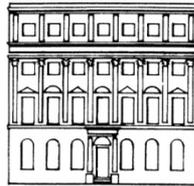


# German Historical Institute London



## BULLETIN

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*Pop Nostalgia: The Uses of the Past in Popular Culture*

Conference Report

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*Pop Nostalgia: The Uses of the Past in Popular Culture.* Joint Workshop with the BSSH South Sport and Leisure History Network, held at the German Historical Institute London, 10–11 November 2016. Organizers: Dion Georgiou (London) and Tobias Becker (GHIL).

Nostalgia is seemingly present in most aspects of life, from recollections of one's childhood and Hollywood reboots of beloved film franchises to vague calls to 'make America great again'. It is therefore no surprise that academic study of nostalgia has grown in recent years, with broad discussions of its effects not just on the individual, but on society as a whole. It is, however, the appearance of nostalgia within popular culture that indicates just how widespread this phenomenon has recently become. Bearing this in mind, the organizers of the workshop 'Pop Nostalgia: The Uses of the Past in Popular Culture' set out to answer a few key questions. Has nostalgia become worse from decade to decade? How widespread is popular nostalgia? And how does popular culture 'use' the past?

After a brief introduction by the workshop organizers, Dion Georgiou (London) and Tobias Becker (GHIL), the first panel, 'Alternative Pasts, Presents, and Futures', chaired by Deborah Sugg Ryan (Portsmouth), began with a paper by Susan Baumert (Jena). Baumert comparatively studied three main retro-events: the prohibition era inspired Jazz Age Lawn Party in New York, the Blitz Party in London, and the Bohème Sauvage in Berlin. There was much discussion about the authenticity of the events inspired by these retro-events, with boisterous 'Blitz Parties' overshadowing the true experience of life during the Blitz in 1940s London. Yet Baumert convincingly presented the motivations behind creating and attending such events, whether to satisfy tastes in fashion, to seek historical significance, or to pursue individual pleasures. She also suggested that in an age of prominent remembrance, all three retro-events were about escaping the present to imitate the past. In this sense, these events all aimed to create positive emotions about historical eras while providing incentives to engage in a serious study of the past. Helen Wagner (Duisburg-Essen) gave the next paper, discussing the cult fictional charac-

The full programme can be found under 'Events and Conferences' on the GHIL's website <[www.ghil.ac.uk](http://www.ghil.ac.uk)>.

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ter Horst Schimanski and localized nostalgia for the Ruhr area. Although not an immediate popular success, Schimanski eventually became a local symbol of the Ruhr area and its industrial past, strongly linking nostalgia and identity-formation. Though Wagner rejected the notion that nostalgia is simply a longing for yesterday, she argued that nostalgia for cult figures could help to shape a new regional identity for the future. The last paper in the panel, by Tobias Steiner (Hamburg), examined how television is widely employed to import historic occasions into the present. Stressing the importance of television as the principal means by which children and adults learn about the past, Steiner drew on television shows that present an alternate history, such as *The Man in the High Castle* and *11.22.63*, to argue that they allow viewers to see the past from a different perspective. By repurposing history through alternate history, audiences are presented with a fantasy of what could have been, highlighting not only the viewers' preoccupation with the past, but also their ability to engage critically with various examples of the past.

The second panel, chaired by Sabine Sielke (Bonn), focused on gendering the past. Elena Caoduro (Luton) presented a stimulating paper on the cultural phenomenon of retro femininity. She noted that today's society is much more preoccupied with the past than ever before, especially with regard to pop music. More importantly, Caoduro argued that through popular music, retro femininity challenges and resists traditional notions of femininity, and in the process provides new forms of identity for female music artists to develop. Kim Wiltshire (Ormskirk) delivered the next paper, discussing the changing portrayal of men in cinema. Drawing on films featuring Michael Caine and their later remakes such as *Alfie* and the *Italian Job*, Wiltshire discussed the shift from a 'lad archetype' to presenting masculinity in crisis. The remakes represented a different period for men, contrasting with the 'simpler times' portrayed in Caine's original films. The superficial male dream, as seen through Caine's characters, gave way to broader concerns in the presentation of men for later generations, as highlighted by film remakes and reboots. Thus Wiltshire noted that nostalgia is not simply about the past; rather, it is about a sense of absence in the present. The last paper in the panel, by Christina Bush (Berkeley), highlighted the relationship between nostalgia and sneaker culture. Bush argued that the release of Reebok's Alien Stomper sneakers to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of

the film *Aliens* in men's sizes only suggested wider issues of gender identities in modern times.

