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Mellostalga: looking forward to looking back

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ABSTRACT

Nostalgia has predominantly been situated as a positive orientation to the past – a function of either personal or vicarious rose – tinted memory, triggered by circumstances in the present – a past/present dichotomy. Yet, nostalgia has no counterpart, a concept to explain a longing for the future, anchored in the present and determined by actions taken in the present. This paper details such an emotion by proposing the concept of “Mellostalga.” Drawing on a study of visitors to the site of a British TV drama, the process of experiencing mellostalga through a series of triggers and actions is examined. These include; stimulating mellostalga; mellostalga, the present and the future, and, capturing the mellostalga experience, or “looking forward to looking back.”

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Nostalgia as a concept has been the subject of considerable debate in recent years. Protagonists include cultural theorist such as Boym (2001, 2007) who view nostalgia as a complicated emotion, tied to “reflection and longing, estrangement and affection” (2007, 7). Adopting a different lens, psychologists, tend to look at nostalgia as an individual emotion and a special function of memory (Batcho 2000; Batcho and Shikh 2016; FioRito and Routledge 2020; Kim, Kim, and Petrick 2019; Niemeyer and Siebert 2023; Sedikides and Wildschut 2018). Sociologist on the other hand, regard it as a reaction to the wider societal environment (May 2017; Pickering and Keightley 2006; Jacobsen 2023), while consumer researchers, often combine these perspectives in conjunction with marketplace nostalgic offerings (Ahlberg, Hietanen, and Soila 2021; Blanchette 2014; Brown 2013, 1999; Cantone, Cova and Testa 2020; Devine 2013; Goulding 2001; Higson 2014; Schindler and Holbrook 2003; Sodergren 2022). One thing that is clear however, is that its manifestations are multiple. Moreover, there is general agreement that nostalgia is a species of memory that may be personal or vicarious (Goulding 1999, 2001), individual or shared (Sedikides and Wildschut 2018), positive or negative (Batcho 2000). Nevertheless, whatever the position, nostalgia always has a past element to it that influences emotions in the present (Davis 1979). This raises an interesting question – if nostalgia relies on a past/present relationship, is there a counter emotion that draws on the past and the present to construct an optimistic and actionable vision of the future? This paper proposes such a counterpoint – an antonym to nostalgia, defined as “mellostalga” – a concept that involves perceptions of future time, set against experiences in the present.

In order to illustrate this, data from a qualitative study of consumer behavior at the site of the popular British comedy/drama television production, “Doc Martin,” is explored. Filmed on location in the Cornish village of Port Isaac, UK, it might be considered a modern day nostalgia production. Although firmly set in the present, it draws on tropes, narratives and characters that belong largely to an idealized past. For example, the place is idyllic and unspoiled by modern

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architecture. The plot further revolves around a small-scale, close knit community. It draws on images of the dysfunctional modern city versus the security and traditions of the village, along with a comedic police officer who never has a crime to solve. In short it is representative of a contemporary *gemeinschaft*. Fundamentally, it has numerous ingredients for evoking a nostalgic reaction. Yet, the findings of this research suggest that rather than stimulating nostalgia, the story and the place stimulate more forward-looking aspirations and future life plans. It is this that I call *mellostalgia*.

Crucially, this paper is not about predicting the future – it is about anticipating, planning, and preparing for it. Primarily it is about introducing a concept that broadens our understanding of temporal relationships through the connection of present, and future interdictions. In order to add context, I first explore the concept of nostalgia – what it is and how it manifests through a variety of consumer experiences. I next present a case for the concept of *mellostalgia* – a present/future orientation. This is followed by the research study, including a description of the context, the Doc Martin story, and the location in which it is set, before discussing the methodology. The remainder of the paper focuses on three main themes that emerged as central to the *mellostalgic* experience. These include:

- (1) *Stimulating mellostalgia*: The first theme identified deals with the way that images and narratives trigger *mellostalgia*, acting as a stimulus for “proactive reactions” and the anticipation of future experiences.
- (2) *Mellostalgia: the present and the future*: The second theme identifies *mellostalgia* as a way of actively orienting oneself in time, and especially in relation to an aspirational future.
- (3) *Capturing the mellostalgic experience: looking forward to looking back*: The third theme explores the way that *mellostalgia* works as a process of looking forward to looking back. Here I examine the place of captured images in the making of future memories and experiences, noting how an anxious present is compensated by creating memories that can be enjoyed positively in the future.

What this case study of Doc Martin and Port Isaac suggests, is that engaging with media images and narratives can stimulate a *mellostalgic* experience, providing a positive orientation towards the future and a purpose in the present. *Mellostalgia* may thus act as a mechanism for coping with a dystopian present by envisioning a better future, and even enable actions geared towards realizing this future. But first, in order to position the concept, it is necessary to consider the nature of nostalgia.

