

Saudade/Duende: Voice and Nostalgia in the Early Recording Era

IASPM International, McGill University, Montréal, Canada, July 2003

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Nostalgia

from the New Latin, derived from Greek *nostos* return home + New Latin -
algia; akin to Greek *neisthai* to return, Old English *genesan* to survive,
Sanskrit *nasate* he approaches

In this paper I want to talk about *nostalgia*, or, more specifically, about a particular set of discourses that have been articulated by (and which - in turn - have articulated) the cultural imagination of loss, want and their voicing in popular song from what I am terming here the long fin de siècle [a period of some 70 years, from circa 1870 to 1939, in which discourses about agency and the self are particularly intensely contested]. I will concentrate my energies in this paper on popular song of the Iberian peninsula, and, in particular, the early recoding history of fado and flamenco since these traditions thematise longing, nostalgia and other culturally mediated negotiations of trauma in quite interesting and intensely contested ways.

To contextualize my analysis, and to give you all a sense of the sound world we are dealing with here, I want to play two short extracts, one fado, one flamenco:

Extract 1: Fernanda Farinha: Belos Tempos (1965)

Extract 2: Tomas Pavón: Seguiriyas (1930)

One way to theorise nostalgia, is to approach its meanings from the contexts in which it is operated. In this, the European long fin de siècle frames approaches to loss and

trauma in very specific and historically circumscribable ways. In particular, nostalgia is posited within the Freudian economy as a state being alien to the world, a being OUT OF PLACE and a yearning for a bygone object. Freud defined the object as that in which and through which the drive attains its aim and it is this psychoanalytic sense of the lost object that provides a useful insight here into some of the ways we might be able to theorize nostalgia in popular music contexts.

Growing out of {and in many ways departing from} a Freudian theorization of loss and trauma, **object-relations theory**, as proposed by the so-called Middle Group of the British Psychoanalysis Society (Ronald Rairbairn, D. W. Winnicott and Michael Balint) has tended to ground theorizations of loss and trauma in three primary propositions

- Theory A: "motivated nostalgia theory"
 - Separation from an object causes us to exaggerate the objects' merit, because we are motivated to have positive memories of things encountered in the past (explains **Absence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder** or AMTHGF).
- Theory B: "physical reinforcement theory"
 - Separation from an object causes us to devalue an object because attraction is predicated upon constant physical reinforcement (explains **Out of Sight Out of Mind** OOSOOM).
- Theory C: "distorted memory theory"

- Separation from a object causes us to exaggerate an objects' qualities (whether good or bad) because memory distorts reality (explains both AMTHGF and OOSOOM).

LACAN'S CRITIQUE

Lacan has shown how OBJECTS RELATION THEORY envisions the possibility of a complete and perfectly satisfying relation between the subject and the object, thereby positing a kind of pre-established harmony between human need and an object that satisfies it, a nostalgia to replace nostalgia, if you will. The crucial element for us here is Lacan's observation in the first Seminar that object relations theory misses the symbolic dimension of desire. Given these problems, we might be able to reformulate a culturally-sensitive theorisation of nostalgia that recognises the discourse of wanting and losing as grounded in specific historical contexts, places, cultures.

For both Fado and flamenco, the long fin de siècle marks a particular shift in their conditions of dissemination and reception. Indeed, for both traditions, this was the period of rapid urbanisation, and the period in which both musics appeared for the first time on the commercial urban stage: Fado's *revistas* (reviews) & *casas do fado* and flamenco's *cafes cantantes* and *peñas flamencas*. This is a period, moreover, in which the impact of commercial recording begins to make itself felt: the earliest recordings are akin to field recordings, but the first commercial recordings (from the mid-1920s after the advent of electronic recording) already reference these earlier recordings as somehow magically charged *mananciales de nobre* (noble sources) *fuentes de sueños duros*, as if to suggest that the slightly later recordings were mere

faded traces of an earlier ‘golden’ practice. The nostalgia industry gets to work extraordinarily quickly in this context.

In the early commercial recordings, moreover, record labels seem to be attempting first of all to ‘naturalise’ the technology of recording which would have been marked as undoubtedly ‘new’, as implicated in industrial processes ‘alien’ to the two traditions: We can see this ‘naturalisation as working in two distinct ways

- naturalisation by referencing the pre-history (i.e. recording *already* belongs to this tradition)
- naturalisation by utilising advances in that technology to elide the technology – commercial electronic recordings appear as early as 1927

Clearly then, later long-fin-de-siècle discourses on flamenco and fado are already touched by the dissemination of certain kinds of objects – *recordings*. Whilst these objects are not readily mappable onto the psychoanalytic object, they do change the symbolic dynamic in some striking ways. The playwright and folklorist Federico Garcia Lorca referred to the gramophone as early as 1920 as a kind of *tecnología mentira de la escritura* [false technology of writing] and Adolfo Salazar, documenter of the famous 1922 *concurso de cante hondo* refers to the technology of recording as *un arañar violento* [violent scratching]. Clearly, for both commentators, recording technologies constitute an unwelcome intervention in flamenco practices. A strikingly similar discourse can be seen in the reception of the famous *fadista* of Lisbon Adelina Fernandes who, having signed to HMV’s Portuguese franchise by the late 1920s, her

albums outselling anything else in their catalogue, was nonetheless ridiculed by *puristas* and connoisseurs as unspeakably commercial.

