Lost Moments: Nostalgia, Physical Media, and the Past

I

Staring at my heavy collection of vinyl records gathered over the past two years, with the record player sitting right beside it, I tried hard to remember the last time I actually popped one in and listened to it in its entirety. Running my finger across the dusty platter where a record should sit, I felt shame in realizing that I had actually never once listened to an entire LP from start to finish. Yet, I do remember the excitement with which I purchased the turntable and the ambition I had to grow my record collection over the years – and that still exists – but a melancholy now sits where the ironic novelty of this outdated piece of technology once originated. I almost exclusively listen to music on Spotify, and find comfort in the ease and immediacy that the digital platform provides me. Still, I feel pride in possessing this lost form of artistic engagement but I cannot help feeling like a poser. I have never had a relationship with this object before this, and there are no memories or experiences from my childhood that I can associate with the record player as an apparatus. *What makes me fond of a piece of technology that existed so long before I was alive, and how does that proclivity manifest itself?* Upon pondering over it some more, I later came across an Instagram advertisement for a company that converts digital music libraries into cassette tapes that are actually playable. I was particularly struck by this, and upon noticing the amount of positive and excited comments on their videos I laughed to myself. *What a gimmick,* I thought. Now, I do recognize the irony in the differing ways in which I gauged both of these happenings – one in a very poignant and personal manner, and the other as excessively judgemental – but the genesis of the questions I asked remained the same. *Why?*

In recent years, there has been an accelerated communal yearning for technology, specifically in terms of media, that existed as a physical entity in our lives, or the lives of those older than us. Whether it be the DVD, the hardcover book, the cassette tape, or the personal stereo – younger generations have now started to find value in physical objects that contain what our modern, non-tangible forms of media can now do hundred times faster. Born out of the tendency for innovation, the decline of comparatively ineffectual physical media and haptic consumption has led to an oversaturation of information and forms of engagement. Digital film, television streaming, eBooks, and on-demand music catalogs have eliminated the need for actual physical ownership over a piece of media. Still though, there has been a significant uptick of possession and recreation of physical media within the cultural consciousness that seems to arise from a collective cultural desire for the 'retro' aesthetic. While externally this may seem like a recreation in vogue, there lies a profound cause-and-effect mechanism between the progression of technology and the simultaneous regression to what seems like a simpler, more meaningful time with regard to media and our engagement with it. This essay will provide a critical illumination of the collective redressal and renegotiation of prominent forms of artistic engagement. I wish to explore the paradoxical phenomena that led to, and to some extent reversed, the decline of physical media, and their confluence with the bittersweet idealization of the past.

II

This discordant, two-fold phenomena can be traced back to touch and movement – the kinaesthetic, sensory, and motor processes that take place when actively participating in one's own experience. Many contemporary forms of communication and engagement with art have been inextricably linked to our audio-visual senses, but have detracted from the value that haptic

feedback has on the experience. While touch screens on smartphones or the keyboard on our laptops can be regarded as tactile feedback, there exists a void between the input and the output, and the satisfaction quotient produced when we perform these actions does not seem to measure up to earlier apparatuses. The operations that we initiate and set off onto the physical object, as a result of our desire to be mentally engaged, condition our enjoyment of the output. The satisfaction quotient produced when working with older tools, in comparison, is strong and tangible – the palpability and automaticity of the actions work in tandem with the end result. Upon talking to my father, Ricky Chopra, avid connoisseur of radio cassettes, old newspapers, and vinyl records, I learned what inclines him to maintain the tradition of physical media in his own life.

> "*I enjoy engaging myself in the process of it. [That] makes me feel like I have more agency over what I am consuming, and how I register it. The process of holding a vinyl record, and the action of placing it on the player and aligning the needle with [the] grooves, is what I find joy in. Apple Music feels too quick; the beauty of the activity is lost*".

In a blog post for the *Institute for Sensorimotor Art Therapy*, Dr. Cornelia Elbrecht writes about the relationship between touch stimuli and psychomotor responses, and how our previous experiences with the actions that we take impact our emotional association with them. Elucidating her investigations of clients that used clay-work as a therapeutic exercise for coping with childhood trauma, she quotes a client who says, "I cannot distance myself from it the moment I engage". This engagement the client is referring to denote their tactile sensation of the clay and the "kinaesthetic motor action" of tampering with the clay, "combined with sensory perception" as affecting them emotionally – in a way that makes it a crucial part of the

experience (Elbrecht para. 10). Elbrecht points out that this touch-triggered sensory experience is inherently connected to memory, granting that it is the *feel* of the clay that prompts the clients to revisit and renegotiate their conceptions of past experiences. Analogously, Ricky's revisitation to the record player activates synapses similar to the ones Elbrecht attributes to the recalling of emotional and sensory experiences. His memories that are associated with the activities that precede the final output of music from the record player come back to him, and in turn, so does the *time* that he holds so fondly. What is lacking in newer forms of media is this emotional, reminiscent component that is a key part of the human experience.

