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# *Nostalgia for Classic Films: A Form of Dissatisfaction and Escapism of Present*

**Keying Ren**

*La Salle Institute, Troy, USA*
*kren@lasalleinstitute.org*

***Abstract.*** The growing popularity of classic films in contemporary culture has made nostalgia an increasingly significant cultural phenomenon in recent years. While current research frequently examines nostalgia through psychological or cultural memory lenses, it is also significantly linked to an individual's discontent with contemporary society. This paper explores whether nostalgia for classic films reflects a sense of dissatisfaction with modern cinema and contemporary social realities, and how it functions as psychological escapism. Nostalgia for classic films is driven not only by their artistic qualities but also by discontent with the commercialization and homogenization of modern cinema, as well as a desire to escape the pressures of one's everyday life. This study concludes that nostalgia operates both as an emotional experience and a cultural response, offering insights for future film production and cultural analysis.

***Keywords:*** Nostalgia, Classic films, Modern cinema, Cultural dissatisfaction, Escapism

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the resurgence of interest in classic films has increased in contemporary culture, reflected in film restorations, streaming platforms, and renewed academic discussion. An increasing number of viewers across different generations are watching older films and falling in love with their artistic integrity and authenticity. This phenomenon is closely linked to people's sense of nostalgia, which is typically defined as a sentimental longing for and attachment to the past. Nostalgia, while linked to personal experiences and emotional connections, also represents a wider cultural phenomena that mirrors the attitudes and anxieties of modern society. Current studies have investigated nostalgia chiefly as a psychological coping strategy or as a manifestation of cultural memory. Researchers contend that engaging with nostalgia might offer emotional solace and strengthen identity by re-establishing connections to significant previous experiences [1]. However, within the context of modern film production and society, there remains a knowledge gap regarding how nostalgia for classic films specifically relates to contemporary dissatisfaction. Modern films are often criticized for over-reliance on commercial formulas and formulaic narratives, with some arguing that this sacrifices originality and emotional depth. This contrast between classic cinema and modern films raises important questions about why audiences turn to the past and what this reveals about their perceptions of the present.

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This paper examines nostalgia for classic films as both a response to dissatisfaction with contemporary society and a form of escapism. By comparing the aesthetic qualities and narrative structures of classic and modern cinema, and by analyzing audience perceptions and feedback, the study seeks to understand the underlying motivations behind nostalgia behavior. The significance of this study lies in reframing nostalgia beyond a mere sentimental perspective. Instead, it defines nostalgia as a meaningful cultural response that reflects broader social anxieties and desires. By doing so, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how audiences engage with cinema across time and how the past continues to shape the interpretation of the present.

## 2. The appeal of classic cinema

### 2.1. Artistic style in classic cinema

Audiences often revere classic films for their intense focus on visual storytelling and meticulously crafted artistic expression. Due to technical limitations, early filmmakers relied primarily on framing, lighting, and camera movement to convey meaning. The Mise-en-scène of an old film was always carefully considered and arranged, though the equipment at the time wasn't the best [2]. The pioneer filmmakers at that time created those techniques for the very first time, which people in modern industry are still applying it. The condition fostered creativity, resulting in films that demonstrate a high degree of intentionality in their visual language. In contrast to numerous films reliant on digital effects, vintage films frequently utilise extended takes and meticulously composed shots. These strategies promote audience engagement with the image, prompting the interpretation of nuanced cues instead of depending on overt exposition. Consequently, audiences may regard old films as more 'genuine' due to the heightened visibility of the artistic effort in each scene. Furthermore, the absence of advanced technology required filmmakers to focus on performance, dialogue, and Mise-en-scène more. This emphasis contributes to a sense of craftsmanship, which remains a key factor in shaping their enduring appeal.

### 2.2. Simplicity and emotional sincerity in old films

Classic films are typically characterized by concise storytelling and clear emotional resonance. The narratives usually follow a linear structure, with well-defined characters and motivations. This straightforward narrative style makes it easier for audiences to be engaged in the story because the emotional tension is presented without excessive complexity. In contrast to numerous films reliant on digital effects, vintage films frequently utilise extended takes and meticulously composed shots. These strategies promote audience engagement with the image, prompting the interpretation of nuanced cues instead of depending on overt exposition. Consequently, audiences may regard classic films as more 'genuine' due to the discernible artistic effort evident in each scene. This restraint can create a more genuine and relatable experience for the audience. Additionally, the simplicity of these films does not necessarily indicate a lack of depth. On the contrary, many films explore complex themes such as identity, morality, and interpersonal relationships in ways that are accessible to audiences. For example, the war theme and romance in *Casablanc*a, the complex discussion about childhood, money, and love in *Citizen Kane*. These kinds of old movies don't have the best visual effects or the most breathtaking scenes. Still, their balance between simplicity and depth contributes to the perception that classic films possess a unique emotional authenticity.

