

Interpreting nostalgia as a therapeutic tool in *Aftersun* by Charlotte Wells (2022)

Nostalgia is an oft-misrepresented concept. Originally, it was seen as a medical condition, describing the psychosomatic effects of severe homesickness (Wilson, 2015, pp. 478-479). Transliteration from the Greek '*nóstos*' and '*álgos*' leads to 'return home' and 'longing' respectively (Boym, 2001). Over time, it has morphed into an acute longing for a home, past, or memory that can no longer be visited—or that never existed in the first place; the longing is more for a state of mind than a strictly geographical location (Chase and Shaw, 1989, p.1). This shift of focus from spatiality to temporality was also represented in shifting representations of nostalgia. In literature, for example, “Odysseus longs for home; Proust is in search of lost time” (Phillips, 1985, p.65).

Cook (2004, p.98) argues that "memory is a central preoccupation of cinema, and a crucial part of the development of cinematic language", using the example of analepsis as a primary feature of filmic narratives. Barthes (1986, p.345) argues that leaving the cinema is like awakening from hypnosis. The argument could be made that the phantasmagoria of this trance combined with filmic techniques such as cross-cutting allows filmmakers to create a Proustian connection from present to past. The innate efficacy of cinema in presenting memories just as realised as their respective 'presents' lends itself to rich analyses of nostalgia in film. Rather than focusing on heritage, historical and aptly-named 'nostalgia films' films *being* nostalgic, this post will focus on nostalgia itself as a narrative and thematic focus. Specifically, this essay will interpret nostalgia as a therapeutic tool in *Aftersun* (Charlotte Wells, 2022).

Nostalgia is at the centre of *Aftersun*. However, Wells' intention was not to create a time capsule of the film's late 1990s setting but to explore nostalgia and memory as therapeutic tools to understand and overcome past trauma. Wells (in Quinlan, 2023)

states that small, universal details (such as references to Fanta Lemons, Almond Magnums, and motorcycle arcade games) found within the film's package holiday milieu may have created a "particularly British universality", yet the idea of capturing collective memory specifically to resonate with the audience wasn't her intention. Jameson (1991, p.67) argues that nostalgia films often create "pseudo-historical" depth through foregrounding features like fashion, or, in this case, comestibles found abroad in the late '90s. Rather than constantly making references to create a cheap signifier of the 1990s, Wells (in Quinlan, 2023) opted to simply focus on "representing details [she] remembered". Wells (in Daniels, 2022), aimed to avoid making the film look like a period piece (evoking the past via washed-out colours), instead choosing to recreate the magenta skin tones of images from her childhood photobooks, to make the film "bright and lush [and to] feel very present", highlighting the coevality of the present and the past.

Radstone (2010, p.189) suggests that nostalgia is "like a prescription lens, suited only to certain eyes", which is central to the usage of nostalgia and memory in *Aftersun*, in which thirty-one-year-old Sophie remembers the last time she saw her father Calum alive: a holiday in Turkey, coinciding with his thirty-first birthday. Rather than simply reminiscing, the film sees Sophie filling in the gaps of what she either didn't understand or simply didn't witness, to try to understand why her father took his own life. This investigation of remembered, half-remembered, and imagined events is realised through the film's narrative structure, which uses non-linearity, repeated sequences, and fragmentation (Rickert, 2022). The film's slow, meditative pace captures the repetition, boredom, and banality of a family holiday's downtime (Wells in Simon, 2022), through long, drawn-out shots and sequences, such as those of paragliders in the sky and silent stretches of Sophie and Calum sitting together, among others. However, it also presents an introspective feeling, as if the adult Sophie is poring over every last detail she can remember of the holiday, not only to reminisce about a positive experience with her father but also to understand what went wrong, seeking out any clues that might help her.

The film's non-linear narrative works across two temporal regions: the holiday itself and Sophie's present day. The events of the holiday seemingly play out in largely chronological order, however, some moments—especially those imagined by Sophie—

break linearity. This not only plays into the malleability of memory, but it also acts to follow adult Sophie's train of thought. An example of this is the cross-dissolve from Calum's ambiguous reaction to Sophie gathering the other attendees of a day trip to sing 'For He's A Jolly Good Fellow' on his birthday to an imagined sequence of him naked and violently sobbing. The shot of him crying ostensibly follows the earlier sequence of him marching into the sea and the shadows, before ending up back in the hotel, naked and unconscious. For adult Sophie, the memory of this reaction ostensibly linked with the other hints throughout the film towards Calum's sad, neglected childhood (such as his parents forgetting his birthday). By fading from the birthday to the imagined crying, the viewer is implicitly allowed entry into Sophie's thought process; different memory-scenes synthesise into an imagined conclusion like a jigsaw in both the viewer and Sophie. The complexity of memory and nostalgia—a longing for both her father as a whole, and to understand him—is presented through the inherent dialectical nature of intellectual montage. Boym (2001), even relates a cinematic vision of nostalgia as a “superposition of two images—of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life”. This is presented literally in this long cross-dissolve to present the unknowability of what Calum truly faced, with Sophie's ‘trip down memory lane’ almost acting like a detective investigating a cold case. The truth may be approached but never reached.



