

No time like the past? On the new role of *vintage* and *retro* in the magazines *Scandinavian Retro* and *Retro Gamer*

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Abstract

The article presents a cultural historical rendition of the terms *vintage* and *retro* and how the revival of the recent past based on objects of modern culture is a characteristic feature of late 20th and 21st century culture. In the words of music critic Simon Reynolds, we have entered a state of *retromania*, where revival has become ubiquitous and has changed the focus from new to old. Retro and vintage has been made accessible to a wider audience and is not delimited to the subcultural sphere. This development is shown and analysed through the case of two monthly magazines: *Scandinavian Retro* (2011-present) and *Retro Gamer* (2005-present). On the basis of these specialised retro medialisations the framing of the past through retro and vintage is discussed and suggested as being nurtured by myth and well as materiality.

Keywords: vintage, design history, revival culture, material culture, cultural memory, retro, retro gaming

‘Detta är är retro, [holding up 1960s lamp]
detta är inte retro.’ [holding up a 19th century chandelier]
(This is retro, this is not retro). – *Scandinavian Retro* chief editor Magnus Palm
in the video *Vad är retro?* (scandinavianretro.com)

‘Back to the Eighties’
‘Back to the Nineties’
(permanent features in *Retro Gamer* magazine)



Fig. 1: Scandinavian Retro.



Fig. 2: Retro Gamer.

Using the past as if there were no tomorrow has become a feature of 21st century culture, often expressed through the terms *retro* and *vintage*. Differing from previous revival cultures oriented towards a distant past, retro and vintage are defined in their focus on the recent past, decades instead of centuries ago, and by being based on the reintroduction of the mass-produced objects of modern culture invested with authenticity and value, happening in an interplay of irony and nostalgia. This article will explore the terms retro and vintage through a defining introduction of the concepts and their cultural historical background and contemporary uses. The analysis will stress a changed status of the terms in contemporary culture, where retro and vintage have gained a common usage, transgressing previous borders and distinctions in a condition of sheer 'retromania', according to music critic Simon Reynolds. The synchronous popularisation and specialisation in contemporary practice is illustrated with reference to the publications *Scandinavian Retro* and *Retro Gamer* – lavish popular magazines dedicated to vintage living design and vintage video games respectively.

I will perform a cultural historical reading of the terms retro and vintage using a number of sources reflecting the critical debate as well as observations from different cultural fields, not least the magazines. Instead of performing a full-scale survey of the media, their audiences, and production, I will rather use them as striking and remarkable examples of contemporary retro practice to illustrate the concepts and their current state. The last part of the article will discuss the use of the past in retro and vintage and how it is based on the presence of material objects as well as cultural mythologies – a fact often overlooked in the retro critique. I will argue for a more nuanced perception of retro and vintage, including different cultural positions and practices and thus uses of the past.

1 Vintage: A short introduction

Concerning the term vintage in itself, the critical reception in academic studies has not matched the commonplace circulation of the term and the quite specific meanings it carries as concerning 'modern classics' and conscious anachronism, differing from antiques or simply being outmoded, and coexisting with related terms like retro and kitsch. In contemporary culture vintage is a label for objects from the recent past of a specific value and cultural authenticity – not as unique artworks or high-end status symbols of pure material value but as objects of modern mass-production

and culture now elevated to a status of authenticity and aesthetic remarkability. Like retro, vintage implies a process of revival and the re-introduction of effects of a previous era into the context of the contemporary. To gain the status of visibility and aura of another age is essential to vintage; the things have to have been out of focus and then re-appear in a different setting.

Here the knowing and self-aware position is central; vintage is essentially an investment of knowledge and cultural awareness into materially-existing objects. The defining feature of vintage is not use value but sign value, which supposes a shared understanding of the past and recognition of details such as the patterns on dishes or the graphic fonts in video games. This is also a matter of aesthetic sensibilities and of a certain humor, again based on a self-aware understanding, often clannish and subtle. As a self-conscious way of acquiring and living with things retro is obviously an important performance of distinction for its practitioners, to employ a Bourdieuan terminology (the analysis will later show a changed field for this identity-defining process). An overall definition of vintage and retro is thus: a deliberate and self-conscious revival of the recent past, usually of the era 1950-1980, and largely of the 20th century. Compared to retro, vintage seems to be more concerned with actual objects from the past (like clothing and furniture from the 1960s compared to replica objects or stylistic references in contemporary cultural products) and a slightly more elevated and valuable status than the sometimes more kitsch-cultivating irony of retro. After all, the term vintage is derived from wine-making, where it is a label of distinction through the identification of time and place of origin.

