Between Affect and Concept
Nostalgia in Modern and Contemporary Art and Architecture from the Middle East and North Africa

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Although the term "nostalgia" is becoming ever more present in art and architectural practices and their discourses, it has not yet been comprehensively defined, situated, and explicated in relation to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region's cultural production. This lacuna encourages us to reflect on the relationship between nostalgia and long-established themes in this area of study, such as colonialism, nationalism, and orientalism, as well as more recent debates around movements such as Gulf Futurism. We investigate the ways in which nostalgia can challenge canons, theories, and methods, and how these in turn can be expanded and decolonized to adequately incorporate cultural productions from the MENA region, and in so doing we consider current discourses on global art histories and the decentering of Western art history.[1]

This essay stems from the research seminar "Nostalgia and Belonging. Art and Architecture in the Middle East and North Africa, 19th–21st Century," which we taught together at the University of Bern, Institute of Art History, in the spring semester of 2021. This course was conceived with a transdisciplinary perspective in mind in order to investigate the notion of nostalgia that increasingly informs the discourse on cultural production in the MENA countries and involved merging our respective fields of research and expertise in visual arts, architecture, and heritage. Each of the case studies (see Figure 1) discussed in the seminar revealed a new aspect of nostalgia that was intertwined with topics such as belonging and identity, melancholia and sadness, commemoration and remembrance, migration and exile, trauma and loss, nation-building, fragmentation and restoration, and mimicry and authenticity. This indicated to us the fact that nostalgia constitutes a fruitful concept for the study of both art and architecture from the MENA, espe-

1 See, for instance, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann/Catherine Dossin/Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel (eds.): *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, London: Taylor & Francis 2017; Hamid Keshmirshekan (ed.): *Contemporary Art from the Middle East: Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses*, London: I. B. Tauris 2011.

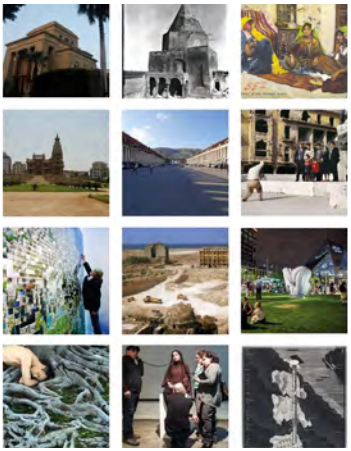

Figure 1: Mosaic of student essays resulting from the research seminar "Nostalgia and Belonging in Art and Architecture from the MENA Region," spring 2021. Each essay is represented by one image of the work of art or architecture that it discusses. The project was published on the academic blog Manazir: Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts, Architecture and Heritage in the MENA (www.manazir.art)

cially because of its complex multirelational, transgeographical, and transhistorical dimensions.[2]

We came to realize, while designing the seminar, that nostalgia frequently tests the timelines and chronologies that we apply as art and architectural historians. Claire Bishop, for instance, has asked elsewhere: "How Did We Get So Nostalgic For Modernism?"[3] On the one hand, the study of nostalgia forces us to be very precise and context-specific with labels such as vernacular, ancient, traditional, futuristic, modern, and contemporary; on the other, it blurs the boundaries between past, present, and future. As both affect and concept, navigating between scientific method and emotion, nostalgia is linked to the lived experience. Hence, in the context of the MENA region, nostalgia's constant shift between historical fact and affect, or real event and imagined alternative, resonates in both the collective memory of the colonial past and the individual trajectories in the decolonial present.

This essay investigates nostalgia as a new theoretical approach to the study of the MENA region's modern and contemporary art and architecture. Its overall goal is to offer an overview of the potential topics that might be addressed by examining the concept of nostalgia and to highlight possible new paths for future research. From that perspective, we have considered nostalgia not only as a theme, but also as a conceptual tool through which to analyze the construction of narratives, emotions, and meanings in art, architecture,

2 The outcome of this research seminar is a collection of twelve short essays written by students from the Institute of Art History, University of Bern, and from the Bern Academy of the Arts, that each focus on one selected object – a work of art or architecture – and the ways in which nostalgia and belonging come into play in the study of the MENA region's modern and contemporary art and architecture. They have been published on the academic blog of *Manazir: Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts, Architecture and Heritage in the MENA*: https://www.manazir.art/blog/nostalgia-and-belonging-art-and-architecture-mena-region (accessed: 08/06/2023).

3 Claire Bishop: "How Did We Get So Nostalgic For Modernism?" (14/10/2013), on: https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/2013/09/14/how-did-we-get-so-nostalgic-for-modernism/(accessed 08/06/2023).

and cultural heritage. First, we investigate the historical theorization of nostalgia in order to better comprehend its potential as a scientific concept for art history. Second, we address the ambiguity of colonial or imperial nostalgia and show how actors from both colonial and postcolonial contexts can express nostalgia for the same object, albeit with different motivations, in the case of photography for example. Third, we look at nation-building and collective identities as polarized in certain architectural typologies and stylistic revivals that triggered nostalgia. Finally, we discuss nostalgia and petro-modernity in relation to Gulf Futurism and the "inauthentic" ruins in the Arabian/Persian Gulf region's contemporary art. This research is informed as much by existing writing on nostalgia as it is by our own analysis of objects of art and architecture from the MENA region, given that nostalgia has not yet been comprehensively studied with respect to its cultural production; this led to a reflection on theory and methodology more generally.

