

NOSTALGIA TI FREGA

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Nostalgia Ti Frega is a photographic exploration of memory, identity and place that focuses on the emigrant community of a Sicilian village destroyed by an earthquake 40 years ago. This paper outlines the key influences across disciplines that have shaped the creative framework of the project.



Nostalgia Ti Frega, 2011, Carla Drago, photographic media, Copyright Carla Drago.

THE PROJECT

Nostalgia Ti Frega is a photographic project being completed as part of a Doctorate of Creative Arts at the University of Technology, Sydney. An exploration of memory, identity and place, the project focuses on the emigrant community of my father's Sicilian village of Salaparuta, destroyed by an earthquake 40 years ago. Aiming to capture a sense of the virtual space the village now inhabits, the project will consist of both digital and analog photographic objects: a limited edition set of photographs, printed on fine art paper, and presented in handcrafted wooden boxes will interact with a photo-book deployed on a tablet touch-screen device. Each printed photograph will be specially coded and, when detected by the digital photo-book, will unlock further, hidden content within it. As a digital object, the photo-book includes features that allow users in distant locations to comment on photographs and to curate and share their own chapters. Their engagement with the application will become part of the unfolding history of the village and its people.

The creative development of *Nostalgia Ti Frega* has drawn influence from several disciplines. Ideas around cultural change, including the effects of industrialization and globalization, the role of memory

and nostalgia in shaping identity; and the use of the imaginary within a shifting cultural context, are explored. The notion of the global village, including what it might consist of in a post-digital age, is a focus. Writing on haptic technologies and touch, and why these areas are increasingly important, has contributed to the creative framework, as has work in the area of material culture, particularly in relation to how objects relate to place and identity. Another important factor has been the use of user-centered design principles from the User Experience field of digital media. Developing out of the Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) discipline of Computer Science, UX principles are concerned with the effect (or emotional impact) on users when using digital products. Finally, the project also explores new approaches to storytelling, building on previous research that proposed a rhizomatic, nodal, non-linear storytelling framework specifically for interactive digital platforms.

THE VILLAGE

Salaparuta was a village of about 3000 people situated in the hills of Sicily's Belice valley, a few kilometres north of Santa Margherita di Belice and several kilometers west of Corleone. Like Santa Margherita, it had a castle and nobility, though after the reunification of Italy in the late 1800s and subsequent redistribution of land, the nobility left. Unlike Corleone, it was not a 'mafia' village.

The earthquake of 1968 was emphatic in its destruction. Several villages and towns were destroyed, 380 lives were lost, 1000 people injured, and 70,000 left homeless. With little local options available most of the population emigrated to Australia, Canada, the United States, and cities in the north of Italy. The rest camped in makeshift barracks and waited for new housing to be built nearby. Today the old village of Salaparuta is nothing more than over grown rubble; it is hard to distinguish where many buildings once stood.

As earthquakes go, the one that struck that winter was not a particularly strong one and, despite the tragic human casualties and destruction of property, did not come close to the catastrophic earthquakes Sicily's urban centers had experienced through history. However, unlike cities, which by their very nature are always in transformation and where destruction and redevelopment are customary elements and expectations of urban culture anyway, villages – usually understood as small hubs of human life in largely unpopulated landscapes – are very different entities. The entire physical presence of a village – its squares and meeting points, churches and cafes, thoroughfares and back-alleys – is intrinsic to how inhabitants socialize and interact, shelter from the environment and from strangers, and generally differentiate between the familiar and the unknown. In short, the physical space of the village is vital to an understanding of who, as a community, its inhabitants are and what their place, as a collective, in the world is.

While it can be argued that all spaces of habitation shape the identity of inhabitants, a village and its association with community, intimacy and belonging is understood to shape identity in a particular way. The notion of 'village' has in fact been used to understand and negotiate ideas around community and connection in many different contexts, from the destruction and redevelopment of urban landscapes, to the ability of mass communication to create a so-called 'global village.'

Traditional Sicilian culture is no different in this regard. The physical endurance of a village is a cultural reference point to the community that calls it home. It maintains continuity, is a reassuring anchor, and persists. So, when a village is destroyed and laid desolate, and, as in the case of Salaparuta, its people are scattered across the globe, what takes its place?

Even though not everyone from Salaparuta is directly related by blood, to be a *Salitanomeans* to be part of an extended family of *paesani* (villagers) and to be treated as such. This extends to descendants as well, so that a child or grandchild (or great-grand-niece-twice-removed) is considered a member of the village, even if they have never been there. Clearly, many years after its destruction, a sense of Salaparuta persists. The village is no longer the same physical place it once was (at least not an inhabitable one) but it is certainly something somewhere in the hearts and minds of its people. It is this ‘something’ and ‘somewhere’ that *Nostalgia Ti Frega* seeks to explore.

