

## Through the Lens of Nostalgia: New Perspectives on Memory and Trauma

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### English Abstract:

The edited volume *Trauma and Nostalgia: Practices in Memory and Identity* explores the relations between trauma, nostalgia, and memory construction across diverse cultural and historical contexts. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives, it examines how nostalgia shapes collective identities and influences contemporary perceptions. Case studies, encompassing various localities in Spain, Italy, the US, and Afghanistan, provide valuable insights. As a great practical contribution to memory studies, the book enriches the field with new case studies.

Durch die Linse der Nostalgie. Neue Sichtweisen auf Erinnerung und Trauma

### Abstract:

Der Sammelband *Trauma and Nostalgia: Practices in Memory and Identity* erforscht die Beziehungen zwischen Trauma, Nostalgie und Gedächtniskonstruktion in diversen kulturellen und historischen Kontexten. Mittels interdisziplinärer Perspektiven wird untersucht, wie Nostalgie kollektive Identitäten formt und zeitgenössische Wahrnehmungen beeinflusst. Fallstudien, die verschiedene Orte in Spanien, Italien, den USA und Afghanistan umfassen, bieten wertvolle Einblicke. Das Buch ist ein praktischer Beitrag zur Gedächtnisforschung und bereichert das Feld um neue Fallstudien.

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What if history was not just remembered, but rewritten – its darkest moments polished into something golden? How does nostalgia turn trauma into myth, making the past seem not only better but necessary? In contemporary Italy, for example, the phrase “Quando c’era Lui...” (“When He was here...”) resurfaces in political discourse, invoking Mussolini’s era as a time of order and prosperity. But is this true to history or is nostalgia playing a trick on us? Through the careful filtering of trauma, nostalgia does not just recall the past – it reinvents it, raising unsettling questions about how easily history can be made to serve the present. The edited volume, *Trauma and Nostalgia: Practices in Memory and Identity*, addresses these questions and enriches the field of memory studies with various case studies from an interdisciplinary perspective. The volume considers the mutual influence of traumatic memory and nostalgia, analyzing how they combine to form a complex understanding of a reconstructed past.

The opening essay by editors Srdjan Sremac and Lucien van Liere provides a broad and introductory understanding of trauma and nostalgia, highlighting the subjective nature of memory, the power of dominant narratives, and the ways in which nostalgia can be used to shape both present and future realities. The editors of the volume set out to explore “processes through which trauma and nostalgia become intertwined, how they are constructed and transfigured in these processes and shape individual as well as collective identities,” and the role of modern technologies “in circulating images and narratives about traumatic and nostalgic pasts” with different case studies (p. 12). Thus, the volume asserts that nostalgia interprets and reflects present relations rather than bringing a past back to life.

In the second essay, Dan Arav analyzes the visual memory of the Gulf War and its connection to trauma and nostalgia. Arav explores how Israeli Gulf War television broadcasts turned domestic spaces into battlegrounds, merging drama, mundanity, trauma, and humor, thereby fundamentally shaping national war perception and historical memory. Notwithstanding the overall theoretical strength of the text, it is regrettable that the author prioritizes the narration of the content of the conflicts over the analysis of their function in the collective memory. This is further compounded by the absence of ‘first-hand thoughts’ from individuals who experienced the Gulf War.

Examining the Italian fascist period, Mario Panico then illustrates how nostalgia acts as a filter that can distort the past when used as a political tool to solidify collective identities. Focusing on the notion of ‘cultural filtering,’ he explores how this process is driven by ideological and cultural forces, resulting in the distortion of historical narratives through an emphasis on positive aspects while diminishing or even eradicating the traumatic elements. Panico argues that this “nostalgic glorification,” (p. 72) runs the risk of normalizing or romanticizing the past. The author’s argument that irony serves as a powerful counter-narrative is successfully supported by an examination of figures such as Stalin, Hitler, Ceausescu, and Kim Jong in contemporary media, where irony can, in my view, highlight the gap between nostalgic distortions and historical facts, combat the trivialization of trauma, and reassert the importance of these traumatic histories.