Nostalgia as a Tool for Research on MENA Cultural Production

Nostalgia Carries Us but Desire Keeps Us Away, a multi-media installation by Saudi-Arabian artist Manal Al Dowayan (*1973), is a diptych consisting of two archival prints that depict a bridge as seen from within a car in motion (see Figure 2). The image is foregrounded by back-lit LED Arabic writing, the English translation of which constitutes the work's title.[4] Nostalgia in Arabic is phrased as نحن نحملنا الحنين إلى المحيطات (al-māḍī 'ilā al-ḥanīn), literally meaning "longing for the bygone," which expresses both belonging and desire. The artwork is part of Al Dowayan's thirteen-part series *And We Had No Shared Dreams* (2010), which investigates the city as an ambiguous space of collective yearning and shared hopes, but also as isolation through "an imagined conversation between urban inhabitants and their cityscape."[5] The artist understands this conversation as "an unstable, symbiotic relationship in a constant state of uncertainty. It is a romance on the verge of collapse."[6] The artwork integrates several of the related notions that nostalgia has come to mean over time with playful ease, thereby encapsulating the term's ambiguity, but also its multi-relational qualities.

4 The literal translation is: "We are carried out by our nostalgia to oceans of longing without impediment."

5 Manal Al Dowayan: "And We Had No Shared Dreams" (s. a.), on: https://www.manaldowayan.com/artworks/35-and-we-had-no-shared-dreams-collection/ (accessed 08/06/2023).

6 Ibid. The work was shown as part of the influential and controversial travelling exhibition *Edge of Arabia: Contemporary Art from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, from which a calalog of the same name resulted. See Edward Booth-Clibborn/Stephen A. Stapleton/Abdullah Al-Turki (eds.): *Edge of Arabia: Contemporary Art from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* [exhibition catalog], London: Booth-Clibborn 2012 (available online on https://issuu.com/edgeofarabia/docs/edgeofarabia-book, accessed 08/06/2023).

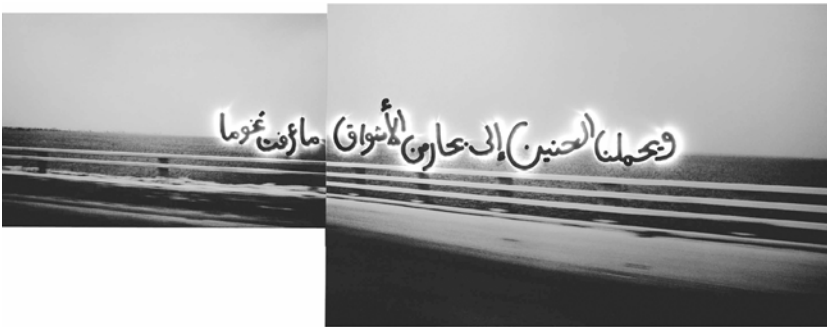

Figure 2: Manal Al Dowayan: Nostalgia Carries Us but Desire Keeps Us Away, 2010. Archival print mounted on dibond & aluminum lettering with LED back lights, 152 x 101 cm & 100 x 66 cm. As published in Edward Booth-Clibborn/Stephen A. Stapleton/ Abdullah Al-Turki (eds.): Edge of Arabia: Contemporary Art from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [exhibition catalog], London: Booth-Clibborn 2012, p. 108.

Nostalgia (from the Greek *nostos*, return, and *algos*, pain) was first coined by the physician Johannes Hofer (1669–1752) to describe Swiss mercenaries' extreme homesickness who longed for their homeland in the late seventeenth century. This affliction's symptoms included melancholia, insomnia, anorexia, weakness, anxiety, and, in certain cases, attempts at suicide.[7] During the nineteenth century, the physiological understanding of nostalgia gradually gave way to the idea of an existential, yet incurable, condition of romanticism linked to emotion.

Since that time, nostalgia has been theorized as a dialectic relationship between past and future across various disciplines of the social sciences and humanities.[8] The fields of modern and contemporary art and architecture have embraced the concept, particularly from the mid-2000s onwards.[9] This rise is connected to a growing number of artists and architects who have introduced practices for revisiting, archiving, unearthing, reimagining, and deconstructing past and present in order to create decolonial, vernacular, and transnational approaches to cultures, knowledge production, and politics.[10] In this regard, Svetlana Boym's

7 See Janelle L. Wilson, "'Remember When…': A Consideration of the Concept of Nostalgia", in: *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 56 (1999) 3, pp. 296–304, here p. 297.

