

Imagining the Possibilities: The Creative Agency of Nostalgic Reflection

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

The College of Graduate Studies

(Interdisciplinary Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Okanagan)

June 2010

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**Abstract**

My video based visual art installation work considers narrative constructions of the past and their associated visual imagery as a means of generating alternative perspectives that foster constructive assertions of the present and serves in the formation of positive outlooks of the future. I propose that through nostalgic reflection of history, new possible meanings and understanding of the current situations can be imagined.

Using video, sound recordings, archival film, photos, video sculpture and first person anecdotes I demonstrate, in two distinct shows, how alternative interpretations of events can be imagined. These exhibits explore how the rumination of past and present can stimulate self-reflexivity and creative engagement with consciousness thus fostering positive identity formation and social connectedness.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to begin my acknowledgements with the person who started this process for me, my supervisor Stephen Foster. My first thanks goes to him because it was his suggestion that prompted my enrolment in graduate school and whose patience and knowledgeable advice got me to the finish.

I am also very grateful to Dr. Mike Evans for his continued confidence in my work and for providing me with the opportunity to be involved in hugely engaging and important projects. Likewise, I would also like to thank the *Métis Nation of British Columbia* and the University of British Columbia's *Centre for Social, Spatial and Economic Justice* for their support making graduate studies financially possible for me.

I would like to thank my committee members: Denise Kenny for her helpful insights and Renay Egami for her encouragement and support. Additionally, my heartfelt thanks goes out to my friend Michael Berger and the many other UBCO faculty members who have been so accommodating and generous in meeting the needs of students.

I am especially thankful to friends and fellow graduate students, Erin Dolmage and Carin Covin, with whom I have been fortunate to share in the experiences associated with being a grad student.

I'd like to thank my family: my partner Mike and daughter Hanna, both of whom have been incredibly patient, helpful, understanding and encouraging; my parents whose sharing of their time and memories made my thesis work possible and whose support has always been so foundational.

Research for this thesis was funded in part by a Pacific Century Graduate  
Scholarship through the Province of British Columbia's Ministry of Advanced Education.

## Dedication

*To my grandparents, Yvonne and Romeo Labreque; Clara and Joffre Gervais*

## 1. Introduction

Several years ago, I began creating commemorative videos for people using images from their photographic collections. These videos were featured at a variety of events including funeral memorials, birthday celebrations, and weddings. The objective of these videos was to pay tribute to individuals in a way that induced emotion and nostalgic sentiment. While making these videos allowed for the continued development of skills necessary for me as an emerging artist working with the evolving technology of digital media, it also led to my interest in the perceptions of personal histories and the creation of a body of work concerning this theme. I became intrigued by the effect of imagery on people's perceptions of their past and how representations of history through imagery and personal memory form nostalgic constructs of the past that are necessary, indeed perhaps fundamental, to the imagining and production of cultural identity. Nostalgic sentiment can also stimulate creative and critical assessment of present realities resulting in adaptation and ongoing revitalization. More recently, my involvement in the creation of a Métis cultural DVD project prompted an exploration of my own mixed ancestral history in the Peace River region of Alberta/BC. What intrigued me were the overlapping historical narratives of Métis communities and my own French "homesteaders" family within the same geographical region. I began to note how people from these communities framed their histories, how their views of the past overlapped, and began to think about what might be discerned from the intersection of these perspectives of history. Again, my attention was drawn by the nostalgic sentiment inherent to both communities. Exploration of my own family history and that of the Métis community in conjunction with my experience in commemorative video, has framed my

study of nostalgia's role in society and it is this framework that informs my current artistic practice and this paper. In this paper I consider how nostalgic sentiment fosters constructive assertions of the present and serves in the formation of positive outlooks of the future. The creative agency of nostalgic reflection feeds alternative perspectives, positive identity formation and social connectedness, all essential characteristics of functional societies that are open to adaptation and change.

My exploration of these issues is framed in four main sections. The first outlines the type of nostalgia referred to in this work, differentiating it from other usages of the term. I identify several reasons why we are nostalgic and consider the context surrounding it. The second section takes into account the relevance of nostalgia in creative practice and details the value of nostalgia and how it functions to promote cultural identity, cultural transformation and positive self-identity through creativity. In these first two sections I draw largely upon the works of writers, theorists, scientists and media artists including Svetlana Boym, Janelle Wilson, David Lowenthal and Fred Davis all of who have written extensively on the merits of nostalgia in terms of cultural experience and identity formation. I cite the work of film studies professors Vera Dika and Rachel Moore in reference to nostalgia's position in film and contemporary art and I refer to the discussions of the cultural values of creativity and art by Denis Dutton, Jonathan Feinstein, Lev Vygotsky, Clifford Geertz and Kenneth Sawyer. The psychological benefits of nostalgia that pertain to nostalgia's positive affect and outcomes related to its social role are based upon research findings conducted by Constantine Sedikides, Tim Wildschut and Denise Baden. In the third section I focus on the correlation between mediated imagery and nostalgia and how they stimulate

discovery, reflexivity and the restructuring of meaning. Here I reference the work of media studies professor Yvonne Speilmann and the theoretical writings of Homi Bhabha, Ella Shohat, Robert Stam, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes. Lastly, I explicate the development and composition of my own artwork, which consists of two separate but related exhibits that substantiate my claims and complete my thesis. These exhibits are comprised of two video based art installations and a collection of video shorts. The inception of these works stem from the theory that video, with its ability to address complex historical, political and social realities through stories and images, is an ideal tool to consider the creative and resourceful aspects of nostalgic reflection. Combining video with the reflexive qualities of three-dimensional installation adds physical and visual extensions to this theoretical discussion. Through my artwork I intend to demonstrate that these formats are ideal artistic mediums reflecting how nostalgia functions in society. Both of the installations use a variety of audio and visual elements including those related to research into my family's history and that of Métis communities. By combining installation work's inherent self-reflexive qualities and non-linear video narratives, these projects reference the reflective nature of nostalgia by prompting the audience to create connections between the various components of the work.

## 2. Part I: Nostalgia: Appreciating Remnants

“The things of the past are never viewed in their true perspective or receive their just value; but value and perspective change with the individual or the nation that is looking back on its past.”

(Friedrich Nietzsche)

“...an interest in context and detail, a love for architectural fragments, a search for layers of history, a humanization”

(Boym 113)

Nostalgia is most commonly defined as a reminiscing of, or longing for, an idealized past. Nostalgic constructs of the past are not necessarily based on historical records or subjugated by chronological order. Hence, they do not require an account of all events proceeding or following the event or objects to which they refer. They evoke a time irretrievably lost and for that reason are timeless. As American Studies writer Ben Lisle states: “There is a tendency to flatten the past...into a collective and anonymous past” (Lisle). Moreover, there is an inclination to hide the tumultuousness of the past behind an idea of ‘the way things used to be’. While nostalgia has become a prevalent sentiment upon which much of capitalism and nationalism subsist, its range of defining characteristics and impact upon society continues to be a subject of inquiry. Indeed, the prevalence of nostalgia in contemporary societies across the globe demands that greater attention be given to it. Consequently, numerous studies and publications related to the phenomena of nostalgia have arisen. These observations include a divergent array of sentiment, ranging from positive deliberations of nostalgia as a relevant and vital part of the human psyche to the disdainful repudiation of it as

sentimental baggage without merit. These largely dismissive views that stem from early theories, dating back to 1600s when the term was first coined, describe nostalgia as a medical condition attributed to soldiers who were homesick. Such a diagnosis implied a shameful character flaw. This mindset is reflected in the attitudes of those that consider nostalgia to be detrimental sentimentality, a “diminution of belief in progress” (Hodgkin 113) and “... an act of terrorism on the future” (Buchanan as cited by Reynolds 448).

More recent studies have tended to shed a more positive light on nostalgia. Studies by Fred Davis, one of the first and most notable authors on the subject of nostalgia provide a constructive assessment of what he refers to as “a deeply social emotion” (Davis as quoted by Panelas 1425). Support for this assessment is being shared by a growing number of researchers across the disciplines of cultural studies, psychology, sociology and the arts. In her book titled *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Boym addresses the distinction in how nostalgia is perceived by differentiating nostalgia in to two typologies; the restorative and the reflective. This thesis deals with what Boym identifies as “reflective” nostalgia. In order to differentiate between the two typologies a brief explanation of both is necessary.

Restorative nostalgia, simply stated, does not consider itself to be nostalgia but the truth. It is fully engaged with a return to origins and assumes that a conspiracy prevails in the sense that there is an existing menace persistently plotting to prevent this return to origins (Boym 42). This type of nostalgia explains how current nationalistic propensity in many parts of the world, including the West, is generated. As Boym points out, restorative nostalgia “proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps” (41). The desire or necessity for a faultless image of the past results in a type of

obliviousness or selective (and encompassing) memory state. Slavoj Zizek's theory of social complicity in upholding certain ideologies also supports this idea. He suggests that members of society are aware of the historical gaps restorative nostalgia enables but ignore them in order to sustain the authorized history thereby allowing the society to continue to function. Nostalgia of this type is then "essentially history without guilt" (Kammen, as quoted by Engle 75).

Contrary to restorative nostalgia, reflective nostalgia is about exploring the past, questioning it, and coming to terms with history and its detritus (Boym 49). This type of nostalgia regards the past with positive acceptance and welcomes it as the remains of former times however ruinous (49). It is through reflective nostalgia of past events that positive evaluations of the present can occur. Evidence of this is commonly found in film and demonstrated in recent psychological experimentation wherein nostalgic memories are found to elicit the telling of stories from which linkages between past, present and future are made. Through the recounting of nostalgic memories of the past, concerns or confusion about what is being experienced in the present is alleviated.

