



## Boo!

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**Stephen Brown**   
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*Why do we think only the dead haunt us when the living are just as good at it?*

—Taylor (2017: 318)

A spectre is stalking consumer society, the spectre of retrospection. And, as a retro-spokesperson of sorts – out of sorts, Ahlberg et al. (2021) suggest – I was invited to comment on their article. Ordinarily, I'd decline such requests. Bar my war of attrition against the stereotyped literary style and structure of stultifying academic articles, I'm a live and let live kinda guy. But as a big, bad boogeyman in the authors' version of events (the Canterville Ghost of CCT, so to speak), I feel obliged to summon up a few spooky sentences. Apologies in advance.

On reading 'The Haunting Spectre of Retro Consumption', my immediate, real-time and admittedly irreverent reaction went something like this:

*Do they mean me? Am I imagining things? Is this a bad dream or scary movie of some kind? Has yours truly been pseudo-psychoanalysed by three people I've never met? Did a revenant just walk across my future grave? Jacques Derrida, perhaps? Surely not. Eric Arnould? Nah, Eric's indestructible.*

*What's that noise? Did you hear it? Listen, there it is again. Rattling chains, maybe? My knees knocking for fear of revelations to come? Tell me, was I really compared at one point to Sigmund Freud? Sigmund effing Freud? I'm lost for words. Siggie's spectre can make of that what it will . . .*

But here's the really disturbing thing. I've since, believe it or not, had a visitation by the ghost of publications past. Many years ago, intrepid readers, I penned a playful postmodern piece that puckishly predicted Phil Kotler's figurative passing (Smithee, 1997). Uproar ensued.<sup>1</sup> I was lambasted to within an inch of my life and variously described as a degenerate, a pervert, a seriously sick puppy who should be put down forthwith, if only on account of his ludicrous literary style and lamentably unscientific prose. I loved it, couldn't get enough of the hostility, especially when invited to review an article by someone with a badass bee in his bonnet. About me. A 30-page tirade, he ripped into my writing and concluded with the flourish, 'Stephen Brown's basic problem

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is that he's just like Oscar Wilde, all style and no content'. He thought it was an insult. I'm thrilled by the comparison to this day. Me and Oscar, besties.<sup>2</sup> It doesn't get much better than that. Please chisel it on my gravestone, beneath 'good riddance from all in ACR'.

## Boo-Hoo

As for the ghost of publications present, fellow fetch fans, it too has made its presence felt and goes by the name, AhlbergHietanenSoila (hereafter AHS). If its unsettling remarks are anything to go by, I am one of the most egregious ghost-hunting, grave-robbing necrophiles in the CCT collective, a ghoulish doppelgänger of pre-post-postmodernism. I have been blundering, apparently, around the Boot Hill of branding – pursuing potentially publishable plunder – then foisting my fatuous, flatulent, flagrantly empirical opinions on well-read, deep-thinking, up-and-coming scholars like themselves.<sup>3</sup> I'm an addled old fool, in effect, with a long felt and frankly embarrassing obsession about retro, nostalgia, yesterday's tomorrows and the good old bad old days. Shame on me.

I suppose some scholars might be mortified by such an assessment of their *oeuvre*. Others no doubt would denounce the denunciators, huffing and puffing with appropriate *amour propre* of the academic kind. But compared to some of the antipathy I've attracted in the past, AHS's observations are really quite innocuous. Embarrassingly so. Shamefully so. They make me yearn for my glory days as the Antichrist of Marketing, the man who rattled Ted Levitt's cage, played Fay Wray to King Kong Kotler atop his skyscraper and was loathed by all and sundry. And sundry's big brother.

Ah, I remember it well, *mes amis*, I remember it well (Brown, 2017). These days, I'm content to receive a citation or three. And, as an undead 'scholar of necromancy' – according to AHS – relieved that my ability to get under people's skin hasn't decomposed completely.

Decrepitude aside, putrefaction notwithstanding and, while waiting for the ghost of publications future to manifest and inform me that I'm about to be debarred from *Marketing Theory*, let me make a few things clear before taking issue with their article. I enjoyed reading AHS's wide-ranging piece. It's good to have a different perspective on our time-turning times. Their intervention is welcome and much needed. Saying that, I am acutely aware that 'The Haunting Spectre of Retro Consumption' isn't just about me. But why they single out Stephen Brown for special treatment is beyond my ken, not least because there are many others more worthy of academic attention. Morris Holbrook springs to mind. The late, lamented David Lowenthal. The Southampton School of Constantine Sedikides and his sidekicks.

Spooky!

