At War with Nostalgia, Truth is the First Casualty
HTS 4th Year Mark Cousins
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To start with an autobiographical note; I am a forces child, the son of an Army Air Corps Coronel. Like many young boys, I was fascinated with war. Days spent running around with plastic riffles, smearing my face with green cammo-paint and constructing makeshift bases from cardboard boxes were not uncommon. This curiosity I held was spurred by a romanticised, filtered understanding of what war actually involved. The censors of this reality were, of course, my parents, in an attempt to retain their son’s innocence. In present day war reporting, the general public are treated in a very similar way. Stories told by the media are often dramatized or injected with a nostalgic sentimentality in an attempt to save the public’s innocence and to avert a national sense of guilt. With this said, I have the capacity to be fallacious, for I have not (yet) experienced war directly. As Winston Churchill put it;

“In time of war, when truth is so precious, it must be attended by a bodyguard of lies.”

The term *nostalgia* derives from the Greek words *nostos*, meaning return to one’s home, and *algos*, meaning pain or suffering. The term was coined by the medical student Johannes Hofer in his 1688 dissertation and was used to describe more succinctly a severe form of *maladie du pays* suffered by Swiss mercenaries in the lowlands of France or Italy who pined for their native mountain landscapes. This medical-pathological definition of nostalgia allowed for a presupposed remedy: the return home, or sometimes merely the promise of it. Failing to uncover its exact locus and discovering that the object of longing occasionally migrated to faraway lands beyond the confines of the motherland, eighteenth century doctors soon recommended seeking help from poets and philosophers.

Although the *word* is comparatively modern, the *idea* existed long before. Nostalgia has strong roots in ancient literature and one of the clearest examples of its early manifestation is throughout Homer’s *Odyssey*. The epic poem centers on the hero Odysseus’ arduous journey back to his homeland of Ithaca following the fall of Troy. The protagonist’s return is prolonged for ten years, in which time his wife, Penelope, is pressured by willful suitors to surmise that her husband is a victim of the war. Odysseus cherishes memories of Ithaca and his family throughout the ten-year voyage and although he bemoans being far from his homeland, his memories sustain him.
The definition of nostalgia has continually shifted, since its establishment in the seventeenth century, to become a frustratingly genre-less, indeterminate condition – an incurable social disease that has managed to creep into and influence innumerable facets of our contemporary society, whether it be the arts, humanities, or politics. In the twentieth century nostalgia began to be regarded as conceptually distinct from homesickness.\textsuperscript{4} The Oxford English Dictionary 2010 defines nostalgia as “a sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past,” and homesickness as “experiencing a longing for one’s home during a period of absence from it.” Homesickness is now seen to be fully associated with place, something tangible that can be returned to. Nostalgia, however, is related more closely to time. Returning to the past is a physical impossibility, it is something that can only be achieved through memory – so whilst Odysseus longs for home it is Proust who is In Search of Lost Time and is the true nostalgic. However, when we recognize that a place one considers to be their home is not a constant constraint, but an indefinite condition that can reshaped over time, we can begin to see how nostalgia starts to contaminate, becoming a prerequisite.

The birth of the nostalgic ailment was linked to war. In the twentieth century, with its world wars and catastrophes, outbursts of nostalgia often occurred following such disasters.\textsuperscript{5} In this essay I will be moving closer in time still, to examine how modern age nostalgia manifests itself on the twenty-first century front line. In particular how aspects of home are remade on enemy soil and the implications that this phenomenon leads to.

October the 7th of this year marked the 10th anniversary of the war effort in Afghanistan, optimistically dubbed Operation Enduring Freedom. Unlike the mythical Trojan War described in The Iliad, which had a comprehensible justification (the stealing away of King Menelaus’ wife, Helen), the conflict in Afghanistan has a distinct flavour of postmodern ambiguity, leaving a bad taste in the mouths of civilian’s and military personnel alike. How can it be ‘won’? and Why is it even being fought? are commonplace disputes that echo through the homelands of the numerous international parties involved.
In reference to the war, Baudrillard sates;

“There is no need to search for long: the event that opposes the nonevent of the war is September 11. The analysis must start with this will of cancellation, obliteration, and laudering of the original event, which makes this war ghostly, to some extent unimaginable since it does not have a final purpose, a necessity, or even of a true enemy.”