By defining nostalgia as either restorative or reflective, it becomes much clearer as to how it affects society and why it has been perceived in such varied light. Restorative nostalgia strives to reinstate a fantasized ideal historic state that never was. Conversely, reflective nostalgia involves being conscious of history as a time to be revered but in a nuanced and mindful way. No longer demarcated under the label of pathology, the extent of nostalgia's social implications can thus be realized. It is in this context that I will be addressing how nostalgia functions as a source of creativity that is

necessary in the understanding and managing of present circumstances and how it is a psychological imperative for social cohesiveness through cultural identity formation, tradition and the process of mourning.

### 2.1. Nostalgia: Moved by Melancholy

The circumstances surrounding nostalgia originated as 'homesickness', or a longing for an idealized past. Recent studies such as those conducted by psychologists Tim Wildschut, Constantine Sedikides, Jamie Arndt and Clay Routledge reveal that the reasons for nostalgia can also be attributed to general concerns about the present and apprehension about the future; reverence for the past is a means of coping with dystopic sentiments towards current conditions (Wildschut et al). Nostalgia is then about the facing of fears. It "occurs in the context of present fears, discontents, anxieties, or uncertainties even though those may not be in the forefront of the person's awareness" (Davis 420). According to author and researcher of film history, Rachel Moore, this shift in the last few decades towards an idealization of the past was kindled by several factors including economic stagnation, the failure of the idealistic goals of the 1960's to materialize, and the exhausted state of modernism. Moore cites filmmaker Patrick Keiller:

"The early 1970s are also the period most often associated with the 'shift in the structure of feeling' that separates modernity from post-modernity, when the coherent imagination of alternative better futures has largely disappeared, so that while we might see ourselves living in a version of a previous period's future, we have no such imagined future of our own."

(Moore 65)

The current “imagined future” is neither better nor how we used to imagine the future. The 1950’s and 1960’s modernist view of the future was considered optimistic and “Jetson’s”-like. The ideals of these visions have not come to fruition nor have we fashioned anything to replace them. This is not because the future is beyond our imagination; technological advancement has led to a fantastical prospective of the future but they are postmodern perspectives that lack the confidence of former outlooks.<sup>1</sup>

Technological advancements have amplified the speed in which imagery (in the form of entertainment and advertisement) is directed at us. Technology has also enabled the digital reproduction and re-presentation of images of the past, resulting in more frequent and more ubiquitous viewing of these images. This has a two-fold effect in prompting nostalgic reflection: First, the pervasive nature and accelerated pace of technology contrasts with our perception of the past as being a less hurried time and therefore we are prone to reminisce about it. The nostalgic dream tends to play out as a longing for a different time – a leisurely time when one could indulge in creative endeavours (childhood – creative play). This is supported in the writing of sociology professor Janelle L. Wilson, “We usher in new technologies, trying to be on the cutting edge at the same time that we try to hold on to a more secure and simple past” (81). Secondly, advances in technology provide more opportunity to be exposed to images of the past. For nostalgia to exist and be sustained there must be images or physical

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of this include such fictions as *Bladerunner* (1982), *Children of Men* (2006) and the numerous works by novelist William Gibson.

evidence of the past.<sup>2</sup>

Historian David Lowenthal who writes extensively about cultural heritage and nostalgia states that “new awareness of the past that fuels today’s nostalgia derives from...technology that furnishes past artifacts and images with compelling vitality” (Lowenthal 19). The popularity of such an allegorical past stems from what Walter Benjamin referred to as the ‘ruins’ in our minds, that stand in for our sense of loss. These ruins reveal moments of the past that give meaning to the present (Moore 67). For Benjamin, understanding comes from witnessing the ruins of the past both allegorically and physically. Boym agrees and describes ruins as being dialectical; “they suggest the coexistence of many historical layers, the plurality of possibilities” (Boym 136). Allegorically, “ruins” are triggered by the appearance of old photographs brought to life by technological means in the form of video. The depiction of old photos (ruin) invokes the sense of a past time (and past technology) and the idea that the photograph has captured a moment of that time. Digital technology has enabled both the resurrection of old photographs through digital scanning techniques (wherein the cracks and discolouration of the old prints are exhibited) and the simulation of old photographs through the application of sepia filters in programs such as Photoshop. The sepia tone is associated with the late 1800’s and early 1900’s when the preservation of photographs created this effect and ever since brown tinted pictures have alluded to

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<sup>2</sup> In his essay titled *Instant Nostalgia: An Emotional and Technological Revolution* (2005), Marc Walters describes three contingency factors required for the feeling of nostalgia to develop. The first is dissatisfaction with current conditions. The second factor is the awareness of a linear sense of time in order to distinguish between the present and the past and the third requires that there be visual evidence of former times.

days of yore. The reproduction of images in this way attempts to capture or replicate the mood and distance associated with old photographs. This mood is part of what Walter Benjamin referred as the object's "aura". The ability to reproduce images such as photographs meant, according to Benjamin, that the image's relationship to space and time (aura) would be changed but its availability to a larger audience would allow for potentially new insights and critical thought<sup>3</sup>. Professor Marlene Briggs counters Benjamin's theory that reproduction of the image results in the collapse of its aura. She contends that the aura is determined by the beholder and "derived from a self-reflexive awareness of antithetical conditions: distance and proximity" (Briggs 115). The presence that the image holds is dependent on its relationship to its audience. Reconsidering 'the aura' of images in this way "accentuates the pivotal role of affect, imagination and invention in the ongoing afterlife of visual media" (115).

The availability to easily incorporate (and animate) photographs in formats such as DVD and You Tube adds to their ubiquity and popularity. In addition, technology has fueled interest in genealogical research through a growing number of on-line family history and name search sites. As a result of these factors, today's nostalgia differs from that of the past in how it is perceived and what triggers it.

## 2.2. Nostalgia Rises to the Occasion

Nostalgia generates creative responses that in turn function to enrich and develop culture through innovation and positive acceptance, and thus, cultural identity is

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<sup>3</sup> In his 1936 essay, *The Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin describes mechanically reproduced art such as film and photography as being absent of 'aura'. He defined aura as the qualities of art that are traditionally associated with it such as its originality, its authenticity, and cultural value.

facilitated and social connectedness is enhanced. In her book titled *Nostalgia, Sanctuary of Meaning*, Janelle Wilson contends that, “Nostalgia may facilitate continuity of identity, allowing people, through narrative and sometimes vicarious experience, to place themselves in time and space” (Wilson 61). These narratives are the life stories that we create for ourselves and because “one’s life/identity is a story in constant making and remaking”, identity is influenced by the acknowledgment of these changes (Ritivoi as cited in Wilson 149). Often, when stories of the past are recited, there is a sense of incredulousness about the difference between past and present. Stories of the past prompt reflectivity and assessment about the changes that have been experienced. Acknowledging these changes defines how we perceive who we are in the present. As Wilson states, “The act of reminiscence and the experience of nostalgia may result in our truly seeing” (160). Of course, not all changes that occur over time are positive. Nonetheless, people are brought together through sharing of memories of ‘the good old days’ and through collectively lamenting current conditions. Likewise, it follows that nostalgia also fosters positive self-esteem. Experiments studying the effects of nostalgia as a coping mechanism have led researchers to findings that suggest “nostalgia can increase positive affect, self-esteem, and feelings of relatedness” and that a “nostalgic perspective of the past can meet defensive needs in the present” (Routledge et al, “A Blast From the Past”). Nostalgia relies on the past and its distinctive features of age and detritus to form a connection to the present (Boym 50). The distance between past and present, the separation, provides a perspective that enables the explanation of the past, shedding light on the current situation.

Hence, nostalgia operates as a coping mechanism. In accordance with

psychological study known as terror management theory, nostalgia is used to “manage insecurities related to mortality awareness” (Routledge et al, “A Blast From the Past”). An article titled *A Blast from the Past: The Terror Management Function of Nostalgia* (2008) cites the work of psychologists Sedikides, Wildschut, & Baden who propose that “nostalgic reverie provides a reservoir of meaningful life experiences to draw upon when facing existential threat” (ibid). The fear and shock resulting from the threat of terror could potentially produce complete chaos if not mitigated and controlled by the soothing effects brought about through favorable reflections upon bygone times. This is demonstrated in the solidarity of previously unaffiliated individuals following a dramatic event or within diasporic communities who find new connection in the telling of a lost homeland. Nostalgia for what once was becomes a tool in the healing process and eventually in the renaissance of cultures. Examples of this are also found amongst indigenous communities.

Collective empathy is remarkably uniting and has proven to be a fervent force.<sup>4</sup> This is made possible by virtue of nostalgia’s capacity to dwell on the positive of what is lost. In this sense it is tied to mourning and consequently to community as mourning is said to be a bonding agency of society (Boym 55). The labour of grief is a constituent element of nostalgia. Both Derrida and Butler speak to mourning and loss as necessary labour that must be carried out in order to relate to each other and form social bonds (Engle 62). Moreover, sociality is the backdrop for most nostalgic sentiment. People’s nostalgic moments often pertain to times they shared with others and therefore feelings of love and friendship are commonly associated with nostalgia (Routledge et al, “A Blast

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<sup>4</sup> In the immediate aftermath of 9/11 there was a ‘rally around the flag effect’ by Americans and newspapers in Italy and France claimed ‘We Are All Americans’.

