

Affective scaffolds of nostalgia

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Abstract: In this paper I analyse nostalgia by reflecting on theories coming from cultural studies, psychology, sociology and philosophy. After introducing the meaning and history of the term nostalgia, I focus on Boym's theories to verify if her classification can be applied to the everyday experience of nostalgia, especially childhood nostalgia, which is the focus of this paper. I then argue that at its core nostalgia consists in a selection and renarration of memories that deeply shape and reveal one's personal identity. By using theories of situated affectivity, I offer an account of the role the environment plays in nostalgia. I show how the media we consume through material culture constitutes a synchronic scaffold for the alleviation of the sense of nostalgic longing and how the processes of selection and renarration can also be scaffolded by the interaction with media. I conclude the paper by discussing how these processes can be externally influenced in a way that resembles what Slaby calls mind invasion.

Keywords: nostalgia; media; situated affectivity; affective scaffolding; mind invasion

1. Introduction

Nostalgia is a complex affective phenomenon that has fascinated poets as much as it has psychologists and philosophers for centuries. Despite numerous studies on the topic, nostalgia still seems an impossible conundrum, a jigsaw puzzle in which past and future, memory and oblivion, pleasure and longing tightly intersect. This bittersweet emotion is deeply dependent on the emoter's environment, especially the technology, media, symbols and material culture present in it (Hutcheon 2000; Boym 2001; Wilson J. 2005; Lizardi 2015) and I believe that the theories of situated affectivity offer excellent tools, especially the various formulations of the concept of *affective scaffolding*, to understand this aspect of nostalgia. However, I adopt a different approach from the one more common in the literature of situated affectivity. Scholars generally start from a theoretical model, usually inherited from cognitive science, and then apply it to affectivity. Instead, I first try to analyse a specific affective phenomenon (i.e. nostalgia) by reflecting on the theories from cultural studies,

psychology, sociology and philosophy. Then, I use theories of situated affectivity to achieve a better understanding of the environment's role in this affective phenomenon. I believe this approach complements those more common to the theories of situated affectivity, and I hope that those interested in both specific emotions (especially nostalgia) and situated affectivity find the methodology and the results reported here useful.

I focus on the way nostalgia is “ordinarily” experienced today – that is to say, in a society deeply influenced by technologies that constantly allow quick access to an infinite amount of nostalgically relevant material. I take account only very briefly of people such as writers and philosophers, who have a peculiar relationship with their nostalgia and have experienced this emotion in a unique way through the act of writing (e.g. Benjamin or Nabokov). While particularly interesting from a philosophical point of view, especially if we consider writing as a form of scaffolding of one's emotions, a literary work is also an idiosyncratic expression of the affectivity of the subject. Since each writer can express nostalgia in a very personal and unique way, analysing the writings of authors such as Benjamin or Nabokov (see Jameson 1969; Boym 2001: 259-284) could mislead if interpreted simply as expressions of the author's affectivity and not also as works of art. Therefore, rather than analysing how the nostalgic person creates texts and artefacts to express her nostalgia, I analyse the relationship between the nostalgic person and the potentially nostalgically relevant material present in her environment. To better achieve this goal, I mainly focus on childhood nostalgia, for various reasons. First, while not everyone has experienced nostalgia for a romance or for “the good old days” (i.e. political nostalgia), most adults have experienced childhood nostalgia at least once. As a matter of fact, of all the kinds of nostalgia that one could list according to their specific object (e.g. political nostalgia, nostalgia for a romance, homesickness), childhood nostalgia is arguably the most widespread, as it is reflected by the abundance of media that nourish and thrive on this emotion (see Lizardi 2015). Moreover, this kind of nostalgia is theoretically relevant because childhood arguably represents the most primary object¹ of nostalgia (see Starobinsky 1966: 103; Davis 1979). However, to better understand childhood nostalgia and nostalgia in general, I also offer examples of other kinds of nostalgia, especially political nostalgia.

This paper is divided into five parts. First, having introduced the meaning and history of the term “nostalgia”, I focus on Boym's (2001) theories to verify if her classification applies to the everyday experience of nostalgia, especially

¹ Here I am referring to the “material” or “particular” objects of nostalgia, not the formal one.

childhood nostalgia. In the second part, I show how, at its core, nostalgia consists in a selection and renarration of memories that deeply shape and reveal one's identity. In the third section, I offer an introduction to the concept of affective scaffolding. In the fourth section, I show how the media that we consume through material culture can constitute a synchronic scaffold to alleviate the sense of nostalgic longing. In the fifth section, I show how the processes of selection and renarration can also be scaffolded, and I discuss how these processes can be externally influenced in a way that resembles what Slaby (2016) calls 'mind invasion'.

2. *Nostalgia: a longing for the past*

The history of nostalgia as a precisely identified phenomenon begins in 1688, when the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer (Hofer 1688; Starobinski 1966) invented the term by combining the Greek words *nostos* (homecoming) and *algos* (pain, longing). He coined this scientific (thus, internationally recognisable) word to identify the pathological sense of *Heimweh*, a German word that literally means 'homesickness', which Swiss mercenaries experienced on the battlefield, away from their beloved Alps (Starobinski 1966). Hofer's idea of interpreting nostalgia as a kind of sickness (i.e. a disorder of the imagination) lasted through the better part of the 18th century. However, as Hutcheon notes, by the 19th century, the word had lost its purely medical meaning:

[Nostalgia] went from being a curable medical illness to an incurable (indeed unassuageable) condition of the spirit or psyche. What made that transition possible was a shift in site from the spatial to the temporal. Nostalgia was no longer simply a yearning to return home. As early as 1798, Immanuel Kant had noted that people who did return home were usually disappointed because, in fact, they did not want to return to a place, but to a time, a time of youth. Time, unlike space, cannot be returned to – ever; time is irreversible. And nostalgia becomes the reaction to that sad fact. (2000:194)²

Nowadays most scholars agree on the point that nostalgia is a longing for a lost time, rather than for a faraway place and that therefore nostalgia should not be confused with homesickness (see Hart 1973: 398-399; Davis 1979; Hutcheon 2000; Boym 2001: 3-18; Wilson J. 2005: 22-23; Sedikides *et al.* 2008). Even

² More precisely, Kant (1798: 178-179) argues that *Heimweh* is generated in Swiss soldiers who live abroad, by images of their homeland from their past. Upon returning home, they would be healed of their *Heimweh*, thanks to the disappointment of not finding what they sought. They would feel disappointed because their homeland has changed; in reality (Kant argues), they were disappointed because they wanted to return to their childhood. As she specifies in a note, Hutcheon takes the idea of nostalgia as a response to the irreversibility of time from Jankélévitch (1974), rather than from Kant.

though we can be nostalgic for a faraway home, if we are feeling nostalgia, distance in time is more relevant than distance in space. ‘True’ nostalgia thrives on the irretrievability of the past (Jankélévitch 1974; Hutcheon 2000). As it will become clear below, the impossibility of coming back to this metaphorical ‘home’ allows its transformation and idealisation.

