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Locating vintage

2015

<https://doi.org/10.5117/NECSUS2015.2.KNOW>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Knowles, Kim: Locating vintage. In: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, Jg. 4 (2015), Nr. 2, S. 73–84. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/NECSUS2015.2.KNOW>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/10.5117/NECSUS2015.2.KNOW>

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Locating vintage

Kim Knowles

NECSUS 4 (2): 73–84

DOI: 10.5117/NECSUS2015.2.KNOW

Abstract

Few issues are as pertinent today as the relationship between old and new, past and present, obsolescence and progress. Contemporary culture is increasingly characterised by a heightened awareness of the past through a revaluing of old styles, artifacts, and aesthetics. From vinyl records and super 8 cameras to iPhone apps and second-hand clothes, vintage and retro increasingly permeate our collective conscious. But how can we parse and understand these overlapping practices of looking back? This introductory essay acknowledges the ambiguous terrain of vintage and the blurred distinction between authentic appreciation and stylistic appropriation. It locates the vintage phenomenon within Walter Benjamin's dialectical image, arguing that current artistic engagements with outmoded technology might be seen as productively activating the past in the present and exploring the new in the old. However, the simultaneous explosion of vintage into mainstream consumer habits requires a broad examination of the term in order to draw out its contradictions and complexities.

Keywords: vintage, retro, nostalgia, analogue, Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard, hipster

- She said I looked like a 1950s housewife
- Well your dress *is* slightly anachronistic
- What? It's vintage I'll have you know!
- I know, but being vintage doesn't make it attractive.

During a party scene in Xavier Dolan's film *Les Amours Imaginaires / Heartbeats* (2010) the two twenty-something characters engage in a brief exchange that touches on the pervasive yet paradoxical nature of vintage

and its association with notions of quality, beauty, and value. Within a sea of trendy young partygoers, the dress in question stands out as an object of ridicule. What Angela McRobbie refers to as ‘anachronistic dressing’¹ is here thrown into relief, framed and legitimised by the catchall aesthetic criterion of ‘vintage’. Interestingly, in the subtitled version of the film, the final retort – ‘je sais, mais c’est pas par ce que c’est vintage que c’est beau’ – is translated (or rather interpreted) tellingly as ‘not all vintage should come back’. This cutting criticism of an indiscriminating embrace of past styles *because* they are past highlights a key issue in the explosion of vintage into virtually every area of contemporary culture. Dolan is particularly attuned to popular culture, and the film demonstrates the extent to which vintage has been appropriated not just as a fashion statement but as a way of life that is itself adopted stylistically and at times ironically. Towards the end of the film the two friends, seated awkwardly on vintage chairs, drink tea from mismatched vintage china cups. ‘I’m out of madeleines’, says Marie (Monica Chokri), before handing Francis (Xavier Dolan) a book featuring the iconic 1926 image by Erich Consemüller of a masked woman relaxing on a designer chair by Marcel Breuer. Bauhaus style meets everyday vintage chic in a mishmash of temporal references that contain a knowing wink to empty nostalgia.

Through its numerous references to vintage, *Les Amours Imaginaires* provides a playful springboard for thinking about how the term relates to attitudes and (life)styles and the extent to which the past increasingly frames our relationship to the present. In fact, vintage has become such a mainstay of contemporary society that we rarely stop to think about how it functions and the way it informs our value judgments, affective attachments, and purchasing habits. From the original 1950s dress serendipitously stumbled upon in a second-hand shop to the faux-vintage jacket bought in a high street store, and from the dusty old Super 8 camera found in the attic of a deceased relative to the plethora of iPhone apps offering a range of vintage photographic filters, the past clearly has a hold on our collective conscious. Authentic artifact or stylistic simulation – often the boundary is ambiguous, the distinction confusing. For some it seems to matter, for many it is irrelevant. Is the user of the iPhone app less genuinely rooted in history than the collector of vintage cameras, less engaged in the process of remembering, whatever form that might take? Where are the threads that connect vintage, nostalgia, and irony? Perhaps it is too easy to assume that the younger generation is less sincere in its digital appropriation of the ‘real thing’ when affluent buyers of highly-priced originals may be more invested in vintage as a marker of taste and

social status than they are in historical origins. Similarly, can we readily distinguish between an authentic appreciation of the depth and texture of vinyl records on the one hand and the ‘utter fetishisation of anything “retro” that Jake Kinzey equates squarely and disparagingly with the hipster style on the other?’² We might find that on closer inspection they are but two sides of the same coin.

