Drawing Nostalgia – Memory, Displacement and the Cinematic Language of Longing

Link to the Creative Practice component: https://vimeo.com/tasosgiapoutzis/drawing-nostalgia

Research Questions

This is a practice-led study of how essayistic film form can investigate nostalgia in migratory experience when verbal language is partial, hesitant, or insufficient. Rather than treating film practice as an illustration of theory or as evidence that particular techniques reliably produce particular viewer responses, the project approaches audiovisual form as a methodical inquiry into how longing, memory, and displacement may be staged, mediated, and reflected upon through cinematic language

- How can cinematic language evoke the psychological and emotional texture of an immigrant's nostalgia, especially when verbal expression proves challenging?
- How might integrating intertextual elements broaden the cultural and intellectual context of a personal story of displacement?
- What can an essayistic filmmaking approach reveal about nostalgia as a "broader longing for an idealized place and time" (Nikelly 2004, p.184) that reshapes how migrants imagine home and identity?

Focusing on Jurgita, a Lithuanian artist living in Scotland, the project developed through an iterative process of conversation, filming, and editing rather than from a fixed formal plan. Her difficulty in articulating nostalgia directly became a methodological prompt, leading the filmmaking process to explore how observation, non-verbal expression, and essayistic construction might approach experiences that resisted straightforward verbal explanation. These exploratory decisions shaped the evolving relationship between image, sound, text, and intertextual reference, which is developed further in the Methods section.

Context

Contemporary accounts of nostalgia position it not as simple sentimentality but as a complex relation between memory, desire, and identity. Arthur Nikelly (2004) distinguishes nostalgia from homesickness by arguing that it exceeds the wish to return to a literal home and instead names a more ambivalent longing for an *idealised time and place*. This emotional duality can affirm identity while simultaneously restricting engagement with the present. Salman Akhtar

(1999) similarly suggests that migration can intensify retrospection, as memories of the lost world may acquire a heightened glow (p.125). In a migratory context, nostalgia is therefore not only retrospective feeling; it is also a way of negotiating present dislocation, attachment, and self-understanding. This understanding is central to Jurgita's situation as a Lithuanian artist living in Scotland, where memory does not simply pull her backwards but reshapes how home and identity are imagined in the present.

Svetlana Boym's (2001) account of *restorative* and *reflective* nostalgia provides the project's principal conceptual framework. The former seeks to rebuild the lost home. *Drawing Nostalgia* is grounded in reflective nostalgia, which, for Boym, "dwells on the ambivalences" (p.XVIII), temporal fracture, and the incompleteness of return rather than seeking to reconstruct a lost home. This distinction is crucial to the film's ethical and formal orientation. The project does not aim to restore an origin or resolve longing through narrative closure. It instead approaches nostalgia as an ongoing meditation on absence, distance, and remembrance. Boym's emphasis on reflective nostalgia as self-aware and unfinished offers a productive way of thinking about migrant temporality because it allows longing to remain unresolved without reducing it to pathology or sentimentality. The film's restraint, fragmentation, and refusal of explanatory completion emerge from this conceptual choice.

This understanding of nostalgia also requires attention to media form. As Katharina Niemeyer (2014) argues, nostalgia in and through media is not merely represented; it is organised through mediated relations between past and present. That emphasis is especially productive for essayistic filmmaking, where temporal layering, juxtaposition, interruption, and citation can do analytical work. Within the essay-film tradition discussed by Alter and Corrigan (2017), the value of the form lies in its provisional, reflective, and self-questioning mode of address. The essay film thinks through relations rather than resolving them. That orientation makes it especially appropriate for a project in which nostalgia is not available as transparent testimony but must be approached indirectly through image, rhythm, sound, and text. It also clarifies why on-screen writing matters here: rather than functioning as explanatory captioning, text becomes part of the film's reflective structure, consistent with experimental practices in which language forms part of the "formal and conceptual fabric of the film" (Knowles, 2015, p.46).

Spatiality is equally important to the project's conceptual terrain. The film's attention to Jurgita's flat, her drawing practice, and the near-empty exterior landscapes she moves through draws on Henri Lefebvre's understanding that lived space is socially and affectively produced rather than passively inhabited; not simply "a thing among other things" (1991, p.73), but part of the relations through which everyday life is experienced and understood. Within this framework, spaces such as the home or the landscape are approached not as neutral backdrops, but as environments that shape how individuals relate to memory, belonging, and themselves. The film puts this into practice by organising Jurgita's flat and the exterior landscape as recurring spatial registers through which different relations to dwelling, memory, and displacement can be explored.The contrast between domestic enclosure and exposed landscape probes the relation between shelter, estrangement, memory, and self-fashioning. In this respect, the film also sits alongside contemporary British work that registers migration and dislocation through formal and spatial strategies: *His House* (2020) renders forced migration through horror aesthetics, while *Limbo* (2020) uses stylised isolation and suspended temporality to articulate the experience of asylum. *Drawing Nostalgia*, however, turns away from externally driven plots toward quieter, everyday forms of temporal and affective unease.