A decade is a long time to be at war. Odysseus ultimately set foot in Ithaca after an onerous ten-year test of loyalty, leadership and determination. Unfortunately for the troops in Afghanistan, finding a way home is not something that comes glazed in the literary romanticism of Homer’s poetic prose, it is part of the sun bleached, blood soaked reality of first finding a way out, an end. When an endeavor is prolonged or extended there tends to be noticeable linguistic reactions that evolve with time. The Afghanistan conflict began with a reactionary measure, an invasion (The act of invading, especially the entrance of an armed force into a territory to conquer), and this has subsequently turned into an occupation (The act or process of holding or possessing a place). Here we return to this idea of place, the pivotal word that appears in the definition of homesickness that distinguishes it from nostalgia. The word occupation is strongly associated with the concept of settlement, which is defined as “a place, typically one that has hitherto been uninhabited, where people establish a community”. The pertinently ironic feature of this word is that it can simultaneously be defined as “an official agreement intended to resolve a dispute or conflict.”

Over 700 imported settlements, or bases, can be found dotted across huge swathes of Afghanistan’s dust cloaked landscape, ranging from relatively small encampments to mega-bases that resemble small American towns.
The City in the Sand

Located in southern Afghanistan, *Kandahar Airfield (KAF)* is the crucible of the coalition’s war. This utilitarian, city *ex nihilo* was conceived through conflict. With a population of over 30,000 *NATO* troops and contractors, it has become one of the largest military installations in Afghanistan, and is still growing. British, French, Dutch, Canadian and U.S. armed forces are just some of the twenty or so nationalities that make up the living population, situated in one of the most dangerous regions of the country. Its multinational inhabitants did not relocate here through choice, they were deployed. Its built fabric did not emerge gradually from the sand, made of adobe, the first pieces arrived in utopian splendor off the back of U.S. flat bed trucks in the 1950’s.

![Kandahar Airfield, Bird’s Eye View](image)

The base is a modern day reincarnation of the Roman *Castra* (singular: *Castrum*). The vast defensive infrastructures that enveloped these ancient settlements were usually built on high land and on home soil, in anticipation of attack. What makes a base like
Kandahar so unusual is that it is built on the front line; a ‘stones throw’ from the enemy, or in this case, a ‘missile launch’.

There is a long tradition of military personnel recreating aspects of their homeland on foreign soil in varying forms. A notable military anecdote involves the Suez landing of 1956 when a staff officer observed a three ton truck stuck on the harbour ramp during the battle. “Who the hell are you?” he yelled. “I, sir,” replied a dignified voice, “am the Mess Sergeant of Her Majesty’s Life Guards, and I have with me the Officers’ Mess silver and champagne.”

Although one is unlikely to find champagne at this dry base, provisions have been made that allow the inhabitants to act out familiar daily rituals. Most recreational activities occur around a centrally situated quadrangle constructed from imported timber, famously known as the Kandahar Boardwalk. In a recent interview for Time Magazine one soldier remarked that it “Feels like I’m back home in Jersey. right back home on the Jersey Shore.” Beneath an elegant trussed roof are found dozens of glass-fronted stores, complete with flashing neon signage. Outside the Green Beans Café stands a sign that reads “Honor First, Coffee Second.”

In March 2010 General Stanley McChrystal, commander of the U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan ordered the closure of multiple fast-food outlets at the base as a way to focus on the war and provide space for U.S. troop build up. This sparked ISAF Command Sgt, Maj. Michael Hall to state on his blog; “This is a war zone – Not an Amusement Park.”

The employment of nostalgia as a tool to distract audience members in amusement parks from the problems they face in the world outside has been researched within a wide variety of academic disciplines. What is peculiar, however, is that many of these premises are relevant to the situation at Kandahar Airfield, an environment many would consider to be the very antithesis. Referring to KAF as a ‘Theme Park,’ may appear morally questionable due to the sensitive subject matter at hand, but this does not make the definition any less correct. A park can be defined as “a large enclosed area of land devoted to a specified purpose.” The theme, i.e. the ‘original justification for the war’, is something that has long ago disappeared though, originally understood
as “finding Osama bin Laden and breaking up al Qaeda.” 11 Bin Laden is now dead, and al Qaeda broken – but the park continues to expand, with ever increasing levels of attendance.