III

Surely, this type of study on the impact of tactile perception and its incontrovertible impact on the human experience necessitates our inclusion of time and memory into our inquiry. It seems as though the multiplicity of Ricky's interest in this 'retro' technology stems also from his personal memory of these apparatuses. "*It's all a part of my story, I feel. I grew up on these devices and a huge part of me resists their replacement*". Ricky's aural and aesthetic memory of days past push him to continually revisit these moments. He pointed out that he is not averse to change and novel technology, but he does not want to see what brought him so much joy in his younger days to die out. This type of collective memory of an older generation, so heavily interconnected and self-informing, has started to carry over into the younger ones. Generational change has always been at the forefront of cultural conversation, and now more so than before are we seeing a collective push for a move back to 'simpler times'. Online propagation of terms like 'cottagecore', 'tradwives' and the abundant conversation surrounding nostalgia exemplify sentiments of escapism. These sentiments are linked to collective cultural memory, and the ascribed value, of certain entities that continue to remain relevant in many people's minds. It is

human nature to ponder about the way life was lived before we came into existence – anthropological history has always been one of the most studied and hotly debated subjects. The tangible remains of history and the 'antiquated' human experience are omni-present; they surround us even in the face of their decaying visibility and importance, and since the past and the present rub shoulders so closely, one's curiosity inevitability turns to these old materials in order to forge a connection with histories that we perhaps were not physically a part of but emotionally feel a calling towards. Not only does physical media allow us to peek into the imaginative processes that ultimately led to the new forms of media, but they also become intimations through which we appreciate the expanse and potency of human creativity and evolution. Moreover, physical media and its influence will always linger in order for us to look back at generational zeitgeist and connect to it in whichever way we see fit.

In his book, *Hauntology: Ghosts of Future Past*, Merlin Coverley examines, among others', Svetlana Boym's delineation of the evolution of nostalgia as it relates to societal consciousness. His reading of Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* argues the following:

> …the nostalgia one feels is redirected towards 'unrealized dreams of the past and visions of the future that became obsolete'. The history of nostalgia might allow us to look back at modern history as a search not only for newness and technological progress, but also for unrealized possibilities, unpredictable turns and crossroads (Boym qtd. in Coverley 14).

Increasingly, we have been seeing how technology puts us in uneasy scenarios – new forms of communication and ever-increasing technological innovation has led to many novel complications in society. The impending technological threat that artificial intelligence seems to

be posing, or how social media has changed the way we interact with each other, seem to have many consequences that go way beyond just the realm of the forms themselves. Life in the contemporary era can be characterized as a site of the loss of control – over both our individuality and societal machinations. Our hyper awareness, via new forms of media, of the issues facing humanity can lead to feelings of alienation and detachment from one's own life. The immediacy with which information is disseminated and consumed in the 21st Century often contradicts what it sets out to achieve – it has a tendency to obfuscate reality. The past, though, is familiar terrain for humans, and we have a tendency to revert to familiarity. The core of Boym's argument lies in the sacrosanct fact that humans turn to the past because we are inevitably faced with the grim realities of the world as it exists in the current state. Whether or not we were around for the time when the VHS tape was the only form of home video, the human experience remains to be continually informed by the elements that influenced how it came to be. Consequently, one may find refuge in these older tools. As Coverley spells out in *Hauntology*, the '"technological uncanny" has become ever-present in modern society – a term that defines the process of "contrast[ing] the imperfections of earlier recording techniques with the timeless anonymity of the digital" (Coverlet 6). I was never around during the time of analog photography, but I revere the miraculous process that makes the capturing of reality possible. Therefore, now knowing how digital photography has replaced the form, I have an increased interest in learning and observing the processes that got it to this point. The past is no longer a period that disappears – it is preserved and reborn, in perpetuity. Similar to Ricky's reasoning, a huge part of us resists the replacement of these signifiers of the past that society lent such gravity to. People are reluctant to render invisible these forms in favor of novelty – rather, we wish to

complement and compare the shifts in artistic language between times; a continuous balance between tradition and innovation.

