# Time/After-Time: Modes of ’80s Nostalgia

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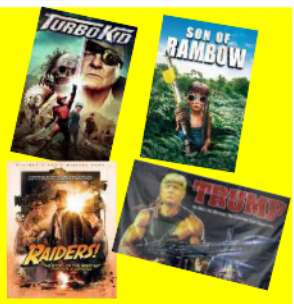
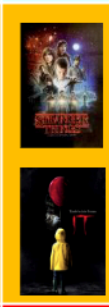
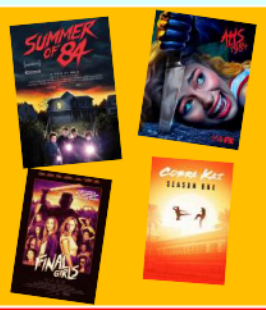
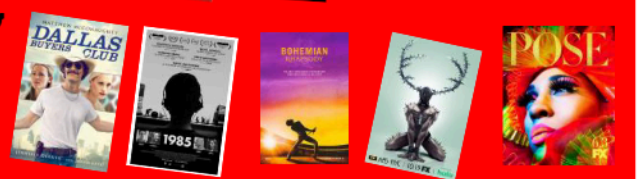
**The ’80s are back! But Why?** Representations of recent historical periods in popular culture are frequently explained as the effect of a mechanistic nostalgic “cycle” that is theorized to operate in 40-, 20-, or 15-year increments. Looking more closely at the variety of these representations, however, reveals a more complicated dynamic. Evaluating retro-’80s texts within the framework of this expanded taxonomy of nostalgic modes provides opportunities to look more closely at the ways in which nostalgic fantasies intermingle with political agendas, historical critiques, and constructions of contemporary subjectivity.

| Nostalgic mode | Paradigmatic exemplar | Other instances |
|---|---|---|
| **Reflective** These texts represent the 80s in the mode of comedy, save for the haunting sense that the world that gives the characters so much joy is doomed, and that this vanished happy world is ultimately inaccessible to us. | The entire structure of *The Goldbergs* caters to an “escapist” style of nostalgia that stages a wish-fulfilling “return to the womb” fantasy, with the ahistorical uchronia of “the ’80s” serving as the womb. | |
| **Restorative** Nostalgia in the restorative mode “characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in the anti-modern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths” (Boym, 2001, p. 41). | *Ready Player One* celebrates the twin values of virtual reality and nostalgia that the OASIS epitomizes, promising to “restore” a simulacral version of the 1980s as a permanent utopia beyond Anthropocene despair. |  |
| **Anti-nostalgic** Le Sueur identifies another mode of representing the past which he refers to as “anti-nostalgia,” in which “the bloodstained past is studied only so that we may avoid similar mistakes” (1977, p. 195). | The character of Patrick Bateman personifies a nightmare critique of the ’80s as an era of savage atrocity wrapped in a luxurious carapace, and Mary Harron’s 2000 film adaptation amplifies the extent to which Bateman is a creature of his historical era. | |
| **Deconstructive** Ellis articulated the concept of a deconstructive mode of nostalgia, explaining that this kind of nostalgic representation is “still nostalgic … but it’s also more critical of the past, rather than affirming or reconstructive” (2017). |  These franchises owe their commercial success to their promise to indulge audience’s ’80s nostalgia, but the ’80s world they depict is one in which children and childhood itself are hunted, tortured, terrorized, and traumatized. |  |
| **Transformative** In the transformative mode, nostalgic icons are revisited in ways that attempt to redeem the perceived sins of the past: “One cannot live on nostalgia alone, so we evolve” (Donaldson, 2018). | Texts that foreground the stories of non-white, non-straight, and non-male protagonists living in the 1980s have necessarily been involved in a transformative project of reshaping, complexifying, and broadening the way we think about the ’80s. | |

**The African American ’80s**

**The LGBTQ ’80s**



**’80s Women**

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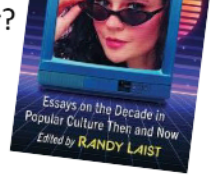
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