

AMNESIA

The Two Faces of Nostalgia



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The built environment testifies to the power of nostalgia. Just about every neighborhood furnishes ready examples for which it matters little whether the builder looked back to a bygone America, England, or Mexico. We like to dress our buildings in finery borrowed from the past, evoking a more firmly rooted dwelling. This is hardly a new development. Consider the decorated sheds of the nineteenth century with their borrowed ornaments. Gesturing toward a past that cannot be resurrected, such buildings invite the label “kitsch.”

Symptomatic of this tendency are the architectural visions of recently deceased artist Thomas Kinkade, self-styled “Painter of Light” and perhaps, at least in terms of sales, America’s most popular religious artist. For some years his nostalgic interpretations of suburban dwellings, at home on Hallmark cards, have been translated into housing developments. As Dan Byrne, CEO of the Thomas Kinkade Company, puts it: “The Thomas Kinkade brand stands for the values associated with home and hearth, peace, joy, faith, family and friends. Partnering with HST in the creation of homes inspired by the artwork of Thomas Kinkade delivers on what collectors tell us inspires them most about Thom’s work—that they wish they could step into the world created in the painting. The Thomas Kinkade Company is pleased to align itself with such a visionary home builder.”¹ What was only a picture laden with nostalgia, a sort of dream, becomes reality. Indeed what is wrong with buildings that self-consciously edify, that are drawn from pretty pictures of a transfigured past, that invite us to forget the ugliness of the world we have created, in which we must make our way? Why not welcome such remembering, which is inevitably also a forgetting?

The changing fortunes of the word *edify* are instructive in this connection: once it meant simply to raise an edifice, a building. When religious and moral thinkers appropriated the word, they also raised spiritual structures in which human beings might discover their spiritual homes. This was Søren Kierkegaard’s intent in *Edifying Discourses*. The term thus came to mean “to improve morally or spiritually” by offering guidance and strengthening faith. Why then did it eventually acquire an increasingly negative connotation, as suggested by synonyms such as *preach* and *indoctrinate*? Today “edifying art” suggests “kitsch.” It conjures what has lost genuine life as if it were still alive but precisely because of this, succeeds only in preventing us from facing reality. This is how Arthur Schopenhauer viewed the popular return to Gothic architecture in the nineteenth century—in bad taste and born of what had become a mere simulacrum of faith: “In the interest of good taste, I am bound to wish that great wealth be devoted to what is objectively, i.e. actually, good and right, to what in itself is beautiful, not to that whose value rests merely on the association of ideas. Now when I see how this unbelieving age so diligently finishes the Gothic churches left uncompleted by the believing Middle Ages, it seems to me as if it were desired to embalm a Christianity that has expired.”² Kinkade’s architectural fantasies invite a similar response, providing us with a definition of kitsch supported only by an association of ideas drawn from the past yet no longer rooted in the experience of the sacred that once gave architecture its meaning. This is how Frank Lloyd Wright understood sentimentality in architecture: the “picture had now triumphed over architecture, and symbolism took the place of original inspiration.”³

Yet what alternative can we point to in the absence of such experience or inspiration? Is bad faith perhaps better than no faith, and edifying kitsch preferable to Modernist irony or abjection? It is part of the human condition that, never quite at home in our world, we dream of a genuine homecoming,

1 “New Housing Community in Columbia, MO Features Thomas Kinkade Homes,” Businesswire.com, August 14, 2006, accessed September 24, 2013, <http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20060814005221/en/Housing-Community-Columbia-MO-Features-Thomas-Kinkade>.

2 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), 418.

3 Frank Lloyd Wright, *Genius and the Mobocracy* (New York: Horizon Press, 1971), xii.



Martin Heidegger's Hut, Todtnauberg.
Photo: Barbara Figal.

4 Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 2001), 160-61.

of paradise lost and regained, and look to the past for traces of a better world to project its promise into the future. Martin Heidegger invited architects to look back to an eighteenth-century Black Forest farmhouse, which he saw as a more authentic dwelling, quite aware that it would be foolish to build such a house today.⁴

Can such idealizing memories, in fact, cast a light into our world, giving us the strength to put up with its deficiencies while moving us closer to a genuine dwelling? In a world that we find difficult to call home, where too many demonstrate cold hearts, should we not welcome a bit of kitschy sentimentality, even when the energy, the will, and the means to transform reality are often lacking? The romantic nostalgia of Friedrich Schiller, Hölderlin, and Nietzsche for an imagined Greece that never quite was, or of Karl Friedrich Schinkel for an idealized version of the Middle Ages, fills many of us today with a longing for an age still innocent enough to allow such sentiment to shape its architecture.