NOSTALGIA AND IDENTITY

In his 1983 essay on postmodernism and consumer society, Fredric Jameson argued that the formal features of the post-modern world expressed the deeper logic of its social system; namely that it had “begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, [had] begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterated traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve.” [1] Jameson’s view was that people simultaneously lived in age that was radically disconnected from its past, but paradoxically, because of a pervasive nostalgia toward this lost past, were unable to articulate or describe the present or the very nature of their own environment.

He was essentially describing an identity crisis – the collapse of an established order and the resulting cultural void from which anything was yet to emerge. This is not unlike the migrant experience of the villagers of Salaparuta. The loss of old identity, precipitated through a physical disconnection to the homeland; a disconnection, creating a pervasive nostalgia towards the past; and this nostalgia, in turn preventing the emergence of new identities, are all hallmarks of what many migrants experience when adopting a new country as their home.

Jameson does not offer any way out of the bind he identifies. Dubious of our ability to experience what he saw in the 1980s as impossible dimensions, he calls for our bodies to “grow new organs, to expand our sensorium” and waits to see what the “new architecture” will bring. [2]

Over two decades later, it is clear that identity has certainly moved beyond Jameson’s postmodern stasis and is understood in ways suggesting we have indeed developed new dimensions. [3] Nostalgia too, rather than a stultifying, empty void, has grown new limbs, becoming something with the potential to enable hybrid, conflicting, previously impossible identities and histories.

In her 2001 book, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym – an artist and migrant to the USA from the Soviet Union – dissects nostalgia into two prevalent types: “restorative,” which seeks the return to an original state and the recovery of an absolute truth (and which she aligns with nostalgic quests for restoration prevalent at the end of the 20th century) and “reflective,” which is a meditation on history and on the passage of time and perpetually defers a homecoming by cherishing shattered fragments of memory. “Reflective nostalgia does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home; it is enamored of distance, not of the referent itself. This type of nostalgia is ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary.” [4]

Reflective nostalgia sits neatly in Boym’s artistic, Off-Modern art practice, “a detour into the unexplored potentials of the modern project.” [5] While *Nostalgia Ti Frega*, is not a radical experiment in terms of artistic expression, as Boym characterizes her art, it does embrace the notion of reflective nostalgia as a

tool through which to understand the paradoxical, hybrid, complex identities of its subjects, the *Salitane*, and their homeland today. As Boym states, “For many displaced people from all over the world, creative rethinking of nostalgia [is] not merely an artistic device but a strategy of survival, a way of making sense of the impossibility of homecoming.” [6]

MATERIAL CULTURE AND CONTAINMENT

Another focus of the project has been to consider the ways in which virtual ideas and emotions can be made manifest and expressed through material objects.

Part of this interest stems from the fact that photographs themselves, especially family photographs, are already objects that function in this manner. Historically, photographs and photographic objects have played important roles as repositories for both collective and individual memories, binding people to a sense of self and to each other. [7] Within Sicilian culture, photographs remain highly cherished objects with enormous emotional power. In the wake of the earthquake, when it was deemed safe to return to the village and recover what could be salvaged, photographs were considered highly valuable. They contained so many memories and emotions of lives now destroyed it is not surprising this was the case.

Photographs are also a potent example of how we use objects to understand ourselves and our relationships to others. In *The Comfort of Things* Daniel Miller demonstrates the manner in which people express themselves through their possessions, using them to both mediate interpersonal relationships and formulate a sense of self. [8] Greg Noble develops this approach in his work on the ‘cumulative self’ by considering the containers used to house our cherished objects. Specifically in relation to a shoebox containing photographs Noble writes:

The open-ness of the shoebox – [its] ability to function as [a form] of self-reflection and to undergo alteration – suggests that [it] be understood not in terms of containment as enclosure but as a form of containerisation, a holding together of objects for their safe transport. [It secures] the development of a stable but cumulative self because [it provides] both the mobilities and moorings necessary for ongoing existence in a complex world. [9]

Ideas around containment have clear synergies with reflective nostalgia – the ability for histories to be fragmentary and transformed by rearrangement, to offer more than one pathway, to move not in a single, straight, direction but inhabit many places at once. Given the evolving and emergent nature of the community at the centre of *Nostalgia Ti Frega*, incorporating technologies of containment into the project is a way to cradle the ever-shifting community identity, and also participate in its formation. Moreover, it enables the analog/physical aspects of the project (the wooden shoe-box) the ability to provide an emergent story experience, one the digital photo-book application will similarly provide.

