

## **Andreas Böhn: Nostalgia of the media / in the media**

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Winters, Patricia  
1995      Vodka marketers from overseas are partying it up here on American soil. *Newstimes* [source: *New York Daily News*, AP-NY-06-19-95].  
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# Nostalgia of the media / in the media

Andreas Böhn

The media have always been a means of bringing back memories, but they have also become the object of memory. The cultural and technological development of the media has brought about great changes; some of the media have even disappeared. As a result, the media of the past become objects of cultural memory. The way the media were in the past and how they have changed has become represented and reflected in the media, and this is where self-reference comes in. Media can refer to themselves as they exist in time and how they have changed in time. More and more, they do so in rather nostalgic ways, or they reflect a nostalgic way of looking at the media as it can be found in our society.

## 1. Nostalgia and the paradox of memory

Nostalgia seems to be a feature of our time, but neither the concept nor the phenomenon is new. The word “nostalgia” first appeared in 1678 as the title of a medical dissertation by Johannes Hofer (Fischer 1980: 268, ref. 8). It derives from the Greek words *nostos*, ‘coming home’, and *algos*, ‘pain’. In the word “nostalgia”, the general sense of longing for something lost, or at least not at hand, is expressed by means of a spatial image. Nostalgia is considered as a disease caused by being away from home. Quite early, for example in Rousseau’s correspondence, the role of symbols is mentioned as a cause of nostalgia. The Swiss soldiers abroad hearing a Swiss melody were reminded of their native country and became nostalgic; therefore it was forbidden, on penalty of death, to play this melody during their service (Fischer 1980: 12). However, what we currently understand by the concept of nostalgia is a predominantly temporal notion which cannot yet be found before the 1970s (Fischer 1980: 15–16). Since *nostalgia* has come to mean the ‘longing for something far away, not necessarily in space, but in time’, symbolic representation and objects as mediators between the past and the present have gained more and more importance.

Nostalgia has to do with what can be called the general paradox of memory. On the individual level, our consciousness consists of immediate states, each of

them dissolving into the next in the course of time, but each state of consciousness is also related to the preceding and the following state. Husserl (1893–1917: 28, 43) has described the two directions in which consciousness extends as “retention” and “protention”. The associated temporal processes determining our consciousness allow us to construct our personal continuity and guarantee our identity as conscious beings in time; each immediate state becomes transformed into a representation of itself, and by the retention of this representation in the following state of consciousness we are enabled to operate with it.

On the collective level, there is no such automatically functioning device of memorization. Humans, social groups, and societies had to develop other strategies of creating memory to make social continuity and identity possible. But such strategies have always been endangered by the possibility of failure. Time is a constant threat to social stability, the more so when a society changes rapidly and when its members are conscious of the changes. One of the strategies of creating collective memory has been the attempt to eliminate time, to relate the present very closely to a past which is held in great social esteem. An example is the glorification of a “heroic age” as a phase of social and cultural foundation of the present. The paradox of such strategies of glorification of the past lies in the circumstance that memory would not be necessary if the past were not absolutely gone and that memory tries to represent the past as something which is still present. Cultural strategies of dealing with the past can emphasize either side of this paradox. Rituals which re-enact scenes from the past and have us participate in by-gone events show the past as something which is still there; mourning over the dead, by contrast, does not prevent that the mourners remain conscious of the death of the deceased.<sup>1</sup>

At a higher level of reflexivity, of course, cultural ways of representing memory can also deal with many other kinds of events. Nostalgia as a relation of pain and longing for the past at a mainly personal and emotional level is directed towards objects which cannot only represent but also evoke the past. It is directed towards objects which allow, at least for a certain time, for a lustful revival of this past in a process which can be seen as a first of three steps. The second step is taken at the collective level where cultural objects are produced that serve in an analogous way for larger sections of the population. The third step is the reflection on these tendencies in advanced cultural discourse, be it in a theoretical or an artistic way.