In his critique of the contemporary retro phenomenon, Jean Baudrillard describes our fascination with the past as a symptom of postmodern vacuity or loss of history, where acts of remembering provide a way of escaping the void of meaning in which we are caught. While this account still has some import and relevance in identifying societal responses to our current late capitalist condition and can arguably be seen to operate in the recent wave of digital nostalgia, where ‘all content can be evoked pell-mell [...] everything is equivalent and is mixed indiscriminately’,³ it leaves little room for reflection on the different manifestations of vintage and retro and closes down the complexity of nostalgia as *both* productive and reductive. As Stuart Tannock has argued, ‘[i]n order to develop more adequate critical discussion of nostalgia, the presence of multiple and different nostalgias among individuals and communities of social groups throughout Western modernity has to be acknowledged.’⁴

In its inseparability from nostalgia, vintage therefore demands further investigation if we are to understand the multitude of practices and processes of remembering that it activates and its potential for opening up new aesthetic and ethical engagements with history. This involves tracing its shifting manifestations and meanings across a seemingly infinite range of cultural phenomena and locating a stable reference point from which to assess future sites of productivity and theoretical application. The past decade has seen a growth of academic interest in cultural negotiations of the past, particularly in relation to the field of nostalgia studies. Katharina Nieyemer’s edited collection *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future* is a vital contribution to this area, as is Amy Holdsworth’s *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*. Simon Reynolds’ *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to its Own Past* and Elizabeth Guffey’s *Retro: The Culture of Revival* both provide a thorough account of what Reynolds describes as the ‘re’ era: ‘revival, reissue, remakes, re-enactments. Endless retrospection’.⁵ Within these categories, however, the specific character of vintage – its relationship to nostalgia and its distinction from retro – remains underexplored. Where does vintage end and retro begin, and how can the differences in their stylistic features and material engagements allow us to parse an overwhelming array of contemporary practices of

looking back? Within the often-overlapping meanings of these terms, how can we distinguish between what Baudrillard and Walter Benjamin describe respectively as nostalgic reification and critical interrogation?

In the field of media studies, vintage is intricately tied to technological transition, questions of obsolescence, and the delicate interplay between the old and the new, the analogue and the digital, tangible material traces and clean lines and surfaces. Through the process of media replacement in which digital technology with its promise of speed, efficiency, and instantaneity supplants older technologies, these latter are reframed and repositioned, thereby taking on desirable auratic qualities and a reassuring materiality. As several of the contributions in this special section point out, the aesthetic signifiers of analogue technology – dust, scratches, faded colours, granular textures, cuts, flares, and other imperfections – have become part of the language of new media, allowing users through various software applications to access a certain vintage ‘look and feel’ without the need to negotiate or even truly contemplate the outmoded technology from which it originates. At the same time, those very technologies that new media attempts to emulate, rather than disappearing altogether, pass, in Raymond Williams’ terms, from the ‘dominant’ to the ‘residual’⁶ and enter into new aesthetic relationships and value systems on the basis of their reduced and marginalised cultural status.

For Benjamin, cultural debris in the form of the obsolete, the outmoded, and the discarded opens up a process of historical reflection that runs counter to the linear narrative of modernist progress. ‘It is not that the past throws its light on the present’, he states, ‘or the present its light on the past, but [the dialectical] image is that wherein the past comes together with the present in a constellation.’⁷ Benjamin’s dialectical image thus provides a model for thinking about current practices of cultural recuperation, where a desire for the materialities of analogue filmmaking, vinyl records, and Polaroid photography is not simply a case of fetishising the past, but often represents a more complex engagement with how history functions in the present. As I have argued in a forthcoming article on the aesthetics of slowness, the use of what may now be considered ‘vintage’ equipment such as Super 8 or 16mm film can be framed as an attempt to (re)discover a different kind of temporality and bodily investment to the one offered by digital technology and its insistence on speed and instantaneity.⁸ These engagements with old processes open up, as Williams argues, a form of critical knowledge that enables ‘new perceptions and practices of the material world’.⁹ It is within alternative grassroots communities – the burgeoning scene of analogue film labs, for example, with its circulation of

