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Kara Jasper

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Nostalgia in Entertainment

Kara Jasper

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Neon signs, big hair, and Volkswagen vans that shine in pastel colors are images that evoke a sense of lived history, a time not too long ago in our memory. These nostalgic images are increasingly prevalent in media, as shows such as *Friends*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *Full House* make a resurgence, and as new media develops set in older time periods, like *Stranger Things*. Remakes of Disney movies or continuations of movie series that ended years ago, such as *The Matrix*, are fueling nostalgia driven entertainment.

Nostalgia is the key element that characterizes this media—it is “pleasure and sadness that is caused by remembering something from the past and wishing that you could experience it again.”¹ Bound up in nostalgia are memories of carefree forgetfulness of responsibility, ease of life, joyous laughter, and sheer play that does not demand productivity. Nostalgia brings back a childhood imagination that carries a note of sadness because of the stark contrast between the hope and bliss of then, and the drudgery and reality of now. Whimsy and wonder intertwined in the world of this word. It should be unsurprising, then, that this feeling or state of mind is increasingly prevalent in culture, especially in the entertainment industry. Thus, we will articulate some of the theology, critiques, and hopes found in the trend of nostalgia in entertainment.

Meaning in Nostalgia

Hope for the future is still relevant in entertainment (as seen in *Dune*), but the plethora of movies about the future have lost some of their shine and intrigue. The audience’s excitement for what is to come has diminished, and our cultural engagement is growing smaller because of the lack of vision we hold. Our prophetic imagination is shrinking because of the real pain and despair that we have experienced.² The past holds a type of discarded hope, a longing for what once was, before the influence of technology and a polarized public began to seep its way into all corners of life. We have started to see the effects of greed and progression, and thus the yearning for a simpler time presents an opportunity for escapism and whimsical interaction with the pure, unadulterated good. The setting of shows such as *Cheers* or *Friends* feels safe and familiar to the audience. The desire for a simple life is not wrong, yet escapism for past simpler times of others’ lives presents the problem of substitution and idolatry.

A deeper element of this trend that I resonate with is the multifaceted world of the term nostalgia. That word has always been attractive to me, and C. S. Lewis’ writing has broadened

that understanding. Nostalgia is something more than wishing for the past and the simplicity that it holds. Lewis articulates that there is a quite elusive element here: “We usually notice just as the moment of vision dies away, as the music ends, or as the landscape loses the celestial light.”³ Here, longing is a key element—the reality escaping our grasp, “Beauty has smiled, but not to welcome us; her face was turned in our direction, but not to see us.”⁴

Elements of beauty course through this genre of entertainment, culminating in a life accompanied by a distinct message offering a vision of what life could be. This is often portrayed through the eyes of children. Their whimsical nature of approaching the world gives the audience hope that this, too, is how they may interact with the world. *Stranger Things*, a Netflix television show, has several children as their main characters. Potentially, this could show our need to see a restored humanity—that peace and reconciliation can happen through the birth of a restored child. The storyline begins to feel familiar. The age before screens is pictured as a type of Eden; the Fall is the rise of technology and busyness, and we live in the aftermath with no hope for a Messiah.

The audience must be cautious of wholeheartedly accepting this trend of nostalgia. There can be emotional manipulation that makes kitschy art easy to consume. Kelton Cobb, discussing and quoting Theodor Adorno, a sociologist in the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, notes a particularly helpful point about the purity of art: “Unlike genuine art, which is difficult to experience, the reception of kitsch is effortless...moreover, is ‘pre-digested’ art, which, as in the case of popular music, offers a ‘composition which hears for the listener’ and ‘promotes conditioned reflexes,’ thus leaving the imagination dormant.”⁵ Media that incorporates nostalgia may not always include kitsch, but it should be recognized that those in power—both artists and corporations—know how easy it is to play on emotions, particularly those that involve wishing for easier times. Does the media we consume show something beautiful, prompt further actions of love, or bring awareness to reality and the meaning behind it? Asking questions keeps us from engaging with art as merely a sounding board for our feelings.

Power in Nostalgia

The element of power is pervasive in the economic side of nostalgia in entertainment. The consumers’ natural gravitation toward the familiar does not go unnoticed in a capitalist economy. In this view, commodified nostalgia—this emotion or state of being—is monetized and controlled. Emotions are close to the heart, and sellers understand that the heart directs the actions of consumers. Capitalizing on the desires of a population is the way that things sell.

But nostalgia has the funny tendency to make us view the past in a way that is not consistent with reality. Within personal memory, it is tempting at times to remember the past with rose-colored glasses, while forgetting the bad things. It should come as no surprise, then, that our societal nostalgia often neglects to portray the evils and oppression existent in the past. It would be untrue to say that all wrongdoing has been abolished, but we have made headway in

recognizing the evils of racism and sexism and working towards the societal reconciliation of broken relationships.