From the Past”).

The stories derived from nostalgia provide the “palpable images of human needs” that are necessary but may otherwise be missing (Su 3). The images associated with nostalgia provide substance in moments of grief when despair obscures feelings of assurance and disables the ability to know what to hold on to. The alternatives provided by nostalgic narratives are less valuable for their potential to provide a blueprint for a better or more utopian world than for their potential to offer hope that alternatives do exist.

Nostalgic reflection stimulates imaginative ways to consider and compare the present with what is treasured from the past by recognizing the disparity between the two. In this way it provides a means of reflecting on how current societal conditions are amiss. The circumstances surrounding the objects of nostalgia become barometers for what is absent in the present. Nostalgic representations are expressions of possibilities and opportunities for alternatives.

### 2.3. Nostalgia as a Creative Agent: Reflection As Source

Nostalgia looks to the past as a muse for what could have been (Boym 351). This conjecture of possibilities lost is a creative endeavour; one cannot consider the potential of ‘what could have been’ without first being able to imagine it, and thinking imaginatively is an intrinsic part of nostalgia. The imagining of these possibilities is summoned and fostered by particular points in time as much as they are mediated by elements of that time but these elements can be manipulated. Using imaginative thinking allows for the restructuring of events that in turn have the potential to provide

new understanding of the past and yield fresh perspectives on historical events.

Nostalgia as a creative force is referenced in the work of professor Jonathan S. Feinstein. In his 2006 publication titled "The Nature of Creative Development" Feinstein draws upon numerous case studies of a variety of well and lesser-known individuals to outline the circumstances and stimuli that lead to creative conditions. Feinstein considers a spectrum of possible influences pertaining to creative development including, most notably, that of reflection. "Individuals generate many responses in the course of recalling, re-imagining, and reflecting upon experiences they have had and elements they have encountered..."(Feinstein 287). While creativity can be the result of immediate reaction to stimuli, Feinstein emphasizes that evidence reveals the majority of creative response to be kindled by reflection. "Individuals generate many responses in the course of recalling, re-imagining, and reflecting upon experiences they have had and elements they have encountered, in particular thinking about them in the context of and together with their interests, making connections" (287). He argues that the reflection upon which creativity develops is separated from the stimuli by way of context and time, both of which correlate to the pretext surrounding nostalgia. Enlisting the work of William Faulkner as an example of how reflection, and specifically nostalgia, prompts creative response in literature, Feinstein cites Faulkner's own words about how he came to write about the era in which he spent his childhood; "nothing served but that I try by main strength to recreate between the covers of a book the world as I was already preparing to lose and regret..." (167). Feinstein observes, "His statement conveys a sense of nostalgia for his childhood and for the civilization of the South as it has had been" (68). Further examples of this type of reflection are found not only in the

creative work of many writers and storytellers but also in numerous other forms of cultural and creative contributions.

#### 2.4. The Effects of Nostalgia Inspired Creativity

“Creativity exists not only where it creates great historical works, but also everywhere human imagination combines, changes, and creates anything new.”

(Lev Vygotsky as quoted by John-Steiner 72)

As one of the objectives of this paper is to discuss the cultural benefits of nostalgia in its capacity to incite creativity, it is necessary to expound upon what creativity means in terms of its cultural significance, how creativity serves to enrich cultural identity and social connectedness and how it facilitates progressive negotiation of the future. In his book titled *The Art Instinct* (2009), Denis Dutton offers a comprehensive look at art as a vital component of human existence, citing aesthetic perspectives as far back as Aristotle to support the position that art gives us insight into the human condition (Dutton 32). As Dutton states: “The arts are systematic, organized ways that human beings have of thinking imaginatively beyond their present circumstance” (ibid). This philosophy forms the basis of how creativity and imagination play a role in matters concerning cultural identity and affirmative perspectives about current and future conditions. Dutton believes that people have naturally evolved to be interested in fictions because they allow for the imagining of different scenarios and therefore the development of strategies needed to cope should these scenarios arise (Dutton 105). Imagination is, in this way at its most basic level, survival enhancing as it correlates to the human

capacity to imagine alternatives. The arts as a means of communicating emotion, identity and subsequently culture, are thus adaptive, as communication of these alternatives are often based on creative action and artistic endeavors.

It is important to note that the arts of which Dutton speaks and creativity as a general concept are indeed different but related by way of development; visual arts or artifacts are one possible outcome of creativity and imagining. In order to address culture as a whole I am extending the concepts surrounding creativity to include both the creation of products and the creation of practices (modes of operation, traditions, etc) (Sawyer 139). The arts in all forms are an embodiment of culture and it is through artistic expression that culture is given voice, questioned, assessed, produced and reproduced. They offer “a space for awakening folks to critical consciousness and new vision” (hooks 39).

Creativity involves the rearrangement of signs and symbols, the defining components of culture. Here I refer to a definition of culture by Clifford Geertz: “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (Sawyer 138). How signs and symbols are imaginatively reconstructed has bearing on what they refer to, how they are interpreted or how they are remembered. Even minute details, such as the way an article of clothing is woven or which colours appear in the weave, can have meaning or be symbolic.

Cultural change, cultural expression, and cultural transmission, that is the rearrangement of signs and symbols, entails creativity. In his work concerning human

innovation, Dr. R. Keith Sawyer addresses the connection between creativity and culture by emphasizing the effect of creative domains, the sets of symbols that enable communication and form the basis of culture. The signs and symbols we choose and the way they are used have ongoing cultural implications in practice. Even simple modifications in one domain can influence the entire practices surrounding that aspect of a culture. Therefore changes in the creative domains influence transformations in cultures. Support for this is found in the theoretical work of psychologist Lev Vygotsky whose studies regarding creativity also refer to cultural transformations as being the result of introductions of variations in traditions. These variations are then “conventionalized” and passed on (Moran and John-Steiner 81). This is illustrated in the variations that occur in the telling of established stories. Over time the variations are passed on and the revised versions become the new traditions. Likewise, the transmission of culture is also predicated on the influence of creativity. As Feinstein explains, an individual’s creative interest inherently transfers cultural elements by way of its development. The cultural elements that an individual is subject to are carried forth through the development of creativity that occurs over time by way of exploration, creative endeavours, insights, and a multitude of other actions (Feinstein 524). Thus creativity affects cultural change and the transformation of culture and is a means of adapting to present circumstances while also establishing grounds for a more confident mindset about the future. Scholars Seana Moran and Vera John-Steiner reference Vygotsky’s findings to point out that creative development is “future oriented”. Namely, perceptions of the past, whether or not they are factual, continue to be re-assessed in the anticipation of the future (Moran and John-Steiner 66). Nostalgic interpretations of

the past can also change to adapt to the concerns of the future. Examples of this can be found in the regularly employed efforts to alter nostalgic versions of the past in the attempt to preserve certain ways of life that are, for various reasons, deemed worth preserving. A farming lifestyle is one example of this. Idealized perceptions of the farming way of life create a positive attitude towards agriculture, thus potentially inciting people to pursue, or at least support, this lifestyle. Conversely, if the future entailed moving away from an agricultural lifestyle, a nostalgic construct of the same point in time might focus on the exhilarating time spent when away from the farm.

Nostalgic sentiment, in regards to a particular point in time, corresponds to the feeling that whatever transpired concluded in a positive outcome or has some positive aspects to it. Thinking in this manner about the past increases the likelihood of creative, positive assessment about the future. This thought process is what Vygotsky maintains is part of the creative development that occurs throughout a person's life and "within a changing social and cultural milieu". (Moran and John-Steiner 66). Vygotsky describes this creative process as divergent thinking; the capacity to mentally restructure an issue in order to think about it in a new way. As such, nostalgia's ability to derive new connections or perspectives between events of varying chronological time frames (thinking divergently) contributes to both its innovative capacity and its value as a coping mechanism. Divergent thinking, I propose, is a factor in Theodor W. Adorno's philosophy of dialectical nature wherein nostalgia perspectives of the past can assist in the understanding of history (Moore 16). According to Adorno, history is appreciated when consciously confronted and is best understood as the construction of interconnected parts that are reciprocally implicative in their significance. That is to say,

comprehensive understanding comes from the acceptance that both the nostalgic past and the present are equally essential to the overall understanding.

### 3. Part II: Construction of the Past

“The particular qualities and intentions of photographs tend to be swallowed up in the generalized pathos of time past”

(Susan Sontag 21)

Looking back in time and glorifying moments of our lives is an innate characteristic of culture. It is therefore not surprising that the photographic image, which symbolizes an essence of past time, has become ubiquitous and a prevailing motif in our culture. The photographic image as representation plays an important role in the formation of nostalgia as it relates to perceptions of history. Our inveterate history has been transformed by the advent of photography and subsequent imaging technologies. The representational meaning and even social value of the photograph or filmic image is considerably different from that of a painting. While the subjects in a photograph may be not unlike the subjects in a painting, the technique is considered to be more evidential in photography than in painting. American philosopher Stanley Cavell, comparing a painted portrait to a photograph, describes this in a quote:

“A representation emphasizes the identity of its subject, hence it may be called a likeness; a photograph emphasizes the existence of its subject, recording it, hence it is that it may be called a transcription.”