In her study of vintage clothing sociologist Nancy Fischer localised the term vintage relating to second-hand clothes and anachronistic dressing to have occurred in the early 1970s, making headlines as a remarkable trend in the decade. For instance, *Vogue* reported a 'Boom in Vintage Clothes' in 1979.¹ Previously, the use of second-hand clothes had been a necessity and associated with charity, but the act of re-use was now re-interpreted as a fashionable form of alternative consumption along the lines of the counter-cultural impulses of the 1960s. Accordingly, cultural theorist Angela McRobbie has pointed to the role of anachronistic dressing in 1960s culture, where the Beatles appeared in colorful uniforms on the emblematic and eclectic *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) LP cover created by artist Peter Blake. Both Fischer and McRobbie point to the importance of an infrastructure of second-hand clothing to appear with markets and media appearances. Even though vintage implies a myth of being alterna-

tive to the established trade and taste system, the popularity of vintage seems to have been well-supported by media coverage and promotion from the beginning.

In the media coverage in youth, fashion, and lifestyle magazines of second-hand and anachronistic clothing that Fisher portrays in her analysis, second-hand solely occurs as charity in the 1950s. The 1960s witness examples of re-sale shops of nearly-new clothes (not vintage or retro), and then the new youth style associated with the counter culture. The 1970s can be labelled 'the mainstreaming of vintage dressing' and the 1980s 'the establishment and diffusion of vintage style'.² Even though Fischer notes that the incentives for acquiring vintage clothes expressed in surveys are strikingly similar from the 1980s to the 2000s, described as 'high quality at a low price, originality, eco-consciousness and nostalgia',³ I will argue that remarkable changes in the role of vintage and retro has occurred in recent years with a prolific spread and a new attribution of value. I will now address this development through a short cultural-historical sketch of retro and the current retromania.

2 Retro: A short introduction

Retro should also be seen as an invention of the last decades of the 20th century, different from previous revivals of a distant Golden Age (from the Neo-Sumerian revival of older Sumerian dynasties around 2000 BC, suggested by Egyptologist Jan Assmann as the first known 'revival culture'⁴, to the better known 18th century classicism or the artistic program of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood) as being an informal representation of the recent past. Also differing from previous revivals primarily taking place in fine arts and official culture, retro is based on modern popular culture and the agency of subcultural practices.

The term retro is first encountered in the early 1970s as a neologism, derived from words like retrospective and retroactive, describing the deliberate use of the look of the recent past as 'retro style', 'retro look', or 'retro fashion'. A decade before, at a cultural moment characterised by another optimism, the brake rockets of NASA's space flight sending astronaut John Glenn into space were called 'retro-rockets', obviously without any retro connotations. In 1973, America in 1962 was recalled as an entirely different era through the features of youth culture in the movie *American Graffiti*, produced by George Lucas. Reproducing the looks, sounds, and aura of the recent past in a combination of irony and nostalgia, the movie spear-

headed a remarkable revival of the 1950s (1962 marks the end of the 'Fifties' era in *American Graffiti*) in the 1970s, for instance including the television series *Happy Days* (1973-1983), the musical *Grease* (1973, due to its success made into a blockbuster movie in 1979), and cover albums of 1950s and early 1960s rock by prominent new artists like John Lennon (*Rock and Roll*, 1975), Bryan Ferry (*These Foolish Things*, 1973) and David Bowie (*Pin Ups*, 1973).

This presence of the Fifties in the Seventies, forming the imagery of a collective youth before the turbulent coming-of-age of the Sixties, was not uncontroversial, as it was received with head-shaking astonishment by several commentators in articles like 'The New Nostalgia Yearns for the Apathetic Fifties' in the St. Petersburg Times in 1971. The 'proto-retro' of the Fifties revival implicated a re-framing of the era, elsewhere remembered as dull and grey and not worthy of any revival. Even more controversially, a French trend of the look of the war-era 1940s in the beginning of the 1970s became known as *la mode rétro*, arguably giving the name to retro. This revival was expressed in institutionalised fields like haute couture fashion and film rather than in practiced youth culture, for instance in the Yves Saint-Laurent 1971 collection *Hommages aux Années 40*, and in films like *Lacombe, Lucien* (Louis Malle, 1974). It was also a more obviously controversial gesture than the typical later retro practice concerning the emergency state of the war years rather than a civil past.