Nostalgia

Coined by the seventeenth Century physician Johannes Hofner and derived from the Greek *nostos* – to return home and *algia* – a painful condition, the contemporary use of the term has largely lost its medical and physical dislocation from place, to be superseded by a dislocation in time (Davis 1979; Pickering and Keightley 2013). That said, possibly a longing for place and home still lingers on, partly as a reaction to rapid change, and partly due to a desire for a more stable, imagined past (Higson 2014). Indeed, nostalgia often entails a sense of loss – of what symbolizes place, cultural identity, traditional values, and a sense of continuity (MacLaren and Brown 2001). Today nostalgia is largely considered to be a species of memory, but it is “always infused with imputations of past pleasure or happiness” (Kaplan 1987, 465), whether personally or vicariously experienced (Goulding 1999, 2001), real or mythic (Sodergren 2022). Notably, it can sometimes be triggered by negative experiences in the present, or a negative comparative appraisal of the present with the past (Davis 1979).

In its extreme form nostalgia has been linked to despair and depression, a form of pathology that acts as a screen function that prevents movement into the future (Kaplan 1987). However, there is evidence that nostalgia can also be a positive emotion. It might be the result of memory sharing, and it may also provide a sense of continuity between past and present selves (Sedikides and Wildschut

2018). Nonetheless, nostalgia is not experienced in the same way, with the same frequency, or evoked through the same stimulus universally. Reactions depend upon other variables such as age and sex (Holbrook and Schindler 1994), the role of family, friends, and sense of belonging (Goulding 1999), or alternatively, social and individual loss (Goulding 1999, 2001). It is also generally accepted that nostalgia is not a stable concept and how we understand it has changed over time. Today, it is heavily mediated, managed, experienced, and prone to constant recycling through stories, sound, images, styles and characters (Higson 2014; Brown and Sherry 2003). It has also become something of an industry, evoked through experiences as diverse as heritage and museums, dance, and even websites (Devine 2013; Goulding 1999, 2001; Blanchette 2014; Cervellon and Brown 2018; Higson 2014). These diverse contexts have served to expand our understanding of nostalgia and the past as a contemporary consumption phenomenon. Yet, the relationship between the present, the future, and a forward-looking orientation, are areas that have garnered less attention.

Mellostalgia: looking forward to looking back

Nostalgia is linked to time and perceptions of times gone by. But this raises questions regarding our relationship with the present and the future. Predominantly, if we are busy looking back in time, what does this mean for those who would look forward? For those who would use the wide range of available experiences and resources to envision and shape a positive future? There is a need therefore for a concept that serves as an explanatory tool for a present/future orientation. Furthermore, labels are important. They offer a short-cut, a simpler definition, and a distinct meaning. That is not to say that they are set in stone or do not have different manifestations. Like any concept, they are open to critique, development, and further interpretation. As it stands, nostalgia has no antonym, or term that describes a future orientation rooted in the present. Yet many consumer experiences are sought and performed with an eye to reliving them in the future, or even to shape future lives. In order to conceptualize this, the term “mellostalgia” is proposed – mello, from the Greek “mellon,” to anticipate a future event, or *mello* meaning futurity, and “algia,” as most commonly defined as a *longing for*.

In 1966 Ossip Flechteim introduced the term “futurology” in his book “History and Futurology.” In this he presented a rationale for the development of future studies as a branch of sociology similar to that known as historical sociology (Sardar 2010). According to these principles, futurology begins with a science of the present and is an exercise in sociology that aims to make explicit the social structures that create the future (Bell 1976, 1997; Koselleck [1979] 1985). However, whilst we cannot deny the role of social, political, and economic factors in determining the future, there is also scope for human agency in determining more localized and personal futures (Dator 1996).

In recent years attempts to predict, forecast or anticipate the future have entered academic discourse under a number of guises. These include futurology, forecasting, foresight, scenario planning and prospectives (Godet 2010; Sardar 2010). These in themselves do not provide knowledge of the future, but they do suggest certain possibilities (Sardar 2010). “The future cannot be ‘predicted’ but alternative futures can be ‘forecast’ and preferred futures can be ‘envisioned’ and ‘invented’” (Dator 1996, 7). The future can also be anticipated, and to some degree, this may influence the way we think about, feel, and address our contemporary problems (Adams, Murphy, and Clarke 2009). The accepted view, moreover, is that future studies should not simply be seen as a single, linear approach to looking ahead, but should also involve current contexts that look beyond the horizon as well as at what lies beneath and before the horizon (Koselleck [1979] 1985; Slaughter 1995; Sardar 2010). Indeed, the image of the horizon signifies a broadening of experience, whether gained through travel, education, or other fulfilling behaviors (Koselleck [1979] 1985; Pickering 2004).

This has implications for the concept of mellostalgia and how we conceptualize time related emotions. And, significantly, what this can tell us about individuals as creative, active agents in the construction of their own destinies. This is not to imply that the role of the future has been

ignored by consumer researchers. For example, Weinberger, Zavisca, and Silva (2017), examined the relationship between the past, present, and future as experienced and constructed by middle and working class, young adults. Their findings indicated a difference between the two in terms of their ability to exploit cultural capital to determine imagined futures. Looking back to the early 1960s Howland (1962, 198) suggested that the future “may include a longing for something we have not yet really known, but only dreamed about” (cited in Cervellon and Brown 2018, 393), a form of “nostalgia in reverse,” (Canavan and McCamley 2020). Central to this is the question of temporality, and particularly our relationship with the past, the present, and the future.