In a world overshadowed by environmental and terrorist threats, memories of the Holocaust, two world wars, and various atomic disasters, who does not look back with tenderness at what writer Hermann Broch called the *Backbendzeit*, the age of the Vienna fried chicken. But this urban environment, which gloried in its decorated sheds—was condemned as the capital of decadence by Modernists, who possessed a faith in reason that we no longer share. Buildings decked out in borrowed decoration—which our fathers and grandfathers, still filled with Modernist fervor and conviction, criticized wholeheartedly as inauthentic, sentimental, or false—may well suggest to us, despite and perhaps because of their backward-looking theatricality, our lost innocence. Bad faith can also be innocent. Think of the extraordinary popularity of the castles built by Ludwig II of Bavaria to idealize himself in the image of Louis XIV, in spite of the fact that his dream of an operatic kingship had no place in Bismarck's Germany. Why not try to forget the unpleasant present? To be sure, reality had the final word: the king paid with his life for the attempt to turn reality into a fairy tale.

But if our time is, as Broch thought, the age of the value vacuum, why call bad faith bad? Isn't bad faith better than no faith at all? Today many have become nostalgic for nostalgia itself—and what is wrong with nostalgia?



The Ringstrasse and Parliament, Vienna. Photochrom Print, c. 1890.

2

Nostalgia is a word, like *aesthetics*, whose birth we can locate with precision. Both terms originated in the Enlightenment and testify to dissatisfaction with the culture of reason created by the movement—that is to say, with our modern world. Have we lost sight of experiences vital to human flourishing? Both identify phenomena that in their seeming irrationality call the rule of reason into question.

Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten became the founder of aesthetics by trying to make room for experiences of the beautiful within a fundamentally Cartesian framework. Aesthetics came to be understood, along with logic, metaphysics, and ethics, as one of the branches of philosophy. He coined the term to name the philosophical discipline he established in his dissertation of 1735, written when he was just twenty.⁵

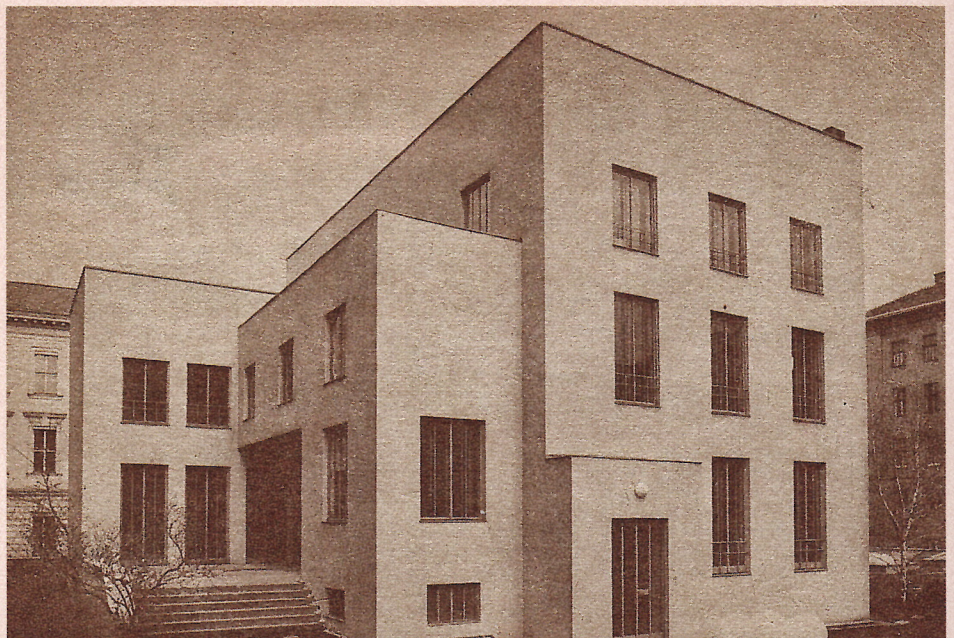
Nostalgia antedates *aesthetics* by half a century. The term was invented by Johannes Hofer, an Alsatian medical student studying in Basel, in his 1688 dissertation by joining *nostos*, meaning a journey back home, and *algia*, meaning pain. This neologism describes what in the vernacular was called *Heimweh* (“homesickness”), which Hofer had come to understand as a potentially deadly disease that had not been properly recognized by the medical profession. In extreme cases the only cure was allowing the patient to return home.⁶ *Nostalgia*, then, is a sickness born of an inability or unwillingness to be content with memories or dreams of a home left behind. The nostalgic feels an acute need to actually return home, preventing him from coping effectively with his current environment. As such, memories of home become an obstacle to making a new home in the wider world.

