

The Nostalgia Machine

by Davi Ramos

Alvino's glasses were black and thick-rimmed. He took the delicate snuffbox from his shirt pocket, pressed his thumb against the tobacco, and used it to cover his left nostril. He inhaled gently, feeling the impact of the nicotine. The Guide stood erect, her tall, slender profile dominating the room. The pink suit contrasted with her air of authority, and the elongated red glasses highlighted the austere beauty of her figure. She was followed by a group of twenty students of various ages and college degrees. Alvino hurried along so as not to fall behind. When The Guide unlocked the door to the basement, some of the students sneezed from the dust. The stairs creaked under their feet. It was unusual for the notorious object to be housed in the forgotten basement of the **Museum of the International Institute of Borderline Sciences**. The room was hot, humid, and windowless. Breaking the darkness, a bright interrogation lamp cast a light on The Machine.

Like a specter, The Guide broke the silence. Her voice betrayed an indefinite expectation.

“As you can see, the Nostalgia Machine is nothing more than a rectangle of translucent glass. It is forty centimeters wide, twelve centimeters high, and fourteen centimeters deep. You can see its interior without difficulty. However, when looking inside it, the observer is unable to conceive its contents. You will be able to see its contents perfectly, and you will have, at that moment, a perfect notion of what you perceive. But you will not be able to communicate anything concrete about it. Furthermore, once you remove it from your field of vision, there will be no trace of understanding left.”

The instructor paused briefly to let the audience digest the unusual logic of her words. She continued imperiously.

“Look into the Machine with the greatest attention. Allow it to make itself understood.”

The students followed the command. Including some who, without meaning to do so, locked their eyes on the object by some magical persuasion.

“Without taking your eyes off the machine, tell me what you see.”

— A snake swallowing itself — said a student with glasses.

— Waves dance lazily — replied another.

— Overlapping layers. Infinite in number, but they add up to just one.

— Nothing. Absolutely nothing. An empty mirror — replied Alvino.

The Guide looked at Alvino curiously.

“Empty mirror,” she repeated. “That’s what I said.”

She looked at him with curiosity.

“Who are you?”.

— Alvino Queiroz. Sixth year of medicine — he replied.

She made a mental note to remember his name

“This is the final stage of our little experiment. Enough time has passed. A fraction of a second

would have sufficed, and you have had much more than that. Take your eyes off the Machine. Now look at me and describe to me what you saw.”

Laughter filled the room. They didn't remember anything.

“The effects of the Machine are more complex than the vulgar notion of ‘Nostalgia’ would lead us to believe. We call it ‘The Nostalgia Machine’ because that was the name given to it by its creator, who carved it with a knife into the table where it was found.”

Using a flashlight, The Guide pointed out the author's scribbles on the battered table. Now that everyone had gotten used to the dim light, she noticed with satisfaction the glances in her direction. The students were eager for the rest of the story.

“The Machine was found in the room of the Italian inventor and poet Antonio Filipetti at a boarding house in Venice, 1912. There were only four objects in the room: The Machine, the table that supported it, Antonio Filipetti's body, and the bloody knife with which he opened his own stomach.”

She let the disturbing image settle for a few moments in the listeners' minds and continued.

“In his last moments, Filipetti poured his intestines onto the ground. He then piled them up in such a way as to form vertical layers of considerable height. Like a small wall erected from his guts. An inexplicable force kept the construction standing for eight days, at the end of which it liquefied in an instant, with a nauseating odor. His remains were not preserved.”

She approached the Machine. The visitors followed her.

“The first idea that comes to everyone's mind is that The Nostalgia Machine gives corporeal substance to our most cherished memories, allowing them to exist in our world. They may also think that it excites our brains so that we relive these experiences in vivid hallucinations that are indistinguishable from their real counterparts. This misconception has certainly led many unsuspecting individuals to the Machine. Despite its name, it does not generate nostalgia as we understand it.”

“At first, this may seem like a meandering concept. However, once you understand it, you will see that it is trivial. The Machine does not embody the memories the user already has...”