Temporality: Everyone has a past, and everyone at some point, is likely to feel nostalgic for good times remembered. This may become more prevalent in times of crisis or disruption. For example, Niemeyer and Siebert (2023) note the increased demand for nostalgic media productions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Simultaneously, we can all contemplate what the future will bring, and construct scenarios of what life will be like (Cheung 2023; FioRito and Routledge 2020; Smith and Campbell 2017). This may, at times, involve anxiety about what the future might hold (Batcho 2000; Batcho and Shikh 2016). Intrinsically, and also crucial to both nostalgia and mellostalgia, is time. The natural home of nostalgia lies in the past – in memories recalled in photographs, films, brands, products, themed environments, retro-fashion, re-enactments, revivals, museums, and increasingly, social media (Ahlberg, Hietanen, and Soila 2021; Brown 2013; Hartmanna and Brunk 2019; Niemeyer and Siebert 2023). Conversely, the temporal location of mellostalgia is the future. It dwells in dreams of things to come, in anticipation, in the imagination, and in actions taken to make those dreams come true. However, to a large degree, both are dependent on the present. For example, if the present represents a time of fulfillment, belonging, and contentment, the past may not be such a seductive and fantastical place to retreat to as a means of nostalgic escape.

Similarly, the future is always on the horizon (Koselleck [1979] 1985). It may not be something that dominates thoughts and actions, although this does not mean that we do not plan for the future, look forward to it, possibly feel anxious about it, or even fear it (Batcho and Shikh 2016). But, our feelings about it and our actions are largely conditioned by our place in the present. Certainly, the past may influence perceptions of the present (May 2017), but it is the condition of the present that determines the intensity of the mellostalgic reaction. Like nostalgia, mellostalgia has certain characteristics. Nostalgia is a form of memory, but it is a filtered and selective memory. It is the past recalled through rose tinted glasses, a removal of any negative realities from the remembered past (Davis 1979). If it is not “rose tinted,” it is not nostalgia – it is memory, or possibly even personal taste. Mellostalgia on the other hand, is a future oriented vision of what is to come. But, it is a positive and proactive vision that has to be worked toward. Anticipation in this sense is part of mellostalgia, but it is not the whole. Anticipation can be negative and fill the individual with dread, and anxiety. Conversely, mellostalgia filters out any negative possibilities that may deter action. In short, it differs from other future oriented nostalgic explanations, such as anticipatory nostalgia (Batcho and Shikh 2016), that are more associated with fear of the future.

The Present: There is little question that we are living in a time of unrelenting pessimism – a climate of fear, largely precipitated by the global COVID-19 pandemic that disrupted the way we lived, and to some degree, still live our lives. Strictly imposed lockdowns that saw family and friends isolated from each other, severe restrictions on civil liberties, alternative working practices, and state control of our movements, defined these years. As we started to emerge from this unprecedented social experiment (Arad, Shamai-Leshem, and Bar-Haim 2021), the war in Ukraine erupted, plunging the west into crisis over oil, gas, food security (Behnassi and El Haiba 2022), and potential nuclear war (Bollfrass and Herzog 2022). The combined knock-on effect of these two seismic events has been increased inequality, economic instability, restricted mobility (Albalate, Bel, and Gragera 2022), food poverty, industrial unrest, political disenchantment, and an increase in cases of mental health problems (Weich 2022). This is set against a backdrop of a “neoliberal/enterprise culture with its competitive ‘winner takes all’ orthodoxy of personal autonomy, relentless self-improvement and unremitting meritocratic-oriented targets” (Cronin and Fitchett 2021, 6).

To cite Ahlberg, Hietanen, and Soila (2021) “it seems that doubt and pessimism about the times ahead are increasingly entering the field” (162). We find ourselves “thrust into spectral presences that we can never quite articulate, a haunting within us in an atmosphere of late capitalism where temporal belief in the future has been cancelled.” (157). Add to this extreme concern over climate change, environmental destruction, eco-anxiety (Niemeyer and Siebert 2023, 2), and conflict in the Middle East, and the future appears threatening. In effect there is a brooding inevitability about this destruction in recognition of the hopelessness of the situation (Bradshaw and Zwick 2016).

The Future: On the whole, it would appear that the present is marked and marred by pessimism and lack of futurism. Consequently, the retro-mania so eloquently described by Stephen Brown (1999) and others, may not be enough to compensate for the lack of utopian thinking (Ahlberg, Hietanen, and Soila 2021, 168), and may only exaggerate the shortcomings of the present. But, despite this omnipresence of despair, we should not forget that humankind is resilient. Wars have been fought, lost, and won. Disasters, whether natural or man-made have devastated communities, but lives have been rebuilt. Tragedies do occur, but people can survive. In effect, we have the ability to develop coping mechanisms. For example, even in the darkest days of Covid, when lockdowns were at their most restrictive, people formed new connections, sometimes virtual, other times spontaneous. Neighbors met each other, often for the first time in cities such as London, as they stood on their doorsteps or balconies, clapping for the doctors and nurses who kept the hospitals functioning. People pulled together to deliver food and vital provisions to the vulnerable, and we all looked forward to a future without social distancing, face masks, vaccines, and civil liberty restrictions. This gives credence to the idea that “humans are prone to seeking and maintaining meaningfulness” (Sedikides and Wildschut 2018, 57), often in pursuits that bond them to others (May 2017, 401).

