

Retro: A Guide to the Mid-20th Century Design Revival. Adrian Franklin, London: Bloomsbury, 2013, 256 pp.

RETRO, MORE THAN SHEER NOSTALGIA

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The book, as the name implies, is about the retro and its many faces. The origin of the phenomenon could be traced back to the postwar period and today retro is still more than relevant. The ever-growing popularity of retro in the design world has raised increasing interest in the realm of art and design researchers. Shedding more light on this widespread and complex trend is well needed.

The author of the book, Adrian Franklin, is well-known in the Anglo-Saxon world and in Europe. In this work he introduces fresh methodology to retro as a phenomenon, utilizing sociological approach and pondering the social and cultural conditions and motifs which played their role in the birth of retro as an artistic and cultural expression.

The book does not try to be a catalogue, a form of approach which other design related books often use. From the center of Franklin's book can be found a fluent discourse in which he presents his main theories in an approachable way. Franklin's approach works for the benefit of the reader. Even though the chapters concentrate in various rather heterogenic objects the examples are carefully chosen and highly informational. The text is supported by a large quantity of images from which surprisingly many are related to the Nordic design, perhaps due to the important role of the Nordic countries in the era of modern design. The fact that the Nordic countries possess a large amount of design museums and publications dedicated to once vanguard objects might also explain their high role in the book.

The Introduction is crucial to understand the latter part of the book. The chapters concentrate on different products ranging from furniture to technology. One of the most interesting insights might be the part explaining our admiration to vintage objects, the driving force which could be considered as the starting point of retro. Retro reminds us from the past but does not always belong there – unlike vintage. The author associates the idea with postmodern theories and the

adoration that we feel to our own material culture and then introduces the thoughts of the philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin regarding nostalgia and eclecticism – concepts fundamental to understand not only retro but perhaps the artistic expression of the postmodernity itself.

Throughout the book echoes the idea that retro is firmly connected to the popular culture which often makes references to the past, its products and designs. Yet Franklin does not connect retro to the starting point of the postmodern art: the impossibility to create new – the action not to create but to recreate, as suggested Jameson. However the author examines shortly “revival”, another important concept of retro.

Some of his own questions Franklin fails to answer, for example he does not provide a clear opinion to the question should retro be considered a genre of design, merely a mode, a source of inspiration or perhaps combination of all former. Yet most of the arguments he presents are well presented. The esthetics has clearly been a source of inspiration to the author who often uses expressions such as “the aura of the object”.

Personally I found the first chapter, dedicated to the furniture, the most interesting one. Even though the author is not an expert in this particular field he succeeds to offer a great amount of detailed facts that make the chapter worth reading. The fifth chapter deals with plastic and it is equally fascinating. The 70’s “plastic revolution” and its importance to the design, is well explained and the vast imagery of plastic objects impressing and detailed.

The presence of the aesthetics of modernity in retro is dealt in the last chapter. Franklin introduces the idea that modernity, in some way, is not yet over but omnipresent and in fashion when seen from our own cultural perspective. When connected to the modernity the retro object acquires a vintage character. From the commercial perspective this means reissuing different objects, conserving their value, exclusivity and details, characteristics that also appeal to the collectors demands.

Retro has become one of the main fashion styles due to our interest in vintage objects, the green values, the second hand stores and internet, factors that together have created a vast network for this kind of products. It is significant, as Franklin suggests in the book, how universal the retro seems as a fashion trend if we look back in history. One interesting answer to the universal appeal of retro might be the interpretation that sees it as a combination of memory and material culture as a way to search for our identity. It is obvious that retro, as a style, is inspired by the nostalgia of past objects, but more than a mere reproduction of old designs it is should also be seen as a projection of our distinctiveness. Retro has always been a way to express our notion of identity within nowadays changing society.

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