

Retrology: Addicted to the Future

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Abstract

The present investigation examines the hypothesis that contemporary pop music has caught ‘retromania’: infected by its own past, it will bring about its own downfall. It identifies this observation as retrology: a specific school of thought within pop history. The article first looks at the major premises on which retrology is founded. It then asks why these assumptions have been so widely accepted. Next, it offers a sociological approach to look at pop music’s increasing interest in the past without recourse to moralistic divisions. Pop is seen as a social system, and not as an opaque accumulation of individual activities. Reproducing itself by a specific form of communication—the concatenation of songs—its main goal is simply to continue; it therefore desires neither ‘advancement’ nor ‘retro-gression’. The conclusion is that retro does not indicate a crisis; rather the opposite—it allows pop to carry on.

Keywords

Retromania, communication, self-reproduction, innovation, evolution

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Introduction

From the very beginning, pop music had a history of ups and downs—heydays as well as periods of stagnation. And at the latest since the first wannabe Elvis hit the stage, pop culture pessimism has been an integral part of the system's semantics.² But if the scholars who currently dominate the discourse on pop are correct, then the decline has sunk to a new level. In this case, we should assume we have reached a historical caesura: the beginning of the end of pop music. The diagnosis is 'retromania'.³ In its current incarnation, 2014 Anno Domini and 60 Anno Elvis, it seems that pop has caught a yesteryear bug, a compulsion to constantly and ever faster cite and reference the past until the cultural-ecological catastrophe that will forever stop the beat from going on.

We can identify this observation of a pop crisis as retrology: a negative self-description that centres around the inflation of past references.⁴ It can itself be observed as a retro form, as it attempts to apply Jean-Francois Lyotard's concept of postmodernity—as the end of all meta-narratives, an 'after' in which forms from different eras are all available simultaneously—to contemporary pop music.⁵ And at first glance, it seems quite evident that pop should suffer the same fate as

² On the assumption that pop might be a social system, see Heidingsfelder (2012).

³ A term coined by British pop historian Simon Reynolds, who initiated the debate with his book of the same name (*Retromania. Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*, 2011).

⁴ According to Luhmann, the institutionalisation of reflection is an important criterion to identify the autonomy of a social area like religion (reflection programme: theology) or art (aesthetics) (Luhmann 1990: 469ff.). It seems that pop has not yet been able to fully establish such a reflection instance. The first attempts to identify the pop identity happened in the medium of journalism—favoured form: the 'think piece', first cultivated by Richard Meltzer—and the hybrid medium of cultural studies also could not guarantee scientific consistency. However, retrology can be understood as an attempt to classify and systematise the observation of pop. It also shows the typical characteristic of any reflection programme: its affirmative nature. Pop itself is not being questioned. For details, see Heidingsfelder (2012: 347ff.).

⁵ See Lyotard (1986). Around 15 years earlier, Arnold Gehlen already made similar observations. He interprets the acceleration of cultural processes, the effervescence, abundance and mutability of cultural forms as a kind of racing standstill or 'crystallization' (see Gehlen 1963a: 293ff.). Baudrillard later takes Gehlen's ideas to their logical conclusion: 'The future is already here, everything is already here, everything has already been... It is not an exaggeration when we say, everything has happened before.' Which, if true, would naturally also apply to the preceding sentences (Baudrillard, quoted in Hesse 1983: 103; see also Luhmann 1997: 114ff.), who doubts the dawning of a new era, since key characteristics of modernity persist.

modern art, modern literature and modern architecture—the areas of study which made Lyotard's diagnosis plausible.

While mass media—sociology's greatest adversary—has no doubts about this ostensible fact, there have as yet been no sociological studies on the topic. But has pop really travelled all possible avenues of development to their ends? Are elemental changes no longer possible? From the perspective of retrology, pop musicians can of course still do something new—surprise us, and be creative, but the assumption is that all fields have already been mapped out. There are no more real alternatives, no more revelations—the existing styles and forms are definitive. All that remains is to rearrange pre-existing elements, and to continuously update the already formulated, which at best can be 'unfolded' (Gehlen) or 'tweaked' (Reynolds).⁶ Pop musicians can only close the gaps and take what someone else has begun to its logical conclusion. The music may still seem to be fast and furious—pop's wheels do not stand still. It goes on and rushes, to paraphrase Rilke, but it only circles and turns.⁷ The multifarious kaleidoscope of songs and sounds pop produces and the numerous phenomena that accompany them only act as a smokescreen for an underlying inertia. Pop today is nothing but an endless loop and therefore, history is no longer being made. If this is correct and pop has basically exhausted itself, then there is really nothing left to work with but citation and variation, sampling and parodying.⁸ Retrologists' worst fear is that the day is not far off when pop will forever cease to exist.

This idea of a pop apocalypse calls for preventative action. As Niklas Luhmann points out, the terms *crisis* and *catastrophe* not only suggest urgency and speed but are also a self-protective device: 'We have not much time... We have not enough time, then, for theory building and reflection.'⁹ The therapy suggested to stop pop from doing away with itself seems to prove Luhmann's point. It is one of the oldest known to human society: *Don't*.¹⁰ Don't just borrow from the past. Don't randomly combine pop forms without proper contextualisation. *Don't, don't, don't,*

⁶ Gehlen speaks of 'Detailfortschritt' (partial progress, 1963a: 293).

⁷ "And on it goes and rushes to be done,/and only circles and turns and has no goal." "The Carousel", in Rilke (1981: 123).