— ... it creates entirely new nostalgias... — concluded Alvino, stroking the tip of his eccentric mustache.

“Correct,” he agreed.

Patient Number One

“In the **Institute of Borderline Sciences**, one of our concerns was the confidentiality of our research.”

“Initially, we gave preference to internal volunteers, and there were many candidates among us. Perhaps we should have been more careful. To those in charge, The Machine was an arcane and inert enchantment, incapable of producing any effect that could not be explained by the taxonomy of mental disorders.”

“Mário Boanova was a laboratory technician and an enthusiast of paranormal phenomena. He had no friends or family and was aware of the risks. He was the perfect candidate.”

“We did not suggest to him that he rest his palms on the sides of the box. An ineffable intuition led him to do so. We asked him to narrate in detail his mental states.”

RECORDING

“Saturday morning. Leftover candy in the fridge. Cartoons on TV. I am here. Fully.”

“I had sex with a prostitute. When I got home I cried.”

“I miss when my father died.”

“I miss all that is dreadful... again. And again. And again. And again...”

“The longing I have for something makes something whole.”

“My tongue licks the outer surface of the brain.”

“And then he stopped, looked at us with the white side of his eyes, and fainted.”

“Exploratory surgery revealed a brain without protrusions. Under a high-resolution microscope, the brain was not exactly smooth; the folds were numerous, appearing continuous to the naked eye. These protrusions connected with each other in peculiar patterns, similar to river systems. They reconfigured themselves like a mass of snakes at astonishing speeds, moving repulsively, swallowing and recreating themselves without end.”

— What happened to him? — Alvino asked again.

“Patient Number 1 has been in a vegetative state and under our care ever since.”

Patient Number Two

RECORDING

“When you look at an object, you might think of it as something unique and independent. For example, right here in this room, I’m looking at that door. When I look at it, I don’t think of anything complicated: it’s a door, pure and simple. It’s white, with a metal handle, a keyhole, and some decoration. It’s made of wood, so it has edges of the same material. These linear faces separate it from the frame on which it rests. On the side opposite to the lock, articulated pins connect it to the doorway, allowing it to open and close without detaching itself from its axis. This makes a door useful — it only allows the passage of that which must go through it.”

“The door is whole and is part, the room is part and is whole. What makes one thing part of another is a matter of perspective.”

“If I consider the door in relation to the room, it is an integral part of the room to which it is connected. However, if I remove its hinges and carry it out of the building, the room and the door become distinct entities. In doing so, I would not damage either entity. The room would remain a room, the door would remain a door.”

“Just as I did with the door, I sometimes suggest for things to be arranged differently. Some objects are made of wood, some plastic. Some are made of concrete and some, of flesh and blood.”

“If I wanted to redecorate you, I would start with your feet. I like to separate the phalanges of the toes from the metatarsal bones that support them, revealing their delicacy. With a cut, I separate the tibia from the fibula, freeing the leg below the ankle. I disarticulate the knee and perform the amputation. This is, of course, a dirty process, overflowing with blood and tissue. I can improve your appearance through induced hypoxia, with the use of tourniquets and vasoconstrictors, greatly reducing the volume of blood. It is ideal to perform these procedures after the subject has died. When left upside down on a meat hook, a human being will bleed out completely within forty-eight hours from a cut in the jugular.”

“Despite my sophistication, I live in a cramped cell, surrounded by ignorant and brute people. For thirty minutes a day, I walk freely in the courtyard, which has a kind of garden at one end. Sometimes I catch a bird to look at. It doesn’t occur to me to redecorate it. Some things already exist more or less perfectly. All I ask for is a cage, a bowl of water, and some bird seed.”

The recording ended. At the center of the room, The Guide commanded authority. She continued.

“As a teenager, Marcelo Henrique Rodrigues was fascinated by fire. He admired the beauty of the flame, the shapes it destroyed and created. There was a cat in his house named Felix that his father had brought home. The cat was always on his mother’s lap, making him jealous. Marcelo put the animal in a shoebox and filled it with old newspapers soaked in kerosene. He buried the smoldering pile in the backyard.”

