia is an integral element of modern life, manifesting in varied forms and carrying multiple social implications. By portraying nostalgia in post-communist Europe as temporally and politically unsettled, *Extinction* challenges any simplistic dichotomy of nostalgia as "good" or "bad." Instead, it presents it as a condition to be understood and navigated. In the fraught context of post-Soviet identity, nostalgia emerges as a form of survival—a way to maintain dignity and continuity—but one that must remain self-aware to avoid becoming destructive.

Extinction leaves us with a vision of nostalgia beyond extinction—nostalgia that survives the end of an era and adapts to new realities. As we move forward to the next chapter, we will shift from the reflective, critical nostalgia of *Extinction* to examine a contrasting case: restorative nostalgia in Mario Martone's *Nostalgia*. Martone's film, set in a very different milieu (Naples, Italy), depicts the protagonist's return to his homeland and an embrace of roots that may align more with Boym's *restorative* mode. This will allow us to compare and contrast how two filmmakers approach nostalgia's power. Where Lamas sees nostalgia as an open question and an unsettled force pointing to futures unfulfilled, Martone might illustrate nostalgia as a yearning for reconciliation with the past and the rediscovery of one's place. The transition from *Extinction* to *Nostalgia* will thus highlight the spectrum of nostalgia's manifestations: from *nostalgia as critique* (in Lamas) to *nostalgia as homecoming* (in Martone). In doing so, we continue to develop the overarching thesis of this book—that nostalgia in contemporary cinema is not monolithic but is used by filmmakers in nuanced ways to interrogate memory, identity, and ethics.

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CHAPTER 6

Restorative Nostalgia in Mario Martone's *Nostalgia*

Abstract This chapter examines Mario Martone's *Nostalgia* (2022) as a meditation on memory, return, and the ambivalence of belonging. Centring on a man's homecoming to Naples after decades abroad, the film stages nostalgia as both an intimate attachment to place and a confrontation with unresolved personal and social histories. The analysis underscores how Naples functions not simply as a backdrop but as a layered site of memory, where past conflicts and present realities collide. Martone's aesthetic strategies—including shifts in colour palette and aspect ratio, and the rendering of the city as both familiar and estranging—visualise the tension between restorative and reflective nostalgia. The chapter demonstrates how the film highlights the double-edged nature of longing: nostalgia can serve as a resource of continuity and meaning, but equally as a burden that traps individuals in cycles of repetition and loss. By attending to these tensions, the chapter shows how *Nostalgia* expands the cinematic exploration of displacement and identity in contemporary Europe, offering a nuanced portrayal of how the past continues to shape both personal subjectivities and collective imaginaries.

Keywords Mario Martone • Italian cinema • Nostalgia • Restorative nostalgia • Reflective nostalgia • Displacement

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"Knowledge lies in nostalgia. He who has not lost himself possesses not."
— (Pier Paolo Pasolini (epigraph to Nostalgia))

Mario Martone's film *Nostalgia* (2022) immerses us in a homecoming tale laden with longing, memory, and the deceptive comfort of the past. At its heart is a nuanced examination of nostalgia—specifically restorative nostalgia—as both a thematic force driving the protagonist and a stylistic palette colouring the film's imagery. This chapter argues that Martone's *Nostalgia* constructs an alluring vision of restorative nostalgia in its narrative, aesthetics, and character motivations, only to ultimately lay bare the limitations and dangers of this impulse. In doing so, the film reveals a deep ambivalence about the siren call of the "good old days," cautioning that the past, no matter how lovingly reconstructed, cannot be truly recaptured without consequence.

Restorative nostalgia "puts emphasis on *nostos* (home) and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps" (Boym 2001, 41). It is an approach that takes itself "dead seriously" (Ibid., 49), treating the imagined past as truth and seeking a return to origins. Reflective nostalgia, by contrast, "…dwells in *algia* (the longing itself) and delays homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately" (Ibid., xviii). In short, restorative nostalgia is about restoration and "return to origins" (Ibid.), whereas reflective nostalgia is about reflection and the bittersweet acceptance of loss.

Martone's *Nostalgia* provides a rich case study of these concepts in action. The film follows Felice Lasco, a middle-aged expatriate who returns to his native Naples after 40 years abroad. Felice left as a teenager under murky circumstances and has since built a life in Egypt, even converting to Islam and marrying there. Yet on returning to the Rione Sanità quarter of Naples to care for his ailing mother, Felice is quickly enveloped by the sights, sounds, and smells of his youth. The city strikes him as both recognisable and strange—he reassures himself that nothing has changed, despite the persistent presence of threat and deterioration beneath the surface. In three key elements of the film—an early sequence of Felice wandering through Sanità's streets, the overall narrative arc of his homecoming and reckoning, and the recurring flashbacks to his youth—*Nostalgia* paints a portrait of restorative nostalgia in both content and form. This chapter delves into each of these elements, showing how the film initially romanticises the pull of the past and then gradually exposes nostalgia's more "deadly" serious side—ultimately culminating in a tragic

denouement that underscores nostalgia's peril. Spatial experience is central here: Felice's return is narrated through streets, courtyards, and interiors that trigger affective reconnections, showing how restorative nostalgia is anchored in memory-laden urban space. Throughout this analysis, insights from nostalgia studies will illuminate how Martone's cinematic choices echo broader theories: from Boym's critique of restorative nostalgia, to Fred Davis's understanding of nostalgia as a coping mechanism for identity discontinuities, to media scholars' observations on how film aesthetics evoke (and commodify) nostalgia.

By the chapter's end, we will see that *Nostalgia* presents the nostalgic condition as a double-edged sword—capable of offering solace, meaning, and "sweet pain" in the moment of reverie, yet also capable of blinding one to present realities and foreclosing the future. This paradox aligns with Boym's observation that while longing for the past can make us empathetic and human, "…the moment we try to repair longing with belonging, the apprehension of loss with a rediscovery of identity, we often part ways and put an end to mutual understanding" (2001, xv). Felice's journey through *Nostalgia* exemplifies this truth. His attempt to belong again to a romanticised past ultimately shatters the very longing that inspired it. In exploring this progression, Martone's film issues a subtle warning: the past may call to us with siren-like beauty, but to live wholly in its embrace is to risk being lost—or even destroyed—by an illusion.

Labyrinth of Longing: The Streets of Sanità as Memoryscape

Felice's first days back in Naples are depicted in a lyrical, near wordless sequence that immediately situates the viewer in the ambience of nostalgic return. Martone opens the film with an evocative epigraph from Pasolini, priming us for a story about what it means to lose oneself in memories. We then follow Felice as he wanders the narrow streets and cobbled alleys of Rione Sanità, the neighbourhood of his childhood. The camera trails him almost like an unseen companion, observing as he pauses to soak in each sight: sunlit façades of crumbling Baroque buildings, bustling market stalls, dilapidated courtyards echoing with voices. The diegetic soundscape—street vendors' cries, motorbike engines, church bells—intertwines with a gentle jazz score that imbues the scene with a melancholic warmth. Felice's pace is unhurried; he moves as if in a reverie, eyes scanning every

detail of the environment. His expression carries the awe of a tourist and the emotion of a prodigal son. This sequence establishes *Nostalgia*'s nostalgic mood in a reflective key: Felice is quietly dwelling in longing, taking in the "patina of time" that clings to Sanità's physical spaces (Ibid., 41). There is no urgent plot development here—just a man communing with a place that is both his past and (he hopes) his future. This immersion highlights how "media can activate, frame and render memory shareable" (Niemeyer 2014, 4), demonstrating how Martone's film uses its unique sights and sounds to transform Felice's private memories into an experience communicable to the audience. Moreover, the film's detailed depiction of Naples's vibrant street life and historical architecture emphasises how media serve as arenas through which events are not only encountered but also framed, interpreted, and remembered as part of history (Carr 2010; Niemeyer 2011, 2014). They shape the way moments are recorded, contextualised, and imbued with significance, turning lived experience into what is collectively recognised as historical narrative.

Critically, Martone uses visual and sonic cues to convey the texture of memory and the interplay of past and present in Felice's mind. The warm, golden-hued cinematography in these street scenes gives modern-day Naples a slightly faded, timeless look—not overtly sepia-toned (as the later flashbacks will be), but enough to blur the distinction between now and then. The camera often frames Felice in long tracking shots as he walks, occasionally circling around him, which creates a sense that the city envelops him on all sides. In one moment, Felice slows down; the camera follows his gaze looking upward at murals and open windows on old apartment blocks, and we sense that he is seeing both the present scene and an overlay of memory—perhaps hearing echoes of a song from decades prior, or recalling familiar faces of those who once lived behind those windows. Such moments are examples of what Boym calls the personal narratives of reflective nostalgia, where the individual engages in "the imperfect process of remembrance" (Ibid.) and savours "shattered fragments" (Ibid., 49) of the past. The film's patient attention to Felice's subjective experience—his reverent observation of his surroundings—invites the audience into this reflective state. We too begin to feel the ache of nostalgia with him, even if we have never been to Naples. As Katharina Niemeyer notes, nostalgia is often characterised by a "bittersweet longing for former times and spaces," one that can be shared vicariously through media (2014, 1). In these early scenes, Martone clearly aims to evoke that

bittersweet feeling, leveraging the power of cinematic imagery and sound to mediate nostalgia.

One notable aspect of Felice's walk through Sanità is how the neighbourhood itself is portrayed as a living palimpsest of memory. In an interview, Martone highlights his approach, likening Sanità to "a sort of chessboard or labyrinth" and noting that as Felice "gradually delves into the Sanità, it's as though he has a labyrinth inside him" (Bizio 2022). This metaphor of the labyrinth is apt. The winding, maze-like layout of the historic district—with its twisting vicoli and hidden courtyards—mirrors Felice's inner journey through the twists and turns of remembrance. Each corner turned might trigger a new memory; each familiar landmark is a piece of a puzzle he is trying to reassemble. Early on, Felice carries an old paper map of Naples, which he consults hesitantly as if half-forgetting the geography of his youth. The map is a potent symbol: it represents his desire for orientation in both the city and his own past. Yet the very need for a map underscores that things are not exactly as he remembers—the terrain of home has shifted with time, and so has he. Felice's mixture of confidence and tentative exploration shows the ambivalence of nostalgia's first stage: at once feeling the comforting familiarity of home and the disconcerting realisation of one's long absence.

Felice's nostalgia is not only rosy wistfulness, but also bound up with *unresolved guilt and secrets*. The wandering-in-Sanità sequence has an undertone of haunting. There are times when uninterrupted shots reveal without cutting Felice's subjective point of view, showing quick details—a woman in hijab holding her baby, graffiti on a wall—that perhaps remind him of something or someone. These fleeting subjective shots are never explicitly explained, but they contribute to the film's atmosphere of ambivalent nostalgia: sweet and painful, inviting yet eerie. As Pasolini's quote suggests, to *know* (gain knowledge or closure) through nostalgia, one must risk "losing oneself." Felice, in these first scenes, appears gently lost in the sensory embrace of his old neighbourhood, surrendering to the nostalgia with an almost spiritual devotion.

A Mother's Presence: The Emotional Anchor of Return

Felice's initial return exemplifies how nostalgia can function as a search for continuity in the face of life's changes. Fred Davis argues that "nostalgia thrives on transition, on the subjective discontinuities that engender our yearning for continuity" (1979, 49). Felice has undergone immense transitions—leaving Naples at 15, spending four decades abroad, and experiencing profound shifts in language, religion, and culture—that have created a profound rupture in his sense of identity. Returning home, he is driven by an urgent need to bridge that discontinuity, to reassure himself that he is still deeply connected to his roots and to his past self.

The presence and condition of Felice's elderly mother, Teresa, play a crucial role in this reconnection process. The initial meeting between mother and son after decades of separation is presented as a profoundly emotional moment. Their first embrace—marked by tears, tenderness, and few spoken words—communicates an overwhelming sense of mutual recognition and unconditional love that transcends time and distance. This interaction signifies the enduring, perhaps unchanging, emotional anchor that Felice seeks in his past. The profound intimacy of their reunion immediately positions Teresa as the emotional cornerstone of Felice's nostalgic journey.

Subsequent interactions with Teresa, such as Felice bathing her or gently guiding her through old photographs, become tender rituals through which he attempts to restore his former identity as a devoted son. In these moments, Felice not only reaffirms familial bonds but also symbolically returns to a simpler, more secure identity—one unburdened by the complications of his present life. Their interactions, imbued with affection and mutual dependency, serve as restorative acts that reconnect Felice to an identity untouched by his many changes abroad. His care for Teresa, portrayed with gentle reverence, anchors him to a familiar social role and grants him a clear sense of purpose amid uncertainty.