Nostalgia as a cultural phenomenon has become a topic of research, which has gained more and more attention since the 1970s. It has often been linked to postmodernism in general, and more specifically to ways of getting in touch with the past. For example, period pictures in the field of the cinema, remakes, quotations, re-adoptions of seemingly outdated film genres, etc. Whereas a pe-

riod picture refers to a bygone world at the level of representation, a remake refers to a previous movie and implicitly or explicitly to a past of the mediating film. Thus, some of the strategies of nostalgia obviously evince aspects of self-reference, too, but they are self-referential to a much higher degree when the object of nostalgia is a specific medium or when the medium itself is used for representing nostalgia.

## 2. Media, memory, and musealization

The media participate in an expanding culture of memory evincing traces of “musealization”, like the objects in a museum which have lost their use value having become mere signs of their former use values (cf. Böhn 2005), and nostalgia, which can be regarded as a counterpart to the process of modernization. In the process of modernization, the media have been influential instruments of social change not least because they have altered the techniques of cultural memory. Drawing and, even more so, writing were the first methods of exteriorizing memory in an enduring and sustainable manner. The modern audiovisual media, such as photography, the phonograph, and the film, have extended cultural memory to bring back also sensual impressions, which individuals in earlier times had difficulties to remember and to pass on to the next generation. The timbre of the voice, the typical gestures, facial expressions, and body movements are hard to remember if you met a person only once or twice; in words and sentences, such impressions cannot be evoked in a way that others can fully imagine what the description is about. However, when we see a historical film, for example, Oliver Hirschbiegel’s movie *Der Untergang* (English: *Downfall*, G 2004), we cannot only compare Bruno Ganz’s impersonation of Hitler with our personal memory of the dictator (which not many people still have of Hitler), but we can also compare it with original audiovisual documents and with our personal memory of the externalized cultural memory of Hitler’s last days.

Important elements of our personal memory are such memories of cultural memory which have become part of our own biography. Even the time, place, and circumstances of the situation in which we had the knowledge or experience that became remembered can itself remain associated with the memory of it. When did we first see our favorite movie, in the cinema, on TV, on video, etc.? When did we first hear a recording of a certain piece of music which impressed us deeply? Was it a live or a studio version, which orchestra was it, which conductor, from which year was the recording? Did we hear it from an old and scratchy LP which made an ugly noise or from our MP3-player while jogging through a park? The circumstances of the moment of our first hearing will often be remembered when

we hear the same music again. The examples show that media experiences tend to go together with the circumstances in which we acquire the memory of them. Since the media belong to the world of everyday life, they are also the object of our personal memory. Evolving and transforming themselves in the flux of time, they are no longer what they used to be in a former stage of our life. Some of us still remember the time when cinemascope was new and astonishing. A friend of mine once told me what an erotic disturbance it caused in his adolescence when he first saw "I Dream of Jeannie" on color television (after his parents had substituted the old black-and-white television set) because now he found Jeannie so much sexier.

Media products have become the object of nostalgia because they are linked to so many personal memories and biographies or, more precisely, to individuals' constructions of their personal biographies. Whereas younger people are eager to see new movies on TV, older people are happy when movies from the past are shown which remind them of their youth. The tendency to their own musealization which the media have developed is as much a reaction against the rage for the new as it gives an additional impetus to it. In an exhibition on the topic of the history of computer games in the year 2002 in Kassel's Museum for Sepulchral Culture, visitors became really sentimental when they saw the computer model of the old days when they played their first computer games. Since computer games have not yet been on the market for a long time, such nostalgic reactions may seem to come very early but they are understandable since things have changed so rapidly. Nostalgia seems to depend not only on the period of time between the event and the moment of its nostalgic recollection but also on the amount of change. The change can be so great that people are simply unable to cope with it and search, instead, for a withdrawal into an artificial world of nostalgic remembrance. As Gottfried Fliedl (1990: 171) has pointed out, situations of abrupt political change, combined with the destruction of former social structures and hierarchies, have always favored nostalgia and musealization (cf. Fliedl 1996).