Explaining what defines the longing of nostalgia is no easy task, as it is a multiform phenomenon. To better understand this problem, we turn to Svetlana Boym, one of the most influential scholars on nostalgia. Boym (2001: 41-48) argues that there are two main kinds of nostalgia. The first is restorative nostalgia, which focuses on the *nostos* and tries to recreate the lost home (41-48). This nostalgia is at the core of various reactionary and identity political movements. It is so obsessed with the idea of a return to origins that it can even refer to a past that ended before the nostalgic person was born. Inevitably, such a past can be so idealised that it almost resembles a myth (41-48). However, we could say that restorative nostalgia manipulates not only history but also the very people who feel this emotion. They do not fully realise that they are the victims of nostalgia; rather, they consider themselves protectors of truth and tradition (41-50). These traditions, as Boym (42) specifies by referring to Hobsbawm (1983), are often invented and defended through ‘symbols and rituals’ that assure continuity with the past and the possibility of its complete return (Boym 2001: 41-48).

The second kind is called reflective nostalgia, and it focuses on the *algos*; this emotion delays the homecoming melancholically and ironically (Boym 2001: 49-55). This nostalgia thrives on the “ambivalence of longing and belonging” (49-55). It differentiates itself from restorative nostalgia in its relationship with modernity. Rather than rejecting it, it embraces its contradictions and is also very sceptical of the absolute truth, of which restorative nostalgia is so fond (41-55). Instead of focusing on symbols and rituals, reflective nostalgia loves details and fragments of memory (Boym 2001). It is often ironic and even humorous,³ unlike restorative nostalgia, which takes itself seriously (Boym 2001). Boym believes not only that in reflective nostalgia, the subject is aware of her emotion, but also that she engages critically with her longing (48-56). This nostalgia can resemble melancholia, and it can likewise become a motor for artistic creation. If anything, this is the nostalgia of writers and artists (in particular, Boym analyses Nabokov, Brodsky and Kabakov). In other words,

³ The interpretation of the relationship between irony and nostalgia is radically different for other authors. Most eminently, Hutcheon (1988: 39) identifies irony as an alternate phenomenon to nostalgia. She says that irony can manifest itself contextually with nostalgia, but, unlike Boym’s (2001: 354) contention, the former cannot be a co-constituent of the latter.

as the term 'reflective' suggests, the main difference from its 'restorative' sister is that this nostalgia is 'self-aware' (48-56). Therefore, even if it inevitably transforms the past, it never does so to the point of turning it into myth. Rather, we could say that the person who experiences reflective nostalgia plays with the past, not out of a desire for manipulation and control over history or other people but for the bitter pleasure of pondering what was loved and is now lost. Boym's (41-56) analysis shows that nostalgia plays a central role in our identity, both as a group and as individuals. Restorative nostalgia involves a complete identification between the past of the social group to which the subject belongs and the future of that group. In other words, the person who feels restorative nostalgia thinks, "This is who we were and, therefore, who we should be". In contrast, in reflective nostalgia, we have a proper reflection, a pondering of the role that the past plays in our lives. In a way, instead of affirming one's identity, the person who feels reflective nostalgia questions it. She wonders who she was and who she is now.

Boym (41) stresses the fact that her distinction is not rigid, and that nostalgia usually manifests itself in a more nuanced way. However, she is more interested in the cultural products of nostalgia (such as political movements, literature, art and the evolution of urban landscapes) than in the emotion itself. Therefore, her distinction cannot adequately account for the everyday experience of nostalgia. For example, the childhood nostalgia felt by people who are not artists does not reach the extremes of restorative or reflective nostalgia. A person who is nostalgic for her own childhood does not consider the object of her longing retrievable. If anything, such a pursuit would be pathological. Neither is a person nostalgic for her own childhood involved in the deep, almost melancholic pondering that makes the person who feels reflective nostalgia reinterpret her past through artistic production. Rather, she is in a somewhat intermediate position. In other words, even if she were aware of feeling nostalgia, this does not necessarily imply that she would take a critical stance towards the feelings she has for the past and the representations that shape those feelings. As we will see in the fourth section, childhood nostalgia is usually felt through a partial and time-limited reliving of an idealised childhood, made possible by the engagement with the material culture that connects the nostalgic person to her past.

3. *Selection and renarration*

We now have a more nuanced, albeit incomplete, interpretation of how nostalgia views the past. But how does the past become 'nostalgic' in the first place? I believe that at its very core, nostalgia performs a renarration of the

past that takes place first and foremost through a selection. A good starting point for understanding how nostalgia implies a selection and renarration comes from Hutcheon:

[The nostalgic past] is rarely the past as actually experienced, of course; it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire [...] It is “memorialized” as past, crystallized into precious moments selected by memory, but also by forgetting, and by desire’s distortions and reorganizations. Simultaneously distancing and proximating, nostalgia exiles us from the present as it brings the imagined past near. The simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful, or harmonious past is constructed [and then experienced emotionally]. (2000: 195)