The mother–son relationship is also significant in how it highlights Felice's selective reconstruction of his past. His nostalgic gaze tends to privilege comforting memories, carefully omitting the problematic aspects of his youth—his abrupt departure and estrangement from his former life. The emotional authenticity of his bond with his mother allows him to approach his past with a sense of innocence and purity, enabling a temporary suspension of the complex truths he will ultimately confront. Thus,

Teresa's presence serves not only as emotional reassurance but also as a conduit for Felice's nostalgia, bridging his former and current selves, even if only fleetingly and selectively.

This aligns closely with Davis's assertion that nostalgia cultivates an "appreciative stance toward former selves" (1979, 35), softening the more negative implications of life's transformations. Felice's wanderings, therefore, are far from aimless—they reinforce his sense of self by immersing him in relationships and surroundings where he once unequivocally belonged. In caring for Teresa, Felice momentarily reclaims an uncomplicated identity, one defined by familial love and personal authenticity rather than the dissonances of cultural displacement and the inevitable passage of time.

Nostalgia's Allure and Illusion

Yet, even in these ostensibly warm scenes, Martone seeds the idea that nostalgia may be seductive but also illusory. The wistful jazz soundtrack and golden visuals romanticise Naples, perhaps even more than reality warrants. Martone's Naples is vibrant and soulful, but he also acknowledges the area's rough edges—Sanità is described as impoverished and Camorra-controlled. Felice, however, seems insulated by his nostalgic glow. As viewers, we are encouraged to share Felice's affectionate gaze, but we are also aware (through hints like ominous looks from local thugs, or the priest Don Luigi's wary questions) that there is danger beneath the surface. This creates a subtle dramatic irony: Felice believes he is rediscovering a *home* unchanged ("after all, nothing has changed," he says hopefully), while we suspect that much has changed and that his idealised vision cannot hold. The labyrinth of Sanità might not only lead Felice to treasured memories, but also to dark corners he has forgotten or is wilfully ignoring. In this way, Martone's direction conveys an ambivalence about Felice's restorative project from the start. The city is welcoming him like a prodigal son, yet it also looms like a maze that could entrap or mislead him. This duality encapsulates nostalgia's two faces—the comforting allure of the known past, and the peril of mistaking that past for present reality.

In sum, the opening sequence of *Nostalgia*—Felice's quiet odyssey through the streets of his youth—establishes the film's central theme of restorative nostalgia in an initially reflective guise. We witness a character luxuriating in memory, embracing the sensual details of a long-lost home, and attempting to reconcile his past and present identities. The sequence

is emotionally engaging and aesthetically beautiful, drawing the audience into Felice's longing. However, the reflective calm is laced with portents that this nostalgia will demand more than just contemplation—it will compel action and confrontation. Like a labyrinth, Felice's nostalgic journey has an unseen centre that he feels compelled to reach: the unresolved business of his past, symbolised by his childhood friend Oreste and the secret they share. As we leave the gentle glow of the Sanità streets and move deeper into the film's narrative, the nature of Felice's nostalgia shifts from reflective to restorative, driving him towards an ill-fated attempt to literally restore the world of his youth.

Reconstructing Yesterday: Narrative as Restorative Quest and Reckoning

The narrative arc of *Nostalgia* follows Felice's deepening entanglement with his past, structured as a tension between an idealised restoration and the encroaching reality of change. Initially, Felice's return is motivated by filial duty—to care for his mother in her final days—but it quickly becomes apparent that he is also driven by a powerful yearning to relive and redeem his teenage years in Naples. As the story progresses, Felice's nostalgia shifts from passive longing to active restoration: he doesn't just reminisce about "the good old days," he attempts to embody them in the present. This is most evident in two intertwined pursuits: recovering his relationship with his childhood best friend Oreste, and reclaiming the youthful persona he left behind. Through these pursuits, Martone's film dramatises the core of restorative nostalgia—the urge to "rebuild the lost home" (Boym 2001, 41) —and gradually reveals the futility and danger inherent in such a project.

Felice's fixation on Oreste is introduced subtly but grows into the narrative's central conflict. In conversations with Don Luigi and others, Felice eagerly inquires about Oreste, whom he has not seen since he fled Naples at age 15. We learn in pieces that the two boys were as close as brothers, sharing a bond rooted in the streets of Sanità and sealed by adolescent misadventure. Felice speaks of Oreste not as the man he might be now, but almost as the boy he remembers—full of life, laughter, and "hunger" for motorbike races and petty thrills. This romanticised memory persists despite warnings from those around him. A family friend pointedly tells Felice that his old friend is now *O' Malomm*—a local crime boss—and

urges Felice to leave Naples for his own safety. Don Luigi, the neighbourhood priest crusading against the Camorra, likewise cautions Felice: Oreste has become a feared and violent figure, far removed from the friend Felice knew. These warnings, however, do not dissuade Felice. If anything, they strengthen his resolve to reconnect: it is as if Felice believes his loyalty to the shared past can cut through Oreste's hardened present. He repeatedly expresses a kind of faith in their youthful bond, strongly believing that things between them remain the same (a refrain that rings increasingly hollow). Here we see restorative nostalgia in full force as a psychological motivation: Felice cannot accept that the past is gone; he seeks to restore the lost friendship, convinced that deep down the Oreste he knew still exists and that by returning, he can revive that dormant kinship.

This impulse aligns closely with Boym's description of restorative nostalgics, who do "not think of themselves as nostalgic" (Ibid.) but rather believe they are pursuing a genuine *truth* or *homecoming*. At the beginning of the story, Felice does not self-identify as a nostalgic daydreamer (though later in the film, he appears to acknowledge his nostalgic disposition when his partner in Cairo brings it up during a phone call); he truly believes that reuniting with Oreste will bring closure or wholeness to both their lives. In essence, he sees his return as redemptive: he will reclaim his best friend and, perhaps, redeem the mysterious sin of their youth that caused their estrangement. The film slowly unpacks this backstory. In a confessional moment with Don Luigi, Felice finally reveals the secret: as teenagers, he and Oreste attempted a robbery that went wrong, and Oreste murdered a man—a mistake for which Felice feels complicit guilt. Felice's sudden departure from Naples decades ago was to escape the fallout of that crime (and possibly Oreste's wrath as well as the law). Now, older and laden with remorse, Felice returns seemingly to make amends. Yet it is notable that guilt alone does not seem to drive him until much later in the film; up to the midpoint, his actions are framed more by longing than penitence. He eagerly seeks Oreste without even being sure if Oreste holds a grudge. This suggests that Felice's primary motivation is nostalgic—to recover a lost friendship and a lost self—rather than purely ethical. The guilt becomes fully evident only when he directly confronts the past crime via his confession. Up until then, Felice moves with a kind of naive optimism, propelled by the notion that rekindling the old camaraderie will somehow set things right.

Narratively, Martone structures Felice's quest as a series of restorative gestures that increasingly clash with reality. One of the most symbolic

gestures is Felice's purchase of an old motorbike, identical to the one he and Oreste rode in their teens. This is a poignant example of nostalgia influencing action: Felice literally buys a piece of his past, as if acquiring the motorcycle can rewind time. Riding it through the Naples streets, he seems momentarily transported—the freedom and thrill of youth flicker across his face. However, this is an act that aligns with Boym's concept of restorative nostalgia, as Felice attempts to reclaim a past that is, by its nature, irretrievable and impossible to relive in its original form. The motorbike serves as a tangible trigger for Felice's restorative nostalgia—a totem of his youth that he attempts to reclaim physically. This illustrates how "media can serve as a means of virtually accessing the past […] they often establish the precondition for a nostalgic perspective […] [and] media themselves can become an object of nostalgia" (Schrey 2014, 29). The motorbike, like old photos or familiar streets, functions as a mediating object of longing, a conduit through which Felice attempts to re-enter his past.

Yet in the present context, it appears strangely out of place: a middle-aged man navigating the tight alleys of Naples on a vintage bike, chasing phantoms of a former life. The film conveys this with a mixture of empathy and quiet irony: Felice's initial joy is palpable, but the act is laced with melancholy. This sequence reflects a nostalgia that is not merely personal, but also deeply conservative—it leans towards re-enactment rather than reflection. The narrative trajectory surrounding the motorbike reinforces this: Felice's purchase and enjoyment of the ride are eventually answered by Oreste's retaliation, as his thugs burn the bike and deface Felice's home with warning graffiti. In doing so, the film emphasises how restorative nostalgia can provoke hostility rather than harmony, revealing its limits in a changed social landscape. This arc not only illustrates how Felice's attachment to the past obstructs his ability to engage progressively with Naples in the present, but also guides the viewer towards a more critical stance. What begins as a romantic gesture soon collapses under the weight of reality, revealing that nostalgia—when enacted as recovery—can perpetuate illusion and invite danger rather than foster meaningful continuity. This idea is further reinforced by the observation that retrotyping operates like a commodity's "second skin," fabricating a tailored version of the past and converting a longing for an idealised, illusory past into the temporary gratification of consumption (Pickering and Keightley 2014). Here, Felice's efforts to reconstruct his past, including his purchase of the motorbike, can be seen as an individual-level engagement with the

commodification of memory, transforming personal longing into a futile attempt at consumption and re-enactment.

Another restorative gesture is Felice's gradual decision to move back permanently to Naples. He extends his visit beyond his mother's needs, even contemplating buying a flat. Strikingly, he does so without consulting his wife in Cairo, who remains a distant voice on the phone. The film gives only brief glimpses of his life in Egypt (rare phone calls with his partner in Cairo; Felice performing Islamic prayer alone in a room). The near-total absence of his current life in the narrative—his wife appears only as a distant, passive listener, with no evident role or agency in their shared life—is telling. It is as if Felice, by returning to Naples, has all but erased his present in favour of his past. This narrative gap might be seen as a script weakness (the film leaves unresolved why Felice's wife does not accompany him to Naples or what he intends to do to support himself should he remain there). But thematically, the omission underscores how all-consuming Felice's restorative nostalgia has become: his "homecoming" is not just a visit; it is a wholesale attempt to relocate his identity back to an earlier era, with little thought for practical consequences. He is, in Boym's terms, trying to perform a "transhistorical reconstruction" of home (2001, xviii)—to literally step from 1980 into 2020 as if nothing happened in between. This is an inherently quixotic endeavour, one that the film increasingly exposes. Felice's refusal to reckon with the changes (in himself, in others) raises the dramatic stakes, so that by the time he finally arranges to meet Oreste face-to-face, the audience is braced for an inevitable collision between nostalgic fantasy and the hard truth.

The climax of this collision comes in the film's tense final act. Finally, after a prolonged pursuit, Felice secures a meeting with Oreste, now a reclusive but still dangerous Camorra boss. The meeting takes place in the decayed bones of an abandoned building—a stark, dim setting heavy with metaphor. Felice approaches Oreste with a hopeful attitude, addressing him with an old nickname, eyes shining with tears of anticipation. With cold reserve, Oreste regards Felice as almost a stranger. In this pivotal scene, Felice tries to speak the language of nostalgia to Oreste—offering brief references to their shared past in the hope that these fragments might stir something positive in Oreste and re-establish a connection. It is a heartrending attempt to resurrect Oreste's former self. Oreste's reaction, however, is chilling. He remains emotionally closed, even hostile, accusing Felice of abandoning him years ago and destroying their brotherhood. The dialogue (and superb acting) here crystallises the film's critique of

restorative nostalgia: Felice's belief that their friendship somehow survives deep inside both of them is brutally rejected by Oreste. Oreste has not indulged in nostalgic memory—for him, the past is dead, replaced by a survivalist present. Oreste appears to resist emotional attachment, likely due to the traumatic nature of how his close friendship with Felice came to an end. In Oreste's hardened eyes, Felice's return only reopens an old wound and poses a threat (perhaps Felice might betray him to the authorities, or simply weaken his reputation). Ultimately, in a gut-punch denouement, Oreste follows Felice after their meeting, corners him in an alley, and murders him—taking his wallet and finding in it that old photo of the two boys on a motorbike. The past, externalised by the photo, is literally all Felice has left on him at death.

