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The New Old: Archaisms and Anachronisms across Media – Editorial

Stefano Baschiera and Elena Caoduro

Transmedial and transcultural expressions of nostalgia are ubiquitous in our contemporary popular culture. Revival styles, vintage fashions, retro phenomena, skeumorphs and remediations are common presences in our increasingly digital cultural landscape, which gives up the dreams of spotless perfection of the binary code for the indexical ruins of the analogical. The popular culture critic Simon Reynolds has correctly identified the renaissance of past decades at the turn of the new millennium, arguing that "instead of being the threshold to the future, the first ten years of the twenty-first century turned out to be the 'Re' Decade. The 2000s were dominated by the 're-' prefix: *re*vivals, *re*issues, *re*makes, *re*-enactments. Endless *re*trospection" (xi; emphasis in the original). The fascination with the "outdated", the pastiche of "retro" styles, and the evocation of past technologies are evident in media, fashion and industrial design and in different digital realms, from videogames to smartphone apps. This rediscovery and revisiting of past materialities and aesthetics is not simply a form of contemplative longing and emulation, but it also brings forth novel and innovative ways to engage with, rework and reappropriate the past.

This issue of *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* is devoted to the presence of archaisms and anachronisms in the contemporary mediascape and contributes to the current interdisciplinary debates around the nostalgia phenomena. Over the past decade, the digitalisation of culture has revolutionised the way we experience and consume the arts and the mass media, deeply affecting how these are perceived in their materiality. The tangibility of cultural objects, now caught in a constant process of remediation, has slightly waned: books, photographs, films, comic books, music, maps etc. are increasingly present in our life in their digital form. At the same time, the digital disruption of media industries has contributed to the emergence of a postmodern "nostalgia for the analogue" with the rapid increase of faux-vintage and retro phenomena in different aspects of media culture.

This new sensibility towards the past manifests itself in the use of anachronisms and archaisms. On the one hand, "the new old" appears in the persistence of authentically old objects kept as cultural artefacts from specific periods of the past, which find new uses in contemporary life. While old-medium-format cameras, polaroids, audiocassettes and typewriters populate our living rooms (and home magazines) as designer objects, artists and filmmakers rediscover 16mm films and U-Matic tapes and vinyl records are taking back or even surpassing the market share generated by CDs and digital downloads. On the other hand, new cultural products look at the past, mimicking old styles, stories and textures. In their imitative look, video games rediscover the simplicity of 2d and 8-bit technology; computer and smartphone applications feature a skeuomorphic design; everyday objects,

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from clothing to appliances, look at past styles; and photo filters applications such as Hipstamatic can digitally age pictures.

In screen media, this new trend is particularly relevant because of the abundance of stories set in a fetishised past—it suffices to think of the award-winning TV series *Mad Men* (2007–2015) or Ben Affleck's *Argo* (2012)—and the reappropriation of analogue aesthetics, textures and genres from different cinematic eras, including the recurring homages to Hollywood golden age as illustrated in *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016) and *Hail, Caesar!* (Ethan and Joel Coen, 2016). The emerging phenomenon of retrosploitation is closely related to what is happening in more mainstream media (Church). Films such as *Grindhouse* (Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino, 2007) and *Hobo with a Shotgun* (Jason Eisener, 2011) constitute both a pastiche and a manifestation of the subcultural capital of "cult" productions, as well as a nostalgic view of different forms of film consumption, from the drive-in double bill to the VHS.



Figure 1: Director Damien Chazelle (left) and Ryan Gosling (right) on the set of *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016). Photo: Dale Robinette.

The production, representation and reception of "the new old" have been the focus of both literary and sociological studies (Boym; Samuel), as well as of research on design history (Guffey; Baker). However, when we look at the ways in which this discourse is addressed in media studies, the manifestation of nostalgia in the media is often framed as a reaction, a resistance to the change of time. For Katharina Niemeyer, nostalgia is both

> a reaction to fast technologies, despite using them, in desiring to slow down, and/or an escape from this crisis into a state of wanderlust (*Fernweh*) and nostalgia (in the sense

> of *Heimweh*) that could be "cured", or encouraged, by media use and consumption. Nostalgia could consequently present a symptom of progress, but also of crisis. (2)

