



# Retro from the get-go: reactionary reflections on marketing's yestermania

Retro from the  
get-go

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to raise the issue of contemporary retromania with marketing historians.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This is a reflective essay combining personal experiences with empirical exemplars.

**Findings** – It is found that retromarketing is a subject requiring scholarly scrutiny. The commodification of the past is increasingly prevalent and marketing historians are ideally placed to lead the discussion.

**Research limitations/implications** – As yestermania is unlikely to evaporate anytime soon, it provides rich, socially and managerially relevant pickings for marketing historians.

**Originality/value** – Aside from the scurrilous suggestion that historians should get out of the dusty archives, it argues that originality is overrated.

**Keywords** Marketing, Heritage, Retro, *Titanic*

**Paper type** Viewpoint

Howard Luck Gossage, the legendary American adman, once stated that:

[...] an idea is nothing more or less than a new combination of old elements – and that the more old elements you have in your head, the more fertile your imagination (Harrison, 2012, p. 82).

Gossage knew whereof he spoke. Although he is less lauded nowadays than the Ogilvys, the Bernbachs, the Burnetts, the Reeveses – the Drapers indeed – of the golden age of Madison Avenue, Gossage is regarded by many advertising aficionados as the most imaginative of the lot (Cracknell, 2011). His quirky campaigns for Qantas airline, Fina petroleum, Eagle shirts, Scientific American and the Whiskey Distillers of Ireland were tours de force of the copywriters' art. In an era when TV ads ruled the roost, bludgeoning consumers with lowest common denominator claims and catchphrases, Gossage's long-form magazine inserts were erudite throwbacks to the pre-TV era. His copy consisted of highest common factor arguments for the goods and services he fronted. Dismissed, indeed, as a dangerous dinosaur in his day, Gossage's conversational style (he treated readers as equals), interactive ethos (he consistently solicited consumer feedback), working practices (he invented the creative hot-shop) and social network-driven approach (he was building brand communities before today's brand community builders were born) now strike us as remarkably prescient (Harrison, 2012).

A lover of history, whose old-fashioned ideas were ahead of their time, Gossage would be very much at home in today's retrospective epoch. We live, as copious



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commentators have pointed out, in a nostalgia-steeped world. We are caught up in a past times spin cycle – a retromarketing vortex – that is been rotating since the start of the present century and is getting faster and faster with each passing year (Brown, 1999). It is a yester-twister that “proper” historians are hesitant to track, since retro is regarded as degenerate, delinquent and downright disgraceful at times (Lowenthal, 1998). It is a soft-sell spiral, however, where marketing historians should feel at home. Who, after all, is better placed to evaluate today’s past times cash-in? Yet we continue to steer clear of the monetization and marketing of yesteryear. This viewpoint argues that it is time to get real about retro. It commences with a few personal observations, continues with an overview of contemporary retromarketing mania, culminates in a concatenation of concepts and case study, and concludes with a conundrum concerning “new old stuff”.

### **Yesterday’s tomorrows, today**

15 years ago, when I first started writing about retromarketing, I reckoned the “nostalgia boom” was a passing fad. I distinctly remember thinking that it would be all over bar the shouting before I managed to publish a few papers on the phenomenon. By the time these emerged, in the early 2000s, I was convinced that I’d missed the retro boat completely. The millennium had come and gone and nostalgia was ancient history, as were my newly-hatched articles which were already behind the times (Brown, 2001a, b, c).

How wrong can you be? Because here we are, well into the second decade of the twenty-first century and retromania is still going strong. Retro cars continue to roll off the motor industry’s production lines. The fashion business is recycling its past like there’s no tomorrow. Our kitchens and their contents – toasters, kettles, mixers and more – are monuments to yesterkitsch, as are our period feature-enhanced abodes. Popular culture is no less willing to let bygones be buygones, whether it be blockbuster movies (*The Hobbit*, *Skyfall*, *Lincoln*), bestselling novels (*Bring up the Bodies*, *Citadel*, *Dominion*), Broadway musicals (*Wicked*, *Jersey Boys*, *Rock of Ages*), must-see TV (*Downton Abbey*, *Call the Midwife*, *Dallas*, alas) or money-spinning commemorations, anniversaries, centennials and so forth (Grand Central Station, Tour de France, Edinburgh Zoo). Even our on-going economic recession echoes the Great Depression, not least in its attendant civil strife (Is Greece the Weimar Republic reborn?).

And it is not just me. I’m not the only middle-aged man experiencing heritage rage about our heritaged age. According to rock music commentator Simon Reynolds, the first ten years of the twenty-first century should not have been termed the “noughties”, as they often were, but nothing less than the Re-Decade. Pop culture in the 2000s, he says, was dominated by the “re-” prefix: revivals, reissues, remakes, restorations, retrospectives, reinventions, rearrangements, rehabilitations and non-stop re-cycling:

Every year brought a fresh spate of anniversaries, with their attendant glut of biographies, memoirs, rockumentaries, biopics and commemorative issues of magazines. Then there were the band *re*formations, whether it was groups *re*uniting for nostalgia tours in order to *re*plenish (or bloat still further) the members’ bank balances (Police, Led Zeppelin, Pixies [. . .] the list is endless) or as a prequel to *re*turning to the studio to *re*launch their careers as recording artists [Stooges, Devo, Fleetwood Mac, Dexys Midnight Runners] (Reynolds, 2011, p. xi).

