

BACK TO THE FUTURE

“We must by necessity retrieve from the past to re-invent the future.”

[Malcolm Garret, *Baseline* no.13, 1990]

[Hatch Show Print: White Stripes Poster]

Rock-and-roll.

The recently released White Stripes' DVD *Under Blackpool Lights* captures and highlights a fundamental aspect of the dynamic duo's *raison d'être*. Nostalgia. If not a yearning for the past, certainly a love of it underlies and motivates the structure, sound, and image that has been Jack and Meg White's project since the mid 1990s. Shot entirely on super 8, the format for documentation is in keeping with their commitment to record their last album using only equipment manufactured before 1963. The White Stripes are, of course, not alone in turning their backs on not-so-recent developments in audio and visual technology. The 'rock-and-roll revival' of the past few years has given birth to a growing market for vintage guitars, valve amps, and analogue sound-effects (not to mention tight jeans, Chuck Taylors, Ramones t-shirts, blazers etc). To some extent a reaction to the precise and clean aesthetic of the digital late 90s, this new-old attitude is currently rearing its head in various forms of creative output. But how creative can looking back be? Has the past got anything new to offer? Have The Datsuns found something we missed the first time around?

Nostalgia is a dirty word.

It's use, in critical discourse on design, is generally in the negative. It implies a lack of originality or innovation—the appropriation of pre-existing forms and ideas—and worse, a kind of schmaltzy sentimental and emotional attachment to the past. Having been self-diagnosed as nostalgic, I'm interested in how processes, forms and ideas dredged up from the past motivate practitioners and attract audiences, but also—and perhaps more importantly—how nostalgic sources might potentially be transformed to offer less derivative and more exploratory outcomes.

The use and abuse of history.

The tendency for designers to recycle styles from the past has been the subject of heated criticism since the fall of Modernism in the late 1970s. Prompted by architects who had come to be labelled 'Post Modern', graphic designers began to explore historical sampling in the early eighties. Jon Savage, writing for *The Face* magazine in 1983, effectively labelled the decade 'The Age of Plunder'. Citing album covers by Peter Saville and Barney Bubbles, Savage exposed the appropriation at work and lamented the lack of “any *real* sense of history”. Savage was not alone. The fiercest charge came from literary critic Fredric Jameson who attacked Postmodernism for its regressive nostalgia and trivialising irony.

Other young British graphic designers such as Malcolm Garret and Neville Brody made sport of their influences, often targeting early Modernist form while irreverently ignoring its intentions. In 1990 Malcolm Garret coined the term ‘Retrievalism’ to describe his method—claiming that “All art is theft”— while Tibor Kalman publicly pronounced such work to be ‘Jive Modernism’, blaming graphic designers’ lack of historical knowledge for the fact style had become a detachable attribute.

On a recent visit to a design school in Melbourne I had a conversation with a 19 year old student who was wearing a brand spanking new Joy Division t-shirt, originally designed by Peter Saville in the early eighties. Being an old fan—of both band and designer—I tried to spark up a conversation, at which point the wearer admitted to not really knowing anything about either. Style certainly had become a detachable attribute. Sensing this kind of empty nostalgia bugged me, yet I was forced to remember that Saville himself had been accused of this exact same thing twenty years before.

The idea this kind of superficial recycling of style—of form without content—can be anything but regressive, is hard to get your head around. Of course I want to argue that Saville’s appropriations were inherently better through some sense of his ‘knowing-what-he-was-doing’, but, as anyone aware of Saville’s practice will know, this might not necessarily be the case. When discussing his early career Saville himself admits to not having read much and, consequently, recycling form for its face value—its ‘feel’—rather than a deep understanding of what it meant the first time around.

More recently however, Saville, Garret, and Brody have all been written into the growing history of graphic design as some of their era’s most *innovative* practitioners. So what happened here? Finding ourselves now in the midst of another revivalist era, taking a look at how we made it out of the eighties might be a good idea.

Descendant mutations.