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### 2.3. The perception of a "Golden Age" of filmmaking

The concept of a "Golden Age" of cinema plays a crucial role in shaping the appeal of classic films. This concept suggests that there was a period in film history when artistic quality and innovation reached their peak. However, personal memory of cinema is socially constructed by its context to create certain culturally sanctioned discourses. This perception, shaped by selective memory, continues to be a significant storyline for the majority of general audiences and filmmakers [3]. Audiences tend to associate classic films with originality and artistic purity, frequently contrasting them with the so-called commercialization of contemporary cinema. This comparison reinforces people's belief — earlier films were produced with greater creative freedom and less industrial constraint. However, we must recognize that this perception stems from the fact that, in the past, only successful and influential works survived and endured.

### 2.4. Emotional connection with films from the past

Classic films often evoke a strong emotional resonance, stemming not only from their content but also from their close ties to personal and collective memory. For many viewers, these films carry memories from their early lives—whether they are films watched with family during childhood or movie nights during adolescence.This connection enhances the emotional impact of the viewing experience, making it more meaningful than simply watching a film [4]. And these classic films serve as a personal link steeped in one's memory. In addition, it can also serve as a bridge between generations. They allow audiences to engage with cultural artifacts from the past, fostering a sense of continuity and shared experience. It is precisely this quality that enables classic films to be passed down from generation to generation, as they consistently resonate emotionally with diverse audiences. Ultimately, the appeal of classic films lies not only in their artistic merit but also in their ability to forge deep, personal connections with viewers. This emotional bond plays a central role in the formation of nostalgia.

## 3. Nostalgia as dissatisfaction with the present

### 3.1. Criticism of modern film industry and commercialization

One of the main reasons people look back fondly on classic films is their dissatisfaction with the contemporary film industry. Major studios, driven primarily by profit, dominate most modern cinema, leading to the prevalence of film franchises, sequels, and established IPs. Take, for example, the well-known Marvel and DC franchises. While this could ensure commercial success and there are successful examples nowadays [5], it also limits creative experimentation and originality. Moreover, IP-based series that are repeated almost every year gradually lose the freshness they initially offered. As a result, audiences may feel that modern films are formulaic or lack originality, missing the distinctiveness unique to classic films. Against this backdrop, nostalgia becomes a form of critique, reflecting people's alternative expectations for how films are made.

### 3.2. Audience frustration with repetitive storytelling

Nostalgia for classic cinema often reflects a broader dissatisfaction with modern social and cultural conditions, as films from Hollywood's Golden Age offer an escape from today's technological overload, economic instability, and social fragmentation. For instance, films like Roman Holiday (1953) or Singin' in the Rain (1952) present a world of face-to-face interaction and unhurried

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pacing, offering relief from the constant notifications and digital fatigue of contemporary life. Similarly, films such as It's a Wonderful Life (1946) depict close-knit communities where hard work leads to financial security, standing in sharp contrast to today's gig economy and housing crises, while musicals like The Band Wagon (1953) treat identity as playful rather than politically charged, offering a respite from modern pressures of self-branding and ideological vigilance. Even the shared cultural experience of classic cinema, such as Rick from Casablanca, counters the fragmented, algorithm-driven media consumption of today, allowing viewers to temporarily inhabit a more stable and comprehensible world.

### 3.3. The belief in a more authentic past

Another central element of nostalgia is the belief that the past was more authentic and meaningful. The perception influences how audiences evaluate both classic and modern films, often leading to the idealization of earlier periods. Although this belief may not fully reflect historical reality, it plays a significant role in shaping audience preferences. Nostalgia, therefore, functions as both an emotional response and a cultural judgment.

## 4. Nostalgia as escapism

### 4.1. Psychological comfort provided by nostalgia media

Experiencing nostalgia through classic films offers viewers a sense of stability and predictability, thereby providing significant psychological comfort. In an era of rapidly advancing technology, increasingly complex societies, and ubiquitous media information, contemporary life can often feel overwhelming. Classic films, with their familiar narrative structures and emotionally resonant storytelling, serve as a haven [6]. Unlike modern films, which may emphasize visual spectacle or a fast-paced experience, they provide emotional resolutions that feel coherent and satisfying. This psychological comfort extends beyond the films themselves. Nostalgia often reconnects viewers with personal or collective memories, linking the viewing experience to earlier stages of life or shared cultural moments. This emotional attachment helps reinforce the continuity of personal identity, reminding viewers of values, emotions, or social norms that are perceived as timeless. By offering emotional solace and temporal stability, classic films serve as a coping mechanism for dealing with stress and uncertainty.

### 4.2. Classic films as a way to temporarily escape pressures

In addition to offering comfort, classic films provide a positive form of escapism, allowing audiences to escape the pressure of modern, fast-paced life temporarily. Modern society is characterized by constant connectivity and an overwhelming flood of information. Classic films, with their unhurried pace and meticulously crafted visual worlds, enable audiences to immerse themselves in a completely different time, space, and social context. This immersion is not passive. As viewers immerse themselves in carefully composed scenes, nuanced character interactions, and slowly unfolding narratives of classic films, they are guided into a state of reflection. Viewing serves as a transient sanctuary from the strains of contemporary existence, offering individuals a venue to navigate their emotions and restore equilibrium. Moreover, classic films frequently illustrate clear moral or societal structures that sharply contrast with the vagueness and intricacy of modern society.