The tragic ending of *Nostalgia* serves as the film's emphatic statement on the constraints and risks inherent in restorative nostalgia. Felice's nostalgia-driven mission not only fails to achieve the reconnection he yearned for, but directly leads to his demise. By showing Felice's corpse crumpled in the very streets he lovingly traversed earlier, Martone makes a stark point: the city that felt like a nurturing labyrinth of memories has become a lethal maze. In narrative terms, Felice's arc is a classical tragedy of hubris. His hubris was nostalgia—the unwavering conviction that he could reclaim the past, that "nothing has changed" and that the mutual affection of youth would override all else. The reality—that everything has changed, that the past is irretrievable—comes crashing down violently. This outcome validates Boym's paradoxical warning: nostalgia can bring people together empathetically, but "the moment we try to repair longing with belonging […] we often part ways and put an end to mutual understanding" (2001, xv). Felice tried to convert longing into actual belonging (to literally belong again in Naples, in Oreste's life). In doing so, he destroyed the delicate mutual understanding that a more reflective nostalgia might have preserved from afar. Oreste clearly did not share Felice's longing; their shared past was not actually shared in memory. Felice's unilateral attempt to force a restorative closure only alienated Oreste further, culminating in fatal misunderstanding. One might say Felice's nostalgia-driven choices shaped a selective perception—he saw only what he wished to see. This recalls Davis's observation that nostalgia "is an emotion that plays tricks on us" and "simplifies, sentimentalises, and distorts our pasts" (1979, 47). Felice fell victim to such distortions: he sentimentalised his friendship and hometown, glossing over the ugly truths (crime, betrayal, time's passage) until it was too late. The film, by enacting these

consequences, positions itself as a cautionary tale. It does not outright "denounce" nostalgia—indeed, it elicits our sympathy for Felice's feelings throughout—but it demonstrates that nostalgia's charm can be fatally deceptive if mistaken for a roadmap to the present.

It is also worth noting how Felice's fate ties into a broader social commentary. *Nostalgia* is pointedly "everything except a movie about the Camorra," according to Martone; it uses archetypes of return and tragedy against a vividly drawn realistic backdrop (Bizio 2022). Felice's individual nostalgic quest intersects with Naples's collective reality: a city where the past (tradition, old relationships) coexists with entrenched problems (organised crime, poverty). Felice's tragedy can be read as the personal cost of trying to live in a romanticised bubble within a harsh social landscape. His failure to engage with Naples as it is—he approaches Oreste as if they are still boys, rather than acknowledging that Oreste is a criminal power broker in a dangerous world—underscores how restorative nostalgia can act as a form of blindness. The narrative structure, which starts gently and ends with a shock, reinforces this theme of belated awakening to reality. In classical terms, Felice achieves a kind of *anagnorisis* (recognition) at the very end—perhaps in his final moments he recognises Oreste's alienation or the folly of his own mission, a realisation that comes tragically too late to save him.

Martone's storytelling thus methodically builds the case that while nostalgia can imbue life with meaning and guide one home, it cannot literally restore the past without exacting a price. The overall narrative structure—a homecoming turned fatal—echoes the structure of a failed restorative project. We start with hope and end with ruin. This trajectory perhaps reflects a broader cultural scepticism towards nostalgia as a solution. As Boym (2001) argues, restorative nostalgia often fuels nationalist or revivalist movements that seek to turn back time, usually with catastrophic or futile results. Felice's personal journey is a microcosm of that pattern: he attempts a one-man "revival" of his golden days, and it collapses. In contrast, reflective nostalgia might have left him alive—perhaps wistful and forever longing, but at least not confronting a mobster with delusions of brotherhood. Near the end of the film, Felice sits with Don Luigi in his church, reassuring him that Oreste is comfortable with his presence in Naples—a belief Felice holds confidently but mistakenly. Don Luigi, sensing the danger Felice underestimates due to his nostalgia-clouded perspective, explicitly warns him against walking alone in the streets for the time being. This caution represents a clear moment where Felice could

have reconsidered the reality of his situation and adjusted his nostalgic perception of Oreste and Naples. However, Felice's unwavering faith in the bond of their youth makes him dismiss the priest's advice, reflecting a restorative insistence that overrides any reflective caution. This critical moment reveals nostalgia's power not only to comfort but also to dangerously obscure reality, ultimately setting Felice on the tragic path to his death.

Finally, the narrative's concluding beat—Oreste discovering the old photo on Felice's corpse—is a masterstroke of ambivalence. For a flicker of a second, Oreste's stony visage reportedly softens upon seeing that image of their youthful camaraderie. It is left open to interpretation, but one could imagine a hint of regret or buried nostalgia catching up to Oreste in that silent moment. If so, it is painfully ironic: Felice's death might be the only thing that restores their shared nostalgia, too late. This poetic touch drives home the chapter's argument: Martone constructs restorative nostalgia (Felice literally carries the symbol of it in his wallet) only to show its tragic limitations. The photo—a souvenir of a friendship—can trigger feeling, but it cannot undo the damage wrought by time and action. In the end, Felice's nostalgia becomes a relic, an artefact of memory for someone else to hold. The cycle of nostalgia continues, but with a sombre tint.

Thus, through its narrative structure, *Nostalgia* critiques restorative nostalgia on two levels: the personal (Felice's demise) and the thematic (the impossibility of resurrecting a bygone world). It suggests that nostalgia's proper place is in memory and story, not in concrete re-enactment. The next section will turn to how the film's form and style, particularly its use of flashbacks, reinforce this idea by stylistically constructing the past within the film—often in conspicuously polished or "restorative" ways—and how those choices affect our understanding of nostalgia's authenticity. If the narrative gave us the *content* of Felice's nostalgia-driven restoration, the flashbacks give us the *form*—the cinematic embodiment of nostalgia—which Martone uses in a self-conscious manner. As we shall see, the flashbacks in *Nostalgia* both indulge in classic nostalgic aesthetics and undermine them, contributing to the film's ambivalent stance towards the nostalgia it portrays.

Sepia Dreams and Flashback Fragments: The Aesthetics of Nostalgia

Nostalgia's visual and auditory style plays a crucial role in conveying the film's themes, especially through the flashback sequences that punctuate the narrative. These flashbacks depict Felice's teenage years in Naples, providing the audience direct glimpses of the past that so haunts the protagonist. Notably, Martone employs a distinctly stylised approach for these scenes: the flashbacks are presented in desaturated, sepia-tinted tones, within a narrowed 4:3 aspect ratio, and accompanied by era-evocative music (synth and electronic motifs reminiscent of the 1980s). Indeed, "In the last three decades of the twentieth century, nostalgia was commodified and aestheticized as perhaps never before" (Grainge 2002, 64), providing a broader cultural context for Martone's stylistic choices and how they engage with these *memory economies.* This approach resonates with the idea that "Jameson defines nostalgia less in terms of an experiential mood than as an aestheticized mode" (Ibid., 8); *Nostalgia* mobilises a distinct stylistic strategy to evoke the past, rather than merely relying on sentimentality. In other words, there is a shift from raw emotional experience to a crafted aesthetic approach. In contrast to the twenty-first-century scenes shot in widescreen and full colour, the flashbacks look like moving photographs—faded yet aesthetically composed images of youthful adventure. On the surface, this creative choice is a familiar cinematic shorthand for nostalgia: as Kappes and Menke observe, nostalgia in film is often made "graspable" through overt aesthetic cues like "sepia-tinted images," a visual code that immediately signals the past to viewers (2025, 123). By shifting the colour palette and aspect ratio, Martone clearly demarcates memory from the present day, effectively signalling to us, "This is Felice's recollection of the good old days." Such techniques align with what Kappes and Menke (2025) describe as a hallmark of mediated nostalgia, in which the past is evoked through recognisable aesthetic codes—sepia tones, analogue textures, retro visual styles—that immediately cue a nostalgic response, often prioritising affective resonance over documentary accuracy. Martone seems to deliberately draw on this strategy, offering viewers a visually romanticised trip into 1980s Naples complete with the expected trappings of youthful nostalgia: warm colours, romantic light flares, and a slightly grainy "old film" texture.

Yet, on closer examination, *Nostalgia* uses these flashbacks in a way that is both thematically resonant and subtly critical of their own

nostalgia-inducing methods. The flashbacks are triggered at key emotional moments for Felice. The first occurs when Felice early on pulls out that map of Naples; as he does, we suddenly cut to young Felice racing through the streets on his motorbike, the frame shrunk to a vintage TV-like square. Although the cut is visually abrupt, the use of a sound bridge—carrying over the motorbike's engine noise—creates a smooth temporal transition into the past. For half a minute, we are immersed fully in this memory: teenage Felice winds through alleys on his bike before using a match-on-action technique that smooths the transition back to the present. The flashback scene is edited conventionally, with continuity cutting that establishes spatial geography and follows the action coherently. In terms of craft, it could be a scene in any coming-of-age film—there is no surreal fragmentation or haziness; it's portrayed as vivid and whole. Other flashbacks follow suit: one later sequence shows Felice and Oreste in a nighttime motorcycle race with friends, captured with the same kinetic camera movements and clear sequencing of events. Another flashback jumps to Felice's mother scolding the young boy after a dangerous ride, again played as a complete mini-scene with a beginning and end.

From a traditional storytelling perspective, these flashbacks efficiently fill in backstory and allow us to witness the formative moments Felice longs for. However, from the perspective of nostalgia theory, Martone's stylistic choices here are intriguingly at odds with the inherent nature of nostalgic memory. Actual nostalgia, as scholars often note, is fragmentary, non-linear, and riddled with ambivalence and cracks (Boym 2001; Niemeyer 2014)—one remembers moments, sensual impressions, emotions, but seldom a full sequence like a perfectly edited film reel. Boym, for instance, stresses that nostalgic recollection is rarely comprehensive or smooth but rather exists in an interplay of "ruins" and "memory gaps" (2001, 41). One might expect a film truly capturing the feel of nostalgia to present the past more impressionistically—perhaps in brief flashes, jump cuts, or hazy superimpositions, acknowledging how memory is often a jumble. Instead, Martone gives us continuous, cinematically polished flashbacks, almost too perfect to be raw memory. These flashback sequences, by employing conventional framings, carefully balanced compositions, and seamless, almost invisible transitions across space and time, risk oversimplifying the inherently fragmented and subjective nature of nostalgic memory. Martone's stylistic choices thus run counter to the inherent irregularity and emotional complexity identified in nostalgia scholarship. In line with Kappes and Menke's (2025) observations, the

film's nostalgic strategies resemble broader mediated and media nostalgia practices, where aestheticised evocations of the past often blend an appeal to emotional resonance with simulations of authenticity, rather than strictly reproducing historically or mnemonically accurate details. In doing so, these sequences adopt an arguably conservative mode of representation that privileges sentimentality and aesthetic enjoyment, ultimately softening the intricate emotional reality of nostalgia as a lived experience. In other words, Martone intentionally employs the *stereotypes* of on-screen nostalgia—sepia tone, sentimental music, neat storytelling—perhaps to critique how easily the past can be packaged into a consumable product. The flashbacks in *Nostalgia* come across almost as Felice's idealised home movies of his youth, each recollection neatly slotted into place to form a coherent story of "good times."

This approach has a double effect. On one hand, it does indeed create a sense of longing in the audience—the flashbacks are fun, warm, and aesthetically pleasing, so we are invited to enjoy them and sympathise with Felice's yearning. On the other hand, their very lushness and order raise our suspicion. We might question: Is this really how it was, or is this how Felice chooses to remember it? The film does not explicitly voice that question, but the contrast between these honeyed flashbacks and the present-day scenes is telling. It is as if Felice's own mind (or the film, aligning with his perspective) has applied a nostalgic filter—literally—to his past, smoothing out the rough edges. Recall Davis's point that nostalgia mutes "the unhappy, the abrasive, […] those lurking shadows of former selves" (1979, 37) and screens "from memory the unpleasant and shameful" (Ibid., 44–45) aspects of former selves or times. The flashbacks in *Nostalgia* arguably do this. For example, the flashbacks show the thrill of petty theft and joyrides, but notably do not show the violent murder that resulted from one of these escapades—that critical event is kept off-screen until Felice narrates it later. The memories Felice relives are selectively positive (or at least innocently reckless), omitting the trauma. This selectivity is true to how nostalgic memory often works—focusing on an edited highlight reel of the past. But cinematically, Martone amplifies it by making those highlights feel like a conventional film narrative, thereby underlining how nostalgia can often be a kind of internal cinema that plays us our "director's cut" of the past.

