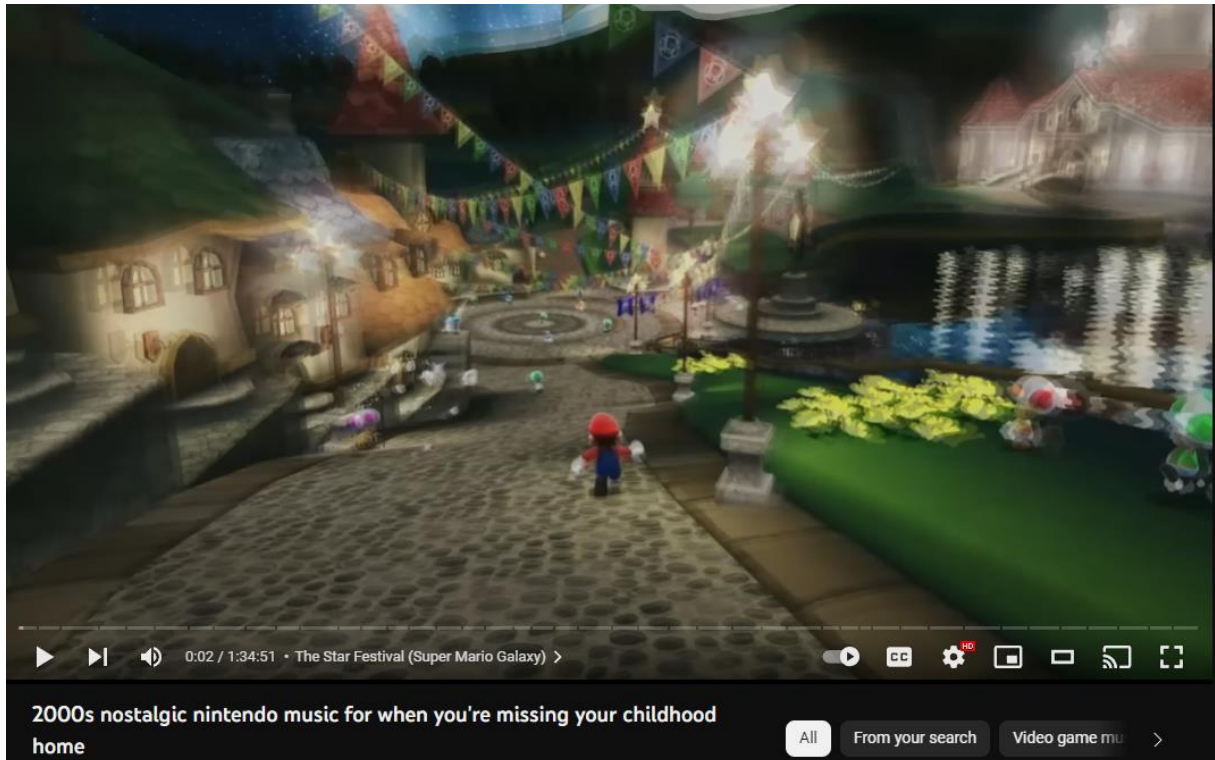


# The Loveliest Lies of All:

A Phenomenological Account of Personal & Collective Forms of Nostalgia



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## Abstract:

Nostalgia is rampant in our present times. Culturally, we see it with the many remakes, sequels, or reboots of different pieces of media. Politically, it has been utilized in the past decade by the radical right to garner support to 'restore' society to a previous and better condition. It seems that nostalgia has a collective dimension, as opposed to it merely being an individual emotion or condition. While this has been suggested within philosophy, there has been little research into this possible communal dimension. This thesis therefore uses (phenomenological) literature on nostalgia, collective (affective) intentionality, and collective emotions to construct an account of personal and collective nostalgia that can help in explaining the phenomenon and the reason for its popularity in our current times. It will also further explore the link that has been suggested in the literature between anxiety and nostalgia, especially when it comes to collective forms of the feeling.

**Keywords:** Nostalgia, Collective Affective Intentionality, Collective Emotions.

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Dancing in a swirl

Of golden memories

The loveliest

*Lies*

Of all

- *Into the Unknown* by Patrick McHale

## 1. Nostalgia is Everywhere

“We are the flagship of the renaissance fleet” said Thierry Baudet in 2017 at the first party convention of Forum Voor Democratie (FvD).<sup>1</sup> Known for his use of mediocre Latin and a repeated glorification of the Dutch colonial past, the politician has come to be the ‘flagship’ for the alternative right movement in The Netherlands. He pridefully reminisces about a time in the past in which things used to be better, when the Netherlands was stronger, and one could be proud of their Dutch identity. Rhetoric about the renaissance fleet, imagery of old colonial ships, and FvD’s logo which looks like a Greek temple; they all seem to point towards a past that is long gone. Even the name of the party itself is a direct callback to the Fora in which the Roman democracies used to play out. This direct form of democracy is in stark opposition to the current state of our political system, Baudet would surely argue.

Even though these imageries of past are all outside of the scope of the lifetimes of Baudet and his followers, they do seem to strike a chord. They see a society full of problems, and remember a time when, in their eyes, everything was better than it is now. Politicians like Baudet make cunning use of these sentiments and use them to stir up nostalgic feelings. “Things might not be as great as they once were or as you remembered, but *I* can be the one to bring this lost empire back to reality.” It is no coincidence that Donald Trump’s slogan for the 2016 U.S. Presidential election was “Make America Great Again”, itself ironically already being used by Ronald Reagan in the 80’s. A focus on the past seems to be a political trend in the now.

This nostalgia can not only be found in the political sphere with actors like Baudet promising a restoration of a glorified past that never was. We can also see it in the media we consume which are increasingly harkening back to a previous era and recycling trends that

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.parlementairemonitor.nl/9353000/1/j9vvij5epmj1ev0/vkd4ghrv9dpw?ctx=vjuhtscjwpm>

were in fashion 10-20 years ago. One does not have to look far to see the plethora of remakes, sequels, reboots, or call-backs. From music to movies, tv shows and videogames, the past sells. There is even a term for this kind of media: "Nostalgia Bait". The success of both this political and cultural nostalgia shows that it somehow resonates with the personal experiences of people in our current times. What is nostalgia and why is it so prevalent? How come that both in the political arena, as well as in our free time we want to focus on past experiences and feelings? The scarce philosophical literature on nostalgia has suggested that it is related to anxiety. While nostalgia can feel good, it is also a temporary rose-tinted look into the past. Feelings of nostalgia and existential anxiety therefore co-exist and feed on each other. There is always a distance between the past and now. The past will never come back, even though one might want it to. This makes it feel pleasant and bittersweet at the same time.

In an age in which crises seem to stack upon each other, fleeing to a glorified past seems like a logical coping mechanism. Across the political spectrum and society, people are dealing with stressful and anxiety-inducing problems. The COVID crisis already resulted in constant stress, but rising socio-economic inequality and impending disasters such as climate change make the future more bleak than it has been for quite a while. For the first time in a long while it seems that future generations will not have a better standard of living when compared to their parents. Not since the cold war has the future been so uncertain, while the nostalgic past remains a pleasant constant. Therefore, nostalgia has become a widespread phenomenon both culturally and politically. But how does nostalgia function exactly? And could we perhaps even talk about some kind of collective nostalgia if we look at the broad political appeal of the feeling? These are the questions that will be answered in the upcoming chapters.

To do so, this thesis will mostly use literature from the phenomenological discipline to create an understanding of nostalgia. This focus was chosen as there already exists some research on the phenomenon of nostalgia within the discipline.<sup>2</sup> Besides looking at the way nostalgia has been presented, it will make use of research on adjacent feelings (e.g., anxiety) to develop a theory of the way nostalgia presently functions within individuals. While there

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<sup>2</sup> Using literature from the psychoanalytical discipline was also considered for this research. Since research on nostalgia within this area is virtually non-existent, it was deemed of less use to the questions at hand. In addition, it was also not feasible for this thesis to do extensive research into two disciplines' takes on the phenomenon. Since phenomenology seemed to be a more fruitful avenue for understanding nostalgia, it was chosen as the course to take.

is some research on the topic of nostalgia, it is quite fragmented and limited in scope. Therefore, a synthesis and clear definition of nostalgia will be presented to clarify the concept philosophically. After this is done, the thesis will build upon this definition to construct a theory of *collective nostalgia*. How is it that groups of people can remember such a glorified past collectively, as we can see in the situation of the Baudet and his followers? By building on the definition of personal nostalgia and using literature on collective feelings/emotions, this thesis will provide a first phenomenological understanding of collective nostalgia. This type of nostalgia can be a response to collective anxieties in society and has many similarities with the singular form of nostalgia. To conclude this thesis, implications of both definitions of collective and individual nostalgia will be treated to see what the future of nostalgia could look like. What can we expect from nostalgia in a rapidly changing world? And: What should further philosophical inquiry into nostalgia look like?

## 2. My Nostalgia

Nostos and Algos. Greek for (longing for) home and pain. If we look at the etymological definition of nostalgia, we can see it as a (painful) longing for home. A certain kind of homesickness. From a historical perspective, this definition seems accurate. The first use of the term 'nostalgia' found its origin in a dissertation by medical student Johannes Hofer in 1688.<sup>3</sup> It was an affliction found among Swiss mercenaries stationed abroad. The condition as it was first described could indeed be seen as a pathological form of homesickness. Patients were described to experience a host of symptoms, such as "[...] continued sadness, meditation only of the Fatherland, disturbed sleep, decrease of strength, hunger, thirst, senses diminished, and cares or even palpitations of the heart [...]"<sup>4</sup>. The only thing that could cure the condition would be the immediate transport of a patient back to their home country. Once there, they would quickly recover. At this point in the history of nostalgia, we do not yet see the positive and bittersweet aspect of the phenomenon. For medics of the time nostalgia was purely something negative, an illness to be cured.

In the centuries that followed, the medical aspect of the term became less and less prominent. Although there are reports of the disease being diagnosed up until the American Revolutionary War, nostalgia generally faded into other mental afflictions during these times.<sup>5</sup> With the advent of positive psychology and marketing research in the last decades it has even become something which is seen as more of a positive emotion or mood, albeit somewhat bittersweet and dual in nature at times.<sup>6</sup> Nostalgia is no longer the homesickness it was, but has become more of a longing for the past. It is something we can enjoy and revel in, even something that can be sold to us. We seem to have moved from an extremely negative perception of the term, to an extremely positive one. From illness to affect. Jeff Malpas has described this change as a move from spatial to temporal displacement.<sup>7</sup> In the past, nostalgia used to be predominantly spatial in nature (a longing for the past because one is spatially away from home) while in current times nostalgia is mostly temporal in nature (a longing for the past because one misses a 'sense of home' that was found in said

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<sup>3</sup> Donald M. Anderson and Godfrey Tryggve Anderson, "Nostalgia and Malingering in the Military During the Civil War," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 28, no. 1 (1984): 156–66, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pbm.1984.0021>.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, 386.