The most famous park of them all is arguably the Walt Disney World Resort in Florida. In one of Walt Disney’s most well known quotes he defines this artificial environment as a form of respite from reality; “I don’t want the public to see the world they live in while they’re in the park, I want them to feel they’re in another world.” 12 It has been argued that because the audience is “bombarded with experiences that blur the line between fantasy and reality” an “illusion of safety” 13 is manifested. I will argue that there are particular nostalgic devices at play within Kandahar Airfield that have the potential to construct similar “illusions of safety.” However, manipulating perceptions of reality are justifiably anticipated to be far more detrimental when experienced in a warzone as opposed to in a peaceful context dedicated to the pursuit of unadulterated fun. Kandahar Airfield and The Disney World Resort can be understood as exemplars of Baudrillard’s concept of hyper-reality;

“The very definition of the real has become: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction... The real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced: that is the hyperreal. . . which is entirely in simulation.” 14

Both environments are walled, defended by a perimeter that acts as a point of equilibrium between the real and the hyper-real. Public experience within the boundary walls is a product of dictatorial decision-making. Both Walt Disney and the General Commander are autocratic figures, censoring information to form a diluted, restricted reality, which is inhabited by the residents. Uniform acts as a visual indicator of status in both situations. The micro-worlds within the theme park are regimented; the employees each have a specific dress code that must be adhered to, categorizing each person into a more efficient state of being. These acts of control, administered by authoritarian figures are akin to how a parent filters the reality of their child to retain an age of innocence. Though any feeling of innocence felt by an
adult in either of these fabricated worlds can only be a product of ignorance or a suppression of guilt.

In a similar manner to how “the entire Main Street experience is designed to evoke nostalgia for an age of innocence,” 15 the Kandahar Boardwalk becomes stage for social encounter that appears demure (one of Disney World’s various resorts is coincidentally named Boardwalk Resort and is reminiscent of Coney Island). The Kandahar Boardwalk is an idyllic precedent study, a utilitarian reinterpretation of the enduring historical model of the civic square. This inwardly looking, pastiche of a Roman forum, has the aesthetic attributes of a rural American barn. It is a domestically scaled, rudimentary civic space that offers an escape. Its experiential acquaintances with habitual forms of the west promise a freedom from danger. It is an impression of a freedom that is largely false though. The boardwalk appears crafted. Sensitively resolved timber details speak a constructional language far removed from a warzone. The warm touch of sun soaked timber is not a sensation that the servicemen will feel in any other area of the base, as practically all other built forms are constructed from reinforced concrete and steel, designed to withstand enemy fire.
Meaning, that this nostalgic fabrication is in fact one of the most exposed and potentially hazardous locations within the base.

British troops deployed to France and Belgium in WWI experienced difficulty in pronouncing place names in French speaking regions, prompting soldiers to humorously twist these words, to form imaginary locations in their mother tongue; “Wipers” (Ypres), “Dirty Bucket Corner” (northwest of Ypres), “Fitzclarence Farm” (east of Ypres), and “Mucky Farm” (Mouquet Ferme) are some examples. The Germans too named farms, woods and villages after familiar places from their homeland. Feste Staufen, a large bunker on the somme battlefield was likely named after a small town in the state of Württemberg where the division was recruited from. British soldiers subsequently renamed it “Stuff Redoubt” 16. The servicemen based in Afghanistan have a language all of their own, based on an enormous list of military acronyms. A B-Hut is a semi-permanent wooden structure used in place of a tent but is often referred to by the troops as a Hooch. 17

There are also stories of specific areas within Kandahar Airfield being humorously renamed after familiar locations from popular culture such as soap operas. 18 Albert Square (to describe an open courtyard), Ramsay Street (to describe a cul-de-sac) and Coronation Street (to describe a long avenue) are notable examples of identifying one’s self with an unknown context by implementing aspects of home life. This verbal establishment of imaginary contexts is similar to the way in which Disney World defines specific, themed zones, such as Frontier Land, French Quarter and Downtown Disney. Both are examples of fabricating “Memory Places” in an attempt to recall or recover a stabilized identity. Even though these places may have never existed in the real world, such as soap opera locations, they still have fixed identities. These identities can actually appear more stable than those of non-fictional places because they are not exposed to the flexible constraints and impacts of the real – they have the potential to be utopian.