8 See Fred Davies: *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, New York: Free Press 1979; Fred Davies: "Nostalgia, Identity and the Current Nostalgia Wave", in: *The Journal of Popular Culture* 11 (1977) 2, pp. 414–424; Jean Starobinski: "The Idea of Nostalgia," in: *Diogenes* 14 (1966) 54, pp. 81–103.

9 Andreas Huyssen: "Nostalgia for Ruins", in: *Grey Room* 23 (2006), pp. 6–21; Hal Foster: "An Archival Impulse", in: *October* 110 (2004), pp. 3–22.

10 See, for instance, the exhibition curated by Okwui Enwezor that included contemporary artists engaging with archival documents: Okwui Enwezor (ed.): *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document*

seminal writing *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) discusses various practices, such as heritage making, collecting, archiving, and exhibiting.[11] In her book, she defines nostalgia as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed," "a sentiment of loss and displacement," but also as "a romance with one's own fantasy," thereby opening up multiple perspectives on this complex phenomenon.[12] Nostalgia seems to resonate in both the MENA region's real and imagined geography in this initial definition, which has been romanticized and orientalized since the nineteenth century onwards.

Boym differentiates between two operating notions of nostalgia: *restorative* and *reflective*. These represent the nostalgic spectrum's two sides; at the same time, these two sides frequently overlap and are not mutually exclusive. Restorative nostalgia is marked by the concern of continuity between past and present and is linked to invented traditions, national revivals, collective symbols, oral cultures, and the total restoration of ruins.[13] Restorative nostalgia—which activate notions of continuity and tradition—can be linked to the narratives of modern revivals in art and architectural styles in the context of nation-building and post-independence in the MENA region's countries. Indeed, examples of neo-pharaonic public architecture in Egypt or the search for Mesopotamian features in Iraqi modernism attest to the restorative approach of collective identities through the past.

Reflective nostalgia, conversely, pertains to loss, melancholia, as well as mourning and is signified by the decay of the ruin, the fragment, and an inconclusive sense of distance and defamiliarization.[14] These occurrences of reflective nostalgia can be found, for instance, in the work of Lebanese and Palestinian artists who address situations of armed conflict, civil war, and the trauma of loss. This resonates in the widespread usage of the archive by artists of the region as well as in the narratives of heritage conservation. Overall, nostalgia, whether it be restorative or reflective, is often driven by the need to create counter-narratives to official discourses or iconographies and to allow for the plurality of historical memory. While Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia has proven to be valuable for our analysis, we found that works of art and architecture frequently incorporate aspects of both restorative and reflective nostalgia, thereby highlighting that the categories are not mutually exclusive in the MENA region's cultural production.

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in Contemporary Art [exhibition catalogue], New York/Göttingen: International Center of Photography/Steidl 2008.

11 Svetlana Boym: *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books 2001.

12 Ibid., p. xiii.

13 Ibid., pp. 41–48.

14 Ibid., p. 55.

Nostalgia and the Unsettled Experience of Modernity

Furthermore, nostalgia can be situated as an individual or collective reaction toward the unsettled experience of modernity in time and space. While nostalgia used to be a "treatable sickness" during Hofer's days, Boym asserts that it had become an "incurable disease" by the twentieth century, given that "[n]ostalgia, like progress, is dependent on the modern conception of unrepeatable and irreversible time."[15] The MENA region, as a space which is crucial for the constitution of European (art) histories and an experimental laboratory for European architects, has also generated its own stories of modernism and its (temporal) contestations. Indeed, while modernism in both art and architecture was translated in colonial contexts, through universalism and the values of a hegemonic culture, counter-narratives emerged through local manifestations of modernism that had different temporalities and historiographies than in the West.

Modernity's trans-temporal aspect is particularly resonant, especially in the debates pertaining to the study of modern and contemporary Arab/Islamic art. The field has received much attention in the past 20 years, particularly in institutions based in the USA, Europe, and increasingly in the MENA region itself. While the main challenge faced by scholars today remains the investigation of specific histories of modernism that go against the grain of Western chronologies, and against the universalist definition of modernity, the field is still marked by fragmentary histories, a scarcity of documentation, and the fragility of artifacts and primary documents.[16] Thus, it often requires painstaking archaeological methods, as well as a critical approach to archives, in order to contest the prejudice of timelessness, anachronism, or even archaism that has so often been projected onto Arab/Islamic cultural production.[17] If, as underlined by Timothy Mitchell, "staging the modern has always required the nonmodern, the space of colonial difference," then this scholarship brings new definitions of modernity that both affirm and transcend this dialectic.[18] Further investigations of transnational, transregional, and diachronic narratives of art and architecture, as well as their local genealogies and global anchorages, remain a necessary undertaking because many of the region's stories of art and architecture remain to be uncovered. In that sense, –as a kind of

15 Ibid., pp. 7, 13.

16 See Silvia Naef: *À la recherche d'une modernité arabe: L'évolution des arts plastiques en Égypte, au Liban et en Irak*, Geneva: Slatkine 1996; Anneka Lenssen/Sarah Rogers/Nada Shabout (eds.): *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, New York: Museum of Modern Art 2018; Nada Shabout: *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida 2007.