<sup>5</sup> Donald M. Anderson and Godfrey Tryggve Anderson, "Nostalgia and Malingering in the Military During the Civil War," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 28, no. 1 (1984): 156–66, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pbm.1984.0021>.

<sup>6</sup> Clay Routledge, "From the Past to the Present: A History of Nostalgia," in *Nostalgia: A Psychological Resource* (Routledge, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Jeff Malpas, "Philosophy's Nostalgia," in *Philosophy's Moods: The Affective Grounds of Thinking*, ed. Hagi Kanaan and Ilit Ferber (Springer, 2011), 88.



past). With such a changing perception of the term in the past centuries, what does nostalgia entail philosophically overall?

## 2.2 The Role of Past and Memory

It is important to first discern what the difference is between a nostalgic experience and memory. Whereas the two are sometimes conflated, especially in popular culture, the reality is much more complex. It is crucial to understand that while memory and remembering are directly linked to a specific experience; the feeling of nostalgia does not have to be. Nostalgia and memory are both about the past, of course, but they are structured and experienced quite differently.

While accounts of nostalgia differ amongst philosophers, what is clear is that in nostalgia the past is enacted and rebuilt internally. As Edward Casey argues: “The world about which we are nostalgic refuses reduction to the determinacy of particular places just as it cannot be captured in isolated recollections.”<sup>8</sup> In this sense, memory does not play a definite role in nostalgia as there is nothing that is specifically remembered. It is a general feeling of pastness that is evoked which may link to certain past experiences but is never directly situated in one of them. Casey, who claims nostalgia to be a construction of a ‘world-under-nostalgement’ explains it as follows “[...] such a world is both determinate as having already elapsed (i.e., as ‘past’ in relation to the present moment) and yet undeterminable as never having occurred in a particular past moment (i.e., as possessing an ‘absolute past’).”<sup>9</sup> This is what separates nostalgia from mere memory. It feels determinate, like a memory, but is undeterminable in the sense that the evoked pastness is not an *absolute* past. It is a construction of a feeling of pastness and can therefore not be found in one singular memory. This sense of pastness has therefore also been dubbed *aeonic time* by James Hart. He states that the focus of nostalgia is not a specific moment, but that nostalgia is about “[...] eras, seasons, or eons.”<sup>10</sup> In this sense, nostalgia has also been described as a combination of memory and creativity, or of fiction and nonfiction. Curiously, there thus exists a difference in the status or importance of memories within the nostalgic experience. While most philosophers agree that nostalgia has a fictive (or creative) and non-fictive

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<sup>8</sup> Edward Casey, “The World of Nostalgia,” *Man And World* 20, no. 4 (1985): 377.

<sup>9</sup> Idem, 379.

<sup>10</sup> James G. Hart, “Toward a Phenomenology of Nostalgia,” *Man And World* 6, no. 4 (1973): 406, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01246601>.

aspect to it, there is no consensus on whether this non-fictional aspect can be ascribed purely to memory or to something else.

One alternative to the memory view is that of iconic representations by Steven Galt Crowell.<sup>11</sup> The difference here is that the representational content of the nostalgic feeling is not based upon memory that needs to be imbued with extrinsic narrativized meaning to be felt as affective. As an example of his view of memory: I may remember my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday on which I received my now favorite Pokémon game, but this recollection only gets its meaning through narrativizing around the memory at the moment of recollection. Crowell's point here is not that recollections do not have an affective dimension, but that this dimension is attached externally by the 'I' after recollection through narrativizing. Meaning is attached and not intrinsically present. Iconic nostalgic representation on the other hand, is already imbued with significance and meaning from the moment it is experienced. That is what makes it iconic.

Crowell sees the nostalgic first-person content as being intrinsically significant from the moment it is experienced. The contents of these representations therefore "[...] serve as portals in which we experience something of *present* significance. The icons speak not of the way things were, but of the ways things are."<sup>12</sup> Nostalgic reminiscence brings a feeling of pastness to the now. When I hear a song from the past, for example, I might get nostalgic and feel a longing for a time in the past that is linked to the song. This happens instantaneously however, and that is what makes it iconic and nostalgic. I do not remember a specific moment when the song played, but a general sense of pastness that is associated with said song. Therefore, adding meaning to this experience by narrativizing after experiencing it is not needed for nostalgia to be felt as something affective.

It is here that we can indeed pinpoint one of the first commonalities across the different forms of nostalgia that have been described within philosophy. While remembrance is often focused on a specific past, the content of nostalgia is much more general. It is about pastness in a more undeterminable (as Casey names it) sense. An example to illustrate this with can be found in a host of videos that became popular during the pandemic on YouTube which could be dubbed "bathroom party videos".<sup>13</sup> These videos

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<sup>11</sup> Steven Galt Crowell, "Spectral History: Narrative, Nostalgia, and the Time of the I," *Research in Phenomenology* 29, no. 1 (1999): 93–94, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156916499x00064>.

<sup>12</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>13</sup> See for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zn67tAr1T9Y>

all had titles like “you're in a bathroom at a 20xx's party”. In them, a picture of a club bathroom is shown while reverbed popular music from a particular era plays in the background. This creates the illusion of being in the bathroom at a party in a club. The popularity of these videos and the nostalgic comments under them showcase the generality of nostalgia. These videos strike a chord because they offer a general experience of pastness. One ‘recollects’ a general atmosphere of a party from a specific era, but no one specific party when hearing the music and seeing the bathroom. Memories play a role, but in nostalgia there are no singular memories that are recollected. All in all, the temporal character of nostalgia is thus defined by a general feeling of ‘pastness’ that is brought into the now.

### 2.3 The Object of Nostalgia

As is clear then, a general sense of pastness is evoked in the nostalgic experience. This is not mere memory according to most philosophers, but also a phenomenon that makes use of imagination, creativity, or ‘iconic representation’. Then, what is the exact content of the nostalgic experience? Although briefly treated by referencing the work of Crowell, this question does warrant some further exploration in this section. If memories are not the content of the nostalgic experience, but rather an evoked sense of pastness, then what is this evoked sense we are focused on? Where does it come from and how does it manifest itself to the ‘I’?

For Dylan Trigg, the idea of home is the essential focus of nostalgic intentionality.<sup>14</sup> He characterizes nostalgia as something both temporal (past) and spatial (home) in nature. Trigg distinguishes between two types of ‘home’ on which nostalgia is focused: Home as a physical site that serves as a place of familiarity, and home as a general atmosphere connected to a specific era. It is especially this latter definition of home which is of such importance to the longing that is connected to nostalgia. We are nostalgic for this feeling of *being-at-home* as Trigg calls it by invoking Heidegger. We do not want to return to “[...] a definite place or time, but more to a certain atmosphere that is characterized by plenitude, integration, unity, and perhaps above all, an innocence marked by the complete absence of nostalgia itself.”<sup>15</sup> It is the general sense of pastness which we are transported to that acts as

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<sup>14</sup> Dylan Trigg, “From Anxiety to Nostalgia: A Heideggerian Analysis. In *Existential Medicine: Essays on Health and Illness*,” in *Existential Medicine: Essays on Health and Illness*, ed. Kevin Aho (Rowman and Littlefield International, 2018), 45 & 49.

<sup>15</sup> Idem, 53.

a gateway to this feeling of integration. A feeling of unity, a feeling of 'home'. Objects, sensory sensations, or social interactions that remind us of the past are the starting point for nostalgia and through them this sense of general pastness is evoked.<sup>16</sup> This in turn leads to the feeling of 'home' and presence which is the actual intentional focus of nostalgia. Think of the nostalgic song that was mentioned in the previous section. It can be seen as a gateway to nostalgia, but it is not in itself the focus of the feeling. The song triggers a feeling of general pastness, which then gives one a warm feeling of integration and familiarity. I am not nostalgic about the song, but about a time in which the song was played in which I was and felt purely present. It is this feeling of unity that one felt in the past that one is nostalgic for, which is conflated with the general sense of pastness it is associated with in nostalgia. It seems to be spatial, as it feels like the nostalgic sense of past is an actual place one can return to.

In this sense, memory does serve as a basis to some form of remembrance when confronted with the 'gateway' object or sensation. However, once imagination takes over, the past is brought into the now and reconstructed. The general feeling of pastness is not a specific memory. It is a connection between memories, and a reimagining of parts of these memories to form a nostalgic feeling of home. That one song that used to play during school dances and parties when you were 18 does not make you nostalgic about one specific dance but rather about a time in which that song was prominent. And since you do not have general memories of certain eras (or of aeonic time), imagination is needed to actively reconstruct this and bring it in the now. Nostalgia can then be seen as a feeling of integration based on a general past made current, activated by some object, sensation, or social interaction one has memories about. From here memory recognizes the object and is activated. However, instead of remembering specific memories and adding narratives to them, imagination constructs a united feeling of pastness. The *icon* is intrinsically meaningful. An era or atmosphere is created by bringing a feeling associated with the memories in the now. Consequently, through this sense of pastness, a feeling of unity and

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<sup>16</sup> Sensory sensations and social cues, together with feelings of distress have been found to be the most prominent triggers of nostalgia in psychological research. See: Tim Wildschut et al., "Nostalgia: Content, Triggers, Functions.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 91, no. 5 (November 1, 2006): 981, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.91.5.975>; Moreover, this was already apparent in the days in of the Swiss mercenaries. It has been claimed they were even forbidden from singing certain 'nostalgic' songs that reminded them of home. See: Fritz Frauchiger, "The Swiss Kuhreihen," *The Journal of American Folklore* 54, no. 213/214 (July 1, 1941): 129, <https://doi.org/10.2307/535274>.

being at home becomes the intentional object of the nostalgic subject. Past made present in the literal sense. *Nostalgia is therefore made and not recollected.*<sup>17</sup>

## 2.4 The Nostalgic Subject

At this point, it is now known and understood that nostalgia is about a general sense of pastness. While triggered by certain intentional objects or sensations in the world, its intentionality is not of an object but of a general sense of time and pure presence. This can be seen as an era (aeonic time), and a feeling of home (as Trigg would say). What then, of the nostalgic subject? We know what nostalgia seems to be, but the role of the 'I' is still relatively underexposed. What is happening to the 'I' that focuses on this pastness? Here it is interesting to investigate the 'break' with the present that nostalgia is often described to be. Since the focus lies on pastness made present, there is a break with the present or intentional focus of the subject as well. The past is shot to the fore: (1) as once's mood changes (Trigg) (2) as the world becomes a nostalgic world (Casey), or, as we saw with Crowell's description of the internal significance of the iconic nostalgic object, (3) as meaning is presented instantaneously. In this sense, the (feeling of) past(ness) is also presented instantaneously to the subject. What changes between the moment before and after nostalgia? What does this break do to the subject? Is it the same before, during, and after?