⁸ See Luhmann (1995: 502). In the English translation, *Art as a social system*, translated by Eva M. Knodt (Luhmann 2000: 329), 'Parodie' (parody) is translated as 'paradox'.

⁹ See Luhmann (1984a: 95). There seems to be little doubt that the alarming notion helped to make the book so successful. Most important complaints: the mass media and their main selection mechanism conflict.

¹⁰ A nostalgic reference to Jerome Leiber's wonderful lyrics of 'Don't', first performed by Elvis Presley in 1958.

don't. But critical and reflexive or 'sentimental' recycling should be allowed.¹¹

The distinction that underlies this thinking is a moralistic one: It divides pop into proper (retro-reflective) and improper (nostalgic) forms—into good and bad, providing an aesthetic code of conduct that is supposed to save pop from doing away with itself. The one principle of pop behaviour that is supposed to guide the decisions and contribute to pop's welfare is transparency. If the translation of old forms into new spectral, reflective forms is made explicit—by, for example, bemoaning pop's 'lost future', or the future dangled before us in 1990s dance music: jungle, garage and 2step—and an alternative history of the losers is written, then, only then, so the idea goes, will we find the anti-maniac prescription that can run interference with the social transmissions in which retromania thrives and provides a way out of the retro-dilemma.¹²

¹¹ This figure can also be observed as a fractal distinction in the sense of Abbott (2001): retro is again divided—in our terminology, it re-enters its own distinction. On the classic distinction of naïve/sentimental, see Schiller (2002).

¹² See Lintzel (2011), and also Karnik (2011). In light of the considerable influence Critical Theory still has in pop reflection, it is not surprising that the variant of retrology is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's concept of history (see Benjamin 1997: 691–704). Except instead of the victims of history, the dead which the angel and the historian would like to awaken, 'to piece together what has been smashed', it is the flops that are lying on the trash heap of (pop) history. We are looking at a deconstructionist reframing strategy—a critique of the rule of the top 100. But German journalist Aram Lintzel does not aim to limit his critique to music. He accuses Reynolds of ignoring non-musical forms that have not yet been resurrected, such as feminism or Berlin's city palace, a facsimile of which is to be built at its former site. From our perspective, it seems fruitful to narrow one's focus on music, even though 'pop culture' in Reynold's subtitle can of course be understood in much broader terms. Moreover, the phenomenon of retromania diagnosed by him can be seen as proof of the autonomy of a pop system that can easily be distinguished from other derivative or imitative trends, as retro phenomena are typically not older than pop itself—mimicking a Mozart minuet or a courtly lovesong will not be considered as being retro, in contrast to a rockabilly or disco imitation. The pop take-off seems to mark the border of retro. This border is not static; it is flexible enough to be expanded now and then to include pre-adaptive advances as the 1920s swing music or early blues. But it seems to be linked to the outdifferentiation of pop. An aria like *Nessun Dorma* can be observed as pop, but it is usually not being observed as retro. A quick look into Wikipedia seems to confirm this assumption. Searching the *Nessun Dorma* article for 'pop' yields several results (for instance, 'Unusually for a classical piece, it has become a part of popular culture'). There are no results, however, if we enter retro into the search bar. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nessun_dorma (accessed 19 February 2016).

We would prefer not to.¹³ Or to once again quote Jerry Leiber: *Baby, don't say don't*. As we all know, the content of a prescription not only includes the name and address of the prescribing provider; unique for each prescription is also the name of the patient. As pop is not a person—it cannot neither hear nor read, it has no address and no job—it is only addressable through its organisations, and whether Warner or Sony are interested in producing retro-reflective pop is highly questionable. Maybe some musicians will find inspiration in Reynold's book and produce music that follows its code of conduct, but this will hardly prevent others from producing non-reflective retro pop.

Let us therefore digress from the question of individual motivation and instead ask the retrologists why their demand for reflection is not itself reflective. Why should pop do anything? Why not just leave it be?¹⁴ The answer is that the whole idea of intervention and 'pop progress' is an important figure within so-called pop theory. Staying within the terminology of psychotherapy, we can call it the unconscious or more precisely, the preconscious of pop reflection. It stems from thinkers who see themselves as agents of cultural and societal transformation. Retrologists also assume that pop can be improved, or even perfected.¹⁵

We can, therefore, define retrology in a first step as follows: a professional and academic discipline that seeks to improve the quality of pop and enhance its well-being through research and crisis intervention, ensuring pop's welfare, and in particular raising voices against retro forms; a profession where one can be actively engaged in helping pop to help itself; a profession that deals with retro issues of pop systematically and scientifically. It is dedicated to the pursuit of pop justice and the

¹³ We understand the rejection expressed by Melville's famous scrivener as a suggestion to not get trapped by an either—or—in this case, either good or bad pop—but to look for a third way instead (see Melville 2014).

¹⁴ To paraphrase Rameau's nephew, let pop follow its fancy. Pop is fine as it is, because the majority is happy with it (see Goethe 1996: 11).

¹⁵ While they accuse pop of being obsessed with the past, retrologists have no trouble sampling age-old classics—from Plato's theory of forms to Nietzsche's concept of history and finally historical materialism, becoming itself a part of the criticised backwards fetishism on a theoretical level. No wonder, retrology is a part of pop. Drawing on the old division between substances and accidents, retrology assumes that no retro phenomenon can alter their being or contaminate the purity of the pop substance. But from an evolutionary point of view, it is rather the other way around: It is accidents that are in the end responsible for the creation of a pop being. For those who value references to our philosophical tradition, it is possible to situate a transcendental pop *self* in the medium of pop—music. This being—immaterial, invariant and invisible—is reproduced in all pop forms in which it becomes visible (see Heidingsfelder 2012: 83ff.).

well-being of oppressed and marginalised forms.¹⁶ In a nutshell, retrology is social work.

