

Back to the Future — Of the Collective Emplotment of Idealized Pasts and Sustainable Futures

Anna Tabouratzidis

Justus-Liebig-University Giessen / International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Anna.tabouratzidis@ggk.uni-giessen.de ; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6253-1083>

Abstract:

Futures Worth Preserving: Cultural Constructions of Nostalgia and Sustainability (eds. Schröder et al.), an edited volume that probes the boundaries of traditional academic anthologies to do justice to the transdisciplinarity of objects of research by incorporating academic, creative, and activist contributions, disentangles the underlying assumptions of curated cultural narratives about 'futures worth preserving.' The volume juxtaposes theories of nostalgia with concepts of sustainability and problematizes their grounding in Western conceptions of time.

Zurück in die Zukunft — Vom kollektiven Emplotment idealisierter Vergangenheiten und nachhaltiger Zukünfte

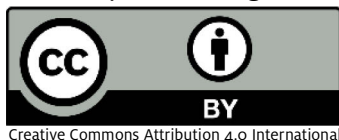
German Abstract:

Futures Worth Preserving. Cultural Constructions of Nostalgia and Sustainability (Hrsg. Schröder et al.), ein Sammelband, der, indem er akademische, kreative und aktivistische Beiträge einbezieht, die Grenzen traditioneller akademischer Sammelbände auslotet, um so der Transdisziplinarität seiner Forschungsgegenstände gerecht zu werden, entwirrt die zugrundeliegenden Annahmen kuratierter kultureller Narrative über 'bewahrensweite Zukünfte' und stellt kritisch Theorien der Nostalgie Konzepten der Nachhaltigkeit gegenüber.

How to cite:

Tabouratzidis, Anna: "Back to the Future — Of the Collective Emplotment of Idealized Pasts and Sustainable Futures [Review of: Schröder, Andressa; Nico Völker, Robert A. Winkler and Tom Clucas (eds.): *Futures Worth Preserving: Cultural Constructions of Nostalgia*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2019.]." In: KULT_online 64 (2021).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2021.1211>



Back to the Future — Of the Collective Emplotment of Idealized Pasts and Sustainable Futures

Anna Tabouratzidis

Justus-Liebig-University Giessen / International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Schröder, Andressa; Nico Völker, Robert A. Winkler and Tom Clucas (eds.). *Futures Worth Preserving. Cultural Constructions of Nostalgia*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2019. 272 pages, 44,99 EUR. ISBN: 978-3-8376-4122-6.

The short title of the edited volume — *Futures Worth Preserving* — perfectly captures the initial surprise and feeling of encountering a paradox: futures that are worth preserving? How would one judge or evaluate what kind of ‘future’ is sustainable and thus worth preserving if one has not lived through it? Preserve in which way, in what form? For whom? Whose future is it, after all? The subtitle — *Cultural Constructions of Nostalgia and Sustainability* — provides insight into formal aspects of these futures and their temporal entanglement: cultural constructions of the past arising out of nostalgic yearnings which are deemed worthy of being sustained for the future. The volume thus takes its impetus from the complex interplay of nostalgia and sustainability, perceiving the present as the ‘locus of overlap,’ emphasizing that the juxtaposition of the two opens up a space for examining the temporal nexus at which they work. The cultural constructions under scrutiny here are a broad range of cultural narratives which intersect in their envisioning of sustainable futures by drawing on “nostalgic resources of the past” (p. 9) — narrative templates which function as sense- and meaning-making resources. The 13 contributions from literary and cultural studies, history, anthropology, and arts activism are preceded by an introduction by the editors which provides valuable insights into the conceptual history of nostalgia and sustainability and their juxtaposition in the context of the present transdisciplinary volume.

Within recent research, nostalgia is perceived as both retro- and prospective, as imagining both idealized pasts and ‘remember[ing] forward,’ it is conceptualized as a symptom of social dissonances which spark a longing for a past time — rather than a place. Different approaches and conceptualizations of nostalgia are pitted against one another; however, the editors and their contributors all come back to the distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia

(*sensu* Svetlana Boym): The former laying emphasis on rebuilding a lost home, re-inventing what was lost based on narrative constructions such as (founding) myths; the latter being an imperfect process of 'dwelling in affliction,' longing for a past and, simultaneously, being aware of its irrevocability. Nostalgia as a symptom of disruption can quickly have debilitating effects, the volume argues, resulting in the creation of a supposedly harmonious version of the past that never existed, perpetuating ill-founded beliefs and values, and causing a fear of the future.

Equally reliant on progress narratives and notions of linearity dominated by Western concepts of time, sustainability is defined as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs," (World Commission on Environment and Development: *Our Common Future*. Oxford 1987, p. 43) quoting from the infamous *Brundtland Report*. Founded on economic, social, and environmental criteria, cultural dimensions and non-linear conceptions of time are, according to the editors, not pronounced enough in conceptualizations of sustainability, which becomes apparent in the anthropocentric and utilitarian approaches that clearly lack any consideration of the more-than-human. In her contribution on paradoxes of US-American environmentalism and its national park system, literary scholar Ioanna Kipourou calls for redefining sustainability, which has been shaped to a considerable extent by the conservation movement in the US, as '*post-capitalist*' so that the concept decenters the anthropos and does away with the idea of humans as managers of nature's resources.

The complex interplay of nostalgia and sustainability is laid bare in the construction of cultural narratives which present an (idealized) version of the past deemed worthy of being preserved, thereby betraying their underlying values and assumptions of what a preferable state is and implicitly assuming that these values will remain stable over the course of time and are being decided upon on behalf of the absent, as sociologist Andreas Langenohl succinctly puts it in his afterword. Illustrative of the desire for a bygone past that inspires future designs is the contribution by Moritz Berkemeier, teacher and cultural studies scholar, who focusses on the commodifying potential of restorative nostalgia in the context of post-suburban development. Nostalgia is being deployed rhetorically and architecturally to construct a narrative of 'the good life in small-town America' that is both worth sustaining for the future due its values, traditions, and qualities and because these post-suburbs are being presented as ecological

and economic sustainable. Pitted against the anonymity of the city and the uncertainty of the current moment, these past futures manifest themselves in neighborhoods lined with white picket fences that could not be less neighborly and sustainable. Berkemeier's example further illustrates a point made by S. D. Chrostowska, utopian studies scholar, who investigates the role nostalgia plays in the genesis and sustainability of values, and states that gentrification, among others, "evokes a privileged anterior time as a model for the present" which is "ascribed greater value" (p. 38) and thus given precedence over alternative ways of life.

Reframing nostalgia from past-oriented to future-oriented as illustrated above does not necessarily have to result in unsustainable, essentialist, and idealist ways of life but, as Lisa Simpson's artistic contribution shows, can be framed positively and thereby highlight the transformative potential and utopian impulse that reflective nostalgia carries with it. Simpson's performative art combines music production and the repurposing of old textiles linking nostalgia with sustainability and shifting the focus from past to future, from fast to slow fashion. Having set out to contribute to discourses of nostalgia and sustainability, the editors and contributors of *Futures Worth Preserving: Cultural Constructions of Nostalgia and Sustainability* have succeeded in combining creative and academic pieces to examine the act of selection, combination, and evaluation by individuals and social groups – their collective emplotment – of a repertoire of cultural and environmental aspects deemed worthy of being sustained for the future. What remains to be explored, and for which this edited volume has laid an important foundation, is the desire called utopia (*sensu* Fredric Jameson), its entanglement with values, its cultural manifestations across the globe, and its influence on concepts of nostalgia and sustainability.