As with vintage, the 1980s can be described as 'the establishment and diffusion of retro style'. In the 1980s the use of retro and vintage grew and sharpened an ironical edge, not least associated with the aesthetical stance of postmodernism. In the influential writings by Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson around 1980, retro is recognised as a feature of the postmodern condition. In 'History: A Retro Scenario', appearing in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard evokes an omnipresent use of the past as 'death pangs of the real' without ability or wish to convey any meaning. Sharpening this critique, Jameson also sees the present postmodernism of late capitalism as dominated by non-critical representations of the past and the 'mass-marketing of nostalgia'. In these representations the past of the historical 1950s has been effaced by a 'Fiftiness' in sheer surface aestheticism. However extravagant they are, the works of postmodernist culture are 'not able to represent our historical past so much as they represent our ideas or cultural stereotypes about that past', and thus 'we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about the past, which itself remains forever out of reach'.⁵

Contrary to this skeptical criticism, it is possible to see critical potential

as well as a real engagement with the past in retro practice. In the book *Fifties Style* by designer Richard Horn (1985) the retro revival of the 1950s is characterised as ‘a sensibility that both ridicules and enjoys the ridiculousness of naively optimistic, consumer-crazed postwar America’,⁶ forming a critical stance towards the past as well as the present:

wearing fifties or fifties style clothes in the eighties can be interpreted as a kind of social protest in and of itself. To do so is to make a statement, one that mocks [...] the values of the fifties, and to a certain extent those of the Eighties that America holds so dear.⁷

Arguably, retro was politicised in the 1980s with the neo-conservatism of Ronald Reagan and slogans like ‘new politics of old values’, which signalled a straight-faced admiration of the past, making retro’s ironical framing of the era a critical response.

The retro of the 1980s also showed a more historical interest in the postwar epoch and its culture, expressed in a boom of books like Thomas Hine’s *Populuxe: The Look and Life of America in the ‘50s and ‘60s, From Tailfins and TV Dinners to Barbie Dolls and Fallout Shelters* (1986) and Alan Hess’ *Googie: Fifties Coffee Shop Architecture* (1986). As chronicles of roadside architecture and life in suburbia, these titles display a very different approach than the appreciation of classic design, combining the aesthetic, the historical, and the entertaining and recognising the recent past as distant, yet formative – features very characteristic of retro. In Hine’s book the popular modern *populuxe*-design (a neologism created by Hine to describe the popular luxury of the era’s material culture) is defined as being different from the more restrained Scandinavian Modern style. The Populuxe Fifties are emblematic of the era’s kitsch cultivation seen on indie album covers and other subcultural spheres, signalling an alternative position towards the contemporary mainstream.

This sums up the meaning of retro as a knowing and somewhat informal use of the recent past, associated with alternative or underground culture. From the beginning retro is based on distinct versionings of a specific past, often challenging the dominant view and valuation of that past. With a varying focus on nostalgia and irony, retro both confirms and challenges the connection to the past, again based on being a deliberate and recognisable reintroduction of material from the recent past.



Fig. 3: Flyer for the shop Mondo Kaos in Copenhagen.

3 Retromania: The retro boom of the 21st century

After 2000 retro and vintage have gained new meanings. The revival of the recent past is not delimited to a subcultural sphere and primarily non-commercial anti-aesthetics. Instead, retro is made accessible and available to a much larger audience, not scavenged in charity shops but marketed in style-conscious boutiques all over the Western world. Perfected, newly-sewn 1950s dresses can be acquired, maybe combined with retro makeup and styling or even a Fifties pin-up photo set, as offered in Montreal's Marina Vintage Style or Copenhagen's Mondo Kaos. Apart from these niche boutiques, the retro look is a frequent feature on the mainstream market. For instance, H&M promoted its Fall fashion campaign in 2012 with pop star Lana Del Rey singing the 1950s song 'Blue Velvet' in a thoroughly retro visual style. Collections tied to 1950s and 1960s icons like Marimekko, Sonia Rykiel, Yayoi Kusama, and Bjørn Wiinblad have been promoted in recent years by H&M, Louis Vuitton, and Rosendahl, again, beyond any subcultural level. Media productions have also frequently gone retro, from a wave of very style conscious television series depicting Mid-Century Modern (*Mad Men* [2007-2015]) to the popular mobile photo tech-

nology Instagram (2010) creating a style reminiscent of Polaroid and Kodak Instamatic photos for a very contemporary and casual photo sharing. Retro is omnipresent it seems, and spreading across distinctions and boundaries. However, retro is still a practice at a subcultural level, where the revival of past subcultures like Rockabilly or Northern Soul is perfected and specified to an increasing degree, supposing a specific shared knowledge and recognition.