Wolfgang Becker's movie *Good-Bye, Lenin!* (G 2002) draws on this tendency with respect to *ostalgia* or *eastalgia*, the nostalgia for the good old days of the GDR (Böhn 2005). The tendency towards the musealization of the GDR in this film does not only extend to material culture, but also to the media. With the help of his friend Denis, a would-be movie director, the protagonist Alex gathers recordings of GDR television, such as recordings of the daily news program "Aktuelle Kamera" or the political magazine "Schwarzer Kanal" which they use to produce their own news programs. Alex's mother, a staunch follower of the communist regime, recovering from a heart attack, has to be prevented from receiving the news that the GDR has collapsed during the time when she was

in a coma. The old lady has to stay in bed unable to move. In this position, she can see the outside world only through her bedroom window. This situation, not unlike the one of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, makes it easy for the two friends to withhold the ongoing political transformations from the bedridden mother. But when she watches television, another window to the world is open which has to be manipulated. First, Alex and Denis simply show her old programs, but then they begin to experiment themselves with montages of old with new scenes of their own production. In the end, they even create an alternative history of the German unification in which they fictionally make come true a "third way" of a German republic between former socialism in the East and capitalism in the West. The reasons why all this became possible are partly in the media politics of the former GDR, as Pflaum has pointed out in his following assessment:

*Good Bye, Lenin!* demonstrates, in an excellent and clever way, the compliance of pictures and tones. The film goes beyond its own story. The fake succeeds all the better considering that the GDR, in the course of its forty years of existence had been in a habit of self-glorification which made the falsification of alleged documents easy enough. (Pflaum 2003: 12)

### 3. Nostalgia of/in the movies

After this little example of TV in a film in a nostalgic reproduction of GDR culture, let us now consider more specific examples of nostalgia concerning the medium of film itself. A movie can create nostalgia by means of film history in general, certain periods of film history, or by making use of old-fashioned genres. An example of the latter would be the film musical, which has been readopted recently in several productions differently but always with a look back in nostalgia. François Ozon combined his retrospective whodunit in *Huit femmes* (F 2002) with elements from the musical tradition. Woody Allen's *Everyone Says I Love You* (US 1997) with a dozen songs and several dancing scenes gives the impression of a musical from the beginning to its end. In fact, it is a compilation and adaptation of material from the classical era of the film musical. The score has been arranged by Dick Hyman, the songs are performed by the actors themselves. Especially the dancing scenes are full of parody. In the opening sequence, the song "Just You, Just Me" performed by two young lovers is accompanied by a choir of three women with baby carriages, an elderly lady with a nurse, a beggar, and a ballet of three dummies in the shop-window of an Yves Saint-Laurent shop. There is a highly exalted dancing scene in a hospital with the song "Makin' Whoopee" by Walter Donaldson and Gus Kahn

taken from the Busby Berkeley movie *Whoopie* of 1930, and there is a ballet of ghosts in a funeral chapel singing "Enjoy Yourself". Near to its end, the movie makes direct reference to its precursors, the Marx Brothers and their absurd choreographies, with the song "Hooray for Captain Spaulding" by Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby from *Animal Crackers* (US 1930). Later, "I'm Through with Love" is taken up for the third time as the tune of a dancing scene with slow-motion effects. The ease of Fred Astaire's style in his famous scenes with Ginger Rodgers and others is imitated and exaggerated as Woody Allen is doing nearly nothing and his partner Goldie Hawn is literally floating in the air. The title song "Everyone Says I Love You" by Kalmar and Ruby from the Marx Brothers film *Horse Feathers* (US 1932) accompanies the finale.

Woody Allen's *Everyone Says I Love You* holds the balance between parody and homage evincing elements of irony and parody in the tradition of the classical American film musical itself. These elements can be found in the early musical comedies of the Marx Brothers or also in *Hellzapoppin'* (US 1941), which is quoted in the hell scene of Allen's *Deconstructing Harry* (US 1997). These early examples were more direct parodies than the more recent ones. Woody Allen's film uses elements from the musical to characterize persons and situations and to borrow tunes and moods. Emotional qualities are presented by means of well-known expressions from the history of the film musical. On the one hand, they seem to be perfectly natural as expressions of emotions, on the other hand, they are obviously not spontaneous expressions of genuine feelings, but stereotypes which, used as quotations, create an ironic distance. There is a shift from the expression of an emotion to the mere mentioning of its precursor, which attaches a historical marker to this expression. The nostalgic undertone or mood results from the feeling that those expressions are no longer useable except in an ironic and distanced way or as a quotation.