Essentially, the pessimistic position downplays the fact that the future may be envisioned and looked forward to, possibly even more so in times of difficulty. As a predominantly constructive emotion, mellostalgia may be considered a form of mental time projection (Schacter, Addis, and Buckner 2007; Ingvar 1985; Tulving 1985). One way of doing this is through engagement in positive experiences which lead to the formation of future life-plans. What follows is an example of one such mellostalgic experience, stimulated through engagement with a popular media production.

Television drama location: a mellostalgic context

The UK, like many other countries worldwide, has long enjoyed an intimate relationship with television soaps depicting community life, whether rural or urban. For example, “Coronation Street,” a drama centered on the lives of working-class residents of Manchester in the North West of England, first aired on television in 1960 and is still going strong today. Others depict rural communities and the dramas that play out in their daily lives. For example, “Heartbeat,” a nostalgic lighthearted police drama set in the 1960s, in a village in North Yorkshire, UK. “Doc Martin” is a British television production that is based and filmed in Port Isaac, Cornwall, in the South-West of England. The central character is Doctor Martin Ellingham, a grumpy and short-tempered individual, played by the British actor Martin Clunes. In the story he leaves London after developing haemophobia and is forced to stop practicing surgery. Rather reluctantly, he obtains a post as a general practitioner in the Cornish Village of Port Wenn (Port Isaac). Doc Martin’s story is a mixture of drama, comedy, pathos, and community. The drama revolves around his clumsy interactions with the villagers and particularly, his often ill-fated romantic relationship with Louisa, headmistress of the local school.

It is set in a beautiful village, populated by villagers who all know each other, and while they have their disagreements, they still represent a community. It is also a community that is in direct contrast to the city. For example, Doc Martin gets offered a post back in London, which is portrayed as a place of hurry sickness, cold, functional relationships, and work at the expense of quality of life.

Back in Port Wenn, crime is almost unheard of, and the sun always shines. It is a window into another world, but one that is attainable – it is a real place, with real people, and a thriving property market. Apart from the story, the scriptwriters also make the most of the spectacular setting and scenery. The historic harbor (pictured) which sits at the heart of the community, leads to a hive of narrow winding alleys, ancient buildings, and spectacular views out to open sea framed by dramatic cliffs. This blend of scenery and characterization has proved to be a winning formula. To date there have been ten series, running from 2004 to the tenth and final series, which aired in 2022, culminating in a Christmas special (inew.co.uk/culture/tel). It has also proved popular worldwide, with the story sold to over 70 countries, including most of Europe, the US, and Russia, many of which have produced their own versions, along with a more localized grumpy doctor (Boniface 2013).

Port Isaac harbor (a key feature in the drama)



Methodology

Research Site: The context for this research into how “Doc Martin” generates mellostalgic responses was Port Isaac, the setting for the drama. However, the research was less inspired by any avid interest in Doc Martin and more by the experiences encountered whilst on holiday there. It is primarily grounded in overheard conversations had by visitors sitting on benches or milling around the harbor; how people in the shops made reference to the series, or lingered on the balcony in the pub commenting on its feature in the drama, and the frequent conflation of the Doc Martin story with that of the village. It began by talking to shopkeepers, visitors, and restaurateurs about their experiences of the village as related to the Doc Martin story. Gradually, a series of questions started to emerge that formed the basis for this curiosity driven research.

The initial broad aim was to investigate the relationship between visitors’ perception of place and people as constructed by the media and how this influenced their experience. This rather open-ended question generated several lines of enquiry – some unexpected. For example, Doc Martin, although set in the present, might be considered a modern-day nostalgia product with its portrayal of village life and close-knit community. However, whilst some visitors saw it as belonging to a long-lost past, others made use of the experience to look forward, and it is these behaviors that form the basis of the mellostalgic reaction described.

The research consisted of two stages, each involving a ten day stay in Port Isaac: The first involved familiarization with the place, the people who lived there, and interviews and conversations with residents, local business owners and tourists about their experience of living, working in, or visiting Port Isaac. It involved immersion in the place, including taking the Doc Martin tour, eating and drinking in the pubs and restaurants that featured in the drama, and a visit to the Port Isaac exhibition. This was done in order to gain a feel for the dynamics and interactions

occurring in the village. It offered insights into the environment and the social relationships between the various parties. Importantly it also provided first-hand experience of the expectations and behavior of those who came in search of the fictional Port Wenn.

The second stage involved a return to Port Isaac when the Doc Martin crew and cast were on site. Filming for each new episode usually occurs between late March and Late July and details can be found on various sites posted on the internet. Data collection during this stage became more focused on the visitor in order to gain insights into the influence of the drama. It consisted of interviews with visitors and participatory observations. Only those tourists who were motivated by the drama were interviewed. Data collection was inductive and qualitative with a view to building conceptually significant insights that were grounded in the lived experiences and narratives of the participants (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In order to gain a more holistic understanding, subsequent data were collected through a variety of methods including:

Participatory observation: This took place largely at the film sites, before, during and after the shooting process. These observations were captured in researcher memos which provided a data set in the form of theoretically sensitizing incidents (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978).