In the bestselling commentary *Retromania* (2011), music critic Simon Reynolds has labeled a retromania taking over popular culture through 'endless retrospection', 'revivals, reissues, remakes, re-enactments', in a veritable 'Re'-decade starting the new Millennium through 'rampant recycling: by-gone genres revived and renovated, vintage sonic material re-processed and recombined'.⁸ Behind this is a change in retro from being a preserve for cultists and aesthetes to a general condition nurtured by vast media access to the past, self-glorifying musealisation of rock history, and, more speculatively, a missing ability to be new and modern at all.

Within the field of music culture Reynolds criticises the obsession with the past that is draining out the once so spectacular energy of the *new*. The recognition of the expansive retromania might be seen along the lines of the general memory boom or history boom observed by several critics. Literature historian and cultural critic Andreas Huyssen has dubbed a shift from 'present futures' to 'present pasts' as characterising late 20th century culture. Here, a broad range of phenomena from new museums and historical restorations to retro fashions and period drama movies draw 'a turning towards the past that stands in stark contrast to the privileging of the future so characteristic of earlier decades of twentieth century modernity'.⁹ While Huyssen is not irrationally skeptical of this, arguing for a balance between the forwards and backwards focus to answer the challenges of the present, Reynolds is worried of a pop-cultural meltdown, where the previously vital culture is missing its ability to be new and modern at all. This position might be controversial and reminiscent of the more deterministic modernist aesthetics of the progressivist ethos of the new – particularly for leisure-based and unofficial pop culture.

Apart from this, Reynolds' commentary is concerned with two circumstances: the tight connection of the retromania condition with new media and technology, and the musealisation impulse in popular culture to preserve and link to the past. In consumption as well as production the easy access to the past has stimulated the use of it in a casual shuffle of samplings, mash-ups, and reruns. For instance, Reynolds states that '[o]n the Internet, the past and the present commingle in a way that makes time

itself mushy and spongiform.¹⁰ A paradoxical product of the contemporary age and its technology is a feel of *hyper-stasis*:

[i]n the analogue era, everyday life moved slowly (you had to wait for the news, and for new releases) but the culture as a whole felt like it was surging forward. In the digital present, everyday life consists of hyper-acceleration and near-instantaneity (downloading, web pages constantly being refreshed, the impatient skimming of text on screens), but on the macro-cultural levels things feel static and stalled. We have this paradoxical combination of speed and stand-still.¹¹

This is of course hard to prove or deny, but it points to a general recognition of changed temporal *feel* and a past-present-future continuum related to the new technology and media.

More politically-radical critics have seen retro as a symptom or expression of capitalist culture's final victory, from the aforementioned Fredric Jameson to Mark Fisher,¹² while others have defended the critical potential in revival aesthetics.¹³ Throughout the 'retro debate' (which still has not been reflected in many academic studies) it is important to recognise a new, expanded role of retro and vintage. For one thing, the revival of the recent past is not only a counter-aesthetic focused on the ironic staging of 'kitsch'; it also includes a more classic conception of good taste and aesthetics. Accordingly, much larger investments are put into retro, which is dealt like expensive antiques and nurtures a whole retro industry. Finally, and more overlooked, retro increasingly overlaps with traditional discourses of history and heritage in a musealisation, where the traditional practices of the museum-like collection and display are spreading far beyond their institutional domain. The recent past is increasingly made subject to museum activities, often based on everyday and popular culture, similar to retro and with a style-confident vintage approach. Examples include *Radically Modern: Urban Planning and Architecture in 1960s Berlin* (Berlinische Galerie, 2015) and the very successful exhibition *David Bowie is*, shown at Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2013 before touring worldwide. The opening of a whole department dedicated to recreating the 1970s in the open-air museum Den Gamle By in Aarhus, Denmark is another remarkable example, as well as historical festivals taking Mid-Century Modern themes like the Golden Days Festival in Copenhagen, formed as a celebration of 19th century culture in 1996, taking the 1950s as its theme in 2012 and the 1970s as the announced theme in 2016.¹⁴ There are even festivals solely dedicated to retro and vintage like Retro Festival near Lon-

don and the Festival of Vintage in York, with the slogan ‘there’s no time like the past’.¹⁵ In Sweden near Gothenburg, 80 kilometers of country road has been inaugurated as *Retrovägen* (The Road of Retro) in 2014 with a program of flea markets, vintage car shows, cafes, and retro-themed exhibitions at local museums. According to the local organisers, the participants along *Retrovägen* have ‘two things in common – the word retro and the period of 1950s, 60s and 70s’.¹⁶