IV

However, it is intriguing to examine notions of loss and degradation when it comes to art stored on physical instruments. *Decasia* (2002) is a documentary by Bill Morrison that stands as a collection of archival footage, backed by an original orchestral score by composer Michael Gordon. For about seventy minutes, Morrison showcases an evocative collage of videos recorded on old film stock. Much of this footage had yet to see the light of day, so to speak, due to one *key* reason – all of it is damaged. Out of old, worn down, and decaying film stock, Morrison forges a haunting yet hopeful *re*assembly of the past that depicts the inevitable and unforgiving effect that time has on all human-made entities. From the decaying, blackening, shrinking videos of days that seem to have been lost in time – a memory that exists purely in textbooks in museums – arise questions of mortality and permanence. *Decasia* reconfigures low-quality, corrupt imagery into images that have come back to haunt us. Coverley denotes "hauntology", as defined by Jacques Derrida, as "the ways in which the past returns to haunt the present" (Derrida qtd. in Coverley 3). He writes that it is through the empty space between then-and-now that the past comes to "haunt" the present, whether it be events, ideas, or entities – in ways that manifest within modern forms of observance (Coverley 5). In the case of *Decasia*, we see how the people, places, and practices of days past re-emerge as splintered entities on modern projection screens – or in some cases, even a laptop. Morrison draws our attention to the fallibility of the belief that physical media is permanent, and highlights the entropy that these 'concrete' forms of media can undergo, and in turn undermines the entire idea of the past remaining in the past. By *horror-ifying* the past, *Decasia* comments on the nature of permanence in an ever-evolving

world, reminding us of how much has been lost due to the failing collective memory of humankind. This film severs the relationship between the reproducibility and preservation of physical media, and their contributions to their development of media technology. In this way, we can confront the false sense of permanence that we, as a society, have developed over our cherished encapsulations of a time passed by, and of time yet to come. The abject imagery in *Decasia* prompts us to confront how newer forms may also face the same type of 'decay'. Digital media, in all of its *cloud based-ness*, is also subject to this very decay since it is also man-made – victim to novel forms of loss that all forms of media indiscriminately face.

Morrison reminds us that nothing is safe from obsolescence. Nevertheless, physical media remains the best way we can restore and preserve moments in time. A deleted YouTube video is lost in the oblivion of the internet and only present on the hard drive of its creator; a broken code base can destroy an application in seconds, yet the correct code remains present on the developer's thumbdrive; and a security loophole can render all of our cherished photos in the hands of a devious hacker, but a photo album can stay in our kitchen drawer for decades. The loss of digitally stored media often entails absolute dissolution – truly a *no trace left behind* scenario – but it is evident that the loss or degradation of physical media still retains some form of meaning and significance. As seen in *Decasia*, the revival of deteriorating film stock conveys a reappraised meaning; and analogously, a torn up polaroid photo of a day out to the park still exists. It can either be taped back together or be left as is; a reminder of a time once lived through. Physical, analog media tools will always exist in whatever new form is forged out of the natural decay. Just as the passage of time affects our perception of time and mortality, it affects our memory and the value we ascribe to our life experience. Physical media, therefore, can be seen as analogous to human life. Our memory and existence is inherently tied to our physical

presence in the world – no matter how fragmented, distorted, or faded the signifiers of a moment may become, there will always be proof of it; actual, tangible evidence of a time once lived through.

V

Sensation, memory, and constancy all inform our experience of life as human beings. In an era so heavily characterized by rapid-fire consumption, be it watching Tiktok, YouTube videos, and Instagram stories, or uncovering entire catalogs of music with a touch of a button, physical media reminds us of the once lost importance of *moments* in daily life. Minimal, analogue forms of media invite the participant to take part in the entirety of the experience. Art and all of its forms derive its meaning from the way it is interpreted, and the way it is interpreted lies in all of the aspects of engagement. Society, cultural memory, and mortality are all interconnected and redirect our energy towards singular *moments* that we are subject to, as cognitive beings. Art and media congregate these forms in continuously unique and novel ways, and the newfound push for the return of physical media within the cultural consciousness exemplifies the importance of these factors in the perception of our existence, and the world around us. Therefore, *I am infinitely fond of a piece of technology that existed so long before I was alive*.

Works Cited

Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, 2008.

Chopra, Ricky. *Personal Interview*. Interview by Krish Chopra, May 2024.

Coverley, Merlin. *Hauntology*. Oldcastle Books, 2020.

Decasia. Directed by Bill Morrison, Icarus Films, 2002.

Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Routledge, 2012.

Elbrecht, Cornelia. "The Psychophysiology of Touch: Haptic Perception — Institute for Sensorimotor Art Therapy & School for Initiatic Art Therapy by Cornelia Elbrecht." *Institute for Sensorimotor Art Therapy & School for Initiatic Art Therapy by Cornelia Elbrecht*, 29 Apr. 2021, https://www.sensorimotorarttherapy.com/blog/the-psychophysiology-of-touch-haptic-perception. Accessed 3 May 2024.