Figure 1.1 A superimposition of two Calums during a non-linear cross-dissolve, *Aftersun*

(Charlotte Wells, 2022). Fair use.

Key to Wells' exploration of cinematic memory is her use of varying film formats, as well as the inclusion of different image-capturing technologies. The film heavily features a mini-DV camcorder, both in the narrative and in the aesthetic style. In the diegesis, the camcorder is a gift from Calum for Sophie to document their holiday. Calum's financial struggles are alluded to, such as reminding Sophie not to get the camcorder wet as it was expensive and the debacle surrounding the lost diving mask. Due to his precarious funds, the camcorder and frivolous purchases such as the Polaroid photo of the pair on the final night of the holiday as well as the expensive Turkish rug can be seen as parting gifts; something tangible Sophie can have to remind her of the last few, positive days they spent together. The Polaroid photo is particularly poignant as a long, static shot of it developing holds as their conversation continues off-screen; a conversation in which Sophie asks why they can't stay on holiday forever, which highlights Sophie's childhood innocence, or perhaps an implicit awareness of their time running out (Nayman, 2023). By focusing on the photo, Wells signifies that their relationship is frozen in time. A physical memory. Alternatively, this could symbolise that the true extent of Sophie's understanding of her father is barricaded by the fact that she can only retrospectively try to figure out what happened. Furthermore, this ties into the semi-autobiographical nature of *Aftersun*, as two of the starting points for the film were Polaroid photos of Wells and her father on holiday, and DV footage of the pair playing chess (Wells in Tham, 2022). Wells' father shares many similarities with Calum: a young, Scottish parent who lived in London (away from Wells and her mother), who gave her a mini-DV camera and committed suicide in his mid-30s (Coyle, 2022). This, then, adds an additional layer to the complex interplay of nostalgia, memory, and imagination as a therapeutic tool in *Aftersun*.

'Analogue nostalgia' refers to the particularly nostalgic "aura" (Wieghorst, 2021, p.210) of analogue technologies. It isn't uncommon to see the innate nostalgia associated with Super-8 film stock's signature patina and scratches deployed in films to evoke a sense of longing. For example, the closing 'what could have been' montage in *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016) emulates the format; *Submarine* (Richard Ayoade, 2010), similarly utilises the format for the 'Two Weeks of Lovemaking' montage, in which the protagonist seemingly experiences the first few weeks of a blossoming romance in a state of

what I call ‘precocious nostalgia’, experiencing the present as if he’s already looking back at it as his future-past; and in the documentary *Stories We Tell* (Sarah Polley, 2012), which uses both Polley’s Super-8 home movies and modern-day Super-8 recreations to blur the line between fact and memory. To fit the ‘90s setting, Wells upgrades from the Super-8 camera to the mini-DV camcorder. Despite utilising the inherent nostalgia of home movies on now obsolete technology, Wells opts to use the mini-DV footage as an objective artefact—the antithesis of the fallible memory-scenes (Al Houari, 2023). An anchor of historical fact between the gap-filling imagination-scenes and the unstable memory-scenes. In addition to these visualisations of the past are Sophie’s nightmare scenes portraying her father dancing in desperation in a strobing nightclub, symbolising how he’s always just out of reach, and never fully knowable between the flashes of light; between the historical, the remembered, and the imagined. Cook (2004, p.3) states “the boundary between ‘objective’ history and ‘subjective’ memory is no longer clear cut”, and Wells exemplifies this through these three contrasting branches of the past.

The film begins with Sophie-operated DV footage; initially, it focuses on Calum dancing around until Sophie enquires what his 11-year-old self expected his 31-year-old self to be doing. His face drops and he hides behind a curtain, revealing adult Sophie’s reflection on a TV screen. The image then freezes and begins to pixelate, before cutting to the first nightclub rave scene, accompanied by the sounds of a baby crying. This opening sets up the film’s framing device and focus on nostalgia, as Sophie—who is now not only the same age as her father was when he died, but is also now a parent herself—looks back at the objective footage of their final time together to help her fill in the subjective gaps. This scene is repeated later in the film but from a more detached, subjective perspective. The camera lingers on a television screen displaying the DV footage as it is being captured. The *misé-en-scène* is full of barriers, screens, and reflections—as well as the TV screen, the action can be seen in a mirror, the reflection of the TV, and at one point even the DV camcorder’s viewfinder in the mirror. The only non-reflected or diegetically filmed action is Calum’s hand briefly entering the frame, placing down the camcorder after asking Sophie to turn it off. These layers and barriers suggest the impossibility of Sophie’s task to uncover the incomprehensible. This is not only because adult Sophie doesn’t know what Calum was going through, but also because Calum didn’t understand what was happening to

himself either (Wells in Gagliano, 2023). That barrier, combined with the additional barrier of accessing the past and the imagined, is visualised through several layers of visual detachment through reflection in the shot. Nostalgia in *Aftersun*, then, can be seen as not simply a ‘wishy-washy’ longing for the past, but a longing to reunite with a deceased relative; to overcome grief; and simply to understand.