In doing so, of course, Reynolds was merely repeating the earlier (and funnier) comments of George Carlin, the late, great, gloriously acerbic American comedian:

America has no now. We're reluctant to acknowledge the present. It's too embarrassing.

Instead we reach into the past. Our culture is composed of sequels, reruns, remakes, revivals, reissues, re-releases, re-creations, re-enactments, adaptations, anniversaries, memorabilia, oldies radio and nostalgia record collections [...].

And our television newscasts not only reflect this condition, they feed it. Everything they report is twisted into some reference to the past. If there's to be a summit meeting, you'll be told all about the last six summits; if there's a big earthquake, they'll do a story about big earthquakes of the past; if there's a mine disaster, you will hear about every mine disaster since the inception of mining. They're obsessed with looking back. I swear I actually heard this during a newscast, as the anchorman went to a commercial break: he said, "Still ahead, a look back." Honest [...].

There's really no harm reviewing the past from time to time; knowing where you've been is part of knowing where you are, and all that happy horseshit. But the American media have an absolute fixation on this. They rob us of the present by insisting on the past. If they were able, I'm sure they would pay equal attention to the future. Trouble is, they don't have any film on it (Carlin, 1997, p. 110).

### Still ahead, a look back

Such quotations may read like the glib remarks of smart-aleck show-offs, which to some extent they are, but it's undeniable that we're living in deeply nostalgic times (Brown, 2006). And marketers are making the most of it, as you might expect. Retro branding is booming. Every imaginable product or service category harbours at least one, often multiple, retro offerings: radios, refrigerators, toys, t-shirts, sneakers, swimwear, alarm clocks, computer apps, cupcakes, cocktails, caravans, cosmetics, candy and, as the Riva Vintage, Rieju Tango and forthcoming Renault 5 bear witness, motor boats, motor bikes and motor cars, respectively. Every individual element of the marketing mix has been brought back from the dead, whether it be old-style packaging (Heinz soups, Kellogg's Corn Flakes), long-lost slogans (*Vorsprung durch Technik*, *Va Va Voom*), half-forgotten mascots (Captain Morgan, Tetley Tea Folk), montages of monochrome television ads (Fairy Liquid, Flash) or resurrected product ranges from the archives (Puma training shoes, Pepsi Throwback, with real sugar!). Hovis wholemeal bread, to highlight a single example, recently revisited its famous 1973 Ridley Scott-directed TV ad of the delivery boy on a bicycle – itself an exercise in dewy-eyed nostalgia – with a two-minute mashup of twentieth-century British history. This started with the Suffragettes, segued into the Second World War, stepped lively through the Swinging Sixties and culminated in the millennium celebrations of 1999. Hovis then brought its retro tableau to a close with the brand's sepia-hued strapline "As good today as it's always been" (which is, in itself, as good today as it's always been).

It is not just a British thing either (Lindstrom, 2012). In Ireland, Barry's tea comes with a side-plate of rose-tinted retrospection. In America, the Super Bowl half-time show has turned into a nostalgiafest, as has the accompanying advertising Olympiad. In Russia, that timeless icon of the imperial past – Fabergé – is laying bejewelled eggs once more, as well as necklaces, bangles, apparel and other *objets d'art*. In Germany,

*nostalgie* for the good old bad old days of the DDR is rampant, everything from Vita Cola and Stalinallee board games to the successful campaign to save *Amplemannschen*, the much-loved little green man on traffic lights and pedestrian crossings. In Italy, management training programmes based on the code of the Gladiators are all the rage, as are samurai workshops in Japan. In China, the latter-day influx of western luxury goods has given rise to a local brand backlash. Icons of the pre-communist epoch, such as Xiefuchun cosmetics, Changzhou hair combs and Wangxinmaji hand-held fans, are on sale in Shanghai's retro shopping centre, the Zhonghua Laozihao Shangcheng ("time-honoured Chinese brand shopping mall"). In the weird and wonderful world of the internet, what is more, an anonymous viral e-mail eulogising idyllic childhood experiences in the tough-love 1950s, 1960s and 1970s is being eagerly forwarded to anyone and everyone by wistful baby boomers:

*Those were the days. Weren't they?*

Congratulations to all my friends who were born in the 1940s, 50s and 60s.

First, we survived being born to mothers who smoked and/or drank sherry while they carried us and lived in houses made of asbestos.

They took aspirin, ate blue cheese, bread and dripping, raw egg products, loads of bacon and processed meat, and didn't get tested for diabetes or cervical cancer.

Then, after than trauma, our baby cots were covered with bright coloured lead-based paints.

We had no childproof lids on medicine bottles, or locks on doors or cabinets and when we rode our bikes, we had no helmets or shoes, not to mention the risks we took hitchhiking.

As children, we would ride in cars with no seatbelts or air bags.