There is no need for us to answer whether the diagnosis of retromania fits reality, whether the reproduction of pop is de facto currently dominated by meaningless citation and referencing. We can leave it to historians to gather enough data to verify the clinical diagnosis.¹⁷ Pop reality is compact and remains out of reach. The question of whether retromanic activity is observed in pop on the other hand, is easy to answer: obviously. It is real—it is a part of pop’s reality. But what are the premises of this observation? What are the unquestioned assumptions? Which intellectual resources underlie this diagnosis of a mania about the past that threatens pop music’s present? By trying to answer these questions, we become social workers ourselves, helping retrologists to analyse the conditions of their own contribution.

The Structure of Pop

The usual causal explanation for the diagnosis ‘pop gone manic’ fixes on the Internet—from a plethora of possible causes—as the dominant factor.

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_work

¹⁷ As mentioned above, one of the largest problems is that the concept was not clearly defined, as if caring about pop justified carelessness in pop analysis. This was a great opportunity for the mass media. Since no one could say exactly what was being talked about, retro phenomena could be detected everywhere in the fog of postmodernity—from ‘bearded bands’ to ‘pop-hype Lana del Rey’ and even the retail sector. See <http://www.spiegel.de/thema/retromanie/> (accessed 23 February 2013). One possible definition of retro could be extracted from George Lucas’ critique of the new Star Wars movie: ‘(Disney) wanted to do a retro movie... I don’t like that. Every movie, I worked very hard to make them different, with different planets and different spaceships.’ See <http://arstechnica.com/the-multiverse/2015/12/george-lucas-criticizes-retro-feel-of-new-star-wars-describes-breakup/>. Retro then aims to *not* make it different: the same planets, the same spaceships—as a return to what has already done, a re-actualisation of forms that have become obsolete. This obsolescence is also what distinguishes retro forms from tradition, which can be seen as a continuing chain of communication, whereas retro demands a gap or certain distance to those ‘novel eccentricities’ (Gombrich) that are taken up again: ‘Dressing up as a sort of teenagers [sic] of the 1950s in black leather jackets and slick back hairs [sic] is popular in Japan these days.’ Theodor Bestor, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/at/contemp_japan/cjp_pop_05.html (accessed 17 February 2016). In contemporary Pakistani pop music, the retro element is, for example, represented by the use of discarded and broken-down old equipment, synthesisers like the old Yamaha DX7 or analogue delay units like the Roland Space Echo. Main source of sample inspiration: the *Pakistan - Folk and Pop Instrumentals 1966-1976* compilation. See <https://radiodiffusion.wordpress.com/category/pakistan/> (accessed 25 February 2016). Thanks to Talha Wynne for this information.

The sheer size of the web's pop memory bank creates an archival delirium.¹⁸ The 'endless digital now' (Gibson), the simultaneity of works from varying eras and the free access to pop's historical inventory—all of these are responsible for detaching pop from the sequential periodicity of history. For pop historians like Simon Reynolds, no less than the existence of their own discipline is at stake, which perhaps explains the dramatic choice of words—retromania as a 'death knell', etc. For if chronologies can no longer be created, recounting—or bringing together successive moments that can be distinguished from and refer to one another—also becomes impossible.

It is, of course, correct that whoever wants to tell a story has to determine a beginning that presupposes a certain end. Exactly this is what makes a story, whether a short story, a long story or a hi-story. While modernity knows many literary forms that question this principle, the historian can only identify cause and effect, whereby usually the cause is attributed to individual acts of communication or communicators. That makes it possible to create sequences and communicate the opaque and incommunicable pop reality. First Elvis, then the Beatles. First Pink Floyd, then the Sex Pistols. Retrologists claim that it is exactly such narratives which are no longer possible, because there is no more inherent logic of development. In the breathless whirl of twenty-first-century pop, effect can no longer be distinguished from cause; individual moments no longer refer to one another.

But the postulate of inherent developmental tendencies—of a pop 'telos'—presupposes a causality that hardly does justice to the complexity of inner-pop processes. The structure of pop is not 'always also sometimes' (German music magazine *Spex*) circular. Rather, its structure is fundamentally circular, or recursive. The history of pop music therefore cannot be presented simply as a causal chain. The Internet, as important it may be, is just one factor among others that has been picked up and used by pop.¹⁹ Its internal dynamics follow one logic only: that of evolution, and evolution has no destination.

This is not to say that the tempo at which pop reacts to itself has not accelerated—this phenomenon is even reflected, in a rudimentary way,

¹⁸ Reynolds, following Derrida, speaks of the 'anarchive'. Derrida uses the same play on words to underline the connection of repetition or the repetition compulsion with the death drive (*Todestrieb*). 'Consequence: right on that which permits and conditions archiving, we will never find anything other than that which exposes to destruction, and in truth menaces with destruction...The archive always works, and *a priori*, against itself' (see Derrida 1996: 11–12).

