

# REVOLUTIONARY NOSTALGIA

Retromania, Neo-Burlesque  
and Consumer Culture

*This page intentionally left blank*

# REVOLUTIONARY NOSTALGIA

Retromania, Neo-Burlesque  
and Consumer Culture

MARIE-CÉCILE CERVELLON AND  
STEPHEN BROWN



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India  
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited  
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2018

Copyright © Marie-Cécile Cervellon and Stephen Brown, 2018

**Reprints and permissions service**

Contact: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. No responsibility is accepted for the accuracy of information contained in the text, illustrations or advertisements. The opinions expressed in these chapters are not necessarily those of the Author or the publisher.

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78769-346-3 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-78769-343-2 (E-ISBN)

ISBN: 978-1-78769-345-6 (Epub)



ISOQAR certified  
Management System,  
awarded to Emerald  
for adherence to  
Environmental  
standard  
ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985  
ISO 14001



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

# CONTENTS

*List of Figures* vii

*Preface: Retromania in Retrospect* ix

## **Introduction**

1. Welcome to Wonderland 3

## **Section I: Past and Present**

2. Borne Back Ceaselessly 13

3. Wheel Meet Again 25

4. Come the Revolution 39

## **Section II: Focus and Findings**

5. Burlesque in Brief 55

6. Considering Consumer Culture 67

7. Fans of Freedom 79

## **Section III: Context and Concepts**

8. Ghost Dance Stance 111

9. Retro Rising Redux	125
10. Dancing is Life	139
<b>Conclusion</b>	
11. At the Hop	155
Appendix 1: Definitions of Nostalgia	167
Appendix 2: List of Informants	169
<i>References</i>	171
<i>Index</i>	207

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	David's <i>Oath of the Horatii</i> (1784)	x
Figure 6.1	Krystie Red Sugar Looks Back	73
Figure 6.2	<i>Follie Follies</i> Poster	75
Figure 7.1	Cherry Lyly Darling in Glamorous Fur	86
Figure 7.2	Florence Agrati as Lady Flo	87
Figure 7.3	Bambi Freckles' Dangerous Femininity	97
Figure 9.1	The Angel of Burlesque	130
Figure 10.1	David's <i>The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons</i> (1789)	151

*This page intentionally left blank*



## PREFACE: RETROMANIA IN RETROSPECT

*Magnifique. Merveilleux. Incroyable.* Such were the superlatives that greeted the star of the Salon of 1785. Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii*, an arresting oil painting of Ancient Roman fealty, completely captivated the crowd, the critics, the cynics, the courtiers and commoners alike. Even the connoisseurs who complained about its technical infelicities conceded that David's stupendous canvas was an astonishing work of art, an outstanding work of art, an unforgettable work of art, a revolutionary work of art (Brookner, 1980).

According to Thomas E. Crow (1985) – albeit many art-world authorities disagree (Roberts, 1989) – Jacques-Louis David's extraordinary exhibit was in fact a *pre-revolutionary* work of art. That is, a prescient presentiment of the political, social and economic cataclysm which engulfed France four years later. It was a portent of the convulsions to come. It contained, Schama (1989, p. 174) contends, all the ingredients of revolutionary rhetoric – patriotism, fraternity, martyrdom and brutal defiance – though whether these attributes were imparted with hindsight or recognised at the time of the *Oath of the Horatii's* unveiling, remains an open question.

What is incontestable is that the artist was a quarrelsome rebel, a congenital renegade, who repeatedly refused to follow the officious dictates of the Académie, an institution whose

arbitrary rules, authoritarian ordinances and absolutist ethos were the Ancien Regime in miniature (Roberts, 1989). His great canvas was flagrantly oversized. Flouting convention, it was shown in Rome beforehand. It arrived irresponsibly late for the Parisian Salon. It overturned the precepts of best painterly practice, both stylistically and compositionally. And, as if that weren't enough, it depicted an entirely imaginary, 'essentially nostalgic' scene for which there was no proper historical precedent (Brookner, 1980, p. 31).