We ate white bread and real butter, drank cow's milk and soft drinks with sugar, but we weren't overweight because [...] we were always outside playing!

We would leave home in the morning and play all day, as long as we were back when the streetlights came on. No one was able to reach us all day, but we were okay. We would spend hours building go-karts out of old prams and then ride them down the hill, only to find out we forgot the brakes.

We did not have Playstations, Nintendo Wii and Xboxes, or video games, DVDs, or colour TV.

There were no mobiles, computers, internet or chatrooms. We had friends and we went outside and found them!

We fell out of trees, got cut, broke bones and teeth and there were no lawsuits from these accidents. And we ate worms and mud pies made from dirt too.

Not everyone made the school rugby, football, cricket or netball teams. Those who didn't had to learn to deal with disappointment. Imagine that. Getting into the team was based on merit.

Our teachers hit us with canes, gym shoes and threw the blackboard rubber at us if they thought we weren't concentrating.

Our parents would tell us to ask a stranger to help us cross the road.

Parents didn't invent stupid names for their kids like Kiora, Blade, Ridge and Vanilla.

We had freedom, failure, success and responsibility, and we learned how to deal with it all.

You might want to share this with others who grew up in an era before the lawyers and the government regulated our lives.

And while you are at it, forward it to your children, so they will know how brave their parents were.

And that is just the tip of the iceberg. Indeed, if anything epitomises today's retro infatuation it is the recent commemoration of RMS *Titanic*, which sank in April 1912

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but resurfaces on a regular basis. At the risk of sounding facetious, the centenary of the sinking of the unsinkable ship represented a bonanza for remembrance mongers (Ward, 2012). Apart from countless quick-buck works of popular culture, including movies, musicals, miniseries, memorials, magazine articles, computer games, iPhone apps, requiem masses and many more, the cities and places most associated with the catastrophe pushed the boat out like nobody's business. In Belfast, the city that built the leviathan, a £100-million visitors' centre opened its doors to worldwide acclaim. In Southampton, the ill-starred liner's place of departure, a Sea City Museum was built to recount the tragic story once more. In Cobh, the vainglorious vessel's final stop before casting off for New York, a *Titanic* Trail was established as part of the old harbour's heritage collection. In Liverpool, the majestic craft's home port, a massive street parade featuring gigantic puppets of the unfortunate passengers, was mounted during the anniversary commemorations. In the North Atlantic, where the pride of the White Star Line collided with an iceberg and foundered with fatal consequences, several cruise ships retraced *Titanic*'s original route and re-enacted memorable aspects of the disastrous maiden voyage (winning and dining mainly, albeit the festivities were put on hold to lay wreaths at the precise spot where the ill-starred steamship went down). In Australia, of all places, plans have been announced for the construction of an exact replica of the Harland & Wolff-built titan, which is expected to weigh anchor in 2017. In Italy, meanwhile, the 2012 sinking of the *Costa Concordia*, was repeatedly compared to the earlier catastrophe – both in the media and by the survivors themselves – though the ship's captain conspicuously failed to go down with his command, unlike his dutiful predecessor. Were it not for the 35 people who perished unnecessarily, I'd be tempted to quote Marx on first time as tragedy, second time as farce.

### So not nostalgia

Instead, let me step back a few paces and see if I can make sense of this back to the future obsession, using RMS *Titanic* as a sounding board for my retro ruminations. In this regard, it is important to note that many esteemed scholars have analysed our nostalgic age. Davis (1979), for example, draws a distinction between private nostalgia and collective nostalgia; Boym (2000) contrasts restorative nostalgia with reflective nostalgia; Jameson (1991) separates traditional nostalgia and neo-nostalgia; Tannock (1995) criticises the critics of nostalgia, arguing that far from being reactionary and conservative, yester-yearning is revolutionary and emancipatory[1]. Maclaran (2003), Goulding (2000), Stewart (1999), De Groot (2008) and dozens of others have plumbed the depths of the nostalgic impulse, moreover, using a range of qualitative and quantitative methods. The leading light, though, is David Lowenthal (2012), who dilates on the differences between heritage and history and contends that our present century is characterised, not by common or garden nostalgia but postmodern ironic nostalgia (PIN), which mines and mocks the past simultaneously. Instead of venerating bygone times, PIN pokes fun at them and revels in anachronism. Thus, The Onion (1997) satirically declares that such is the demand for revivals, America is running out of pasts and considering rationing what remains. Reynolds (2011) wonders what will happen when the excavation of our ever-more recent past finally catches up with the present in a nü-nostalgic apocalypse. Brown (2001a, b, c) maintains that there is nothing to prevent revivals of revivals and that future waves of retromania could well

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consist of heartfelt communal yearning for our twenty-first century yesterfest (ah, do you remember the good old days of the *Titanic's* centenary?)