One of the things I admire about Peter Saville is his refreshingly honest admission to an interest in form, image, and fashion. It seems quite bizarre to me that it *still* sounds so brave for a designer to admit to an interest in the surface of things. One of my favourite texts on design from the nineties is by Anne Burdick who, on the verge of a moment of truth, reveals that “designers crave perpetual stylistic (r)evolution”.¹

Motivated by style’s propensity to sleep around, Burdick’s piece ‘Neomania: Feeding the Monster’, tackles the same fundamental concern as Jive Modernism, but in a way that is inherently more aware of the role graphic design plays as “participant and product” in popular culture. She points out that as the pace of popular culture accelerates, our maniacal search for the constantly ‘new’ has inevitably lead to a point where “style has begun to feed on itself”. More realistic and, interestingly, less nostalgic than the arguments presented by many of her predecessors (who essentially yearn for a Modernist past),

¹ Anne Burdick, ‘Neomania: Feeding the Monster’, in *Looking Closer* (ed. Bierut, Drenttel, Heller, & Holland). Allworth Press, New York, 1994.

Burdick's ideas offer a way forward—a way out of the trappings of utopian notions of originality and innovation.

Her notion of “descendant mutations”, in which form essentially floats freely and is only tied down to meaning by its application to a context, is helpful in understanding that style (defined for her purposes as the visual language of a culture, and of a time) is organic in the sense that it, like us, is subject to evolution. In a more recent text² by Jan Michl, he puts forward a case for ‘design’ to be more appropriately referred to as ‘redesign’, in that no design is ever entirely new, that it is, at best, a new combination of solutions that have already existed.

Anyone working in any field of creative endeavour would hopefully claim to acknowledge the importance of influence. Tibor Kalman, his own practice often involving the appropriation of vernacular forms, stresses the importance for designers to “transform” borrowed ideas into “good design”³. It's not mentioned explicitly, but you can't help but be aware of the tone—good design is new design. In regard to my own line of inquiry this idea of transformation is obviously intriguing—actually it's precisely what I'm looking for—but all Kalman has to offer in this respect is the suggestion that designers must try their best to ‘re-contextualise’ and not ‘de-contextualise’ historical references.

I guess I don't really subscribe to the idea that anything can ever be completely without context, and so I'm forced to consider the Joy Division t-shirt again. I recall something else Peter Saville said. “My generation can only see things in the context of other things that have already happened. So programmed are we by postmodern sensibility—or maybe just the end of belief—that we understand everything referentially . . . Everything is like something else: ‘It's like Elvis, on speed. It's kind of medieval, in space.’ Everything is contextualised and defined retrospectively.”⁴

Nostalgia is the past imagined.

Idealised and romanticised via memory and desire, nostalgia is selective. Memory and desire have a tendency to distort and reorganise their contents and subjects. On July 19th 1954 Sun Records released Elvis Presley's first single *That's all right (mama)*, originally written and performed by Arthur ‘Big Boy’ Crudup. The B-side to the disc contained a version of Bill Monroe's *Blue moon of Kentucky*. Neither song was originally written or performed by Presley, but both were somehow transformed—rendered new. So much so, that the single was an overnight success, and the rest is history. But what I really like about this 7” piece of plastic is that it reveals—literally and poetically—the artist's strategy for transformation. One side taken from a formulaic blues structure, and the other from an equally predictable country tune, within this artefact each previously distinct

² Jan Michl, ‘On Seeing Design as Redesign: An Exploration of a Neglected Problem in Design Education’, in *Scandinavian Journal of Design History* 12, 2002.

³ Tibor Kalman, J. Abbott Miller, & Karrie Jacobs, ‘Good History/Bad History’, in *Looking Closer* (ed. Bierut, Drenttel, Heller, & Holland). Allworth Press, New York, 1994.

⁴ Peter Saville, *Designed by Peter Saville*, (ed. Emily King). Frieze, London, 2003.

genre has become fused into the other—as if the vinyl pressing went haywire and spat out some kind of hybrid monster.

Hybridity was claimed, by Charles Jencks in the late seventies, as a fundamental aspect within the aesthetics postmodernism. Jan Michl's preference for the term 'redesign' can be seen to stem from this, illustrating the evolutionary nature of language and ideas, while describing perfectly the processes employed by the young Elvis Presley, or Peter Saville. The hybridisation of previously disparate forms and/or processes can potentially yield rich and fertile ground for the nostalgic practitioner to step beyond the simple regurgitation of the past.