(Cavell as quoted in Price 7)

Cavell’s analysis is congruent with Roland Barthes’ belief that the photograph is evidence of a moment that existed in the past and whatever meaning it holds is determined by a multitude of factors related to historical and cultural signifiers (Price 9).

Images are given meaning by the context in which they are placed. The individual structural qualities of the components (their aesthetic value, for example) give way to the overall meaning they constitute within the context. Film studies author Vera Dika also supports this reading of the photograph:

“This would necessitate a shift away from the modernist concerns with perspectival space, point of view, or with the film apparatus itself. The focus would instead be shifted onto the distinctive structuring of meaning in the photographic/film image, one privileging its temporality and textuality.”

(Dika 3)

The blending and weaving together of different media such as photographs, film, video, text and audio create compositions that challenge the audience in unforeseen ways. The combining of this imagery with the additionally emotive elements of narrative voice, text and/or music allows for the increased complexity of the overall effect. Video and media can be used to trigger a nostalgic response with seemingly unrelated images and sensory phenomenon. A classic example of this is the 1971 film by artist Hollis Frampton aptly titled *nostalgia*. This work effectively amalgamates the inherent characteristics of film, photographs and audio in a manner that challenges the viewer's ability to assemble mismatched narration and imagery. Through narration, the film addresses moments of the artist's past in the form of photographs that are shown being irrevocably lost to flames, as they are placed on a stove element one at time. The sense of loss is immediate. The resistance between the present (the burning photograph) and the past (both the photograph and what is remembered by the narrator) results in what

Moore calls an “active nostalgia” (13). Like nostalgia itself, Frampton’s work offers a resistance between past and present. It fosters a level of awareness that is referred to by philosopher Henri Bergson as *élan vital*; virtual realities of consciousness based on human creativity and capacity to experience or understand one’s concurrent connection to the past and the present (Boym 50).

The desire to capture and reproduce “temporal structures of time” in the form of imagery has been instrumental in the advancement of image-based technology, culminating in the digitalization of photography and moving images (Dika 224). Moreover, the digitalization of imagery offers new means of contextualizing representations of the past chronologically or hierarchically. As scholar of media studies Yvonne Speilmann explains; the digital form is “omni-directional” (9). That is, it is non-linear, non-hierarchical and reversible. This allows for the incorporation of an interactive component in the creation of DVD projects. The interactive, non-linear format of DVDs provides participants with a means of directing what they want to view in an order that they choose. By incorporating digitized analog sources such as photographs into this digital format it can “draw together historical and contemporary communities”(Evans et al 91). In so doing, interactive DVDs mimic nostalgic reflection’s function of providing a sense of being connected to something that is substantially greater than what is normally perceived in everyday life.

The digitization of analogue formats also enables the de-regulation of conventions normally associated with these media such as their temporality, linearity and authenticity. This allows for the manipulation of what we, as the viewer, believe to be representative of the truth. Hence, “a shift in the organization of visual and narrative

codes” can result (Spielmann, “Visual Forms of Representation”). Similarly, unconventional usage of past images, text and layers of references can be found in contemporary film and video which disrupt traditional aesthetics. This is done by altering temporal space through the insertion of old imagery and modifying the importance of the central characters by bringing into play multiple points of view. This produces what Vera Dika describes as “possible points of resistance through a system of displacements and disruptions” (224). She further describes it as an “internal friction between past and present, between old images and new narratives, and between representation and the real” (ibid). Shohat and Stam use examples from film, movies and music to feature the assemblage of ‘signifying mistakes’; deliberate impairment of normal protocols, to critique dominant conventions (47). The use of photographs, textual elements and audio within the hypermedia construct can further disrupt standard representations of both time and verity thus “appropriating an existing discourse for their own end” (Shohat, Stam 40).

The unpredicted correlation between the various media elements and the disordered means by which they are presented challenges established histories and evokes new means of addressing the past. A quote from postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha expands on this:

“It creates a sense of the new as an insurmountable act of cultural translation.

Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic

precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’

space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The

'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living."

(As cited by Mirzoeff 209)

Bhabha sees the encompassing and continuously reconfigured past as fluid and intrinsic to an imagined present as opposed to a fixed and inert idealized past that remains unconnected to the present.

Again, this is also true of nostalgia. By addressing the subjectivity of history and the selective memories associated with nostalgia, the past is reconstructed to allow for alternative perspectives of the present and future to be imagined. This results in what cultural studies and film scholars, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam refer to as the carnivalesque characteristics described by Bahktin; "an extraordinary flexible form of artistic visualization, a peculiar sort of heuristic principle making possible the discovery of new and as yet unseen things" (Bahktin as cited by Shohat, Stam 45).

The digitalization of linear analog media (such as photographs and film) enables it to be incorporated with digital mediums like video and various computer-based software. Our familiarity with digital technology is such that the distinction between linear analog formats and digital mediums is blurred, resulting in what Spielmann refers to as hybrid media or hypermedia; "forms that no longer refer to distinct media but to already mediated elements that can be seamlessly combined in simulation" (Speilmann, "Intermedia in Electronic Images"). While the ubiquity of this amalgamation or hybrid state makes it virtually inconspicuous within the everyday of the digital world, how it is applied and consequently perceived is inherently open to manipulation. This gives rise to the distortion of imagery and meaning in ways that parallel nostalgic reflection.

The employment of mindful introspection through nostalgia is often depicted in film and video where the past is “explored, mourned and exorcised to enable characters (and audience members) to come to terms with the present” (Cook 12). This rumination of past and present generates self-reflexivity and what Rachel Moore describes as “a direct engagement with consciousness itself” (1). Again, Framptom’s work serves as fitting example; the film is simplistic in form yet it effectively plays with a non-linear presentation of different media, addressing memory and self-reflexivity by means of engagement with the image and text. In this way nostalgia functions as a reflective device or aesthetic choice in the formation of a narrative. Reflexivity, as noted by Moore, pertains to the responses of the characters and audience but media elements themselves can also be assembled to be reflexive as part of its aesthetic design. When media alludes to its own characteristics it reminds the audience of its construct and deliberately exposes the stratagems involved in the overall effect, thereby eliciting critical thought or yielding certain visual or psychological effects.

Films such as those produced by Michael Snow<sup>5</sup> in which camera movement is an isolated feature and Jean-Luc Goddard whose work employed unique editing techniques as a form of critique are classic examples of work that intentionally dwells on the construct of the filmic apparatus. A more contemporary example of this is seen in the art of filmmaker Mark Lewis. Lewis’ work encourages the exploration of how moving pictures are created and the effects they can produce. Specific aspects of film production such as camera actions and timing are prominently featured, drawing attention to them (Tousley).

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<sup>5</sup> *Wavelength*, 1967

The use of reflexivity and its effects has become a familiar device in film and fiction and the subject of study by theorists Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and numerous social science contemporaries. While an extensive overview of reflexivity's role as it pertains to media studies or social constructs lies outside the purview of this discussion, it is significant in relation to how both nostalgia and hypermedia operate and how the fusion of different visual media can address the concept of nostalgia.

It is important to note that the terms 'reflexive' and 'reflective' are both employed within this discourse. These terms connote similar and related meanings but imply different actions. I will defer to the simple but apt explanation that reflectivity is intentional action and reflexivity is an incidental and autonomic (but intrinsic) result. Art can be reflexive in nature and this reflexivity can result in reflection.

The hybrid image, coined 'intermedia' is the visual image that results from the "collision, exchange and transformation of different media" (Szczepanik). Reflexivity occurs at the point where structural differences of the various media are made visible: during transformation or merger between photograph and video, or computer and film. This results in what film studies professor Petr Szczepanik deems "a process of mutual reflecting and self-reflecting of two or more media forms, correlated within a single image" (Szczepanik). In addition to effectively underscoring the differences between media elements, reflexivity can work to reinforce the impact of each medium while prompting reflection and critical thinking through active interpretation. Nostalgia's capacity to inspire innovative perspectives and a connection between the past and the present also stems from reflection. Within both nostalgia and the reflexivity of intermedia constructs there exists a reliance on opposition between elements. This parallels

Adorno's philosophies pertaining to dialectical understanding; each of the different components provides the context that gives the other elements meaning.

Art that incorporates these varying formats has the capacity to reference the past non-sequentially thereby defying the original chronological order of events. It "transgresses the monologic true-or-false thinking" (Shohat, Stam 45). Additionally, each of the individual media elements has the potential to be combined with others in improvisational ways to suit particular goals, elicit further contemplation, or generate new perspectives. Like nostalgia, hypermedia based art forms are discursive in nature rather than historical. By employing the creative process referred to by Vygotsky as divergent thinking, connections (between past and present and between different media components) are drawn in ways that are reflexive and subsequently reflective in nature. Examples of this (eg. Framptom's work) are realized in the interrelationship of various media elements that give the impression of multiple perspectives and diverse points of view. In this way, hypermedia effectually achieves a form of communication that addresses nostalgia while implicating the audience in the process, further reminding us that both nostalgia and hypermedia entail a creative process that is individual, subjective, and susceptible to manipulation.

#### 4. Part III: One Theme - Multiple Components

In what follows, I will discuss how my own work, which is comprised of video installations and single channel video, specifically relates to nostalgia as a creative mechanism for the understanding and articulation of cultural history and identity. I will preface this section with a quick discussion about installation art and its significance in terms of nostalgic reflection. Following this I will describe the evolution and process of my work and discuss how the different components of videos and installation work that comprise two separate exhibitions address this thesis.