POST-DIGITAL, POST-ARTIFACT

Rapid developments over the last two decades in telecommunications, digital technology, and interactive media, mean that people and communities can now connect in new ways. Identity and belonging are increasingly mediated through connections that take place in ‘virtual’ space and photographs are playing an important role in these connections. [10] *Nostalgia Ti Frega* takes its place within this digital

world by being presented, in part, on a tablet touchscreen digital device. Like the box for physical photographs, the tablet serves as a 'container' for the digital application. The size and mobility of tablet devices make them especially suited for this.

Importantly, tablet devices are heralding an interface paradigm shift away from the mouse towards touch – as the mouse transformed the possibilities of user interfaces, so too will touch and gestural interaction. Tablet-touch devices are relatively new, and innovative examples of narrative photographic applications for them still relatively rare. *Nostalgia Ti Frega* will explore the potential these devices offer, both from a user interaction point-of-view, and in relation to dynamic non-linear story experiences, ones that users themselves are able to contribute to. Incorporating ideas from reflective nostalgia into the user experience design, the application will be a platform where content can be transformed and re-arranged, story progression will not be singular or linear, and multiple-versions of the same story are possible.

This intent also neatly extends previous research completed as part of Masters studies in interactive multimedia. There, drawing correlations between 'experience,' as understood by information architects, and 'story,' as understood by film and television practitioners, I highlighted the importance of storytelling in the design of interactive forms of media, especially in contexts where traditional forms of storytelling were no longer as compelling. Using the concept of Rhizomatics, as described by Deleuze and Guittari (and taken up by others) as a basis, I suggested that an active and participatory experience design in digital interactive contexts be informed by non-linear methodologies of narrative. [11] *Nostalgia Ti Frega's* conceptual framework, informed so heavily by ideas from reflective nostalgia and containment, is an opportunity to experiment with this approach.

However, while digital technology has changed the types of social connections and stories we can now experience, we, and our world, are still physical entities. We exist in and in relation to a material world, and, as significant as our virtual connections may have become, our material context is still present and, crucially, still significant. Carol Wilder has speculated that our resistance to digital technology is because the experience of what we perceive to be more 'real' is more valuable to us than the experience of the high-tech. [12] Sherry Turkle goes even further in her 2011 publication, *Alone Together*, surmising that technology's increasing domination of our lives threatens to make us less human: "Under the illusion of allowing us to communicate better, it is actually isolating us from real human interactions in a cyber-reality that is a poor imitation of the real world." [13]

Creating a photographic work that embraces the potential of digital interactivity, while also keeping a firm anchor in the realm of the material, is a timely project. As such, the project – both digital and analog aspects of it – sits firmly within the paradigm of what Craig Mod has termed 'post-artifact': "ethereal and networked, emerging publicly in fits and starts. An 'artifact' complete for only the briefest of moments. Shifting deliberately. Layered with our shared marginalia. And demanding engagement with the promise of community implicit in its form." [14]

Ferdinando Scianna, one of Sicily's most preeminent photographers, began his career by documenting the changing culture of his own hometown. In the 2002 retrospective publication of this work, *Quelli Di Bagheria*, he stated: "I believe that the ultimate ambition for a photograph is that it end up in a family album." [15] In many ways, *Nostalgia Ti Frega* can be thought of as a new kind of family album, one specific to a post-digital, post-artifact age.

References and Notes:

1. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1983).
2. *Ibid.*
3. For example, see Patricia Levy's work in the area of hybrid identities in *Hybrid Identities: Theoretical and Empirical Examinations*, eds. Smith and Levy (Boston: Brill, 2008).
4. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).
5. *Ibid.*
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7. Gerry Badger, *The Genius of Photography* (London: Quadrille Publishing, 2001).
8. Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008).
9. Greg Noble, 'Self, Contained,' (presentation, University of Western Sydney, February 16, 2006).
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12. Dead Media Archive Web Site, "Analog/Digital Transition," November 2010, http://cultureandcommunication.org/deadmedia/index.php/Analog/Digital_Transition (accessed January 10 2011).
13. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why we Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).
14. Craig Mod, "Post-Artifact Books & Publishing: Digital's effect on how we produce, distribute and consume content," *craigmod.com*, June, 2011, http://craigmod.com/journal/post_artifact/ (accessed June 20 2011).