You Say You Want a Devolution?

For most of the last century, America’s cultural landscape—its fashion, art, music, design, entertainment—changed dramatically every 20 years or so. But these days, even as technological and scientific leaps have continued to revolutionize life, popular style has been stuck on repeat, consuming the past instead of creating the new.

By Kurt Andersen    Illustration by James Taylor

HOLD IT RIGHT THERE From the fedora to the Afro, styles have changed with the times. Unless you’re living in the 21st century.

The past is a foreign country. Only 20 years ago the World Wide Web was an obscure academic thingamajig. All personal computers were fancy stand-alone typewriters and calculators that showed only text (but no newspapers or magazines), played no video or music, offered no products to buy. E-mail (a new coinage) and cell phones were still novelties. Personal music players required
cassettes or CDs. Nobody had seen a computer-animated feature film or computer-generated scenes with live actors, and DVDs didn’t exist. The human genome hadn’t been decoded, genetically modified food didn’t exist, and functional M.R.I. was a brand-new experimental research technique. Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden had never been mentioned in *The New York Times*. China’s economy was less than one-eighth of its current size. CNN was the only general-interest cable news channel. Moderate Republicans occupied the White House and ran the Senate’s G.O.P. caucus.

Since 1992, as the technological miracles and wonders have propagated and the political economy has transformed, the world has become radically and profoundly new. (And then there’s the miraculous drop in violent crime in the United States, by half.) Here is what’s odd: during these same 20 years, the appearance of the world (computers, TVs, telephones, and music players aside) has changed hardly at all, less than it did during any 20-year period for at least a century. The past is a foreign country, but the recent past—the 00s, the 90s, even a lot of the 80s—looks almost identical to the present. This is the First Great Paradox of Contemporary Cultural History.

Think about it. Picture it. Rewind any other 20-year chunk of 20th-century time. There’s no chance you would mistake a photograph or movie of Americans or an American city from 1972—giant sideburns, collars, and bell-bottoms, leisure suits and cigarettes, AMC Javelins and Matadors and Gremlins alongside Dodge Demons, Swingers, Plymouth Dusters, and Scamps—with images from 1992. Time-travel back another 20 years, before rock ’n’ roll and the Pill and Vietnam, when both sexes wore hats and cars were big and bulbous with late-moderne fenders and fins—again, unmistakably different, 1952 from 1972. You can keep doing it and see that the characteristic surfaces and sounds of each historical moment are absolutely distinct from those of 20 years earlier or later: the clothes, the hair, the cars, the advertising— all of it. It’s even true of the 19th century: practically no respectable American man wore a beard before the 1850s, for instance, but beards were almost obligatory in the 1870s, and then disappeared again by 1900. The modern sensibility has been defined by brief stylistic shelf lives, our minds trained to register the recent past as old-fashioned.

**Madonna to Gaga**

Go deeper and you see that just 20 years also made all the difference in serious cultural output. New York’s amazing new buildings of the 1930s (the Chrysler, the Empire State) look nothing like the amazing new buildings of the 1910s (Grand Central, Woolworth) or of the 1950s (the Seagram, U.N. headquarters). Anyone can instantly identify a 50s movie (*On the Waterfront, The Bridge on the River Kwai*) versus one from 20 years before (*Grand Hotel, It Happened One Night*) or 20 years after (*Klute, A Clockwork Orange*), or tell the difference between hit songs from 1992 (Sir Mix-a-Lot) and 1972 (Neil Young) and 1952 (Patti Page) and 1932 (Duke Ellington). When high-end literature was being redefined by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, great novels from just 20 years earlier—Henry James’s *The Ambassadors*, Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*—seemed like relics of another age. And 20 years after Hemingway published his war novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* a new war novel, *Catch-22*, made it seem preposterously antique.

Now try to spot the big, obvious, defining differences between 2012 and 1992. Movies and literature and music have never changed less over a 20-year period. Lady Gaga has replaced Madonna, Adele has replaced Mariah Carey—both distinctions without a real difference—and Jay-
Z and Wilco are still Jay-Z and Wilco. Except for certain details (no Google searches, no e-mail, no cell phones), ambitious fiction from 20 years ago (Doug Coupland’s *Generation X*, Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash*, Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*) is in no way dated, and the sensibility and style of Joan Didion’s books from even 20 years before that seem plausibly circa-2012.