From a scholarly angle, one could argue that *Nostalgia* thereby comments on the media representation of nostalgia itself. As Mirjam Kappes and Manuel Menke (2025) note, popular media often sell nostalgia back

to us through enticing images and stories, a process Boym dubbed the "souvenirization" of the past (2001, 38). In *Nostalgia*, the flashbacks are like souvenirs—beautifully packaged memories that Felice "revisits" repeatedly. But Martone shows that these souvenirs, though cherished, are ultimately inadequate to address the complexities of the present. In one scene, Felice excitedly recounts a nostalgic anecdote at a dinner with some local acquaintances (set up by Don Luigi); he becomes animated, slightly drunk, waxing poetic about his youth with Oreste. The camera observes the diners' reactions: they grow silent and "speechless," unsure how to respond to this outpouring of sentiment (and perhaps feeling awkward because they know the dangerous reality of Oreste now). The contrast between Felice's rose-tinted storytelling and his listeners' uncomfortable silence is striking. It visualises how personal nostalgia, when expressed unchecked, can alienate or mystify others who don't share it. Felice is effectively trying to "sell" his memory of Oreste to these people; they are not buying it. This social dissonance echoes Davis's mention of how some "issue warnings and denunciations concerning nostalgia's legitimacy and worth" (1979, 47) —in the film, characters like Don Luigi represent that sceptical viewpoint, gently trying to ground Felice in reality.

In summary, the flashbacks in *Nostalgia* reinforce the film's central argument on multiple levels. Stylistically, they construct restorative nostalgia—the past is meticulously reconstructed on-screen with loving detail and "stereotypical" nostalgic aesthetics, appealing to our own longing for a simpler, happier time. But at the same time, the film invites a critique of this construction: the flashbacks are perhaps too neat, indicating the selectiveness of memory and the artifice involved in any attempt to truly relive the past. Martone thus uses the language of nostalgia cinema (sepia tones, retro music, sentimental scenes) in a self-aware fashion, to the point where the viewer senses the tension between the authentic emotional core of nostalgia and the potentially misleading veneer of nostalgia-as-style. This aligns with Boym's observation that nostalgia is a "double-edged sword" (2001, 58)—it can offer emotional resonance and a reassuring sense of continuity, yet it also carries the risk of slipping into pastiche or ideological manipulation when uncritically embraced. In *Nostalgia*, we witness both edges at play: the sweetness of Felice's dreams is undercut by the bitter aftertaste of their collapse, revealing nostalgia's capacity to both console and mislead.

Through the combination of narrative outcome and aesthetic strategy, *Nostalgia* ultimately presents itself as a meditation on what one might call

the uses and misuses of nostalgia. It acknowledges, even celebrates, the genuine human need to revisit and cherish the past—after all, Felice's nostalgia is born of love (for his friend, his mother, his city). But the film is also acutely aware of nostalgia's discontents: the way it can freeze people in time, blind them to present truths, or lure them into chasing illusions. In Felice's case, nostalgia becomes a trap—one he walks into willingly, even knowing on some level that it's dangerous (there are moments when he hesitates, and others implore him to stop, but he cannot). The film's ambivalence resonates with Boym's assertion that "nostalgia is paradoxical"—it is both a balm and a poison (Ibid., xv).

Conclusion: Longing's Limits and the Path Ahead

In *Nostalgia*, Mario Martone crafts a deeply felt yet clear-eyed exploration of restorative nostalgia—showing how the desire to rebuild one's past, to return to an idealised "home," can shape a life's trajectory both beautifully and tragically. Through Felice Lasco's journey, we witness nostalgia's two faces. In the warm glow of Naples's labyrinthine streets and tender memories of youth, nostalgia appears as a source of knowledge, identity, and even poetic meaning—a testament to enduring attachments across time. Martone allows us to taste the sweetness of that restorative vision, inviting us to empathise with Felice's impulse to reclaim what he lost. Yet, by progressively darkening the narrative and ultimately shattering Felice's dream, the film also reveals nostalgia's deceptive allure. It exposes the limitations of trying to live in yesterday: the past is not a place one can remain, and attempts to do so may blind one to the realities of today. In Felice's case, the same nostalgia that gave him "knowledge" of who he was ultimately led him into a dangerous illusion about who his friend had become—with fatal consequences.

The chapter's central argument has been that *Nostalgia* constructs a vivid portrait of restorative nostalgia in both theme and style, only to demonstrate its flaws. We saw how the film's narrative structure mirrored a restorative project—a homecoming quest—that gradually fell apart as truth emerged. By the film's end, as Felice's story concludes in tragedy, *Nostalgia* imparts a nuanced lesson: longing for home can be both a source of strength and a fatal weakness. In Felice's longing lies a purity—a testament to human connection and the places that shape us—but when that longing turns into an attempt to *inhabit* the past, it becomes what one could call an *identity trap*, simplifying and freezing a dynamic life into

a fixed idea. The film does not propose that one should reject nostalgia outright (indeed, it portrays nostalgia with great empathy), but it does suggest that one must balance it with acceptance of change. This nuanced perspective is vital, recognising that "The multiplicity of nostalgic types […] points to the danger of naturalizing the distinction between 'good' ('reflective') and 'bad' ('restorative') nostalgia" (Angé and Berliner 2015, 78). By acknowledging this multiplicity, Martone's film avoids a simplistic moralisation, instead offering a complex reading of Felice's journey that resists categorising his motivations as purely "good" or "bad."

In closing, *Nostalgia* leaves the viewer in a state of sombre reflection about the interplay of time, memory, and belonging. The final shots and emotional notes subtly prepare us to transition from Felice's tale to broader considerations of displacement and identity. While Felice's story ends, the themes it raises echo beyond one man or one city. His yearning for a lost home, and the absurdity of trying to physically reclaim it, resonates with a universal human condition—especially in our era of migrations and diasporas. In fact, even as *Nostalgia* warns against living in the past, it invites contemplation of how one might find meaning and belonging when the past is unrecoverable. This pensive mood sets the stage for the next chapter, which shifts focus to a very different context—Ben Sharrock's film *Limbo*—yet one that also grapples with questions of belonging and the human search for home in an absurd world. Where *Nostalgia* dealt with the perils of looking back, *Limbo* explores the challenges of moving forward when one's world has been upended. Together, these stories enrich our understanding of nostalgia, absurdity, and the delicate art of finding one's place in an ever-changing tapestry of time and space.

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CHAPTER 7

Absurdity and Belonging in Ben Sharrock's *Limbo*

Abstract This chapter explores Ben Sharrock's *Limbo* (2020) as a poignant and darkly humorous reflection on exile, waiting, and the search for belonging. Set on a remote Scottish island where asylum seekers await decisions on their refugee status, the film portrays displacement not through spectacle or crisis but through the quiet absurdities and emotional burdens of suspended lives. The analysis highlights how Sharrock employs deadpan humour, static camerawork, and long takes to construct an atmosphere of stillness and estrangement, conveying both the monotony and the resilience of his characters. Central to the discussion is the film's evocation of reflective nostalgia, most powerfully expressed through the protagonist Omar's memories of home, which emerge as fragile yet sustaining connections to identity and continuity. In contrast to reductive or sensationalist portrayals of refugees, *Limbo* insists on empathy and dignity, humanising the migrant experience while exposing the psychological toll of bureaucratic liminality. The chapter situates the film within contemporary European cinema's engagement with displacement and argues that its style contributes to a broader rethinking of how migration stories can be told: not only through trauma and conflict but also through irony, intimacy, and the ambivalent work of nostalgia.

Keywords Ben Sharrock • European cinema • Refugee representation • Nostalgia • Reflective nostalgia • Displacement • Exile

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Ben Sharrock's *Limbo* (2020) is a quietly powerful film that uses deadpan absurdist humour and visual minimalism to explore the refugee experience. Set on a remote Scottish island where asylum seekers await the outcome of their applications, *Limbo* depicts displacement as a state of liminality—a purgatorial no man's land where identities are suspended but not resolved. This concluding chapter examines how *Limbo* engages themes of absurdity and belonging through its distinctive aesthetic and narrative approach. Sharrock's film combines absurdist scenarios, stark landscapes, narrative dislocation, and symbolic acts of nostalgia to illuminate the emotional contradictions of forced displacement. Drawing on philosophical notions of the absurd (Camus), theories of humour (Critchley; Bergson), cinematic landscape studies (Lefebvre; Taylor), and migration scholarship on waiting and home (Hage; Taylor), the analysis shows that *Limbo* ultimately portrays refugees inhabiting an in-between state where absurdity and the search for belonging uneasily coexist. The film links nostalgia to spatial stasis, using the island's barren landscapes and liminal waiting spaces to show how displaced subjects attach longing to places they cannot return to and places they cannot yet inhabit.

Sharrock's fusion of static, meticulously composed visuals with moments of surreal comedy serves not to resolve the characters' crises of identity, but to underscore the liminality of their condition—caught between past and future, between the familiarity of home and the alienation of exile. In what follows, the chapter first considers the film's absurdist depiction of bureaucracy as a kind of theatre of exile. It then explores how the bleakly beautiful landscape of the island becomes a space of waiting and emotional displacement. The next sections analyse *Limbo*'s use of deadpan comic suspension to portray non-belonging, and the role of nostalgia and sound in constructing an ambivalent sense of home. The chapter concludes by arguing that *Limbo*'s absurdist humanism highlights refugees' existence in a liminal state—an existence defined not by integration or return but by *enduring* uncertainty.

Sharrock's own cinematic style establishes an absurdist tone from the outset. The film opens in an orientation class for refugees, taught by an over-eager local couple, Helga and Boris, whose role-playing exercises verge on the ridiculous. This immediately signals that *Limbo* will approach the refugee experience in a manner quite distinct from the usual grim realism. Instead, Sharrock employs an "elegant deadpan style" (Bradshaw 2021) reminiscent of auteurs like Aki Kaurismäki and Elia Suleiman, using humour and meticulous composition to humanise his characters without

trivialising their plight. Indeed, as Chuck Bowen observes, *Limbo* "spins the migrant crisis into [an] absurdist, life-affirming boutique dramedy" that treats its refugee characters as ordinary people with quirks and hopes, rather than reducing them to faceless victims (2021). In doing so, the film aligns with Simon Critchley's notion that humour can be a form of lucid coping— "often dark, but always lucid […] a profoundly cognitive relation to oneself and the world" (2002, 102).

The asylum seekers of *Limbo* often meet their absurd circumstances with wry, stoic humour, suggesting that comedy becomes a survival strategy amid the anxious uncertainty of exile. At the same time, the film does not shy away from the sorrow and longing underlying its characters' deadpan façades. The central character, Omar, is a young Syrian musician suffering an existential paralysis—he carries his grandfather's traditional oud everywhere but cannot bring himself to play it. *Limbo* carefully reveals Omar's inner conflict: he has fled war only to find himself stranded in a wind-blasted limbo, wracked with guilt for leaving home and unable to move forward in this new land. This contradiction—between the absurdity of his current stasis and the yearning for belonging—lies at the heart of Sharrock's film. Sharrock uses absurdist aesthetics, from bleak comedy to surreal visual touches, in order to illuminate rather than resolve the tension between uprooted people's need for meaning and the "unreasonable silence" of the world around them (Camus 1975, 32).

Absurdity and the Bureaucratic Theatre of Exile

From its opening scenes, *Limbo* establishes the asylum process as a form of absurd theatre—a dark comedy of bureaucracy that the refugees are forced to perform in. The film's prologue features an institutional fluorescent-lit room where Helga and Boris, well-meaning locals, conduct a class called "Cultural Awareness 101" for the newly arrived asylum seekers. In one session, Helga cheerily instructs the men on appropriate behaviour at a nightclub, demonstrating a dance while Boris plays the role of an overly handsy partner—a skit that grows increasingly cringe-inducing. The sight of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Africa being taught how to boogie respectfully in a club (when in reality they are stuck on a tiny island with no nightlife whatsoever) is both comical and tragic. This scenario exemplifies the "bureaucratic theatre of exile": the official routines and "orientation" performances that purport to help refugees integrate, yet are absurdly out of touch with their actual limbo-like existence.

As Peter Bradshaw quips in his review, the island setting itself resembles "a stage-set for Waiting for Godot" (Bradshaw 2021)—invoking Samuel Beckett's famous absurdist play about two men interminably waiting for a salvation that never arrives. In *Limbo*, likewise, the refugees wait… and wait… for an outcome to their asylum claims, passing time in exercises that often feel like existential vaudeville. The *Waiting for Godot* parallel is deliberate: Sharrock's screenplay echoes the *theatre of the absurd* tradition not only in its humour and pacing, but in thematising the act of waiting as a condition of life. As in Beckett's work, the absurdity in *Limbo* arises from a disjunction between an individual's hopes and a confounding world—what Albert Camus defined as the essence of the absurd: "…the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus 1975, 32). Here, the "world" is represented by the impersonal asylum bureaucracy and the indifferent island environment, both meeting the refugees' urgent need for belonging with deafening silence or nonsense.