The last panel of the day, chaired by Michael Dwyer (Philadelphia), focused on the relationship between nostalgia and fashion. Heike Jenss (New York) opened the panel with a paper examining the uses of the past in the context of fashion consumption and production. Fashion, Jenss pointed out, is situated in time and therefore provides a personal and cultural memory of clothing worn in specific periods. By using terms such as 'vintage' and 'heritage', memory has the potential to add value to old clothing. For example, much as in wine culture, the term 'vintage' can refer to the quality of a product. Moreover, the use of websites such as Ebay, which make it possible for unique goods from the past to be sold, has not only increased the demand for vintage clothing, but has also made purchasing it easier. The past therefore serves as a profitable resource when linked with fashion. Josette Wolthuis (Coventry) continued with a paper on nostalgic representations of fashion on television. More specifically, she analysed the transition of fashions between the 1950s and 1960s on television shows such as *Mad Men* and *Call the Midwife*. The gradual changes in fashion between the two decades helps to highlight a change in the periods which television shows represent, even if the change is an ostensibly sudden transition. Nevertheless, Wolthuis suggests that with the help of fashion, period dramas are capable of creating sentiment amongst their viewers while also offering a social critique of the past and the issues faced at the time. The last paper of the day, by Michael Williams (Southampton), focused on Calvin Klein's spring 2016 advertising campaign, which was influenced by classical sculptures. Williams highlighted this as a prime example of recycling the past that is present within advertising, with the juxtaposition of past and present 'stars' showcasing a literal shift in time whilst demonstrating how the past still influences the present through marketing.

The conference continued on the following day with a panel entitled 'Sensory Nostalgia', chaired by Gary Cross (State College). Elodie A. Roy (Glasgow) began with a paper on the consumption of time and how time itself has become a commodity in an artificial sense. Interestingly, Roy argued that in modern times, there is no time to wait for objects to age. Instead other avenues are explored to find 'aged' products such as 'preworn' shoes. Tutorials on the inter-

net can provide information on how to rust metal, or age a musical instrument, underlining that emulating age shows that a product has lived. This preoccupation with new 'old' products helps the consumer to reach back to the past, rebuilding it through the look and feel of objects, even if such processes of ageing occur artificially rather than naturally. Bodo Mrozek (Berlin) continued the discussion of sensory nostalgia by examining the link between *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for East Germany) and smell. Unlike the senses of touch, sight, and taste, smell, Mrozek argued, is often overlooked in investigating how memory and nostalgia are triggered. Much as a child remembers the smell of a parent's cooking, people can also remember the smell of their surroundings or of particular consumer goods, thus strongly linking smell and memory. Drawing on the example of the perfume industry, Mrozek suggested that the use of East German brands created a nostalgic effect that was both warm and positive, while also highlighting that smell is, indeed, an element of *Ostalgie* and nostalgia in general. Lily Kelting (Berlin) delivered the final paper of the panel, discussing specific restaurants and their engagement with Southern history in the USA. Referring to restaurants such as Aunt Pittypat's Porch, Mary Mac's Tea Room, and Empire State South, Kelting pointed out that sensory nostalgia works in various ways. From deceptive nostalgia presenting a rose-tinted view of a certain period of time to highlighting a restaurant's personal history, nostalgia is clearly a marketable phenomenon within the food industry.

The final panel of the conference related to digital nostalgias and was chaired by Claire Monk (Leicester). The panel began with a paper by Aline Maldener (Saarbrücken) examining nostalgia within Internet forums. Social media, Maldener argued, has changed communications in both past and present. Technology allows us to engage with the past much more easily, allowing different generations of people to discuss, become aware of, and share their perceived pasts. Internet forums, therefore, act as multifunctional memory archives that give people who are interested in a past that is not simply their own a sense of amusement and sociality. They also provide a strong understanding of how nostalgia has developed in recent times. In the age of social media, it has become much easier to find a community of people who discuss the past nostalgically. Rieke Jordan's (Frankfurt) paper carried on the discussion of digital nostalgias, analysing music in both digital and physical formats. Using

recent examples such as Beck Hansen's *Song Reader*, released solely as sheet music, Jordan argued that certain musicians are challenging notions of modern music consumption, especially at a time when physical media is becoming obsolete and music is invisibly stored in electronic devices. By going against this supposed status quo, consumers can engage with modern music in interesting ways, helping the concept of nostalgia to thrive in an 'offline' setting. Dion Georgiou presented the final paper of the panel with a talk on Rage Against the Machine's (RATM) unlikely Christmas number one achievement in 2009. With the *X Factor*'s contemporary monopoly on the Christmas number one, Georgiou suggested that RATM's 2009 success highlighted a few important issues. First, as a symbol of 1990s rock rebellion, RATM's music was able to encourage desired change as against the pop music produced by the *X Factor*. Secondly, social media can strongly influence a popular movement against norms within the music industry. Thirdly, at a time when downloading has become much easier, consumers have a greater ability to retain cultural artefacts in the present.

The conference then proceeded with a final discussion of the papers delivered and proposals for further research. It was suggested that nostalgia might be a solely Western phenomenon, especially in the context of pop nostalgia. For example, do people from Asia or South America feel a sense of nostalgia regarding popular culture like Westerners? Improvements in technology and the rise of social media have also provided easy access to the past in ways previous generations could not have experienced. The distribution of nostalgia has been facilitated by technology, thereby helping to spread nostalgic tendencies amongst individuals. These, in turn, may have made the dissemination of nostalgia worse. Yet there is no doubt that nostalgia and popular culture are strongly linked, especially considering the numerous examples discussed by the conference's participants. It was clear that in spite of any stigma attached to nostalgia, or to scholarship related to it, there is a wide array of topics to be analysed and discussed.

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