These concerns are echoed by Jason Sperb, who in *Flickers of Film: Nostalgia in the Time of Digital Cinema* maintains that "[n]ostalgia is always most intense during periods of dramatic cultural and technological upheaval, whereby the perceived reassurances of a simpler past anchor our perception of an uncertain present (and future)" (1). We suggest, instead, that archaisms and anachronisms as manifestations of nostalgia are perhaps acts of arbitration and reconciliation more than a reaction to or tension among the past, the present and the future.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines archaism as "a thing that is very old or old-fashioned, especially an archaic word or style of language or art"; but also "the use or conscious imitation of archaic styles or features in language or art". Anachronism is instead explained as "a thing belonging or appropriate to a period other than that in which it exists, especially a thing that is conspicuously old-fashioned" or "the action of attributing something to a period to which it does not belong". The overlapping and discrepancies between these two notions illustrate how the past functions as a negotiator of meaning for the present and the future. Archaism and anachronism are terms that are familiar to most people and are used to describe the conscious imitation of the past or the persistence of the old within present times. Yet, in practice these concepts are used interchangeably and their meaning remains ambiguous.

The proliferation of objects and styles often defined as vintage (anachronistic objects in the present) or retro (archaisms, imitative of the past) in screen media urges a reconsideration of this phenomenon and, more broadly, calls for an evaluation of the fetishism for the past and its regurgitation in the present. Popular and academic applications of these concepts have mostly focused on production of styles manifested in the private consumption (fashion, architecture, industrial design). Previous definitions of vintage and retro (Baudrillard; McRobbie) seem inadequate to detail the flexibility of this phenomenon and to properly acknowledge the role of media in creating a vintage/retro world and mirroring cultural products and visual styles from the recent past that are present in our daily life. These are just some of the many examples that illustrate the necessity to analyse and theorise the heterogeneous phenomenon of vintage and retro invocations in screen media. The pace of obsolescence of the apparatus for media consumption constantly leaves something behind, reinterpreted as technological advancement or just lingering at the interstices of our cultural landscape. Concepts of "residual" (Acland) and "zombie" media (Parikka) underline the nonlinear development of technological advancement, while a new attention towards the fantasies connected to the "life cycle" of each medium (including its obsolescence) offers a new approach to the role played by the imaginary in media history (Natale & Balbi).

Methodologically, this special issue feeds into a growing interest in temporality and technologies, and the social and cultural significance of the reappropriation of styles from the past. Through discussions of period reconstruction, film style and mise en scène, "The New Old: Archaisms and Anachronisms across Media" develops a dialogue with ideas about the representation of the past, the heritage film and pastiche clearly evinced in earlier debates (Cook; Vidal; Dyer). By considering technological and cultural changes and the renewed value of retro styles, it also responds to discussions about media archaeological approaches (Parikka) and the key philosophical approaches to the technical objects. This special issue of *Alphaville* wants also to be a reflection on the state of the art of "nostalgia studies". First

discussed within medical and psychoanalytical studies of (home)sickness and melancholia, nostalgia has been widely explored in sociological and cultural research; film, television and sound studies were not immune to the interest and over the past two decades dozens of publication have flourished taking a range of perspectives: postcolonial, queer, feminist. "The New Old" builds on these works in order to find new approaches to theorise the complex relationship between pastness and visual media. In fact, we argue that the complexities of the "new old" question whether this phenomenon is simply restorative and melancholic or rather progressive and future-oriented. Thus, we are confident that this special issue will foster further reflection on the connections between temporality and screen media and become a springboard for a new meta-reflection on the discipline.

In the opening article "Media Hysteresis: Persistence through Change", Philippe Theophanidis and Ghislain Thibault recuperate the temporal notion of hysteresis as a way to reframe the relationship between analogue and digital and more specifically to rethink the folding of time within and across media. The authors offer a historical overview of the concept of hysteresis from the experimental sciences to Marx, Simondon and Baudrillard and define "media hysteresis" as a coevolution rather than a clash or divide between old and new technologies. Theophanidis and Thibault then provide three case studies to illustrate their approach to the persistence of the analogue in the digital: the Bell Systems' push-button phones, the QWERTY keyboard and other technological skeumorphs, which demonstrate that, while users seek old technologies in new devices because of a lack of familiarity, their resistance to change can become a source of new opportunities. As far as cinema is concerned, Theophanidis and Thibault interpret the so-called celluloid revival not as pathological sentimentality, but rather as a "buffer" and perception of continuity in the ever-changing and evolving cinematic experiences. For Theophanidis and Thibault, "the new old" or the persistence of the analogue within an increasingly digital world is no longer an obstacle to progression; instead, it constitutes an essential element for continuous innovation.