Returning to the work of Steven Galt Crowell can be of assistance once more. In doing so, it can also help in understanding the bittersweet feeling that is associated with nostalgia much better as this has not been touched upon until now. For Crowell, the reason nostalgia is so bittersweet has to do with the role of the intentional 'I' in the nostalgic experience. He sees nostalgia as a break in the "Time of the I".<sup>18</sup> He recognizes two types of 'I'. The first one is an 'I' that is always intentional: always in the moment as an intentional subject interpreting the world and its own thought. It is infinite in the sense that it never contemplates its own intentionality. It just interprets and is present. However, in the nostalgic experience this 'I' is presented with a past made present. This general sense of pastness is uncanny to this 'I', because it is both fiction and fact. It looks and longs back to something it cannot go back to anymore, making clear to the 'I' that it itself is also finite. Crowell even goes as far as to say that this bittersweetness is a confrontation with our own

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<sup>17</sup> This does raise the questions whether nostalgia is thus indeed something which can be learned. This is outside of the scope of this thesis, however.

<sup>18</sup> Crowell, "Spectral History: Narrative, Nostalgia, and the Time of the I," 97–98.

mortality; The death of the 'I'. As he states: "[In Nostalgia] I am haunted by the ego that "once" lived, its very living "spectrally" present to me as though I were once more to taste the sweetness of that life"<sup>19</sup> concluding that "Nostalgia too, belongs to the philosophy of death [...]"<sup>20</sup> This 'ego that once lived' is the second 'I'.

I, however, would not go this far. It is my contention that it suffices to conclude that, within the break the intentional 'I' experiences in being confronted with nostalgia, the 'I' recognizes the fleetingness of the past instead of the finality of death. By being intentionally oriented towards a past intentionality ('the ego that once lived'), the 'I' is abruptly made aware of the nature of its own temporality. We all live in the now by virtue of us being intentional subjects. It is impossible for us not to be, as we are always being intentional about something. This also makes us live towards the future. When I am going through the motions during the day, I am not thinking about how being an intentional subject is going to end, or how I am 'being intentional'. However, in nostalgia we are confronted with the fact that even though this feels like something infinite, it is actually finite and fleeting. In this sense, the break from the present through a past-made-present shows the 'I' that its ways of interpreting are finite. Certain modes of being present are not coming back and that is what makes nostalgia so difficult. It seems to give us a feeling of past subjectivity once again, but since it lasts only temporary, we are quick to realize this is not the case. Nostalgia emulates the past but cannot truly get us there. It is a creation of a feeling that we want to be real but know not to be. Therefore, it feels good, but also very unsettling as we are confronted with our taken for granted future-oriented attitude.

## 2.5 Nostalgia as Sickness Still

As of now, I would like to make small detour before we continue defining the phenomenon of nostalgia. As was mentioned before, nostalgia used to be seen as an illness, a serious pathology. It is worthwhile to reflect on this understanding as this will help in understanding nostalgia's negative aspects and break with the present even better. One way in which this can be done is through the work of Havi Carel, who wrote extensively about the phenomenology of illness.<sup>21</sup> For Carel, (serious) illness can be seen as a form of the

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<sup>19</sup> Idem, 99.

<sup>20</sup> Idem, 99.

<sup>21</sup> A focus on the phenomenology, and not psychoanalysis of illness, was chosen as appropriate as the sources on nostalgia and definition of nostalgia in this chapter are all of a phenomenological nature. Carel's phenomenological approach is complimentary to these accounts and easier to connect to them than psychoanalytical literature on the topic of (mental) illness, like melancholia, could be.

phenomenological epoché.<sup>22</sup> She sees the sudden experience of illness or sickness (e.g., heart-attack, aneurysm) as examples in which the way a person views the world is radically altered. Habits change, lives change. In this sense, she sees it as a cause of the world and all of one's assumptions about this world being bracketed by the sudden experience of illness. For her, it is something which can prompt radical philosophical investigation. While contemporarily we tend to see nostalgia as something of a mood, in the past it was debilitating. It paralyzed and stopped people in their tracks. Therefore, what used to be called nostalgia in the times of the Swiss mercenaries can now be categorized more in accordance with pathological symptoms that are related to mental afflictions like depression. Nostalgia in our current times might not be as debilitating anymore, it still contains a radical shift or break in the same way as Carel describes sickness presently.<sup>23</sup>

If we could thus also see nostalgia as a form of the epoché from its pathological origins, what would this look like? We can see that nostalgia is something that overcomes us, something that happens to us. We can prompt to be nostalgic about the past, but there is always something triggering us to be nostalgic. Whether this happens accidentally when we hear an old song on the radio, or on purpose when we look through a photo-album: we are prompted to be nostalgic. It is not a feeling we have control over. It is there, but cannot be actively modulated by us, even though imagination plays a big role in it. Carel already sees illness (and the associated anxiety) as an epoché that is forced upon the individual. She sees it as an “ [...] an invitation to investigate subjectivity in illness and thus to expand the conditions under which subjectivity is studied.”<sup>24</sup> While nostalgia is not seen as an illness anymore, and since nowadays it does not seem to last as long as a serious medical problem would, it can still invite philosophical reflection in the same way as Carel describes.

The uncanny feeling and bittersweet sensation that comes with the more positive feeling of 'home' or the past is a sign of this reflection. Besides purely being a way to happily mire in the face of a constructed and rose-tinted past, nostalgia is also a way in which one is made painfully aware of the disruption between past and present. This was made clear by Steven Crowell's assertion that nostalgia belongs to a philosophy of death. And while I already stated my argument is somewhat milder, the fact that the intentional 'I' is

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<sup>22</sup> Havi Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 213.

<sup>23</sup> Perhaps pathological cases of nostalgia could return in a world which is increasingly becoming nostalgic.

<sup>24</sup> Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness*, 216.

confronted with “an ego that once lived” does call for reflection on the nature of temporality and one’s presence within it. In this sense, we can see nostalgia as a form of philosophical reflection which changes the way an individual looks at the world around them. As a mood-altering process, nostalgia can therefore also still be seen as a trimmed down form of the epoché Carel explains illness to be. The reflective aspect which she identifies within a sick person is not unlike a nostalgic person’s reflection on the past.<sup>25</sup> In nostalgia we thus also see this epoché of the present situation in light of the past. In most cases however, the feeling is less focused on the (dis)functioning of one’s body - as is the case in sickness - and more on the subject’s past experiences and lost temporality. Moreover, nostalgia has some positive elements which are present next to the bittersweet reflection. Sickness, on the other hand, is almost completely negative and not as temporary as a nostalgic experience.

## 2.6 Nostalgia Defined

Then what is nostalgia? Now that we have gone over the different aspects, it is possible to develop a philosophical definition of nostalgia in the context of this thesis. This definition borrows from the works of the philosophers mentioned in this chapter, but also stresses certain parts over others. In conclusion, the definition this thesis uses for nostalgia is the following. Nostalgia is:

A break in the temporality of the ‘I’ which, confronted with some physical object, sensation or social cue that reminds of the past, constructs a general atmosphere of pastness by using imagination and memory. In turn, it brings a feeling of integration and unity related to this past in the intentionality of the now. While it often feels positive through this sense of unity and integration, it is bittersweet through its forced reflection on the temporality of subjectivity and the temporary nature of the integrated feeling. It is not a real past, yet it feels like one. It is past *made* present.

The intentional focus of the nostalgic feeling is not the object, sensation, or social cue that activates it, but the general sense of pastness that it constructs, as well as the associated feeling of integration and unity which it offers the subject. This general sense of pastness is

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<sup>25</sup> And vice versa: sickness also always implies a certain nostalgia as there is a longing to a past unity which has been compromised by said sickness.



not a real memory, as general memories of a past atmosphere do not exist. You have memories of events and happenings, but not of the general atmosphere of a certain time. However, through imagination and use of memories, it does feel like the past is brought back in a way when being nostalgic. Nevertheless, since one knows and feels it not to be real and impossible to return to, the feeling is not only comforting but also bittersweet. This definition borrows heavily from the idea of Crowell, who sees the bittersweetness of nostalgia in the way the 'I' is confronted by a past ego that is not there anymore. Nostalgia is thus a confrontation with a reconstructed past that never was, and one cannot return to, but still feels 'real'. Spatially it feels like a far-away or even fake place, and therefore constructing it and longing for it hurts as much as it pleases.

## 2.7 Nostalgia and Anxiety

Ultimately, the connection between nostalgia and anxiety becomes easy to make. This can be found mostly in the feeling of unity that nostalgia can give a person. Anxiety has been described as exactly the opposite, as a loss of a sense of unity. Both feelings (anxiety and nostalgia) also have to do with temporality: Nostalgia focusing on the past while anxiety looks towards the future. One is always anxious about something that could happen or could be happening, but never about what happened.<sup>26</sup> It is always future-oriented. Dylan Trigg already described anxiety to be very similar in this way, invoking Heidegger in seeing it as *the* quintessential philosophical mood.<sup>27</sup> In anxiety the world is presented as the meaningless nothing it is. It is discomfoting and makes one constantly question everything around them because it has lost its sense of familiarity. This can also refer to a feeling of 'not-being-at-home'.

It is exactly this sense of home (and unity) we do encounter in the nostalgic experience, according to Trigg. This feeling of home breaks down in anxiety because both spatial-temporal continuity as well as a feeling of familiarity deteriorate. Therefore, the world around the anxious subject becomes defamiliarized.<sup>28</sup> By creating a familiar feeling of past, nostalgia allows one to temporarily feel whole again through nostalgia. It gives a feeling of unity and familiarity. However, this past remains lacking. It is not real, but a (re)creation of an atmosphere through imagination and memory. The familiarity and unity

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<sup>26</sup> Only when a past happening might have influence on the future, but then the past is a worry for the future and thus still future oriented.

<sup>27</sup> Trigg, "From Anxiety to Nostalgia: A Heideggerian Analysis. In *Existential Medicine: Essays on Health and Illness*," 45.

<sup>28</sup> *Idem*, 54.

felt are not based on something real and therefore do not last. It can become a way to shield oneself from anxiety without addressing the root problem, which is this lack-of-home. It can be a temporary stop-gap for anxiety, but not a cure.

Trigg merely sees nostalgia as being *motivated* by this anxiety, and explicitly states it is not caused by it. I would like to go one step further and stress that anxiety is one of nostalgia's biggest initiators. It is not the only cause of nostalgia, as mental phenomenon are an amalgamation of complex processes. It is one of the biggest nonetheless. Psychological research has indeed confirmed this, as one of the biggest reasons for nostalgia has been found to be feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression.<sup>29</sup> People turn to nostalgia when they feel self-discontinuity as it can restore a feeling of self-continuity.<sup>30</sup> In the face of adversity and anxiety, it can indeed make people feel 'whole' again. This does not mean that all people that are nostalgic are feeling that way because they are anxiously seeking a sense of home, nor that everybody who is in a negative mental state will indubitably turn to nostalgia. It means that nostalgia and anxious mental states can be closely related in a direct way. Anxiety can be the trigger for nostalgia, as nostalgia gives people a feeling of unity once more. Vice versa, when confronted with nostalgia and the accompanying feeling of unity, the longing for the past can trigger anxiety about the present when one realizes the feeling is only temporary. They are both closely related with one another.