Such fun and frolics are all fine and dandy, but they elide a crucially important point. Namely, that nostalgia and retro are not synonymous[2]. The concepts are closely related, to be sure, albeit an important difference remains. Retro products, brands, experiences, services and suchlike typically combine state of the art technology with traditional looks, design, styling and aesthetics (Brown *et al.*, 2003). Appearance-wise, they echo the old. Performance-wise, they are bang up to date. The new Volkswagen Beetle is stylistically reminiscent of the Bug beloved by hippies and *Herbie* movie fans. However, it comes equipped with airbags, disk brakes, power steering, twin-clutch transmission and a fuel-efficient turbocharged engine. The Roberts retro radio is almost identical to the portable wireless that was released to considerable acclaim in 1956. But contemporary versions are furnished with DAB functionality, internet connectivity and MP3 player compatibility. The Olympus OM-D camera is almost indistinguishable from the legendary SLR of the 1970s, although today's digital version boasts autofocus, face recognition, five-axis image stabilisation, tiltable OLED touchscreen display and more lenses than you can shake a tripod at. Looks-wise, Liverpool FC's current football kit evokes the club's glory days during the 1970s (apart from the long shorts, which bring the fifties to mind), yet the breathable, micromesh, dri-fit material incorporates the very latest breakthroughs in sports fabric science.

And it does not stop there. There is more to retro than the archetypal combination of yester-look and today-tech. Two key subtypes are discernible (Brown, 2006). The first comprises revivals of products or services that were retro to start with. Laura Ashley, for instance, regularly reissues updated versions of its classic English clothes and housewares. But, when the brand began back in 1953, its signature designs were reproductions of William Morris's Arts & Crafts movement of the late-nineteenth century, which was predicated in turn on the pre-Raphaelites' preoccupation with romanticised medievalism. *Hairspray*, John Waters' iconic musical comedy, is set in the early 1960s, just prior to the Beatles invasion. Originally released in 1988, a stage show followed in 2002, which was filmed in 2007 (starring John Travolta) and then further adapted for the Broadway stage and worldwide touring companies. The current version is not only a revival of a revival of a revival but a stage show of a movie of a stage show of a movie. It is a postmodern mash-up of pasts and presentations.

Our second variant refers to retro products or services that were once considered futuristic – the cutting edge of the cutting edge – but are now endearingly archaic. Digital watches, the Art Deco movement, computer games like *Tetris*, *Battleships* and *Space Invaders*, and the rapidly-growing Steampunk subculture, which celebrates Victorian visionaries, sets futuristic sci-fi stories in the piston-pumping past and, as VanderMeer (2011, p. 9) observes, “embraces divergent and extinct technologies as a way of talking about the future”. The epitome of neo-retro, however, is Disney's iconic Tomorrowland, which depicted an amazing world of jetpacks, flying cars, geodesic domes and weekend breaks to the Moon or Mars. These days, Tomorrowland is regarded as a time tunnel to the 1950s, “a museum for new kitschy-quaint notions of the future” (Reynolds, 2011, p. 371). When it was thoroughly refurbished in 1998, with tongue ever so slightly in cheek (Guffey, 2006), the new attraction should really have been renamed Yesterday's Tomorrowland Today!

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### The work of art in an age of retro reproduction

Appealing and persuasive though it is, Lowenthal's (2012) postmodern ironic nostalgia hardly does justice to retro's that-was-then-this-is-now-and-then ethos. More apt, arguably, are the insights of the German cultural theorist Walter Benjamin. In his unpublished interwar master-work on Paris's ageing shopping arcades – a half-forgotten world of “corsets, feather dusters, red and green-coloured combs, old photographs, souvenir replicas of the Venus di Milo, collar buttons to shirts long since discarded” (Buck-Morss, 1993, p. 4) – Benjamin (1999) notes that radically new ideas always come in old packaging. It is the only way, he claims, humankind can grasp the genuinely new. We make sense of truly innovative ideas by relating them to the established, to the familiar, to what is gone but not forgotten. Thus, the first steam engines had mechanical feet which were raised and lowered alternately, like a horse. Early aeroplanes flapped their wings. The first electric light bulbs were made to look like gas flames. Ditto the first motor cars and stage coaches. Ditto wrought iron and carved woodwork. Ditto revolutionary social movements, such as Russian Communism or Ireland's Easter Rising, which consistently wrap themselves in the mantle of past heroes, mythical figures and fabulous exploits:

Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past [. . .] The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action[3] (Benjamin, 1992, p. 253).

Fusions of old and new are no less evident in the cultural sphere, where the past provides a Petri dish for even the most avant-garde futures (Brown *et al.*, 2000). Consider Picasso's modernist primitivism, Eliot's repurposed grail quest in *The Waste Land*, Joyce's teleportation of Odysseus to early-twentieth-century Dublin, D.W. Griffith's and Sergei Eisenstein's invention of the cinematic vernacular in the historical epics *Birth of a Nation* and *Battleship Potemkin*, respectively, or even the famous Futurist manifesto of February 1909, which is replete with past times references and appeals to historical precedent. All media, Rose notes in his recent study of storytelling in our socially mediated age, begin by mimicking familiar forms. Network television, for example:

America's first big hits – Milton Berle's *Texaco Star Theater* and Ed Sullivan's *Toast of the Town* – were pure vaudeville, the variety format that a half century before had lured people to theaters to see a bill of singers and dancers and novelty acts. Popular dramatic series – *Man Against Crime*, *Philco Television Playhouse*, *Kraft Television Theatre* – were broadcast live from New York, just as radio dramas had been. So were comedy series like *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. Not until the 1951 debut of *I Love Lucy* – shot on film in the now-classic, then-revolutionary sitcom format – did television begin to find success on its own terms (Rose, 2011, p. 35).