**An Epiphany**

The Aeron chair in which you’re sitting is identical to the Aeron chair in which I sat almost two decades ago, and this morning I boiled water for my coffee in the groovy Alessi kettle I bought a quarter-century ago. With rare exceptions, cars from the early 90s (and even the late 80s) don’t seem dated. Not long ago in the newspaper, I came across an archival photograph of Ian Schrager and Steve Rubell with a dozen of their young staff at Morgans, the *Ur*-boutique hotel, in 1985. It was an epiphany. Schrager’s dress shirt had no collar and some of the hair on his male employees was a bit unfashionably fluffy, but no one in the picture looks obviously, laughably dated by today’s standards. If you passed someone who looked like any of them, you wouldn’t think twice. Yet if, in 1990 or 1980 or 1970, you’d examined a comparable picture from 27 years earlier—from 1963 and 1953 and 1943, respectively—it would be a glimpse back into an unmistakably different world. A man or woman on the street in any year in the 20th century groomed and dressed in the manner of someone from 27 years earlier would look like a time traveler, an actor in costume, a freak. And until recently it didn’t take even that long for datedness to kick in: by the late 1980s, for instance, less than a decade after the previous decade had ended, the 1970s already looked ridiculous.

There are, of course, a few exceptions today—genuinely new cultural phenomena that aren’t digital phenomena—but so few that they prove the rule. Twenty years ago we had no dark, novelistic, amazing TV dramas, no *Sopranos* or *Deadwood* or *The Wire* or *Breaking Bad*. Recycling bins weren’t ubiquitous and all lightbulbs were incandescent. Men wore neckties more frequently. Fashionable women exposed less of their breasts and bra straps, and rarely wore ultra-high-heeled shoes. We were thinner, and fewer of us had tattoos or piercings. And that’s about it.

Not coincidentally, it was exactly 20 years ago that Francis Fukuyama published *The End of History*, his influential post-Cold War argument that liberal democracy had triumphed and become the undisputed evolutionary end point toward which every national system was inexorably moving: fundamental political ferment was over and done. Maybe yes, maybe no. But in the arts and entertainment and style realms, this bizarre *Groundhog Day* stasis of the last 20 years or so certainly feels like an end of cultural history.

**Nostalgic Gaze**

How did we get here? Coming off the 1960s, that time of relentless and discombobulating avant-gardism, when everything looked and sounded perpetually new new new, cultural creators—designers, artists, impresarios—began looking backward for inspiration. Some 60s counterculturalists had dabbled in the 19th century—the Victoriana of *Sgt. Pepper’s* and Haight-Ashbury houses, the folkish fictions of Bob Dylan and the Band, the stoner-cowboy fantasies of the Grateful Dead and the Hells Angels. But starting all at once in the early 70s, nostalgia proliferated as pop culture became fixated on the past: the 1950s and early 60s—*American Graffiti, Happy Days, The Last Picture Show, Grease*—and to a lesser extent the 1920s, 30s, and 40s (*The Great Gatsby, The Godfather, Summer of ’42, Art Deco, midi and maxi skirts*). Even the one big new
Hollywood species of the mid-70s and early 80s, the special-effects adventure and science-fiction blockbusters by Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, was a re-invention of the B movies of the 40s and 50s.

In the 1970s and 80s too, serious architects re-discovered history, creating “postmodern” buildings with classical columns and pitched roofs and pediments and colorful finishes, and set out to build new towns and neighborhoods resembling older towns and neighborhoods. Anti-postmodern architects in turn designed buildings that evoked the styles of modernism when modernism had been new, and architecture devolved into a battle between two fantasias—nostalgia for the 19th and 18th centuries versus nostalgia for the mid-20th-century avant-garde.

At the same time, fine art that recognizably depicted people, the way all art had before the 20th century, became respectable and even fashionable again. Ditto for orchestral music, where seriousness and ambition were no longer equated with dissonance and unlikability. And in pop music, thanks to sampling, even the last genuinely new form, hip-hop, made an explicit and unapologetic point of recycling earlier songs.

Ironically, new technology has reinforced the nostalgic cultural gaze: now that we have instant universal access to every old image and recorded sound, the future has arrived and it’s all about dreaming of the past. Our culture’s primary M.O. now consists of promiscuously and sometimes compulsively reviving and rejiggering old forms. It’s the rare “new” cultural artifact that doesn’t seem a lot like a cover version of something we’ve seen or heard before. Which means the very idea of datedness has lost the power it possessed during most of our lifetimes.

They never used to remake old TV shows, as they did Hawaii Five-O and Charlie’s Angels this past season. It didn’t use to be that most Broadway musicals were revivals (Godspell, How to Succeed in Business, Anything Goes, and Follies, with Evita, Funny Girl, and Annie due any minute) or a movie/TV-derived pastiche (Wicked, Mary Poppins, The Addams Family, Spider-Man, Bonnie & Clyde). The hottest ticket to any straight play last year? Gatz, a six-hour verbatim theatricalization of The Great Gatsby.