These examples show the general popularity of retro and how it is not an informal, subcultural phenomenon. Musealisation and medialisation are key components in this development, making retro more accessible and profoundly practiced in an expanded range of cultural positions and meanings. This is further investigated and exemplified in two distinct examples of current retro and vintage culture: the magazines *Scandinavian Retro* and *Retro Gamer*.

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Figs 4a, b: Flyers for Festival of Vintage, York, UK, and Retrovägen ('The Retro Road'), Sweden.

4 Scandinavian Retro: Retro in the home

Scandinavian Retro is a 100-page magazine in six volumes per year, published in Swedish (with English article summaries) by Egmont Publishing. It started in 2011 as *Hus och Hem Retro* (as a special issue of the general living and design magazine *Hus och Hem*) and is a glossy, popular magazine dedicated to 20th century design and living.¹⁷ Its richly-illustrated pages cover furniture, crockery, ceramics, lamps, glass, fashion, and popular culture centered on collectible objects for the home. This is supplemented with 'visiting at home' reportages from retro homes, guides to flea markets and shops, and period piece photos. The centre of gravity is the classical retro decades from the 1950s and 1960s and Scandinavian design,

where designers from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland are covered and mentioned in a familiar and informal way.



Fig. 5: Issues of Scandinavian Retro. Photo: Scandinavian Retro.

A sample issue (2014, vol. 2) covers the following themes: sofa tables through the 20th century; a recreated 1970s home at an open-air museum in Jämtland; the 1950s Domino pattern by designer Stig Lindberg; 1960s tapestry by designer Sven Fristedt; iconic women's hairstyles through the 20th century; plastic watering cans from the 1950s to 1970s; a vintage photo of a family picnic from the 1950s; a feature on the children's books of Elsa Beskow (1874-1954) with a guide to the market value of each book; a photo reportage from the newly-opened Retrovägen; and a section of advertisements for shops and markets. Another issue (2014, vol. 6) also contains a register over covered themes and designers, giving the impression of a reference guide. The style is popular and accessible, much based on visual material and an elaborate layout, making *Scandinavian Retro* an obvious coffee table publication, perfect to be placed on the vintage teak table in the trendy living room or in a retro shop. The approach to the past is entertaining and focused on attractive objects. Social history is no big concern, neither is the structure behind the design in business or industry history. However, there is some amount of cultural historical background, for instance in a feature on desk lamps describing how the currently popular design objects were originally developed for use in industrial working

places.¹⁸ This signals a mixture of the historical, the aesthetic, and the entertaining which is emblematic for retro and vintage.

The selection of vintage objects in focus in *Scandinavian Retro* is eclectic, containing classical Scandinavian modern as well as other styles from the period, exclusive designer models, and cheaper, popularised versions. As the designation retro indicates, the period piece character is more important than conventional artistic value. Compared to retro as associated with youth subculture and fashion, *Scandinavian Retro* is focused on the home, its design, and the purchase of objects for it. This indicates the target audience as being older and affluent. The ironic kitsch-cultivating strain in retro is obviously geared towards a celebration of desirable objects. Accordingly, the elaborate and inviting magazine offers an accessible inclusion to the vintage world for a casual audience. The media format of the magazine also testifies to the new role of retro and vintage. It has to have a broad customer base to sustain its production and distribution system, far different from web-based media and online communities. The glossy magazine by a big publisher like Egmont also differs from the magazines previously associated with retro style, from various underground magazines to edgy fashion magazines like *The Face*. As Fischer's analysis showed, vintage and second-hand clothing was frequently covered in fashion and lifestyle magazines of the 1970s. However, the concept of a whole magazine dedicated to vintage is new and a remarkable example of the general popularity of retro and vintage today.

