



# REVOLUTIONARY NOSTALGIA

Retromania, Neo-Burlesque  
and Consumer Culture

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Retromania, Neo-Burlesque  
and Consumer Culture

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# CONTENTS

*List of Figures* vii

*Preface: Retromania in Retrospect* ix

## **Introduction**

1. Welcome to Wonderland 3

## **Section I: Past and Present**

2. Borne Back Ceaselessly 13

3. Wheel Meet Again 25

4. Come the Revolution 39

## **Section II: Focus and Findings**

5. Burlesque in Brief 55

6. Considering Consumer Culture 67

7. Fans of Freedom 79

## **Section III: Context and Concepts**

8. Ghost Dance Stance 111

9. Retro Rising Redux	125
10. Dancing is Life	139
<b>Conclusion</b>	
11. At the Hop	155
Appendix 1: Definitions of Nostalgia	167
Appendix 2: List of Informants	169
<i>References</i>	171
<i>Index</i>	207

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	David's <i>Oath of the Horatii</i> (1784)	x
Figure 6.1	Krystie Red Sugar Looks Back	73
Figure 6.2	<i>Follie Follies</i> Poster	75
Figure 7.1	Cherry Lyly Darling in Glamorous Fur	86
Figure 7.2	Florence Agrati as Lady Flo	87
Figure 7.3	Bambi Freckles' Dangerous Femininity	97
Figure 9.1	The Angel of Burlesque	130
Figure 10.1	David's <i>The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons</i> (1789)	151



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## PREFACE: RETROMANIA IN RETROSPECT

*Magnifique. Merveilleux. Incroyable.* Such were the superlatives that greeted the star of the Salon of 1785. Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii*, an arresting oil painting of Ancient Roman fealty, completely captivated the crowd, the critics, the cynics, the courtiers and commoners alike. Even the connoisseurs who complained about its technical infelicities conceded that David's stupendous canvas was an astonishing work of art, an outstanding work of art, an unforgettable work of art, a revolutionary work of art (Brookner, 1980).

According to Thomas E. Crow (1985) – albeit many art-world authorities disagree (Roberts, 1989) – Jacques-Louis David's extraordinary exhibit was in fact a *pre-revolutionary* work of art. That is, a prescient presentiment of the political, social and economic cataclysm which engulfed France four years later. It was a portent of the convulsions to come. It contained, Schama (1989, p. 174) contends, all the ingredients of revolutionary rhetoric – patriotism, fraternity, martyrdom and brutal defiance – though whether these attributes were imparted with hindsight or recognised at the time of the *Oath of the Horatii's* unveiling, remains an open question.

What is incontestable is that the artist was a quarrelsome rebel, a congenital renegade, who repeatedly refused to follow the officious dictates of the Académie, an institution whose

arbitrary rules, authoritarian ordinances and absolutist ethos were the Ancien Regime in miniature (Roberts, 1989). His great canvas was flagrantly oversized. Flouting convention, it was shown in Rome beforehand. It arrived irresponsibly late for the Parisian Salon. It overturned the precepts of best painterly practice, both stylistically and compositionally. And, as if that weren't enough, it depicted an entirely imaginary, 'essentially nostalgic' scene for which there was no proper historical precedent (Brookner, 1980, p. 31).

But, it was miraculous. It still is (Fig. 1). *The Oath of the Horatii* seized the past, shook the present and shaped the future. David indeed played a prominent part in that future. He was the foremost artist of the French Revolution. Apart from *The Death of Marat*, *The Tennis Court Oath* and his brutal 1789 canvas, *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies*

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**Fig. 1** David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1784)



Source: Marie-Cécile Cervellon (taken in the Musée du Louvre, Paris)

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of his *Sons* (which was even more of a harbinger of the horrors to come than his *Horatii*), he was an active Jacobin, a garrulous member of the National Assembly, an unapologetic signatory to Louis XVI's death warrant and the creative genius behind several spectacular ceremonial occasions (such as *The Festival of Unity and Indivisibility*) that took place as the Terror wreaked havoc and Madame la Guillotine went about her blood-soaked business. Granted, David wasn't the first to embrace neoclassicism, which ruthlessly swept aside the rococo overkill of Watteau and what have you. But, he went way, way beyond 'imitation' of the ancients, as Winckelmann recommended (Jones, 2018), and radically reinvented tradition. He performed what Walter Benjamin (1973, p. 253), arguably the most creative cultural critic of the twentieth century, would later describe as a 'tiger's leap' into the past that explodes the continuum of history (Lehmann, 2000).

Considered today, *The Oath of the Horatii* is an early example – arguably the quintessential example – of *la mode rétro* (Guffey, 2006). For contemporary marketing and consumer researchers, like ourselves, retro products and services are characterised by a combination of the old and the new. Typically, this comprises an old-fashioned form, style or setting combined with bang up-to-date performance, technology or functioning. The on-going *Star Wars* saga, for example, is built on a 40-year-old film that is set a long time ago (in a galaxy far, far away) and where every episode comes complete with state-of-the-art special effects, as well as new plot twists and story lines. Each release, what is more, is accompanied by a worldwide outbreak of retromania as the franchise's long-standing fanbase faces Force-feeding once more.

