

SLEEPING (WITH) NOSTALGIA: ATARI HOTELS, THE LAST BLOCKBUSTER VIDEO ON AIRBNB AND “RETRO” ACCOMMODATION

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the intersection of nostalgia, consumer culture, and modern branding through the lens of two distinctive phenomena that briefly appeared in 2020: the Atari Hotels project and the Blockbuster Airbnb experience. Both initiatives capitalize on collective memories of 1980s and 1990s media technologies to craft immersive, retro-themed accommodations. By examining the role of nostalgia as an identity marker, the study situates these ventures within the broader context of "technostalgia" and "retrotopian" marketing. It further reflects on the commercialization of obsolescence, suggesting that these projects exemplify contemporary culture's tendency to repurpose past icons into commodified experiences, creating spaces where nostalgia is both curated and consumed.both the Atari Hotel project and the Blockbuster sleepover, posit the idea that nostalgia has become an entertaining experience. Visitors have the chance here to house, sleep and play inside (their own) nostalgia, stripping the algia out of nostalgia and making the nostos all about a return to fond childhood memories. Evidently, if nostalgia is a very personal feeling that is experienced on an individual level, it is also now very much framed and structured as a collective, recognizable color, style. It is also, fundamentally, associated to a lifestyle and an identity.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Identity, Nostalgia, Retro-Marketing, Technostalgia, Tourism.

I. INTRODUCTION

In late January 2020, shortly before the pandemic broke out, news came out of an ambitious “Atari Hotels” complex in Phoenix, Arizona, the very first video-game themed hotel. This project’s main location (and aesthetics) has moved to Las Vegas and is slated to open in 2024 (other main cities are supposed to get their Atari Hotels as well). The idea behind this initiative, according to one promoter, would be to “attract both those seeking nostalgia and those competing in the e-sports world.” On August 11th 2020, 8 months into the pandemic, the last standing Blockbuster video store, in Bend, Oregon, USA, made a stunning appearance on Airbnb, offering the possibility for residents of the county to book one of three nights inside the store for “a night back in the 90s”. The manager of the Blockbuster “offered movie lovers of a certain age the chance to relive a nostalgic, pre-Netflix summer sleepover.” This chapter will attempt to look at these two unrelated announcements that appeared during the first two years of the pandemic, and offer some spontaneous, exploratory, tentative, and probably inconclusive reflections.

II. ULYSSE’S BED

In recent years, I’ve been delving into the longer history of nostalgia and its’ classical, modern and contemporary tropes, looking in particular at the recent and not so recent manifestations of technostalgia and retro-marketing and trying to consider its historical possible roots. A seminar I gave on the issue of nostalgia and some time ago got me looking at the ties between traveling and nostalgia and, more essentially, the idea of the home, the room and even the “bed” as a “locus” of *what we long to return to, classically*. The prototypical model being of course Ulysses’ in the *Odyssey*, who is only recognized by Penelope, and one could argue that he has really truly returned, only once he *finds the bed* he shares with his wife Penelope, a bed that is made of a tree rooted in his *home* (that in a way *is his home*). According to Barbara Cassin, in her compelling reading of the *Odyssey*:

"Planted there", solid in the ground, *empedon*, like Ulysses before the Sirens and the being of Parmenides. Being rooted, far from any metaphor, is first and foremost the rooting of the nuptial and conjugal bed, which is dug right into the bole of the tree, as one makes one's bed, rooted for good in the earth of the house. And that's how you know you're home.