The project also extends concerns developed in the researcher's earlier scholarly and film outputs (Giapoutzis 2026, 2021, 2019), all of which explore the relation between memory, affect, and cinematic form. Among broader cinematic influences, *Drawing Nostalgia* resonates most with the reflective sensibility of Jonas Mekas and the essayistic experimentation of Chris Marker whose work has been influential in demonstrating how cinema can translate recollection into rhythm and texture. Mekas's diary films render memory through fragmentary montage, shifts in pace, and the tactile qualities of filmed experience, while Marker's essay films use associative editing, temporal displacement, and reflective voice-over to construct recollection as an unfolding relation between image, sound, and thought. Jurgita's viewing of Mekas' *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972) places her experience beside that of another Lithuanian émigré whose cinema turned return, exile, and remembrance into reflective form. That intertext does not collapse the differences between their situations. Rather, it opens a transnational lineage of mediated longing in which personal memory encounters cultural memory. In this way, the project locates Jurgita's experience not as an isolated case but as one situated within wider histories of migration, remembrance, and artistic self-reflection.

Methods

This project adopts an arts-based, practice-led methodology in which making the film constitutes the research process itself. Following Leavy's account of arts-based research as an exploratory mode in which theory and practice are intertwined and form shapes both content and reception (Leavy, 2015), *Drawing Nostalgia* treats cinematic construction not as a vehicle for demonstrating predetermined audience effects but as a methodical inquiry into how nostalgia may be configured audiovisually. Briefly, Bordwell's distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic norms is helpful here. The film organises its own intrinsic relations through monochrome grading, episodic montage, restrained sound, footnote-like text, and the juxtaposition of domestic and exterior space, while also recognising that those relations will be read through extrinsic conventions associated with documentary, essay film, experimental cinema, and migration narratives (Bordwell, 1985). This framework allows the project to discuss formal intention without presuming a uniform or guaranteed spectator response. Instead, it asks how the film's organisation may orient interpretation through its own formal relations, while recognising that viewers' responses will vary according to their familiarity with documentary, essay film, experimental cinema, migration narratives, and the work's cultural references.

The inquiry began through conversations with Jurgita, a real Lithuanian migrant and artist in her twenties living in Dundee. These discussions made clear that nostalgia was difficult for her to articulate directly, not only because of the emotional complexity of the subject but also because neither Lithuanian nor English felt fully adequate to expressing it. That difficulty was not treated as a problem to be solved through more explanatory interview material. Instead, it shaped the film's method. The project therefore privileges non-verbal and para-verbal forms of expression: gesture, duration, silence, routine, image texture, and reflective textual fragments. In methodological terms, Jurgita functions neither as a fictional character nor as a source of transparent testimony. She is a participant whose presence, practice, and limits of articulation structure the inquiry itself.

Formally, the film develops as an essayistic and episodic structure rather than a linear narrative. Scenes from Jurgita's present life – making visual work in her flat, moving through a misted forest, watching Mekas – are filmed in modular fashion and assembled through montage. The editing process is treated as a form of 'rewriting' with images and sounds that

allows meaning to emerge through juxtaposition. This is not undertaken to prove that fragmentation produces reflection in any universal sense. Rather, montage becomes the means by which the project could investigate whether temporal discontinuity, repetition, and pause might register nostalgia as a condition of uneven remembering. The film's structure therefore does not mirror memory as a transparent equivalent; it stages a set of formal relations through which memory, presentness, and imaginative projection can be held in tension.

Cinematography and mise-en-scène are likewise approached as variables within the inquiry. Footage is shot digitally in colour and graded in monochrome, creating a low-key black-and-white image with occasional texture and noise. The monochrome palette is not assumed to trigger a fixed mood. It is used to suspend some of the documentary specificity associated with colour realism and to test whether a reduced chromatic field could place memory, present-tense observation, and aesthetic distance into a more reflective relation. Similarly, variations between static observation and gently mobile camera movement are used to explore how bodily searching, hesitation, and spatial uncertainty might be composed audiovisually. The interior flat and the sparse exterior locations are arranged as contrasting yet connected spatial registers, allowing the film to investigate how dwelling and exposure may mediate belonging and estrangement (Lefebvre, 1991).

Sound is treated with the same methodological care. Sparse diegetic elements – footsteps, room tone, ambient noise – are combined with minimal non-diegetic textures, including drone and distant wave-like sounds. The sound design investigates how withholding, silence, and small acoustic details can re-orient attention and temporal perception. The Greek song *Apópse se Thymíthika* ('Tonight I remembered you') in the closing movement extends this principle by opening the film outward to a transnational sonic register of remembrance rather than closing Jurgita's experience into a single national frame. On-screen quotations from Boym operate similarly. They are not there to certify the meaning of the sequence but to place personal experience in dialogue with conceptual discourse.