While nostalgia thus seems to be about the past made present, there is also a clear relation towards the future. If (1) nostalgia is (often) a reaction to a loss of unity which is characteristic of anxiety; and (2) anxiety is future-oriented, then (3) nostalgia is also a reaction to the future instead of purely a past-oriented feeling. Looked at from this perspective, nostalgia then becomes the easy answer to a future and present full of (perceived) problems instead of a more hopeful future-oriented attitude which would also have to potential to fulfill this need for unity. It becomes a flight from the present and future. This response can take different forms. In general, I would say there are two manners in which this can manifest itself. One such a way is by fleeing towards a personalized feeling of nostalgia. It is to revel in one's own past made present in order to forget the anxieties of the day. When I am feeling anxious about my personal life, I can escape this feeling by

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<sup>29</sup> Clay Routledge, "What Makes People Nostalgic?," in *Nostalgia: A Psychological Resource* (Routledge, 2016).

<sup>30</sup> Constantine Sedikides et al., "Nostalgia Counteracts Self-Discontinuity and Restores Self-Continuity," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 45, no. 1 (March 2014): pp. 52-61, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2073>.

looking at old family photos or playing nostalgic video games for example. I can revel in the elicited nostalgic feelings that come with engaging in these activities to feel better. This form of nostalgia has also been dubbed 'reflective nostalgia' by cultural theorist Svetlana Boym.<sup>31</sup> It is an affective and personal feeling of nostalgia that is not necessarily shared with others.

However, there is another nostalgic way to respond to these anxious feelings. Take for example the growing inequality present in many countries in the Western World, but also beyond.<sup>32</sup> This is something which elicits a lot of anxiety for many people across different backgrounds, especially for those experiencing a decline in their standard of living. When the future seems bleak and anxiety-inducing, a nostalgic past can be a way to restore feelings of integration and unity. In addition, it can even become a goal to restore this past in itself. It is for this reason that a sentence such as 'everything was better how it used to be' has become commonplace in society. In this way, we could describe nostalgia as an 'inability to hope'. One becomes fatalistic about the future, turns to the past through nostalgic remembrance, and by doing so the past status quo can become something one wants to restore and bring back. Boym calls this second type of nostalgia 'restorative nostalgia' and argues that it has strong political potential.<sup>33</sup> However, nostalgia only *creates* a general sense of pastness. A sense of pastness that never truly was as it seems to be remembered. It is not a factual past at all.

This is also where the potentially dangerous consequence of nostalgia becomes clear. It can be found in the fact that the nostalgic ideal can never really be attained. When one is feeling anxious in the face of the future, the rose-tinted atmosphere of an imagined past might indeed be very attractive to turn to. This sense of unity is only temporarily, and that is the problem. Either the nostalgic accepts his condition and understands it not to be realizable, or they do not. In the first case, this can be the cause of anxiety and bittersweetness. In the latter case, however, a realization of this past and an actual return to the conditions of this past can become a political aim. When this is the case, nostalgia can become a driver of the reactionary politics we have seen so much (in the West) in the last 10 years with Trump, Baudet, Brexit and many more. Nostalgia can thus be a response to anxiety on the individual level, but also on a larger scale. What would such a collective

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<sup>31</sup> Svetlana Boym, "Reflective Nostalgia: Virtual Reality And Collective Memory," in *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2002), 49-50.

<sup>32</sup> See for example: <https://www.oxfamnovib.nl/files/rapporten/2022/bp-inequality-kills-170122-en.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> Svetlana Boym, "Restorative Nostalgia: Conspiracies and Return to Origins," in *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2002), 41-43.

nostalgia look like overall? Is this even possible? The next chapter will try to answer these specific questions.

### 3. Our Nostalgia

We can all think of instances in which we experienced a shared form of nostalgia. Think, for example, of a time when you got together with an old friend and jointly reveled in the past you shared together. It might arise when playing a computer game together with someone you used to play with when you were a child. Or you might visit an 'oldies but goldies' party with friends and enjoy a shared feeling of nostalgia while listening to hits from a different era in your life. But it could also just occur in a generic conversation you have with a stranger about the past. There is a strong social aspect to nostalgia. Research indeed confirms that social interaction is a big trigger for possible nostalgic feelings.<sup>34</sup> What is the relation between these social interactions and nostalgia? Can we speak of a type of collective nostalgia? And more interestingly philosophically: what would this look like?

The literature seems to point towards the possibility of a collective nostalgia now and again, but this is not always made explicit. There is this shared understanding that communal nostalgia is a possibility, but it is not clear as of now what this could exactly entail. This chapter will therefore aim to establish an understanding of this phenomenon. To do so, it will look at research on collective intentionality (CI), and its sub-forms collective affective intentionality and collective emotions to examine the possibility of a collective nostalgia. First the literature on collective (affective) intentionality will be examined to serve as a theoretical basis, after which the literature on collective emotions, nostalgia and memory will be examined to show how research on these topics has developed. Then, the third section of this chapter will combine the findings of these two parts by constructing a communal account of nostalgia. The differences as well as similarities between personal and collective nostalgia will be expanded upon and collective nostalgia will be defined. Finally, this definition will be used to understand the link between anxiety and nostalgia once more in the context of collective nostalgia.

#### 3.1 Collective (Affective) Intentionality

While phenomenology often seems to be mostly about the 1<sup>st</sup> person experience, there is also a rich discipline within it focused on describing the way in which the social world is experienced by us together. This subject is called 'Social Ontology'. Its focus is on understanding how the social world comes to be through individual subjectivities, and how

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<sup>34</sup> Wildschut et al., "Nostalgia: Content, Triggers, Functions.," 981.

these subjectivities form the social world (and vice-versa). One concept within this domain that is of importance to the current research is that of 'collective intentionality'. In describing the social world, one problem that needs further description is that of a shared intentionality. When a group is doing or wanting to do something together, the question arises whether we can speak of multiple subjects being intentional together separately or whether some other more collective and interlocked mechanism might be at play. The literature on collective intentionality therefore also originally aimed at understanding how it is possible that a group can perform an action together.<sup>35</sup> By now, this discussion has been extended to the realm of feelings, shared personhood, but also emotions and moods (of which we could see nostalgia as being one).

### 3.1.1 The Basics of Intending Something Together

There are generally three main strands of recognized theories within philosophy at large which explain how collective intentionality takes form: the content, mode, and subject view.<sup>36</sup> To understand the differences between them, let us imagine a soccer team playing a game. The content-based view of collective intentionality locates the collective intentional aspect in the shared content of the intentions of the team members. In this soccer example, these can be the shared intentions to win the game or score a goal. Grouping or 'meshing' these intentions that have a shared content together makes the intentionality collective.<sup>37</sup> The same intentional focus across different individuals thus make that intentionality collective. The modal view on the other hand, would hold that a group jointly 'we-intending' something is the basis for the collective aspect of their intentionality. It goes beyond mere shared content. The focus is now not on intending a collective action, but collectively intending an action. In the soccer example this means that the team intends to win or score a goal *as a team*. This makes the intention collective. It is a move from the individualism of the content view to a more collective we-intention. It is that difference between wanting something alone and wanting something as a member of a group.<sup>38</sup> The subject view of

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<sup>35</sup> Dan Zahavi, "We in Me or Me in We? Collective Intentionality and Selfhood," *Journal of Social Ontology* 7, no. 1 (February 1, 2021): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1515/jso-2020-0076>.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Szanto, "Husserl on Collective Intentionality," in *The Phenomenological Approach to Social Reality*, ed. Alessandro Salice and Bernhard Schmid (Springer International Publishing, 2016), 154, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-27692-2\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-27692-2_7); David P. Schweikard and Hans Bernhard Schmid, "Collective Intentionality," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/collective-intentionality/>.

<sup>37</sup> Szanto, "Husserl on Collective Intentionality," 156.

<sup>38</sup> Raimo Tuomela, *The Philosophy of Sociality: The Shared Point of View* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 46.

collective intentionality even goes as far as to suggest that there is something as an 'intentional collective we' wherein the collective aspect can be found. Margaret Gilbert describes this as the 'pooling of wills'.<sup>39</sup> This account of collectivity supposes that a group can be a subject, and that the group becoming a subject through an intentional position leads to the collective aspect of collective intentionality. Returning to the case of the soccer team, the collective aspect should be found in the team. This is the plural subject in this example. It is not the intention to win as in the modal account that makes the intention collective; but the fact that there is a *we*, a team, that intends anything at all. By playing together and working towards something *as a team*, a plural subject comes into existence. It is this plural subject that can then be said to be the one that collectively intends something.

While these are the traditional views, there has also been the suggestion that collective intentionality is primarily collective because of the relational aspect of subjects. This considers the affective dimension of collectivity as well. It is especially this last form of collective intentionality which is therefore of interest to this research. The content, mode, and subject account focus on groups of people that are always already *doing* something, are already engaged in collective action and can in this way be pointed out as engaging collectively. The relational account, however, stresses that the collective aspect can be found in the relations between these individuals even before any collective action is yet taken.<sup>40</sup> For the possibility of collective emotions such as nostalgia, this account is more suited. It is about relating and in turn jointly experiencing something, not necessarily intending something together in the sense of acting. It is not the collective content, mode, or the plural subject that makes something collective, it is the relations between people that make these three possible in the first place. As Szanto states: "... there is no collective intentionality without individuals who we-intend, but we-intentions are only what they are when individuals relate to another accordingly, indeed, they are nothing but relatedness".<sup>41</sup> This becomes especially clear if we take into account the notion of collective *affective* intentionality, in which the role of relations between subjects plays a crucial role.

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<sup>39</sup> See: Margaret Gilbert, *On Social Facts* (Routledge, 1989).

<sup>40</sup> Szanto, "Husserl on Collective Intentionality," 156.

<sup>41</sup> Szanto, "Husserl on Collective Intentionality," 156.

### 3.1.2 Adding the Affect

The three core accounts of collective intentionality are predominantly preoccupied with joint or shared action. While they are the most prominent views, it can be difficult to see how an emotion and affective feeling such as nostalgia could be explained through them. Something more is needed to explain the affective dimension of collective intentionality. This is something which has also been remarked upon by Felipe Leon and Dan Zahavi.<sup>42</sup> Since emotion is often acknowledged as being a possible form of collective intuition, it is useful to draw from phenomenological accounts of collective *affective* intentionality. While the coining of the term is fairly recent, the first philosopher who has been seen as describing this phenomenon was Max Scheler in his work 'Exemplars of Person and Leaders'. He proposed a tri-fold example of true shared feeling and its adjacent forms, the case of two grieving parents. He does so by describing the following scene:

- (1) Parents who loved their child are positioned in front of the child's corpse. They have two kinds of pain and complexes of bodily feelings: for instance, they may feel weak. **But they share one suffering which they feel with "one another."**
- (2) Someone else [*A Friend, e.g.*] joins the parents who was not as close to the child as they are. He has "sympathy" with the parents; he grasps their suffering as present in his perception, viz, he sees "that they suffer" but without any trace of co-feeling their suffering. **He experiences his own suffering only "with" the state of affairs concerned.**
- (3) Someone else again sees the parents' tears and woes (say, an elderly errand woman) being induced by spontaneous impulses of imitation toward analogous impulses of movements. In this third person there occur **feeling-states tied to analogous impulses of expression**. Such feeling-states have, of course, no relation to the dead child, or they may only afterwards have such a relation by way of a judgment.<sup>43</sup>

In this example it is immediately clear that Scheler conceives of different ways in which people can share emotions. In the most extreme and perhaps 'true' case of shared emotion, it concerns the sharing of one and the same feeling. To be able to experience this, there is an

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<sup>42</sup> Felipe Abad León and Dan Zahavi, "Phenomenology of Experiential Sharing: The Contribution of Schutz and Walther," in *The Phenomenological Approach to Social Reality*, ed. Alessandro Salice and Bernhard Schmid (Springer International Publishing, 2016), 220, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-27692-2\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-27692-2_10).