The orientation class scenes encapsulate how *Limbo* uses deadpan absurdist humour to critique the bureaucratic handling of exiles. On one level, these scenes are undeniably funny. The awkward role-play and misplaced earnestness of Helga and Boris produce a comedy of incongruity—culturally clueless officials teaching courtship etiquette to a group of isolated, traumatised men who have far more pressing concerns. This humour resonates with Henri Bergson's classic thesis that the comic often arises from a kind of *mechanical inelasticity* (1913, 10) in human behaviour: when people rigidly enact roles or routines regardless of context, they appear laughable. In Bergsonian terms, Helga and Boris's seminar becomes comical because they dogmatically follow a scripted "cultural awareness" curriculum—complete with flip charts and scripted scenarios—while utterly failing to adapt to the real emotional situation of their audience. They behave like well-meaning automatons, illustrating Bergson's point that we laugh when "the mechanical [is] encrusted upon the living" (Ibid., 49)). The refugees, seated around the classroom's perimeter, watch this spectacle in bemused silence; they are both the subjects and the spectators of this bureaucratic theatre. The camera often frames these scenes in symmetrical wide shots, emphasising the staginess and the characters' stiff body language. The result is a tone of gentle satire: we laugh at the dissonance between the instructors' cheery demonstrations (such as Boris's hilariously literal depiction of improper dancing) and the refugees' blank, trapped expressions.

Yet Sharrock's absurdist portrayal is laced with empathy and a sharp critique of the system. The humour carries a sharp, spirited edge that undercuts any sentimentality. By presenting the asylum integration class as absurd, *Limbo* indicts the dehumanising tendencies of bureaucratic regimes. As Chuck Bowen notes, there is "a hint of blasphemy" in treating such material lightly—but this irreverence is precisely the film's strength (2021). It refuses to sanctify or melodramatise refugees as helpless victims; instead, it restores their agency as people who can observe and respond to the absurdity around them (even if mostly through silence or dark humour). This aligns with Critchley's view that humour can be a form of ethical protest, a way to "recall us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition […] not for tragic heroics but comic acknowledgement" (2002, 102). In *Limbo*, the refugees' deadpan reactions—a raised eyebrow, a quietly muttered remark—speak volumes. For instance, during an English lesson scene, when asked to form a sentence starting with "I used to…," one man dryly states, "I used to be happy before I came here. I used to cry myself to sleep every night. But now, I don't have any tears left," delivering the line with a flat, matter-of-fact tone. The clash between the trivial prompt and the horrific content is both hilarious (for how it punctures the exercise's platitudes) and devastating. In a single moment, the film lays bare the absurd inadequacy of bureaucratic niceties in addressing refugees' real trauma. The laughter this elicits—if we laugh at all—is what Samuel Beckett called the "laugh that laughs […] at that which is unhappy" (1953, 25). It is a mirthless, ironic laugh born from pain, a recognition of absurdity rather than a dismissal of it. Through such moments, Sharrock makes a poignant point: the official processes meant to help refugees can themselves become *theatre*, where refugees are audience to the often absurd performances of bureaucracy.

The notion of the asylum system as absurd theatre extends beyond the classroom scenes. Throughout *Limbo*, there is an implicit critique that the refugees' prolonged waiting is not just a tragic accident but, in some sense, by design. Omar and his companions begin to suspect that they are being intentionally held in this stage of limbo—isolated, idle, despondent—so that they might lose hope and voluntarily give up their claims. This cynical view is articulated in a line of dialogue about breaking the refugees' spirits, and Sharrock conveys an intensifying sense of fear and resentment that hangs over the men like an oppressive cloud. The film thereby touches on the real-life critique that certain governments make the asylum process interminable and degrading as a deterrent. In *Limbo*, the characters have

no choice but to play along in this theatre of exile: attending the classes, waiting for official letters. This absurd situation evokes Camus's philosophy of the absurd, wherein the individual faces a world that seems structured to deny them fulfilment or meaning. Just as Camus's Sisyphus is condemned to repeat a meaningless task, these refugees are stuck in repetitive bureaucratic limbo—filling time with absurd exercises and routines that lead nowhere. One might say that refugees attending cultural awareness classes is a Sisyphus-like image of absurd task completion. Camus famously wrote that "one must imagine Sisyphus happy" in the very absurdity of his task (1975, 111); similarly, Sharrock finds moments of humour and camaraderie amid the refugees' futile wait, suggesting a resilience of the human spirit even within an absurd system.

Thus, the *bureaucratic theatre* in *Limbo* is twofold: it is both the literal dramatisation of bureaucracy (the orientation skits, official procedures turned into performance) and the figurative idea that the entire asylum process is an absurd play in which refugees are assigned the passive role. Sharrock's use of absurdist aesthetics—the deadpan comedic tone, the stylised staging of scenes, the Beckettian mood of waiting—serves as a powerful critical lens. It allows *Limbo* to illuminate the existential predicament of its characters: forced to abide by arbitrary rules and rituals, clinging to routine as their lives are put on hold. Yet the film does not strip them of dignity or agency; rather, by granting them wit and humour, it humanises them more deeply. *Limbo* allows refugees "to be as ordinary as anyone else, with regular dreams, disappointments, and hang-ups" (Bowen 2021), thereby countering the dehumanisation that occurs when they are seen only as victims. In this way, the absurdist comedy in *Limbo* paradoxically affirms the refugees' humanity. Their laughter (and ours) at the bureaucratic farce is a form of resistance—a refusal to let the absurd completely defeat their sense of self.

Landscapes of Waiting and Emotional Displacement

One of *Limbo*'s most striking features is its portrayal of the island setting—an extraordinarily desolate yet strikingly beautiful Scottish isle. This windswept landscape is more than just a backdrop; it becomes a visual metaphor for the refugees' condition of waiting and their emotional displacement. Sharrock and cinematographer Nick Cooke film the terrain in wide, static shots that capture both its desolate beauty and the isolation of the people within it. Endless expanses of sky and moorland dwarf the characters,

emphasising how small and stranded they are. The camera often observes from a distance as Omar or others trudge along an empty road that cuts through barren fields, or stand phone in hand by the lone telephone booth in the middle of nowhere. These carefully composed images convey a sense of stasis—the world seems to stand still around the refugees, as if time itself has paused. The island is at once a physical limbo and a psychological one, a place where, as Ferguson notes, "…we never lose sight of these folks being stuck in purgatory" (2021).

Sharrock's approach aligns with Martin Lefebvre's distinction between *setting* and *landscape* in narrative cinema. As Lefebvre (2011) explains, a *natural setting* in a film only becomes a landscape in the aesthetic sense when it gains a degree of independence from the immediate demands of plot, inviting the viewer's contemplation of space for its own sake. In classical narrative cinema, backgrounds are usually subordinated to story and action, functioning merely as *settings* for characters. *Limbo*, however, frequently unhinges the landscape from narrative events, allowing the island's scenery to take on an expressive life of its own. In several scenes, the camera lingers on the empty vistas after the characters have left the frame, or it frames the characters in wide long takes where nothing "happens" except the persistence of their waiting. These are moments where, in Lefebvre's terms, the natural space acquires "the kind of autonomy traditionally required by pictorial landscape imagery" (Ibid., 66). We, the audience, are given time to contemplate the howling wind, the leaden sky, the treeless horizon. Such shots convey what David Melbye calls *landscape allegory* (2010), where the external world mirrors internal psychological or spiritual states. The island's windswept barrenness reflects the refugees' feelings of desolation and suspension. Omar, for instance, is often shown small and distant against the vast landscape, visually reinforcing his sense of being lost and out of place. When he trudges through a driving wind with his coat pulled tight and oud case on his back, the environment itself seems to resist him—the cold, hostile weather an analogue to the cold welcome he has received in this country.

Indeed, the environmental estrangement in *Limbo* compounds the refugees' emotional displacement. Coming from Syria, Ghana, Nigeria, or Afghanistan, these men find themselves in a climate and landscape utterly unlike home. The film highlights this through subtle details: they bundle in donated overcoats against the chill; Omar attempts to cook his mother's recipes but the local shop carries only salt, no familiar spices. Such elements in the narrative underscore what Ghassan Hage terms the feeling of

existential immobility or "stuckedness" that migrants experience when they are physically prevented from moving forward in life (2009, 97). The hostile landscape intensifies this stuckedness—the men are not only bureaucratically frozen in place but also literally weather-bound on an inhospitable isle. Hage argues that in protracted waiting, people come to perceive stuckedness as an "inevitable […] state which has to be endured," effectively normalising waiting as a permanent condition (Ibid.).

Limbo's long takes of the island's unchanging terrain give cinematic form to this insight. The landscape seems caught in a melancholic stillness; day after day the same grey vista greets the refugees, reinforcing the sense that nothing will change. At one point, a sequence following the postman's van on its slow route—a scene played for gentle comedy—emphasises the monotonous routine that structures the refugees' days. They watch the mail van hopefully (letters might bring news of their status), but the very regularity of its route and the sparsity of mail delivered become another absurd ritual of waiting. The *geography* of the film—one phone booth, one road, one shop, one community hall—is deliberately minimal, mapping out a tiny, knowable world that nonetheless offers no escape. This spatial minimalism complements the temporal stasis, creating an almost Beckettian setting where the motto could be "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful"—except here the awfulness is veiled in an elegant visual poetry.

Critically, *Limbo* does not present the landscape as purely oppressive; it also finds a stark beauty and moments of solace in it. The island's captivatingly beautiful appearance, with wide-open skies and clean air, is not lost on the viewer. Sharrock uses the natural scenery to introduce visual irony: the kind of place tourists might find idyllic is experienced as a kind of prison by the refugees. This accords with Henri Lefebvre's observation (in a different context) that landscape can carry contradictory emotional resonances – it can be a "living link" to identity or, conversely, a reminder of loss (1991). By "living link," Lefebvre refers to the way physical environments are bound up with lived experience, memory, and the reproduction of social life; they anchor people to histories, relationships, and cultural meanings that extend beyond the present moment. Such spaces are not static backdrops but active participants in shaping identity. In *Limbo*, this idea is inverted: for Omar, the Scottish landscape is profoundly not his. Rather than reinforcing a sense of belonging, it becomes a daily reminder of rupture from everything familiar, stripping the "link" of its nurturing potential and leaving only the ache of displacement. Cultural geographer

Ken Taylor writes that "one of our deepest needs is for a sense of identity and belonging" and that this is often rooted in landscape and place (2008, 1). By that measure, Omar and his companions have been severed from the landscapes that anchor their identity. The film communicates this sense of dislocation visually. When Omar gazes at the foreign hills, we sense he is mentally thousands of miles away, recalling perhaps the olive groves of Syria or the busy streets of Damascus. His *home landscape* exists now only in memory and imagination. Margaret Drabble[1] notes that the memory of landscape, especially when associated with home, can be suffused with pain if that place is lost: "…we lose not only a place, but ourselves, a continuity between the shifting phases of our life" (in Taylor 2008, 2). This captures Omar's situation—he fears he has relinquished his Syrian identity by leaving home, and in the bleak landscape of exile he struggles to redefine himself.

The emotional displacement in *Limbo* is thus both internal and external. Internally, the refugees are in turmoil—Omar in particular is racked by guilt, anger, and doubt about who he is now. Externally, they are displaced into a landscape that offers no familiarity or comfort. Sharrock bridges these two dimensions through cinematic technique. For example, the film often uses negative space in its compositions—large portions of the frame occupied by sky or ground, with the human figures off-centre or distant. This visual loneliness mirrors the characters' emotional loneliness. In one shot, Omar stands at the island's only payphone (a bright red phone box incongruously placed in an empty field) speaking to his parents abroad. He is centred in the frame but completely isolated in the vast grey landscape, tethered to home only by the thin cord of a telephone line. The stillness of the shot, broken only by the wind, conveys the immense gap between where he is and where his heart lies. In these images, one can discern the film's alignment with what Martin Lefebvre calls the "pictorial contemplation" of landscape (2011, 65). We are invited to contemplate the scenery not just as physical setting but as a condition: the condition of waiting and displacement.