In both the flamenco and the fado context, furthermore, recorded objects seem to have created an ‘imaginary’ loss, - the great voices of the tradition before recording are now lost forever since they cannot now be recorded: nostalgia, in this context, as a condition of modernity, seems to have been generated by the very technologies that shape that modernity: this is a common trope in recent scholarship on trauma and in this context, it is the displacement enacted by recorded objects on the popular imagination of the locatedness of the tradition in specific places, specific cultural spaces that is crucial to my reading of this nostalgia work: recording technology intervenes in a these musical cultures’ imagination of themselves.

IN both fado and flamenco, there are, of course, extremely rich thematics of loss and trauma... these are accompanied (as it were) by highly stylized figurations of performative mourning: melisma, ritardando, vocal articulations to express ‘breaking’ or break down, simulated weeping, sighs, moans and raucous declamations.

Extract 3: Nina de los peines, ‘Ahorta te vas y me dejas’ (50” into track)

The juxtaposition of these stylisations of mourning and loss point to what Timothy Mitchell has called the *flamenco epistemology* and we can speak also here I think of the *fado epistemology*: both epistemologies have their own terms for the generalised (stylised) sense of loss that they try to articulate: *duende*, *saudade* and, from Galicia, *a morriña*. In all these traditions, nostalgia, nostalxia, nostalgia, works as a way of negotiating the rapid displacement of agrarian working classes to the cities, and as a way of turning that trauma of displacement into a culturally productive trope.

Nostal(x)gia also marks a transformation of the object memento from a 'place' or as trace of a lost way of being to a kind of abstracted object – the voice, embedded in the storage medium of the early electronic recording, becomes a proxy for that other mourning, that displaced subjectivity played out in the atomisation and generalisation of locally generated musical practices. It is the mobility of the recorded object that allows it to take up the place of the displaced object and, furthermore, it is that mobility is what grounds its potency and generates a certain anxiety.

The Spanish progressive philosopher and *noventayochista* [from the so-called generation of '98] Miguel de Unamuno approaches the question of nostalgia in a particularly interesting and, for us, telling way: he speaks in his famous critique of Spanish *casticismo* (state-Catholic conservatism) *En torno al casticismo* of two kinds of *tradición: la tradición eterna* and *la tradición falsa*. The latter is clearly aligned with the debilitating *casticismo* of late nineteenth-century Spain whilst the former, eternal tradition is marked as a kind of what he calls *intrahistoria*. This term much discussed by Hispanists and Spanish historiographers is defined by Unamuno in *En torno* as a history silenced by the surface noise of events, as a history unfolded between the personal and the collective but buried under 'official' history, a history never articulated in the modern media. He says:

Los periódicos nada dicen de la vida silenciosa de los millones de hombres sin historia que a todos horas del día y en todos los países del globo se levantan a una orden del sol y van a sus campos a proseguir la oscura y silenciosa labor cotidiana y eterna, esa labor, esa labor que como la de las madreporas suboceánicas echa las bases sobre que alzan los islotes de la historia.

[The papers never speak of the silent life of the millions of men without history who, at all hours of the day and in all countries of the globe, rise from

their beds at the order of the sun and go to their fields to pursue their dark and silent quotidian and eternal labour, this labour, this labour that, like that of the sub-oceanic coral, builds the base on which the islands of history are raised up.]

What is also striking in this article is the way in which Unamuno references *periódicos, papeles y lo de la tecnología* as *ruido* or noise: the machines of dissemination cover over the *intrahistoria* of the everyday, the collective, the *hondo* or deep. This sense of ‘depth’ as lost in the *olas* of modernity, of a putative ‘authenticity’ somehow silenced in the name of the administered history of a *tradicón falsa* is clearly to be linked in Unamuno to a progressive political agenda, a regeneration of Spain through the recuperation and valorisation of the everyday. Indeed, this characterisation of the everyday as the repository of *lo hondo* is highly suggestive in the fado/flamenco context since both seem to have generated discourses that actively contest the status of the listener from outside and both have consistently policed very carefully all access to the core skills needed to perform from within the tradition.

Indeed, in both flamenco and fado traditions, depth, *lo más hondo, o mais fundo*, is a crucial marker of an authenticating trauma, what Timothy Mitchell has referred to in flamenco as a traumatic ethnogenesis, and which acts as a site for the spectacularisation of those traditions: this is a spectacularisation, moreover, which practitioners of the traditions have long been happy to engage in – the political economy of both fado and flamenco as sites of inter-class encounter has long been marked by a complicity in a knowing stylization of ‘suffering’ as spectacle to paying guests.

If, in both traditions, the trauma of displacement is already thematised in the topoi of going-away, losing, wanting-without-getting, then the displacement enacted by recording technology helps construct a new and thoroughly modern form of abstracted nostalgia that displaces that primary displacement from place, home, self, tradition, by overlaying another level of stylization. Indeed, there has been a tendency in both traditions to 'sex up' the stylization of trauma, to enact ever more hyperbolic performances of the deep styles, to intensify the performative authenticity, as if to spectacularise and thereby, perhaps, recover the primary trauma as commodity. If, as Bryan S. Turner has suggested, "for the nostalgic the world is alien." (Turner 1987:149), then, in the production of nostalgia at the long fin de siècle and since, that alienation does quite specific cultural work, enacting a set of processes which generate 'aura' as a kind of hyperbolic authenticity . As Baudrillard puts it, "...what the bygone object encapsulates is not real time, but the signs or cultural indices of time." (Baudrillard 1990:36) and it is the production of auratic bygone objects that the Iberian traditions can be seen to negotiate in rich and productive ways the recuperation of those signs and indices.

Many thanks to the British Academy for the overseas conference grant that enabled me to attend this conference