And the same is often true of iconic brands. Apple, for instance, has consistently wrapped its cutting-edge products in attractively retro packaging, whether it be the Art Decoish iPods, the Star Trekish iPads, the pastel-coloured hippie-chick iMacs, the legendary TV ad 1984, which evoked George Orwell's 1940s vision of the future, the “Think Different” campaign which featured monochrome images of venerable iconoclasts (Albert Einstein, Mahatma Gandhi, Samuel Beckett, etc.), or even the very

name of the company which simultaneously echoes the Garden of Eden, Newton's discovery of gravity, and The Beatles' legendary record label. Its intermittent updates, likewise, invariably leave legions of Apple enthusiasts in a falling-behind-the-times-gotta-upgrade-right-away frenzy, which unfailingly does wonders for the tech-titan's bottom line (Brown, 2007b).

Apple is not alone. From the beginning of "modern" branding in the mid-nineteenth century (Bastos and Levy, 2012), innovative products have been draped in anachronistic packaging, primarily to reassure risk-averse customers with intimations of reliability, dependability, longevity, heritage. Hershey's chocolate, Nabisco biscuits, Keillor's marmalade and the once and future Coca-Cola, whose famous copperplate logotype was antiquated from the outset, are classic cases in point (Sivulka, 2011). Purveyors of Victorian patent medicines were particularly partial to providing their palliatives with a fictitious heritage predicated on the secrets of the ancients or timeless wisdom of Native American tribes. The very first brand mascot – the Quaker Oats man of 1877 – was not dressed in contemporary sartorial style but in the tricorne hat and clerical collar of the previous century's Puritanism, as he is to this day. Whether it be Marlboro's 1950s evocation of the nineteenth-century Wild West, or Bailey's Irish Cream, the allegedly ancient beverage of the Emerald Isle, which was invented in London in the mid-1970s, or the latest version of the Volkswagen Beetle, which has been remodelled as a neo-retro homage to the 1990s original, or Facebook's new-fangled Timeline, which thoughtfully organises our disorganised former lives in sequential photographic fashion, appeals to the past are an ever-present feature of contemporary marketing practice.

### **RMS retromatic**

The *Titanic* too was retro from the get-go. Although today's accounts of the iconic steamship stress that it was the cutting edge of the cutting edge – a veritable masterpiece of Edwardian technology, nothing less than the biggest, most sophisticated and mind-bogglingly advanced moving object on earth – the reality is that it was anything but (Cameron, 2011). To the contrary, it was a proto retro product. Far from being a breakthrough in marine engineering, its "Belfast bottom" double hull was decidedly old-fashioned, as was its hopelessly inadequate rudder. Its triple-expansion reciprocating engines relied on sadly passé propulsion systems. Its super-duper safety features – the much-lauded watertight bulkheads – represented a regression from Brunel's Great Eastern of 1858. Its construction partly relied on a hand-hammered riveting process that was far from the state-of-the-art of shipbuilding, despite occasional claims to the contrary (Davenport-Hines, 2012).

*Titanic's* cabins and public spaces, what is more, were decorated in period styles – Tudor, Georgian, Jacobean, Regency, Louis XIV, Second Empire, Queen Anne, etc. – and it was advertised prior to the fateful sailing as an incomparable cross between traditional creature comforts and the highest of high tech spec. The almost unthinkable sinking revealed that the allegedly unsinkable ship's lifeboat provision, navigational decisions and evacuation procedure after the collision (which relied on the out-of-date "Birkenhead principle") were abysmally antiquated yet in accord with contemporary best practice. Even the gigantic ship's name harked back to ancient, immemorial, marvellously mythical times, albeit the allusion to the Titans could not have been more ill-chosen[4]. For all its futuristic accoutrements – electricity, elevators, wireless,



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gymnasium, swimming pool, squash court, Turkish baths and so on – the *Titanic* was retro incarnate.

The subsequent cultural history of the unsinkable ship is equally retrotastic in tenor (Howells, 1999). Every wave of renewed interest in the tragedy introduces new elements to the old narrative. In the mid-1950s, for instance, the bestselling book *A Night to Remember*, not only reignited interest in the liner after 40 years of forgetfulness, but it was an innovative work of real-time history writing, a modernist approach to non-fiction that anticipated the “faction” of Truman Capote and the “new journalism” of Tom Wolfe. The discovery of the wreck by Robert Ballard in September 1985, not only brought the latest submersible technology to bear on a 75-year-old maritime mystery but James Cameron did exactly the same with his blockbuster 1997 movie, which combined futuristic special effects with a richly detailed period setting, added an up-to-date wraparound story and recycled one of the oldest plots known to humankind: boy gets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl, boy goes down for the third time (Lubin, 1999).