##### 4.1. Installation Art: Nostalgic Proclivities in Three Dimensional Forms

In installation art there exists the potential for different media forms to be brought together in transformable ways that are determined, to varying degrees, by the audience. Linking the components requires a conscious involvement on behalf of the viewer. Regardless of the level of engagement intended by the artist or chosen by the participant, the experiencing of installation art prompts a self-reflexive response because it requires that the viewer negotiate how it is to be experienced. Installation art parallels nostalgia's capacity to spark alternative perspectives; further, installation's reflexive capacity can be harnessed to reference the reflective nature of nostalgia.

In *Explaining Creativity*, Keith Sawyer surmises that "conventions, domains, and fields are required for art to exist as a social system, as a shared cultural activity" and that in breaking with conventions installation art actually reinforces these conventions by bringing attention to them (195). The strengthening of conventions, as proposed by Sawyer, can be viewed as a means of strengthening and enriching social

connectedness in the same way that nostalgia can. Social connectedness is a necessary component of change, as both change and adaptation require the consensus that is derived from the sharing of social traditions. The potential for installation art to both reinforce cultural conventions while also shifting them makes it a versatile medium, and one especially powerful for referencing something as multifaceted as nostalgic perspective.

#### 4.2. Projected Imagery: Nostalgic Simulations

“Like light, projection carries inherent capacities for distortion and illusion as well as rational correspondence (by extension, the psychoanalytic concept implies a confusion between inside and outside, between interior psychic life and external reality).”

(Kotz 102)

Video projection provides unique possibilities in the creation of artwork and consequently it has become a common art form in many galleries and international exhibitions. Bill Viola, John Baldessari, and Martha Rosler are prominent early examples of artists whose art is based on video technology. Tony Oursler is known for his incorporation of projected imagery on unconventional surfaces such as three dimensional soft cloth forms but recent advancements in projection technology have inspired artists like Ross Ashton to create large-scale projected works using large architectural forms such as England’s Durham Cathedral.

The way in which video involves the concept of time and space makes it particularly well suited to the depiction of nostalgia. Nostalgia’s ability to trigger images

in our mind that span the realities of time and space are reflected in new media theorist and curator Liz Kotz's description of projection: "techniques of projection offer ways of joining a space, an image and a subject", it "offers a seductive immateriality: the projected image both is and is not there"(Kotz 107). The quality of projected imagery that toys with veracity is an apt means of depicting the multifarious nature of historical narratives. Artist Stan Douglas' recent work titled Klatsassin, 2009, a non-linear video work that is exhibited as a large scale projection, is a perfect example of this. Douglas' work uses actors to portray 840 different possible sequence combinations of an historical event that took place in 1864 in British Columbia. This work demonstrates video's capacity to show the multiple perspectives of a single event. As Douglas' work suggests, there can be 840 sides to a story.

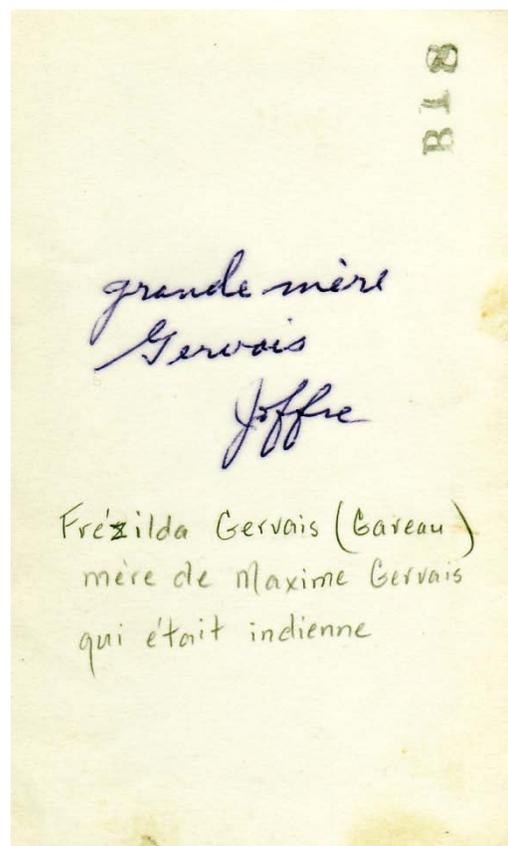
## 5. Part IV: Collecting Objects of Nostalgia

Several years ago, when the digital reproduction of images first became available, I began scanning old family photographs from my grandmother's albums. These were sometimes put to use in video projects but often they were simply collected. This digital collection grew to include images from other members of my family and even from people I didn't know. They were images of the past accompanied by associated stories that I had never heard before. One such image was that of my paternal great grandmother. On the back of the photograph, someone had written: *Frézilda Gervais (Gareau) mère de Maxime Gervais qui était indienne* (figure #1; figure #2). This was the first time that I was made aware of having First Nation ancestry in my family. Coincidentally, I was just beginning to learn about Métis history.

Figure 1. Photograph Front



Figure 2. Photograph Back



While the majority of the material for this thesis project (images, video and audio recordings) were purposefully sought, many elements were gathered before the project began and before I realized that I was collecting objects of reflective nostalgia. To add to my collection of family images and to talk to other people who also lived in the Peace River region, I went there and sought out people who were willing to talk about their history and their memories in relation to the region. Having only recently learnt that the area was significant in terms of Métis history and that a large part of the population identified as being Métis, I was curious about the integration of the different communities; the Métis people who have links to the Red River and the people who originated from French settlers like my great grandparents. My curiosity stemmed, in

part, from never having heard any of my relations ever mentioning anything about Métis people.

I spoke with individuals from both communities who were usually, but not always, about the same age as my parents. What caught my attention was the similarity in what people chose to talk about and the way they reflected upon their personal histories. They seemed to share a thoughtful musing about the past. I found the points at which the narratives of people from different communities, French and Métis, intersected to be most interesting. Despite their feelings that their histories were separate from each other and that they rarely integrated, they often went to the same places to fish; they went to the same schools and had the same type of social gatherings.

In the stories that I heard about what people had to do or the way things were done, there was often a sense of incredulousness about the difference between those days and the present. Talking about the past seemed to prompt assessment about the changes that they had experienced. As Janelle Wilson states, “The act of reminiscence and the experience of nostalgia may result in our truly seeing” (160). I was noting this aspect of nostalgia during the time I spent talking with people about their history. That is, how identity is influenced by the recognition of how one changes over time. Acknowledging these changes defines how we perceive who we are in the present.

Not all the changes that have occurred over time are positive. Evidence of economic stagnation due to the decline or modification in agriculture is visible in the deterioration of the local parks and other community infrastructure (figure # 3). In the town of Falher the hardship felt as a result of these changes was notable in the

atmosphere of the local coffee shop where many of the long time residents still meet in the mornings. One such person shared his observations of the once thriving honey industry that the area was famous for. After a long talk about mites and the decline of the bee industry, he pointed out, “Falher used to be the honey capital of Canada. When they built that [bee sculpture] all the beekeepers were ‘belly-up’ (figure #4). So they should have built that bee upside down”. I recorded the audio of this conversation and used part of it to create *The Land of Wheat and Honey* video.

Figure 3. Old Sign



Figure 4. Bee Monument



Despite the economic conditions that many smaller towns were experiencing, many people from these communities seemed happy to share their stories of “the good old days”. Sharing these nostalgic reflections of the past and lamenting current conditions was what brought many of the community members together, in the coffee shop, at the ‘after church’ gatherings that took place and other events like the community barbeques that were being held. This provided evidence of nostalgia’s capacity to bring people together through collective empathy and its use in terms of its ability to help alleviate the sense of despair induced by adverse changes. On one occasion, the proprietor of the little motel where we stayed came to the door of our unit carrying with him a book of old photographs. He talked about the history of the area and

connections he had to various families within it. Like the encounter in the coffee shop, this interaction was unplanned and unsolicited being initiated by this older man who recognized our surname and was curious about us.