Intertextuality is central to the method. Jurgita's encounter with Mekas's *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* forms a concrete point of dialogue between her own experience and an earlier cinematic meditation on exile and return. Likewise, citations from Boym become part of the film's reflective texture rather than an external commentary. In both cases, reference

serves the second research question by widening the personal story into a broader cultural and intellectual context. The method does not use intertextuality to stabilise meaning. It uses it to open correspondences, dissonances, and historical echoes that exceed the singularity of the filmed situation. The film is therefore structured as a practice-led investigation into how image, sound, text, and citation may together approach nostalgia as lived yet mediated experience.

Outcomes

The principal outcome of the inquiry is a more nuanced understanding of nostalgia in migratory experience as a condition better approached through formal relation than through direct statement. The project suggests that nostalgia becomes most legible here not as confession or plot point but as an oscillation between routine and reverie, present activity and mediated recollection, domestic enclosure and exposed landscape. This inquiry suggests that essayistic form can productively sustain this ambivalence productively, allowing memory to remain fragmentary and unfinished rather than forcing it into narrative resolution.

A second outcome concerns the relation between cinematic strategies and research knowledge. The inquiry suggests that monochrome grading, modular editing, sparse sound, and written citation can be configured to suspend immediacy and foreground mediation itself. In other words, the film does not seek to make nostalgia appear as transparent interior truth. It makes visible the processes by which memory is arranged, encountered, and reactivated through audiovisual form. This is a significant research outcome because it shifts the discussion from whether film can "show" nostalgia directly to how film can investigate the conditions under which nostalgia becomes thinkable as a temporal and sensory configuration.

The work also foregrounds the value of intertextuality as a methodological resource. Mekas's presence in the film does more than signal influence. It situates Jurgita's reflection within a longer transnational history of cinematic remembering by a Lithuanian émigré, while Boym's on-screen quotations connect her lived experience to a conceptual vocabulary of reflective nostalgia. The result is not a closed interpretation of her condition but an expanded field of association in which private memory, film history, and theory can coexist. This directly addresses the second research question by showing that intertextuality can widen a personal story without subsuming it within an abstract framework.

Finally, the inquiry reveals the importance of opacity. Jurgita's difficulty in verbalising nostalgia and the film's refusal to resolve that difficulty became a methodological insight rather than a limitation. Her drawing practice, silence, and gestures are allowed to remain partially unreadable, and that partial unreadability is integral to the project's understanding of nostalgia. Practice-led research here generates knowledge not by converting ambiguity into explanation, but by showing how ambiguity itself can be a valid and meaningful research outcome when the object of study is affectively dense, temporally layered, and resistant to paraphrase.

Impact

The project's impact lies first in its situated contribution to practice research on migration, memory, and essayistic form. Its value does not rest on inventing new cinematic devices. Rather, it offers a clearly articulated example of how established essay-film strategies can be configured as an arts-based inquiry into reflective nostalgia in a migratory context. In that respect, the project contributes to ongoing discussions of how practice research can generate knowledge through form as well as through discursive exposition.

A second area of impact is pedagogical and methodological. The film offers a usable model for integrating theory into moving-image practice without subordinating the work to exposition. The combination of footnote-like on-screen text, intertextual citation, spatial contrast, and restrained sound demonstrates one way in which scholarly concepts can be staged audiovisually rather than simply paraphrased. This may be useful in teaching and supervising practice-led work in film, media, and adjacent arts-based research contexts.

The project also makes a modest cultural contribution by proposing a non-sensational representation of migrant interiority. Rather than framing displacement primarily through crisis, the film attends to quieter temporal and spatial forms through which longing persists in everyday life. Its significance therefore lies less in claiming to speak for migrants in general than in offering one situated configuration through which questions of home, belonging, and remembrance may be approached by differently positioned viewers. Taken together, these contributions define impact in precise rather than expansive terms. *Drawing Nostalgia* shows how a short essay film can function as a rigorous mode of inquiry into emotional and temporal states that resist direct statement. Its scholarly and practical significance lies in demonstrating that practice-led film research can investigate nostalgia not by asserting what it

is once and for all, but by constructing conditions in which its ambiguities, mediations, and lived contradictions can be explored.

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Filmography

When Dahlias Bend Down (Tasos Giapoutzis, 2016, Greece/UK)

Quiet Life (Tasos Giapoutzis and Marios Kleftakis, 2019, Greece/UK)

Sans Soleil (Chris Marker, 1983, France)

Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania (Jonas Mekas, 1972, United Kingdom/West Germany)

His House (Remi Weekes, 2020, United Kingdom)

Limbo (Ben Sharrock, 2020, United Kingdom)