Disney’s underrepresentation of race and gender is an issue with strong parallels with the base. In From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture, Ramona Fernandez states; “the bodies of people of color and women, and therefore the narratives surrounding them, are largely absent in EPCOT,” continuing by
saying that “(Disney World) does not just suppress people of color and women; it has the tendency to suppress anything problematic.” 19 Military service is an area where gender roles have often been considered paramount and the social culture of the base is specifically directed towards satisfying the needs of the heterosexual male. Gender roles are a key issue in The Odyssey, where Penelope is painted as a helpless, target of male lust, awaiting her husband’s return from the war. Whilst the sirens are represented as seductresses, a distraction from the return home, symbolic of the inferior status of women – only capable of asserting control through charm. Coincidentally, when a serviceman hears the piercing din of a siren sounding at the base it signifies that they are under attack.

Masculinity has always been something closely associated with war and the battlefield was, until recently, always a place devoid of female presence. It is an understatement to say that men, militarism, and the military are historically, profoundly, and blatantly interconnected.20 The fourth cardinal virtue of a true woman, as outlined in Barbara Welter’s influential essay The Cult of True Womanhood 1820-1860, is domesticity. Welter stated that a woman’s proper sphere was the home where a wife created a refuge for her husband and children.21 The introduction of domestic pleasures into the base is likely to cause a shift in the culture of masculinity, chauvinism and aggression. Domesticity is a matter not simply unified with the idea of home – it is highly feminine phenomenon. Fabricated scenes of domesticity within the base are thus not only characteristically home-like, they are effeminate, motherly falsifications.
Madeleine’s of the Middle East

‘I couldn't believe I was in Kandahar eating a double-dipped chocolate ice cream at sunset on a Saturday afternoon. I remember thinking, “We're in the heart of the war-zone. The bad guys are 10 miles away. And here we are eating soft-serve ice cream.”’

- U.S. Capt. Braden Coleman, from South Carolina (Interviewed at KAF) 22

In a passage from Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, re-experiencing the taste of a madeleine cake instigates the remembrance of a past experience;

“...No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses... and as soon as I had recognized the taste of the piece of madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-blossom which my aunt used to give me immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like a stage set” 23

This *involuntary memory* is not retrieved through an intelligent, conscious effort, but is serendipitously awakened. Buried deep inside *Kandahar Airfield’s* defensive
perimeter are contained, what I will refer to as, *Proustian Contrivances*; artificially constructed mechanisms with the capacity to induce involuntary memory, which are evidently inauthentic. In this alternate universe, nestled into the war-torn desert landscape soldiers can experience the ‘taste of home’, and pay for the pleasure in dollars, naturally. A few miles from the spiritual home of the Taliban, multiple global fast-food outlets allow Dutch troops the taste of Canada, American troops the taste of France and so on. Due to the international reach of these franchises a *Whopper* from *Burger King* could just as much induce a French soldier to recollect an indistinguishable past episode as it would an American. This city is just ten years old but has grown into a capitalist arena where the pleasures of home are sold and profited from. These fast-food outlets work as *Proustian contrivances* because they are an experiential means of allowing one to consume a product of Western wealth within a regressive context of fascism. It is distinctly out-of-place, a simulation with the potential to stimulate memory of another time; “It was kind of unreal. At least for a few minutes, you could pretend you were somewhere else. It was like going back home.” Explained U.S. Army Sgt. Charles Reed after celebrating his 30th Birthday at T.G.I Friday’s, Kandahar Air Field, 2010.

This bittersweet taste of home can be served up instantly. Just as the fast-food available on most street corners of the Western World is regimentally prepared and administered, quite ironically, with military efficiency, it is no different at *Kandahar Airfield*. Meaning that if one is to believe that a memorable taste has the capacity to evoke recollections of the past without conscious effort then this is a form of *junk-nostalgia* that comes ‘precooked’, ready to be heated up and taken-away. The following passage from *The Odyssey* does well illustrate my next point;

“...on the tenth day we reached the land of the Lotus-eaters, who live on a food that comes from a kind of flower... the Lotus-Eaters, who did them no hurt, but gave them to eat of the lotus, which was so delicious that those who ate of it left off caring about home, and did not even want to go back and say what had happened to them, but were for staying and munching lotus with the Lotus-eaters without thinking further of their return.”