outmoded technology and the resurrection and reinvention of practices deemed obsolete¹⁰ – that we find the past productively activated in the present. This is as much about projecting forwards as it is about looking back, since analogue artists are increasingly pursuing new modes of expression and asking important questions about what it means to be working with old materials in a digital culture so obsessed with upgrades and latest versions.



Fig. 1: Lost and found: recycled filmstrips used for an analogue editing workshop.

As a number of writers have argued, the vintage or retro phenomenon has developed partly as a response to capitalist practices of consumption, the overabundance of goods, and the emphasis on rapid cycles of production, replacement, and disposal.¹¹ The increasing standardisation of consumer items and their lack of durability (which necessitates subsequent replacement and sustains the cycle of consumption) gives rise to a sort of ‘newness fatigue’ – a frustration with, in Benjamin’s word’s, the ‘hellish repetition’ of

the new as ‘always-the-same’¹² – and produces a desire to seek out ‘authentic’ alternatives. Vintage is therefore associated with the knowing, ethical consumer who pursues an oppositional mode of being through artifacts that hold a deeper value and meaning deriving from their historical origin. It functions as a way of dissociating oneself from the mass of undiscerning shoppers by carving out an alternative practice based on rituals of hunting through second-hand stores and picking out the rare ‘find’ or bargain. In their studies of second-hand cultures, Louise Crewe and Nicky Gregson draw attention to the additional importance of human exchange and the sense of belonging as members of a community sharing specialist knowledge about vintage items and their origins and history.¹³ Vintage shopping turns the modern subject into a curator of their own style and identity through a knowing selection and combination of household objects and/or items of clothing, jewelry, and other accessories. What is interesting about this redefined status of the old object is the process through which ‘junk’ and discarded stuff, when reframed as vintage, ‘starts again to produce value as a signifier of taste and class’.¹⁴

This special section, to a large extent, emerges from my own attachment to old things – analogue technology, the bric-a-brac of flea markets, books that have passed through several anonymous hands – and my susceptibility to the aesthetic and affective draw of the vintage object, the traces of time that manifest in its material presence and which are testimony to a life lived, places travelled, people encountered. These objects from the past have a story to tell and I, in turn, tell myself stories about them. Their histories become part of my history, our respective stories and identities overlapping and intertwining, converging at points and diverging at others. Vintage in this sense is closely tied to the idea that things, objects, stuff, have ‘cultural biographies’ that, as Staffan Appelgren and Anna Bohlin have argued, ‘can be seen as a culturally generative force that reconfigures objects into objects-in-motion, enabling particular forms of subjectivity’.¹⁵ I consider this process to be deeply embedded in what recent theories of ‘new materialism’ describe as the ‘performative power of materiality’¹⁶ – the notion that non-human matter has agential capacities, a vitalism or ‘thing power’¹⁷ that contains within it the ability to produce change, and which, importantly, challenges and reconfigures the dominant view of the human actant as the *only* actant. Considered from this perspective, our interaction with objects is not a one-way process – things are not passively acted upon by human subjects but are, rather, active participants in the constitution of their and our own subjectivities. This is a mutually-defining process that Karen Barad formulates as ‘intra-action’¹⁸ and which Coole

and Frost describe as a 'multitude of interlocking systems and forces'.¹⁹ To study vintage is therefore to question and explore the complexities of our relationship with objects and to take up more ethical positions in terms of our own agency and responsibility towards the material world.