But, it was miraculous. It still is (Fig. 1). *The Oath of the Horatii* seized the past, shook the present and shaped the future. David indeed played a prominent part in that future. He was the foremost artist of the French Revolution. Apart from *The Death of Marat*, *The Tennis Court Oath* and his brutal 1789 canvas, *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies*

---

**Fig. 1** David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1784)



Source: Marie-Cécile Cervellon (taken in the Musée du Louvre, Paris)

---

of his *Sons* (which was even more of a harbinger of the horrors to come than his *Horatii*), he was an active Jacobin, a garrulous member of the National Assembly, an unapologetic signatory to Louis XVI's death warrant and the creative genius behind several spectacular ceremonial occasions (such as *The Festival of Unity and Indivisibility*) that took place as the Terror wreaked havoc and Madame la Guillotine went about her blood-soaked business. Granted, David wasn't the first to embrace neoclassicism, which ruthlessly swept aside the rococo overkill of Watteau and what have you. But, he went way, way beyond 'imitation' of the ancients, as Winckelmann recommended (Jones, 2018), and radically reinvented tradition. He performed what Walter Benjamin (1973, p. 253), arguably the most creative cultural critic of the twentieth century, would later describe as a 'tiger's leap' into the past that explodes the continuum of history (Lehmann, 2000).

Considered today, *The Oath of the Horatii* is an early example – arguably the quintessential example – of *la mode rétro* (Guffey, 2006). For contemporary marketing and consumer researchers, like ourselves, retro products and services are characterised by a combination of the old and the new. Typically, this comprises an old-fashioned form, style or setting combined with bang up-to-date performance, technology or functioning. The on-going *Star Wars* saga, for example, is built on a 40-year-old film that is set a long time ago (in a galaxy far, far away) and where every episode comes complete with state-of-the-art special effects, as well as new plot twists and story lines. Each release, what is more, is accompanied by a worldwide outbreak of retromania as the franchise's long-standing fanbase faces Force-feeding once more.

The pandemonium that accompanied Jacques-Louis David's ancient Rome-evoking masterpiece, a revolutionary and revelatory work of art, which was simultaneously backward-looking and ahead of its time, may or may not have

been the first recorded instance of consumer retromania. But, as this book shall show, there's no shortage of retro a go-go nowadays. Revolutionary nostalgia, *à la* David, is not lacking either, though the notion might come as a surprise to those old-school scholars who consider nostalgia 'inherently reactionary' (Bonnett, 2017, p. 7). As Benjamin (1979) observed about Surrealism, the most avant-garde artistic movement of his day, 'revolutionary energies inhere in the outmoded' (Eiland & Jennings 2014, p. 491). That's equally true today.

For our part, we firmly believe that artworks – be they J.-L. David's, J. J. Abrams's or André Breton's – provide unparalleled insights into the character of popular culture, consumer society, the human condition, if you will. Without getting too precious about it, we concur with Ezra Pound's claim that poets, painters and playwrights are the antennae of the human race (Gay, 2007) and with an eminent consumer researcher's statement that 'you can learn more ... from a reasonably good novel than from a "solid" piece of social science research' (Belk, 1986, p. 24). Works of art may not 'tell the truth' in any veridical sense. However, in today's post-truth world of fake news, alternative facts and so forth, the ultimate truth is inaccessible anyway. Artworks offer an attractive alternative to standard social science research techniques.

Hence, we regard retromania and revolutionary nostalgia through the lens of neo-burlesque, a reinvented performance art that is flourishing in France, Britain, America and elsewhere. Each individual chapter, furthermore, will be introduced with the aid of an appropriate exemplar drawn from diverse domains of popular culture, past and present. We also aim, in accordance with the artistic idea that the manner must reflect the matter, to communicate our findings, our feelings and our facts in a way that reflects the spirit of the things we're writing about. Neo-burlesque is irreverent, fun, cheeky, ribald and obstreperous. We can't promise all of

that, but we'll do our best to ensure, in the words of cultural critic Craig Brown (2018, p. 14) – discussing Cohn's classic book about the early years of rock and roll, *Awopbopaloo-bopalopbamboom* – 'that language should go in tandem with its subject'. If, in short, you're looking for sober scholarship, circumspect commentary or carefully qualified conclusions, bail out now.

There is one area, though, where we remain strictly conventional. Namely, with regard to the content of this preface. The primary purpose of a preface is to explain why the authors undertook the work that's about to unfold. Prefaces, by convention, are both written last and pertain to the prehistory of the project. In our case, Marie-Cécile was very much the prime mover. A life-long lover of vintage fashion, she spent many a happy hour browsing through the flea markets of Paris, Les Puces de Saint-Ouen in particular. While there, she found herself increasingly drawn to the neo-burlesque subculture, whose affiliates shopped in much the same places and were equally enamoured with vintage merchandise. As a marketing professor specialising in luxury brands and second-hand fashion, Marie-Cécile was no less conscious of the enormous store luxury labels set by their illustrious heritage and whose archives are regularly raided by in-house design teams seeking inspiration for forthcoming collections, cruise shows, magazine spreads and suchlike.