Still, I suppose somebody has to be the butt of AHS's article, and I guess I'm a convenient whipping boy, straw man or whatever the wide awake terminology is nowadays. (I presume it's not butthole, but if the shoe fits and all that.) I'm equally acutely aware of the principles of reader-response theory, which presuppose that written words are open to all sorts of interpretations, none of which are definitive. People can read whatever they like into my publications, such as they are. Who am I to contradict them? Oh, and while we're on the subject, I'm cognisant that ambitious young academics have to make their mark and what better way to do so than take a hatchet to the presumed dead wood of the field. I wielded that axe myself when I was youthful and full of it.<sup>4</sup>

## Boo Hiss

Be that as it may, and with the academic etiquette of false modesty firmly in mind, you'll forgive me if I confine most of my comments to AHS's section 'The Haunting of Stephen Brown'. It's not

that I'm an egomaniac – well, no more so than Donald Trump, Boris Johnson or Vladimir Putin – it's merely my inner Oscar at work. I have nothing to declare except the declarative sentences of my overwrought writing.<sup>5</sup>

That said, it goes without saying that I beg to differ from my critics' reading of retro-related research and the relatively minor part I've played in its progress. My principal quibble is that they assume theorising retro/nostalgia is the be-all and end-all of the exercise – the ultimate objective, as it were – and that my inability to formulate a meaningful Theory of Retromarketing keeps me awake at night, hiding under the duvet, worrying about the spectres of papers past, present and future. Clearly, they're unaware of where I'm coming from, what motivates me and why I write the way I do. Who can blame them?

For what it's worth, guys, I have no desire to formulate a theory of retro or nostalgia or yesteryearning or anything else for that matter. Ever since my Pauline conversion to – and subsequent backsliding from – the creed of postmodernism, I've been sceptical about model-building, grand narratives, theory with a capital T. The thing that reading Derrida's deconstructive endeavours did for me was cast doubt on Big Theory. I accept that theory has its place and plays an important part in prevailing academic ideology. I've deployed it myself in the past. But I don't believe every paper must make some kind of 'theoretical contribution' to be considered worthy of publication. I subscribe to the view that marketing is more of an art than a science (Brown, 1996) and that we can manage perfectly well without theoretical justification. I support Michael Billig's (2019) suggestion that academic articles need more examples, less theory. I think the 'T' in CCT is misplaced. I reckon that Frère Jacques, punster nonpareil, wordsmith extraordinaire, must be turning in his grave at the thought of his thought being corralled, conceptualised, consumed by creatures of the night like us. I'm reminded at times of pareidolia, spirit mediums' tendency 'to see patterns in random data: faces in tree trunks, figures in wallpaper, stuff like that' (Maclean, 2020: 108).

Spooky!

My essentially a-theoretical attitude, admittedly, corroborates AHS's contention that I keep returning to retro incessantly, much as demented dogs are drawn back to their vomit. I'm hardly alone, though, in my obsessive-compulsive scholarship. When we consider, say, Evert Gummesson's series of articles on Relationship Marketing, Russell Belk's occasional extensions of the Extended Self, Shelby Hunt's obdurate insistence that Relativists should be buried alive in the mausoleum of marketing research or the endless authorial tinkering that accompanied Service-Dominant Logic's rise and demise – not to mention the Sisyphean treadmill of textbook writers' New Editions – my repeated recourse to retro isn't entirely aberrant. But is this behaviour due to theoretical *aporia*, as AHS assume?

## Yah Boo Sucks

Actually, it's the opposite. It's attributable to my early-career conviction that time is cyclical rather than linear (Brown, 1991). I was, if not exactly obsessed with Nietzsche's notion of the eternal return, very sympathetic towards it and the theories of cyclical time more broadly (Brown, 1995). To be frank, I was first drawn to 'the nostalgia boom' because I not only thought it was going to be a fairly short-lived epiphenomenon of the *fin de siècle* (Stern, 1992), but in the firm belief that it would disappear like the once-dreaded Millennium Bug when the 21st century got into its stride. I well remember fearing that my first book on the subject – published in 2001 – would appear too late to benefit from, let alone capitalise on, the centennial celebrations. Needless to say, nobody bought it anyway . . . .

Indeed, my hard-to-shake sense that time isn't linear, that history repeats itself in some shape or form, that the current cycle of retro can't last, is the main reason I keep returning to the topic. When on earth will nostalgiamania end? Surely it should be dead and buried by now! When the *Star Wars* triple-trilogy finally wrapped, I assumed that was it, all done, the Empire Strikes Out (Brown, 2018). I felt much the same when they announced the New Beetle's days were numbered, just as I did when the Orla Kiely fashion empire, which was founded at the start of the retro boom, came to grief in 2018 (Lynch et al., 2020). The self-appointed retromeister, Stevie B, got it wrong, wrong and wrong again.