[1] In *A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature* (1979), as an allusion to Virginia Woolf's evocation of the emotional impact felt when a cherished place is lost.

Nostalgia, Sound, and the Ambivalent Home

While *Limbo* is dominated by visual minimalism and silence, sound and music—or the conspicuous lack thereof—play a pivotal symbolic role in the film. Central to this is Omar's relationship with his oud, the stringed instrument he has carried all the way from Syria. The oud is not just a prop; it is laden with nostalgic significance and represents Omar's former identity as a musician, as well as his connection to home. *Limbo* uses elements of sound design and acts of nostalgia to depict the refugees' ambivalent relationship to home. Nostalgia in the film offers comfort and a sense of identity, yet it also deepens the pain of exile and contributes to Omar's paralysis. The film's careful sound design—including its intentional stretches of diegetic silence and selective use of music—underscores this ambivalence. Through an analysis of key scenes involving phone calls, music (or its absence), and sensory evocations of home (like food and memories), we see that *Limbo* portrays "home" as an unsettled presence in the lives of the displaced: a source of longing, guilt, and imaginative sustenance all at once.

Omar's oud is the most potent symbol of nostalgia in *Limbo*. It is explicitly tied to his family heritage—we learn that it belonged to his grandfather, a master musician, and that Omar himself was a talented performer in Damascus. The instrument's design even features a stylised illustration of his family's garden back in Syria. In essence, the oud embodies Omar's home. Yet throughout most of the film, Omar cannot bring himself to play it. He keeps the oud in its case, hauling it around like a burden. Farhad jokingly but perceptively remarks that Omar carries the case "like a coffin for his soul." This grim image highlights how Omar's inability or refusal to make music is symptomatic of a deeper spiritual malaise: in leaving home and languishing in limbo, he feels as if his soul (his passion, identity, purpose) is dead or dying. Playing the oud, which should be a source of joy and self-expression, has become fraught with emotional peril for him. As Bradshaw observes, Omar is gripped by "fear that to play the oud under these wretched circumstances would be an act of futility and disloyalty" (2021). Here is the core of nostalgic ambivalence: Omar longs for the comfort and sense of self that music gave him, but he withholds it as if in penance. He perhaps feels that making beautiful music in a place where he is miserable would betray his true feelings or dishonour those suffering back home (including his brother, who stayed to fight). So, the oud remains silent for most of the narrative, its silence speaking volumes.

Sound design-wise, the film often emphasises the quietude of Omar's world—the wind, the distant ocean, the hum of fluorescents in the hostel—pointedly lacking the sound of the oud that could fill that void. The absence of music becomes an audible sign of Omar's dislocated identity.

Nostalgia manifests in other sensory ways too. The phone calls Omar makes to his parents in Turkey are a lifeline to home and a conduit for nostalgia. These calls, heard only through Omar's side of the conversation and the muffled tinny voice on the line, are some of the most emotionally resonant moments in the film. In one scene, Omar urgently asks his mother for the exact recipe of a particular Syrian dish, insisting on every detail so he can recreate it. He is attempting to taste home, to use food as a means of transport back to the family kitchen of his memories. This act of nostalgia is at once touching and, as the film gently hints, destined to fall short. Indeed, Omar never actually cooks on-screen the meal he asks his mother about, but the phone call itself becomes a moment of poignant connection and longing. His insistence on learning the exact details of the recipe—pressing her for every ingredient and step—underscores a desire not only to recreate a dish but to reclaim a piece of his lost world. The conversation reflects Boym's reflective nostalgia—a longing that recognises that the past is irretrievable, tinged with both affection and melancholy (2001). In Omar's case, the recipe becomes a symbolic link to home: a gesture towards preserving identity and intimacy across distance. Notably, the phone itself is a symbol of distant sound—the voice from afar that at once alleviates and accentuates his longing. Sharrock directs these phone scenes with restraint, often focusing on Omar's subtle facial reactions as he listens. The sound of his mother's voice soothes him momentarily, but when the call ends, the click of the receiver and the ensuing silence feel heartbreaking. The abrupt return of ambient silence after the call dramatises the solitude of exile. Sound, or its cessation, marks the gulf between Omar's two worlds: the auditory memory of home versus the quiet reality of limbo.

The ambivalence of "home" for refugees is further illustrated by the complex emotions around returning or not returning. Omar's family is split—his parents are themselves displaced in Turkey, whereas his brother Nabil remained in Syria to fight. This has created in Omar a profound guilt, a feeling that he abandoned home and family duty. In one of *Limbo*'s rare forays into a more surreal, overtly emotional register, Omar imagines an encounter with Nabil in the middle of a nighttime snowstorm. This hallucinated conversation (or dream sequence) allows Omar to confront

his guilt and sorrow. Nabil, as Omar imagines him, tells Omar that pursuing safety and a future abroad was not cowardice—essentially giving Omar permission to live. "A musician who doesn't play is dead," Nabil chides in this vision, urging Omar to honour life by making music again. This pivotal moment marries sound with nostalgia and belonging. It is nostalgia in that Omar's psyche summons the voice of his brother (the embodiment of home and familial loyalty) to guide him. It is about belonging in that the conversation helps Omar realise that he still belongs to his family and culture even if he is far away—and that expressing that through music is not a betrayal but a continuation. The quote about a musician who doesn't play being dead strikes at Omar's existential crisis: to deny his art (the oud) is to be spiritually inert, neither truly living here nor back home—a ghost in limbo. After this cathartic sequence, Omar at last takes out the oud and begins to play.

The film's climactic scene has Omar performing music in the local community hall before a small audience of refugees and a few locals. As he strums the first notes on the oud, something shifts visually: the film's aspect ratio subtly widens at this moment, signalling an opening up of cinematic space (Harrison 2021). Aurally, the sound of the oud—warm, melodious, evocative of Middle Eastern musical scales—fills the soundtrack, breaking the long silence that had prevailed in Omar's life. This is a deeply ambivalent "homecoming." On one hand, by playing his grandfather's music, Omar is reclaiming his identity and forging a sense of belonging in exile. The music transforms the drab hall into a temporary home-space, a shared emotional realm where Omar's heritage is acknowledged and celebrated. Farhad and the others watch with quiet smiles; one imagines they too are thinking of their own homes, their own lost joys. In this moment, the refugees have a form of cultural belonging together, even in a foreign land. The oud's music is a sonic link to home that also resonates in the present setting, potentially bridging the gap between refugee and host (if any locals in the audience open their ears to it). On the other hand, the act of playing is ambivalent because it does not magically solve Omar's situation. When the music ends, he is still on the island, his asylum status still uncertain. The film's ending, after the performance, is purposefully open-ended (true to its title). We see Omar walking into the distance with his oud, into the same wilderness that once signified desolation, now suffused with the tentative hope of music. The sound has re-infused the landscape with life, yet the future remains unwritten.

Nostalgia in *Limbo* is thus shown as both sustaining and limiting. It sustains Omar by keeping his connection to home alive (through memories, recipes, music), giving him a sense of self when he could easily lose identity in the bureaucratic limbo. But it also limits him when it becomes an anchor to the past that he cannot reconcile with his present. The early silence of the oud represents that impasse. Only by transforming nostalgia into creative expression—by playing the oud, not just cherishing it as relic—does Omar move forward internally. This reflects a broader dynamic noted in migration studies: exiles often live in a state of *in-between*, where they must negotiate between preserving their past (through nostalgia) and adapting to the present. The term "ambivalent home" captures this well. Home is no longer a simple concept for Omar. Is home the place he left, which is now war-torn and inaccessible? Is it where his family is (temporarily Turkey)? Or could home be something he carries within—the music, language, and memories he brings—which might allow him to carve out a new home wherever he finds acceptance? *Limbo* leaves these questions unanswered in narrative terms, but addresses them emotionally through its aesthetic choices. Any narrative ambiguity is intentional. Sharrock resists a sentimental resolution; instead, in the end we get a moment of consolation that is as transient as a song. It is as if the film is saying: in the liminal existence of a refugee, moments of belonging (a communal laugh, a shared meal, a song) are ephemeral and bittersweet, yet they matter immensely.

It is also worth noting how *Limbo* contrasts Omar's silence with Farhad's expressiveness to explore ambivalent home feelings. Farhad openly indulges in nostalgia for pop culture icons like Freddie Mercury—an interesting twist, since Mercury is not from Farhad's culture but was a global figure. Farhad's love for Queen's music (and his amusing attempt to grow a Mercury-esque moustache) is nostalgia of a different sort: a fantasy of Western pop glamour that perhaps fuelled his image of the UK. It underscores how "home" for refugees can be layered—Farhad left a home he loves (Afghanistan), but also carried dreams of another "home" (the idealised West of his music and movies). In Scotland, he finds neither one fully, yet he optimistically creates a hybrid micro-home, adopting local stray fauna. Farhad's comic optimism and Omar's dour nostalgia represent two poles of the refugee experience of home and displacement. The film treats both with affection and shows that ultimately each man must confront reality in his own way: Omar through the soulful reckoning of his music, Farhad through steadfast cheer that masks hidden heartbreak (he briefly alludes to loss back home, though he keeps details private).

Limbo uses the motif of nostalgia and sound—especially the voice and the musical performance—to delve into the refugees' ambivalent relationship with home. Home is portrayed as at once a longing that keeps them alive and a weight that holds them back. The film's sparse soundscape powerfully conveys absence (of home, of normal life) while its climactic musical moment conveys both presence (of culture, memory, identity) and the pain that accompanies that presence. The oud's melody does not so much resolve the tension as momentarily give it beautiful form. As one listens to Omar's plaintive music filling the community hall, one senses a communal emotion among the displaced: a mix of mourning and hope. This resonates with the idea that in diaspora, art and music often become carriers of identity and belonging, albeit in transformed ways. *Limbo* affirms that refugees carry their homes with them in intangibles—recipes, songs, stories—and that these can indeed create meaning in exile. However, it equally shows that such acts of nostalgia are *ambivalent*: they do not replace the physical and social reality of having a home. That unresolved ambivalence is what Sharrock leaves us with as the music fades, leading us to the final considerations of liminality and the possibilities that lie beyond it.

Between Liminality and Possibility

Limbo concludes on a note that is neither full closure nor outright despair, but something in between—much like the liminal state it portrays. In its final moments, as Omar finishes playing his oud and steps out into the cold island, the film subtly shifts our perspective from one of static suspension to one of tentative movement. The aspect ratio's expansion and the echo of music suggest a world ever so slightly opening up. Yet the fundamental circumstances remain unchanged: these characters are still in limbo, awaiting decisions beyond their control. This ending encapsulates the film's central argument: that the refugee experience, as depicted in *Limbo*, is defined by coexistence rather than resolution—the coexistence of absurdity and longing, of laughter and loss, of stasis and the faintest momentum forward. In this concluding chapter of the book, which has examined displacement, identity, and nostalgia across contemporary cinema, *Limbo* stands as an exemplar of how a film can artfully render the contradictions of forced displacement without neatly resolving them. Instead, it finds meaning in between, in the liminal space where asylum seekers and refugees actually live.

Sharrock's fusion of absurdist aesthetics with humanist empathy leaves us with a nuanced understanding: refugees in *Limbo* do not experience a tidy narrative arc of redemption or integration; rather, they inhabit a liminal condition where hope and hopelessness intersect. Anthropologist Victor Turner's concept of liminality—being "betwixt and between" stable states (1967, 97)—is vividly illustrated by the film's title and content. The asylum seekers on this remote island have left one social identity behind (that of citizens of their home countries) but have not been incorporated into a new one (legal residents or citizens of a new country). They are literally in a rite of passage that has stalled in the transitional phase. Turner notes that such liminal personae are often "no longer classified and not yet classified" by conventional social structure (Ibid., 96). In *Limbo*, this translates to the refugees' ambiguous status—they are physically present in Britain but not socially or legally recognised as belonging there. The film underscores this by showing how they are simultaneously inside and outside society: they live in the community (on the island) yet apart (in hostels, not allowed to work, regarded with suspicion or curiosity by locals). Their days are filled with the formality of waiting, a sort of anti-structure where normal rules of time and progress do not apply. These characters are stuck in a purgatory. Purgatory, in theological terms, is itself a liminal realm—neither hell nor heaven, a place of temporal suspension but also of *potential* purification.