From Homer’s Antiquity to the young Johannes Hofer’s now-famous translation of the vernacular *heimwehe* into the term *nostalgia* that he coined for the first time in 1688, nostalgia has in fact

meant a desire to get back home, to sleep in one's own bed (with all the maternal, womb-like attributed associated with the bed). My interest in the Atari Hotels and the Blockbuster sleepover, could be thus summed up in a question: what happens to Ulysse's bed, in our digital age of corporate technostalgia, with the underlying lingering question, akin to many contemporary manifestations of nostalgia: *what are these things the symptom of.*

III. TECHNOSTALGIA: THE STUFF DREAMS ARE MODE OF TODAY

Even if they belong to very different realities, both the Atari Hotel project and the Blockbuster Airbnb sleepover, seem concerned by a common understanding of nostalgia and beds: possibly the idea that nostalgia has become an entertaining experience, it has become, as Peter Fritzsche calls it, a “nostalgia without melancholy”. Visitors have the chance here to house, sleep and *play* inside (their own) nostalgia, stripping the *algia* out of *nostalgia* and making the *nostos* all about fond childhood memories. Evidently, if nostalgia is a very personal *feeling* that is experienced on an individual level, it is also now very much framed and structured as a collective, recognizable color, style. It is also, fundamentally, associated to a lifestyle and an identity.

The omnipresent role of media in our lives and the quick turnovers we've encountered has made us develop a special type of attachment with things we were connected to only for brief moments of our lives and that have quickly become obsolete. How long did we actually own and use our yellow Sony Walkman, an Atari console, a Street Fighter arcade joystick, a portable CD player, a Polaroid camera (or whatever is analogous to these for the reader)? But everyone who has used these medias recalls the exact tactile impression on the fingers, the dials, the plastic of the cassette, the cartridge, the texture, the smell, etc. In a way, nostalgia has become a vector of self-identity and lifestyle, a sense of belonging to a certain group of people that share, not as much same tastes and political views, but a handful of precise sensorial experiences (and in particular of media, technologies, and the “worlds” that surround them). *I am what I'm nostalgic about, with others.* I can be living thousands of miles away from someone in the US or Canada (with whom I share no common world view), but we can have a moment of deep binding connection the moment we start talking about our memories of going to the local Blockbuster store, playing on our Atari Console or arcades, listening to music on tape or watching films on our VHS player.

This is even before discussing specific films and games, but we “remember” the sound, the smell, the tactile feeling, the physical presence and this is in a way the “thing” Atari Hotels and the Blockbuster sleepover seem to be pointing to. Atari and Blockbuster are brands that summon

— at least for North Americans who grew up in the 80’s and 90’s — experiences and trigger images, smells and imaginaries, beyond what they “actually are” or have become. They have become detachable cultural icons, and which explains why Atari can become a restaurant in Ottawa, Canada, and Blockbuster a DIY Halloween costume. Much in the same way the colors rendered by Kodak’s famous Kodachrome film stock were conceived not to represent correctly reality, but our heightened and more vivid memory of reality, our “memories” of playing on the Atari and going to Blockbuster are in many ways exaggerated and inflated by nostalgia, in a way not so dissimilar to Proust’s Madeleine: the Madeleine was just a buttery cake dipped in tea, before becoming the ultimate ecstatic embodiment of time regained. Nobody would of thought, back then, the sound of cracking open a VHS tape and smelling the plastic and magnetic tape, the aroma of cheap popcorn and butter-soaked carpet of the Blockbuster could summon something almost womb-like for certain people, to the point of desiring being locked up in the store a whole night. Similarly, the idea of gripping an Atari joystick, spending nights burning your eyes on the glow of a cathod-tube fluorescent 8-bit 16 color graphic, did not necessarily equate itself with something particularly enthralling at the time but now, becomes so-perfectly exotic while being entrenched in our collective memory, that it gains museum-worth value. And the nostalgia industries – knowing this – know how to manufacture and package the past, even if it hasn’t the slightest correlation with how that past was actually experienced and looked like in the past. As you all know, the XVIIth and XVIIIth Century illness that went under the name of nostalgia, coined by the Swiss Johannes Hofer, was usually cured by sending the home-sick person back home.