I've now reached the point, brothers and sisters, where I no longer believe in cycles and arrows of time. I'm with Rudge in *The History Boys*, who remarks apropos the idea of temporal repetition that 'it's just one fucking thing after another' (Bennett, 2004: 44). It seems to me that a series of serendipitous, nostalgia-inducing shocks in the system, from 9/11 and the Great Recession to the current Coronavirus catastrophe, are the causes of retro's continuance, as is marketing managers' realisation that, since nostalgia sells well, they should sell nostalgia like there's no tomorrow.

Well, that's how I see it at present, though there's a ghost of a chance I'll cycle back to cycles at some stage. Not that anyone will be interested, especially after AHS's close reading of the academic Ouija board and the scholarly séances, I imagine, to come:

Is there anybody there?

*Stephen Brown*

The services marketing guy?

*No the pomo retro bloke*

Who?

*The ghost-writer who startled Kotler*

Alan Smithee, you mean?

*No, the Antichrist of Marketing*

Bog off, butthole

*I prefer dear departed*

Get real

*Spooky!*

Much the same is true of my thinking on nostalgia. That too has changed, as has the meaning of the word itself. It continues to suffer from 'semantic drift' (Starobinski, 1966). When I started writing about nostalgia, some 25 years ago, it was regarded as a fraught, ambivalent, bittersweet emotion. These days, thanks to Sedikides and co., it is primarily presented in a positive light. Nostalgia is good for you. The sweet side of bittersweet obtains (Brown, 2018). The bitter side, the nugatory side, the side Hofer was referring to when he reported how nostalgia sufferers' symptoms include an eerie ability to see ghosts (Boym, 2001), now goes by the phantomic moniker 'hauntology'. It has been rebranded, basically. And I for one am delighted that my Finnish fault-finders are making a case for the subordinate side of bittersweet.

## Boo Boo

So, where does this leave us? Let me reiterate that, aside from their misunderstanding of my understandings, AHS's article is commendable and I congratulate them on bringing Derrida's brilliant neologism to the marketing community's attention. I've attempted to do so myself, as they

generously concede, but as a committed CCT recusant, castoff, contrarian – whatever – I’m gratified someone’s doing Derrida’s ghost dance, the hauntological hokey-cokey. It’s a pity they quote so little from the late, great thinker’s most readable book, not least resonant lines like ‘the spectral rumour . . . and the spirit of nostalgia cross all borders’ (Derrida, 1994: 137). But what our ghost busters/boosters do do is offer a ‘more deeply and intensely so’ (p. 12) reading of retro, by means of a ‘more theoretically striking vantage point’ (p. 13), than has hitherto been available. Or so they tell us. If they say so themselves . . .

Unfortunately, and not unlike my aversion to Big Theory, this too is a bit of a problem for me. Because it presupposes that ‘deepness’ is a Very Good Thing. It’s a presumption, to be fair, that pervades consumer research, where reviewers routinely exhort authors to delve more and more deeply into their data sets. Digging ever further down is the best way, the only way they say, because that’s where the data’s conceptual treasures are buried. Maybe they’re right. They certainly assume they are.

But I’m not so sure. Marketing’s preferred investigative metaphor – up-down, vertical is veridical – is not unlike the ‘layers of meaning’ model of Biblical interpretation which obsessed scholars in medieval times and for aeons thereafter. Traditionally, four layers of meaning were identified – the literal, the allegorical, the tropological and the anagogic – albeit more and more got added as eager exegetes plumbed increasingly abyssal depths and sought higher level revelations (Frye, 1950). Walter Benjamin (1998 [1963]), for instance, foresaw 49 layers of meaning in *Trauerspiel*, German mourning plays of the 16th and 17th centuries. His convoluted book on the topic is almost unreadable, as even his greatest admirers admit (Steiner, 1998).

The same, I fear, is befalling consumer research. It seems to me that our deeply meaningful articles are getting ever longer, ever more turgid, ever less rewarding. Additional depth isn’t always a good thing, amigos, albeit shallowness is no solution. The essentially horizontal dimension of readability, intelligibility, enjoyment – the sweep of the story, as it were – is the price we pay for profundity.<sup>6</sup> Is it a price worth paying?

The way we write now, as the article under consideration amply demonstrates, is also a wee bit too pessimistic. After offering their deep thoughts on Derrida’s hauntology, AHS intone that ‘we no longer participate in the optimisms of the past, as the happy days of marketing have increasingly evaporated’ (p. 13). This philosophy of despair is prevalent throughout the critical marketing school of thought and there’s no denying that there’s much to be despondent about these days. Especially during current coronaviroid circumstances (Bradshaw and Hietanen, 2020). It also characterises the writings of leading hauntologists, such as the late Mark Fisher (2014), who was tormented by ‘ghosts of futures past’ (Coverley, 2020) and did much to propagate the idea that ‘our phantom present’ is obsessed with thoughts of ‘lost futures’ (Sansom, 2020: 21). And while some, AHS among them, appear to believe that no future is a good thing, it’s a nihilistic way to look at the world, millenarian almost.<sup>7</sup>