Associated with this, the accumulation of vintage objects, as suggested above, represents an ethical stance against a contemporary 'throwaway culture' and the attendant problems of waste disposal that increasingly threaten the environment. To rescue old objects from the rubbish heap, recycling, reusing, giving them a new life, and framing them as vintage, is to go against the logic of consumer society. In the Autumn 2013 NECSUS special section on 'Waste', guest editors Alexandra Schneider and Wanda Strauven point out that '[w]aste seems to have become the new buzzword of this decade.'²⁰ That we might argue the same of vintage is not incidental. However, the editors also draw attention to the other side of this connection when they highlight the troubling 'aestheticization of waste' that manifests in the stylistic appropriation of obsolescence and the 'commercial exploitation' of old media.

Perspectives on the counter-cultural gesture of mining the past are problematised, then, by the displacement of vintage into the mainstream. Walking through the city I experience Baudrillard's 'empty form of representation' as my visual field is bombarded by vintage shops of all kinds that sit alongside high street chain stores; sitting in a café bar I catch sight of a flyer for a '10 year anniversary shindig', promising 'vintage hair, make up, nails, face painting' and 'special vintage afternoon cream teas'; during a visit to the bank I am surprised yet compelled by a display of old machines for weighing coins, found in a store cupboard and arranged carefully on the counters because, the teller informs me, 'they look nice'; on leaving I pass a man wearing a t-shirt on which is printed the words 'vintage denim'; at home, browsing the Internet, I notice a whole host of vintage products – a bank of archival photographs that can be printed as 'vintage posters', a new vintage-style camera, vintage nappies ... Vintage, it seems, is everywhere, but its meaning is increasingly nowhere – a contemporary appendage, a signifier without a signified, a 'lost referential'. It encapsulates the new branded as old, as well as the old rebranded as new. It relates to both objects and experiences and confuses the distinction between mainstream and alternative.

From within this confusion we need to stake out a path back to the origins of vintage in order to understand how the term came into being and to trace its development through the twentieth century and into the contemporary era. How does vintage function as a memory practice, what

are the different manifestations of vintage, and are Schneider and Strauven justified in treating the current ‘pre-digital nostalgia or vintage craze’ as ‘disturbing’? The articles in this special section provide insightful perspectives on these pressing questions; they take up a variety of positions and map out the theoretical, historical, sociological, and aesthetic foundations for understanding vintage as a vital part of contemporary culture.

Through archival research into more than 400 documents from a variety of sources, Katharina Niemeyer weaves together a compelling historical overview that will serve as an indispensable reference point for future research into vintage. She asks a crucial question: ‘what exactly happened in between the documented appearances of vintage in the fields of first oenology and, later, fashion and furniture?’ Distinguishing vintage from the related aesthetic categories of retro and kitsch, her discussion clarifies different approaches to and appropriations of the past through their association with nostalgia. This theoretical grounding culminates in a consideration of how articulations of nostalgia manifest in contemporary uses of both digital and analogue media.

Tim van der Heijden picks up on these questions in his consideration of two contemporary instances of what he terms ‘technostalgia’ – the digital smartphone app iSuper8 and Johan Kramer’s film *Bye Bye Super 8 – In Loving Memory of Kodachrome* (2011). Comparing the ways in which these two projects approach the ‘death’ of Super 8 film, van der Heijden makes a significant contribution to the field of memory studies, arguing that they can be read from the perspective of Svetlana Boym’s ‘restorative’ and ‘reflective’ nostalgia respectively. Boym’s work has been particularly influential in developing more nuanced understandings of how nostalgia operates in contemporary society not simply as a ‘yearning for yesterday’²¹ but also as a productive means of negotiating the past. Nostalgia, she argues, ‘is not always retrospective; it can be prospective as well’.²² While restorative nostalgia is associated with a reconstruction of the past, reflective nostalgia moves towards a process of deconstruction, ‘calling into doubt’ the certainties of the past and acknowledging the complexities of our relationship to the past in the present. In negotiating these two positions through his discussion of different kinds of memory practice, van der Heijden opens up crucial insights into the relevance of vintage aesthetics to the wider field of nostalgia studies.