The theme of the tension between analogue and digital media is explored also in the second contribution of this issue. In "Performing History/ies with Obsolete Media: The Example of a South African Photo-Film" Marietta Kesting interrogates the transmission of memory in post-apartheid South Africa and the blending of different materialities and technologies in artwork, specifically in *Pied Pier's Voyage* (2014), a project by South African artist Lebohang Kganye. In her article, Kesting explores the politics of memory at play in Kgaye's photo-film, an elaborate artwork combining cut-out silhouettes from family album and archival pictures and re-enacted performances, which are eventually digitally recorded and edited into a stop-motion animation. After providing a short overview of the history of the photo-film format, an archaeological exploration of the multiple declinations and intertwining of still and moving images, Kesting draws attention to the fairy tale atmosphere of *Pied Pier's Voyage*, claiming that the magical undertone and mixed techniques remind viewers of specific memories of life in apartheid townships and their own personal memories, as well as critically deconstructing this yearning for the past. In short, contemporary artists, Kesting argues, are tampering with old photographs and recontetxualising them with digital technologies in order to reanimate the past and fill the missing archives of the present.

The various manifestations of analogue technologies in digital culture are a concern also in Jonathan Rozenkrantz's article, which shifts the attention to contemporary subcultures, analysing the short film *Kung Fury* (David Sandberg, 2015), the music video "Fromdatomb$" (David M. Helman, 2012) and the work of video art *Fiorucci Made Me*

Hardcore (Mark Leckey, 1999). Rozenkrantz proposes to pluralise the concept of nostalgia when dealing with subcultural manifestations (retro gaming and hip-hop cultures) and introduces the notions of "retrospectacle" and "aesthetic of remanence" to define the current age, where analogue video is reframed by digital culture.

Television, both as an object and a medium, has often triggered discussion about memory and temporality in popular culture. In particular, television series have provided a useful tool to understand the complexities of the relationship between memory and nostalgia in media when they playfully display and rearrange collective and personal memories. Drawing inspiration from television's complex relationship to nostalgia (Holdsworth), in "The Wonder Years: Nostalgia, Memory and Pastness in Television Credits" Kathleen Williams shifts the focus to credits and opening sequences of contemporary television series to shed new light into how pastness coexists with the present and is articulated, manipulated and represented. Considering series such as *Transparent* (2014–2016), *Californication* (2007–2014) and *Fuller House* (2016), Williams maintains that title sequences function not only as reminders of the style, themes and narrative of a show, but also offer insight into how individuals negotiate new rituals of television consumption. The nostalgia revealed by the fake home videos, montages of family photos or the ageing retro filters applied to credits ought to be understood along the lines of nostalgia's original definition (the longing for a return to one's home). Williams suggests that the construction of pastness in titles reflects the coexistence of personal and collective memories and illuminates changed habits of television consumption in the era of streaming services and video-sharing sites.

In the closing article, "Retro Quality and Historical Consciousness in Contemporary European Television", Louis Bayman picks up the discussion about mediated memories in television, this time, however, focusing on the intertwining of personal experiences and historical events in television series. Distancing himself from postmodern theories of retro that consider it as an ahistorical process, Bayman analyses the series *This Is England 86* (2010), *Deutschland 83* (2015) and *1992* (2015) and interprets their retro style as a pleasurable but serious attempt to re-experience and understand social and cultural history. For Bayman, retro is invoked in these series to create an escapist fetishisation of music, fashions and lifestyle of the past, on the one hand, and to generate an ironic detachment from elements of the past, on the other hand. In fact, Bayman concludes, retro is infused with transformative power as the subculture and mainstream products of an era that is able to capture historical changes: shifting national borders, new political orders or class identities.

Archaims and anachronisms are thus intended as processes that involve reactivation, a dynamic practice of exchange between the past and the present, the old and the new. Whilst in many cases these mediated memories might turn events, objects and fashions into fetishes, their attempts at reconstructing the past and making it coexist with the present can offer creative opportunities for the future.

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