Here Hutcheon correctly identifies the object of nostalgia as a lost past, moreover she highlights the connection between memory and nostalgia. These two phenomena share some characteristics; however, we should not conflate them (see Casey 1987: 368). Just like nostalgia, memory is a selection, as we do not remember everything that was present; nostalgia and memory are not photographic images of the past to which they refer. As a matter of fact, memory also implies a renarration of the past, and such a renarration is often dependent on past and present emotions, which “colour” and shape it (see De Sousa 2017). Another important point is that the renarration of memory and that of nostalgia have to do with one’s identity (Davis 1977; 1979; Boym 2001; Wilson J. 2005). This is evident with memory. Memory contributes to the formation of one’s identity, as it tells us who we were, or at least who we believe we were. On the other hand, the relation between nostalgia and identity is more complex and by understanding this relation we can also understand why memory and nostalgia should not be conflated. Nostalgia reveals what aspects of the past we would like to bring back, if given the opportunity, or at the very least, what aspects we would like to experience again. In its most extreme instances, nostalgia reveals the future we want, a future that conforms to our idealised past. Therefore, this emotion does not simply reveal who we believe we were, but, more importantly, that we believe something about that past to be so good and positive that we want our present and future identity to maintain strong continuity with it.⁴ In other words, we mainly feel nostalgia by focusing on the

⁴ For the relation between identity and nostalgia in psychology and sociology, see Davis (1977; 1979), Sedikides *et al.* (2004), Wilson J. (2005). The fundamental idea that all these authors share is the so-called ‘discontinuity hypothesis’, first theorised by Davis (1977; 1979). According to this idea, nostalgia at its very core is a coping mechanism that forms and corroborates our sense of identity in response to existential threats. Or, as Davis (1977: 420) puts it: “1) the nostalgic evocation of some past state of affairs always occurs in the context of present fears, discontents, anxieties or uncertainties even though these may not be in the forefront of the person’s awareness, and 2) it is these which pose

moments of the past that we now believe to have positively determined our present identity and that should also shape our future identity. I want to stress the fact that what determines the selection of the moments that shape our nostalgia is not the relevance they had in the past, but the value we attribute to them in the present, in light of the identity we think we have now or that we desire to have in the future. This process of revaluation – or, if you will, renarration – of the past is an essential component of nostalgia. To better illustrate this point, I offer four examples, in which I consider how past events (either positive or negative) are seen in the present.

(1) The fact that we would feel nostalgia by focusing on events that determined our past identity and that still have a positive impact on our present identity is quite intuitive. Let us consider a retired athlete who is nostalgic for his heyday. Clearly, without a difference between his present and past conditions, nostalgia would be impossible, since we can only long for something that we believe not to have. However, at the same time, he also perceives a strong continuity in his identity through time. The successes of his youth are as important now as they were then in defining who he is. He might be unable to compete anymore, but in a way, his identity is still that of an athlete, albeit a retired one, and the nostalgic renarration of his past successes is what validates this identity. (2) However, not all things that were once pleasurable and important to one's identity are relevant to our nostalgia. For example, things that were very important when we were children, such as books or movies, might leave us now completely indifferent or may even motivate shame. We usually are not nostalgic for a past that we disown, a past that is too far away from the identity we now have (or desire). (3) Moreover, some events that have defined our childhood and, therefore, our identity, nonetheless are not part of our nostalgic renarration because they were not happy events at the time, and we still recognise them as unhappy. For instance, I remember the attack on the Twin Towers on 9/11 very distinctly. Even though I was only a child, that day changed the way I would see the world; it was an event that played a crucial role in the formation of my identity. Yet, I would never be nostalgic for that day. This is quite intuitive since nostalgia can only refer to events that we now think were once happy and good. (4) Finally, one can be nostalgic for a time that was not necessarily seen as partially or wholly positive then but is seen as positive today. If we keep using the 9/11 example, I could say that on a deeper

the threat of identity discontinuity (existentially the panic fear of the “wolf of insignificance”) that nostalgia, by marshalling our psychological resources for continuity, seeks to abort, or at the very least deflect”. While this theory captures a fundamental aspect of nostalgia, focusing too much on it might blind us to another fundamental aspect of this emotion: Nostalgia also reveals our identity; not only the one we have now but, also and more importantly, the one we want in the future.

level, I might be nostalgic for how the world was before 9/11, when it seemed to be a safer place. I am nostalgic for how the world was then, and in a sense, I would like to be part of that world once again. However, if I am nostalgic, it is because I idealise a past that in reality was probably as troubled as the present. In this instance, it is clear how nostalgia essentially performs a reevaluation of the past, which can become an idealisation and even imply a rejection of the present, or at least of parts of it (Hutcheon 2000: 195), and an imagining of the future (since I want the future to conform to my ideal image of that past). In general, nostalgia reveals not simply who we thought we were but, more specifically, who we think we are and who we want to be. At this point, it should also be clear that the nostalgia we feel does not simply reveal the identity we think we have (or wish we had); it also helps shape that very identity through the processes of renarration.

Since the object of nostalgia is an idealised past that was fundamental in the formation of our identities (present or desired), it is clear why childhood is the perfect object of nostalgia.⁵ Not only is childhood the crucial moment in the formation of our identities; it is also the time when everything seems possible. The sense of infinite possibilities and near omnipotence that we associate with childhood and youth make them even more of an ideal object for nostalgia (see also Peters 1985). I conclude this section by stating clearly that in childhood nostalgia (but the same could be said for all forms of nostalgia), we do not long for specific and selected moments that acquire a new meaning in the present. Rather, we long for childhood as a whole, idealised and renarrated by the combination of those selected and reevaluated moments (see also Casey 1987: 368). This point can be better understood if we think that this narration is not done once and for all. Rather, it is a continuous process, constantly open to new interpretations (see Davis 1977: 419; Silver 1996: 3; Wilson J. 2005: 35, 61). This means that whenever we feel nostalgia, we could volun-

⁵ Here I am referring to the 'material' or 'particular' objects of nostalgia. Other instances include the idealised good old days, youth, a mythical prehistorical past. In this paper, I do not focus on the formal object of nostalgia. However, I believe that Heidegger (1983: Eng. tr. 5-9) has thus far come closest in the individualisation of the formal object of nostalgia. He argues that what he calls *Heimweh* (which, in this case, I believe can be assimilated to nostalgia) is longing for an original unity. In *Heimweh*, we are driven 'to being as a whole' or 'to be within the whole' (1983: Eng. tr. 5). Heidegger, who here is interpreting Novalis's fragment – 'Philosophy is really a homesickness [*Heimweh*], an urge to be at home everywhere' (Novalis 1923, Vol 2: 179), goes on to explicate the way this desire to be at 'home', to be 'as a whole' or 'within the whole', is at the core of the philosophical endeavour. While fully explaining this part of Heidegger's argument would require an article of its own, here we can say that the German philosopher has implicitly found the formal object of a phenomenon that he calls *Heimweh* (but that intuitively includes nostalgia). In this light, we can affirm that childhood, the nation, the good old days (that is to say, the particular or material objects of nostalgia) represent particular formulations of the whole, of which we want to be part once more.

tarily or involuntarily focus on different reimagined aspects or moments, thus forming a new renarration. However, this process determines only the way we connect to and characterise the object of longing, which essentially is always the same – that is to say, a childhood that has been somehow renarrated and idealised to some degree.