¹⁹ We will examine the 'how' further on.

in the names of bands and songs (Pop Will Eat Itself, 'Pop is Dead'). Moreover, it seems that it was such self-descriptions that triggered the reflective correlate of retromania. But even while those forms that have been diagnosed as retro most certainly emphasise the repetition of old forms, even repetitions—which in the strictest sense would include only reissues—are not just the same old song. First of all, they are issued at another time, which automatically and necessarily gives them another meaning. Therefore, even quote-happy outcrops of retro movements communicate the present. Second, the supposed standstill too must be stabilised in time. Stagnation is also reproduction, because it performs itself as divergent. Social reproduction is not just replication—a kind of infinite loop, *Hegel's schlechte Unendlichkeit* (in which the operation to overcome finiteness constantly reproduces itself without ever accomplishing its goal, 'true' infinity). It is not enough that a song is played over and over again. At some point, there is an end to the heavy rotation of even the most successful song or genre. And then it needs to be followed by something else—something new. But whatever it is followed by, that which is not chosen and is not realised remains as a potentiality. To use the invocation with which Reynolds ends his book: *We believe that the future is out there* (Reynolds 2011: 428). Except that this is not a question of faith. Just because the present is not like Reynolds and the others imagined it would be, does not mean the future is done with. Evolution means that, from a pool that permanently produces surplus, those possibilities are chosen that are most suitable for reproduction. In the case of pop, this means whatever helps block reflection. By definition, retro-reflective forms might not be the best tools for this task. A hit hits you or does not. If you have to wonder whether a song is a hit or not, if you have to spend time in contemplation, it probably is not a hit. It might not even be pop (Heidingsfelder 2012: 63ff.).

The production and repression of possibilities—in pop as in evolutionary processes in general—go hand in hand. An observer like Reynolds may remark that things did not necessarily have to turn out the way they did, he might have preferred a different outcome, which is legitimate. But whatever happens in pop, references always go beyond the newly actualised. A band such as Kitty, Daisy & Lewis automatically also reproduces possibilities for other bands, other interpretations, other looks, etc., just like the Beatles' choice of being the 'nice guys in suits' automatically opened up a flank for the Rolling Stones. Those who come later can accept or reject certain songs, pick up a certain sound or explicitly turn away from it. Pop praxis leaves behind traces, possibilities that can be reactivated. In this way, pop can refine or diversify itself—

always depending on what came before—because it is the past that establishes and serves as the foundation of the differences to come. That is why every pop song is always both reprise and original.²⁰

Individual intention takes a back seat in this process.²¹ The system reproduces itself aimlessly and inevitably; it is not the same as its actors, as Kitty, Daisy & Lewis, the Cool Kids, the Soft Boys or Simon Reynolds. People may have aims, but pop itself has no goal. No one knows what will happen—but only those who expect feminist rap can be disappointed when it turns out to be sexist, and only those who expect innovative pop can be disappointed when it turns out to be retromanic.

There are two basic ways to deal with dashed expectations.²² Either you realise your expectations were not met and correct yourself: ‘That’s how it should have been, but it was not to be. Life’s tough and pop doesn’t take requests on call-in radio.’ Or, despite the facts, you stick to your expectations: ‘Pop has disappointed us again, but we won’t let ourselves be swayed by that. We hold fast to our belief in the right way to bring the past into the present.’²³ Retrology reacts normatively. It sets conditions for the unknown direction of evolution. Anything goes? Not if retrologists have anything to say about it. What pop music has long since accomplished, is being denied—its irresponsible and manic experimentation with multiple styles. The result is a rift between aspiration and reality. But within this reality, everything exists within every juncture. Pop is always more than it is in the moment. That which

²⁰ Empirical evidence can be found in the remarkable big data study of Matthias Mauch et al. (2015) that ignores the usual theoretical preconceptions and concentrates on pop’s most important structure: the charts. According to Mauch et al., there is hardly any danger that musical styles have exhausted all of pop’s possibilities; at least, none of the data confirm the relentless decline in the cultural diversity of popular music retrologists assume.

²¹ If only because ‘no intention, however neatly presented, is assured of being realized by the work’ (Adorno 1970: 24). Jennifer Lena pinpoints this problem with her term ‘thin histories’, or history that concentrates one-sidedly on actors, an approach which makes it impossible to do justice to the reality of pop. Lena calls for defocalisation, shifting attention away from the actions of individuals and toward social structures and collective action. Her study of popular genres is a remarkable example of what such a shift might look like (see Lena 2012). However, if one is interested in the social function of pop, it is necessary to see *through* the multifarious pop events and concrete phenomena. That is to say: a certain ‘thinness’ or abstraction is unavoidable. In Niklas Luhmann’s words: ‘Our flight must take place above the clouds. Occasionally we may catch glimpses below’ (1996: 1).

²² According to Luhmann, there are two basic ways of dealing with dashed expectations: a cognitive and a normative, which he associates with two different functional systems—science and law (Luhmann 1995: 157).

²³ And the process of internal adaptation to fulfilment or disappointment we call ‘emotion’ (see Luhmann 1996: 269).

is not reproduced is also reproduced; the unactualised is part of pop's actual reality. This surplus of the unactualised acts as the condition for the possibility of evolutionary complexity. What has been defined as reality limits these possibilities on the operative level. The synchronicity so feared by retrologists cannot threaten pop for reasons of logic alone. Pop cannot be everything, at least not all at once. Even if the digital age provides us with unlimited access to everything, it is impossible to update everything at the same time. Access is necessarily always selective. If this were not so, there would be no retro phenomenon, and no pop.