Belfast’s much-vaunted visitors’ centre likewise recounts the century-old story of the great ship’s construction, destruction and continuation in cultural memory. But it does so with the aid of the very latest tourist-trapping technologies – innovative dark rides, stunning special effects, assorted touch-screened wonders, real-time video link to Ballard’s on-going undersea expeditions and suchlike. The entire building, believe it or not, is regarded as a symbol of Belfast going forward, a sign that the world-renowned city, once widely considered to be an urban wasteland of riots and rubble, is determined to forge a cutting-edge future by recapturing the city’s high-tech past. Granted, building a place brand on the biggest new product failure of all time is somewhat perverse, not to say downright ridiculous, though its proponents are deadly serious. Here is how a bullish city branding specialist recently described the *Titanic* museum to me:

The signature building has many parallels with Belfast itself. Just as *Titanic* was at the cutting edge of technology and innovation in the nineteen hundreds, the same is true today in the new Belfast, the renaissance city, which is at the forefront of so many things – aerospace, wind turbines, robotic technology, culturally too. It’s an inspirational message that’s reflected in the signature building, which has the latest design technology and is at the leading edge of visitor experience (Project manager, personal interview, 2012).

If you think that is strange, by the way, do not strike up a conversation with a *Titanic* fan. Today’s *Titanic* enthusiasts, as Biel’s (2012) study of the brand community shows, talk in a weirdly antiquated language that would be laughable if it were not so ludicrous. Their discourse is like something out of a melodramatic Edwardian novel, a combination of clanking clichés involving vasty deeps, unruffled seas, darksome nights, gallant fights, mortal wounds and just about everything bar fair maidens, knights errant and love songs strummed “neath moonlit balconies”. Cameron’s multi-Oscar-winning movie was similarly lambasted for its egregious anachronisms (Bernstein, 1999). That is, the use of contemporary language, behaviour and gesture – such as Jack’s master class in expectoration, Rose flipping the finger at Cal Hockley’s henchman or her use of Tom Wolfe’s expression “masters of the universe” – in period settings, although in Cameron’s case these were inserted for necessary comic relief[5].

Be that as it may, this melding of past and present, which is evident throughout the *Titanic* cultural complex, is a further testament to Benjamin (1992), one of whose 18

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theses on the philosophy of history describes Klee's *Angelus Novus* (the angel of history) with its face turned toward the past while being blown by a gale of modernity into a tumultuous future. In the same essay, he articulates a philosophy of *Tigersprung*, which pertains to the fashion system's tendency to leap into the past – without nostalgia – in order to create an ever-changing present (Lehmann, 2000). In his admittedly complex writings on allegory, furthermore, Benjamin emphasises the importance of ruination (Tambling, 2010). The continuing power of German tragic drama, is predicated on its depiction of disintegration, degeneration, despair and the “untimely”; in other words, history torn out of the conventional chronological narrative of progress that characterises official representations of times past. When it comes to conceptualisations of history, clearly, Walter Benjamin was ahead of his time.

### Yester-tech once more

For all his cryptic insights, you do not need to turn to Benjamin's gnomic ruminations to grasp the importance of untimeliness. It is equally well illustrated by Edgerton's (2006) unnatural history of technology, *The Shock of the Old*. Traditional histories of technology, he notes, tend to focus on firsts – on inventions, on innovations, on breakthroughs – and often comprise a catalogue of key dates when new-to-the-world technologies appeared (flight, 1903; nuclear power, 1945; contraception, 1955, the internet, 1965, etc.). This woefully Whiggish view of history should therefore be replaced with studies of technology-in-use, since the reality is that old and new technologies operate in tandem. The new does not ordinarily supplant the old, despite the hype and boosterism of those with vested interests in advancing the next big thing. Using tractors, rickshaws, airships, railroads, spinning wheels, wooden furniture and corrugated iron as apt exemplars, he argues that the old is more resilient than it is given credit for and often makes a comeback when the shortcomings of the new become apparent. Condoms, cruise ships, sewing machines, mechanical watches, vinyl records, cable television, organic foodstuffs and ever-dependable bicycles are just some of the domains where the old is not only holding up but advancing with intent, what Edgerton (2006, p. 50) terms “moving forward to the past”.

It does not take a soothsayer to see that the same is true of management theory and practice. Regardless of all the talk about new and improved management technologies, notwithstanding the swarms of butterfly buzzwords that incubate between the pages of *HBR*; and, irrespective of the constant cacophony of concept creating, churning, chopping and changing that goes on in the noisome cellars of management consultancies, the ideas in use at any one time are likely to be a mix of the old and the new, with a preponderance of the former. In marketing, the 4Ps, the USPs, the STPs, the PESTs, the SWOTs of this world may have much less cachet than the cultreematics, the purple cows, the brand gyms, the neuromarketings, the metaphor elicitation techniques of the moment, but they have not gone away by any means. Indeed, the concepts that do take hold are often throwbacks to, or echoes of, times past. Relationship marketing represents a reversion to pre-modern marketing principles, when butchers, bakers and candlestick makers knew their customers individually and intimately. Ted Levitt's legendary “Marketing Myopia”, the single biggest breakthrough in marketing scholarship, is basically a potted history of the American oil industry, with a sidebar on outmoded Hollywood movies and buggy whips. Today's much-debated conceptual innovation, service-dominant logic, is



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essentially an extended exercise in archive mining, a case of old economics wine in new marketing bottles (Brown, 2007a). It is clear that we live in a steampunk world of yester-thought as well as yester-tech.