A detail that should be noted is that *Scandinavian Retro* is distributed in the Scandinavian countries plus in Japan. This surprising fact shows the notorious demand for Scandinavian vintage in Japan and the interplay of local specificity and global circulation also characteristic of retro in contemporary culture. The retrospective recognition of Scandinavian modernism probably started in Japan before spreading to the West (and of course Scandinavia) in recent years. In Scandinavia, Scandinavian modernism is part of national heritage discourses, for instance through exhibitions of designers like Hans J. Wegner at Designmuseum Denmark in Copenhagen (2013). The association of Scandinavian with vintage design, like in the magazine *Scandinavian Retro*, surely adds to its value, even if it is not strictly limited to exquisite Scandinavian modernism or the canonical designers of the official musealisation. The magazine also includes the functionalistic style of the 1950s and early 1960s as well as the quite ornamented late-1960s and 1970s style, thus ignoring distinctions important in the era. This can be an expression of creative juxtapositions often found in retro

(combining kitsch exotica with form-follows-function Scandi-modernism) or an overall encompassing inclusion, satisfying as many tastes as possible.

Scandinavian Retro is obviously a product of the retromania era with its accessible guidance to retro in the home, aimed at a wide and casual audience. This is a character embedded in the media of the magazine, for instance compared to the informal spaces of blogs or web forums. With its focus on design and living it also expresses a new domesticisation of retro, ironically taking the objects back to a similar context that they were originally aimed at. The tile-topped table was marketed for the living rooms of middle class suburban homes in the 1950s and was stored away before being put up as retro in a bohemian café in the 1990s. Now it is more likely to appear in a respectable living room again.



Fig. 6: *Retro Gamer* magazine presented with gadgets. Photo: *Retro Gamer*.

5 *Retro Gamer*: Niche or mainstream?

Another magazine remarkably showing the demand for retro is *Retro Gamer*. This UK-published monthly magazine is solely dedicated to the field of retro gaming – playing vintage video and computer games, usually from the 1980s and 1990s. It was established in 2005 and reached issue number 100 in 2012, (of August 2015) currently on its 145th volume.¹⁹ Like *Scandinavian Retro*, *Retro Gamer* is a glossy, visually-dominated popular magazine. The content also expresses a merging of the historical, the aesthetic, and the entertaining, giving guided access to a specific field.

The magazine is about 100 pages and uses its subject of vintage computer graphics to create a distinctive look. A simulated sticker says 'Old', where magazines are typically branded as 'New' (see illustration). *Retro Gamer* emphasises this turnaround of the high-tech entertainment of the recent past from new to vintage old by a rhetoric of 'classic' and 'anniver-

sary' around the games and hardware. Regular features include the columns 'Back to the Eighties' and 'Back to the Nineties', carving out the main focus of the magazine. A sample issue (No. 109 from 2012) contains the following: a reportage from the retro gaming event Play Expo 2012; a column about the love of tape decks by comedian Iain Lee; a feature on the productions of the software house Ultimate; an interview with Tetris creator Alexey Pajitnov; articles on 'Arcade games that never made it'; the feature 'The Making of ...', describing the creation of a classic game; and, oddly enough, 'Future Classics: Modern games you'll still be playing in the future'. In its first years *Retro Gamer* was issued with a CD with sample games. Technological development has motivated this to be moved to the webpage retrogamer.net, which is also the home of a debate and blog universe.

The concept of a printed magazine dedicated to the digitally-based subject of retro gaming might be paradoxical, expensive, and only able to represent a small part of the games. However, the medium of the illustrated magazine makes it possible to deliver an accessible guide to the games and the associated retro universe. The publisher of *Retro Gamer* (Image Publishing) issues over 20 magazines, mostly dedicated to technology and digital culture, including five magazines on computer games.²⁰ Like *Scandinavian Retro*, *Retro Gamer* is far from an underground magazine produced by the scene for the scene. It is a commercial publication by a big publishing house appearing between niche and mainstream. Again, this is remarkable and typical of the new status of retro and vintage, where the revival of the recent past is made accessible and invested with knowledge and value.

Compared to the conventionally home sphere-based focus on design and living in *Scandinavian Retro*, retro gaming is more associated with youth and pop culture. The vintage status is arguably more ironic, as this popular entertainment, largely based on being new, is re-approached as durable classics. A returning question concerning retro gaming is whether the old games are played today because of their retro value as period pieces, surrounded by a nostalgic aura of cultural historical authenticity, or, as some practitioners claim, because of the qualities of the games compared to contemporary productions. *Retro Gamer* seems to meet the 'culturalist' as well as the 'functionalist' demand, describing the gamer experience as well as the period piece ambience of the games. In a similar way as the popular design history of *Scandinavian Retro*, *Retro Gamer* does not deal with the infrastructure behind the gaming business or the more technological programming aspects of the games.