But since pop is a specific form of communication, it is not surprising that a change in the means of communication media, with the invention of the computer and in its wake the Internet, has affected its structures.²⁴ The retro phenomenon can therefore also be understood as an attempt to develop new ways of dealing with the irritation caused by the new media, even if in a very different manner than retrologists themselves propose. It simply is one method of finding new forms by drawing from the unactualised, from the potential enhanced by never having been. Especially jungle and 'drum and base' (Dietrich Schwanitz) developed so quickly that many possibilities could only be hinted at.²⁵

Apparently, many old forms can be made new, and the surplus of meaning that is automatically reproduced with these re-actualisations might later be used to insert new forms; less perfect, more futuristic, retro-reflective or feminist. Repetition itself ensures that pop continues. However, not every re-actualised trend can establish itself; but some, such as Amy Winehouse's 'sixties' soul or Robbie Williams's pop swing, exhibited eminent connectivity.²⁶

Not only pop but also the role of the critic changed with the advent of the Internet. Formerly, chronological selection processes profited not only from stringent criteria but also from difference. Often critics recommended bands that had been overseen, that had been flops, not tops. The Monks! Alex Chilton! Gang Gang Dance! Now it is no longer the experts who have the last word, but—at least for the time being—the listeners or so-called users. It might, therefore, well be that retrology is

²⁴ Dirk Baecker sees the result as a new form of culture (see Baecker 2007).

²⁵ Allowing David Bowie, for instance, on *Blackstar* to relish 'in the drum-and-bass and jungle sounds of the post-rave era', presumably providing retrologists with the kind of retro-reflective forms they have in mind. See <http://observer.com/2016/01/what-it-was-like-recording-blackstar-with-david-bowie/> (accessed 20 February 2016).

²⁶ Just like the idea of retromania. It remains standing because writers are paid for articles in which they decry today's pop as an 'endless loop' and because journals and websites that would otherwise publish standard pop journalism are filled with retro specials.

nothing more than a defensive attack by certain pop historians who are worried about losing their social function.²⁷

The Paradigm of Progress

Theories are also judged by their success. The idea that pop is retromanic has held on because of the support it has received from the mass media. It provides them with the necessary subcomplex narrative: *Pop is sick, it suffers from retromania, and we need to find a cure before it is too late.* It is a success that may be linked to the fact that it offers us a position from which we can see—and define—the fragmented pop landscape, perhaps for the last time, as a whole, to make its inaccessible unity accessible. Pop is ascribed a narrative that pretends not to be one, and that allows us to tell a story that cannot be told—the story of connections that are no longer recountable. The function of this narrative is integration; to unite once again the impenetrable diversity which confronts the pop stars, fans and experts of today.

Thus, retrology too is a symptom—an attempt to save, on the semantic level, that which has long been lost on the socio-structural level. This perhaps explains retrologists' defiant sadness about the postmodern character of pop music—a sadness that 'at least in its mood holds on to what one knows to be lost' and demands this sadness also be expressed by the music itself (Luhmann and Fuchs 1994: 25–37, 28). Conservatism about the future is the blind spot or the a priori of retrologists, who do not seem to be aware that they are waxing nostalgic when they go on about how jungle and 2step once looked towards the future. Insistent upon the fulfilment of certain hopes, the conservation of past expectations absurdly appears to be progressive. This division between past and present must be kept alive as a conflict for retrology to exist, which also means that the belief in progress acts as a guiding principle: The new must always be better than the old. The expectation is that pop should always move towards a better self, it should continually be perfected, or at least improved. But is *I Am The Walrus* better than *Twist & Shout*? And have jungle and 2step had ever truly been about the future? And not about finding the right beats and themes for the dance floors of their present? Without noticing it, retrology thus rejects all pop music, which

²⁷ Retrology as a kind of social reflex. Because it is necessary to distinguish between progressive and regressive nostalgia, all of a sudden experts are back in the game (see also Gehlen 1963b: 302).

cannot be coded along the lines of old and new.²⁸ Not everything that is new is pop.

This demand for newness is not new either. By the mid-1960s at the latest—and it is no coincidence that this is where Reynolds first sights retromania—pop music was given a temporal imperative. Since then, each song and every artist has had to be new and different.²⁹ Even covers suddenly had to be original in their variations.³⁰ The ‘self-consummation of forms’ (*Formverbrauchseffekt*; Luhmann 2000: 44) which this brings forth is, by now, ubiquitous. Today, everyone expects originality—more than is realistically possible. Pop, too, must bow to the limits of growth. The popularity of backward-looking forms can thus also be seen as an effect of saturation. This makes the future a problem for retrologists. If only the new can make history and nothing is new anymore, it follows that there is no more history. But is it true that something needs to be new to make history? Conceivably, the history of pop music has not come to an end. We should, therefore, try to consider another research option: Maybe retro should not be seen as a problem, but as the solution to a problem. But which problem can we construct that retro is addressing?

²⁸ We see hit/flop as the code of pop (Heidingsfelder 2012: 170ff.).

²⁹ In art, deviations and the concurrent surprise effect have, since the late seventeenth century at the latest, been considered to have a value in and of themselves and needed no other justification (see Luhmann 2008b: 148). In pop, radical deviation was always an integral part, and beginning with rock’n’roll at the latest, deviance was considered a mark of quality. This need not refer to musical quality, but can instead refer to content, fashion, etc. Luhmann pointed out that the idea of ‘style’ is one way of dealing with newness. For this reason, some musicians deliver a style with their music from the very beginning, to satisfy the question of meaning that accompanies every new phenomenon (Luhmann 1995: 211). Examples from jazz would be the album titles *Cool Jazz* by Miles Davis or *Free Jazz* by Ornette Coleman; lyrics such as those on the album *New Forms* by Roni Size are also examples of this, informing listeners of the novel character of the form presented to them: ‘New configuration, new riff and new structure/Built on the frame that’ll hold the room puncture... When we apply the breaks, there’ll be no skids/Just more elements to continue as we glide’ Reprazent feat. Roni Size, *Brown Paper Bag*. See also Sugarhill Gang, *Rapper’s Delight*: ‘Now what you hear is not a test.’ What is it then? A new form of music called rap. Which those not in the know could easily confuse with testing a mike.