The use of (often distorted) music is another key example of nostalgia in the film. The soundtrack features many songs from the late 1990s, however, they aren’t simply there to place the film in its setting; the lyrics often “[get] across what the characters can’t or won’t put into words” (Gagliano, 2023). Nayman (2023) describes this as music acting as a “temporal marker and internal monologue”. An example of this is when All Saints’ ‘Never Ever’ plays diegetically as Sophie steps away, withdrawn, from the group of older children she socialises with after her father inexplicably disappears for the evening. The lyrics can just about be made out as “I feel isolated / don’t wanna communicate”, directly stating what Sophie’s silence evokes. Wells (in Bowman, 2022), explained that when a film is quiet, any inclusion of lyrics forces the viewer to read into their significance and that she chose the pieces very specifically for the film. There are three key examples of lyrics having even greater significance in the film. Sophie performs a karaoke rendition of R.E.M.’s ‘Losing My Religion’ while trying and failing to coax Calum into joining her. The backing track subtly warps during Sophie’s performance, which at first may seem to just be authentically representing the recreated instrumentals of karaoke versions of songs, yet it may alternatively suggest something of the fallibility of memory. The lyrics are foregrounded, not only by Sophie’s awkward performance but also by visually showing them on the karaoke screen. The lyrics, on the one hand, represent Sophie retrospectively realising her father’s struggle to be happy—“I think I thought I saw you try”—while on the other hand, they externalise Calum’s struggle to protect his daughter from his emotional turmoil at the expense of having it bottled up inside him—“I’ve said too much / I haven’t said enough” (Nayman, 2023). Another example is the deployment of Blur’s ‘Tender’. The piece begins as normal at the end of the previously analysed scene of visual distancing; it then fades down in volume to subtly play in the background as the pair discuss Calum not feeling like he belonged where he grew up, stating that Sophie doesn’t know where she could end up. ‘Tender’ then returns, slowing down, distorting, and crescendoing. Transitioning into

a rave sequence, the past and present are linked as the slowed-down lyrics present adult Sophie's desperation to understand her father and her grief over his death.

The penultimate scene depicts Calum trying to convince Sophie to dance with him on the final night of the holiday intercut with a rave sequence, depicting Sophie screaming at her father, trying to grab onto and hold him as he dances. Underpinning this is Queen and David Bowie's 'Under Pressure'. Halfway through the scene, the instrumental is removed to just focus on Bowie and Mercury's voices as they sing lyrics which give voice to Sophie's wish to understand her father, the pain of coming to terms with his suicide, and realising there was nothing she could do as an innocent child blind to his problems, or as an adult with no way of accessing him except through memories. Upon Mercury singing the word "why", a non-diegetic cello from Oliver Coates' score weaves in and overtakes the vocals; this interweaving was precisely mapped out by Wells (in Bowman, 2022). By stripping away the famous instrumental and replacing it with the contemporary addition of a cello, Sophie's past and present collide in a moment of realisation and clarity, marked by the precise focus on the lyrics. The cello harmony recontextualises the original melody, much like the nostalgia recontextualising Sophie's memory. The sequence ends with the line "this is our last dance", emphasising the pair's final moments together—their literal last dance. The focus on the lyrics of 'Under Pressure' is the "most obvious piece of exposition in the film" (Ibid.), and exemplifies the importance of music in *Aftersun*'s exploration of nostalgia as therapy.

Boym (2001) describes two varying forms of nostalgia: restorative (which "protects the absolute truth") and reflective ("which calls [truth] into doubt"). By basing *Aftersun* on the interplay between subjective memory, recorded fact, and imagination, Wells casts Sophie into the grey area between reflective and restorative nostalgia. In reference to *In Search of Lost Time*, Deleuze (1995, p.124) states that the 'childhood event' (the dichotomy between "the adults we knew as a child and that of the adult we are among other adults and other children") acts with a "delay". Deleuze (Ibid.) continues, "there is no question as to how the childhood event acts only with a delay. It is this delay, but this delay itself is the pure form of time in which before and after coexist". This is central to the understanding of *Aftersun* as a complex depiction of nostalgia (both restorative and

reflective), memory, imagination, past, present, and grief all coexisting; they meld together into therapeutic catharsis. The film, according to Tham (2022), is not about closure; it is about “the love and pain of searching for answers, even if they never come”.

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