

Will the Real Pop Culture Please Stand Up?

Retromania and the search for originality

We live in a culture dominated by high speeds, convenience and ever-expanding eclecticism. Where significant cultural movements once gripped the world, fads and trends now cut shallow ripples in the fabric of local society.

Today's popular culture is, in a fundamental sense, built entirely around instant gratification and nostalgia as these phenomena masquerade in place of originality. This statement may seem bold — brash, even — but it is this same notion that becomes a startlingly blunt hypothesis in Simon Reynolds' *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (Faber & Faber; paperback, \$18).

Reynolds, a human encyclopedia of music culture, pulls the reader through his book like a hot knife through butter. He's clearly a talented writer and has killer form and voice when he puts pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) — from a stylistic standpoint these are excellent traits to possess.

Reynolds possesses a wicked sense of humor, too: It's lines like "to venerate artworks from the past was like wasting one's *elan vital* on something inert and

decayed; like fucking a corpse" that make *Retromania* gripping. If you go into this book expecting cleanliness and godliness from start to finish, you're going to be disappointed.

Beneath the rugged exterior that these instances convey, however, Reynolds triumphs through the sheer scope of his knowledge — from the music, films and television shows he cites to the people, places and things that made them significant, he's incredibly well informed.

It takes finesse to explain the origins of the word "nostalgia" alongside anecdotes from great experiences with music and make it interesting; it takes real skill to use all of this in order to inspire a genuine craving for the past in an unwitting reader. So, yeah, this book is pretty much like a musically erudite *Inception*.

With this in mind, there are definite points at which Reynolds verges on information overload — a complication, perhaps, that goes with vast knowledge — and he has to reign himself in.

This aside, there are very few moments that force the mind away from the subject at hand. I found myself drifting from the book every now and then (only to discover,



as is the norm, that I had some pages to re-read), but during these blips I found that I was focused on a deep re-hashing of everything Reynolds had just told me.

At its core, *Retromania* not only argues that the past will always be a more desirable entity than the present; it also stands as a didactic analysis of the human condition through decades of what some would denounce as pure, cycling unoriginality. Pop culture is one hell of a remixed ride through time, and Simon Reynolds is fearless in his exploration of it. **EW**

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