Interviews and shadowing: In terms of recruiting participants, a number of those who had signed up for the Doc Martin tour were approached and asked if they would participate by discussing their reasons for coming and the nature of their experience. Others were recruited from the various film locations themselves and, given their obvious interest in the drama, agreed to share their experiences. In some cases, and with their agreement, visitors were shadowed throughout the course of the day and evening. This involved taking notes and asking questions as well as letting conversations develop in a naturalistic way. All the data used in this paper were obtained through informed consent and all names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Sample: The final sample consisted of a range of visitors in terms of age, background and country of origin. In total 37 visitors and five business owners (retail and hospitality) were informally and formally interviewed. With regard to the visitors, the youngest was 29, the oldest, 78, although the majority were aged between 40 and mid-fifties. Most worked in professional occupations (or were retired and had done so previously), so could be described as middle class. The sample included visitors from the UK, the USA, Canada and New Zealand.

Data analysis: Data collection and analysis was conducted simultaneously. As memos were recorded, photographs taken and interviews transcribed, a comparison was applied (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in order to identify similarities and differences. This began with description, and eventually progressed through a process of abstraction to the identification of key themes and relationships that offered a theoretical insight into the phenomenon. Eventually, after a period of reflection, three interconnected themes that supported the concept of mellostalgia were identified. These are.

- (1) Stimulating mellostalgia.
 - (2) Mellostalgia: the present and the future.
 - (3) Capturing the mellostalgic experience: looking forward to looking back.
- Each of these is discussed next.

Stimulating mellostalgia

Mellostalgia, like nostalgia, does not occur in a vacuum. It is always an emotion that takes place in the present and is usually triggered by experiences in the present. Experiencing mellostalgia however, differs in two fundamental ways from the received conceptualization of nostalgia. First, the past is gone so it can never be reclaimed, although it can be *remade* (Cantone, Cova, and Testa 2020; Cervellon and Brown 2018). The future, on the other hand, can be optimistically anticipated and planned for. Second, mellostalgia draws on images encountered in the present (in this case the scenes and characters encountered in the drama). It then contrasts them with current life, which stimulates actions aimed at creating specific future experiences. In this sense mellostalgia is the

product of present and future interactions, as the following statement from George illustrates. George is a 67 year old American retiree who was visiting with a group of friends from his home town, all of whom were fans of Doc Martin and had taken a collective decision to visit. This was also the group who had agreed to be shadowed. To quote:

Life can get pretty damn boring at times. I gave up work about three years ago so that has left a gap in my life. I thought it would be great to have all this free time to do all the things I never had time for when I was working, but somehow it isn't quite like I imagined. The kids have all grown up and left home. They've got their own lives to lead ... I do a bit of reading and walking, and I go down to the club [an afternoon club for the over 60s]. But then funny thing, one of the women from the club started talking about this show she had caught called Doc Martin and how it was set in England and had this character, a doctor who was rude and arrogant but funny at the same time. I'm not one for television, but she got us interested and we all started watching it and talking about it and sort of got caught up with the whole story and the place ... Anyway, it went on like this until we thought, why don't we go over and visit the place, see it for ourselves ... Once we made up our minds we started to put the wheels in motion, working out how we'd get here, searching the web for places to stay, and then we found out that they were planning to film the next series in the Spring so that gave an even greater impetus to the whole thing. You can go on the website and find out where and when they'd be shooting so we made up our minds we were going to be there, booked the house up the hill, made sure we had all the equipment, and now we're here and right in the middle of it all ... George 67 - USA

Sites such as Port Isaac/Port Wenn act as a mellostalgic trigger – a stimulus for proactive reactions. In this case, it was the drama, which had to be believable, likeable, and stimulate the imagination. For George his past was defined primarily by work which left a gap when he retired. In contrast his present lacked fulfillment until he discovered a common interest with others which unified the group and galvanized them into taking decisive action. In so doing, he gained, along with his companions, a sense of purpose in the present and a goal for the future. This would be the point that mellostalgia would start to be experienced. This can be induced through media texts and images and conceptualized through a framework of esthetic experience production. It can be created by associating the image with the values and tastes of the observer (Johansson and Toraldo 2017). But, it is more than simply musing on possible futures. As relationships, experiences, and feelings come closer to the goal, anticipation and imagination give way to actions (Jenkins and Molesworth 2018).

Working for mellostalgia: Mellostalgia, like nostalgia, relies on the presence of positive imagery, and more importantly, imagery that takes the individual to a place of contrasts and alternative time/place-scapes. In stimulating mellostalgia, the role of both positive action and an optimistic state of mind are important (Seligman 1999). Mellostalgia may sometimes require work, commitment, and a determination to construct a future to look forward to, as Jack, a fellow American from the group explains:

I think by now we know every inch of this place. We make sure we're there for all the shoots and we've captured it all on film ... we're just up the road from the Doc's house and being that close makes you feel like you're really a part of it all ... and in a way we literally are ... we booked that house on the promise that there would be parking, but the only way the film trucks can get up is if they park in our spot, but that's ok, we leave the cars at the top of the village and this way we're right in the thick of things ... To be honest it's been exhausting, this place is pretty hard to get around with all the hills, but it's worth it. When we get back and watch the new series when it's aired, we can remember exactly where we were when each scene was shot ... Jack - 65 USA