Hofer’s subjects were Swiss, and the Swiss were especially associated with this strange ailment. This was a particular concern for the French government since the Swiss were sought-after mercenaries, and attacks of nostalgia induced, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau reports, by the *Ranz-des-vaches*, that Tune so cherished by the Swiss that they [not the Swiss] have forbidden it from being played in their Troops on pain of death, since it would cause those who heard it to dissolve in tears, desert, or die, so much would it arouse in them the ardent desire to see their country again.⁷ Just what was it that drew them back home with such force—the air, the milk, the food? A convincing answer eluded the enlightened doctors.

5 Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry (Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus)*, trans. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954).

6 See Helmut Illbruck, *Nostalgia: Origins and Ends of an Unenlightened Disease* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 5.

7 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Dictionary of Music,” cited in Illbruck, *Nostalgia*, 88.



Ludwig Wittgenstein House, Vienna, c. 1930. Period postcard.



Neuschwanstein Castle, Upper Bavaria.
Photochrom Print, c. 1890.

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, nostalgia gradually ceased to be considered primarily a medical problem and figured increasingly into poetry and philosophy. It came to be recognized as a dissatisfaction with present reality that transforms a remembered or imagined past into a figure of some lost paradise. This presented the Enlightenment with a challenge: Was there something missing in the culture of reason or were nostalgics simply cultural laggards who had not yet recognized the countless ways in which the progress of reason had improved their lot? Rousseau thus points out that the Swiss who had come to appreciate the gifts of the Enlightenment no longer experienced attacks of nostalgia with the same intensity. Immanuel Kant—no doubt thinking of Rousseau and understanding the Enlightenment as humanity's coming of age—tended to dismiss nostalgia as a product of the troubled imagination of someone who refused to grow up.⁸ When a nostalgic does manage to return home, Kant notes, reality is likely to shatter its imaginative construction and leave the sufferer disappointed. But while blaming the changes that have taken place, she is finally cured. What really has changed, however, is not the place but the individual. It is thus not so much a particular place, Kant suggests, that the nostalgic longs for, but rather a lost youth. But isn't it childish to want to be a child again?

8 Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, A85/B86.

If nostalgia is understood to be an “unenlightened disease,” as Helmut Illbruck calls it in the title of his marvelous study, why should someone privileged to live in the age of Enlightenment—humanity's coming of age, as Kant understood it—long to return to a much less free, more circumscribed mode of existence? And yet, as Kant himself had to recognize, nostalgia is not quite so easily dismissed as a childish product of a troubled imagination. Casting a shadow on the Enlightenment and its achievements, Kant observed that nostalgia is more likely to afflict those who grew up in regions such as Switzerland (he also mentions Westphalia and Pomerania) that, while “poor in money,” were socially more firmly knitted together. The nostalgic has not yet made *Patria ubi bene* her motto. Nostalgia implies a legitimate critique of an increasingly money-centered modernity that has paid for an increase in freedom with a loss of genuine community and dislocation. Nostalgia thus possesses a forward-looking, revolutionary potential. The longing for home can figure a legitimate longing, not so much for a particular place or childhood, as



Bruno Taut, Gardenstadt Falkenberg estate,



Karl Friedrich Schinkel, *Cathedral Towering Over a Town*, Oil on canvas, c. 1830.

for a sense of community lost with society's emphasis on individual freedom. As such, the progress of freedom calls into question the values reflected by the Kinkade brand: "home and hearth, peace, joy, faith, family and friends." Such values are not easily dismissed, even if the words and buildings that respond to them may be.

