

Real Things and Why They Matter

The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter.

By David Sax. New York, NY: Perseus. 2016, 282 pages.

From today, painting is dead!" is said to have been proclaimed by the French painter Paul Delaroche in 1839 after seeing his first daguerreotype. His was an early name on the list of people who have made fools of themselves when prognosticating a future resulting from a new medium or invention. Motivated by either techno-euphoria or pessimism they have become famously wrong. In July of 1913 Thomas Edison told a reporter that books will soon be obsolete in the schools, having been replaced by movies. Of course, photography has affected the practice of painting, and to some degree film has found a place in schools. Who hasn't suffered through an "educational film"? These gaffes are not limited to the 19th and 20th centuries.

Fairly recently (2013) Marc Andreessen, a major venture capitalist, predicted that, "retail guys are going out of business and e-commerce will become the place that everyone buys. You are not going to have a choice." In other words — goodbye brick and mortar store. Try telling that to the dudes at the "Genius Bar" next time you're in an Apple store. Evidently Steve Jobs didn't see the handwriting on the wall either, nor Amazon, which

is opening actual bookshops. In 2012 Sebastian Thrun, the creator of Google's self-driving car, who had just launched a MOOC ("massive on-line open course") asserted that such classes would be so disruptive that 50 years hence only ten institutions in the world would provide higher education. Five years after his prognostication we might think that half the Ivy league would be gone. Nope.

David Sax's book is a welcome antidote to these seers. It's much better than its misleading title might have you believe. There is no "revenge" here. But it is a direct assault on some widely-held beliefs about the "digital revolution." His chapters take us on a tour of companies, businesses, and a summer camp that refuse to accept the clichés of the digital age. Starting at a vinyl record store in his home city of Toronto he announces, to my skepticism, that a "new record store opens every two months" in his city. This is surely hyperbole, but my web search brought an article about the best vinyl stores in Toronto with photos of a dozen of them, each filled with bins stacked full with lively sleeves containing new and used LP records. Some clue to the success is seen here in the jackets: the records come with a tactile and visual excitement not found in an MP3 file or digital stream. According to Sax, the shipment of LP albums in the U.S. grew from 990,000 in

2007 to more than 12 million in 2015 — annual growth rates of more than 20 percent. Anecdotal evidence shows the buyers to be principally in the age group 18–24 who regard the iPod as "uncool" — a gadget their parents use. Many recording artists prefer recording for an analog device — digital capture and processing of sound offers too many choices to the recording engineer and musician; for vinyl, you play and record a tape of the song, and if you like it, it gets transferred to vinyl. If you don't, you just start over.

Sax visits Nashville Tennessee and goes to URP records. Every day they are pressing 40,000 records, and their staff has tripled since 2010. A European company executive tells him that 30 million new record discs were pressed worldwide in 2015. And, of course, if people are buying records they are getting turntables to play them on. Crosley, an American maker, churns out 1 million per year.

There is an honesty to much of Sax's writing. He is not so naïve as to tell us that vinyl LP records will overtake CD's nor for that matter the even stronger downloading of MP3 files and the use of streaming services. Vinyl represents just 10 percent of all music sales — CD purchases are three times bigger. It's clear that vinyl sales will level off at some fraction of music consumption and will constitute a niche market for certain

cognoscenti. This kind of observation applies to much else in the book.

We probably all recall the predictions of a “paperless society.” Sax confronts these seers in his chapter “the revenge of paper” pointing out that “paper is the oldest analog technology to be seriously challenged by digital.” Paper is best seen in Sax’s argument in a product called the Moleskine — a handsomely bound hardbound book filled with blank creamy white paper. The name has nothing to do with moles or their skins. It is the creation of an Italian company called Modo & Modo. One would like to think that the books are created by an ancient guild of Italian craftsmen, but they in fact come from China. They are, however, hand sewn, and have a nice little pocket in the back. Typically, 20 million are sold a year; twenty thousand stores in the world market them. The author observes that (like the Prius) use of the book proclaims one’s “values, interests and dreams ... when everyone is using a phone from Apple or Samsung, a paper notebook stands out. “Moleskines are not advertised — their users tacitly do it for them.

Moleskines are praised by their adherents as an aid to creativity. The head of a global branding agency Landor Associates informs Sax that a decade ago all the designers in his firm received copies of Adobe Photoshop. The quality of their work seemed to diminish. The team was then given Moleskines and banned from using their computers for the first week on their newest project. The belief was that their ideas would flow more freely before the seductive creamy white page. The move worked, and the ban remains in place. Sax reveals that all the notes for his book were written in his Moleskine and that the cool people he interviewed for this book project also used them.

Do any of you readers use a camera that shoots film? Most likely the question makes you think of the rich, elderly, white guy who sat next to you on an airplane the one time you flew business class. He blathered on at length about his film cameras: Leica, Hasselblad, or Nikon, which he pulled out of the luggage rack to show you. But the stereotype he just reinforced might give you a bum steer on film.

