

We are, undoubtedly, living in the age of memory. From the TikTok slideshows filtered in 35mm grain to the presidential campaigns promising a return to a “better time,” the aesthetics of nostalgia are a dominant, gradual force. While late capitalism has been rightly criticized for commodifying everything from intimacy to outrage, its most seductive product may be the past itself. Nostalgia does not need to be accurate to be powerful. It just needs to feel good. Or safe. Or familiar. And it does. Oh, it does.

So whose past is this anyway? Nostalgia, etymologically rooted in the Greek *nostos* (return home) and *algos* (pain) was first defined as a diagnosable condition in the 17th century: a pathological longing for home, often among soldiers far from familiar territory. Today it is less a disease (for some, at least), but it is everywhere: fashion, political rhetoric, music, design, media.

Crucially, though, nostalgia is never politically neutral. There are two proposed types, as established by Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia*: restorative and reflective.

I will illustrate the difference between these two with a little roleplay scenario. Let us imagine, God forbid, that your house has burnt down overnight, and the fire has taken with it all your prized possessions. You are essentially with nothing to your name. In a couple of months, we do not know where you will be. Perhaps in a new house, perhaps working as a firefighter, perhaps getting married on a whim in Vegas. Any of this is possible. But no matter where you are, the conditions of nostalgia suggest that you, as a nostalgic, will think again about this house, this burnt house with all you loved in it gone. Restorative nostalgia would seek to rebuild this lost home. Reflective nostalgia would remain by the ash to do exactly what the name suggests. A drastic example, but hopefully enough for you to grasp this concept.

Restorative nostalgia is the domain of nationalist politics. “Make America Great Again” is its most distilled slogan. This phrase activates a collective remembrance of a time when gender roles were rigid, whiteness was dominant, and empire was unchallenged. It offers almost no dimension. So the aesthetics of nostalgia here are not sentimental but ideological for the most part. The ideas of white picket fences, nuclear families, and vintage Coke ads stick to a particular feeling of legitimacy. Reflective nostalgia might be more insidious in terms of individuality. I am sure I do not even need to explain this.

I am also sure that you know nostalgia is not entirely confined into politics. It is a powerful emotional and aesthetic tool in digital subculture. The proliferation of lo-fi aesthetics, analog filters, and retro iconography across platforms like Instagram and Tumblr are a reflection of longing. The rise of “cottagecore,” for example, evokes an imaginary pastoral life, free of industry and alienation.

It is handmade bread, sundappled meadows, and floral linens, without the actual drudgery of subsistence farming or whatever other boundaries exist for it.

Similarly, vaporwave (an aesthetic genre combining glitchy 80s corporate design, elevator music, and cyberpunk detritus) ironizes nostalgia by exaggerating it. But whether ironic or earnest, we must remember that these aesthetics flatten the past into something consumable. *The past as referent finds itself gradually replaced by the past as stylization.*

This nostalgia can be self-soothing in an age of climate crisis, political instability, and cultural fragmentation. It offers a fantasy of return. To a land, to a person, to innocence. These are attachments to ideas or fantasies that actively impede our ability to thrive.

There is also a lot omitted, certainly. A pastel-toned image of 1950s suburbia omits redlining, Jim Crow, and the violent enforcement of gender norms. The vintage Americana of *Stranger Things* omits Reaganomics and the AIDS crisis (although more defensible: they were certainly concerned with broader issues given the scope of the show). Even the “cozy” academia of dark academia TikTok often - as many continue to point out - centers whiteness, elite institution, and genderless or highly aestheticized forms of queerness that reproduce privilege.

Repurposing this fantasy can be fatal. Not all memory is reactionary. The memory of something often cannot confront its consequences. To put it plainly, not everybody is allowed to be nostalgic in the same way. For many, the past is not a place to return to but a site of ongoing rupture which we smooth over presently.

In a world unmoored from a stable narrative where the future feels speculative at best, it is tempting to find refuge in the image of a more coherent past. But we must proceed with caution, as we might be worked out of our capacity to imagine anything else.