It is in this notion of *potential* that *Limbo* hints at possibility even within liminality. While the film does not grant its protagonists a conclusive happy ending (we do not learn the outcome of their asylum claims other than that of Farhad), it does suggest that within the liminal state they inhabit, there are seeds of change and resilience. Omar's final act of playing music can be seen as an emergent transformation within liminality. He has, in Turner's terms, undergone a kind of inner reclassification—from a voiceless, traumatised exile to a man who can express himself again. This does not resolve his external limbo, but it profoundly affects how he will continue to inhabit it. We sense that after the film's end, Omar will no longer be entirely passive in his waiting; he has reclaimed a piece of agency through his art. Farhad's unwavering optimism is another quietly transformative element: throughout the narrative, his refusal to succumb to despair creates moments of community (however fragile) and even directs Omar towards healing. In the context of a book on displacement and nostalgia, *Limbo*'s contribution is to show that belonging need not be an all-or-nothing proposition tied to legal status—it can be experienced in small

doses, through friendship, routine, and cultural expression, even before the larger political resolution arrives.

At the same time, *Limbo* remains clear-eyed about the constraints of the refugees' liminality. The film does not indulge in naive optimism. The enduring image of those young men on that island—pacing, waiting for a letter that may change their lives—is a sober reminder that structural issues (borders, asylum systems, geopolitical conflicts) define much of their fate. Ghassan Hage's concept of *stuckedness* resonates here: the refugees have limited control, and the strategy becomes one of "waiting out the crisis" with whatever dignity and humour they can muster (2009, 97). Sharrock illustrates how the system itself often offers no clear end point; some asylum seekers wait years in such limbo. Thus, any possibility the film points to is hard-won and largely internal. It lies in how the characters adapt to stuckedness, how they carve meaning from waiting. In *Limbo*, this is achieved through absurdist humour (making the waiting bearable and even illuminating), through landscape (finding moments of still beauty in their environment), and through nostalgia (keeping their identities alive in exile). These strategies do not break the limbo, but they humanise it. They turn what could be an invisible, bureaucratic existence into something relatable and narratable. In doing so, Sharrock's film aligns with a trend in contemporary cinema that seeks new ways to represent displacement—ways that go beyond the sensational or the didactic, and instead capture the texture of everyday life in exile, with all its contradictions.

Conclusion

This analysis of *Limbo* has illuminated how absurdity and nostalgia intertwine in the cinematic portrayal of forced migration. It shows that the journey of displacement is not only about the dramatic crossing of borders or the attainment of refuge, but also about the prosaic reality of liminal living—the interminable interim where one must find a way to be. *Limbo* speaks to the emotional truth that in such interim periods, feelings of unbelonging can sit side by side with the yearning for community, and moments of laughter can exist amidst sorrow. It echoes Albert Camus's existential insight that one can have moments of happiness even in the absurd. Indeed, *Limbo* at times finds a kind of contentment in small moments—a shared laugh over a chicken, a friendly football kickabout in the yard, a song in the evening. These do not negate the absurd injustice of the refugees' situation, but they offer a glimpse of how humans persist within absurdity. In

the final analysis, Sharrock's film leaves us *between* pessimism and optimism. It refuses the closure of full belonging, yet it also refuses the nihilism of total absurdity. Liminality, *Limbo* implies, is not only a space of constraint but also one of potential reimagining. Within the cracks of structure, new forms of solidarity, identity, and even joy can emerge.

Looking ahead, this nuanced portrayal of displacement invites us to consider how contemporary films might further push the boundaries of representing displacement and belonging. *Limbo* demonstrates that blending aesthetic innovation (absurdist deadpan, landscape allegory, sonic symbolism) with empathetic storytelling can yield original insights into the refugee condition. Future films may build on this by exploring even more experimental narratives of liminality or by finding new metaphorical languages for home and exile. As global migration continues to shape our era, the need for fresh conceptual and aesthetic approaches in cinema is evident. *Limbo* stands as a compelling example of such innovation—a film that, much like its characters, inhabits a threshold: between comedy and tragedy, between despair and hope, between the world that is and the world that might be. In occupying this in-between space with humanity and wit, *Limbo* not only reflects the current moment of refugee experiences but also gestures towards future stories that can further illuminate what it means to seek belonging in an absurd world.

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CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

Abstract The conclusion synthesises the book's exploration of nostalgia and displacement across contemporary European cinema, drawing together insights from the five case studies: *The Edge of Heaven* (2007), *Tabu* (2012), *Extinction* (2018), *Nostalgia* (2022), and *Limbo* (2020). It argues that nostalgia, far from being a simple yearning for the past, emerges in these films as a dynamic process of negotiating identity, memory, and belonging in conditions of displacement. The discussion highlights the dual nature of nostalgia: reflective nostalgia offers a means of working through loss and fostering resilience, while restorative nostalgia risks trapping individuals and societies in illusions of a recoverable past. Cinema is shown to be uniquely capable of articulating these tensions, functioning as a "memory machine" that captures both the emotional texture of longing and the socio-political realities that shape it. By foregrounding displaced perspectives, these films challenge reductive narratives about migrants and refugees, offering instead a complex, empathetic portrayal of lives in transit. The conclusion reflects on the cultural and political significance of these representations, suggesting that European cinema has become an important arena for rethinking identity, history, and belonging in an age marked by mobility and uncertainty.

Keywords European cinema • Nostalgia • Displacement • Reflective nostalgia • Restorative nostalgia • Identity • Migration

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Contemporary European cinema reveals with striking clarity that nostalgia is not a static yearning for a bygone past, but a dynamic dialogue between memory and displacement. Throughout this book, we have explored how the emotional experience of longing is profoundly reshaped when one is uprooted, and how filmmakers have captured this interplay on-screen. Five very different films—*The Edge of Heaven* (2007), *Tabu* (2012), *Extinction* (2018), *Nostalgia* (2022), and *Limbo* (2020)—have served as case studies, each illuminating unique facets of nostalgia's role in the lives of displaced people. Taken together, their stories make a compelling case for the central argument set out at the beginning of this study: that nostalgia, far from mere sentimentality or escapism, functions as an active process of meaning-making for individuals and communities in transit, helping to negotiate identity between past and present, "here" and "there." In these cinematic journeys, longing for the past becomes a way to make sense of an unsettled present—a "constant search for the self" (Ritivoi 2002, 10) connecting past and present for those who find themselves in new lands (Ibid., 1–2). Each film demonstrates how this search, with all its consolations and contradictions, plays out on both personal and collective levels.

Nostalgia, Displacement, and Identity

Across all the chapters, nostalgia emerged as a crucial bridge between past and present identity for migrants and exiles. Displacement—whether through migration, exile, or diaspora—inevitably entails a rupture in one's life story; the familiar anchors of home, family, and culture are loosened, leading to what Salman Akhtar describes as an identity crisis of discontinuity between past and present selves (1999, 123). In this context, nostalgic memory becomes more than a mere indulgence—it is often a survival mechanism that helps to mend the discontinuity. As scholar Andreea Ritivoi observes, nostalgia in the immigrant context is essentially a way of renegotiating identity by weaving together one's past and present (2002, 1–2). All five films illustrated this vividly.

At the same time, nostalgia in these films is not portrayed as a one-dimensional pining for yesterday, but as a multifaceted emotional state that can evolve and adapt. We see characters not only longing for a return to the past, but also using the past creatively to deal with the present. The films and stories examined here revolve around characters in the throes of profound change—crossing borders, losing loved ones, confronting

ageing and memory—and in each case nostalgia becomes a key through which they seek continuity amid change. Notably, this nostalgia is not always directed backwards in a simplistic way; often it is as much about finding a place in the present as about returning to the past. *The Edge of Heaven* encapsulates this idea by showing that nostalgia can attach itself to new places and relationships (a concept of multi-directional nostalgia, so to speak): what matters is not simply the geographic location of *home* but the feelings of familiarity, love, and identity that one associates with it. Through such nuanced character journeys, these films portray nostalgia as an active, ongoing negotiation of identity—a personal narrative that helps displaced individuals thread together the fragments of their lives into a coherent sense of self.

The Double-Edged Sword of Nostalgia: Longing and Critical Reflection

While nostalgia provides comfort and identity, it also emerged from our study as a double-edged sword, capable of illuminating truths or, alternatively, obscuring them. On one side, nostalgic longing can humanise and heal. It offers the "algos" (pain) of longing with an awareness of loss—a reflective form of nostalgia that dwells in ambivalence and helps people make sense of suffering (Boym 2001, 41). This reflective nostalgia, as Boym describes, cherishes shattered memories without trying to rebuild them (41). Many of the films' most poignant moments are suffused with this reflective quality: Omar finally playing his grandfather's oud in *Limbo*'s concluding scene, for instance, is a quiet acceptance of his past and present coexisting—he cannot go back to pre-war Syria, but through music he carries Syria within him. Such instances suggest that embracing the *bittersweet* nature of nostalgia—acknowledging that the past is gone even as one treasures it—can be a source of resilience. This aligns with the view of cultural theorist Pam Cook, who argues that engaging with nostalgia in film can provide "a way of coming to terms with the past, enabling it to be exorcised in order that society, and individuals, can move on" (2005, 3). We saw this therapeutic potential in *Tabu*, where the act of storytelling (reliving Aurora's youth in Africa via an old-fashioned film-within-a-film) functions almost like an exorcism of Portugal's colonial ghosts—allowing a confrontation with painful history so that it may finally be laid to rest. In these ways, nostalgia—approached reflectively—becomes not a prison but

a prism, refracting the past's meaning into insights that can guide the present. It can strengthen our bonds with others, and even foster understanding across cultures by highlighting the universal ache for home.

On the other side of the sword, however, the films also warn against nostalgia's perilous allure—particularly the variety Boym terms restorative nostalgia, which puts emphasis on *nostos*. Martone's *Nostalgia* is an incisive case study of restorative nostalgia's beguiling and dangerous side. Through the tragic tale of its protagonist, Felice, the film issues a subtle but firm warning: to live wholly in the embrace of an idealised past is to risk being destroyed by an illusion.

Crucially, the pitfalls of restorative nostalgia depicted here carry broader implications beyond one man's story. In Europe today, we have witnessed a surge of political movements trading on restorative nostalgia—visions of making the nation great again by reviving a glorified past. The films in our study indirectly address this contemporary reality by offering a counter-narrative through reflective nostalgia. For instance, *Extinction* highlights the hollowness and absurdity of yearning for unmaterialised national visions, forcing viewers to confront the futility and personal cost of clinging to nationalist myths. *Tabu*, while steeped in the aesthetics of old colonial-era romance, ultimately critiques the very nostalgia it evokes, showing that any attempt to resurrect a lost imperial "paradise" is shadowed by guilt, loss, and irretrievable injustice. Even *The Edge of Heaven* can be read as a rebuke to simplistic restorative notions: characters find new "homes" in unexpected places and people, implying that one cannot recreate a singular homeland or identity without change—one must accept hybridity and change as part of life. In all these cases, nostalgia is portrayed not as a mandate to build walls or turn back clocks, but as a prompt for introspection. We are invited to sit with the longing and the loss, rather than to launch a quixotic project of total restoration. By juxtaposing nostalgia's comforting glow with its deceptive dangers, the films advocate for a conscious, critical engagement with nostalgia—one that can humanise and connect, rather than divide. This nuanced stance is a valuable contribution to the current cultural conversation. It reminds us that while nostalgic feelings are natural and even beneficial, we must be wary of those siren calls to "restore" an imagined past in literal terms. Instead, the true value of nostalgia may lie in reflecting on the past to inform the present, fostering empathy and understanding across the very differences that displacement creates.

Cinema as a Memory Machine: Narrative, Aesthetic, and Emotional Insights

Our exploration has also underscored the special role of cinema as a medium for articulating nostalgia and displacement. Film, with its potent blend of visual, auditory, and narrative techniques, offers a unique "language" for memory—one that can collapse time and space, juxtapose past and present, and externalise inner emotional states in ways that few other art forms can. Each film in this study deploys cinematic form to simulate the workings of nostalgia in the displaced mind. For instance, *The Edge of Heaven* employs a non-linear, chaptered narrative that shuttles between Germany and Turkey and between different characters' interlocking stories. This structure itself mirrors a migrant's fractured sense of time and place, the way memory intrudes upon the present and how lives separated by geography can still profoundly affect one another. The editing and storyline compel the audience to piece together the narrative like a memory puzzle—thereby engaging us in the very act of meaning-making that nostalgia entails. In *Tabu*, Miguel Gomes famously split the film into two halves ("Paradise Lost" and "Paradise") and filmed the African-set second half in the style of a silent-era movie—complete with grainy black-and-white cinematography and a melodramatic score. By invoking the look and feel of old cinema, *Tabu* not only conveys the distance of the characters' colonial past, but also induces in the viewer a kind of collective cine-nostalgia—a longing for the romanticised simplicity of classic films.