<sup>43</sup> Max Scheler, "Exemplars of Person and Leaders," in *Personal and Self-Value: Three Essays*, trans. Manfred Frings (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 160. Bold added for clarity, italic additions by me.



external object and focus. This we see clearly with the example of the grieving parents. There is no 'my grief' or 'your grief', only 'ours' with at its focus the dead body of the child. This feeling-with-someone is not the same as the feeling-for-someone (or sympathy) the friend feels for the parents and child, and even less so in comparison to the impulsive or reflexive imitation of the elderly errand woman. Critics have pointed out that the death of a child is often the catalyst for a couple separating as they cannot process their grief in the same way together. However, Scheler's example merely suggest a first instance of grief which is shared by both parents. How this grief is processed further does not have to be collective and can therefore also conflict between the parents.

This (extreme) example coincides with the way in which Scheler imagined collective affective intentionality, or as he called it: sympathy. According to him, there are different levels of this sympathy, which he specifies as:

- (1) **Unification:** a feeling that arises through a sort of infectious reflexive reaction based on others.<sup>44</sup> Important here is that the individuality of the other is not conscious toward the person sympathizing. This is mostly true for basic or simplistic feelings. It is an unconsciousness imitation of expressive gestures which in turn invokes the feeling of the other people making these gestures.
- (2) **Sensing:** Understanding feelings of someone else.<sup>45</sup> This is the same as the old woman in the example above when being confronted by the parents' sadness and grief. She does not know why the parents are feeling the way they do but recognizes them as being sad and understands these feelings accordingly.
- (3) **Fellow Feeling.** This form of sympathy consists of 'feeling-with-one-another' and 'fellow feeling-with another's feelings'.<sup>46</sup> These roughly correspond with the parents and their friend in the example. 'Feeling-with-one-another' is a fellow feeling that is shared by two or more subjects concerning something else. The parents and their deceased child respectively in Scheler's example. It is not merely me acknowledging your feelings as object of my intentionality and you acknowledging mine, but a true shared feeling had by multiple subjects. The mere acknowledging of someone else's emotion as what I am

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<sup>44</sup> Matthias Schlossberger, "The Varieties of Togetherness: Scheler on Collective Affective Intentionality," in *The Phenomenological Approach to Social Reality*, ed. Alessandro Salice and Bernhard Schmid (Springer International Publishing, 2016), 179–80, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-27692-2\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-27692-2_8).

<sup>45</sup> Idem, 180-181.

<sup>46</sup> Idem, 182-183.

intentional of while feeling a similar emotion would be the ‘fellow feeling-with another’s feelings’ and is exemplified by the friend in the example. He feels bad for the parents, and their sadness/grief is the object of his feeling towards them, but he does not share in the same feeling towards the child.

For Scheler, sensing plays a role in both forms of fellow feeling. In ‘fellow feeling-with another’s feelings’, one first senses the other’s feelings and then builds upon this feeling in a second step reflecting on this sensed feeling. Here the feeling of an other is clearly object as we saw with the friend. In ‘feeling-with-one-another’ however, sensing, and fellow feeling are merged and one and the same. They cannot be differentiated any longer. This is a shared feeling in the truest sense according to Scheler. Although he focuses on an outside and external focus of the shared feeling, his description is very easily translatable to an internal focus such as is the case with nostalgia: The gateway objects and memories on which nostalgia are based can also be shared across people.

What is important to mention about Scheler’s conception of shared emotion, however, is that he does not advocate the notion that two (or more) people can feel the exact same pain or joy at the same time.<sup>47</sup> It is impossible for multiple people to share one experience as these are tied to one’s own consciousness and body. However, to him, collective affective intentionality as feeling-with-one-another is the sharing of the same *intentional moment*, which in turn leads to an (emotional) response in the ego (and possibly body) of the subjects sharing that emotion. Feeling the exact same emotion (such as the same pain and joy) would entail the merging of consciousnesses, which would paradoxically erase the duality of both subjects and is thus impossible not only practically but also theoretically. Feeling-with-one-another is not one symbiosis of two subjects, but a shared experience between particulars.

### 3.2 Collective Emotion, Nostalgia and Memory

Scheler’s work forms a precursor to current investigations of collective affective intentionality, specifically those of shared emotions. This next section will therefore construe the current phenomenological debate on collective affective intentionality and emotion and use these to connect it to the subject of this thesis: nostalgia. To do so, two exemplary cases

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<sup>47</sup> Idem, 185.

of collective nostalgia will be introduced. Additionally, the aim of these two examples is to understand whether it is possible to speak of one form of collective nostalgia, or whether multiple forms could be a possibility. They will be used mostly interchangeably throughout this section, as the way in which they function do overlap to a great extent.

The first case of collective nostalgia is predominantly focused on a shared past as the basis for the collective feeling of nostalgia. Here we must think of the kind of nostalgia one engages in when reminiscing with an old friend. Let us take the example of two old roommates remembering their shared dorm room from during their student years together. The feeling of nostalgia that is shared in the present is based on shared experiences made in the past. The collectivity in the now is secondary to the previous collectivity in the past. The second case of nostalgia, on the other hand, could be seen as more ‘impersonal’. Here we can think of a group of five elderly in a retirement home without a shared history reminiscing about the shared time period in which they were young. Often the phrase “everything used to be better” reflects this sentiment well. These elderly persons experience nostalgia collectively, but this nostalgia is not based on memories they made together. The collective aspect can be found in the present moment, in which the nostalgic remembrance is taking place. This nostalgia can, of course, still be focused on something all involved parties experienced. However, these memories were not shared or made together. How can both of these cases of nostalgia be explained through the theories of collective emotions?

### 3.2.1 Feeling Affect Together

While Scheler’s early conception of collective affective intentionality has been criticized, it did introduce a critical aspect to the debate on collective experience: An outside object which is evaluated from a shared perspective as the focus of feeling together with someone else. When we look at the current literature on the topic, a shared object is often of critical importance. Usually, it forms the foundation on which collective emotions can be based. Just as with Scheler’s example of the deceased child, a *unified evaluative perspective* has been deemed a critical component of collective emotion.<sup>48</sup> This is most prominently explained by Bennet Helm as a shared perspective from which something is evaluated as a group.<sup>49</sup> Members commit to this shared position, either implicitly or explicitly, and therefore

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<sup>48</sup> Gerhard Thonhauser, “Shared Emotions: A Steinian Proposal,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 17, no. 5 (February 8, 2018): 1012, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-018-9561-3>.

<sup>49</sup> Bennett W. Helm, “Plural Agents,” *Noûs* 42, no. 1 (2008): 36 & 40, <https://www-jstor-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/stable/25177153>

evaluate certain objects (but also each other) similarly. There is this type of collective perspective that is shared and understood by the subjects of the group as being of their group. However, while this can help in understanding how collective and plural actions are taken in the same way, it does not help in explaining collective emotions. If left as is, these types of evaluations make a collective affect nothing more than a shared judgement.

As pointed out by Gerhard Thonhauser, to truly do justice to the understanding of collective emotion one must also explain the affective experience.<sup>50</sup> If we limit ourselves to the view of collectivity of Helm, collective emotion is nothing more than a shared evaluative moment on which one reacts emotionally on an individual level. Emotions are reduced to 'right' or 'wrong' group evaluations. In doing so, this foregoes the phenomenological affective experience of a shared emotion. If we think of the two nostalgic roommates reminiscing about their old dorm here, it seems unsatisfactory to reduce this genuine collective nostalgic feeling to two individuals sharing an evaluation of which they are both aware. It is almost robotic to see them as two 'evaluators' who are both judging their nostalgic past separately based on some joint standard. Something is felt here by both members with regards towards each other and their past. Besides them evaluating their shared past as part of a dyad, they also need to be aware of each other as friends and the fact that they, as a dyad, are feeling something together. This needs to be accounted for and can help in explaining the affective dimension of collective emotion. Thonhauser, drawing on Edith Steins work, calls these two requirements the *plurality* and *integration requirement* of shared emotion.<sup>51</sup> The first corresponds with an awareness of self and other, the second with a sense of togetherness.

Zahavi and Salice also use Stein to describe similar facets of collective affective intentionality that are of importance in understanding the collective and affective dimensions of shared feelings. These are: a shared evaluative perspective of some object, the enrichment of one another's emotions by the interaction of different group members, and again a sense of togetherness.<sup>52</sup> The group of elderly reminiscing about the time period of their youth are not merely evaluating the past (and the now) from the same evaluative perspective with individual emotional feelings attached to them, but they are also aware of

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<sup>50</sup> Thonhauser, "Shared Emotions: A Steinian Proposal.", 1012.

<sup>51</sup> Gerhard Thonhauser, "Towards a Taxonomy of Collective Emotions," *Emotion Review* 14, no. 1 (January 18, 2022): 36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17540739211072469>; Thonhauser, "Shared Emotions: A Steinian Proposal.", p. 1008

<sup>52</sup> Dan Zahavi and Alessandro Salice, "Phenomenology of The We: Stein, Walther, Gurwitsch," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of the Social Mind*, ed. Julian Kiverstein (Routledge, 2016), 520–21.

the company they are doing this in and how they are feeling as a group while doing so. This even adds to the sense of joy (or possible bittersweetness) felt. Here a distinction can be made between the ontic subject of shared experience and the phenomenological subject. Hans Bernhard Schmid proposed this difference as ‘ $S_A$  feels  $x$  as had by  $S_B$ ’.<sup>53</sup> The ontic subject (elderly woman  $X$ ) feels an emotion or nostalgia phenomenologically as being had by a first-person plural (the group of elderly), a *we*. Thus, there can be a difference between the ontological subject and the phenomenological subject. The ontological ‘*I*’ can experience something as a phenomenological *we*.