“Patient Number 2 represented a unique opportunity. Classical psychopaths have limited affective capacity and deficiencies in empathy processing. Emotionally, Marcelo was close to a blank slate, giving the Machine greater latitude to work.”

“We gave Patient Number 2 every assurance that his wishes would be granted. When he looked at The Machine, Marcelo smiled without worry. He caressed the object, making tiny movements with his fingers. After ten minutes of this disturbing calm, Marcelo Rodrigues walked over to us, placid and indecipherable like the Mona Lisa.”

“He narrated a radiant experience. His memories were full of tenderness and loss. Instead of driving him mad, The Machine, finding its ideal object, ‘was satisfied’. The saturation of memories did not have any unhealthy consequences on the Patient.”

“Marcelo told us, intoxicated, about his first death, which until then had been an embarrassing memory. The poorly sharpened knife, requiring several weak and ineffective blows to the neck. The pathetic screams of the boy in needless suffering. The repulsive gargle of blood from his ruptured throat. The wrench desperately applied to the skull, staining the most important piece of his project. The unbearable heat of the summer day in the small, cluttered room. The dog barking outside, drawing too much attention. The unfortunate decision to get rid of the body, wasting his efforts.”

“Now, when reviewing the mental film of that day, Marcelo felt a delicious melancholy. It was a failure coated in sweetness.”

“As a result of that experiment, you will find, under the care of our **Advanced Correctional Sciences Laboratory**, the most affable and good-natured serial killer humanity has ever known. We created a happy psychopath.”

How the Machine Works

The general light came on.

“Some of you may fondly remember your first kiss or your first sexual experience. Use that as an example, and substitute any other experience that you remember fondly. At first, The Nostalgia Machine would not touch these memories. Now fixate on an unpleasant memory. Naturally, you want to put that behind you. But I am preventing you from doing so by instructing you to keep it active in your conscious field.”

“Imagine that from now on, you will not only be forced to remember that day, but also experience, in addition to the painful memory, a strange emotional connection to those events. An irresistible current leads you to relive them. That, in essence, is what The Machine does. It creates nostalgia that did not exist before.”

“How can this be? From our point of view, it is very simple. First, you place your palms on both ends. To you, the process will seem very long. Subjectively, it will take days, months, maybe even

years. We do not know for sure, and it varies from person to person. To those watching from the outside world, it will take between five and ten minutes. The process is divided into two stages.”

“In the first phase, The Machine will saturate your preexisting memories with an emotional component. Starting with events of lesser complexity, it progresses to increasingly intense events. With the exception of the nostalgic accumulation, no other aspect of these memories will be altered. You will long for traumatic circumstances, reliving them over and over.”

“When all memories are saturated, a brief interval occurs. The user regains control. He can, if he wishes, remove his hands from the device. The patient exhibits profound introspection, becoming unable to communicate through words.”

“At this stage, MRI scans show intense activity in the parts of the brain related to memory, as well as in the segments responsible for the production of images, sounds, and olfactory stimuli. Based on these observations, we speculate that the subjects continually replay their personal “movies”. This “kinesthetic projector” is so absorbing that some patients become incapable of registering any external stimuli.”

“After a few minutes away from the Machine, an intense fixation compels them to resume the process. No unsaturated memories remain. At this stage, **The Machine operates at a higher level of abstraction, generating nostalgia about the very events it provoked.** The subject experiences nostalgia for the processes that led him to be saturated with nostalgia. For lack of a better word, he is in love.”

“In its usual functioning, human beings remember events while ignoring the neurophysiological processes involved in the acquisition, storage, and replay of the impressions brought by their senses. When we remember, we remember *something*. Not the internal mechanisms used for its introjection. We can assume that The Nostalgia Machine does much more than overload memories. It also infects the host brain with the functionality necessary for the execution of its processes. A part of the brain specializes in the observation of the brain itself, producing mental metaformations capable of expressing, to the seat of consciousness, the very events it produces.”