4. *What are affective scaffolds?*

Now that we have a better understanding of nostalgia, I will address the problem of how this emotion relates to the subject's environment, in particular, material culture and media. I believe that the media play a role in the way we both feel nostalgia and develop a nostalgic attitude towards the past. To better understand these ideas, I will use concepts derived from theories of situated affectivity. The supporters of these theories argue that we should not analyse affect and emotion as processes that take place exclusively intracranially. That is to say, they hold that affectivity is not a process bound to the individual brain; rather, it also encompasses processes that take place in the body and sequences of active engagement with the environment, usually in a highly social and relational context (Slaby & Wüschner 2014). Thus, affectivity is a process that involves the brain and the body of the emoter; moreover technology, processes or structures present in the environment can support emotional performances and the development of specific affective repertoires (Griffiths & Scarantino 2009; Krueger 2014; Slaby 2014; Colombetti & Roberts 2015).⁶

Since I want to focus on the role material culture plays in nostalgia, I will use the concept of scaffolding, a central notion in situated affectivity. Clark (1997) introduced the notion of the external scaffold in cognitive science by elaborating the work of Vygotsky (1986). An external scaffold can comprise items or structures present in the environment, which the subject can use reliably to support cognitive processes (Clark 1997: 45-47). Classic examples of external scaffolds are language and technology (from pen and paper to computers that can be used, for instance, to do complex calculations) (Clark 1997). A more recent example is that of an experienced bar tender who associates cocktails to specific glassware and decorations, which she arranges on the counter rather than literally memorizing long orders (Stephan & Walter 2020).

⁶ I do not argue whether affectivity can be extended (i.e. co-constituted by extrabodily processes) or at most embedded (i.e. co-dependent upon extrabodily processes) (see Stephan *et al.* 2014: 69). I remain neutral on the issue because, as Stephan and Walter have recently argued, from a practical point of view, whether affectivity can be extended or merely embedded does not matter. Rather than losing ourselves in metaphysical quandaries, we should, as I do in this paper, focus on the “personal, moral, and societal importance of being aware of these scaffoldings” (Stephan & Walter 2020).

Griffiths and Scarantino (2009) brought affective scaffolds into the debate on situated affectivity and deepened the concept with the distinction between diachronic and synchronic scaffolding:

[T]he environment plays an active role in structuring and enabling emotional “engagements,” which [...] are scaffolded by their natural context of occurrence. The environment scaffolds emotion in two ways. Synchronically, the environment supports particular emotional performances – particular episodes of, say, anger or sadness [...] Diachronically, the environment supports the development of an “emotional phenotype” or repertoire of emotional abilities. Thus, the provision of confessionals in churches enables certain kinds of emotional performance (synchronic scaffolding), and the broader Catholic culture supports the development of the ability to engage in the emotional engagements of confession (diachronic scaffolding). (443)

The environment, which encompasses everything from language to architecture and from material culture to political institutions (Colombetti & Krueger 2015), does not simply offer triggers for the affective reactions of the subject. As a matter of fact, the notion that emotions are a response to the environment is a trivial one that would not need the concept of scaffolding to explain it. Rather, the environment offers support for expressing and developing affectivity, thus partaking in the affective process in specific ways. Colombetti and Krueger (2015) make an important development in the concept of affective scaffolding, arguing not only that our emotions depend on our sociocultural context, as Griffith and Scarantino (2009) had already argued, but also that affective states involve the active manipulation of the world. According to them, this process leads to the creation of what they call ‘affective niches’ – that is to say, “instances of organism-environment couplings (mutual influences) that enable the realization of specific affective states. This active manipulation need not be the product of a conscious intention, although it can be; rather, it is often just part of our repertoire of habitual dealings with the world”⁷ (Colombetti & Krueger 2015: 1160). Niche construction theory offers a deep understanding of affective scaffolding because it highlights the fact that as affective organisms, we and the environment in which we live are structurally entangled. According to niche construction theory, as inhabitants of a specific environment, we modify it in various ways in order to better fulfil our

⁷ The concept of niche construction originates in evolutionary biology, and Odling-Smee and Feldman (2003) have studied it particularly. An example of niche construction in nature is the dam-building activity of the beaver. This activity shapes the environment where the beaver lives. The environment shaped to fulfil the needs of the beaver thus becomes a niche, which in turn affects the beaver’s behaviour and that of its progeny. The concept of niche construction was first introduced in cognitive sciences by Sterelny (2010).

needs (in this case, affective needs), thus shaping a niche. At the same time, the niche in which we were born and that we have contributed to forming shapes our affective structure. A particularly interesting example that Colombetti and Krueger offer, which helps in understanding the concept of affective niche, is the example of the woman's handbag. Such a handbag is an instance of a highly portable and personalised affective scaffold, as it is a

collection of technologies specifically chosen for regulating affect: charms and tokens for good luck and peace of mind, which influence one's appraisal of, and ability to cope with, specific situations; photos, assorted mementos (such as old theatre tickets and restaurant receipts), snippets of notes, and letters from loved ones that bring about fond memories of individuals and elicit specific feelings; and small weapons or tools that affect one's awareness of one's action possibilities, which accordingly generate feelings of confidence, power, and security. (2015: 1163)

The model of niche construction can be particularly useful in describing collecting, which is a phenomenon deeply related to nostalgia (Boym 2001: 309-336; Wilson J. 2005: 107-172; Lizardi 2015). Owning, collecting and organising objects from the past allow us to create a space in which certain affective phenomena would otherwise be impossible. For example, Wilson J. (2005: 113) notices how some people collect toys that they desired when they were children and could not have at the time. In this instance, owning that particular object allows the individual not only to connect to her childhood, but also to 'complete' it to some degree and, thus, idealise it. In a sense, owning those toys lets the subject somewhat affectively 'restore' what never was. This idea of restoring and experiencing a past that one has never lived becomes even more apparent when we think of those who collect artefacts from an era that ended before one's birth (see Wilson J. 2005: 109-127). From the perspective of niche construction, a collection appears as a reliable and highly individualised source of nostalgic feelings. In the next two sections I explain in more detail how exactly environmental supports can function as scaffolds for nostalgia.