Jack highlights the careful planning, hard work and even sacrifice (car parking, walking up hills) that are endured for the sake of the future experience. As Godot (2010) comments, anticipation cannot be transformed into action without the active participation of the actors themselves. Indeed, experiences valued by many often involve challenges that push participants beyond their comfort zone (Weinberger, Zavisca, and Silva 2017). Moreover, it is not just individual action. As this case illustrates, mellostalgia may be socially performed and experienced. It can involve others in a collaborative mission of planning, sharing responsibilities and action. In short, it can “situate, attract and mobilize subjects individually and collectively” (Adams, Murphy, and Clarke 2009,

249). In this sense, visions of the future become less like dreams, and more like plans (Jenkins and Molesworth 2018). These relationships further suggest agency in the construction of the experience which is produced, contextualized and performed through a negotiated, future oriented process of production and consumption (Kim 2010).

Mellostalgia: the present and the future

For many of us, visions of a desirable future life are influenced by images that are mentally accessible through a variety of images, including fictional representations (Pickering 2004). For example, Rachel, is a 53 year old teacher from the UK and a big fan of Doc Martin. But, it was not just the engaging story-line or even the characters themselves that held an alluring appeal. It was what they and the place represent, and the idea that their life could become a reality for her. Her ambition is to eventually escape the city and retire to the country which she sees as a kind of safe haven of community and belonging, as she says:

I'm mad about these kind of programs. They're so idyllic in how they portray life, the slow pace of the country where people have time to chat - relaxed, easy going, and somehow safe. You can't help but compare it to the city. I live in quite a nice area, but I still don't feel comfortable walking home at night. I always have a tight grip on my bag, and you turn on the news and all you get are stories about murder, terrorist threats or attacks, ... Here you get the impression that it's the kind of place where you could leave your door open and not worry about being burgled. And it's exactly like it is on tv. You know, it's a story, but it's a nice fantasy ... I know people say that village life can have its problems, everybody knowing your business, insular, but I think deep down this is the life everyone would love to live ... by the sea, away from the hustle and bustle of the city ... maybe when I retire I'll move to somewhere like this ... It's like going back to how things used to be, I suppose it's like England of the 1950s ... (Rachel)

Rachel's narrative reveals a complicated temporal relationship. The past she describes is highly nostalgic. It is the pastoral myth of village life which she atrophies in the 1950s. Here the village is linked to time which is imbued with distinct qualities which Rachel equates with place – Port Isaac of the *present*. Correspondingly, there is the alienating *present* of the city which contrasts directly with her hoped for, pre-imagined and utopian village *future*. In this sense, mellostalgia is not just a reaction, but a way of actively orienting oneself in time (Adams, Murphy, and Clarke 2009).

Programs like Doc Martin, allow her to imaginatively construct a more secure and social future. Conversely, such fictional images also reinforce the idea of the city as a dystopian space, a place of potential danger. Indeed, the city becomes a metaphor and a cipher for the fears and anxieties that exist in contemporary life. The news with its reporting of crime and threats simply brings to the fore the safety and security thought to exist in village life. It is a view that conjures up images of Simmel's ([1979] 1903) vision of the city; a place of unpredictability, uncertainty and isolation. Significantly however, Rachel's idea of country life is based on what she sees on television and experiences on holiday. It is also an ideal that is deferred as an aspirational future goal which offers an escape from the anxieties of the present. Mellostalgia therefore, can be both a temporal and a spatial emotion.

Rachel has a distinct image in her head of an idealized future, away from the city. But, there are alternative stories of people who had made the transition from city to county only to be disappointed with the experience, and consequently had to pursue a different future. For example, Gary and Elizabeth, a professional couple, were on holiday and had been made aware of Port Isaac through watching Doc Martin. However, they had already "lived the rural dream" and followed the format of city dwellers escaping to the country and making their home in an affluent rural village. The dream however, turned out to be less than idyllic. They found incidents of racism, petty feuds, strict norms of behavior, and hierarchical social structures. Having moved to a small city, their future is now anticipated through plans and dreams of enjoying living in a more active environment.

Their story highlights the ongoing and evolving nature of mellostalgia. In effect, when a goal is achieved or an experience doesn't work out, different visions of the future can be constructed and

worked towards. In this sense, the future is always in sight, and something to look forward to, health, resources, and social connections permitting.

Capturing the mellostalgic experience: looking forward to looking back

In order to be able to look back in the future, there have to be tangible reminders that enable the viewer to reconnect with the past. This takes physical and mental energy. It also requires the technology that will enshrine these memories for future retrieval. Of course, this is not new. Since the advent of the camera, people have captured their memories on film as physical links to a future past.



Louisa, Doc Martin's on/off partner being filmed leaving the Port Wenn (Port Isaac) Fish Market.