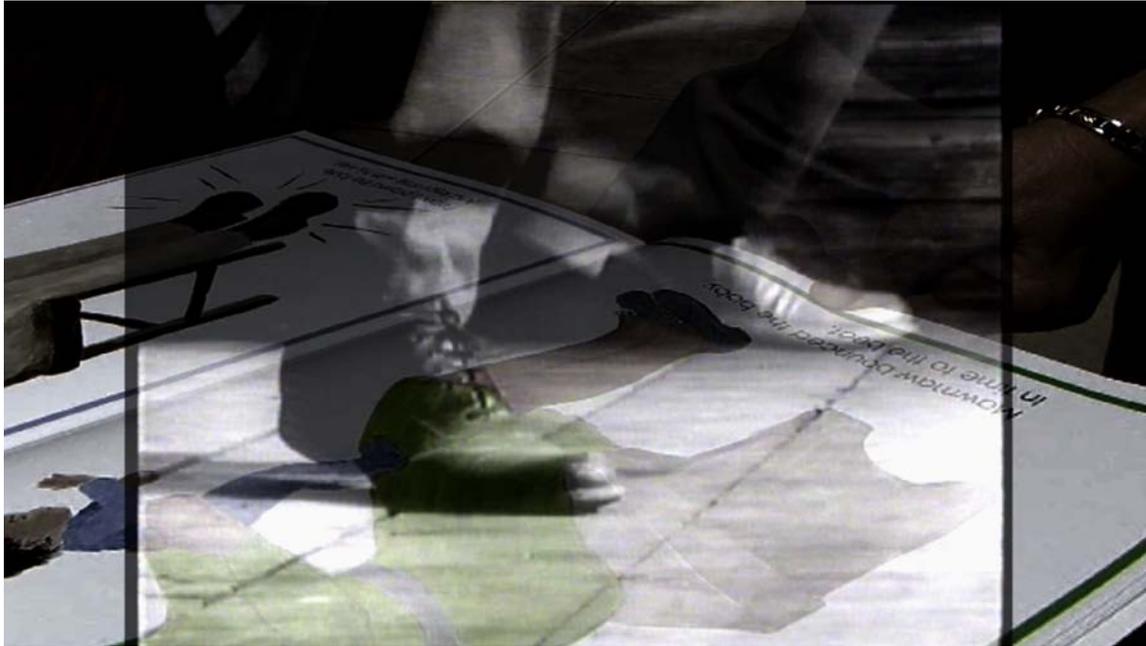
### 5.1. Re-sourced/Recalled

My collection of images and recordings resulting from my interest in and conversations with people of the Peace River region seeded the ideas for several projects. *Re-sourced/Recalled* is a video based installation using an amalgamation of photographs, video, narration, digital imagery and written material to reference the way in which nostalgia affects historical narratives. These visual and audio elements are from a variety of sources including found footage from documentaries, family archives and interviews. While the narratives are based on nostalgic reflections of the past, the composition of imagery and audio does not relate to specific events directly. Like nostalgic constructs, this allows for the fashioning of different possibilities and the manipulation of disparate and/or corresponding events.

Through the layering and masking of images spatially and temporally, distinct elements are combined in a projected image. Images from different media and different times are merged to dislocate the viewer from the normal cues used to orientate them to one specific narrative, thus referencing the non-sequential nature of nostalgia. At several points in the video, such as when a man's feet are dancing on a children's book (figure #5), the blending of images form a single, hybrid image. In this case the dancing feet appear to be making the book bounce. It is at these points when the structural elements of the different media are not immediately apparent that they are most

reflexive and have the greatest potential to generate a reflective response in the viewer (Spielmann, “Intermedia in Electronic Images”).

Figure 5. Video Still of *Resourced/Recalled*



The grid-like overlay, both in the glass panel and at points in the projected video, has two specific references that relate to barriers both conceptually and physically. Firstly, it addresses the politically constructed demarcation of the region (figure #6). It speaks to the role that the land divisions have played in the formation of people’s history in the region; it is also a reminder of the development of the land, how it was partitioned, the effect this had on people, their control of the land and the landscape that was formed as a result (figure #7; figure #8). The variations in colour and texture of the pattern also reference the variation in the utility of the land and the resource that it is in terms of agricultural production. Secondly, the stained glass quality of the coloured glass panels, a common feature of many churches, alludes to the significant role that

the Catholic church played in the development of the communities in the area and the impact it had on peoples lives. Most of the towns in the region were named after the Catholic clerics that established the missions and schools in the area.

Figure 6. Installation View 1: *Resourced/Recalled*



Figure 7. Aerial Image 1



Figure 8. Aerial Image 2



There are essentially two relevant spaces created by the panels that form the installation; the space in front of the glass panel and the space between the glass panel and the projection panel (figure #9; figure #10). The glass panel provides reflection and distortion of both the viewer and the projected imagery. This allows for differing views of the projected images and different reflections of the viewer depending on where the viewer is standing and the images being projected. The limited depth of these spaces compels the viewer to be part of the installation in a more self conscious way; it impels a more direct engagement with the work, reflexively revealing details of the individual components and their characteristics.

Figure 9. Installation View 2: *Resourced/Recalled*

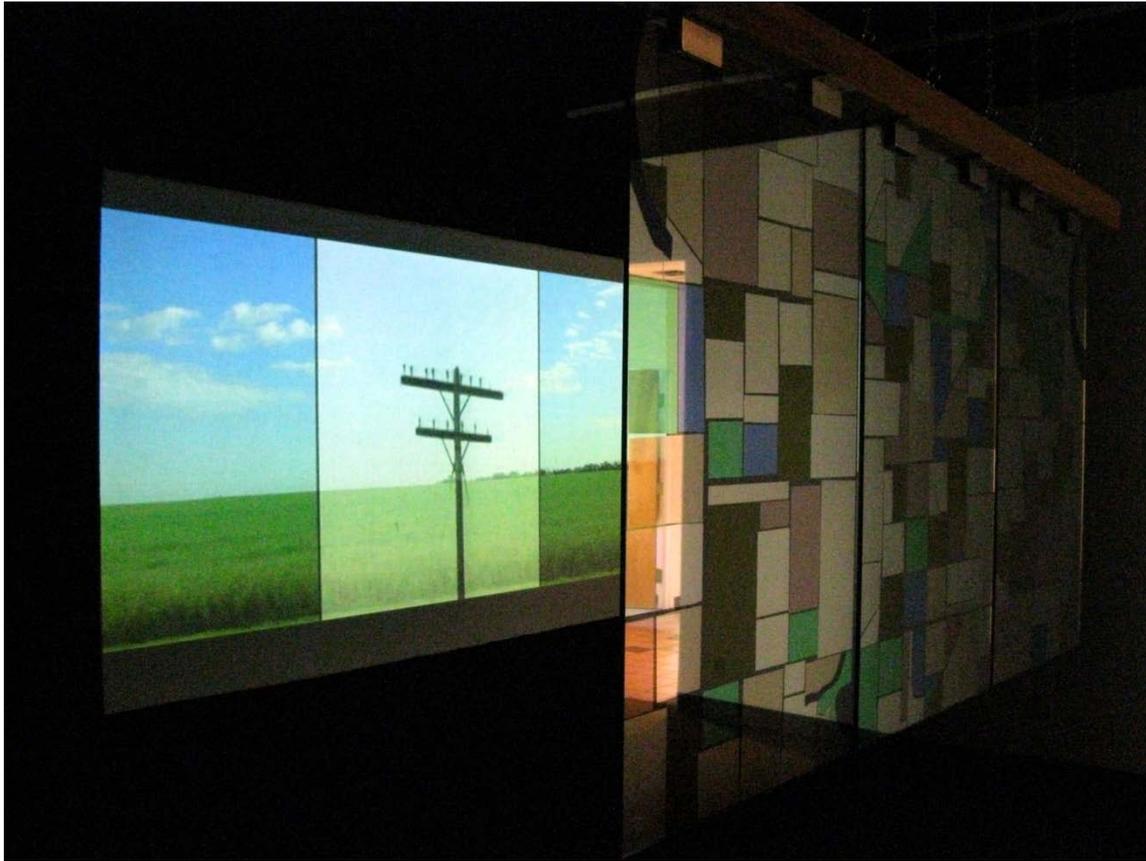


Figure 10. Installation View 3: *Resourced/Recalled*



The video is a combination of narrative fragments that were selected based, in part, on how they interrelate. While this allows for different points of view to be expressed, the linearity of the video suggests that there is one common narrative despite the scope of subject matter that is being referred to (why people came to live in the area, means of transportation, school etc). The incorporation of a variety of voice recordings provides a reflexive element that exposes the various perspectives and provides space for other components of the narratives to be imagined.

## 5.2. Time Pieced and Layered

Like *Re-sourced/ Recalled*, the concept for this work evolved from the exploration of the Peace River region and the prairie communities from which my family originates. It addresses the nostalgia associated with the unique geography of the region and the narratives that stem from the physical and political nature of the landscape. This work embodies the notion of change over time. The words themselves, 'change over time', called to mind the visuals of a math equation with one equation on top and another below with a horizontal line between. This visual layering of elements and the way they correlate to history, geography and time formed the basis of how I came to structure the installation.

In keeping with the concept of geography, the layered elements are horizontal and the projection is directed downwards and is seen on the floor (figure #11; figure #12; figure #13). The typical rectangle format of the video projection is transformed by the use of a scrim to create an hourglass vignette. The hourglass shape cut into the scrim provides an element of time. I had been experimenting with growing wheat to add to the notion of change and references to geography as they apply to the Peace River region. Thus, the scrim is covered with burlap that has wheat kernels sewn into it. These kernels sprout into living plants and grow throughout the exhibition (figure #14). The floor layer, and consequently the projection surface, is white wheat flour mounded in such a way as to emphasize the hourglass shape of the projection. Besides being an excellent material upon which to project the video, wheat flour on the ground represents the basis of the agricultural industry in the Peace River region.