Stephen is a lapsed postmodernist who passes himself off as an academic specialising in consumer research, specifically the subdiscipline colloquially known as CCT (consumer culture theory). Drawn to the irreverent and retrospective wings of postmodern thought, epitomised by Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson, respectively, Stephen has written a number of papers on retro marketing, retro branding and retromania more generally. He has also written several less than best-selling novels, which are still available from all good charity

shops, used bookstores and Amazon Marketplace emporia. They are well worth 0.01 p. of anybody's money.

In our field of marketing and consumer research, academics are increasingly expected to specify precisely who did what in co-authored research publications. The division of labour was very clear cut in this instance. Marie-Cécile initiated the project, collected the data and gathered all the accompanying photographs, videos, archival material, etc. Stephen wrote the text in consultation with Marie-Cécile, and with the expert guidance of the editorial and copyediting team at Emerald, Philippa Grand, Rachel Ward and Rajachitra Suresh in particular. We are very grateful for their assistance, as we are to our informants, who allowed us to include excerpts from the interviews conducted by Marie-Cécile. The photographic agencies Emmanuel V. Photographies, 2shadowland, Mickaël Rius Photographies and Vincent SAB Photos kindly granted permission to reproduce their portraits of Cherry Lyly Darling, Lady Flo, Bambi Freckles and Krystie Red Sugar, respectively. Neoretro produced the poster of Follie Follies, which features in chapter 6, courtesy of Florence Agrati. Hilary Downey of Queen's University, Belfast, was responsible for the *Angel of Burlesque* artwork in Chapter 9. Thank you, all.

This book is dedicated to Marie-Cécile's daughter, Ava Marie des Lys, and her mother, Gabrielle (a.k.a. GaBichette).

Stephen Brown and Marie-Cécile Cervellon  
July, 2018

# INTRODUCTION

*This page intentionally left blank*



## WELCOME TO WONDERLAND

When *Burlesque* was released in November 2010, the omens for the movie were favourable. Starring Cher and Christina Aguilera, the would-be blockbuster was set in the ever-popular world of the performing arts and told the timeless tale of a talented small-town singer who makes it big in show business while learning life lessons along the way (Bloom, 2010). Better yet, the classic rags-to-riches narrative was conveyed with a production budget of \$55 million, which filled the screen with incredible costumes, stunning dance routines and lashings of retro razzle-dazzle (Armstrong, 2010). Best of all, *Burlesque* was in tune with the zeitgeist, surfing the wave of a nostalgia-freighted art form that had surged in popularity during the first decade of the twenty-first century, when emancipated women embraced the traditional strip-tease and rebooted it as ‘neo-burlesque’ (Blanchette, 2014).

The movie, unfortunately, underperformed at the box office. Within two weeks of its Thanksgiving-timed release,

*Burlesque* had fallen from the top 10 and quickly disappeared thereafter. If far from a catastrophe, Steven Antin's frills- and feathers-filled film was closer to a turkey than a triumph. The principals were panned for their pedestrian performances; the clichéd storyline was ridiculed for its obvious debt to *Coyote Ugly*, hardly the most female-friendly source material; and, as if that weren't enough, the content was condemned by some members of the neo-burlesque community, who considered it a cheesy caricature of their subversive subculture. It failed to connect with those it aimed to attract and whose good word-of-mouth would have helped greatly. Despite Stanley Tucci's wonderful, world-weary one-liner when Cher gives Christina Aguilera a job in her cheap 'n' cheerful burlesque club – 'Welcome to Wonderland' – more than a few movie-goers spurned Stanley's salutation. You're welcome to it, they collectively replied. Don't curtain call us; we'll curtain call you.

The wondrous welcome, however, was delayed not denied. Antin's wannabe blockbuster may have been insufficiently feel-good for audiences struggling with the financial fallout from the Great Recession, but *Burlesque* is enjoying a happy ever afterlife on DVD and Netflix, where Aguilera's decorous dirty dancing, Cher's moonstruck attempt to turn back time and Tucci's reprise of his droll role in *The Devil Wears Prada*, has been elevated to the dizzy heights of camp classic, guilty pleasure and, arguably the ultimate cinematic accolade, so-bad-it's-good. If not exactly *Rocky Horror*, *Showgirls*, or *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, *Burlesque* has been redeemed, reclaimed and reassessed. In keeping with its retrospective subject matter, and reincarnated plotline, the movie has made a comeback, a welcome return on investment.