In *On connaît la chanson* (F 1998), Alain Resnais, who had already used musical elements in *La vie est un roman* (F 1983), borrows songs from the tradition of the French chanson instead of taking them from musicals (Ochsner 2004). At the formal level of the combination of story and music, the deviations from the originals are even greater than in Allen's movie. The songs are borrowed in the acoustic form of their original performance with the voices of well-known singers like Edith Piaf, Charles Aznavour, Gilbert Bécaud, or France Gall. The actors in the movie apparently do not sing with their own, but with someone else's voice. With a different voice, they "sing" songs in a voice recorded from entertainers of the past according to different technical recording standards. Sometimes a man even sings in the voice of a woman and vice versa. For example, in the opening sequence, the commanding officer of the German occupation forces, having just received the order to destroy Paris, sings the song "J'ai deux

amours, Paris et ma patrie" in Josephine Baker's voice. Though the songs go very well with the situation in which they are sung, they create an ambiguous effect. By themselves, they aim at enacting certain affections in order to express and to intensify the emotions. Using these songs as elements of a narration could serve the same purpose as in an opera or in a classical film musical. However, the aforementioned ruptures and divergences between story and song, actor and voice are incompatible with the traditional purposes of combining a narrative with music. Emotional intensification and historical distance are in an unstable balance, which makes it very difficult to concentrate on one of the two and to forget about the other. However, as much as these discrepancies may be an impediment to our identifying with the protagonists and getting emotionally involved in the story, it gives us the possibility of concentrating on the songs and of remembering the possible emotional importance they may have to us. The movie turns into a sort of "living museum" of French chanson culture, with *Everyone Says I Love You* as its counterpart in the classical American film musical.

Maurizio Nichetti's *Ladri di saponette* (IT 1988) does not only quote a specific form typical of a genre of film history but a whole set of formal characteristics of a historical period, the style of Italian postwar neorealism. Neorealism is not simply a period style among others. It was intended and perceived as a counterpoise against fascist monumentalism and distraction by means of glamorous settings and sceneries. The neorealist movies tell stories about people in a humble social environment, stories about the living conditions of ordinary people, about moral values, and matters of conscience. The neorealist movies construct the image of new nonfascist Italy, and this new image was not only highly esteemed in postwar Italy, but also internationally well liked and honored. The title of Nichetti's film is a reference to Vittorio de Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (IT 1948), the most famous example of this style, which won an Oscar in 1949, already the second for de Sica.

The change of its title is indicative of what is happening in the film. *Saponette* are the commercials for soap, washing-powder, etc. which rudely interrupt the movies shown on TV. Nichetti's film begins with a TV presentation of a film in the neorealist style, paying homage to neorealism in black and white. The commercials in the breaks are, of course, in color. There are elements of parody in both the film and the commercial. At a certain point the film gets mixed up with the commercials when a figure in color from a commercial enters the movie and the black-and-white scenes now have one of its actors in color. At this point, the forms of neorealism and current television advertisements are in direct confrontation. Film and commercials are no longer separate. They are both integrated within the one diegetic framework of Nichetti's film in which they

nevertheless remain clearly marked as two different modes of representation. The combined scenario now evinces divergent goals for the narrative personae in their respective stories, such as preservation of basic moral principles under difficult circumstances, family values, or modest prosperity in the frame of neo-realism versus consumerism in the frame of the TV commercial. The mixing-up of the two frames has effects on the narrative plot, too. The postwar neorealist family wants to escape their misery and live in the consumer's paradise of post-modern advertising. In this way, the anachronism of neorealism in the eighties becomes evident but also the lack of realism and morals of the commercials. Both worlds operating separately in the peaceful coexistence of the usual TV program with the movies, but they shatter into pieces when they clash, as in *Ladri di saponette*.

The quasi-neorealist film-in-the-film is in itself, like the movies it imitates, highly sentimental. By means of its nostalgic touch it is able to involve the viewers emotionally with the values it promotes. At first glance, the arrangement of feature film, TV studio scenes, commercials, and TV viewers at home is clearly committed as to its values: the good old times of the feature film versus the contemporary perversion, but this initial emotional orientation of the spectator gets more and more into trouble. It ends up in an utter boundary crossing at different levels, a crossing that finally erodes the moral hierarchy and the affective structures established in the beginning. The result is mixed emotions and a sense of affective ambivalence on the side of the viewers who have followed the development of the filmic narrative.