Today, nostalgia’s corporate icons have become the substitute home we want to return to: nostalgia has become the lost home and “retrotopian” *place in time* that one aches to return to in order to *be immersed in one’s (often fictional) memory of the past* (and the pandemic seems to have brought a surge of this). This “place” of the past is embodied by the name of a brand which is tied to aesthetic, colors, a visual style, but also a technology that becomes the watermark of a moment in time (70’s, 80’s, 90’s) that allows us to escape the present and/or make it more tolerable. As a nostalgia driven ad campaign for a 2D RPG Game called *Spleen* rhetorically asks: “Can nostalgia save us from melancholy?” These examples seem like two very different answers to this question.

IV. TRAVELLING NOSTALGIA

Accommodation, nostalgia and tourism have a long history (that is impossible to summarize here). Nostalgia is very often embedded in the very semiotic fabric of travelling, in many forms: in the

form of colonial conquest, of course, but also if we consider one's desire to travel to reconquer memories of childhood travels; to visit not only another place, but also another time, a place locked in the past; one travels to recognize places one has seen in pictures, books, dreamed of or seen in movies. Nostalgic tourism has been focused recently on people wanting to visit locations for movies that, classically, touched our childhood (and very often are not "real"): Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, and the never-dead Star Wars series have encouraged tourists to discover maybe not Tunisia, but Tattaouine, not Oxford but Hogwarts, not New Zealand, but Middle-Earth, etc. There are also, of course, the "theme hotels" that, like "theme restaurants", plunge the visitor in another time: Hard Rock Cafés, Planet Hollywood, 20's Art Deco, and retro hotels have been very popular, apart from the Nintendo Theme Park that has opened in Orlando. Going to this hotel *becomes the experience* (no matter the country or city you are in). We also know that Soviet Tours have made their appearance on the nostalgia tourist circuit, with the exceptional series of communist boutique hotels that satisfies all our "Stasi Nostalgia". The longing seems to be for an ironic, kitsch style – which looks more like a Wes Anderson décor than an authentic 60's East Berlin Soviet Hotel —, confirms the conflation between travelling and the idea of simulacrum: we are going to, not a place that "exists in reality", but to a place that is an image and is often an image of an image.

But hotels have become promises of experiences that are adapted to your lifestyle and deep identity. We can see this in the French production and distribution company MK2, which recently launched its Hotel Paradiso, "for the people for whom cinema is a lifestyle". In a way, and in very different ways, the Atari and Blockbuster hotels offer an experience where you can synch yourself to your "lifestyle". These hotels are saying to you: "you can be, only here, who you truly *are*, where you can explore the best, the precious of who you are" and where you can let this thing — the kid which you were — loose again." (I'm paraphrasing of course).

V. ATARI: IN FACT, TODAY

Another point of comparison is that both Atari and Blockbuster are "companies" that barely exist. Since the 1984 videogame crash, the pioneering California company Atari created by Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney has, until recently, been frankly not much, being sold and resold through the 90's and 2000's, venturing in the Casino business, in failed intelligent watches, selling the licenses of most of its games to other companies. Atari is now owned by a French company based in Paris (Atari SA, formerly Info Games), that filed for bankruptcy in 2013. But starting in 2016

(much like Polaroid, Kodak, even Fisher Price) it has been reveling in its own mythology. At a time when games studies bloomed in communications and film departments, when massive amounts of publications concerning Atari have emerged in the last 10 years, that the MoMA began acquiring and exposing games (many, Atari games), Atari secured its place in the symbolic realm. The retro-techno-stalgia (as many scholars have argued) has encouraged Atari to rebrand itself using its “heritage” value. Even if Atari’s attempts at reconquering a place in the current gaming ecology (with its new VSC system) have been met with mockery and resistance, the brand still resonates. It has released a series of refurbished classic Atari 2600 and 5200 Games for the Nintendo Switch and other contemporary consoles. It also gave a license to a company called At Games to produce a series of so-called Atari Flashback consoles, made to look like mini version of the Atari 2600, but with emulated built-in games (in some versions, you can add scanlines) and then they are the multiple versions of mini-consoles and arcades (like the catastrophic mini-Pong) that many legacy companies like Nintendo and others have put out in recent years. Clearly, licensing has been a huge part of its business, and the Atari Hotels, which is not an Atari project, to be clear, is one such cases.