A collective emotion is then something which focuses on a shared object whose evaluation leads to a genuine shared evaluative perspective. In taking this shared perspective, members of a collective are aware of them being emotional *as a group*. There is thus a sense of togetherness. Moreover, they are aware of the others and themselves being in this group. To be clear, this view does not imply a merging of multiple subjects and their ego to feel the exact same emotions. This was made clear by Schmid’s distinction between the ontic and phenomenological subject. Rather, it challenges the reductive accounts of collective emotion by making clear the crucial importance of the way in which affect can be felt collectively. The sense of togetherness and awareness of self and other as a group are fundamental elements to do justice to the feeling of a shared emotion. In turn this also leads individual ontic subjects to feel their experience as had by a phenomenological plural; they feel as a ‘*we*’. It is thus not merely a shared moment and baseline of appraisal that make an emotion shared, as the accounts only focusing on the unified evaluative perspective would suggest.

A final note that is important to consider is that there might be cases in which all these requirements are present (or thought to be present) within a member of a group reminiscing but that they might be mistaken. They might truly be the only one feeling nostalgic. One of the roommates could think he is being nostalgic with his friend, but the other roommate might not truly feel the same way as him due to a variety of reasons. Phenomenologically, these conceptions of shared emotion thus leave the possibility of being ‘mistaken’ in being recognized as a shared emotion. This could always be the case. If the

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<sup>53</sup> Hans Bernhard Schmid, *Shared Feeling, Pural Action: Essays in Philosophy and Social Science* (Springer, 2009), p. 78; Mikko Salmela, “Shared Emotions,” *Philosophical Explorations* 15, no. 1 (2012): 37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13869795.2012.647355>; Héctor Andrés Sánchez Guerrero, “Shared Feelings and Joint Feeling: The Problem of Collective Affective Intentionality Specified,” in *Feeling Together and Caring with One Another: A Contribution to the Debate on Collective Affective Intentionality* (Springer, 2016), 112.

above conditions are truly met in a group and had by all, however, we can say that collective affective intentionality is taking place. In the emotional episode people are still interacting with each other and not merely statically feeling as a group unit. There might be some room for misrecognizing the situation, but this does not mean that the whole possibility of shared emotion, and thus also nostalgia, has to be dismissed.

### 3.2.2 Nostalgically Reminiscing Together

Now and then, a collective dimension of nostalgia is referenced in the philosophical literature, but not many authors have clearly elucidated on this concept. To Avishai Margalit for example, collective nostalgia is explained as being akin to vicarious memory: a secondhand memory of someone else's firsthand experience internalized and felt like one's own.<sup>54</sup> Margalit connects this to the conflict between Israel and Palestine: Many Palestinians are nostalgic for a homeland they never experienced in the way they remember.<sup>55</sup> However, while implications of this fact are given, no further explanation of what makes collective nostalgia collective is expounded upon. Margalit's account seems to be similar to the psychological research that has employed the concept of collective nostalgia. This research has found that collective nostalgia increases bonds between in-group members, but that it also can be seen as an "... emotional response to collective discontinuity that drives collective action intentions aimed at protecting ingroup continuity" in the context of nationality.<sup>56</sup> Politically, it is leveraged by radical right-wing parties to bind voters to them with varying degrees of success.<sup>57</sup> In turn, it has been defined in these researches as a "[...] sentimental or affectionate emotion predicated on thinking of oneself as member of a certain group, that is, it is based on idealistic conceptions of events or features of that group's past."<sup>58</sup>

These first conceptions show similarity with the way in which collective emotion was described. Group formation and mutual recognition is of great importance here. Moreover, looking at the comparison with individual nostalgia it can still be seen as an emotion connected to nostalgic recollection, and it is related to a feeling of discontinuity. However,

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<sup>54</sup> Avishai Margalit, "Nostalgia," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 21, no. 3 (2011): 273, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2011.581107>.

<sup>55</sup> It thus seems Margalit's account is more akin to something called Anemoia: nostalgia for a time you yourself have never known.

<sup>56</sup> Anouk Smeekes, Constantine Sedikides, and Tim Wildschut, "Collective Nostalgia: Triggers and Consequences for Collective Action Intentions," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 62, no. 1 (August 11, 2022): 197, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12567>.

<sup>57</sup> Joris Lammers and Matthew R. Baldwin, "Make America Gracious Again: Collective Nostalgia Can Increase and Decrease Support for Right-wing Populist Rhetoric," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 50, no. 5 (April 3, 2020): 943–54, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2673>.

<sup>58</sup> Idem, 944

these philosophical and psychological accounts do not go into any more detail on how this collective nostalgia functions. One small exception has been a short essay by historian and philosopher Frank Ankersmit called *Individuele en Collectieve Nostalgie* (Individual and Collective Nostalgia). Similar to psychological research's findings and Margalit's account, he links the concept of collective nostalgia to the existence of a shared past of groups in a society. He even sees the existence of a shared nostalgia as an important side-product of what binds a society, namely a sense of a collective past and collective memory. Ankersmit ponders the question whether individual nostalgia comes before collective nostalgia or vice-versa. His conclusion is that both are a possibility, linking this mostly to the idea of sudden societal changes:

Meestal zal die snelle verandering zijn winnaars en zijn verliezers kennen – zoals het geval was in de Franse en de industriële revolutie. En dan zal, zoals we zojuist zagen, de individuele nostalgie aan de collectieve nostalgie voorafgaan. Maar je hebt ook snelle veranderingen die allen min of meer gelijkelijk raken, veranderingen zonder in het oog vallende winnaars en verliezers. En dan gaat de collectieve aan de individuele nostalgie vooraf.<sup>59</sup>

This is an interesting point that can help in conceiving of what this collective nostalgia precisely entails, both structurally and societally (the latter will be discussed more in the concluding chapter of this thesis). Individual nostalgia leads to collective nostalgia when parts of a society encounter upheaval or sudden change, while it happens the other way around when this upheaval is faced by an entire society. This is reminiscent of the psychological accounts, but also the notion of Dylan Trigg about nostalgia's connection with anxiety. Still, even Ankersmit's account presupposes the existence of a collective nostalgia without going into greater detail about what this then precisely entails.

The fact that Ankersmit introduces the importance of collective memory to the functioning of collective nostalgia warrants some further exploration. Collective memory has also been seen as a form of collective intentionality. In general, memories are encoded in the short-term memory, and then consolidated in the long-term memory after which it can be said to be stored there.<sup>60</sup> When these memories are retrieved for memorizing, they are

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<sup>59</sup> Frank Ankersmit, "Individuele En Collectieve Nostalgie," *Groniek*, no. 214 (2017): 21, <https://ugp.rug.nl/groniek/article/view/32568>.

<sup>60</sup> Kourken Michaelian and John Sutton, "Collective Memory," in *The Routledge Handbook of Collective Intentionality*, ed. Marja Jankovic and Kirk Ludwig (Routledge, 2018), 142–45.

decoded once more. Michaelian and Sutton suggest four types of collective memory based on the encoding and retrieval process (see Table 1).<sup>61</sup> Memories in a group setting can either be encoded parallelly with others, meaning they are encoded separately; or memories can be encoded interactively, meaning that they memories are encoded while group members are actively interacting with each other. When it comes to retrieving these memories, again we see the same two types. Either the memories are retrieved individually and parallelly to each other, or interactively by multiple group members contributing to the recollection. What this entails to phenomenologically has not been expounded upon. In collective nostalgia, we could see this as imagination doing something to that collective moment of remembrance. When a group interactively retrieves, their separate pieces of memory and acts of imagination influences the evoked feeling and remembrance the group members experience together. They construct a sense of past together. Especially episodic memory plays a role here, as this type of memory is accompanied by a feeling of reliving the past.<sup>62</sup>

	Parallel Retrieval	Interactive Retrieval
Parallel Encoding	<u>PP</u> : No interaction among group members at either stage of the process.	<u>PI</u> : No interaction at time of encoding, memory retrieved jointly.
Interactive Encoding	<u>IP</u> : Interaction during encoding, none during retrieval.	<u>IJ</u> : Interaction during encoding and retrieval.

**Table 1: Forms of Collective Memory (Based on Michaelian and Sutton)<sup>63</sup>**

The most interactive form of collective memory is referred to as ‘Strongly Shared Memory’ by Michaelian and Sutton (IJ in the table). The other three are seen as more of a weaker form of the same phenomenon. However, I would argue that the forms based only on parallel retrieval (PP and IP) are better explained as individual memory or remembrance. For neither of these two examples, people are jointly engaging during the process of remembrance. If we then start to think about the role of collective memory within collective nostalgia, interactive retrieval seems to be the discerning factor. The example of the old roommates can be seen as an illustration of interactive encoding/interactive retrieval, as there is an actual shared experienced past on which the nostalgia is based. These memories

<sup>61</sup> Idem, 143.

<sup>62</sup> Idem, 141.

<sup>63</sup> Idem, 143.



were made interactively by the roommates together. Moreover, these shared memories are recollected together interactively as well. The collective memories here are the truly shared memories between the two roommates that serve as the basis of their nostalgic remembrance.

This differs for the case of the elderly in the retirement home, however. Here we have an example of parallel encoding/interactive retrieval as we only see a shared moment of recollection. The memories in this type of nostalgia are not shared among members, they were encoded and made separately from other group members. The elderly are interactively retrieving memories, but these memories were not created together interactively. This might therefore also be the nostalgia in which imagination plays the biggest role as there is no true shared past that can put constraints on the nostalgia of the group. The *unified evaluative perspective* here is less strictly delineated than in the case of the roommates. Still, there is a limit to this type of nostalgia as well. While the memories used in the process might not be shared memories of the group, they do have to have some form of commonality to them. Otherwise, there would not be any shared nostalgia at all as a group cannot be nostalgic together without a common focus of their nostalgia. While this shared understanding might not be based on shared group memories, they do have common elements. Therefore, we can call the memories used here 'common memories'. Similar memories between different group members, but not collectively made.

### 3.3 Collective Nostalgia Defined

Having examined both personal nostalgia and its possible collective aspects, we can now define the two forms of collective nostalgia that have formed the common thread in this chapter. As nostalgia is something which makes use of memory, the collective aspect of memory is the biggest differentiating factor between the types of nostalgia. As was shown, memories can be either encoded interactively (joint) or separately, and these memories can be retrieved interactively (joint) or separately as well. Moreover, while for one type of nostalgia shared memories are of importance, for the other it is common memories which form the basis of the collective nostalgia. This leads to the following table:

Types of Nostalgia	Memories	Role of Memories & Encoding	Retrieval
Personal Nostalgia	Personal	Made Alone or Together	Done Alone
Full Collective Nostalgia	Shared	Made Together	Done Jointly
Collective Group Nostalgia	Common	Made Alone	Done Jointly

**Table 2: Types of Nostalgia**

We can differentiate between two types of collective nostalgia and one merely personal. While it does not matter for personal nostalgia whether memories were made alone or jointly (it is recollected by one person ultimately), for collective nostalgia there is a clear difference in the role of memory and the types of memories used in the process. It is *the* difference between the roommates and the elderly people examples across this chapter. Moreover, we can see *Full Collective Nostalgia*, as I would call it here, as an extension of personal nostalgia now based on shared memories while *Collective Group Nostalgia* is a more political volatile extension of more singular memories that are common to a group of people. These memories can be guided externally, for example by a charismatic leader, and in turn directed towards a political goal.<sup>64</sup> To be clear, this does not mean that *Collective Group Nostalgia* does not involve any memories created with others (either interactively or parallelly made). It merely means that in the recollection and retrieval of these memories in the nostalgic experience these specific others are not present in re-imagining the past. As was made clear in the definition in chapter two, nostalgia brings the past in the now. With *Full Collective Nostalgia* the focus is mostly on the shared past of the group, while with *Collective Group Nostalgia* the focus is mostly on the now and the joint recollecting of common memories as a group.