Nostalgia (2022) juxtaposes warm, sepia-toned flashbacks and an evocative 1980s soundtrack against the colder, harsher hues of present-day Naples, embodying visually the contrast between Felice's idealised memories and the more sobering reality. Martone's camera frequently lingers on the physical details of the neighbourhood—the peeling paint of old buildings, the echo of church bells—to convey how place itself becomes a container of memory, a *memoryscape* through which Felice walks as if through his own past. In *Limbo*, Sharrock opts for long, static shots of the windswept island and uses deadpan comedic tableaux, creating an atmosphere of stillness and waiting that mirrors the refugees' suspended lives. When Omar recalls home, it's often through sound—the static-laden payphone calls, the gentle notes of his oud—which pierces the island's silence and momentarily transports him (and us) elsewhere. Such moments underscore how cinema's sensory arsenal (image, sound, montage) can externalise the internal state of nostalgia: a single musical motif or a carefully

composed frame can evoke an entire world of longing. The directors in our study consciously use Jameson's *nostalgia mode*, but with purpose and restraint. Unlike the hollow pastiches Jameson critiqued (films that merely "cannibalize" the past because the present seems unrecoverable; Jameson 1988, 20), these European filmmakers leverage nostalgic style to deepen storytelling, not to escape from meaning. They demonstrate that, when handled thoughtfully, cinematic nostalgia can be more than surface decoration—it can be an engine of empathy and reflection.

This observation aligns with the arguments of scholars who see positive potential in nostalgic art. Pam Cook, as noted, views cinematic nostalgia as a way of working through history rather than hiding from it (2005, 3). These films validate Cook's perspective: each uses nostalgia to broach complex discussions about history, identity, and loss. Whether it's a personal history (as in *Nostalgia* or *Limbo*) or a national one (as in *Extinction* or *Tabu*), the act of looking back is never treated as simple yearning. It is portrayed as an active interrogation of how the past lives within us. For example, *Extinction* blurs documentary footage with staged scenes and never fully identifies what is real or imagined—a choice that places the viewer in a reflective position, questioning how much of Kolya's subtle and somewhat confusing nostalgia is truth versus a personal myth. Such storytelling mirrors the way memory itself works: partial, subjective, sometimes unreliable. By replicating memory's texture, cinema invites the audience to experience a bit of the dislocated characters' subjectivity—to feel nostalgia *with* them. This empathetic engagement is perhaps cinema's greatest strength in representing displacement. As viewers, we are transported into worlds we may never have known—a Turkish-German family's saga, a post-Soviet limbo, a Lisbon widow's regret, a Neapolitan homecoming, a refugee holding pattern on a Scottish isle—and we are prompted to identify with the longing and search for belonging that pervade those worlds. Film thus becomes a kind of cultural memory machine, preserving not just historical facts but emotional truths. It can mediate nostalgia in a way that audiences find palpable and shareable (Niemeyer 2014), thereby opening a space for cross-cultural understanding.

In an era when images of migrants and refugees often flicker past us in news feeds—too often reduced to statistics or stereotypes—the detailed, compassionate character portrayals in these films perform a vital ethical function. They restore individuality and dignity to those in transit and ask the audience to consider the inner lives behind outward journeys. Numerous films addressing Europe's migrant crisis tend to either stylise

human suffering or use it as a dramatic device, often failing to authentically represent refugees' own viewpoints. By contrast, works like *Limbo* strive to "redress the balance" with empathy and authenticity, avoiding the trap of turning migrants into voiceless symbols (Phillips 2018). The films analysed in this book contribute to this more nuanced cinematic discourse. They validate the idea that European cinema has undergone a "World Cinema turn," embracing border-crossing stories and hybrid identities (Berghahn and Sternberg 2010, 5) as central to its narrative DNA rather than peripheral. Scholars have noted that migrant and diasporic narratives have shifted from the margins of European film to the mainstream, enriching and revitalising the continent's cinema (Berghahn and Sternberg 2010; Loshitzky 2010). Our case studies exemplify this shift: these are internationally acclaimed films by auteurs, celebrated at A-list film festivals and beyond, indicating that stories of displacement and nostalgia now resonate widely with European audiences. In illuminating the emotional reality of migration, contemporary directors are effectively expanding Europe's self-portrait on-screen—acknowledging that Europe is as much a land of arrivals and departures, memories and hopes, as it is of settled traditions. And in doing so, they are helping audiences confront the past and find ways to let go, using empathetic imagination as a means of emotional reconciliation and forward movement.

Memory, Belonging, and the Future: Final Reflections

Standing back from the details of each film, what overarching insights can we draw about nostalgia, displacement, and identity in the twenty-first-century European context? First and foremost, our exploration reaffirms that nostalgia is a fundamentally human response to displacement, one that carries both profound adaptive value and significant risks. It is universal, and yet it is also intensely personal and context-dependent. For migrants, exiles, and refugees, nostalgic longing is rarely a trivial indulgence; it is more often a lifeline that connects them to a sense of home, however symbolic or imagined that home may be. All five films demonstrate this life-sustaining aspect of nostalgia. Whether it's through music, storytelling, rituals, or relationships, displaced characters hold onto pieces of their past as a way to assert their humanity in situations that often threaten to strip it away. This finding dovetails with psychological studies

that have shown nostalgia can increase one's sense of self-worth, enhance feelings of social connectedness, and even reduce stress in the face of adversity (Wildschut et al. 2006, 975–978). In essence, nostalgia serves as an emotional anchor when the storm of dislocation erodes one's bearings.

Yet, as we have also seen, nostalgia alone cannot resolve the external challenges of displacement. The comfort it provides is real but partial; it must be balanced with a clear-eyed engagement with the present. Felice's tragic end in *Nostalgia* underscores this truth in the starkest terms. Longing for the past can enrich the present with meaning, but mistaking the past for a blueprint or a refuge can be perilous. Likewise, Europe's ongoing debates about immigration and identity might take heed of this lesson: while collective nostalgia (for simpler times or ethnically homogeneous societies) might rally public emotion, it offers no realistic roadmap for solving present problems—indeed, it can sow division and hinder integration if pushed too far. A reflective approach, on the other hand, might help Europe to remember its past—including histories of migration, colonialism, and cultural exchange—without becoming captive to it. By reflecting on who "we" were and how that has changed, societies can better negotiate who "we" are becoming. In this respect, the films studied are more than just stories; they are mirrors held up to Europe's collective conscience. They ask difficult but necessary questions: What does it mean to belong to a place or a community? Can we find belonging in more than one home? How do we honour the memory of where we came from while embracing the reality of where we are? And importantly, whose memories get to be part of the European story?

European cinema, as this book has shown, is actively engaging with these questions, suggesting that art can play a pivotal role in shaping public understanding. Films cannot change asylum laws or end wars, but they can humanise abstract issues and influence the cultural climate in which policies are debated. When audiences weep with an exiled musician in *Limbo* or empathise with a grieving mother in *The Edge of Heaven*, they are, in a small but significant way, experiencing the world through the eyes of "the other." Such empathy is the antithesis of the dehumanising rhetoric that sometimes dominates discussions of migrants and refugees. In this sense, cinematic nostalgia—by personalising and universalising the ache of displacement—may counteract the "othering" effects of restorative nationalist nostalgia. It reminds us that behind every statistic of migration is an individual story of longing, loss, and hope, not unlike those in our own family histories. Indeed, Europe's nations are themselves palimpsests

of migration and cultural mixing, however much nationalist nostalgists might deny it. A film like *The Edge of Heaven*, with its Turkish-German tapestry of lives, or *Tabu*, with its meditation on colonial entanglements, implicitly acknowledges this reality: European identities have always been fluid and interwoven, and nostalgia must grapple with that complexity rather than rewrite it.

Looking forward, one may ask: What is the future of nostalgia in an ever more mobile and interconnected world? The stories we examined suggest that nostalgia will not only persist but evolve. As globalisation and digital technology enable diasporas to remain in contact and even virtually experience aspects of home, the nature of nostalgic longing may change (e.g. through online communities or media streaming, a migrant can keep their mother tongue and culture alive more easily than in the past). Yet the "ache" of nostalgia (nostos + algos) is unlikely to disappear, because at its core it speaks to something timeless—the desire for continuity, for a narrative that makes sense of one's life. What may shift is how we collectively frame that desire. If the twentieth century often cast nostalgia as a retrograde impulse, the early twenty-first century is, as we have seen, more inclined to view it as an integral part of our emotional toolkit—one that can be harnessed for positive ends if handled with self-awareness. The challenge will be to cultivate the reflective, creative, and inclusive potentials of nostalgia while mitigating its reactionary and exclusionary tendencies. Cinema will no doubt continue to be a laboratory for this effort. It is encouraging to note that filmmakers are already pushing boundaries, experimenting with new narrative forms and genres to capture the migrant experience: from hybrid documentaries (*Extinction*) to absurdist comedies (*Limbo*), from transnational ensemble dramas (*The Edge of Heaven*) to intertextual historical meditations (*Tabu*), and personal tragedies (*Nostalgia*). Each new film adds a layer to our understanding, inviting audiences to see the phenomenon of displacement through fresh eyes.

In concluding this book, we return to the insight that nostalgia, in the context of displacement, is not about retreating into the past—it is about navigating the relationship between past and present. It is, metaphorically, a form of internal travel that parallels the external journey of migration. Just as Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey* longed painfully for Ithaca while navigating strange new seas, modern exiles carry their Ithacas within them, in memories and dreams, even as they forge new lives abroad. The ancient Greek origin of the word nostalgia—*nostos* (return home) and *algos* (pain)—captures the bittersweet truth that every quest for home is marked

by an awareness of loss. The films we have studied affirm that this pain of homecoming is not merely a lament; it can also be a source of knowledge and creativity. "Knowledge lies in nostalgia," wrote Pier Paolo Pasolini—the epigraph Martone chose for *Nostalgia*—"He who has not lost himself … possesses not." By this Pasolini suggests that in feeling loss, we come to understand ourselves more deeply. After examining these cinematic journeys, we can appreciate the wisdom in that paradox. Losing one's original home—or feeling lost between worlds—is invariably painful, but the longing it instils can lead to new forms of finding. In the ache of nostalgia, people discover what truly matters to them, be it a sense of community, faith, cultural heritage, or personal ideals. And in expressing that ache, as these films do so beautifully, there is a possibility of forging connections—between displaced people and their adopted homes, between the past and the present, and between the screen and the audience.

Ultimately, the odyssey of nostalgia and displacement that we have traced through European cinema is a story of human resilience and imagination. It shows that while we may not be able to reclaim the past, we can re-story it—we can tell it anew, and in doing so, bring comfort, understanding, and even change into the present. Nostalgia, as portrayed in these films, does not solve the crises of displacement—but it does help people endure them, understand them, and sometimes transcend them. It provides continuity in a world of change and a touch of home in far-flung places. And for viewers safely in their seats, it provides a bridge of empathy to those adrift in foreign lands.

To close, then, we affirm that nostalgia in the context of migration is neither purely a malady nor a cure-all; it is a complex, deeply ambivalent human response, one that can yield insight or illusion. European cinema, with its rich storytelling traditions, has illuminated this complexity in ways that academic theory or political rhetoric cannot. Through character and metaphor, light and shadow, these films have depicted the contemporary condition of displacement with all its emotional hues—from despair to laughter, from yearning to reconciliation. If this book has demonstrated anything, it is that in the meeting of nostalgia and displacement lies a powerful narrative of our time: one that speaks to the enduring human need for belonging and the creative means we employ to fulfil it. In the final analysis, to be displaced is to live "betwixt and between" (Turner 1967), and to be nostalgic is to carry a part of one's then and there into the here and now. Cinema, as our guide, has shown us the beauty and poignancy of that condition. The hope is that by understanding the role of nostalgia in

the migrant experience, we might approach the world's continual movements of people not with fear or cynicism, but with greater compassion and insight. After all, the longing for home—and the creativity in reimagining it—is a story as old as humanity, and one that continues to unfold in new forms. As long as there are journeys, there will be stories woven with nostalgia; and as these films remind us, those stories are well worth telling, for they carry the echo of who we are in a world forever shifting, where roots drift and home is always in the making.

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Index[1]

[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

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