17 See, for example, Karen Exell/Rico Trinidad: "'There Is No Heritage in Qatar': Orientalism, Colonialism and Other Problematic Histories", in: *World Archaeology* 45 (2013) 4, pp. 670–685.

18 Timothy Mitchell: *Questions of Modernity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2000, p. xxvi.

tentative affective response towards the complicated and multilayered experience of modernity–a focus on nostalgia can serve both as an affective catalyst, as well as a conceptual connector cutting across established timelines and designated latitudes of so-called 'margins' and 'centers'. From that perspective, nostalgia reveals an ongoing process of negotiation between past and present, fluctuating and ever-transforming across real and imagined localities and temporalities.

The Ambiguity of Imperial/Colonial Nostalgia

Modern and contemporary art and architecture in the MENA region cannot avoid examining the complicated relationships with colonial experiences, as well as hegemonic discourses of art, architecture, and heritage that are strongly intertwined with Western modernity and modernism. Andreas Huyssen has noted that "nostalgic longing for a past is always also a longing for another place," a "utopia in reverse."[19] Consequently, the 'Orient,' understood in the sense defined by Edward Said as a concept discursively constructed by Western scholarship through a colossal body of knowledge rather than a geography, can be linked to the nostalgic desire for a temporality and a spatiality that do not necessarily exist.[20] One might ask about the extent to which nostalgia goes beyond the binary discourse of orientalism that opposes local and universal, East and West, by considering this precise common desire for an imaginary place, which pertains both to Huyssen's definition of 'nostalgic longing' and Said's definition of 'orientalism'. How can one come to terms with the ambiguities of a nostalgic approach to art, architecture, and heritage of disputed objects? How can nostalgia inform our approach to the contested heritage of architecture and archaeological artifacts that were produced or "discovered" during colonial times? Furthermore, how might one explain the growing, often nostalgically framed, interest in such objects throughout popular culture and social media?

Photography, to give one example, has emerged as a contested field of imperial nostalgia. Recently, an increasing number of websites, Facebook pages, and Instagram accounts have documented architectural heritage or have published old photographs, postcards, and memorabilia from the region.[21] These pages are run locally and have been established either by confirmed scholars or by amateur historians and collectors. The images published in social media evoke times before or during independence and national movements and show urban centers, such

19 Huyssen: "Nostalgia for Ruins", p. 7.

20 Edward W. Said: *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage 1979.

21 As examples of these types of projects, see Mohamed Elshahed (ed.): "Cairobserver" (s. a.), on: https://cairobserver.com/ (accessed: 08/06/2023); Khalid Almubailesh: "Māḍī Al-Kuwayt" (s. a.), on: www.kuwaitpast.com/arabic.html (accessed: 23/06/2022).

as Alexandria, Beirut, Tunis, and Doha, built in an eclectic fusion of Westernized and vernacular styles. They feature historical scenes of daily life that capture Westernized lifestyles or that stage a supposedly intact social community living in harmony with the local environment prior to modernization. Regarding the Arabian Peninsula, for example, many of these websites and accounts look at the pre-oil life in the region and tend to glorify this period as one with a strong sense of social cohesion and community. Other initiatives in Egypt are intriguing due to their celebration of colonial architecture and their direct association with the legacy of colonization, as Mercedes Volait rightly points out.[22] In her account of the invention of *Belle Époque* architecture as an apparently neutral label, she highlights the politics of the appeal of this renewed take on colonial architecture: on the one hand, it is considered to be part of a heritage discourse with its economic and political interests; on the other hand, though, it calls on amateur historians to shed light on social and cultural marginality. Looking at colonial nostalgia as an acute and broad social phenomenon, William Cunningham Bissel similarly poses the question: "How exactly do we come to terms with expressions of colonial nostalgia by the descendents [sic] of those who struggled long and hard to overcome the effects of European domination and exploitation?"[23]

The ambiguity of this phenomenon of colonial or imperial nostalgia resides in the fact that it operates on two levels: it is not only expressed by colonized subjects of former colonies but also by the agents of colonialism themselves. Paradoxically, in both cases, nostalgia manifests itself as a longing for the place and culture as it was prior to or during colonization. As formulated by Renato Rosaldo, "imperialist nostalgia uses a pose of 'innocent yearning' both to capture people's imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination."[24]

Interestingly, it appears that these two manifestations of colonial nostalgia intersect or overlap in the case of orientalist photography. For example, the nostalgic display of colonial photography can be read on several levels in the photographs produced by studios like Lehnert & Landrock in Tunisia and Egypt at the turn of the twentieth century (see Figure 3).[25] The staged imagery of the harem (and the fact that

22 Mercedes Volait: "The Reclaiming of 'Belle Époque' Architecture in Egypt (1989–2010): On the Power of Rhetorics in Heritage-Making", in: *ABE Journal* 3 (2013), on: https://doi.org/10.4000/abe.371 (accessed 08/06/2023).