In her study of vintage television viewing, Helen Piper similarly explores the processes of memory through responses to historical programmes and reminiscences about the material presence of the television set in the domestic setting. In its focus on ‘the felt, lived, and remembered’, Piper’s

contribution moves the emphasis of television history from the macro to the micro, arguing that audience research has a crucial role to play in constructing alternative, personal narratives about how the past continues to function in the present. Reflecting on how memories are formed and articulated through specific triggers, Piper demonstrates how individual identity is constructed through a constant negotiation between our past and present selves and reveals how this process is tightly bound up with our cultural consumption and material interactions. The association of vintage with lived experience makes important steps towards understanding the phenomenon as an integral part of our emotional development.

Moving from television to film, the contribution by Stefano Baschiera and Elena Caoduro shifts the focus towards the subject of aesthetics. Here, they argue that ‘the aesthetic category of vintage is spurious’ and requires further elucidation in order to clarify the dialogue between overlapping yet distinct stylistic approaches. Drawing on a number of films that incorporate an aesthetic of the past into their visual design, they propose a taxonomy that consists of ‘faux-vintage’, ‘retro’, and ‘anachronistic’. Through their insightful analysis of Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013) and Jim Jarmusch’s *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2014), the authors draw out specific features of the anachronistic mode, touching on the difficulties of representing contemporary modes of digital communication within the filmic *mise-en-scène*.

The relationship between vintage and retro is further unpacked by Kristian Handberg in his discussion of two popular magazines focusing on vintage living design and vintage video games: *Scandinavian Retro* and *Retro Gamer*. Here, Handberg traces the contemporary development of the two terms from their usage in fashion and design to their appearance in festivals and museums, arguing for ‘a more nuanced perception of retro and vintage, including different cultural positions and practices and thus uses of the past’. Vintage, he observes, is based largely on the presence of material objects ‘elevated to a status of authenticity and aesthetic remarkability’ through the passage of time – their disappearance from mainstream circulation and reappearance in a new context. His account draws particular attention to the explosion of vintage into the mainstream after 2000 and identifies current trends in re-appropriating the past.

The section concludes with Arild Fetveit’s consideration of vintage aesthetics in popular culture, taking the music videos of Lana del Rey as a case study. Connecting the use of ‘aggressively de-skilled do-it-yourself Super 8 cinematography’ in these videos to the contemporary interest in ‘dead media’, Fetveit develops a theory of ‘precarious aesthetics’ – faded, worn, grainy, and unstable images that provide an alternative to the visual per-

fections of digital. Through Fetveit's discussion of contemporary society as defined by insecurity, vulnerability, and a state of indeterminacy, the theme of vintage and nostalgia is catapulted into broader theoretical terrain, demonstrating how the cultural 'in-between-ness' of outmoded aesthetics might be used as a springboard for exploring the notion of precarity more generally. We end, therefore, with a meditation on the critical potential of vintage aesthetics in popular culture in revealing the 'flaws and inadequacies' of the contemporary world in which we live.

In their overlapping explorations of vintage, the six contributions provide a mosaic of perspectives on this enduring cultural phenomenon. The aim is not to provide conclusive answers but to open up the discussion by offering new theoretical frameworks and aesthetic connections that might be taken up in new contexts. The threads of this vintage fabric hang loose, inviting others to continue its story.

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Notes

1. McRobbie 1988.
2. Kinzey 2010, p. 39.
3. Baudrillard 1994, p. 44.
4. Tannock 1995, p. 454.
5. Reynolds 2011, p. xi.
6. Williams 1977.
7. Quoted in Buck-Morss 1989, p. 291.
8. Knowles forthcoming in 2016.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
10. For an overview of the artist-run analogue film lab culture see Chodorov 2014 and Knowles 2014.
11. To cite just a few: Appelgren & Bohlin 2015; Crewe & Gregson & Brooks 1998; Franklin 2011; Hetherington 2004.
12. Buck-Morss 1989, p. 108.
13. Gregson & Crewe 2003.
14. Boscagli 2014, p. 83.
15. Appelgren & Bohlin 2015, p 148.

16. Barrett & Bolt 2013.
17. Bennett 2010, p. 20.
18. Barad 2003, p. 821.
19. Coole & Frost 2010, p. 9.
20. Schneider & Strauven 2013.
21. The term comes from the title of the book by Fred Davis (1979).
22. Boym 2001, p. xvi.