3

Kant's discussion of nostalgia evokes ambivalence: It is criticized for refusing to confront contemporary reality, with the nostalgic finding refuge in a past that is long gone. Yet for Kant the nostalgic recalled a way of life that contrasts favorably in certain ways with the money-centered environment in which he found himself. Schopenhauer recognized these two faces of nostalgia in a very different way: having lost faith in the Enlightenment, unlike Kant, and finding reality unsatisfactory, he understood dreams of homecoming all too well. The nostalgic is right not to feel at home in the world, to want to escape from it, but wrong in the desire to actually return to that home whose memory haunts him. Homelessness is the human condition. If Schopenhauer is right, any homecoming will inevitably disappoint. The nostalgic would do better to become absorbed in the beautiful illusions of art, which make reality bearable, at least for a time.

Is Schopenhauer right to insist that the human condition renders all dreams of genuine homecoming futile? Isn't it really the way a particular historical situation has distorted reality that is to blame, as Kant hints in his reference to the Swiss longing to return to a less self-centered way of life? As Frederic Jameson observes: "It is scarcely surprising that out of the alienating structures of nineteenth and twentieth century capitalism we should look back with a (not necessarily unrevolutionary) nostalgia at such moments in which life, and form, are still relatively whole, and which seem at the same time to afford a glimpse into the nature of some future non-alienated existence as well."⁹ In the tradition of Johann Winckelmann, Friedrich Schiller, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx thought that art would never again be as beautiful as it was in ancient Greece and that humanity would never again unfold itself quite so beautifully. But to admit that what fills us today with nostalgic joy cannot be retrieved does not mean that it may not point towards a better future. Marx appeals to the joy we experience when we observe children: "A man cannot become a child again, or he becomes childish. But does he not find joy in the child's naiveté, and must he not try to reproduce its truth at a higher stage?"¹⁰ Schopenhauer would have challenged such a claim. Not only will the nostalgic's return home inevitably disappoint, but so will any attempt to find meaning in the repetition of some lost naiveté "at a higher stage," as Nietzsche once hoped for a modern repetition of Greek tragedy. Nietzsche later condemned himself for his romanticism, understood as "the impossible attempt to resurrect what has died and lies irrecoverably behind us."¹¹ Weren't the Enlightenment's high estimation of Greek art and Romanticism's later embrace of the Gothic aesthetic responses to what the cult of reason destroyed yet longed for, based on constructions of a mythical paradise that never was and never will be?

Thus the general point of Marx's comment on our appreciation of Greek art: what moves us in great art, both as memory and promise, is the idea of a fuller humanity. Nostalgia plays a part in this appreciation and is not divorced from hope. All great art transcends the limited circumstances that gave birth to it, reaching beyond any historical period. Art expresses the power of human

9 Frederic Jameson, "Introduction," in Henri Arvon, *Marxist Aesthetics*, trans. Helen Lane (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), xvii.

10 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage, 1973), 111.

11 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Dawn* III, par. 159.

self-transcendence and the freedom that allows us to dream up figures of what Kant called the highest good, of plenitude.

The inability to forget and let go of the past—whether in the form of nostalgia clinging to a past transfigured into paradise or to memories that have become a vision of hell—can blind us to what the present and future have to offer. It is with good reason that the principles of the Enlightenment portrayed “nostalgia” first of all as something to overcome, like a disease or some other aberration incompatible with humanity’s true coming of age. Better to forget! As poet Hölderlin put it: “*Kolonie liebt, und tapfer Vergessen der Geist* [The spirit loves colony and brave forgetting].”¹² Here he touches on not only the importance but also the difficulty of forgetting, allowing it to be called “brave.” We find it difficult to let go of the past; after all, it has made us who we are and provided us with orientation. Nostalgia and a desire to forget are thus mingled. A presupposition of the founding of a colony, of a new way of dwelling and building, is that the idea of home leaves those venturing into the new dissatisfied. They want something new and different, and yet the colony remains bound to that mythical home that continues to enthrall them. All responsible building is a creative repetition of the past that is open to new possibilities. And so, again and again, colonies have sought to preserve the image of home in a new environment, enacting a contest between nostalgia and the need to forget.

Nostalgia shows us two faces—one that looks to the past and the other to the future. One seeks to return home; the other is content to leave home a dream that projects its promise into the future. The former is destructive, the latter constructive. Every attempt to return home must shipwreck on the reef of reality. Dreams of home, on the other hand, can cast a light over the present that reveals hope for a better future. And what is life without such hope?

¹² From a late version of the final stanza of “Brod und Wein,” cited in Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymne “Der Ister,” Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 53 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1984), 157.



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