5. *Alleviating the longing through synchronic scaffolding*

In this section, I use the concept of affective scaffolding to examine how childhood nostalgia is generally experienced today. In childhood nostalgia, we can 'satisfy' the desire to bring back the past by momentarily reliving the experiences and feelings that structure our nostalgic longing, through engagement with media, such as books or movies, that were important in our childhood or thematically or emotionally related to it. This nostalgia is not fully restorative because the subject is not delusional – she knows that her childhood will not

come back. Neither is it reflective; even though engagement with the past can be active, it lacks the more critical and creative components that are specific to reflective nostalgia. The idea that nostalgia thrives on some kind of material support is not new. Authors such as Hutcheon (2000) and Lizardi (2015) have realised that in our era, technology offers the means for making nostalgia more accessible than ever. As Hutcheon notices:

[N]ostalgia requires the availability of evidence of the past, and it is precisely the electronic and mechanical reproduction of images of the past that plays such an important role in the structuring of the nostalgic imagination today, furnishing it with the possibility of ‘compelling vitality’. Thanks to CD ROM technology and, before that, audio and video reproduction, nostalgia no longer has to rely on individual memory or desire: it can be fed forever by quick access to an infinitely recyclable past. (2000: 196)

Since Hutcheon wrote this, potentially nostalgic material has become more accessible than ever: movies, books and songs are now constantly available on our smartphones. Internet archives, such as YouTube, allow access to almost all media that has ever been produced ranging from black-and-white movies to sitcoms from the 90s, and from newsreels from the 30s to whatever was culturally relevant when we were children. In other words, nostalgia is now at our fingertips and we can experience it whenever we want (Lizardi 2015).

As already seen in the previous section, we should keep in mind that speaking of material culture as merely a trigger for our nostalgia could be too simplistic, even though this is a popular attitude (see Wildschut *et al.* 2006; Lizardi 2017: 6). I do not deny the fact that the environment can unexpectedly trigger our nostalgia;⁸ rather, in this section and the next, I focus on how the environment can be organised – usually, but not necessarily, by the subject – in a way that can structure our nostalgia. As a matter of fact, material supports do not simply elicit an affective response. They also allow us to experience nostalgia in a way that otherwise would be impossible. Even though an actual ‘homecoming’ is known to be impossible, material culture offers a direct connection with the past, a connection so strong that we could describe it as material culture allowing us to relive the events and experiences that constitute our nostalgic renarration whenever we want.

In the recent and variegated literature on situated affectivity, the idea that material culture can constitute a solid scaffold for affectivity has gained traction. Scholars have been especially interested in material supports such as

⁸ Proust’s (1913) episode of the madeleine is often used as an example to support the idea that a sensation can trigger nostalgia (see Hart 1973). I do not deny this possibility, nor will I argue whether the famous Proustian passage describes nostalgia or another phenomenon.

MP3 players, portable computers and, most of all, smartphones that allow the consumption of all kinds of media, including literature, movies and especially music. These technologies, I believe, allow for two different kinds of user-resource interactions (i.e. interactions between an individual and an affective scaffold). The first kind of interaction is one in which an individual uses material culture as *unidirectional material tools for emoting* (see Stephan & Walter 2020). For instance, if one unwillingly finds herself feeling a painful nostalgic longing for her youth, she could look at old pictures in which she shares happy moments with friends or family. Through this interaction with a resource present in the environment, she can regulate her nostalgia by engaging in a pleasurable contemplation of the past. Through the picture the past is contemplated as something not completely lost, but somewhat still ‘present’ and available. This mediated aesthetic connection with the past is pleasurable and thus alleviates the sense of longing. In this instance, therefore, the subject initiates an intentional and unidirectional influence of the world into herself to satisfy a specific affective need (see Stephan & Walter 2020). This alleviating of the sense of longing could occur without an external support. After all nostalgia is bitter because we long for something, and sweet because we love indulging in the contemplation of the past, be it a mediated contemplation or not. However, the use of a scaffold makes the alleviating function easier and quicker to be performed.

The second type of user-resource interaction I want to discuss in this section are *functionally integrated gainful systems* (FIG) as first introduced by Wilson R. A. (2010). In particular, Krueger and Szanto (2016) try to show that the music we listen to through our portable devices does not merely trigger our affectivity and that the relation we have with our portable devices capable of reproducing media is not unidirectional. Rather, in combination with the listener, they generate a FIG. FIGs have three fundamental characteristics: “they consist of processes that are (1) *coupled*, in that they are linked by reliable causal connections; (2) *integrated*, in that they are mutually-influencing and working together as one; and (3) *functionally gainful*, in that these processes together realize novel functions they can’t realize separately” (2016: 867). Therefore, similarly to a niche, a FIG involves the ongoing feedback between an individual and specific features of her environment. Krueger and Szanto argue that the activity of listening to music can fulfil the requirements of FIG. This becomes evident if we think about the fact that material culture always mediates our engagement with music (DeNora 2000; Krueger & Szanto 2016: 867). We generally listen to music through technology, such as MP3 players and the ubiquitous streaming services offered through the smartphones in our pockets. These material technologies represent a reliable source that we can

access as often and as long as we wish, fulfilling the requirement of coupling (Krueger and Szanto 2016: 867-868). What about integration? Our engagement with music through material technology allows us to manipulate music in real time. We can create playlists that include selected artists, genres and tracks, depending on our mood. We can manipulate the auditory properties of the music by regulating volume and bass, and we can even determine the listening context (e.g. headphones or speakers). Finally, the manipulation of music loops back into us, as what we listen to can modify our mood, thus creating a functionally gainful system. The subject alone cannot fulfil the self-stimulation we achieve through the manipulation of the music, achievable only through the engagement with material culture (2016: 867-868).