Figure 11. Installation View 1: *Time Pieced*



Figure 12. Installation View 2: *Time Pieced*

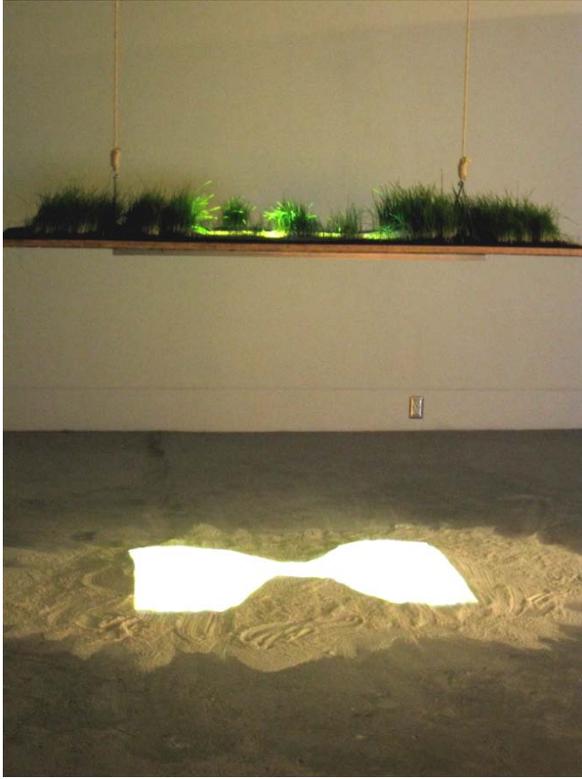


Figure 13. Installation View 3: *Time Pieced*

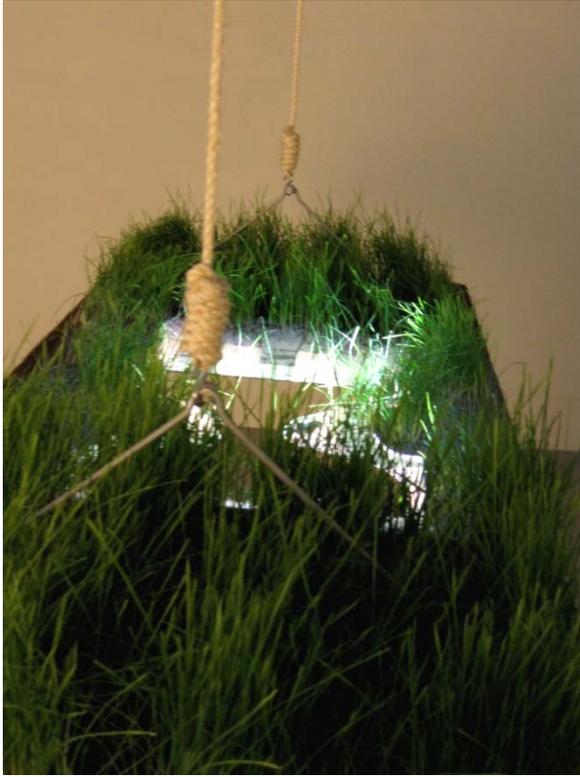
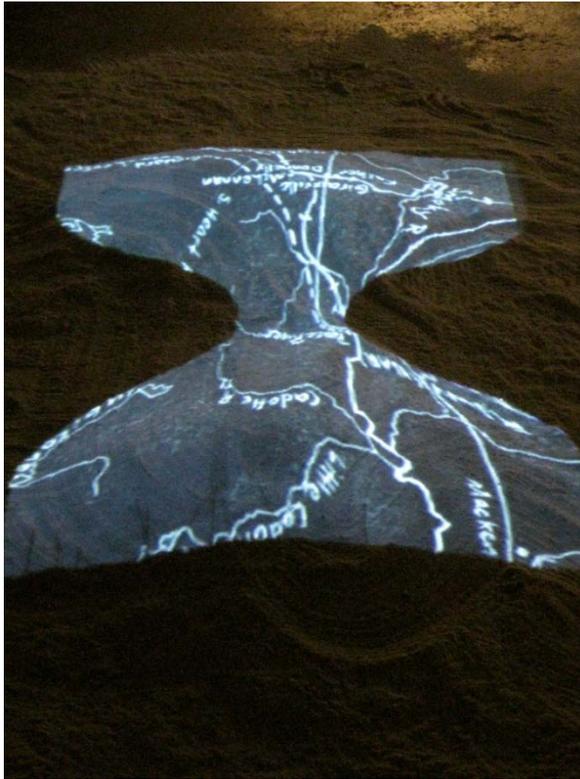


Figure 14. Close Up of Wheat Growing



The video itself also contains references to wheat, agriculture, geography and time. The imagery of animated wheat sprouts and mature wheat grass interspersed with satellite images and a road map of the Peace River region sweeps across the floured surface emulating the contents of an hourglass (figure #14). The audio, composed mainly of different wind and water textures, also holds strong associations to the region. Like the narratives of the past that comprise nostalgic sentiment, the projected elements and the physical barrier of the scrim work together as layered components through which the social and cultural histories that relate to the land are referenced. The back and forth motion of the video combined with the audio creates a mesmerizing effect and often holds the viewers attention beyond the duration of the two minute video loop.

Figure 15. Installation View 4: *Time Pieced*



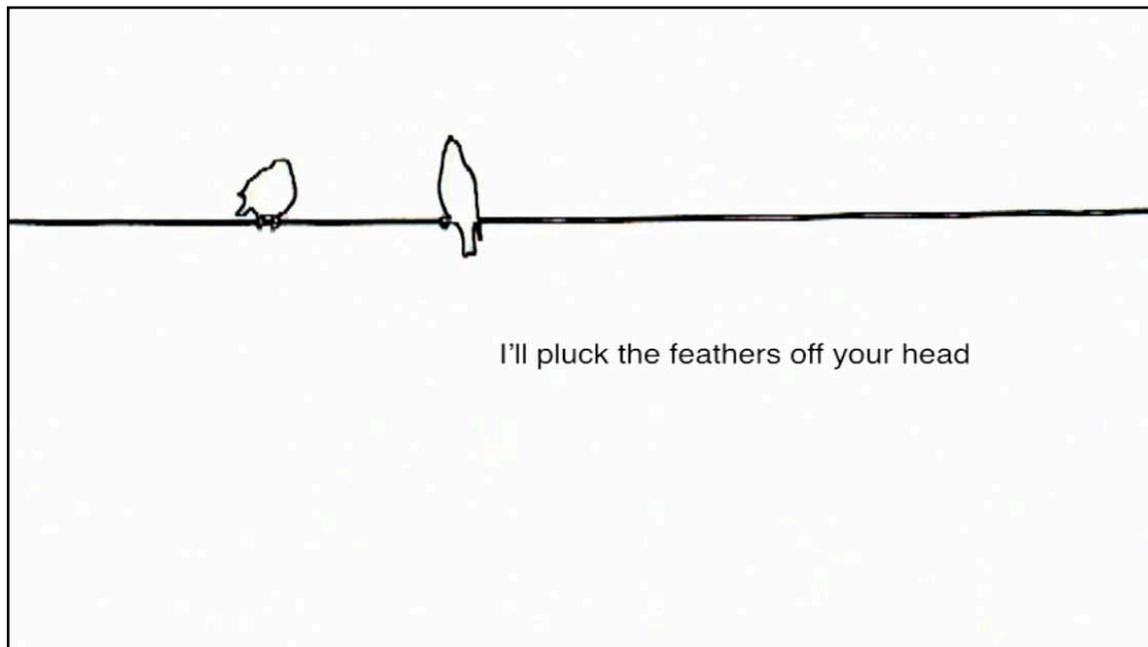
### 5.3. Alouette

*Alouette* is a video that, like the others in this exhibition, has as its subject an object of nostalgia that is connected to the Peace Region through its French settlers past. *Alouette* is a French children's song that is familiar to many Anglophones and Francophones alike. The simplicity of the visual elements, the black contour lines of birds on a wire against a white background underscores the elementary and innocent nature of the song as an aspect of childhood memory (figure # 16). This nostalgic childhood association is juxtaposed with the song's lyrics shown on the screen in English.<sup>6</sup> Like many nursery rhymes, the jaunty melody contrasts with the words and

<sup>6</sup> *Alouette, gentille Alouette* (Skylark, nice skylark), *Alouette, je te plumerai* (Skylark, I shall pluck you), *Je te plumerai la tête* (I shall pluck your head), *Je te plumerai la tête* (I

people who have never known the English translation are often surprised by what they read when viewing the video. The intermittent audio element is taken from the original song but only the deepest base notes are incorporated and emphasized. This alters the mood and rhythm of the song in such a way as to make it strange and dark.

Figure 16. Video Still of *Alouette*



The idea for this video came about when I recently learnt the history behind the song. As a child, I understood the words in French. I remember being perplexed by the thought that some people would joyously torment small birds while addressing them in song. It wasn't until recently that I was relieved to learn that the birds were being plucked as a source of food and not just for the sake of torment and cruel enjoyment.

This song is nostalgic in the sense that it reminds one of the naivety of childhood. Knowing more about the song can alter the way it is thought about but the

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shall pluck your head), Et la tête (And your head)...

nostalgia surrounding the song remains and is perhaps even accentuated due to the increased disparity between what it recalls of the past and the knowledge that it now holds in the present. This supports the idea that our associations with objects of nostalgia can change. Exhibiting this video and exposing the English translation of the song and its history may have potentially altered whatever nostalgic sentiment it held for its viewers.

#### 5.4. Party Line

The relationship of the audio to the physical installation of *Party Line* is paradoxical. In the audio, the original phone is described as a box on the wall. The image of an old rotary dial style desk phone is shown on a modern, portable communication device, which is taken out of context by mounting it to the wall, simulating the original phone (figure #17; figure #18).