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This explicit structure cultivates a sense of order, assisting viewers in feeling more anchored and less disturbed by the tumult of contemporary society.

### 4.3. The romanticization and idealization of past eras

A central element of escapism is the romanticization of the past. Nostalgia for classic films is often accompanied by an idealization of certain eras as simpler, more meaningful, or culturally more cohesive than the present. Films from these periods typically emphasize elegance, emotional sincerity, and clear storytelling, thereby creating a "better" past. This selective perception allows audiences to immerse themselves in a world where conflicts are resolved, values are upheld, and life appears more orderly. However, this idealization is both an advantage and a limitation. It enables audiences to experience the past in a controlled and aesthetically pleasing manner, but it can also distort historical reality. Many classic films omit social inequality, political tensions, or economic hardships, presenting a sanitized version of history instead. Just as we have censorship regulations today, the Hays Code governed Hollywood in the last century. While audiences derive emotional resonance and the comfort of escapism from these films, they are simultaneously exposed to a carefully curated, or even illusory, past.

### 4.4. The concept of the "Golden Age Illusion"

The "Golden Age Illusion" holds that certain periods in film history are perpetually elevated to prominence, characterized by innovation, artistry, and cultural relevance. This concept reinforces feelings of nostalgia by constructing a psychological framework that automatically places older films above contemporary works. However, this illusion is largely a human construct. Historical memory tends to retain only the most influential or acclaimed films, while less successful or formulaic works from the same era gradually fade from the collective consciousness [3]. Although the "Golden Age Illusion" is narrow in scope, it plays a significant role in shaping audience perceptions and cultural discourse. It enables audiences to use nostalgia as an interpretive lens, judging the past and present against an imagined standard. Thus, escapism and idealization intertwine: audiences seek spiritual solace in classic films while maintaining a critical perspective on the significance cinema once represented.

## 5. The balance between appreciation and escapism

### 5.1. Nostalgia can be both appreciation of artistic history and emotional escape

Nostalgia is not merely an escape from reality; it can coexist with a genuine appreciation of cinema. Classic films are highly regarded for their contributions to narrative, visual composition, and thematic exploration. Engaging with these films encourages audiences to reflect on the evolution of cinematic techniques and the historical contexts in which they were created.Nostalgia provides an emotional framework that enables audiences to navigate present existence, utilising the past as a reference point for contemplation and comfort. This dual role illustrates that nostalgia may stimulate critical thought while simultaneously offering emotional solace. By acknowledging these two dimensions, audiences attain a more profound comprehension of film culture, perceiving classic works not merely as objects of emotional connection but also as significant landmarks in history and art.

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### 5.2. The danger of overly romanticizing the past

Although nostalgia carries a hint of escapism, classic films possess intrinsic artistic and cultural significance that transcends emotional comfort. The visual techniques, narrative structures, and performance styles developed in earlier eras continue to influence and shape contemporary filmmaking [7]. For example, directors often reference or adapt cinematic strategies from the past, revealing continuity and influence across generations. Moreover, classic films reflect the cultural and social values of their era, offering a perspective for understanding historical attitudes, aesthetic norms, and social concerns. By engaging with these works, audiences can explore the evolution of cinematic expression while uncovering the cultural memories embedded within them. In this context, nostalgia serves as a gateway to understanding film history, reinforcing cinema's enduring relevance.

## 6. Conclusion

Ultimately, nostalgia for classic films is not merely about the past—it is a mirror reflecting the present. It reveals not only the qualities in older films that audiences appreciate, but also what they feel is missing in today's world: sincerity, craftsmanship, moral clarity, and simply a slower, more thoughtful narrative style [8]. In this sense, looking back has become a quiet yet powerful way to explore the present. However, while nostalgia can offer comfort, it harbors a subtle danger. It can smooth over the rough edges of history, distorting complex eras into a golden age that never truly existed. Consequently, it is essential to examine the past with a discerning and judicious perspective—not to undermine the fondness of recollection, but to maintain its veracity.

While this study is rooted in qualitative insights, it opens the door to richer and more robust exploration. Future research might explore the sentiments of actual audiences or compare waves of nostalgia across different cultural contexts and digital spaces. After all, today's nostalgia is not confined to re-release theaters or film forums—it thrives in YouTube comments, TikTok clips, and streaming playlists, each reshaping the past in its own way.

At the end, our longing for old films reveals more about our present reality than about cinematic history. It speaks to our anxieties, our hidden desires, and the values we seek in this era of cultural uncertainty. In this quest, the past is no longer a place to dwell but a compass—pointing toward the future we still hope for.

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