How can this model help in understanding nostalgia? First, even though it works particularly well with music, a medium with which the user can interact easily, I believe that it can easily translate to other media, such as videos. The ongoing feedback between the user and the device allows the creation of playlists of nostalgic material⁹ on the go. For example, whilst listening to a song from my childhood, I can also be reminded of a similar song that was popular around that time. Immediately I can use my device to stop listening to the former song and start listening to the latter. Not only that, I can listen to the song as whole or, as it often happens, just to that chorus that was so popular when it first came out. Then I might be reminded of how that song was played during a particular scene of movie I really like and at once, without changing device (and maybe without even changing app) I can watch that precise scene as many times as I want. In other words, I can structure my nostalgic experience in a way that could only be possible through the interaction with such devices. Not only that, if in a way the device allows me to structure my experience exactly as I desire, it is also true that my desire is partially determined by the fact that the device allows me to be erratic. As in Krueger and Szanto's (2016) example, the technology that allows us to reliably self-stimulate our affective state (in this case, nostalgia) is always in our pockets. Therefore, we could induce nostalgia in ourselves whenever we want, by manipulating the device that reproduces the media. Moreover, as long as we are in full control of the device, we can also prolong the nostalgic experience by keeping feeding ourselves with nostalgic stimuli.

What I find particularly interesting in these models of scaffolded nostalgia is the peculiarity of the functional gain. Reading a book, listening to a song or watching a movie from our childhood immediately connects us to the past in

⁹ The concept of 'playlist past' is central to the work of Lizardi (2015). With this expression, he refers to the possibility that new technologies offer and the mass-media industry encourages of compiling collections of nostalgic texts, ranging from books to videogames. According to Lizardi, the playlist past is a nostalgic, individual, narcissistic and acritical past.

a way that otherwise would not be possible.¹⁰ While our memories of the past can change through time, the interaction with media from that time allows us to connect directly to that past in a way that memories cannot offer. Only through something that comes uncuffed from the past can we reconnect with our childhood in the most direct way. In other words, media has the quality for which the nostalgic person yearns most: an immediate connection and continuity with the past. It is only natural that nostalgia should occur through them.¹¹ In these instances, the environment integrates the function of alleviating the sense of longing by allowing the subject to engage in an experience comparable in the imagination of the subject to those that characterised her childhood. The subject could not fulfil this function autonomously through remembering alone. Remembering a melody and listening to it do not create the same effect. In the same way, the phenomena of remembering a childhood experience (such as the engagement with a text) and recreating that experience in the present are radically different. However, this relief is always time-limited and incomplete; it is bittersweet, we could say, since (as argued above) the object of longing is a time idealised as a whole and not as single experiences. In this light, we can easily see how nostalgia is often scaffolded through material culture. Despite instances in which one might feel nostalgia without some kind of affective scaffold, nowadays it seems that nostalgia usually takes place through engagement with material culture.

6. *Scaffolding the nostalgic renarration*

In this section I show how the nostalgic renarration can be scaffolded, and I discuss how this process can be externally influenced. The idea that our nostalgia can be externally influenced and even manipulated is not new (see Jameson 1991; Lizardi 2015), however, I believe that the tools that situated affectivity offers – especially what Slaby (2016) calls “mind invasion” – can be used to better understand these problems.

The previous section shows how one can structure the present experience of childhood nostalgia through synchronic scaffolding – an instance of what Slaby (2016) would call a user/resource model. In this model, a conscious individual (“user”) – who is usually a fully developed adult – pursues a specific

¹⁰ This example works best with texts consumed when we were children and discovered again as adults, but it can also work with texts that reuse elements from texts of our childhood.

¹¹ Of course, this is rather paradoxical. Media allows for an instantaneous connection with the past, and in this sense, the connection seems immediate. At the same time, this connection takes place through a medium; it is ‘mediated’, as Lizardi (2015) would say. Through the engagement with media, we see a core feature of nostalgia: the relation with a past that is lost and, yet, somehow available.

task through intentional use of a piece of equipment or by exploiting specific aspects of the structure of the environment (“resource”). This model, which is dominant in the theories on situated affectivity, is incomplete, as it fails to fully address the complexity of the relation “subject/environment” and ignores important political issues (Slaby 2016). More specifically this model does not highlight the fact that the resources subjects use also play a role “in bringing about and enabling the agent, and transforming her or him in various ways” (2016: 7). In other words, we should focus not only on how we shape the niche to accommodate our affective needs but also on how, in turn, the niche shapes us by creating affective attitudes and needs.

Now it should be evident that the idea of childhood nostalgia as an exclusively private and spontaneous emotion about fond memories of one’s youth cannot be correct. Rather, the nostalgic process of renarration – which takes place through selections and reevaluations – is deeply dependent on one’s social and cultural environment. Here, I give an example of how nostalgia is an affective attitude that we have towards the past, which can be developed and structured through diachronic scaffolding. Returning to the example of 9/11, I now show how the process of selection and renarration can be scaffolded. I might be nostalgic for how the world was before 9/11, but were things actually simpler? I cannot know, since I was too young at that time to judge. Therefore, my nostalgia for how the world was before 9/11 must necessarily rely on more than just my memories, most notably, the way that mass media produced before and after 9/11 represent that time. I can use mass-media images depicting the world before 9/11 as a “mind-tool” to compensate for the scarcity of memories I have of those times. Not only that; through active engagement with these media, I can structure my nostalgia. This could somewhat resemble reflective nostalgia, especially if we consider the active engagement, irony and self-awareness that characterise this kind of longing. This is yet another example of the user/resource model that would work best with media produced around the time for which we are nostalgic.¹² However, once we start considering media made after the time for which we are nostalgic, yet depicting that time, we must realise a fundamental characteristic of media in general: they are in themselves renarrations. Mass-media products, such as movies, books or documentaries, especially those about the past, necessarily make a selection; they offer a point of view, and therefore, they always necessarily imply a reevaluation. Thus, the concept of scaffolding becomes even more relevant.