23 William Cunningham Bissell: "Engaging Colonial Nostalgia", in: *Cultural Anthropology* 20 (2005) 2, pp. 215–248, here p. 217. Bissell investigates colonial nostalgia in an anthropological perspective looking at the case of heritage narratives in Zanzibar.

24 Renato Rosaldo: "Imperialist Nostalgia", in: *Representations* 26 (1989), *Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory*, pp. 107–122, here p. 108.

25 Rudolf Franz Lehnert and Ernst Heinrich Landrock ran photographic studios in Tunisia and Egypt in the early twentieth century that produced orientalist photographs that were mostly bought by a European audience.

Figure 3: Lehnert & Landrock: Three Women Sitting in the Court of R. Lehnert in Tunis, ca. 1904–1908. Postcard, © Dr. Edouard Lambelet, Lehnert & Landrock – Egypt

postcards reproducing such images circulated widely) can be read, following Malek Alloula's analysis, as the persistence and endless reproduction of stereotypes that carry the phantasm of the imperialist gaze.[26] Indigenous photography studios in Alexandria, Beirut, Cairo, Jaffa, and Jerusalem and photographers stemming from the MENA region also created images that referenced the harem's colonial/orientalist aesthetic, but these tell a very different story. In his investigation of photography in the late Ottoman and early Mandate period, Stephen Sheehi brings the role of photography to the fore as a means to reclaim modernity, arguing that "the act of 'imitation' was an ideological act by which non-Western subjects claimed ownership of modernity along with its intellectual and capital resources and privileges."[27] In other words, the recourse to colonial aesthetics by photographers pertains more to reclaiming modernity than engaging with its historical heritage. Thus, these overlapping displays of orientalist aesthetics appear to broaden the scope of colonial nostalgia from being solely a marker of othering to becoming a means for shaping multiple identities and, moreover, augmenting indigenous agency (see Figure 4).

In a region in which war and conflict have been part of everyday life for decades, is it possible that the utopian dimension of colonial nostalgia holds the potential of repair, if not of healing? A colonial period, depending on the context,

26 Malek Alloula: *The Colonial Harem*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1986, pp. 3–5.

27 Stephen Sheehi: "A Social History of Early Arab Photography or a Prolegomenon to an Archaeology of the Lebanese Imago", in: *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39 (2007) 2, pp. 177–208, here p. 178.

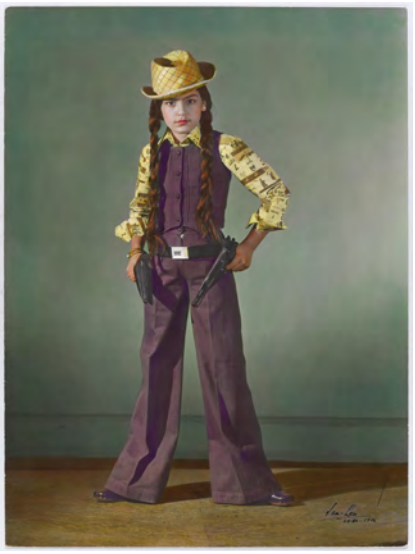


Figure 4: Van Leo: Studio Portrait of Sherihan, 1976 in Cairo, Egypt. Gelatin silver developing-out paper print, hand-colored, 40.0 x 29.8 cm. Van Leo Collection, 0081va00060, 0081va, Courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation, Beirut

might not only be remembered for its legacy of violence, cultural domination, and unjustly ruled societies, but also for relatively peaceful decades of national or personal stability in retrospect. Imperialist eras have become intersected not only by negative personal trajectories, but also by positive memories, such as family coherence or individual success stories. Moreover, historical distance sometimes allows for a more reconciliatory judgment of the past. Thus, colonial nostalgia operates as a mode of social memory by emphasizing distance and disjuncture. This may explain the widespread use of archival documents in the art and curatorial practices of a region often marked by stories of loss and exile.[28] Indeed, works by artists such as Emily Jacir, Mariam Ghani, Joana Hadjithoma and Khalil Joreige, Walid Raad, and Zineb Sedira all engage with textual, photographic, or oral archives to address questions of memory, remembrance, loss, and fragmented topographies. Zineb Sedira's video *Gardiennes d'images*, for example, focuses on an interview with Safia Kouaci, the widow of Algerian photojournalist Mohamed Kouaci, whose personal archives record his involvement in the Algerian National Liberation Front, his life in exile in Tunis, and his return to Algeria after independence, where he worked as an official photographer for the government. Sedira's work intertwines the individual experience of the photographer with the country's history of colonization and independence through the notions of memory transmission and the archive (see Figure 5).

28 See Bissell: "Engaging Colonial Nostalgia", p. 216. On the use of archives in visual culture, curatorial and collecting practices in the MENA region, see Anthony Downey (ed.): *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, London/New York: I. B. Tauris 2015; Sonja Mejcher-Atassi/John Pedro Schwartz (eds.): *Archives, Museums, and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World*, Farnham: Ashgate 2012.