The work of Edgerton, Benjamin and indeed the science of memory – which reveals that our memories are not simply stored and retrieved, as was once believed, but created anew on each recollective occasion (Ferryhough, 2012)[6] – thus suggest that traditional notions of nostalgia, and moreover neophilia, are far from fit for purpose. Time’s arrow, beloved by future-focussed progressives, and time’s cycle, preferred by past-preoccupied reactionaries, needs must be supplemented with time’s spiral, the recycling of the past within a rising, long-term trajectory of betterment and, occasionally, tiger leaps to higher levels (Kemp, 2011). Few would deny, for example, that James Cameron’s Oscar-garlanded movie not only retold the old, old story and attained a new level of cinematic accomplishment, but lifted the entire *Titanic* industry to a level that eclipsed everything that had gone before (bar Robert Ballard’s discovery of the wreck, perhaps). Such was its predecessor-obliterating power, that when Cameron’s game changer was re-released in 2012 – in newly upgraded 3D format, naturally – many first-time viewers were unaware that the movie was based on an historical event. In Belfast’s money-no-object *Titanic* building, moreover, many visitors were enraged by their inability to recreate a “Jack and Rose” moment on its replica grand staircase, which was off-limits to the general public. These days, the movie is more meaningful than the metal, even in the town that built the monster steamship.

### God rest ye merry marketing men

There is, however, a twist in the tail of time’s spiral. And that is the incessant demand for new old stuff. The retro market is just as beholden to the “new and improved” imperative as any other. Museum curators must shuffle their collections and mount brand new exhibitions of old masters – or new old modernist masters like Rothko, Pollock and Serra – if they want to keep the turnstiles ticking over and sell the tie-in t-shirts, key-rings, mouse pads and guidebooks. Each passing year brings a slew of significant anniversaries and cash-in commemorations that must be seized upon and systematically exploited by forward-thinking retro-marketing managers. Jane Austen, Richard Wagner, Rosa Parks, Sylvia Plath and the 35th anniversary of Fleetwood Mac’s timeless *Rumours* album are being celebrated as I write these reflections and, with the commemoration-rich First World War looming on the heritage horizon, there is no danger of retro running out of steam anytime soon.

Nevertheless, a nagging question remains. What happens to retro products and services whose moment in the past times spotlight has passed? This issue faces the managers of Belfast’s newly built *Titanic* museum. The centenary of the sinking has come and gone. Worldwide interest in the infamous steamship is certain to wane from its 2012 peak. Although it will never disappear completely, since *Titanic* is too iconic for that, the anniversary industry is moving on and there is a danger that Belfast’s state-of-the-art retro experience will get stuck in the past, both literally and figuratively, spinning its wheels and cogs and steadily losing tourist-trapping traction.

Its developers, needless to say, have considered this passé possibility and, as you might expect, they have scheduled a rolling programme of new old attractions. Thus, far, these include a tableau of costumes from Cameron’s *Titanic* movie; a huge blueprint of the ship that formed part of the British public inquiry into the sinking; an

exhibition of Irish schoolchildren's artwork inspired by the once and future liner; and the grand opening of a newly-refurbished tender vessel, the SS *Nomadic*, which transported first-class passengers from Cherbourg's shallow harbour to the deep-and-wide *Titanic* anchored offshore. Built in Belfast by Harland & Wolff, as a quarter-size replica of its "big sister", the neo-*Nomadic* now occupies a dry dock immediately adjacent to the visitors' centre and is thus in a position to offer the authentic *Titanic* experience that the brand museum cannot.

This steady stream of new old stuff is not confined to physical exhibitions, moreover. All sorts of offbeat stories and headline-friendly anecdotes relating to the unsinkable ship have been held back by the centre's management for future public consumption. As the managing director of their PR firm mentioned to me in an interview immediately prior to the opening of *Titanic* Belfast:

The stories are unending. We have a master-plan for the next three years, based on brainstorming sessions. But they are self-perpetuating. We have human interest stories, engineering stories, cultural stories, design stories, architectural stories, historical stories, inspirational stories, off-beat stories, quirky things. The stories themselves generate stories, because we get local coverage of the international coverage in *Fodor*, *National Geographic*, *The Economist* and around the United States generally. There's always something. Always new angles. We're holding stuff back we have so much. It's non-stop (PR consultant, personal interview, 1912).

If nothing else Belfast's totemic tourist attraction bears witness to the insightful remarks made in David Mitchell's award-winning novel *Cloud Atlas*, where he employs the *Titanic* tragedy to distinguish between two different types of past, the actual past and the virtual past. Whereas the actual sinking is descending inexorably into oblivion, as eyewitnesses die off and the wreck slowly disintegrates, the virtual sinking is becoming increasingly vivid, increasingly voluble, increasingly veridical, thanks to its incessant recycling in films, books, documentaries and similar cultural representations. "The actual past," he contends, "is brittle, ever-dimming and ever more problematic to access and reconstruct: in contrast, the virtual past is malleable, ever-brightening and ever more difficult to circumvent/expose as fraudulent" (Mitchell, 2004, p. 408).