The next narrative highlights a different type of motivation, but one that is also firmly anchored in future anticipation of vicariously sharing images captured for retrieval. Shirley, 62, was visiting Port Isaac with her husband Mark, 61, from Canada. They were also motivated by the drama, but for different reasons. To quote Shirley:

My sister is very sick, in fact we've been told that she doesn't have long to live. Sometime after she found out she started watching all these medical programs, not serious documentaries, but dramas about hospitals and surgeons – "St Elsewhere," "House" ... Doc Martin just happened to be one of them although it isn't set in a hospital. She really loves it. I mean it does touch on medical matters but it's so light hearted and there's so many other story lines going on. She fell in love with the setting and the characters. She told us about it and now we're totally hooked. That's why we're here, we just had to come. I would have loved her to be with us but she isn't up to travelling this kind of distance, but we've made sure we've got plenty of film of the village and photographs, all the places we've seen on TV. The surgery, the harbor, Mrs Tishall's pharmacy and we'll be able to show them to her when we get back and kind of re-live the experience with her ...

In this case mellostalgia can be viewed as a form of future compensatory consumption. It is also a means of easing present day problems through an anticipated collective sharing of images secured on site. In this sense, mellostalgia provides a set of tools for mental liberation by replacing the anxious realities of normal life with a future filled with desirable possibilities (Heath and Nixon 2021). The drama seen on TV is a fictional representation that may be played with, recontextualized and reconstructed. It is a frame to gaze on familiar, yet unfamiliar scenes in order to create new memories and new experiential spaces (Kim 2010). In this sense, the present is experienced from the point of view that the future is what matters most (Adams, Murphy, and Clarke 2009).

Discussion

The philosopher Maurice Blondel (1993) saw the future as a field to be constructed using materials from the past and present. Accordingly, the future is not forecast, rather it is prepared by humans

who can think in terms of their own futures and adopt tactics geared towards creating desirable futures (Godet 2010). Mellostalgalia, in essence, is a position that calls attention to the positive aspects of human functioning and experience (Linley et al. 2006), with the future firmly in sight. It acts as a counterpoint to nostalgia which is a present past emotion, although they do share some characteristics. The following table lays out the main differences and similarities between the two concepts.

Factors influencing the condition	Nostalgia	Mellostalgalia
Temporality	Nostalgia is located in the present but involves a preference for the past. The present may be alienating, and the future may be perceived as uncertain. The past is seen through rose tinted glasses. Nostalgia involves selective memory with the negatives filtered out.	The past is gone and is remembered either positively or negatively. Mellostalgalia originates in the present but is largely a positive future orientation. It is optimistic and involves agency, plans, and action to make the desired future happen.
Present Macro – Conditions	Nostalgia may emerge as a reaction to current social, cultural, political, and economic conditions. The impact of these may lead to feelings of insecurity or anxiety and may evoke nostalgia for a more stable past. Those most vulnerable who are highly impacted may experience fear of the future.	Mellostalgalia may emerge as a reaction to current social, cultural, political, and economic conditions. The impact of these may lead to feelings of insecurity or anxiety and may evoke mellostalgalia for a more stable time to come. Those least vulnerable, with the necessary resources, may develop strategies of resilience and set in place plans for the future.
Personal Circumstances	Individuals or groups who feel anxiety or frustration in the present may be more inclined to nostalgia. Factors may include age, health, social roles, and economic, social and cultural capital. The past may also be seen as a time of glamor, pleasure, and sociality. For example, a person, in poor health, with low economic capital, and few social contacts may feel anxiety in the present, fear of the future, and nostalgia for the past.	Individuals or groups may or may not experience anxiety in the present, but they do not look backwards. They may have higher levels of resilience, or support systems, and may have the personal physical, mental, and financial resources, to strategize the future. For example, middle or high earners, with good social networks, family, and friends, in good health, and social capital, are more likely to have higher degrees of resilience in the present and set realistic and achievable goals for the future.
Manifestation	Nostalgia can have many manifestations – personal, social, imagined, compensatory and cultural. Different pasts may be remembered or desired differently depending on such factors as age, social class, sense of belonging, role acquisition or loss.	Mellostalgalia can have many manifestations – personal, social, imagined, compensatory, and cultural. Different futures may be aspired to depending on such factors as age, social class, and the means to make things happen.
The Role of Stimulation	Nostalgia needs to be stimulated and may be sensory, or created (i.e. film, photographs, heritage, music, television, nostalgic products etc.). Products and services that help the individual to recreate the past are preferred.	Mellostalgalia needs to be stimulated. Products and services that provide images of a happy future may serve as the trigger (i.e. television, books, advertisements, services), along with the means to make things happen. Communication should stress the benefits <i>to come</i> .
Emotional Response	Nostalgia can be a positive emotion, but it can be negative if the person or group, become so obsessed with the past, that they feel alienated in the present (i.e. pathological nostalgia) and lack a sense of futurism.	Mellostalgalia is largely a positive emotion, but it could be negative if the person or group become so obsessed with the future, that they forget to live in the present (i.e. obsessive saving for the future to the detriment of current life).

Fundamentally, mellostalgalia relies heavily on the interaction between the present and the future. However, it must be recognized that few people would be in a constant state of nostalgic longing, or obsessive contemplation of the future. Consequently, neither nostalgia nor mellostalgalia are absolute states. They may wax and wane, largely depending on conditions in the present. Also, there may be different dimensions which come into play at particular times in people's lives that lead to a greater or lesser sense of nostalgia or mellostalgalia. In effect what programs such as Doc Martin offer is a chance to experience an alternative mode of being that stands in contrast to the more negative

or mundane experiences of contemporary life. In this sense it is a stimulant, but only one of many possible stimulants.