¹² For example, there is a noticeable difference between a movie from the 50s, depicting society through the lenses of its own time, and a movie about the 50s, depicting instead that same society in a critical or romanticising way.

These cultural products represent not only a support for our memory; they also (and most importantly) represent a scaffold to the processes of nostalgic selection and renarration themselves. As a matter of fact, the structuring of the renarration of our past is necessarily co-dependent on the renarrations of the past which the environment offers us and with which we engage. This can become more apparent if we think of childhood nostalgia in general. Even though in childhood nostalgia, unlike in other forms, such as political nostalgia, we exclusively deal with experiences we actually lived, those experiences are not nostalgic *per se*. They become nostalgic only after they are presented as such (Hutcheon 2000; Boym 2001; Lizardi 2015). or, in other words, when the processes of selection and reevaluation (or renarration) take place. Even though these processes could occur independently, more often than not they are integrated by the selections, reevaluations and renarrations already present in the environment in the form of media.

Now a political problem arises. The scaffolds through which we make this selection and renarration can be ‘hacked’. To better understand this, I refer to Slaby’s (2016) concept of mind invasion:

The term “mind invasion” is intended to capture some of the ways in which it is exactly not my individual decision to employ a mind tool in the pursuit of my self-avowed goals, but rather forms of pervasive framing and molding effected by aspects of technical infrastructure and institutional realities. (6)

Affective mind invasion takes place when an individual adopts affective dispositions that are typical of a specific environment (e.g. from the corporate workplace to the world of sport and from academia to the army). In mind invasion, the affective dispositions and patterns of interpersonal interaction that individuals adopt are not only considered normative in the environment in question (see Colombetti & Krueger 2015) but also adopted without the full awareness or consent of the subject.¹³ Thus, the new affective disposition is detrimental to the subject and beneficial to those who have more control over the environment. For example, Slaby analysed the corporate workplace where, over time, employees adopt patterns of interpersonal interaction, emotional experience and expression, made possible through environmental scaffolding. Employees might feel the affective need to always be reachable, even when not at work. Technologies such as email and smartphones support this affective attitude. Even though employees are those who actively engage with the technology, the affective attitude

¹³ Stephan & Walter (2020) argue that mind invasion takes place when structures present in the environment reach inward into the individual. Such invasion can be used with the consent of the individual, as in the case of psychotherapy, or without her consent, such as in cases of manipulation.

that results from this engagement is only beneficial to the employer and can even be detrimental to the employee, who might feel guilt or anxiety when she is not reachable (Slaby 2016: 9-11).

Mind invasion can account for some forms of political restorative nostalgia. This nostalgia usually manifests itself in environments such as the fascist nation or party, in which symbols and rituals are deliberately and systematically employed to exalt the greatness of the past of the nation and the envisioned continuity of that past with the present. For example, fascist Italy used symbols of Imperial Rome, such as the fasces and the eagle, as omnipresent reminders of the ancient greatness of Italy (Giardina 2008), which Italians were meant to restore. Also, the creation and popularisation of rites, festivities and architecture (Giardina 2008) were, in a way, 'mind tools' (see Slaby 2014: 35) adopted to invade the minds of many Italians who otherwise probably would not have been nostalgic at all. Since many Italians were 'victims' of restorative nostalgia, they considered themselves not as nostalgic persons but as protectors of a continuity of identity that, in reality, was nothing more than the product of a myth (see Giardina 2008).

When we try to apply mind invasion to childhood nostalgia, it is not easy to identify a specific environment in which our mind is systemically invaded, in order to develop a certain exploitable nostalgia. A possible way to overcome this impasse would be including 'digital spaces' in the notion of mind invasion.¹⁴ As a matter of fact, targeted ads might be a good example of how our mind can be invaded on the web. For instance, a person who browses YouTube in search of cartoon theme songs that might alleviate her childhood nostalgia, might be profiled as a user who is into collectibles related to those cartoons. As a consequence, she might be bombarded by ads that try to sell such collectibles. Were she to click on such ads, they would become more frequent and more specific. The omnipresence of such nostalgic reminders would then transform the browsing experience from a relief into an indefinitely prolonged nostalgic longing, to which the user would not normally consent.¹⁵

The idea of being used by mind tools, rather than consciously using them, helps to explain important aspects of childhood nostalgia. Authors, such as Lizardi, emphasise how highly marketable childhood nostalgia is and the mass-media industry's keen interest in nourishing a kind of nostalgia that relies on the continuous consumption of the material it sells (Lizardi 2015). As

¹⁴ For instance, Stephan & Walter (2020) include social media in the list of tools that can invade the mind.

¹⁵ Even if he does not talk of targeted ads but of pop culture in general, Lizardi (2015) has similar concerns.

we have already seen, things become nostalgic and, thus, profitable only after they are presented as such. By producing media that reuse pop culture relevant when the adults of today were children (see Lizardi 2015), the media industry performs a *de facto* selection and a reevaluation of that pop culture, making it relevant to us once again. The audience identifies that media as nostalgically relevant not because they independently think that part of their childhood is still important (see Lizardi 2015) but because their evaluation is invaded by the offering of the environment. Oblivion is as important as memory in the shaping of our nostalgic narrative (Hutcheon 2000); without it, the selection performed by nostalgia would be impossible. In a way, these media have taken away the ability to forget (Reynolds 2011; Lizardi 2015). They enhance memory to a degree that is detrimental to the subject. The subject can no longer determine whether something seems relevant to her own nostalgic renarration because that thing bears actual importance for her identity and personal history or simply because that thing is presented externally as relevant. Clearly, in these cases, the selection at the core of the nostalgic renarration is not the spontaneous activity of the subject or the product of active engagement by someone who structures his nostalgia through the autonomous use of material culture. Rather, this selection is engineered to be vague enough to appeal to the masses. As a result, the renarration of each individual will tend to increasingly open up to the inclusion of elements of pop culture and, in turn, to nourishing a nostalgia characterised by a longing that the consumption of media that reuse these pop elements can satisfy.

