

Dr. Pietras
Expos 20: “The Politics of Nostalgia”
Fall 2021

Why I’m Interested in Our Course Theme

My interest in nostalgia comes from two places: the scholarly, and the personal.

I first became interested in nostalgia as a scholar when I was writing a doctoral dissertation on English Renaissance literature. The very idea of a “renaissance”—which the *OED* defines as “Any period of exceptional revival of the arts and intellectual culture”—is a nostalgic one; it implies a return to an earlier, more glorious era. Although my dissertation didn’t take these issues up explicitly, it sparked my interest in the persistent longing to return to the past. Once you start looking, you can see it everywhere in American culture: in television, movies, music, fashion, and (yes) politics.

A more personal reason for my interest in nostalgia comes from the work-study job I had as an undergraduate in my college’s Alumni Relations Office. One of my responsibilities was helping to put together booklets of alumni reminiscences, usually for classes celebrating the 50th anniversary of their graduation. Reading these reminiscences left me with a strange sort of double nostalgia. On one hand, I was fascinated by the vanished world described by various alumni, and wished I could have experienced it. On the other, I felt what scholar Svetlana Boym calls “anticipatory nostalgia”: I missed something I hadn’t yet lost. I was still an undergraduate, but I already had a sense of what it would feel like to look back on those years—an experience that’s only grown sharper with time.