Similar to the previous chapter, M. Paula O’Donohoe explores the complex interplay between trauma and nostalgia in the transmission of memories of the Spanish Civil War and Franco regime. Donohoe shows how these memories are shaped by family narratives, public discourse, media, and education, and how they continue to influence contemporary Spanish society. In particular, her understanding of the transgenerational aspect of memory transmission can be seen as a productive extension of Marianne Hirsch’s work on postmemory, as Donohoe argues that fragmented family memories become the primary source of historical understanding in the absence of formal education.

Using the Afghanistan National Museum as a case study, Bram Verhagen and Srdjan Sremac explore the interplay of trauma, nostalgia, and material culture in post-conflict state-building.

The authors demonstrate that the museum fails to achieve its goal of promoting a unified Afghan identity, because it is perceived by the wider public as a symbol of Western influence and fails to engage most Afghans due to geographical inaccessibility, Western-centric design, and exclusion of local languages, highlighting the challenges of creating inclusive cultural institutions in post-conflict contexts. While the argument is compelling, the essay is lacking in theoretical foundation and would have benefitted greatly from an exploration of the norms of behavior, social customs, and belief systems that define Afghan society. Because key distinctions between Afghan oral culture and European material culture are not acknowledged, the comparison of the museum and its societal function becomes Eurocentric and ultimately futile. In order to undertake a comprehensive analysis of Afghan culture, it is necessary to adopt a more robust postcolonial perspective, particularly when considering Afghanistan's historical role as a buffer zone between Russia and the British Empire.

Chapters five, seven, and the final chapter of the volume critically examine the intersections of trauma, nostalgia, and cultural memory in film and television, which gives the volume a coherent thematical structure and creates a concise body of research. In chapter five, Mariecke van den Berg and Jan Grimell explore the representation of the psychological aftermath of war in homecoming films, focusing on veterans' experiences with PTSD, moral injury, and the broader societal implications of trauma and masculinity. They argue that nostalgia functions as both a coping mechanism and a cultural force shaping reintegration narratives, though the chapter notably omits the perspectives of civilians, non-Western contexts, and female service members. The emphasis on film and television in these chapters, while relevant, tends to overshadow other forms of media. An examination of digital media, for example, could have offered a more complete understanding of how contemporary audiences engage with and make sense of the past.

In chapter seven, Mathijs Peters analyzes Edgar Reitz's "Heimat" films to critique Hartmut Rosa's concepts of 'resonance' and 'Heimat' (homeland), arguing that *Heimat* can never be free of nostalgia. Applying Svetlana Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia, Peters shows that Reitz's films link nostalgia, trauma, and German cultural memory, especially with regard to the Holocaust. In the final chapter of the volume, Joshua Hollmann

analyzes the television series *Mad Men* (2007–2015), arguing that its depiction of the 1960s reflects contemporary American anxieties about identity and belonging. He demonstrates how the series engages with cultural trauma (e.g., the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement) by drawing on various forms of nostalgia, such as utopian, collective, reflective, and reconciliatory.

Overall, the edited volume reveals how nostalgia works to distort personal, cultural, and collective memory. While significant academic research has been conducted on the theoretical underpinnings of nostalgia and trauma, this edited volume makes a substantial contribution to memory studies through its integration of media studies and visual memory, which enriches the existing scholarly corpus. In my view, Panico's challenge to Umberto Eco's 'memory filtering theory' and Mathijs Peters' critical approach to Hartmut Rosa's attempt to develop a 'nostalgia-free' interpretation of *Heimat* and resonance represent significant new theoretical contributions. The volume's case studies, predominantly centered on the West, offer a valuable addition to the existing body of knowledge in this field. However, its focus on 'Western' cases of memory and its limitation to cultural contingencies prevent it from fostering a comprehensive comparative understanding.

Verhagen's and Sremac's chapter on the Afghanistan National Museum provides a welcome disruption from the otherwise Western-centric orientation of the volume. Nevertheless, its practical emphasis on post-conflict pedagogy appears somewhat incongruous with the volume's theoretical exploration of trauma and nostalgia. While other essays meticulously examine memory and identity through cultural, sociological, and psychological lenses, Verhagen and Sremac focus on intervention. This deviates from the volume's overarching theme, which focuses on the complex interplay between trauma and nostalgic memory. Regardless of these minor concerns, the edited volume offers a valuable perspective on the broader cultural dynamics between memory, trauma, and nostalgia, making it a worthwhile read.