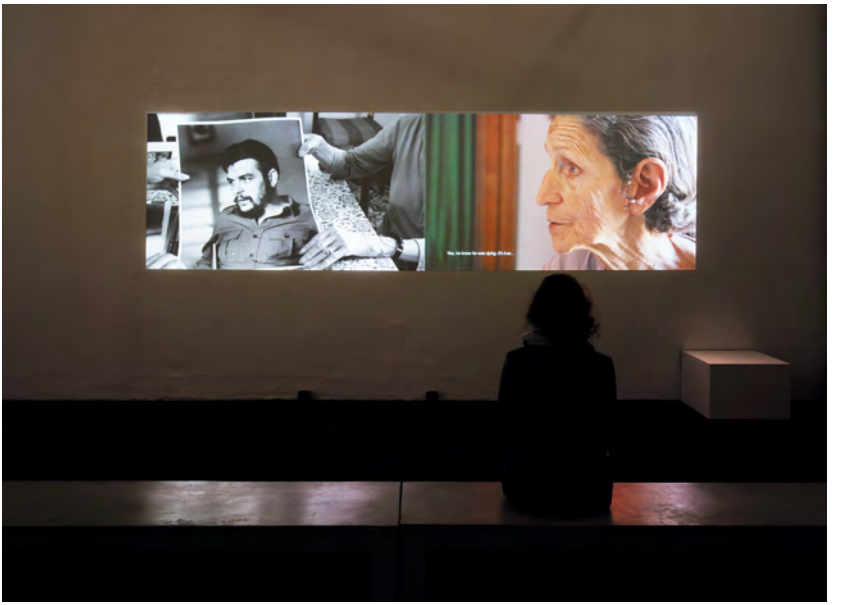


Figure 5: Zineb Sedira: Gardiennes d'images, 2010. Installation shot. Photo by André Morin, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Kamel Mennour, Paris

Colonial or imperialist memory is often preserved in official archives that were initiated during colonial rule. Derrida described the "archive fever" (*mal d'archives*) of our times as "a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement."[29] The archive crosses the limits between the public, the private, and the intimate, between state and society, and between the secret and the non-secret. The power of what belongs to history and what is excluded therefrom is a consequence of the archive's function of classification and of putting into order. This practice of silencing and epistemic violence exerted through knowledge, as identified by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, can be found in colonial archives, for instance.[30] These absences are addressed by artists from the MENA region, whose engagement with archival documents in relation to war, loss, and memory has become so prevalent in recent years that

29 Jacques Derrida: "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression", in: *Diacritics* 25 (1995) 2, pp. 9–63, here p. 57. Originally published as Jacques Derrida: *Mal d'Archive: Une impression freudienne*, Paris: Ed. Galilée 1995.

30 See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives (Introduction)" [1985/1999], in: Charles Merewether (ed.): *The Archive*, London/Cambridge: Whitechapel/MIT Press 2006, pp. 163–169, here p. 165.

one might ask about the extent to which the archive has become constitutive of a certain aesthetic of contemporary art in the region.

This "archival impulse" also speaks to the endeavor to collect, preserve, and access both social and cultural memory. Grassroots initiatives have led to the establishment of significant private archival institutions in recent decades. One of the driving forces is, once again, the creation or preservation of countering, correcting, or of simply filling the gaps of absences and missing narratives. For instance, the Arab Image Foundation (*al-Mu'assasah al-ʿArabiyyah lil-Ṣūrah*) is a non-profit organization that was established in Beirut in 1997, the goal of which is to collect, preserve, and promote photographs from the MENA region and its diaspora.[31] It has also become a source of material for many contemporary artists working in the region. Another example, concerning architectural heritage, is the Palestinian Riwaq Centre for Architectural Conservation. Founded in 1991, the center engages with projects to document, restore, and revive traditional architecture as part of Palestinian cultural memory across the West Bank and Gaza, some of which dates back to the British Mandate period and prior to 1948.[32]

Figure 6: Céline Brunand: Retour à Helwan: La Maison des vivants, 2021. Video still, Courtesy of the artist

31 Hal Foster: "An Archival Impulse", in: *October* 110 (2004), pp. 3–22; Arab Image Foundation: "[Website]" (s. a.), on: https://stories.arabimagefoundation.org/ (accessed 08/06/2023).

32 Riwaq is located in Al-Bireh, close to Ramallah in the West Bank, see Riwaq: "[Website]" (s. a.), on: www.riwaq.org/ (accessed 08/06/2023).

The critical artistic engagement with decolonial history is ongoing and often relates to archival work and photography, given the MENA region's dynamic and contested modern and contemporary history (see Figure 6). The ambiguity of how to interpret the past is often expressed either in or through nostalgia, for which this notion has become a seminal tool, both in terms of affect and concept. Certain typologies seem to be particularly prone to becoming infused with collective identity and social memory in the realm of architecture and in the process of nation-building and modernization and have, thus, become the focus of nostalgic engagement.