Although it seems wildly inconceivable that a serviceman would not want to return home through finding such pleasurable experiences in a dangerous, alien environment, there are apparent dangers associated with this modern phenomenon of
saturating a context of conflict with luxuries associated with home. This imported nostalgia tends to confuse the actual home with an imaginary one, forming a phantom homeland, for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill, as Svetlana Boym puts it, “unreflective nostalgia can breed monsters.” 26 The environment subsequently becomes indefinite, not quite utilitarian enough to be a war zone, not quite comfortable enough to be a home. When Proust remarks “we are healed of a suffering only by experiencing it to the full,” 27 he is speaking of the perils of ambiguity, the genre less and the unspecific – all of which nostalgia is a victim of. The question of whether the home-like fabrications at the base restrict the servicemen from “experiencing it (war) to the full,” leading them never to be “healed of suffering” does not have a simple answer. Kandahar Airfield is in a state of limbo and due to the faithful insertion of these facilities to such an exaggerated extent it allows undesirable sensory associations to be formed and exported back home. Meaning the comforts of home can become tainted with associations of war, ready the escape as an unexpected involuntary memory.

There is a particularly inconvenient, though inevitable by-product to this consumption; human waste. Affectionately referred to as “The Poo Pond,” 28 this vast, open air, sewage treatment facility is situated squarely in the middle of the base, in close vicinity to the living quarters – a town planning catastrophe. The ancient Roman Castra were typically built on sites with a presence of running water, with the more permanent camps featuring the aqueductus. However, in the dry, hostile landscape that surrounds the base water bodies are few and far between. The swamp-like pond is an infamous artificial feature of the landscape, filling the air with an inconveniently consistent stench. Returning to Proust, the senses of smell (‘l’odeur’) and taste (‘la saveur’) are the most stimulating, for they are unremittingly ‘l’édifice immense du souvenir’; (the vast structure of the memory). The sense that is least involved is the visual one. 29 Below, the narrator recalls an Involuntary memory (olfactory) stimulated by the smell of a public lavatory along the Champs-Élysées;

“The old, damp walls at the entrance, where I stood waiting for Françoise, emitted a chill and fusty smell which, relieving me at once of the anxieties that Swann’s words, as reported by Gilberte, had just awakened in me, pervaded me with a pleasure not at all of the same character as other pleasures, which leave one more unstable than before, incapable of retaining them, of possessing them, but, on the contrary, with a
consistent pleasure on which I could lean for support, delicious, soothing, rich with a truth that was lasting, unexplained and certain.”

The pond has become a mythical mechanism in itself, a creature of the modern day folklore that circulates around the military base. One legend describes how the base came under attack from Taliban and how one of their rockets struck the pond and disappeared, never to be seen again. “Did someone swim in the ‘Kandahar Poo Pond’?” is another one of these urban legends. The tale of a Canadian special ops. soldier who jumped in to win a bet and was subsequently hospitalized for two weeks. The pond is Kandahar Air Field’s very own Charybdis, the whirlpool that sucked six of Odysseus’ men into its gaping maw, hindering their homecoming.
Not even war serves as the last bastion of authenticity, but it may well be the acceptable context of pastiche. Soldiers who are detached from their loved ones, in dangerous, unfamiliar lands, are able to seek consolation through various nostalgic devices. Although these sensations may be artificially constructed or momentary, it doesn’t take away from the fact that they are felt and have the means to influence behaviour. The word nostalgia was conceived as a wartime ailment, and through its definitional metamorphosis, has subsequently ended up as the cure - a contradictory twist of fate. Many of the curative constructs are viewed as symbols of a disseminating, gluttonous and consumerist culture. Although their insertion into a context of war is an additional example of this dissemination, here they are novel – thus can be misperceived as authentic.

We know Bin Laden was evil, and now he is dead. This is something we can easily understand about the conflict in Afghanistan. But just as our comprehension of nostalgia has altered with time, so has our conception of good and evil, right and wrong, winning and losing. If the industrial revolution had occurred before the Swiss mercenaries packed their bags for France, maybe nostalgia might never have existed. Baudrillard believed that the Gulf crisis was simulated to such an extent through television reporting that the reality of the war was obscured, rendering it obsolete. The conflict in Afghanistan has continued ten times longer than the Gulf War. Long enough for a city to emerge with an internalized hyper-reality all of its own. I believe that the war effort in Afghanistan has become worryingly obsolete not only through media saturation, but as a result of its perennial nature. Scenes of warfare have become so familiar to those watching at home, that we have become accustomed to this prepackaged actuality, of which we are presented. We have grown up with this censored reality, and so we can unwittingly be nostalgic about this censored reality – this is a worrying predicament.

“By the way, do you know how General Schwarzkopf, the great Gulf War strategist, celebrated his victory? He had a huge party at Disney World. These festivities in the palace of the imaginary were a worthy conclusion.” \(^{33}\)

I wonder if the strategists in Afghanistan will follow his lead.
Notes

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