“Nostalgia, as we understand it, is linked to people, objects, or past events. It intensifies the connection with our own history. It produces, as a result, an identity that seems to us, at the same time, subjective and tangible. That is a particularly human idea. Perhaps the Machine’s ‘goal’ is to lead consciousness to a state of pure nostalgia, free from the memories that usually provoke it.”

“In 1912, Antonio Filippetti was intensely interested in the idea of purity. That was the theme of his poems of that period. The purity of Platonic love. The rage, animal, and uncontrolled. The uncompromising melancholy. The Machine is the culmination of these efforts. Perfect nostalgia no longer refers to earthly objects. It enjoys itself like liquid water in a glass made of ice.”

“Then follows the rewriting of memories, gradually discarding all register of humanity. The Machine reconstructs the user’s brain in infinite recursion, until nothing remains but the nostalgia of the nostalgia of the nostalgia.”

Patient Number Three

The Guide adjusted her glasses, reinforcing the intensity of her attention. She continued without pause.

“César Maldonado is our next subject of study. A conventional criminal with several police records, he committed telephone fraud without much success. He spent his money on drinking and gambling and was a frequent presence at cockfights. César was immune to self-criticism. To him, everyone owed him something. He read poorly and never wrote. His ‘notes’ were confusing drawings, and

violence, his favorite method of conflict resolution. César participated in the experiment with the promise of financial gain.”

“Whatever The Machine did, we believed it would do so in discrete steps. Our instrumentation strongly suggested that the brain’s ‘smoothing’ occurred towards the end of the process. We placed The Machine on a table with a trapdoor. After two and a half minutes, an electronic mechanism would swallow it, preventing further contact.”

“Patient Number 3 placed his hands in the activation position. At the scheduled time, the trapdoor swallowed the Machine, interrupting the process. The Patient’s despair was terrifying. A chill ran down our spines. This felt very personal to us—it was either about us or against us. César Maldonado struck the metal table with his giant bear paws, sending vibrations all the way to us. He struck it without a word, slow and imperious, in an irresistible rhythm.”

“He approached the one-way mirror, knowing we were there. Perhaps to tell us something, or even squeeze our throats...”

“And once again, he pounded. And pounded and pounded on the glass between us. He opened his mouth in silence and roared like an anguished beast. Roared without control. The corners of his lips were bleeding, his larynx trying in vain to regurgitate his vocal cords.”

“Something snapped, loud and sharp. The untethered jaw swung beneath the skull, the skin around holding it like a piece of string.”

That was the high point of the speech. The audience needed no additional stimulus. The Guide waited, satisfied.

— Jaws do not detach from the skull by a mere act of will... — observed a nursing student.

— I would say that this goes far beyond the concept of “will” or any usual notion of psychology... in fact, it seems to me that it has very little to do with any form of desire. It is a primal and essential impulse that completely circumscribes the will. — Alvino replied.

The Guide pressed a button. A screen lit up, showing a sequence of photos that confirmed all the elements of her story.

— The process was interrupted before it was completed — concluded Alvino.

“No. Later observations showed that that was the only correct moment to interrupt The Machine.”

— So there is no right time. The process cannot be interrupted — continued Alvino.

"Exactly."

— Where is Patient Number 3?

The Guide pressed a button, revealing a photograph of the Patient, his mouth open as if swallowing his own face in the opposite direction of the bite.

“César Maldonado is on our premises.”

Alvino

A door opened at the back of the room, bringing with it the sounds of daily activity. Understanding that this was the end of the presentation, the students filed out slowly. The measured murmur was soon replaced by lively chatter as they were eager to fit this experience into the ordinary narrative of their lives. Alvino remained. The lenses of his glasses were fogged up, covering his eyes. Sweat dripped from his brows, and he trembled subtly.

— I... — Alvino stuttered.

“Yes,” she replied.

— The Machine. I need to see it closer.

“Is that all you want?”

— No. Of course not.

He adjusted his glasses.

— I need to touch her.

“First, let’s go to my office. You need to sign some documents.”

The Guide smiled suggestively and headed towards the stairs. Alvino followed her, his mind empty of any thoughts.

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