Collective Architectures: Social Housing, Revivals, and the Nation

Being nostalgic allows one to attach one's hopes, dreams, and losses to seemingly bigger socio-political movements, collective values, former places, and historical periods. In this regard, architectural manifestations such as memorials and large-scale housing, as well as symbolically loaded typologies like national museums and parliament buildings, figure as crystallizations of nostalgic reactions in architecture and its public discourse. Nevertheless, the role of social housing has, until recently, been overlooked in urbanistic research about the MENA region.[33]

Historically, social housing has been envisioned as large-scale housing initiatives within existing cities as well as entirely new cities planned by national or local governments and public agencies. These are often conceived of as prestige projects to showcase ideologies such as postcolonial nation-building or modernization, symbolizing, for example, the trust placed in architectural modernisms as a motor of social change, as Mohammad Gharipour and Kivanç Kilinç have shown.[34] Social housing can create spaces of national or collective belonging both physically as a built structure in urban space and socially as a visual marker of the nation-state. It can also symbolize an imagined community, an ideal future society in the framework of post-independence decolonization processes and nation-building. Moreover, housing architecture incorporates an afterlife of changes, modifications, and rebuilding with years of use (often by changing groups of inhabitants). It becomes what one might call an "archiving machine" in the sense that it records the social memories of its tenants, rather than of a state. Here, nostalgia marks the transition or connection between the individual trajectories and experiences and the collective socio-political agendas as they materialize in architecture.

The deliberate destruction of prominent housing clusters–which became homes as well as landmarks over time–is therefore often met with popular opposition and tristesse, as was the case with Al-Sawaber in Kuwait City (see Figure 7).

33 See Mohammad Gharipour/Kivanç Kilinç (eds.): *Social Housing in the Middle East: Architecture, Urban Development, and Transnational Modernity*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2019.

34 Ibid.

The 33 buildings and more than 500 apartments, erected in 1981 on the basis of a design proposal by Arthur Erickson, embodied a bold architectural language that was progressive in form and spoke to the city-state's desire for a new typology. It was initially conceived to encourage Kuwaiti families to move back to the city center. Architectural historian Mae al-Ansari has shown that, for a variety of different reasons, it eventually came to house Kuwaiti widows and divorcees as well as Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis, thereby becoming a home to socially marginalized groups.[35] When news of its planned destruction emerged, the directly affected inhabitants as well as architects, urban planners, and the public in Kuwait and the region began to campaign against the demolition, arguing for the preservation of the architectural and cultural heritage that it comprised. Despite the objections, however, Al-Sawaber was demolished in January 2019.

Figure 7: Al-Sawaber, Kuwait City. Photograph taken by Laura Hindelang before demolition

Apart from the nostalgic engagement with specific typologies, another insightful example from the realm of architecture in relation to our discussion of nostalgia is the revival of neo-Islamic or historicist architectural styles (such as neo-Phar-

35 Mae Al-Ansari: "Constructed Marginality: Women, Public Housing, and National Identity in Kuwait", in: Mohammad Gharipour/Kivanç Kilinç (eds.): *Social Housing in the Middle East: Architecture, Urban Development, and Transnational Modernity*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2019, pp. 207–238.

aonic and neo-Mesopotamian) that prominently characterized the architecture of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century in places such as Egypt, Iraq, and Lebanon. The adaptation of historical styles served to create a new, albeit familiar, national symbolism for the emerging modern nation-states (which were often still colonially entangled), as in the case of the Saad Zaghloul mausoleum in Egypt's neo-Pharaonic style (see Figure 8). The "re-discovery" of historical architecture in the MENA region coincided with Europe's re-engagement with its historical canon in what is designated as historicism today. Political aspirations towards manifesting the nation's tangible, architecturally represented body are intersected with the search for an adequate, formal, and stylistic expression rooted in the history of a place. Certain historical building forms, materials, and ornamentation have been highlighted, while others have been deliberately overlooked in the interest of creating authenticity and collective belonging through architecture. This selective adaptation, with highly loaded ideological explanations of why one particular historical style rather than another, represents the imagined community in the making, often giving way to expressions of nostalgia. This is also because the inherent place or time that is supposedly referenced usually lies somewhere on the wide spectrum between real and imagined.

Figure 8: Saad Zaghloul Mausoleum, Cairo (detail of the main entrance). Photograph taken by Nadia Radwan