³⁰ With this pop musicians were turned from craftspeople who create according to rules into artists—and pop music is as of this point a medium into which the zeitgeist is inscribed. On this, see also Stanley Crouch’s complaint in ‘Man in the Mirror’: Profundity has been forced on music actually intended to function as no more than the soundtrack for teenage romance and the backbeat for the bouts of self-pity young people suffer while assaulted by their hormones. Rock criticism changed all of that, bootlegging the rhetoric of aesthetic evaluation to elevate the symbols of adolescent frenzy and influencing the way pop stars viewed themselves. (Crouch 2009: 209)

Retro as a Solution

Systems theory is decidedly not a theory that looks for causal explanations. It can, however, offer pop historians an analytical framework that limits the causally relevant elements (Luhmann 1997: 570). If we want to explain an event with something that came before it, we need to figure out how the old and the new relate within a specific situation. Where are the marked discontinuities? Is there an occurrence that acts as a caesura and makes it possible to mark the emergence of retro?

For many years, the history of pop had been a history of expectations going far beyond new, exciting musical forms. In this way, it shows some remarkable similarities with the concept of Christianity.³¹ However, the disciples of pop were not waiting for the beyond, but for paradise in the here and now: ‘No more wars and all people love each other.’³² Until all hope was abandoned just a few years later. Robert Crumb’s cartoon ‘On the crest of a wave’ (see Figure 1) perfectly captures this euphoria before the crash.

The new decade, often a welcome occasion for an arbitrary cut in the flow of events, functions well in this case as a decisive date to mark a clear ‘before’ and ‘after’. At the beginning of the 1970s, the dashed hopes are expressed at every level of the system, and particularly explicitly in singer-songwriter lyrics, such as Jackson Browne’s ‘Doctor My Eyes’, James Taylor’s ‘Fire and Rain’ or Paul Simon’s ‘Run That Body Down’. This is the moment that pop uses for a reorientation. From this time on, the system is interested in seeing its present as the result of an inevitable

³¹ Many have suggested that the temporal concept of dynamic development is directly connected to a Christian worldview. In his history of Western music, Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht assumes that this compulsion to innovate—and that dominates not only the retrologists’ thought but also the entirety of our modern lives—could be a secular variant of a dynamic eschatology (Eggebrecht 1996: 42–43). The opposite would be Eastern or non-Western—static or circular—concepts of time that are, for instance, represented in Sufi music. The assumption of a pop apocalypse—that retro might end pop forever—inverts this idea: Not innovation but stagnation is responsible for pop’s end. However, I do not see a direct link between the pressure to innovate and teleological time. Rather, the former emerges in the late Middle Ages as a preadaptive advance of functional differentiation and its compulsion to temporalise (see Fuchs 2005: 83).

³² Bernd Brumbär, the light designer for German prog-rock group Amon Düül, among others. Quoted in Schober (1994: 39). See also Gehlen’s (1963: 285) ideas on the secularisation of the Christian concept of the world and how to act within it. He understands Marxism—alongside the theory of evolution and psychoanalysis—as an ‘ersatz religion’.

history—in order to be able to characterise the early 1970s as a period that differed from those before it.³³



Figure 1. On the Crest of a Wave

Source: © R. Crumb.

Pop had one-upped itself, and had reflected on this one-upping and put it into the songs. Listeners were now expected to be more discerning and artists who developed new skills were favoured. Musicians began writing ‘pieces’ rather than songs—as Joe Walsh once self-mockingly remarked. *Unfinished Music No. 1: Two Virgins* by John Lennon and Yoko Ono even managed to create pop without any songs. But pop did not manage to

³³ This process was also aided by ironic texts such as the following by Lester Bangs: Run here, my towhead grandchillen, and let this geezer dandle you upon his knee. While you still recognize me, you little maniacs. You know the gong has tolled, it’s that time again. Now let me set my old brain a-ruminatin’, ah, what upbuilding tale from days of yore shall I relate [to] today? ‘What’s all this shit about the Yardbirds?’ Ah, the Yardbirds. Yes, indeedie, those were the days. (Bangs 1988: 5)

do away with class, racism or phallogocentrism.³⁴ Marcuse's concept of 'repressive tolerance' was thrown around to explain how pop's political potential had been used up, assimilated or neutralised (Marcuse 1968: 93–128). As always, pop itself needed no such highfalutin concepts to put this sobering realisation into words: 'You Can't Always Get What You Want', the Rolling Stones told their fans—which was not a song about material goods but was, literally, the era's swansong.³⁵ You could still get more than enough rock'n'roll. The problem was: It was *only* rock'n'roll, to refer to another one of their songs.