This virtual past has the additional benefit that it can be extended – in classic Igor Ansoff fashion! – to ostensibly unrelated territories and timelines. That is to say, the future of *Titanic* Belfast is not necessarily confined to an unending reworking of the ship-shape legend for ever-diminishing returns. It has already mounted retro rock concerts, featuring once-famous bands playing golden oldies and greatest hits; staged good old-fashioned fun runs where the participants jog around in historic garb and vintage fancy dress; and successfully hosted a traditional Victorian Christmas extravaganza, complete with sleigh bells, suet pudding, costumed carol singers, and a fleeting appearance by Santa Claus himself[7]. Not only did the last of these prove enormously popular – the venue sold out throughout the festive season – but it reminds us that Christmas, arguably the biggest marketing occasion in the calendar, is retro incarnate (Belk, 1989).

### **Brands against the current**

For the past 15 years or so, the western world has gone wild for retro. From *Mad Men*, the multi-award-winning television series set in a 1960s advertising agency, through the burgeoning of Burlesque, a tongue-in-cheek take on strip-tease that stresses the



suffix instead of the prefix, to the Citroen DS3, a latecomer to the crowded retro auto market which attracted attention through its purportedly “anti-retro” positioning, there is not a sector or service that has not plundered the past in its pursuit of future income streams. The first act of newly-appointed fashion directors, such as Hedi Slimane at YSL and Raf Simons at Dior, is to raid the brand’s archives for their inaugural collection. There is hardly a movie coming out of Hollywood that is not a sequel or prequel or threequel or 3D re-release or big-budget reboot of an existing franchise or, failing that, a remake of one kind or another. Even two-ton turkeys, like Robert Redford’s 1974 version of *The Great Gatsby*, are being brought back from the dead to remind us, in three dimensions, of the Jazz Age once again. A movie tie-in edition of the novel will doubtless be downloaded to millions of Kindles as Fitzgerald’s future readers are borne back ceaselessly into the past like before.

Retro, for some, is a grotesque pastiche of the past, a cesspit where heritage trappings are preferred to historical substance (Lowenthal, 1998). And so it is. But it remains a distinctive feature of today’s past-facing, future-fearing society, one that is worthy of further investigation by marketing historians. Although retro is not the be all and end all of twenty-first century marketing, it is liable to loom large for some time yet[8]. So much so, that steampunk scholarship – “looking to the future through the lens of the past” (Sedia, 2012, p. 1) – could be the next big thing. You read it here first!

## Notes

1. Space does not permit detailed discussion of these unfailingly insightful scholars. To pluck an example at random, Jameson (1991) aligns nostalgia with postmodernism, albeit as an affectless form of nostalgic pastiche where an amalgam of past styles, looks and modalities are picked, mixed and mashed up with abandon (Brown *et al.*, 2000).
2. Several definitions of retro are extant (Guffey, 2006). In the art and design community, for instance, the term “retro-futuristic” is often employed for the old/new combination I describe. This paper sticks with the definition of retromarketing outlined by Brown (2001b).
3. This quotation, as you are well aware, is a reboot of Marx’s unforgettable analysis of France’s farcical coup d’etat of 1851. In his riotous “Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” the Titanic thinker notes that “At the very times when they seem to be engaged in revolutionizing themselves and their circumstances [...] they anxiously summon up the spirits of the past to their aid, borrowing from them names, rallying-cries, costumes, in order to stage the new world-historical drama” (Marx, 1983 [1852], pp. 287-288).
4. The Titans were a legendary race of giants who waged war against Olympus and paid a heavy price for their presumption. Roundly trounced by Zeus’s thunderbolts, the upstarts were consigned to a watery limbo beneath the lowest depths of the Tartarus (Lord, 1986).
5. Consider, for example, Cal’s derogatory comments on Rose’s collection of modern art or Jack’s windblown philosophy of life, which owed more to Bob Dylan than Henry Adams, the Gilded Age American advocate of free-wheeling self-discovery. Adams, incidentally, was booked on the return voyage of the *Titanic* (Biel, 2012).
6. Instead of memory, I could just have easily made a comparison with metaphor. Metaphorical thinking, remember, transports ideas from old established realms to new, ill-defined domains in order to domesticate, to better grasp, to help make sense of an unfamiliar “target” by recourse to a familiar “source”. Or, as Pinker (2008, p. 241) puts it, “metaphors are a mechanism that the mind uses to understand otherwise inaccessible concepts”.

7. Santa, sadly, did not arrive in a leaky lifeboat instead of his supersonic sleigh. The reindeers objected, apparently. I hesitate to say it, but there were elf and safety concerns as well.
8. Note, I'm not claiming that retro is the only show in town. Cultural formations, as Williams (1977) explains, ordinarily involve dominant, emergent and residual elements. The extent of retro's dominance is debatable, I agree, but it can hardly be described as emergent, let alone residual.

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