The pandemonium that accompanied Jacques-Louis David's ancient Rome-evoking masterpiece, a revolutionary and revelatory work of art, which was simultaneously backward-looking and ahead of its time, may or may not have

been the first recorded instance of consumer retromania. But, as this book shall show, there's no shortage of retro a go-go nowadays. Revolutionary nostalgia, *à la* David, is not lacking either, though the notion might come as a surprise to those old-school scholars who consider nostalgia 'inherently reactionary' (Bonnett, 2017, p. 7). As Benjamin (1979) observed about Surrealism, the most avant-garde artistic movement of his day, 'revolutionary energies inhere in the outmoded' (Eiland & Jennings 2014, p. 491). That's equally true today.

For our part, we firmly believe that artworks – be they J.-L. David's, J. J. Abrams's or André Breton's – provide unparalleled insights into the character of popular culture, consumer society, the human condition, if you will. Without getting too precious about it, we concur with Ezra Pound's claim that poets, painters and playwrights are the antennae of the human race (Gay, 2007) and with an eminent consumer researcher's statement that 'you can learn more ... from a reasonably good novel than from a "solid" piece of social science research' (Belk, 1986, p. 24). Works of art may not 'tell the truth' in any veridical sense. However, in today's post-truth world of fake news, alternative facts and so forth, the ultimate truth is inaccessible anyway. Artworks offer an attractive alternative to standard social science research techniques.

Hence, we regard retromania and revolutionary nostalgia through the lens of neo-burlesque, a reinvented performance art that is flourishing in France, Britain, America and elsewhere. Each individual chapter, furthermore, will be introduced with the aid of an appropriate exemplar drawn from diverse domains of popular culture, past and present. We also aim, in accordance with the artistic idea that the manner must reflect the matter, to communicate our findings, our feelings and our facts in a way that reflects the spirit of the things we're writing about. Neo-burlesque is irreverent, fun, cheeky, ribald and obstreperous. We can't promise all of

that, but we'll do our best to ensure, in the words of cultural critic Craig Brown (2018, p. 14) – discussing Cohn's classic book about the early years of rock and roll, *Awopbopaloo-bopalopbamboom* – 'that language should go in tandem with its subject'. If, in short, you're looking for sober scholarship, circumspect commentary or carefully qualified conclusions, bail out now.

There is one area, though, where we remain strictly conventional. Namely, with regard to the content of this preface. The primary purpose of a preface is to explain why the authors undertook the work that's about to unfold. Prefaces, by convention, are both written last and pertain to the prehistory of the project. In our case, Marie-Cécile was very much the prime mover. A life-long lover of vintage fashion, she spent many a happy hour browsing through the flea markets of Paris, Les Puces de Saint-Ouen in particular. While there, she found herself increasingly drawn to the neo-burlesque subculture, whose affiliates shopped in much the same places and were equally enamoured with vintage merchandise. As a marketing professor specialising in luxury brands and second-hand fashion, Marie-Cécile was no less conscious of the enormous store luxury labels set by their illustrious heritage and whose archives are regularly raided by in-house design teams seeking inspiration for forthcoming collections, cruise shows, magazine spreads and suchlike.

Stephen is a lapsed postmodernist who passes himself off as an academic specialising in consumer research, specifically the subdiscipline colloquially known as CCT (consumer culture theory). Drawn to the irreverent and retrospective wings of postmodern thought, epitomised by Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson, respectively, Stephen has written a number of papers on retro marketing, retro branding and retromania more generally. He has also written several less than best-selling novels, which are still available from all good charity

shops, used bookstores and Amazon Marketplace emporia. They are well worth 0.01 p. of anybody's money.

In our field of marketing and consumer research, academics are increasingly expected to specify precisely who did what in co-authored research publications. The division of labour was very clear cut in this instance. Marie-Cécile initiated the project, collected the data and gathered all the accompanying photographs, videos, archival material, etc. Stephen wrote the text in consultation with Marie-Cécile, and with the expert guidance of the editorial and copyediting team at Emerald, Philippa Grand, Rachel Ward and Rajachitra Suresh in particular. We are very grateful for their assistance, as we are to our informants, who allowed us to include excerpts from the interviews conducted by Marie-Cécile. The photographic agencies Emmanuel V. Photographies, 2shadowland, Mickaël Rius Photographies and Vincent SAB Photos kindly granted permission to reproduce their portraits of Cherry Lyly Darling, Lady Flo, Bambi Freckles and Krystie Red Sugar, respectively. Neoretro produced the poster of Follie Follies, which features in chapter 6, courtesy of Florence Agrati. Hilary Downey of Queen's University, Belfast, was responsible for the *Angel of Burlesque* artwork in Chapter 9. Thank you, all.

This book is dedicated to Marie-Cécile's daughter, Ava Marie des Lys, and her mother, Gabrielle (a.k.a. GaBichette).

Stephen Brown and Marie-Cécile Cervellon

July, 2018