Yet this rock'n'roll—as a specific subgenre, not as a synonym for rock music in general—made it possible for pop to survive. The fact that it first made pop as a social unit possible is most likely the decisive factor here. It was this gaze into the past via glam rock that enabled pop to look ahead—to change its structure and move forward. The resurrection of the genre brought the future back into the system.³⁶ The end of the hope that revolution was around the corner was not the end of the system's

³⁴ The idea that it perhaps was due to the surprising structural coupling of pop and social protest that started with the motorcycle gangs of the 1950s and reached its height during the so-called Summer of Love. This connection made it possible for pop to be understood for a time as synonymous with *counterculture* and *subversion* (see Heidingsfelder 2012: 489ff.). See also the chapter 'The Cultural Politics of Pop' in Huyssen (1986: 141ff.). Herbert Marcuse's estimation of students, hippies and dropouts as the 'working class of the future' also contributed to this correlation, leading those so honoured to promptly name him their 'intellectual guru'. The emancipatory potential he attributed to the followers of pop allowed slumbering communist hopes for revolutionary change to awaken. Within neo-Marxist theories, this had a self-potentiating effect and in the end became a key element of what I have called critical pop theory (see Habermas 1978: esp. 121ff., and Heidingsfelder 2012: 305). Traces of this former alliance are still present in the retrologists' texts as a kind of background radiation.

³⁵ One of these fans was Greil Marcus, who interpreted the song as follows: 'Gimmie[sic] Shelter and *You Can't Always Get What You Want* both reach for reality and end up confronting it, almost mastering what's real, or what reality will feel like as the years fade in. It's a long way from *Get Off My Cloud* to Gimmie[sic] Shelter, a long way from *I Can't Get No Satisfaction* to *You Can't Always Get What You Want*.' Interestingly, it is these two 'end pieces', which Marcus is most taken by on *Let It Bleed*: 'The music of these two songs is just that much stronger than anything else on the album.'

³⁶ The first glimmer of glam rock—for Reynolds the paradigm of a retromanic form—could already be seen in the curious and contrasting performance by 'Sha Na fucking Na' (Jake Brown) at Woodstock. Elizabeth E. Guffey (2006) took a closer look at the role of the band in her book *Retro: The Culture of Revival*. She notes that this seemingly backward-looking, merely nostalgic retro phenomenon was full of references to the present and did not reconstruct but (did) construct the 1950s, emphasising Busby Berkeley rather than Joe McCarthy. This was less about fulfilling sentimental desires for the good old days and more about a camp-inspired exaggeration of certain formal aspects of the era. In other words, it was exactly that kind of reflexive nostalgia retrologists demand.

self-reproduction. Pop could again become that which it is, *because it was*. It had failed, but thanks to Gary Glitter, Sweet, Mud, T. Rex and David Bowie—the latter marking the re-entry of innovation into Glam—it could go on (see again Abbott 2001). What is regarded as a deficit, a mistake by retrologists, appears to serve an elementary function.

Yesterday's Songs Today

Retrology might be interested in the originality of pop music, but what is pop interested in? 'Pop's appeal', Sukhdev Sandhu wrote in a review of *Retromania*, 'doesn't just lie in its ability to shock and surprise; it can also be a source of safety and succor...' (Sandhu 2011). We only need to think of ourselves. Why do we find what we already know appealing? Because our expectations are met. We bring certain expectations to every new song by Coldplay, but whether they will be fulfilled or dashed—and in which form—is unknown. The newer the new is, the larger the gap to be closed between expectation and fulfilment. When we re-engage with songs and styles we already know, we of course also bring certain expectations. And listening once more to 'Yellow' renews these expectations, which are always met—even if by disappointment.³⁷ Indeterminable perception makes way for determined reception. To an extent, we can determine our indeterminate future when listening to a song we know. But we can only determine from the here and now, everything else is open-ended. No song remains the same, *even if it remains the same*. We have no choice but to experience the same differently. To paraphrase German rapper Sido, 'Yesterday's songs are only yesterday's songs *today*' ('Ihr seid nur die Schlampen von gestern *jetzt*'). This does not mean that we question 'Yellow's' self-sameness; it means that when we recognise the song, we experience it as something familiar. Old records by the Allman Brothers and Led Zeppelin, rock'n'roll, sixties soul or jungle reaffirm rather than surprise. And by doing this, 'observational sequences can build up comfortable redundancies' and in the process contribute to the stabilisation of reproduction.³⁸

Retro pop ignores the dictatorship of the ever-new and as an aside reminds us that no pop song is ever truly new. Everything new can only

³⁷ See Husserl (1980: 410f.). Anyone who ever experienced a live performance by Bob Dylan will tell you about such disappointments, and Dylan fans even expect to be disappointed in this way.

³⁸ See Luhmann (2000: 130). Also: 'Even the newness of novelty is redundant, since experience has always shown what it is about' (Luhmann 2013: 258).

appear as new because it was already principally possible. Each song must transmit variety and redundancy simultaneously—although not to the same extent—if we are to be able to recognise the new as such.³⁹ Tradition is always a part of pop—in the sound, the look and the lyrics. Even the decidedly contemporary music of a band such as Kings of Leon refers back to other bands (in this case, Creedence Clearwater Revival [CCR] and The Grateful Dead), albeit without explicitly mentioning or citing them.

For a long time, pop took the form of avant-garde experiments in order to escape the tyranny of expectations. Albums such as *Two Virgins* or Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music* questioned the boundaries of pop and by doing so, only stabilised them. In contemporary or 'post-pop', the demand for being new, of outdoing predecessors is replaced by the imperative to make use of old forms. Now its experiments are retro, and pop escapes by retro-gression: either through citation or through bringing together heterogeneous styles as in so-called mash-ups, forms that process both high variation and high redundancy at the same time. It is an attempt to create 'requisite variety', as Ross Ashby called it, to insert our pluralistic environment into the system and incorporate the heterogeneity of tastes and styles (Ashby 1958: 83–99). Here too, the function determines the limit. Unlike in art, reflexivity in pop cannot therefore mean that the listener should only imagine a song.⁴⁰

This does not necessarily mean that we are at a standstill. Pop today is simply less like a river flowing in one direction and more like that vast, complex system we call the ocean.⁴¹ It reproduces itself continually, and in doing so, either uses structures or does not, either changes them or does not. In principle, pop does not need a history; it only needs the next song.

