



Reading



Reading is an affective and reflective relationship with a text, whether it is a new, groundbreaking monograph or one of those books that keeps getting pulled off the shelf year after year. Unlike traditional reviews, the pieces in this section may veer off in new directions as critical reading becomes an extended occurrence of thinking, being, and creation.

Demers, Joanna. "The Novelty of Looking Back (Editorial): Simon Reynolds' *Retromania*." *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 3 (2013): 53-57.

THE BOOK

Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past
by Simon Reynolds
New York: Faber and Faber, 2011.

The Novelty of Looking Back

Joanna Demers



Simon Reynolds.

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You couldn't hope for a better vindication of Simon Reynolds' *Retromania* than the release of David Bowie's 2013 album *The Next Day*. Its track "Where Are We Now?" is an understated reminiscence of life in Berlin, obliquely referring to Bowie's own time there in 1976. Its tone is muted and mournful although not longing for a return; it rather suggests that there may not be anywhere to return. The past is indeed a foreign country, Bowie has us understand, inaccessible to returns. *The Next Day* features a cover photo that reproduces the cover of Bowie's 1977 album "*Heroes*," one of the products of Bowie's Berlin residency.

The “*Heroes*” photo is one of a kind – a close-up of Bowie decked out in a black jacket and miming a strange, hieratic gesture – and *The Next Day* trumps it by blocking out Bowie’s face with a white square inside which the words “The Next Day” appear in nondescript black font. Near the upper right corner where in the original are written the album title and Bowie’s name, a black marker line crosses out the word “Heroes”. Bowie quite literally invokes the Stranglers’ punk anthem “No More Heroes”.

The anticipation and acclaim for *The Next Day* is understandable if we keep in mind the vigor of retromania. Reynolds charts this fatal love for all things nostalgic and historic in Western popular culture – if by historic we understand cultural phenomena that are perhaps a few decades old or even only three years old. Retromania is an inevitable aspect of contemporary culture, an ouroboros that eats the old to create the old. It resuscitates the careers of performers long past their prime; just witness the reunion tours of every group from the Rolling Stones to My Bloody Valentine to Gang of Four. Retromania also restages pivotal concerts – here Reynolds dazzles with descriptions of the Forsyth/Pollard reenactments of The Cramps’ 1978 concert in the Napa State Mental Institute, or the Smiths’ last concert in 1987, or Bowie’s 1973 killing-off of his Ziggy Stardust persona – with painstaking attention to the finest details of costuming, lighting, and song sets. Fans of obscure or overlooked pop can become entrepreneurs who carve out new markets by creating nostalgia for music hardly noticed its first time around; here Reynolds makes sense of everything from the enduring Northern Soul phenomenon to newfangled genres like minimal-synth, cold wave, and cool wave. Revivals of styles are common of course, but so too are revivals of styles that were never recognized as such in their heyday. In this context, Bowie’s first album in over a decade struck all the right notes even as its content itself was conventional.

We are so inundated with proof that pop culture is inherently a retro-culture that it becomes easy to become inured to it. But trecento Italy or 1920s Japan were not especially inclined toward the past. Why are we?

Pop culture is simultaneously a culture of excess and of unfulfilled desire: the two are dialectically related. Bataille and Adorno and Žižek and Deleuze have all said as much, but the most succinct articulation of the principle comes from Don Draper, the self-made ad executive of *Mad Men*:

But what is happiness? It’s a moment before you need more happiness.

Draper speaks here of the consumer's unquenchable thirst but also of his own inability to be satisfied with his wife, his job, his life. Post-Fordism creates the sense of lacking and then inculcates the belief that there is surfeit available to fill that void. Pop consumers depend on two types of excess: financial excess in the form of disposable income and temporal excess in the form of free time, time not earmarked for work or familial obligation or worship. Pop culture is a culture of addiction where we are all junkies with enough money and time to score again and again.

The "again and again" part, Reynolds proves, is not only characteristic of our need for pop titillation but has been assimilated into the substance of pop culture. Preservation technologies such as the phonograph and video mean that we can capture and re-experience that which used to be ephemeral – a song, a birthday party. Capture and preservation used to be the purview of the producers but today are integral to consumer experience, meaning that the very distinction between production and consumption is blurred. DJs sample to remember, to pay homage, to steal. Hegel's diagnosis has been confirmed literally: art for us is a thing of the past because we (like Jimmy Stewart's character Scottie Ferguson in *Vertigo*) repeat the erotic and emotional experiences foundational to our personalities. We know that the past is a foreign country, and this only enflames our desire.

Fine; this too is retro, a retro-cultural theory that we've all heard before. What are our options now? There is "hauntology", the electronica-based hazy reminiscence of 1970s and 1980s music made popular by Boards of Canada, Oneohtrix Point Never, and Ariel Pink. Reynolds ends *Retromania* with a tepid endorsement of hauntology, a subgenre that is melancholic but at least does something creative with its old parts rather than merely rehashing the past. Or there is the tack of acknowledging our collective anxiety of influence, of owning up to the fact that it is impossible to create without forbearers in mind. This is the tactic of hip-hop and other sample-based artforms. We should just accept our retromania, in other words, and go on, because everything that can be said has already been said.

Or there is the Realpolitik tack. The terms of our existence, not only of our art, have not sufficiently changed.

I'll end with this third possibility. Anything that is imaginable has already been done in retromaniacal art. We must bank only in that which we can't imagine. This is no call for a new art or more original art or any

type of art in particular. History shows that those who worry about what art should be are usually not the ones making interesting art. This is instead a call to fix our attentions on what sort of society, of existence, we wish to put in place as the one we've known since the early twentieth century passes away. Excesses of time and money that conspired to create narratives first of progress and then decay are bound to change – perhaps even disappear or then again perhaps be coupled with other excesses, liberties, liabilities. Art will sort itself as it always does to make sense of that new situation. We should instead figure out our new definition of happiness.