Retro Gamer not only revives the outdated cultural objects of the recent past but also attributes value to the ephemeral pop culture genre of computer games. Where *Scandinavian Retro* covers esteemed design (even art) taken serious in its day, as well as more popular objects, *Retro Gamer* is solely dedicated to the lowbrow cultural territory of computer games and not associated with historical meaning or aesthetic value in the 1980s. The musealisation gesture of *Retro Gamer* is thus remarkable and corresponds with media archaeological efforts in the retro gamer culture, where the oft-forgotten history of hardware and software are collectively assembled. Simultaneously, a more institutionalised musealisation is also occurring, with semi-official museums like Computerspielmuseum in Berlin and retro gaming events as part of established cultural festivals (recently Golden Days in Copenhagen featured a LAN party as a main event²¹). It is debatable whether this inclusion of previously disdained material in categories of heritage and cultural commons confirms these categories and their relevance for contemporary society or forms a challenge to the notion of these. As mentioned in the perspective from Huyssen of the shift from 'present futures' to 'present past' (roughly corresponding with modernism to postmodernism), and in Reynolds' lament for the missing dynamics of the new in popular culture, 'heritage' and 'common past' might clash with the idea of modernist culture. Still, it has nonetheless become an important issue, as new things get historical and, in the terms of cultural memory studies scholar Jan Assmann, move from the levels of everyday communicative memory to the collective level of cultural memory. Considering the omnipresence and power of mass-produced popular culture in modern societies it should be an important task to include its forms in our heritage – a process that retro musealisations, as in retro gaming, has pioneered.

6 Between myth and materiality: Vintage as a framing of the past

As indicated above, retro and vintage imply a transgression of traditional fields and distinctions, making studies of both phenomena hard to delimit as 'object-based' within design and art, or 'sociality-based' within a subculture and social identity. Vintage is not limited to a commercial enterprise, not an ideological movement or *ism*, nor a copyrighted imprint belonging to makers or critics. Indeed, vintage furniture and clothing is traded commercially, but it is also made, restored, and practiced beyond the commercial sphere. Overall, I argue, vintage is an aesthetic category concerning

material objects. These things are not materially produced into the category of vintage but culturally nominated at a later stage of their physical life. Even though the term vintage signals a status of durable value and quality, vintage implies a radical rereading and revaluing of objects. As sociologist Michael Thompson stated in *Rubbish Theory* (1979), man-made objects are produced into a certain functionality and value that typically decreases over time. The material life cycle of objects does not necessarily correspond to their economic life – they simply continue to exist. After being new and in use they go into a state of uncertainty, typically in transit zones like attics and storage closets, from where they can be taken into value again or disposed of more definitely. According to Thompson the choice is between rubbish and durability, oblivion or coronation – a choice deliberately staged in retro and vintage.

The new status of the object as retro/vintage obviously gives it a radically changed meaning, as the things in question are typically ordinary everyday objects of the recent past revalued as authentic and unique. From being outmoded and too much of their age ('that awfully Eighties-like look') their time-specificity becomes a mark of distinction, and the anonymity of the mass-produced modern object is associated with authenticity and remarkability, as an orange 1950s krenit bowl is lauded and priced as vintage and placed on the revalued teak chest of drawers. The re-interpretation cultivating the associated origin of the object ('this whiskey glass carries the aura of the Mad Men era') is a selective and aesthetised window to the past obviously formed by the contemporary imagination. Accordingly, retro and vintage can be said to be the shape of this window formed by the repeatedly developed versions of a desired past like the 1950s.

Fredric Jameson diagnosed movies depicting the 1950s as just showing a 'Fiftiesness', obviously stereotyping the past and reflecting the empty post-modern culture in his famous essay and later book *Postmodernism, or, the logic of late Capitalism* (1983/1991). Film scholar Christine Sprengler has elaborated on this 'framing of the Fifties' in *Screening Nostalgia: Populuxe Props and Technicolor Aestheticism in Contemporary American Film* (2009). Admitting the constructive character of the cinematic representation of the past, Sprengler uses the distinction between *The Fifties* – a specific mythical, nostalgic construction – and the historical time from 1950 to 1959, with all its social, political, and cultural complexities.²² Sprengler points to deliberately different versions of the 1950s dominating the present recall, as she recognises different 'kinds of Fifties' in movies, such as the *Lounge Fifties* with its 'Rat Pack' style, *Hollywood Fifties* inspired by the