Sax, in his “revenge of film,” tells us about a film camera you might never have heard of. This is the *Lomo*, which began life in Russia as the Lomo Kompakt Automat in 1984 — a cheap plastic camera for the proles. Two young people from Vienna, Sally Bibawy and her then boyfriend Matthias Feigl, learned of the device while on a trip to Prague in 1991. They tried it and loved it, embracing what purists would regard as defects: bizarre light leaks and color saturations, darkened edges, dubious focus. The unpredictable images carried with them an air of surrealism. The couple were so taken with the camera that they established a Lomographic International Society with its own manifesto, which they published and which encouraged society members to “always carry their camera, use it anytime, shoot from random angles, shoot quickly without thinking, embrace the camera as part of life.” They became international distributors of the device and launched a web site for users to upload their images. This marriage of an analog technology to a digital one is a theme running through Sax’s book — there are Moleskines that are designed now to be scanned with smartphones.

When the Russians stopped making the camera, the couple got into the business by opening a factory in China. Today their company markets a broad spectrum of film prod-

ucts: medium format, 35 mm, and even instant cameras that produce a print. They gross about 20 million Euros a year with these instruments, which are not generally cheap. For the price of one you can get a good used digital Nikon with a perfect lens and focusing. But people seem to love the Lomo.

There are other revenges in Sax’s book. In his “revenge of retail” you find that retail stores have their revenge in the growing number of American bookstores, although you never learn here that retail stores in general are in very big trouble worldwide thanks to the Internet. The *New York Times* recently reported that from October of 2016 until May of 2017, 89000 Americans working in general merchandise stores lost their jobs. Macy’s, a major American department store brand, has announced plans to close 68 stores and lay off 10000 workers. The venerable Sears, dating to the 19th century, has expressed doubts whether it can continue in business. Sax’s “revenge of print” tells us that 20 new magazines are being started in the United States each month; these are usually niche publications, which began as on-line blogs, e.g., *Gay Wedding Magazine*. But nowhere is this bit of bad news: in American newspaper publishing, since 2000, over 270000 people have lost their jobs — two thirds of the workforce.

The general pattern of much of the book is to present niche enterprises and activities that have grown or remained strong in the face of the digital Leviathan. Sometimes this is a great comfort: I like to think of new bookstores opening, and of the board game geeks so colorfully described in his “revenge of board games.” An overriding *leitmotiv* is certainly the manifestation of a deep human desire for activities presenting a live three-dimensional experience involving our senses as well

as interaction with other humans: bookstores where we can touch, weigh, maybe even smell the product and talk with someone browsing the same section; stores where we might make an unexpected discovery of a book, much as we do in a library.

But another *leitmotiv*, not mentioned by the author, tempts me to call the book *The Revenge of the Rich*. We are treated to a world of expensive analog watches (the Shinola at \$550), expensive blank notebooks — the Moleskine, an overpriced simple camera (the Lomo), and a device-free summer camp that currently costs \$8900 for 7 weeks. To participate in the author's revenge and to reject analog you typically need some disposable income. As always, the *au courant* consumer has some extra money. Such examples of revenge will always belong to a niche market — and their buyers want that; it makes them feel discerning.

The book does suffer from a lack of historical perspective that might have helped tie together the vari-

ous revenge chapters. Even before the so-called digital age there has been a yearning by some segment of the population for technologies that are more transparent or tactile than those in general use. In the age of the typewriter, many writers preferred the experience of placing a pen on the paper. I've had decades of electrical engineering students who claimed that the sound obtained from a vacuum tube amplifier is superior to that produced by one with transistors. Both are analog devices, but the warm glowing vacuum tubes suggest to their user a stream of electrons being amplified or modulated. And surely much of the appeal of a long-playing record is in watching the needle move through the grooves — something you don't get from an CD or an MP3 file. The photographer's romance with cheap plastic cameras producing unpredictable results preceded the Lomo. The popular, Chinese made, Diana camera dates from the early 1960s, and was famous for light leaks and its bad plastic lens. It

was the antithesis of the handsome, complicated Nikons and Canons that were becoming very popular in that period. The Diana was of sufficient importance in serious photography to have figured in an essay by Janet Malcolm in her 1980 book *Diana and Nikon* — she remarks that photos taken with the Diana have the look "of avant-garde art." The popular steampunk movement, now over a generation old, also has its roots in transparent technologies: the steam engines, balloons, and high wheel bikes of the Victorian era. Open the hood of a modern car and you are hard put to figure out how the engine functions. Look at a steam engine and the workings become clear.

Reviewer Information

A. David Wunsch is Book Review Editor of this magazine. He is Professor Emeritus in the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, Lowell, MA. Email: A_Wunsch@uml.edu.

A. David Wunsch

American Illuminations

American Illuminations: Urban Lighting, 1800-1920.

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If you ever visit the city of Boston, and have access to a car, try this some evening: Drive west-bound along Storrow Drive which

is on the south side of the Charles River and take note of the buildings of the Back Bay section of the city, which will be on your left. This is a lovely collection of harmonious brownstones dating from the 19th century. Just as you are nearing their west border you cannot help noticing what we locals call "The Citgo

Sign." This is an electronic billboard that blinks out the triangular logo of the Cities Service gasoline company. Comprising 3600 square feet it is so beloved that the City of Boston's Landmark Commission considered giving it protected status. Following much pressure, the current owner of the underlying building has pledged