#### BACK TO FRONT

*Burlesque*'s afterlife, admittedly, cannot be divorced from the nostalgia-rich conditions that prompted its production in the

first place. The so-called ‘nostalgia boom’ that characterised the late 1990s – and that many believed was an artefact of the millennial transition (Naughton & Vlasic, 1998) – is still going strong. Twenty-one years ago, the celebrated stand-up comedian George Carlin (1997, p. 110), since deceased, pointedly remarked that:

*America has no now. We're reluctant to acknowledge the present. It's too embarrassing. Instead we reach into the past. Our culture is composed of sequels, reruns, remakes, revivals, reissues, re-releases, re-creations, re-enactments, adaptations, anniversaries, memorabilia, oldies radio and nostalgia record collections.*

Incessant commemorations also attracted Carlin's ire. ‘Who gives a fuck’, he continued, ‘about Bugs Bunny's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday’, or Lassie's 55<sup>th</sup>, or the Golden Jubilee of *Gone With the Wind*, or the start of the Korean War or the fact that Bambi has also reached the big 50? Shit, I didn't even like Bambi when I was supposed to, how much do I care now?’ (Carlin, 1997, p. 111).

Carlin's incorrigible comments are no less true nowadays. Whether it be award-winning television shows such as *Pol-dark* and *Peaky Blinders*, or the return of old favourites like *Red Dwarf* and *Will & Grace*, or the inexorable rise of vinyl records, vintage fashion and venerable fragrances (e.g. Roger & Gallet's *Aura Mirabilis*) or latterly relaunched motor vehicles like the legendary Vauxhall Viva and the muscular Ford Mustang, or consumers' seemingly insatiable penchant for old-fashioned skateboards, surfboards and skis, or the ceaseless cavalcade of reunion tours by once rebellious rock bands that reform for one final payday (or two or three or four or more, depending how the gigs go), there's no lack of retro consumption, nostalgia marketing and throwback branding

bouncing around (Baird-Murray 2017). ‘The past’, Aspden (2013, p. 12) avers, ‘is a time whose time has come’.

Even contemporary politics is caught up in – and can’t escape from – the coils of ‘nostalgic nationalism’ (Kuper, 2017, p. 5). Donald Trump is determined to make America great again. Ditto Macron’s France. Brexiteers seek to reinstate Britain’s ‘island nation’ status. The Chinese, Indian and Russian leaderships aim to recapture the glories of the national heretofore, as indeed do those of Islamic State and al-Qaida. According to Hamid (2017, p. 2), contemporary political rhetoric is deeply steeped in neo-nostalgia, where ‘leaders seek a return to imagined past greatnesses that were usurped by foreign invaders, colonisers and barbarians’.

As per Carlin’s pre-posthumous profanities, commemorations too are two-a-penny. This year’s alone include Votes for Women, Karl Marx’s bicentenary, the birth of the Big Mac and jumbo jet, Hugo Ball’s daring Dada Manifesto, Mary Shelly’s imperishable *Frankenstein*, Alfred Hitchcock’s towering *Vertigo*, Van Morrison’s immortal *Astral Weeks*, the Armistice of 1918, the student uprisings of 1968 and, perhaps most importantly from our perspective, the 150th anniversary of the arrival of burlesque, which is conventionally dated to the scandalous New York debut of Lydia Thompson’s *British Blondes* in September 1868. More later...

## BACK ATTACK

Such is today’s appetite for retrospection that it won’t be too long, surely, before we start commemorating the nostalgia boom of the 1990s. The recently announced reformation of the Spice Girls is a lip-synched whisper in the wind (Sinclair, 2018), as is the re-release of the Nokia 3310,

which comes complete with irksome ringtone and Snake, its original 1970s-style video game (Burkeman, 2017). Zadie Smith's latest novel is likewise set in the mid-1990s, a time when Britannia was cool and 'optimism infused with nostalgia' prevailed:

*The boys in our office looked like rebooted Mods – with Kinks haircuts from thirty years earlier – and the girls were Julie Christie bottle-blondes in short skirts with smudgy black eyes. Everybody rode a Vespa to work, everybody's cubicle seemed to feature a picture of Michael Caine in Alfie or The Italian Job. It was nostalgia for an era and a culture that had meant nothing to me in the first place.*  
(Smith, 2017, p. 88)

There is, though, one crucial difference between nostalgia then and nostalgia now. Back then, nostalgia was nugatory. Characterised by excessive sentimentality and woebegone moping around, it was regarded as the signature ailment of maudlin baby boomers and reactionary right-wingers (Bonnett, 2010). Twenty-one years later, nostalgia is generally considered healthful, wholesome, a very good thing and, not unlike the initially reviled *Burlesque*, something that pretty much everyone experiences, enjoys and benefits from (Adams, 2014). As Cher warbled at the time, 'You haven't seen the best of me'.