A point of departure.

Nostalgia is often aligned with the politics of conservatism, and there's certainly something healthy about each generation rejecting the one that came before it. The infamous Dadaist, Richard Huelsenbeck, claimed that all art begins with critique and doubt, and it is a commonly held belief that to some extent longing is what makes art possible. However, when a younger generation rejects the dominant contemporary culture of their forbears, they will often turn (more or less consciously) to the past in order to create their own future.

“The question of ancestry in culture is spurious”, claims Greil Marcus in *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*. “Every new manifestation in culture rewrites the past, changes old *maudits* into new heroes, old heroes into those who should have never been born.” Thus Peter Saville. Once *maudit*, now hero—his career celebrated recently by way of a retrospective at the Design Museum in London. In a publication released alongside the exhibition Saville recalls seeing Jan Tschichold's work for the first time. “I was astonished it was all so old—design had been to all these places and had seemingly forgotten or never embraced them.”⁵

Might a return to the past herald a new point of departure from it? A new trajectory—a side street that was missed last time you passed by? It is my contention that nostalgia, in this sense, can be a source of revolution—the past still a site for exploration and unexpected outcomes.

⁵ Peter Saville, *Designed by Peter Saville*, (ed. Emily King). Frieze, London, 2003.

Hatch Show Print [box]

Designing posters for local bands over the last few years, I had begun to reference—in fact steal—formal elements and images from the book *Hatch Show Print: The History of a Great American Poster Shop*. Initially I simply enjoyed exploring a set of formal devices I was unfamiliar with. Of course, as I began to get the style down, I began to wonder where it might go from here? Would I simply regurgitate the same formulas over and over again, or could I somehow manipulate the formula, turn it in on itself, and head off in a new direction. It seemed to make sense that before I ‘went’ anywhere, I should visit the source of my own nostalgic borrowings.

Having attempted various ways to mimic the aesthetics of letterpress and wood type with my Mac, a photocopier, and a bottle of turps, I was recently fortunate enough to spend a week working as an intern at Hatch Show Print in Nashville, Tennessee. Expecting to arrive in downtown Nashville and be making coffee or running errands for elderly men in dusty labcoats covered in ink, I was shocked—pleasantly surprised—to find the place alive and kicking. Saved from near ruin in the early nineties, the revival of Hatch Show Print has been led by the slightly eccentric, while delightfully down to earth, southern gentleman (not a Republican!), Jim Sherraden. With the help of the Gill family girls, a handful of fulltime staff, and a seemingly endless supply of willing volunteers, Hatch turns out about six hundred jobs a year for clients new and old. Everything is as it was—type set and printed by hand. Reprints—literally, from the original woodblocks—of posters produced by the shop for the likes of Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, and Elvis Presley, keep the place busy with curious visitors keen to snap up an authentic piece of country music memorabilia.

Nostalgia has obviously played a key role in the survival and revival of Hatch Show Print. Rarity, the fact that you can’t really get posters like this anymore, is largely what attracts new clients and customers. While this also explains, to some extent, the interest practitioners have in being at Hatch, the predominant motivating factor I picked up on was ‘authenticity’. An often misplaced aspect of nostalgia is the sense that a loss of authenticity has occurred over time due to the march of technological progress. Of course there’s nothing inherently more authentic about working with blocks of wood or with a computer. Any use of the term ‘authentic’ begs the question, “as opposed to what?” It’s relative. The sense of authenticity that Hatch locates is very similar to what William Morris and John Ruskin were concerned with one hundred years ago now—the distance of the *maker* from the *made*.

As an intern at Hatch one should expect to layout, proof, and print all their own work. In the space of a week I produced three posters (two for clients and one for myself). Working in an atmosphere that felt a million miles away from a commercial design studio, I couldn’t help but begin to think about how a return to ‘out-dated’ processes and their reciprocal formal languages, might herald new points of departure for a nostalgic practitioner. Determined to make something ‘more’ out of my romantic tendency to want to live in the past, my continuing practice will attempt to transform the familiar and locate new trajectories from within nostalgic impulses.