era's Film Noir movies, and *Populuxe Fifties* depicting suburban life. In a similar way, Reynolds recognises different musical 'essences' drawn out of the Fifties, reaching from the clean-swept teenage pop in *Grease* (musical by Warren Casey and Jim Jacobs, 1971; film by Randal Kleisner, 1978) to the rebel yell of obscure rockabilly favored by punk-influenced groups like The Cramps. Throughout this, retro practices set up a distinct version of the past using a recognisable set of props and aesthetic means in a selective framing of a specific past. Besides this constructivism, Sprengler also points to some elements in the retro recalls being produced by the past. 'There is much about the 1950s that sources the Fifties including the period's images of itself,'²³ she writes. For instance, the 1950s was the first decade to represent itself in mass media and popular culture. The 'populuxe props' (or Scandinavian Modern furniture) is not just culturally constructed today (by 'our own pop images and stereotypes of the past', as Jameson claimed), but reflects an unprecedented abundance of objects from cars to kitchenware produced, distributed, and lived within the era. Any practice of retro and vintage naturally reflects a material presence of objects from the past; the constellation of objects will vary from place to place: We find a different constellation of 1950s things in Oslo than in Paris or Dallas, for example. This is consciously reflected in *Scandinavian Retro* and its guides to retro scenes.

On the other hand, retro is nurtured by a general circulation and cultural distribution, including medialisation and marketing. The analysed magazines are examples of this, with their supply for the vintage demand in their specialised fields. Obviously, such media distribute specific versions of retro and thus framings of the past. When retro gets more established, as shown in the magazines, the distributed images could be expected to prevail in the way Jameson feared, not to mention the loss of the new as lamented by Reynolds. However, the omnipresence of retro also leads to different uses of the past and to engagement with the past. For instance, the magazines contain knowledge of specific aspects of the past, be it the aesthetics of 1950s watering cans or 1980s hockey video games – areas not contained in the domain of traditional history and possibly opening up to an enlarged understanding and experience of the past and its role today. It is also important to state that these magazines are not practiced retro but inputs to it. Retro is practiced in a combination of many fields and happens actively over time, socially and materially. More than ever, it is thus difficult to attach a specific meaning to retro and vintage or to see them as direct responses to or consequences of specific conditions in contemporary culture. Retro is practiced simultaneously with the digital revolution and

nurtured by its changing thing-world. This creates an experience of changed materiality common to any retro and vintage object, from Finnish enamel to Bomb Jack on the Commodore 64.

To a larger degree than usually thought, retro is a central part of the way contemporary culture relates to the past – not as a random and superficial play with any past, but as a cultural memory of the thing-based industrial society with its self-confident new and modern things, in the post-industrial information society, where the production of meaning instead of things is the main activity of Western societies. Vintage and retro have become multifaceted practices, becoming available and accessible to a larger audience while simultaneously being practiced at an increasingly dedicated and specialised level. The magazines *Scandinavian Retro* and *Retro Gamer* illustrate this very well with their accessible guidance to retro practice and combining the historical, the aesthetic, and the entertaining.

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Notes

1. Fischer 2015, p. 56.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 52-60.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
4. Assmann 2011, p. 18.
5. Jameson 1998, p. 10.
6. Horn 1985, p. 58.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
8. Reynolds 2011, p. xi.
9. Huyssen 2003, p. 11.
10. Reynolds 2011, p. 63.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 427.
12. Fisher 2009, 2014.
13. Thorne 2003; Stanley 2013.
14. <http://goldendays.dk/case/det-sker-nu> (accessed August 2015).
15. <http://www.festivalofvintage.co.uk/> (accessed August 2015).
16. <http://www.retrovagen.se/Pages/Page.aspx?pageId=2397> (accessed August 2015).
17. <http://www.scandinavianretro.com/om-oss> (accessed August 2015).
18. *Scandinavian Retro*, Vol. 2, 2014: 51-56.
19. http://www.retrogamer.net/blog_post/retro-gamer-issue-145-is-out-today/ (accessed August 2015).
20. <http://www.imagine-publishing.co.uk/> (accessed August 2015).
21. <http://goldendaysfestival.dk/event/play-it-again-historisk-arkade-nat> (accessed October 2015).
22. Sprengler 2009, p. 39.
23. *Ibid.*