Figure 17. Installation View 1: *Party Line*

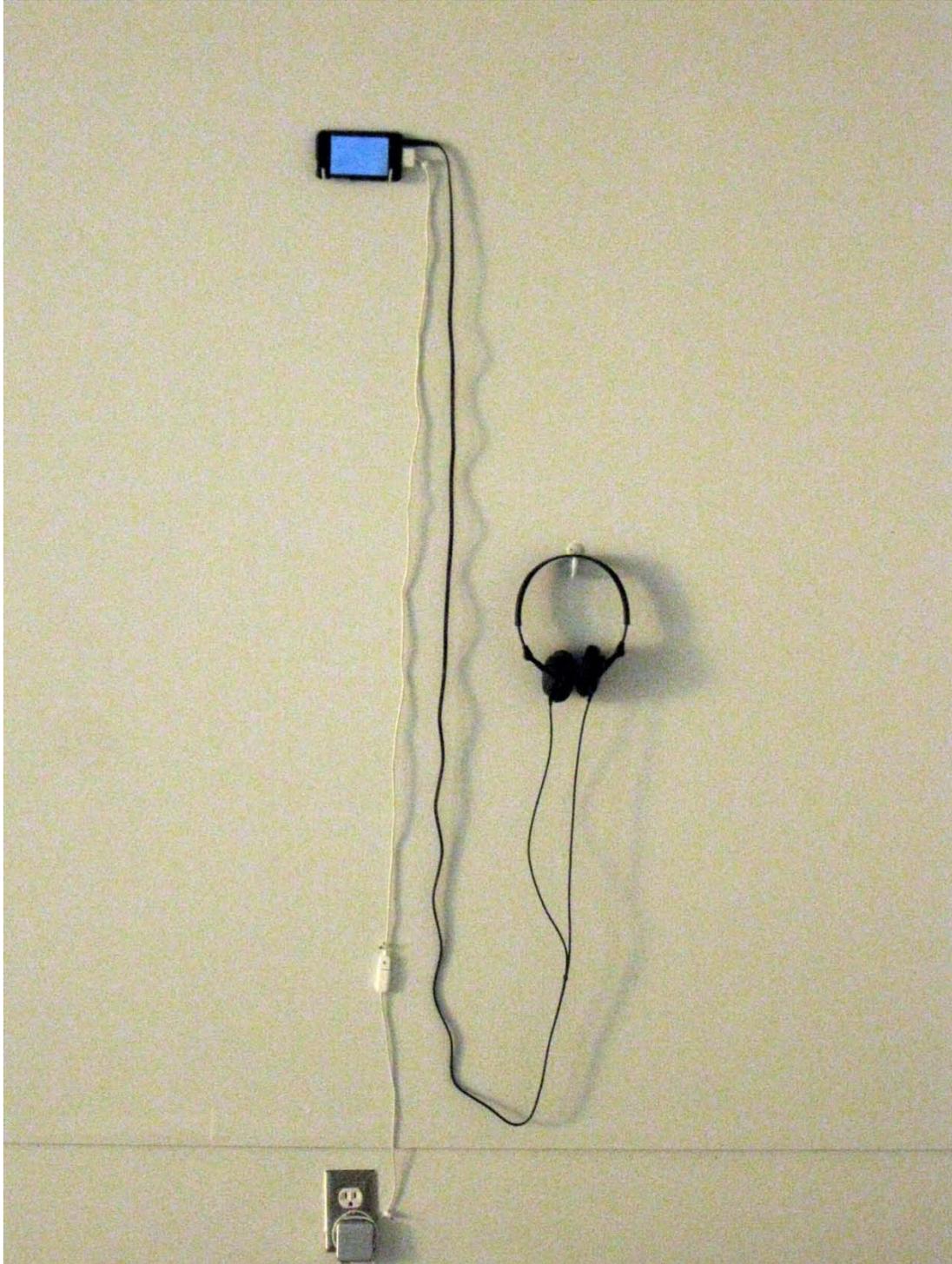


Figure 18. Installation View 2: *Party Line*



Referencing three distinct epochs of telephone development through the audio, the image being displayed and the display device increases the associative capacity of the installation. These references have the potential to either be objects of reflective nostalgia or provide images of nostalgia but this potential is dependent on the demographic of the viewer. While many people may recall the party line system of telephone communication and are familiar with the old rotary style plastic enclosed desk phones, only people of a certain age experienced and therefore remember the old wooden box phones. Ironically, these people are the least likely to recognize the electronic device mounted to the wall. The relatively recent development of touch screen smart phones has completely changed the nature of telecommunication yet ring

tones associated with old style phones are very popular and commonly heard on devices such as these.

### 5.5. Frontiers

This 30-second video is a quick, tongue in cheek play on the science fiction movie. The odd combination of wheat sprouts and space brings together two former “frontiers”; space and the West. Both of these frontiers were seen as having potential for new opportunity and as a result inspired many explorations and fictions. One result of exploration of the Western frontier has been settlement in regions like the Peace. The wheat sprouts at different stages of development symbolize the agricultural propagation of the Western prairies, a recurring theme in many of the works being shown in this exhibition (figure # 19). The audio is reminiscent of the first human moon landing and connotes nostalgic sentiment related to that era.

Figure 19. Video Still of *Frontiers*



## 5.6. Blocks

In this video of a young girl constructing a house using toy blocks is combined with a photographic image of the house that her grandfather grew up in. Again, the work is related to the theme of nostalgia and my personal connections to the Peace region, as the house is located in the town of Falher where my father grew up (figure #20; figure #21; figure #22).

Figure 20. Installation View 1: *Blocks*



Figure 21. Installation View 2: *Blocks*



Figure 22. Installation View 3: *Blocks*



The images, both containing sentiments surrounding the family home and familiar toys, merge, at points, into a single hybrid image. As exhibited in the video for

*Re-sourced/Recalled*, this demonstrates what Petr Szczepanik describes as the reciprocal reflexivity that occurs when media forms merge into one. It is at the point of merger that their structural differences become apparent; the still image is recognized as such when combined with the video imagery. Each image, the photographic image of the house and the video clip of the hands building with blocks, relies upon the other for its significance and meaning within the overall effect. The nostalgic qualities of the subject matter represented in the images such as home, childhood, multi-generational traditions and the act of building are heightened by the combination of the two images.

### 5.7. The Land of Wheat and Honey

In this video, a life long resident of the “Honey Capital of Canada” reflects upon the weakened state of the honey industry in an area surrounding the town of Falher, Alberta. This audio is juxtaposed with romanticized imagery of wheat fields and the biblically associated moniker: “The Land of Wheat and Honey”<sup>7</sup> that is associated with region (Figure #23).

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<sup>7</sup> Exodus 3:8 The Land of Milk and Honey

Figure 23. Video Still: *The Land of Wheat and Honey*



In the telling of how and why the honey business has slumped, the speaker muses upon the way it used to be. He mentions the people who kept bees and who, like him, have had to leave the industry. This nostalgic association with others and the nostalgia of former prosperity becomes a means of social connectedness, a source of positive self-esteem and a means of coping. Past success eclipses the adversity of current conditions and becomes a representation of who they are and an indication of the potential for a better future. It is also this reflection and insight of the past that furnishes the present with meaning and fuller understanding.

## 6. Conclusion

This body of work represents an array of musings and ideas that have developed from my experiences with commemorative video, my involvement in the production of a Métis cultural DVD, research into my own family history and theoretical studies related to these factors. I see this collection as the culmination of my artistic research as I explored different means of depicting elements of history and characteristics of nostalgia. This is evidenced in the varied compositions and styles of the work within the collection.

Part of my objective in this thesis has been to investigate the value of nostalgia individually, socially, and culturally. In doing so, I came to realize that the sentimental constructs such as commemorative video are precisely what people want for their celebratory events but they are limited in their capacity to truly engage people in the creative capacity that nostalgic reflection engenders. As Svetlana Boym points out, “Sentimentality is a ready-made emotion.” It lacks creative potential and has little or nothing to contribute towards the future (338). As I have sought to demonstrate, the creative nature of nostalgic reflection involves exploring the past, acknowledging and accepting its deficiencies as well as its pleasures. It is the imaginative restructuring of events in order to understand them in a more comprehensive and future orientated way.

By exploring nostalgia through research into my own family history in rural communities of northern Alberta, I have sought to address the role that nostalgia performs as a creative impetus, specifically in the context of positive identity formation and social connectedness, both integral constituents of cultural regeneration and

revitalization. People from these communities shared their stories and experiences with me, and these stories helped defined who they were. Through comparing and contrasting narratives of the past to the present, we learn to make sense of ourselves and form our identity. Moreover, the sharing of these experiences contributes to social connectedness and collective empathy.

In the process of studying nostalgic reflection and learning to recognize how it is employed, I have come to realize the important role it plays in the lives of people. Witnessing and understanding the significance of nostalgia and how it works as a reflective means of understanding that generates new perspectives motivated me to develop video-based art installations that address these elements.

While the specific object of nostalgia or theme of this work might be more relevant to some people than others, the triggers of nostalgia, the imagery or ideals associated with the past, are commonly identifiable. Therefore, art of this nature has the potential to speak to a broad audience. Like reflective nostalgia, art is the exploration of potentialities that strives to engage its audience through reflective thinking. This engagement begins inwardly and emanates from the individual, leading to what Boym describes as a “sense of anarchic responsibility toward others as well as to the rendezvous with oneself” (342).

Both nostalgic reflection and creative endeavours such as art are a means of collectively expressing and sharing aspects of culture that shape people’s identity and consequentially create and nurture a sense of community. In a society based on quantification, the immeasurable activities and processes associated with art and

culture are often relegated to the peripheries yet art and culture offer some of the most effective means by which nostalgic reflection can be explored and appreciated.

Therefore, it is my hope that in creating and disseminating projects that promote reflective thinking, an appreciation of its intrinsic value to society can be fostered.

Through evaluation of the past, inclusive of its imperfections, and valuing the variety of imagery and personal narratives that accompany it, creative and constructive visions of the future can be generated.

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