It thus seems that, far from being a passing fad, an epiphenomenon of the millennium transition, the nostalgia industry is bigger and better and bolder than ever. It's a mature market with propitious and profitable prospects. Almost 40 years after Fred Davis (1979) wrote the book on yearning for yesterday, the name of the game is earning from yesterday. Just ask ABBA, whose avatar tour is set to hit the road armed with two new songs, plus a sequel to *Mama Mia!* in the

multiplexes. Money, money, money, here we go again. My my, buy buy, how can we resist you?

As if that weren't enough to be getting along with, it seems that those opposed to the nostalgia bonanza can't help reveling in the thing they're condemning. In *Retromania*, a 500 page diatribe about contemporary pop music's addiction to its past, Simon Reynolds (2011) lovingly lists the rampant retrospection in manifold fields of popular culture. After dealing with film and theatre and fashion and television and revived West End musicals, he waxes lyrical about retro toys, retro gaming, retro food, retro interior design, retro candy, retro ringtones, retro travel, retro architecture and retro advertising, such as the recent reuse of Heinz' much-loved slogan from the 1960s, 'Beanz Meanz Heinz'. But strangest of all, he gasps, is the demand for retro pornography...

## BACK TRACK

Reynolds doesn't mention burlesque, though we're not complaining. This book comprises an overview of recent developments in yesteryearning, yesterearning and yesterlearning. Its centrepiece is an empirical study of a neo-burlesque community in France, a community of fun-loving, liberation-seeking women whose pastime is not only being commodified by the malefactors of multinational capital, but also being condemned by fourth-wave feminists who regard neo-burlesque as just another twist in the tale of female oppression (Ellen, 2018). Far from being a form of false consciousness, we show that neo-burlesquers find freedom through *falsie conscientiousness*.

Short and sweet, *Revolutionary Nostalgia* comprises three sections of three chapters each, plus an introduction and conclusion. The first section, *Past & Present*, sets out the

necessary background, with chapters devoted to *nostalgia*, *retro* and the *resurgence of insurgency*. The second section, *Focus & Findings*, is our centrepiece. It devotes one chapter to the rise and fall and rise again of *burlesque*, another chapter to our empirical *research* approach – a three-year period of ethnographic immersion – and a culminating chapter where the *findings* of our study are spelled out. The third and final section, *Context & Concepts*, is more speculative and somewhat discursive, inasmuch as we reflect on ways and means of conceptualising neo-burlesque, nostalgia and retro marketing more generally. These comprise considerations of *hauntology*, *post-postmodernism* and *matters metaphorical*, all of which are tied together in our *conclusion*.

Before stepping lightly on to the dance floor, however, a word regarding positioning is in order. This book is written with a readership of consumer researchers and marketing specialists in mind, specifically those who subscribe to the precepts of CCT (consumer culture theory). Our findings, though, are likely to be of (at least some) interest to sociologists, anthropologists and historians, as well as women's studies, media studies and cultural studies scholars and students. Ditto the neo-burlesque community, whose irreverent ethos has inspired our rambunctious writing style. This is no po-faced tome on an ancient art form, much less a reverential treatise regarding neo-nostalgia and the retro revolution. It is, rather, a fun-first, frolic-filled, fantasy-fortified trawl through the fishnets, feather boas and firmly held feminist convictions of the neo-burlesque community. Flagged in the preface, but here stated formally: our style reflects the content. We subscribe to the view, forcefully put forward by Fred Davis (1979, p. 29) in *Yearning for Yesterday*, 'The nostalgic experience can only be grasped through some such medium as music, dance or poetry and possibly through painting and some kinds of photography'.

## BACK AND FORTH

Although dance is our principal delivery mechanism, novels can be pretty useful as well. Consider Michael Crichton's (2000, pp. 360–361) prescient comments in *Timeline*, a top-selling techno-thriller written at the turn of the millennium, when contemporary retromania was getting into gear. Seeking investors for his quantum leap time-machine, a Steve Jobs-type tech savant practises his super-slick sales pitch:

*'We are all ruled by the past, although no one understands it. No one recognises the power of the past', he said, with a sweep of his hand.*

*But if you think about it, the past has always been more important than the present. The present is like a coral island that sticks above the water, but is built upon millions of dead corals under the surface, that no one sees. In the same way, our everyday world is built upon millions and millions of events and decisions that occurred in the past. And what we add in the present is trivial...*

*The invisible rule of the past, which decides nearly everything in life, goes unquestioned. This is real power. Power that can be taken and used. For just as the present is ruled by the past, so is the future. That is why I say, the future belongs to the past.*

Almost 20 years on, there is no stopping nostalgia. It is now our 'dominant cultural force' (Lyne, 2016, p. 8). Or so it seems. How come?