The Zeitgeist around Atari has clearly benefited from digital culture, podcast culture, retro gaming culture, but also Netflix, particularly a series like *Stranger Things* where Atari signs and T-Shirts abound, but also merchandise or sub products that have become directly associated with gaming culture and in particular Atari games. For instance, fan culture has taken hold of the Atari icons and has also produced “authentic simulacras” of *Stranger Things* games but also Atari Cartridges that have put the name and the “brand” back into circulation. It’s clear these “things” that brought Atari Hotels CEO Napoleon Smith III (the current CEO is a woman called Shelly Murphy), a man who is responsible for the reboot of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Captain Kangaroo*, to get involved in this fantasy project that is built like a fiction. He says the hotel is “For younger folks, we want to invoke nostalgia, but also offer a totally modern experience that allows everyone to visit the “Lost City of Atari.”

To my knowledge, construction is still not yet underway, but we have an elaborate website and publicity campaign, and many suggestive art drawings. Apart from the fact we have no image of any room (nor beds), that it doesn’t look like something “real”, I’m struck by the fact that it basically looks like *Blade Runner* and *Tron* (another image of an image) : dystopian manga driven rainy visions of high-tech-asian control cities has become our utopia. Nothing really looks or feels like an Atari game (that is of course not even Japanese) and the historical referents point to a period

when pretty much Atari had begun disappearing. Again, what is symptomatic here is the distance that resides between the legacy brand, its' logo, the imaginaries it invokes (manga culture, fictional virtual worlds, etc.) and what the company actually was and is.

VI. BLOCKBUSTER DREAMING: BE KIND, REWIND (TIME)

The case of the Blockbuster Airbnb is obviously very different. It's imaginary is located in our eternal blue and yellow 90's. It provides an excellent example of what Hobsbawn calls the "invention of a tradition." The idea that going to the Blockbuster — as is championed in a recent (again) Netflix documentary called *The Last Blockbuster* (2020) — can refer to an "authentic", concrete, "real" thing (opposed to streaming, watching films on YouTube, etc.) is a purely ideological construct. Like some may know, Blockbuster Video, who at its height had 9,000 stores across the US and Canada, has completely disappeared from the surface of the earth except for one franchise in Bend, Oregon, owned by a woman named Sandy Harding.

The paradox (and the same can be said of Atari) of converting Blockbuster Video into a symbol of nostalgic resistance, of authenticity, tied to a blossom of cherished memories of dates and family expeditions, goes to show the distorting power of nostalgia. Blockbuster was after all the driving force behind the uniformity of commodity and cultural alienation that reduced cinema culture to a handful of sanitized Hollywood films (no foreign section, no pornography, almost no film pre-80's), a homogenized hegemony of popcorn plastic skittle films. But America loves survival stories that they can relate to (and it seems everyone in North America has a cherished Blockbuster memory), especially wholesome Christian narratives with an American mother figure of four that has been making headlines since 2019 and has survived the pandemic because of this (and I would say both Atari and the Airbnb are clearly publicity stunt that captured the news and worked up to a certain extent).

VII. CONCLUSION

Atari was never a hotel and sleeping in a Blockbuster was on no one's wish list. The fact that these two things have become desirable to some (but possibly laughable to most), says a lot about contemporary culture's capacity to reinvest and reinvent symbolically and commercially obsolete brands and to try and capitalize on a promise of an immersive, nostalgic experience *rooted in childhood and adolescent fantasies*, which have become pandemic refuges in which some feel the need to cuddle. I can't stop thinking that anyone in Bend, Oregon or Las Vegas that checked in or will check into these businesses, at the end of the day, or early in the morning, will have to go to

bed and go to sleep. And one can only wonder what their dreams will be made of. One thing is for sure, they know that that morning, they won't have to make their beds, like when they were kids, no more than Ulysses', for that matter.

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