If we combine the previous findings surrounding collective memory with those of collective emotions, we see that the difference between personal and collective nostalgia is the addition of the unified evaluative perspective, a sense of togetherness, and an awareness of the other. In addition, the different ontic subjects come to see themselves as a phenomenological plural subject, as a we. If these aspects are present together with an interactive retrieval process, imagination can come to the fore in combining shared or common memories into to a genuine shared form of nostalgia. This nostalgic recollection is still not something that provides an accurate representation of past. Especially with

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<sup>64</sup> This will be touched upon more in the final chapter of this thesis.

*Collective Group Nostalgia* this is the case as the common memories from different people are interactively retrieved and combined to generate one shared sense of past. This can therefore also be a more speculative conception of past as it is brought about by many different viewpoints. For *Full Collective Nostalgia*, this is less so, as the memories that are the basis of the collective nostalgic episode were interactively encoded in the past with the same person(s) with whom you are interactively retrieving them in the present. Since all group members were part of the retrieved memories themselves, limits to imagination are set more strictly. Memories are updated, while in *Collective Group Nostalgia* the common object is constructed in the present to form a fake 'shared' past that has never been present.

If we then return to the definition of individual nostalgia from the previous chapter, we can add these aspects. Collective nostalgia can consequently be seen as:

A break in the temporality of *multiple 'I's'* which, *jointly* confronted with some physical object, sensation or social cue that reminds of the past, *interactively construct* a general atmosphere of pastness by using imagination and *either interactively encoded shared memories or personally encoded common memories* to bring a feeling of integration and unity linked to the past in the intentionality of the now. *This is done by taking a unified evaluative perspective towards the object of nostalgia and the memories.* While this sense of past often feels positive as a sense of unity and integration of the 'I', it is bittersweet through its forced reflection on the temporality of its subjectivity and the temporary nature of the integrated feeling. *It feels as a shared form of nostalgia as the group members are mutually aware of each other in this process and feel a sense of togetherness and sharedness in this unified perspective and interactive retrieval process. They feel individually as if they are experiencing this together as a 'We'.* It is not a real past, but feels like one, *even more so as it is brought about intersubjectively.* It is a *shared feeling of past made present.*

It is important to stress that this definition might not be exhaustive for all possible forms of collective nostalgia. Thonhauser already defined different forms of collective emotions based on the amount of involvement of the unified evaluative perspective, sense of togetherness, and shared awareness. Therefore, *Collective Group Nostalgia* and *Full Collective Nostalgia* might contain more sub-forms based on the level of involvement from

group members. However, for the most common situations in which one could say collective nostalgia to play a role, this definition and the two types of nostalgia are a sufficient first step in explaining them.

Let us return one final time to the examples of the roommates and the elderly and construct phenomenologically what is happening in both cases based on this definition. These collective forms of nostalgia always presuppose some interaction between group members. In the case of the old roommates, an example of *Full Collective Nostalgia*, this can be them talking about a song they used to play in their dorm in their days of living together while listening to it. Or it can just be a conversation about their shared past. They could be *parallelly* nostalgic about either of these or give this no further thought in a collective sense. However, when they communicate and thus *interact* while they start to retrieve memories about their student time, a collective form of nostalgia begins to operate. The object of nostalgia leads to an interactive retrieval process and, in turn a unified evaluative perspective towards this gateway object or sensation and its implied lived and jointly experienced past. As soon as the roommates interactively start to retrieve memories, imagination can come to the fore in both subjects. This can lead both to feel the *aeonic* sense of pastness of nostalgia. Again, it must be made clear that they would not feel the exact same feeling but that they share the same evaluative perspective, and in turn feel a sense of togetherness and awareness of the other as sharing this moment. They feel themselves as jointly experiencing something as a we. Neither roommate is sharing in the exact same feeling, but the feeling itself is inextricably tied to a collective and interactive process and would not have been present without.

In the case of the group of elderly reminiscing in the retirement home, an example of *Collective Group Nostalgia*, the same mechanisms are at play. However, the defining factor here is that the retrieval process does not make use of shared memories. There is a unified shared perspective towards the object that triggers nostalgia, yet the memories that are invoked in constructing the nostalgic feeling were not encoded interactively across the members of the group of reminiscing elderly. These are merely common memories about similar events, experiences, or histories. Therefore, in the interactive retrieval process, there is ample room for a multitude of perspectives that may or may not completely overlap. The construction of the shared nostalgic feeling can therefore be based on a more imaginative

and less *factual* picture of the past.<sup>65</sup> However, since multiple group members are interactively chiming into this experience, it can still feel as something intersubjective and real to them. It does not merely feel like something personal the individual 'I' experiences, but as something that is common across all participants and experienced as a we. This makes this collective form of nostalgia especially potent politically.

### 3.4 Collective Nostalgia and Anxiety

Taking into account collective nostalgia's strong political appeal, it is important to once again look at the relation between these types of collective nostalgia and anxiety. As was made clear by Ankersmit and the psychological research, collective nostalgia can be seen as a response to societal change or anxieties. This is closely related to collective nostalgia's function as something that binds groups together. Margalit and Svetlana Boym already made clear that nostalgia has a strong political potential that can bind people together. In the move from personal to collective nostalgia this can be seen even more clearly. In personal nostalgia, one often searches for a feeling of unity and integration, which can be a response to anxiety and the future. This does not have to be the case per se for collective nostalgia. If we look at the example of the old roommates reminiscing, the focus does indeed seem to be mostly on reveling in a shared feeling of pastness that has gone by and will not come back. But this does not have to be something related to anxiety. However, when a group of people revel in the past because of certain negative aspect of their current lives or fears for the future, the link with anxiety becomes clear once again.

This relationship with anxiety is conceivable for both forms of collective nostalgia described in this chapter. However, I would argue that *Collective Group Nostalgia* is especially prone towards this link with anxiety. There are no memories that were made together on which this type of nostalgia is based, and therefore the interactive retrieval process in the present is at the core of the collective aspect of this nostalgia. Combined with the fact that collective nostalgia is something which helps in building the identity of a group and is responsive to large-scale societal anxiety, this creates a form of nostalgia which can give people without shared memories a sense of integration and group-identification which they might be lacking. In the face of recent and future anxieties such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the degradation of the public sphere, loss of meaning, and an epidemic of

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<sup>65</sup> Insofar as nostalgia can ever be an accurate representation of past

loneliness, a nostalgic sense of a shared collective past based on looser common memories can once more give a group of people a feeling of being 'at home'. This feeling of home is felt in *Full Collective Nostalgia* as well, but it is grounded in a truly shared past. As such it is less about *group-formation* and more about *group-maintenance*.

Therefore, *Collective Group Nostalgia* can also be likened with Boym's conception of 'restorative nostalgia'. It is clear that nostalgia does not accurately paint a picture of the past, but mostly glorifies it. In *Collective Group Nostalgia* this glorification is mostly a critique of the present and serves as the basis of group-identification in opposition to the present and future. Restoring this shared sense of past based on interactive and intersubjective retrieval can then become a goal of the created nostalgic group. Just like with individual nostalgia, the group can fail to realize this past they envision and are building their group identity around never truly existed at all. This is especially so because this form of collective nostalgia feels as something intersubjectively real to the nostalgic group members. If all involved think the same or similar about the imagined past, they are more inclined to confidently believe in their shared vision of past. Harnessing these feelings can lead to groups with a strongly shared identity which have a common cause and a common (imagined) history. What this entails politically, then, will be reflected upon in the next chapter.

## 4 Future Nostalgia

It seems paradoxical to talk about the future of nostalgia. Nonetheless, it is important to also look at the implications of the types of personal and collective nostalgia as described in this thesis. The understanding of nostalgia has changed much over the past 100 years. In the future, new forms or understandings of nostalgia might therefore also arise. Consequently, this last concluding chapter will aim to review the implications of personal and collective nostalgia, now and in the future. I will offer some further avenues of inquiry, as well as some additional comments on the political impact of nostalgia and the influence of media and technology on nostalgia as a whole.

### 4.1 Everybody Is Nostalgic

As was mentioned in the introductory chapter, nostalgia has been on the rise in recent years both politically and culturally. Especially in a time in which crises seem to be upending each other this can be seen. In the past two decades people have been confronted by, amongst other things, a recession, pandemic, and the recent cost of living crisis. Looming over all of these is the impending climate disaster. These problems have not been adequately resolved by democracies across the globe. In turn, this has resulted in a declining trust in institutions and politics which gave rise to the alt-right and conspiracy theories all over the world.

While these crises are experienced by all, they are especially hard on the younger generations like Gen-Z and (late) Millennials. We could say these generations seem to be perpetually stuck on the brink of adulthood. Close but not fully able to get there. The classic ‘markers of adulthood’ like owning a house, a long-term job, or having children are being achieved later and later and are also much more difficult to attain for this group than before.<sup>66</sup> Especially when it comes to work, it has been suggested that these younger generations actually prefer flexibility.<sup>67</sup> Research in the past years however, has been showing this not to always be the case (any longer).<sup>68</sup> Becoming an adult is thus postponed for these generations. Adult responsibilities, however, keep piling up. Combine this with the societal crises that these groups are also facing, and it is no wonder that they start to desire

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<sup>66</sup> Richard A. Settersten Jr. and Barbara Ray, “What’s Going on with Young People Today? The Long and Twisting Path to Adulthood,” *Transition to Adulthood. Special Issue on The Future of Children* 20, no. 1 (season-01 2010): 22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27795058>.

<sup>67</sup> See: <https://hbr.org/2016/05/what-millennials-want-from-a-new-job>

<sup>68</sup> See: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/sustainable-inclusive-growth/future-of-america/how-does-gen-z-see-its-place-in-the-working-world-with-trepidation>

back to a past devoid of certain responsibilities.<sup>69</sup> The longing to return to those moments is something that can therefore be of all ages and backgrounds.<sup>70</sup> In our current age, anxiety seems to be the big motivational factor for nostalgia. This does not mean that it is the only motivator. Think again of the example in the previous chapter of the reminiscing roommates, which was quite a positive example. Nostalgia can still be something positive which is not purely an escape or reprieve from the present. When anxieties rise across individuals and society, however, nostalgia can become a more prevalent reactive emotion within those that encounter these negative feelings.