Petroleum, Gulf Futurism, and the "Inauthentic" Ruin

The ruin must also be a paradigmatic element in any discussion about nostalgia. We can witness many icons of historicist and (post-)modernist architecture in the MENA region crumble into ruins at present, due to a lack of maintenance, indecision about the definition of cultural heritage, conflict and war (apart from the deliberate destruction of buildings such as Al-Sawaber). Where there is architecture, there are also potential ruins. Ruins negotiate, but do not resolve the interplay between notions of the whole, complete, and united and notions of the fragmented, broken, and isolated. Focusing on industrial ruins, Andreas Huyssen observed that buildings constructed with concrete, steel, and glass do not facilitate ruination

as much as those made of stone, brick, or wood. Huyssen considers ruins to be a very impactful trigger of nostalgia for modernity "because they still seem to hold a promise that has vanished from our own age: the promise of an alternative future."[36] In the age of fossil fuels, coal, natural gas, and petroleum, typical construction materials from concrete to steel to plastics refuse to become "authentic" ruins. Thus, they challenge the traditional process of parting with a historical period via the process of falling into ruin to welcome something new, thereby intensifying nostalgic reactions over this unsolved dilemma.[37] The urge to negotiate this dilemma is especially tangible in the Arabian Gulf region, where urban development has picked up at unprecedented speed. Art- and architecture-related cultural production feverishly examines its recent petroleum-fueled past in order to inquire about its potential future, a new direction that is called "Gulf Futurism."

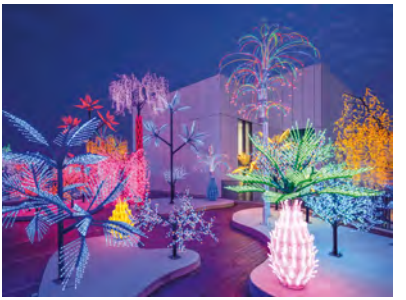
Nostalgia often stems from a position of discontent or unease with past memories and future perspectives and, thus, possess utopian (or dystopian) potential. The Arabian Peninsula and its neighboring oil-producing countries have experienced an all-encompassing and rapid transformation due to petroleum industrialization and the subsequent petro-dollar modernization and nation-building; this is informed by "a future that was already prescribed, premediated, and integrated as a temporal infrastructure."[38] The Gulf countries' twentieth-century rise to international fame, as the MENA region's richest and fastest developing nation states, is critically re-assessed by scholars, artists, and the public along the lines of social and ecological sustainability, political participation, and social-ethnic belonging in these deeply unequal societies. Contemporary cultural producers focus on historical works of art and architecture or everyday visual culture in particular for a re-examination of official narratives, images, and imaginaries that have given way to high hopes for an unobstructed future path, one fueled by oil revenues, fossil energy, and petroleum-based materials.

Alia Farid and Aseel AlYaqoub created an outdoor installation of LED-lit plastic trees titled *Contrary Life: A Botanical Garden Devoted to Trees* for an art center in Dubai (see Figures 9 and 10). It was inspired by the local practice of decorating trees or using artificial vegetation in private homes, and the installation proved to be a spectacular sight at night. However, a few months and long hours of sun exposure later, the plastic trees had drastically deteriorated, stimulating new questions about environmental responsibility and future sustainability over this "inauthentic" ruin. Other artistic currents re-assess the (often-far-too-rosy) picture of petro-modernity as the "good old days" on social media, in family photo albums,

36 Huyssen: "Nostalgia for Ruins", p. 8.

37 Ibid., p. 20.

38 Jussi Parikka: "Middle East and Other Futurisms: Imaginary Temporalities in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture", in: *Culture, Theory and Critique* 59 (2018) 1, pp. 40–58, here p. 46.



Figures 9 & 10: Aseel AlYaqoub/Alia Farid: Contrary Life: A Botanical Garden Devoted to Trees, 2018. Installation of plastic trees and LED lighting. Art Jameel Commission for Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai, Photo by Mohamed Somji; courtesy of Art Jameel and the artists

and in publications by Ministries of Information. Artistic and architectural investigations attest to the inconsistencies at play when past and future no longer align, contrary to official messages of unlimited growth. Nostalgia as a trigger and trace is a crucial tool for both artistic and architectural (research-based) practice as well as art historical analysis. Indeed, the utopian dimension of nostalgia–which, in Boym's terms, is not necessarily directed to the future or to the past, but instead transcends established boundaries of time and space–may possess the potential to overcome deadlocked situations or outdated imaginaries of the future.

Conclusion

We believe that nostalgia can work both as an *affective* catalyst as well as a *conceptual* connector that cuts across established timelines and designated latitudes of "margins" and "centers." Nostalgia can feature as the social and cultural signifier of an affective as well as an intellectual reaction toward an unsettling temporal and/or spatial dimension. Its strongly felt presence in contemporary discourses on art and architecture in the MENA region, both self-ascribed by artists and architects, and attributed by critics and scholars, works to highlight the observation that a significant and contested (re-)negotiation of this region's cultural history is currently taking place, both at the individual and at the collective level. Nostalgia can open the path to new ways of considering the product of transcultural encounters, especially given that being an artist or an architect from the MENA region has become a valuable marker, albeit a highly contested and often very emotional one. Ultimately, nostalgia shows us that human engagement with the past, the present, and the future works against the associations of real/possible and imagined/impossible. There is an intrinsic motivation to engage with time and space, irrespec-

tive of those realities or potential changes by recognizing emotions, dreams, and memories as being meaningful material. In this respect, nostalgia proves to be not only a relevant conceptual, but also an intrinsically affective, tool to describe and analyze the construction of narratives and meaning in the MENA region's art, architecture, and cultural heritage.