The important factor with mellostalgia is the ability to mentally and physically connect with place, time and people in an active, positive and forward-looking manner. This calls for vision, action and at times, even hard work. It can be collective (as in George and his group's case). It can be individual (as in Rachels case), or it may be compensatory (as in Shirley and Marks's case), and, at the broader level, it might also be cultural. For example, Goulding et al.'s (2018) longitudinal study of the aftermath of the 2011 tsunami in Japan, documented a case of a village which suffered extreme devastation. Families and friends were tragically lost, homes and livelihoods decimated, and even the infrastructure destroyed. The response was first, to grieve and come to terms with such loss – to consolidate in the present. The second, was to share experiences and also resources. The third, was to collectively allocate responsibilities and set in motion plans to build an even better future. Years later, they have achieved their goals having developed a sustainable and green economy, established networks and business partnerships, and even built up a thriving marine-based tourism industry. In short, they did not dwell on the past, or try to build back what they had lost. On the contrary, they were forward looking, action oriented, positive about the future, and socially and culturally centered.

At the time of writing the future seems very bleak. Or, as Ahlberg, Hietanen, and Soila (2021, 163) note, even those who are relatively economically secure in the West, are experiencing “a future foreclosed by a general ‘mood of dread.’” However, whilst we can choose to succumb to a climate of fear and despair, this is not necessarily a natural state. Fundamentally, mellostalgia may act as a coping mechanism, but it may also open up the possibility of envisioning a better future, and, in the process enable actions geared towards realizing this future. We might also rethink our narratives around such temporal desires that have the potential to shape new visions of the future. For example, concerns over eco-anxiety, artificial intelligence, and cybernetics, may mobilize the creative potential to devise alternative visions of the future and the relationship between humans, nature, and technology (Niemeyer and Siebert 2023). We may also “find new ways of connecting and anchoring ourselves to gain a sense of belonging and appreciation of social or geographical place,” (Smith and Campbell 2017, 623).

Essentially, the experience of mellostalgia suggests agency in the construction of the future experience. Moreover, the essence of the experience is not simply to live in the moment and enjoy it for what it is. On the contrary, there may be a form of deferred gratification that calls for a suspension of pleasure in the present in the pursuit of actively creating a future life to come. Increasingly consumers are being drawn to unusual forms of consumption including leisure pursuits and vacations that are not necessarily perceived as immediately enjoyable. Such activities may be driven by a desire for accomplishment, and tend to be productivity orientated whereby progress towards an end goal generates a positive effect (Keinan and Kivetz 2011). However, this in turn often relies on having the technology to do this. In the case discussed here, this largely depended on the camera which allowed the visitor to capture, store, create, edit, interpret the story, retrieve and relive it in the future.

The camera has always produced images to be enjoyed in the future, but ever increasingly sophisticated equipment allows for greater autonomy over the life story and the level of engagement. It allows the consumer to become screen writer, director, producer and editor of their own mellostalgic narrative. Through technology we record the memories of tomorrow which we then edit into projections of the future (Van Dijck 2008). In this sense, memories captured on film are not simply representations of the past or present. On the contrary, “we witness the birth of memory as a function of the future” (Deleuze 2003) which remains open for new interpretations (Kitzmann 2004). As such, the experience at Port Isaac opens up a mediatized landscape of possibilities that provide a positive orientation towards the future and a purpose in the present – a canvas for the creation of mellostalgia.

Limitations and future research

Like nostalgia, which is multi-layered and diversely experienced (Higson 2014), mellostalgia, is unlikely to be a singular phenomenon. Many factors may influence the mellostalgic reaction, such as age, social class, particular aspirations, and the ability to achieve goals in the desired manner. For example, many of the participants in this study were middle aged, middle class, and had the financial means of achieving their ambitions. Given that the young, as a rule, have much longer futures ahead of them, it would be interesting to explore in greater detail mellostalgic tendencies based on age.

Moreover, television dramas will not be the only stimulus for the emotion. Other examples might include the increasing impulse to preserve and immortalize our lives on social media sites such as X and Face book. Here the individual can record and share the highlights of relationships, rites of passage and social bonding. These shared cyberspaces are similar to the TV series Doc Martin in that neither are totally separate from the physical world they represent, nor are they entirely imaginary.

It would also appear that life is no longer lived just for the moment in the moment. It is lived to be captured, shared, and remembered even after life has ceased. As Van Dijck (2008) observes, we see this in the trend towards multi-media productions that galvanize remembrance after death. Today it is not just artists or actors who manage to secure an eternal place in the virtual universe. This can now be achieved by everyone and can be either personally constructed accounts of life, or professionally produced and edited soft focused productions which increasingly resemble fashionable television formats or conventional film genres, accompanied by music of the deceased choice. These professional, carefully selected recordings turn pictures and home movies into a five minute eulogy to be screened during the funeral service (Van Dijck 2008) – the ultimate in mellostalgia.

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Notes on contributor

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