The question then arises how the personal and collective forms of nostalgia interact with each other. Ankersmit stated that with rapid societal change across society, collective nostalgia surfaces first and can then move towards individual forms of nostalgia. In comparison, when experiencing rapid personal change, he sees it going the other way around. Personal nostalgia comes first then, after which it can move towards the collective. As the Western world is currently quite fragmented and divided along different ideologies, I would say that this can make sense if we look at it not from a grand societal scale but on the scale of different identity groups. For an alt-right ideological group the way in which society is changing rapidly can be something which makes them collectively nostalgic when interacting with each other about an idealized past. This can in turn also make them personally nostalgic in those moments in which they are not interactively retrieving past memories nostalgically with others.

However, using the definitions of nostalgia as developed in this thesis, it is difficult to agree with Ankersmit's move from personal to collective nostalgia. Personal nostalgia might drive someone to search for others who feel likewise, but it is not a guarantee or a precursor to collective nostalgia in the way collective nostalgia can be for personal nostalgia. For the first, a unified evaluative perspective, as well as mutual recognition and interactive retrieval process is also necessary. When nostalgia is felt jointly first, it leaves room to keep feeling it alone based on this earlier interaction. When it is just felt on a personal level however, it does not have to move towards the collective as easily as Ankersmit describes it at all.

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<sup>69</sup> Not to say that everybody had a perfect youth that they wish to return to. However, there are always nostalgic memories of pure presence, of being at home, in someone's past. They might be imaginative and nostalgic to a large extent, but they are still there.

<sup>70</sup> That this is the case could already be seen in the original example of nostalgia among the Swiss mercenaries Johannes Hoffer described in 1688. They were struck by nostalgia and homesickness but were all still young men.



## 4.2 Nostalgia and Political Power

When we look at groups and societal anxieties in relation to nostalgia, additional questions about the relationship between collective nostalgia and politics arise. What is this political purpose that it can have for different ideological groups? The research on collective nostalgia presented in this thesis clearly shows that it can be used politically, in particular regarding the formation of groups. In the last decade, this has been explicitly the case for the so called 'far-right' and other reactionary groups. As research has shown, these movements explicitly focus on the past as a form of doing politics. Examples include but are not limited to: Donald Trump, Thierry Baudet, or Boris Johnson and the Brexit campaign. They all wanted to 'restore' something in the countries in which they were operating. By pandering to a group of people who were feeling unrest, insecurity, or anxiety about the present and future of their societies, they were able to generate feelings of nostalgia in their constituents. Just as Ankersmit suggested, collective nostalgia can lead to personal nostalgia. This has become clear. By talking about the need for restoration of the past, these politicians gave people who were feeling anxiety an object to focus on: their common memories of 'better days'. It did not matter that these days might not have been better for all. Some groups are better off today than they were in the past. Yet, this feeling of integration and familiarity that nostalgia offered has been of great importance. Feeling this together with others leads to stronger feelings of group-identification. Therefore, it is also the reason why these political movements gained such a big following with a strong shared sense of identity.

It is specifically the second type of collective nostalgia which is the culprit for this development: *Collective Group Nostalgia*. Since it is based not on shared but on *common* memories between different people, it leaves a lot of room for imagination. It can much more easily captivate a bigger group of people than *Full Collective Nostalgia* can. We might not share memories with many people around us, but we do share many common memories with other people of a similar background. These types of collective common memories can be leveraged in a political setting and in turn be used to bind people together. A group of people is intentional towards this feeling of integration, unity, and home through their collective nostalgic remembrance of common memories. It is then understandable that they wish to bring this feeling that they associate with the common memories of the past in the now. Especially when a charismatic leader actively influences the collective interactive

retrieval process of the group, instructing them about the way their collective (but fake) nostalgic past can be restored.

For these societal groups that are anxious about the present and future, be it because of technological change, societal change, or personal struggle, there exists something in the past that was better. There is something there which can improve the present. Or, as we have seen with these reactionary movements, there is an absence of something in the past in comparison with the present which made said past better. To restore this past and improve the present, the nostalgic needs to bring something from that past back to the now. Or, and this is crucial, something in the now must be removed that was absent in the supposed past of the group: i.e., a scapegoat to point towards. In case of the reactionary right, we can think of 'The European Union', 'Immigrants', 'The Left', 'Woke PC Culture', or if we dive deeper into the rabbit hole of the conspiracy-riddled extreme right, the 'Reptilian Overlords' and 'Jewish Cabal'. The nostalgic feeling of integration and being at home is conflated with the general memories of past which have elucidated it, and in turn aspects of this past are either glorified or novel aspects of the present are vilified. Something needs to be brought back from the past in the now, or we need to remove something from the now to return to the past. In both cases, the past is put on a pedestal and the feeling of nostalgia is slyly used by politicians to stir up their nostalgic constituents.

While the aforementioned examples are mostly focused on the ideological right, collective nostalgia is omnipresent across the whole of society. Therefore, it is wrong to only paint the reactionary right as reveling in their imagined past. People can be collectively nostalgic without it turning into something political per se. The roommate example showed this, and everybody can think of multiple other instances in which they were joyfully nostalgic with others. In a time of loneliness and anxiety, nostalgia can even bring a sense of joy and connection. If felt together, it can lead to group identification and a feeling of integration. Although temporary, and thus not capable of fixing one's issues for good, it can offer relief to those who are feeling down. One such example can be found once more on YouTube, where there is a community with at its focus Nintendo Music. Under comments of many videos containing mixes of songs from, for example, the Pokémon franchise, people leave comments about their past playing these games. Many comments are liked, responded to, and discussed. As one popular comment underneath a video reads "Reading everyone's comments is making me smile, feels good to be in this headspace again just like when I was a

kid.”<sup>71</sup> This sense of nostalgia based on common memories, and nostalgia in general, does not have to be something negative at all. It can be something positive which brings joy, albeit temporarily, and can exist separately from anxious emotional states in those feeling it.

#### 4.3 Mediated & Techno-nostalgia

The link between (collective) nostalgia and something like YouTube warrants some further exploration into possible future developments of nostalgia. People are not only nostalgic about their personal, shared, or common memories, they are also nostalgic about technology and media use. This can be seen especially well with video games. While many other media are somewhat passive, or not something one actively contributes to, video games are media in which the player actively plays a part. They are transported to another world in which they get to make their own memories. There is no gameplay without interaction. Therefore, these memories made are closely related to a location as well. Moreover, when playing a game that is engaging to the player, they are ‘sucked in’. A state of pure presence is achieved, which is akin to a feeling of unity and integration. As these games are often played across a certain time period and not in one go, they do not only have a spatial dimension, but a temporal one as well. There are memories attached to them spread out across time. Seen separately, these aspects are not completely unique to the medium of games. The combination of these affordances together, however, make them especially prone to nostalgic remembrance.

Is the type of nostalgias based on video games indistinguishable from nostalgia based on memories in the ‘real’ world? The way people talk about their nostalgia in game worlds right now seems to suggest this is not necessarily the case. These places are described as real by players in their nostalgic remembrance. They are seen as places that people have visited in their past and sometimes still do. Players understand them not to be real in the sense that they exist offline, but in their interactive experiences they have felt as real in their play and in their memory. What’s more, video games from the past are still accessible exactly the way they were. Sure, nostalgic remembrance might render memories more rose-colored than reality permits. Moreover, one will never be able to go back to the past in a temporal sense. Spatially, however, these virtual worlds can be accessed in exactly the same

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<sup>71</sup> See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VToyayJ4u2k&t=1288s>

way as they were when first encountered. In a sense, these worlds one has made memories in in the past can be encountered once more exactly as they were. This adds an extra dimension to the relationship between nostalgia and technology that is worthwhile exploring.

In a more specific sense, the link between personal and collective nostalgia and social media is another avenue for future research into nostalgic remembrance. In the case of the person who became nostalgic by reading the experiences of other gamers underneath a gaming music video, it is difficult to delineate whether we can call this personal or collective nostalgia. Comments of others do play a role, and in a way these can be seen as a delayed way in which common memories are interactively retrieved. This does not happen at the same time however, and is mediated throughout the internet. More and more of our experiences are mediated in this way by technologies of different sorts. Looking at the way one can be nostalgic with and through one's online presence is another avenue for future research which could be fruitful to understand the link between technology and nostalgia.

#### 4.4 Final Theoretical Considerations

There are a few last areas of research into the theoretical aspects of nostalgia which could be looked at in future research. While the two types of collective nostalgia defined in this research cover most of the types of common nostalgic experiences one can have collectively, there might be more types of nostalgic experiences than these. The technologically mediated nostalgia mentioned in the previous section is one such case, but more could also exist. Nostalgia is a complex phenomenon in which many different cognitive processes are interacting with each other. When this is felt collectively, it becomes even more complex. The aspects that collective nostalgia contains, such as the unified evaluative perspective, sense of togetherness and sense of sharedness, could possibly vary across nostalgic experience and therefore also lead to different subtypes of *Collective Group Nostalgia* and *Full Personal Nostalgia*. Future research into these facets of collective nostalgia could help in coming to understand and develop them further.

Finally, while nostalgia is associated with one's own memories and experiences, a look into 'acquired' or 'learned' nostalgia is also something which has not been considered much in current research. *Anemoia*, as it has been called, is a concept that has been pondered about in popular culture but lacks representation in research. Margalit already

talked about vicarious memory in the context of the occupation of the Palestine by Israel and how certain memories can become learned. In the context of nostalgia, we see people being nostalgic about their own lives and histories first and foremostly, but not exclusively. Examples of 'acquired' nostalgia are abundant: The glorification of confederate statues in opposition to Black Lives Matter, the focus of reactionary politicians of Baudet on the colonial era, or even teenagers nowadays thinking they were born in the 'wrong era'.<sup>72</sup> Memories about these concepts can become conflated with one's own memories of past. Since nostalgia's sense of general pastness is in itself not a true and accurate past, learned or 'acquired' nostalgia thus seems to be a strongly plausible phenomenon. This is something which cannot yet be fully explained by current philosophical research on (collective) nostalgia. It would not be far-fetched to think that collective types of nostalgia in particular can become based on a past that one has never experienced. As it is so closely related to group-identification and formation, learning to be nostalgic about something that is of importance to the group can be a way to feel integration with said group. Future research in this area could therefore also help in understanding the political aspect of collective nostalgia better.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, there remain a host of different avenues for philosophical inquiry in the nature of nostalgia and its collective dimension. This thesis tried to offer a first cohesive understanding of the personal and collective variations of this phenomenon in philosophy. Future research into the facets named in this section can help in further understanding how nostalgia functions, and how it has become such a potent tool for politicians. As the future remains uncertain, and the biggest crisis humanity has ever faced is approaching, nostalgia might become even more prominent. While this thesis took a quite critical approach towards nostalgia, it can truly offer us a comforting feeling of integration in times of trouble. We do have to remain wary of not reveling in this feeling too much when faced with adversary, however. Otherwise, we run the risk of treating the symptoms of our anxiety, but not the root or cause. Then, it will only inhibit us from taking action to improve the present and future. We should not let that happen. Nostalgia can be a painkiller but should never be the remedy.

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<sup>72</sup> A community on Reddit exists which make fun of people who feel this way, see <https://www.reddit.com/r/lewrongeneration/>

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