#### 4. Nostalgia and self-reference

The analysis of the above examples has shown that besides the ongoing production of genre films and the continuous modification of genre rules, and besides the nostalgic imitation of historical styles, for instance in period pictures, there are other ways of incorporating genre traditions and elements of style into a film. Quotations of formal elements can be used to play with the emotions associated with these forms or to create a historical distance from them which may cause a nostalgic longing for their restoration. These are some of the means of the cinema to reflect on its own history. The tendency of the film to deal with itself and reflect on its impact on its viewers has even been passed on to television. *Pleasantville* (US 1998), directed by Gary Ross, is a movie about a boy who loves certain old TV family series from the 1950s (Dika 2003: 201). His nostalgia is represented like the nostalgia for neorealism in *Ladri di saponette*. Both movies leave us with the impression that the past is much better than the present

because it is past and we do not really have to live it any more. The protagonist of *Pleasantville* is nostalgic for the world of the 1950s family series, which is not only fictitious but was already outdated when he first saw it, apart from the fact that he never knew the society and the state of mind that produced it. The only thing he knows are the episodes from the series which are repeated on TV and that they are old because they are coded with "past".

Not only does the cinema serve as a cultural archive for television and has become a source of nostalgia, but also has the reverse become true. The above discussed *On connaît la chanson* does not only refer to the tradition of the musical but also to the French chanson and its phonographic recordings. Other media can be added, for example, the radio, as in Woody Allen's *Radio Days* (US 1987), a film that associates nostalgic reminiscences of the radio as it was before the advent of TV, with personal memories from the narrator's childhood. In a similar way, movies such as Giuseppe Tornatore's *Nuovo cinema Paradiso* (F/US 1989) or Ettore Scola's *Splendor* (F/IT 1989) intermingle the recollections of an individual life (in the former case beginning with the protagonist's childhood) with the personal memories of a particular movie house, the films shown there, the technical equipment which was used etc. Rather differently, in Agnès Varda's *Les cent et une nuits* (F 1995), the history of the film is narrated to a young woman from the memory of an allegorical Monsieur Cinéma.

In Tornatore's and Scola's movies, general history, personal history, and media history are interrelated, as *Splendor* is with the end of World War II, the protagonist's return, and the showing of Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (US 1946). At the moment when the owner of the cinema enters it for the first time after the war, the final scene of the movie is presented. It is Christmas, the community and the protagonist are reconciled, and everybody sings "For Auld Lang Syne". The tune is taken up at the end of the movie when the village community gathers to defend the old cinema which is in danger because it is no longer profitable. The movie changes from color to black and white, and although we are in the middle of summer, snow begins to fall. Few people nowadays remember this, but Christmas in its ritual essence is a means of recalling something from the deep past to the present in order to share its effects. The Christmas scene taken from *It's a Wonderful Life* associates the demise of the cinema in a small town with the powerful history of the medium in order to convey the message of its endurance and resistance against current transformations. However, as the film *Splendor* demonstrates, that which is "greater than life" works only in the movies. In this respect, *Splendor* is the most nostalgic of all films dealing with the film culture of the past; it is self-referential with regards to the medium which it represents and of which it evokes the feelings of nostalgia.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, the focus was on examples from the film which do not only follow the trend towards nostalgia but also reflect it in a rather complex manner. Below the surface of the current trend towards media nostalgia, there is a broad current of musealization to counterbalance the hype about progress which the new media cause. Even among those who are euphoric about the internet or even addicted to computer games, nostalgia can be found, for example, nostalgia for floppy disks, which seems to be the most recent manifestation of media nostalgia. The nostalgia of the media does not only extend to the material remains which have been collected in media archives, personal collections, or which have been exhibited in museums and cultural centers. Media nostalgia is also apparent in the way the media represent the media and in the way they let us see the world narrated by them. More and more, the media devote themselves to media nostalgia, relying on different historical ways of positioning themselves in relation to other media. Media nostalgia in the media is a manifestation of self-reference in the media because the media refer to themselves, show how they have been the source of entertainment, how they have been subject to historical changes or even destruction, and how they have been remembered or consigned to oblivion.

### Note

1. In this context, Boym (2001: 41) distinguishes between "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia: "Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance."

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