Accompanying the happy images of red swiveling barstools are Jim Crow laws and suppressed women. Glorified nostalgia lacks acknowledgement of the harm we've done and the hurt we've caused. When media brings back the picture of the good old days, companies are asking us to participate in selective memory. For all the ground that has been fought for and gained in terms of justice, is this not a slap in the face to those who have lived through injustices? When we are soothed to indifference, our awareness and compassion decreases. Further, entertainment companies "churn out art and entertainment that lull the oppressed into believing that they are actually happy with their lot in life."⁶ The nostalgic entertainment industry is "the new opiate of the masses, a means by which the elite preserve their privilege."⁷

Community in Nostalgia

The biggest thing at play in nostalgic entertainment is the portrayal of community. Moments of ecstasy arrive in times of togetherness, time spent with family. A simpler time when we loved or were at least ambivalent to the person we passed in the grocery store, instead of intense polarization and hate of others. Everyone is on edge all the time, partially because of hyper-connectivity that can shatter our world in mere moments, or because of the increasing lack of civil discourse. Thus, the communities we see on screens feel enticing. Because the reality of our lives does not match up with the reality of the show, imagining we are a part of it scratches our itch for community. This is a form of escapism.

The sacredness of nostalgia is found in simplicity, in taking things at face value, no complexity or grey areas as far as the colored plain reaches. The trend of nostalgia portrayed effortlessly gives hope to the audience that this time of simplicity and honesty might return. There is an intrinsically good element at play here, where the hope of a future with no more argument between friends, agonizing moral decisions, or a world that is falling apart at the seams, truly exists. There is hope for what is ahead, and the nostalgic elements in entertainment grasp at a deeper longing springing from a mere few decades ago.

The good life in nostalgic entertainment is bound up in the attention span, as well as a healthier divide between work and play. In the present, work has been easily brought into the home, and with screens surrounding our lives in ever-present, ever-increasing ways, boundaries are disappearing. We begin to feel invincible in our lack of limits; we feel this ravaging of splintered attention in our bones, and so we long for a world of set boundaries.

One of the main hopes of this trend is to feel something—preferably a good emotion with a hint of sadness. We want to be a part of something bigger than ourselves.⁸ The gospel offers the hope of being connected to a larger story, a narrative that bring hope for our future rather than despair. The audience that participates in the trend of captured nostalgia desires the elusive message that will begin to explain the hope of something more true, beautiful, and

good. Nostalgia is often just a glimpse of something else, something deeper. C. S. Lewis notes that this mysteriousness is deeper than we may think: “I am trying to rip open the inconsolable secret in each of you—the secret which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence.”⁹

We want to explain the longing and yearning in our hearts with the diagnosis of nostalgia. For a moment, it seems to capture the inexpressible, the desire of belonging and cultivating just beyond our grasp. The story of Jesus of Nazareth consistently shows a care for those who are searching for belonging, a welcome home to the beauty of abiding in the God who made every beautiful thing. Holding hope for a future where all will be made new is more secure than hoping for an 80’s vibe, or college-like communities (*Seinfeld* or *Friends*), to stay. In the despair of today, when hope is fragile and dangerous, the promise of restoration is necessary. It is this hope that audiences search for.

Conclusion

I recently went to an assisted living home where one resident had displayed outside her door a sign that read “Christmas: When Times Were Simple.” There is a similar longing among both the young and old that simple things are right things. This is the picture of nostalgia, a wonderful emotion that unites people and speaks to their deepest yearnings. And yet, it often turns into escapism or blindness to reality when we forget those whose pasts we are erasing, or when we perceive the past as a false utopia. Escapism comes into play when we elevate the “good old days” as an excuse to neglect the active work that we are called to do today.

May we choose to uplift the art that involves our full humanity, not just the stroking of our emotions. When we hear the longings of a world in need of belonging and beauty, may we offer the gospel, where the search for beauty finds its home in the heart of the LORD. It is in dwelling with our Father that restoration of the world will come, when beauty is fulfilled and our longings find their ultimate rest.

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1. “Nostalgia Definition & Meaning,” Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster), accessed December 13, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nostalgia>.
 2. Walter Brueggemann and Davis Hankins, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018).
 3. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (London: William Collins, 2013), 39.

4. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (London: William Collins, 2013), 40.
5. Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 47.
6. Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 46.
7. Justin Ariel Bailey, *Interpreting Your World* (Rough Draft, 2021), 56
8. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Praising God in Song: Beauty and the Arts," in *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness and Wisdom* (London, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2016).
9. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (London: William Collins, 2013), 29-30.