**Loss of Appetite**

Look at people on the street and in malls—jeans and sneakers remain the standard uniform for all ages, as they were in 2002, 1992, and 1982. Look through a current fashion or architecture magazine or listen to 10 random new pop songs; if you didn’t already know they were all things from the 2010s, I guarantee you couldn’t tell me with certainty they weren’t from the 2000s or 1990s or 1980s or even earlier. (The first time I heard a Josh Ritter song a few years ago, I actually thought it was Bob Dylan.) In our Been There Done That Mashup Age, nothing is obsolete, and nothing is really new; it’s all good. I feel as if the whole culture is stoned, listening to an LP that’s been skipping for decades, playing the same groove over and over. Nobody has the wit or gumption to stand up and lift the stylus.

Why is this happening? In some large measure, I think, it’s an unconscious collective reaction to all the profound nonstop newness we’re experiencing on the tech and geopolitical and economic fronts. People have a limited capacity to embrace flux and strangeness and dissatisfaction, and right now we’re maxed out. So as the Web and artificially intelligent smartphones and the rise of China and
9/11 and the winners-take-all American economy and the Great Recession disrupt and transform our lives and hopes and dreams, we are clinging as never before to the familiar in matters of style and culture.

If this stylistic freeze is just a respite, a backward-looking counter-reaction to upheaval, then once we finally get accustomed to all the radical newness, things should return to normal—and what we’re wearing and driving and designing and producing right now will look totally démodé come 2032. Or not. Because rather than a temporary cultural glitch, these stagnant last couple of decades may be a secular rather than cyclical trend, the beginning of American civilization’s new chronic condition, a permanent loss of appetite for innovation and the shockingly new. After all, such a sensibility shift has happened again and again over the last several thousand years, that moment when all great cultures—Egyptian, Roman, Mayan, Islamic, French, Ottoman, British—slide irrevocably into an enervated late middle age.

You can see a corollary dynamic operating in politics as well. At the same moment that movies and music and art and design suddenly began reveling in old-fashioned subjects and forms, America became besotted by Ronald Reagan’s dreamy vision of a simpler, happier, old-fashioned America. Today, with our top federal income-tax rates half what they were when Reagan became president and income inequality dialed back up to its 1920s level, the mantra of today’s sore-winner Republicans remains, still, Less Government ... Lower Taxes. Likewise, today’s radical grass-roots political movements are remakes. The Occupy Wall Street (and Occupy Everywhere Else) protests are a self-conscious remix of the Tea Party and Arab Spring protests. And, although the Tea Partiers began by nominally re-enacting the pre-Revolutionary early 1770s, they were actually performing a cover version of the New Left’s would-be-pre-revolutionary late 1960s. Meanwhile, the thing driving all the populist rage, right and left, is the unprecedented flatlining of economic progress: Americans’ median income is just about where it was 20 years ago, as unchanging as American style and culture.

*Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose* has always meant that the constant novelty and flux of modern life is all superficial show, that the underlying essences endure unchanged. But now, suddenly, that saying has acquired an alternative and nearly opposite definition: the more certain things change for real (technology, the global political economy), the more other things (style, culture) stay the same.

But wait! It gets still stranger, because even as we’ve fallen into this period of stylistic paralysis and can’t get up, more people than ever before are devoting more of their time and energy to considering and managing matters of personal style.

And why did *this* happen? In 1984, a few years after “yuppie” was coined, I wrote an article in *Time* positing that “yuppies are, in a sense, heterosexual gays. Among middle-class people, after all, gays formed the original two-income households and were the original gentrifiers, the original body cultists and dapper health-club devotees, the trendy homemakers, the refined, childless world travelers.” Gays were the lifestyle avant-garde, and the rest of us followed.

**Amateur Stylists**
Likewise the artists, not so much because we loved art but because we envied the way their lives looked. In the 80s, the SoHo idea—a tatty, disused urban stretch of old warehouses and factories transformed into a neighborhood of loft apartments and chic shops and restaurants—became a redevelopment prototype and paradigm, rolling out like a franchise operation in cities across America and around the world.

Tastefulness scaled. The pivotal decade, from the mid-80s to the mid-90s, can be defined as the one that began with Alessi’s introduction of Michael Graves’s newfangled old-fashioned teakettle, of which more than a million were sold; continued as stylish retail went mega-mass-market in America, with Gap (600 stores then, 1,011 now), Target (246 then, 1,750 now), Ikea (1 then, 38 now), Urban Outfitters (a few then, more than 70 now—plus 135 Anthropologies), the Landmark art-house movie-theater chain (a dozen or so then, 245 screens now), Barnes & Noble (35 then, 717 now), and Starbucks (dozens then, more than 11,000 now) all expanding exponentially; and produced the new magazines Martha Stewart Living, InStyle, Wired (always as much about cool as useful), and Wallpaper.