Lizardi (2015; 2017) acutely analyses the current tendency in mass media to exploit nostalgia. However, I believe that he stresses too much the importance of particular artefacts and texts in our longing. He says that we can be nostalgic for beloved texts and artefacts with which we grew up and for the experience we had in the past by engaging with them (Lizardi 2015). What he calls ‘mediated nostalgia’, i.e. nostalgia experienced through contemporary media, essentially intervenes by shaping the attitude we have towards those artefacts and texts (and related experiences). By reinterpreting Freud (1917), he argues that the media encourage either a melancholic nostalgia or an attitude of mourning. Unlike the latter, the former cannot let go of the object of libido (in this case, the texts and artefacts from childhood and the experience of them in the past) because, rather than being presented in its original context, it is reconstructed and idealised (Lizardi 2015). Instead, I believe that when we think we feel nostalgic attachment to texts and artefacts (and the experiences we had of them) from our childhood, it is primarily (even when not consciously) because they allow us to connect to and shape the actual object of our longing – that is to say, an idealised (or renarrated) childhood. We still require texts and artefacts

to fully experience and satisfy our nostalgia. But since they are not the object of our longing and only means to an end (or, to be precise, the scaffolds of our nostalgic longing and its satisfaction), I believe they are interchangeable to a certain degree. As we have already seen, the reevaluated moments and memories selected to renarrate and connect to our beloved lost time are not set once and for all. Rather, they are always open to changes which are reflective of our present or desired identity. Since these moments are somewhat interchangeable, even more so is the material culture (and the texts we consume through it) that can scaffold this selection. It is precisely this interchangeability that makes these scaffolds so easy to be selected *for us* rather than *by us*.

Moreover, the constant production of media that implicitly try to shape and, thus, exploit our nostalgia does not simply 'invade' the process of selection and rewriting of our nostalgic narrative. It also diachronically scaffolds how we experience childhood nostalgia. As we have already seen, we live in a world in which the past is constantly available through technology but, in a way, a past thus recorded and accessible also becomes inescapable (see Hutcheon 2000; Lizardi 2015). The more we engage with this kind of material, the more we will rely on it to synchronically scaffold our nostalgia. Hence, the media industry contributes to the formation of a nostalgia that might reshape our narration. This nostalgia requires the products sold by the mass-media industry to be fully experienced and satisfied.¹⁶ This kind of nostalgia seems to be radically different from the one felt by the retired athlete of the example in section 2 above. While his nostalgia is the reflection of truly important aspects of his personal history, the childhood nostalgia engendered for the masses seems by comparison completely construed and detached from the personal history of individuals. I do not want to insinuate that nostalgia involving collective experiences of the past, such as engagement with the pop culture of our childhood, is intrinsically wrong – quite the opposite. If anything, nostalgia is very much a 'collective' emotion, in the sense that the past for which we are nostalgic is always necessarily a shared past (Boym 2001: 54; Wilson J. 2005). There is nothing wrong in using material culture (including elements of pop culture)

¹⁶ I share with Lizardi (2015) the concern that most of the media elaborating texts from the childhood of the audience are manipulative. I do not agree with him when he uses Jamesson (1991) to state that this manipulation can also lead to an uncritical vision of the past in our society. Contemporary mass media that try to piggyback on nostalgia are not interested in depicting society as it used to be as preferable to today's (as the plethora of examples that Lizardi offers shows). Demonstrating that the mass-media industry generates in our society an uncritical attitude towards the past would require further research, since this societal change would not be the main goal of this industry, but merely a consequence of its marketing strategy. Nevertheless, a systemic and focused mind invasion, such as the one we saw in the example of fascist Italy, can indeed form a society that has no critical interpretation of the past.

from or about our past to scaffold the shaping and satisfaction of our nostalgia. However, we should be more aware of the fact that the processes of reevaluation and renarration cannot be completely fulfilled autonomously, a fact that can be exploited for commercial or political ends.

7. *Conclusions*

In this paper, I offered a multidisciplinary analysis of nostalgia, focusing particularly on how the media we consume through material culture scaffolds the experience and structuring of this emotion. In our environment, certain niches are structured in such a way as to scaffold not only our memory but also the processes of selection and renarration that shape the object of nostalgic longing, an irretrievable time positively reevaluated and renarrated, sometimes to the point of idealisation. If we identify these processes with the 'bitter' part of nostalgia, we could say that the environment scaffolds the 'sweet' part too. Engaging with material culture that we can connect to this renarrated time alleviates the sense of longing, by experiencing in the present what characterised our lost time, according to our renarration of it. This alleviation is always time-limited and incomplete, since what we long for is the lost time idealised as a whole, not the particular experiences that, in this precise moment, we believe have characterised that past. In other words, media can scaffold nostalgia since they support the desired experience of contemplating the past. The scaffolding process in this instance is possible because there is a complementarity between the structure of the emotion and the structure of the scaffold. The former is a longing for the continuity with the renarrated past, the latter constitutes a bridge to that renarrated past. Moreover, a different kind of scaffolding is also possible because there is a correspondence between the structure of the emotion and the structure of media: they are both renarrations. The interactions with the scaffold allow to rearrange the pieces of the past and reevaluate them. Rather than doing this through memory and imagination alone, the subject can rearrange pieces of media to constitute a renarration that suits her. Through the examples concerning childhood nostalgia, I showed how this emotion wavers between extremes. On the one hand, childhood nostalgia can resemble restorative nostalgia – not because we delude ourselves into thinking that the past can come back but because we can fall victim to a nostalgic selection and renarration that is not the product of our free reflection but, rather, is structured to take advantage of us. In a larger sense, the concept of mind invasion can describe this commercial exploitation of our childhood nostalgia by contemporary mass media. A proper mind invasion that structures a restorative nostalgia to accommodate political goals can happen in environments

that are systemically reorganised and controlled, as happened in fascist Italy. On the other hand, media can offer us the possibility of structuring our childhood nostalgia the way a person who feels reflective nostalgia would: freely, actively, self-consciously and sometimes ironically. A nostalgia thus structured would not simply reveal who we are and want to be. It can also help us define and redefine our own identity by constantly evaluating and reevaluating the relevance of precious moments of childhood while, at the same time, enjoying the bittersweet mosaic we put together by freely arranging those moments.

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