³⁹ The same is of course true for producers. In Paul Valéry's words, 'Something truly new would be completely inexpressible' (Valéry 2011: 165).

⁴⁰ As pop reflection is co-produced by pop, the system's function also marks the limits of its reflection (see again Luhman 1997 and Heidingsfelder 2012).

⁴¹ Sir Ernst Gombrich used a similar metaphor in the last chapter of *The Story of Art*, asking the reader to decide 'whether what was once a mighty river has meanwhile broken up into many branches and rivulets'. But in contrast to the retrologists' point of view, he saw in this development no cause for pessimism: 'We cannot tell, but may take comfort from the very multiplicity of efforts' (Gombrich 2006: 472–473). German music journalist Joachim Hentschel is also not worried by the oceanic state of music today:

It used to be that different kinds of music had to fight over a very limited number of channels with limited capacity. Today, there's no more need for this competition. Many different channels exhibit their own markings, shibboleths and behavioral patterns without competition despite maximal presence. (Email from 10 December 2011, M.H.)

It therefore makes no sense to talk about reverse evolutionary processes and the extinction of certain cultural–ecological niches.

Retrologists' assumption that pop poses a threat to pop may therefore be correct. It is an evolutionary possibility that pop acts upon its environment in such a way that it destroys its own foundation because its main goal is simply to continue. This does not mean it desires 'advancement', but simply that it wishes to reproduce itself, no matter the cost. Whatever structures pop appropriates and uses, it always just wants to take the next step. Every new song can be seen as such a step into generally unsafe territory, which has not been made safer by the Internet.

Coda

Social systems can become neither sick nor healthy nor can they undergo therapy. They have no inner organs, they are made out of nothing but chains of communication, and in the case of pop, the continuous concatenation of songs. But if we conduct a thought experiment and agree to study pop with the instruments of psychotherapy, we can understand retromania as a social explosion. Protected by this condition, pop music can finally cite and sample as much as it wants. And since it denies itself nothing when referencing the past, it is compelled to react to *all* past stimuli. The result is a chaotic mix of citations, references and quotes with no inhibitions. Pop is incapable of gaining distance or pausing and becomes lost in the past, exposed and defenceless—and by doing that lends a distinct meaning to Derrida's thesis that the archive is always working against itself. We would be dealing with a psychosocial state of affairs; the system has thrown its entire past into a pot, turned up the heat 'and now this unpredictable brew is boiling over'.⁴²

In fact, many elements of pop seem to exhibit manic characteristics. It is no coincidence that excitement, the need to express oneself and pathologically excessive activity have been part of pop's image from the very beginning. On one side is the jaunty, cheerful and unfounded but yet contagious optimism of the Beatles; on the other side, the in-your-face, ill-humoured aggression of Slayer. We need only look at the exaggerated self-confidence exhibited by so many pop stars, or the stream of consciousness texts, or at the songs themselves, which are often carefree, boisterous and sometimes mischievous. After all, modern psychotherapy considers mania to be a 'youth movement'.⁴³ However, exclusively

⁴² The image chosen by a psychotherapist to describe mania (cited in Faust 1997: 40).

⁴³ In the categorisation of mental illnesses created by Dörner and Plog, every age group has its own mission. Mania is seen as a reaction to problems that arise at the beginning of the third decade: 'This is the world of ever-new youth movements, of back-to-nature groups, the anti-authoritarian movement, the hippies, rockers and punks' (Dörner and Plog 1996: 179).

manic phases are extremely rare. More common are diagnoses of affective psychosis with only depressive phases or disorders in which manic and depressive phases alternate. Usually, euphoria is followed by despondence and megalomania gives way to inferiority complexes. Are there any signs of such a retro-depression? Can retrology itself be seen as such a turn from high to low?

As pop is not a person but a self-reproductive network of songs, we decide to leave these questions undecided. Instead of applying psychological concepts to pop, we chose to observe the observation of retromania instead. We called the specific school of thought that is processing this observation retrology and identified moralistic and teleological explanations as well as the paradigm of progress as its key features. This second-order observation allowed us to create a distance to the phenomenon that could in turn be reinvested in answering the research question: What function does retro serve in pop? The hypothesis was that retro solves the problem of pop's self-reproduction—or more dramatically, of its survival. As an attempt to break with the consensus that progress and development in pop are always necessary, it allows pop to take some time off from the pressure of constant innovation that is exerted from all sides, and to reproduce itself by remembering the songs and sounds of yesterday—which can of course also be former innovations. If this hypothesis is plausible, then retromania is caused by the constant demand for innovation. It may, therefore, be more helpful to describe the inflation of past references in pop as an immune reaction of the system.

The good news for all social pop workers is that retro also serves the pop community, as it is providing inclusion for those considered to be 'outsiders': 'At long last, partying is no longer work and those too lazy to get a style can be hipper than they ever were' (Joswig 1984: 1). We can, therefore, stop worrying and instead have every reason to see retro as something positive, and not as a symptom of a disorder.

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