Then, in the first decade of this new century, came the flood of decorating and fashion and food shows on cable TV—Trading Spaces, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, What Not to Wear, Project Runway, Iron Chef, followed by their scores of second- and third-generation descendants. What really made Mad Men so hot? Not the stories, not the characters, but the “creative class” setting, the 60s-fetishizing production design and wardrobe.

People flock by the millions to Apple Stores (1 in 2001, 245 today) not just to buy high-quality devices but to bask and breathe and linger, pilgrims to a grand, hermetic, impeccable temple to style—an uncluttered, glassy, super-sleek style that feels “contemporary” in the sense that Apple stores are like back-on-earth sets for 2001: A Space Odyssey, the early 21st century as it was envisioned in the mid-20th. And many of those young and young-at-heart Apple cultists-cum-customers, having popped in for their regular glimpse and whiff of the high-production-value future, return to their make-believe-old-fashioned lives—brick and brownstone town houses, beer gardens, greenmarkets, local agriculture, flea markets, steampunk, lace-up boots, suspenders, beards, mustaches, artisanal everything, all the neo-19th-century signifiers of state-of-the-art Brooklyn-esque and Portlandish American hipsterism.

Moreover, tens of millions of Americans, the uncool as well as the supercool, have become amateur stylists—scrupulously attending, as never before, to the details and meanings of the design and décor of their homes, their clothes, their appliances, their meals, their hobbies, and more. The things we own are more than ever like props, the clothes we wear like costumes, the places where we live, dine, shop, and vacation like stage sets. And angry right-wingers even dress in 18th-century drag to perform their protests. Meanwhile, why are Republicans unexcited by Mitt Romney? Because he seems so artificial, because right now we all crave authenticity.

The Second Paradox

So, these two prime cultural phenomena, the quarter-century-long freezing of stylistic innovation and the pandemic obsession with style, have happened concurrently—which appears to be a contradiction, the Second Great Paradox of Contemporary Cultural History. Because you’d think
that style and other cultural expressions would be most exciting and riveting when they are unmistakably innovating and evolving.

Part of the explanation, as I’ve said, is that, in this thrilling but disconcerting time of technological and other disruptions, people are comforted by a world that at least still looks the way it did in the past. But the other part of the explanation is economic: like any lucrative capitalist sector, our massively scaled-up new style industry naturally seeks stability and predictability. Rapid and radical shifts in taste make it more expensive to do business and can even threaten the existence of an enterprise. One reason automobile styling has changed so little these last two decades is because the industry has been struggling to survive, which made the perpetual big annual styling changes of the Golden Age a reducible business expense. Today, Starbucks doesn’t want to have to renovate its thousands of stores every few years. If blue jeans became unfashionable tomorrow, Old Navy would be in trouble. And so on. Capitalism may depend on perpetual creative destruction, but the last thing anybody wants is their business to be the one creatively destroyed. Now that multi-billion-dollar enterprises have become style businesses and style businesses have become multi-billion-dollar enterprises, a massive damper has been placed on the general impetus for innovation and change.

It’s the economy, stupid. The only thing that has changed fundamentally and dramatically about stylish objects (computerized gadgets aside) during the last 20 years is the same thing that’s changed fundamentally and dramatically about movies and books and music—how they’re produced and distributed, not how they look and feel and sound, not what they are. This democratization of culture and style has two very different but highly complementary results. On the one hand, in a country where an adorably huge majority have always considered themselves “middle class,” practically everyone who can afford it now shops stylishly—at Gap, Target, Ikea, Urban Outfitters, Anthropologie, Barnes & Noble, and Starbucks. Americans: all the same, all kind of cool! And yet, on the other hand, for the first time, anyone anywhere with any arcane cultural taste can now indulge it easily and fully online, clicking themselves deep into whatever curious little niche (punk bossa nova, Nigerian noir cinema, pre-war Hummel figurines) they wish. Americans: quirky, independent individualists!

We seem to have trapped ourselves in a vicious cycle—economic progress and innovation stagnated, except in information technology; which leads us to embrace the past and turn the present into a pleasantly eclectic for-profit museum; which deprives the cultures of innovation of the fuel they need to conjure genuinely new ideas and forms; which deters radical change, reinforcing the economic (and political) stagnation. I’ve been a big believer in historical pendulum swings—American sociopolitical cycles that tend to last, according to historians, about 30 years. So maybe we are coming to the end of this cultural era of the Same Old Same Old. As the baby-boomers who brought about this ice age finally shuffle off, maybe America and the rich world are on the verge of a cascade of the wildly new and insanely great. Or maybe, I worry some days, this is the way that Western civilization declines, not with a bang but with a long, nostalgic whimper.