Derrida’s hauntology, however, is often fairly optimistic in outlook. He made the case for Marxism when the left was at its lowest intellectual ebb and right-wing triumphalism was in the ascendant. *Spectres*, a recent biographer records, is Jacques’ most influential text by some distance, more impactful even than his so-called ‘Big Three’, *Writing and Difference*, *Of Grammatology* and *Speech and Phenomena* (Salmon, 2020: 84). The fact that his exhumation of Highgate Cemetery’s foremost thinker infuriated radical, right-on, left-leaning literary critics like Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton must have been deeply satisfying for the provocative philosopher (Sprinker, 1999). *Spectres of Marx*, as I interpret it, is ultimately a message of hope, though the book’s optimistic aspects have been overlooked by more than a few latter-day commentators, such

as Fisher and his followers. AHS, as well. On reading their doom-and-gloom-a-go-go article, it is odd to discover that my work is missing an affirmative conclusion (p. 9). Huh? Do they mean me? Am I imagining things? Is another ghost walking over the walking ghost mentioned earlier?

Spooky!

## Boo Boop Be Doo

But wait, retro aficionados, all is not necessarily lost. As we don't know what the future holds, since cyclical/linear models of time's passage can't be relied upon, a bright new tomorrow may well transpire. According to *The Economist* (2021: 8), which isn't exactly renowned for its utopian outlook, that is precisely what will happen in the years ahead:

*Today, a dawn of technological optimism is breaking. The speed at which covid-19 vaccines have been produced has made scientists household names. Prominent breakthroughs, a tech investment boom and the adoption of digital technologies during the pandemic are combining to raise hopes of a new era of progress: optimists giddily predict a 'roaring Twenties'. Pessimism about technological change is giving way to hope – much of it justified (The Economist, 2021: 8).*

This new era, if indeed it comes to pass, doesn't necessarily mean that retromarketing is doomed to extinction. An entire demographic cohort, the Millennials, has grown up during our nostalgia-steeped times. They've never known anything else. Retro's the norm as far as they're concerned, no big deal, just one stylistic option among many. The novelist Ewan Morrison (2012: 9) puts it this way in *Tales From the Mall*:

*A hundred years from now our grandchildren will ask: what was life like in your time? And we will only be able to reply that we spent our time fantasising of other times and perhaps, shamefacedly: shopping.*

But will the Millennials, in later life, be nostalgic for our generation's yesteryear years or, having been retrospective from birth, will find they have nothing (but nostalgia) to be nostalgic about? Only time will tell. Ahlberg et al. (2021), presumably, will keep us informed in their future articles on neo-, post- and retro-hauntology.

For the meantime, it may be worth recording that I too have a paper on hauntology in press. An empirical paper, naturally. Our respective manuscripts must have passed each other like ghost ships in the night.

Spooky!

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## Notes

1. The full story of Alan Smithee's academic career will be told on another occasion. Suffice to say that the late, much-missed Jim Bell was the frontman – the face of our phantom partnership – and I was the scriptwriter (Brown, 2017).
2. Actually, the comparison was with Shakespeare, but even I'm embarrassed by that. I recommended publication of the paper as it stood, 'provided the author retains that line about Shakespeare'. It never appeared, unfortunately. Oh well . . . .
3. Yes, noble necronauts, I am the Burke and Hare of branding. Or should that be Victor Frankenstein?
4. Specifically piss, vinegar and similar secretions best kept to myself. Try not to think about it, gentle reader. Let's pass over that confession in silence. Seriously, don't have nightmares.
5. For my sins, which are manifold and unspeakable, I've even been compared to James Joyce. During his 'dirty letters' phase. By Barbara Stern, no less, who did a doctorate on Mad-Eye Jimmy. I'd be happy to elaborate but I'm sworn to silence, exile and cunning.
6. This horizontal-vertical issue is not trivial. Debates around meaningful depth versus narrative breadth have dogged literary critics for decades, especially in the case of allegorical writing, where the story and what it refers to can be very different (Quilligan, 2000).
7. Millenarians, by and large, subscribe to the notion of temporal stasis, the Biblical belief that 'time shall be no more' (Boyer, 1992). I can of course appreciate that some, possibly many, of the critical contingent welcome the intimation of no future for consumer society. But this belief is akin to celebrating Covid-19, because it's scourging our hitherto hopelessly hedonistic consumer culture. Tell that to those who've lost their livelihoods and loved ones.

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**Stephen Brown** doesn't exist. He is a figment of your imagination, your worst nightmare. They say he stalks the corridors of Ulster University Business School. They also say his friends call him Babadook. But he doesn't have any friends. Although he has an address, it's best not to contact him. For your own safety.