NEWS LESSON

Why the 1990s Still Feel So Appealing



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Which old object would you choose over its modern version?
2. Can you miss a time you never lived through?
3. What do you think people will miss about life today?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**analogue**	☐
2	**oversized**	☐
3	**carefree**	☐
4	**curated**	☐
5	**urgent**	☐
6	**algorithms**	☐
7	**revisit**	☐
8	**innocent**	☐

A	made larger than the usual size
B	to look at or think about something again
C	sets of rules a computer follows, for example to choose what you see online
D	without worries or responsibilities
E	using physical forms like film, tape and discs, not digital data
F	without knowledge of harm or difficulty, naive
G	chosen and organised, especially for an exhibition
H	needing attention or action very soon

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

For some young people raised online, an inconvenient old camera or CD can feel like a small kind of freedom.

1 Many young people raised with instant photographs and unlimited music are choosing film cameras that conceal the image and albums that must be played in order. The inconvenience is part of the attraction. Alongside oversized sportswear and renewed enthusiasm for Britpop, these objects have turned the 1990s into an imagined alternative to permanent connection. For many of their new owners, the decade is not a remembered past at all; it is a story about what the present appears to have lost.

2 The decade has taken on a mythology as the last truly analogue period, when photographs could remain private, social arrangements required commitment and a night out did not automatically generate digital evidence. That picture is appealing precisely because it contrasts with a present shaped by notifications, algorithms and the expectation of permanent availability. For younger people, the 1990s are not so much a remembered past as an imagined alternative, pieced together from clothing, photographs, music videos and stories told by older generations.

3 Cultural revivals have always worked this way. Fashion regularly borrows from earlier periods, stripping familiar objects of their original associations before presenting them as desirable again. The current interest in Britpop, grainy photography and physical music formats combines that familiar cycle with a sharper reaction against digital convenience. A CD must be chosen and played; a film photograph cannot be immediately deleted. The extra effort, once considered a disadvantage, has become part of the attraction.

4 A revival can make the past look simpler than it was. The 1990s brought memorable music, clothes and design, but also inequality, discrimination, war and the continuing toll of AIDS. Enjoying an old camera or album does not require pretending the decade was carefree. It is a choice about an object, not a vote for everything that came with it.

5 Tate's exhibition, curated by Edward Enninful, offers an opportunity to revisit the decade as a contested cultural moment rather than a collection of fashionable accessories. Artists and photographers explored questions of class, identity, race and representation that remain urgent today. Looking closely at their work complicates the idea that the period was simply more innocent or authentic. Some of the tensions that shape present-day debates were already visible, even if they were expressed through different media.

6 Perhaps the renewed enthusiasm for the 1990s tells us less about what life was actually like then than about the aspects of modern living that people feel powerless to change. Digital technology has delivered remarkable convenience, but it has also turned attention into a valuable commodity. Choosing an old camera will not solve that problem. It may, however, offer a small reminder that convenience is not the only measure of a satisfying life, and that not every moment needs to be shared to be worth remembering.

Sources: Tate Britain. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The writer presents the taste for old objects as partly a reaction to digital habits, not only as a fashion cycle. T F NG
2. The writer expects an old camera to fix the way technology competes for our attention. T F NG
3. Most of the people who buy film cameras are under twenty-five. T F NG
4. Some of the issues debated today were already being explored in 1990s art. T F NG
5. The exhibition treats the 1990s as a period of simple optimism. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

bias	commodity	complicates	hazard	mythology	stripping	tensions	toll

1. Years of conflict have taken a heavy _____ on the mental health of the town's residents.
2. In a crowded online market, a person's attention has become a _____ that companies compete to buy.
3. The new evidence _____ the simple story that the company acted alone.
4. Every nation builds a _____ around its past, in which heroes are bold and mistakes are quietly forgotten.
5. Beneath the polite conversation at the table, old _____ between the two families were easy to sense.
6. Critics accuse the brand of _____ the festival of its original meaning by selling tickets as a luxury package.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. The expectation of constant _____ means many workers answer messages at midnight. (AVAILABLE)
2. Fashion revivals often erase the political _____ that objects once carried. (ASSOCIATE)
3. Campaigners argue that economic _____ is widening between the richest and poorest areas. (EQUAL)
4. Critics complained about the poor _____ of women among the characters. (REPRESENT)
5. Collectors pay far more for an object whose _____ can be proved. (AUTHENTIC)

7 Language focus: phrasal verbs

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. At this level, many phrasal verbs are figurative and fairly formal. Learn the whole chunk, such as shy away from or brush aside, rather than guessing from the verb.

brush **chip** **cling** **factor** **hark** **phase** **shy**

1. Many brands _____ away from admitting that their 'vintage' range is simply reprinted.
2. When pricing a retro console, sellers must _____ in the cost of restoring it.
3. Many commentators _____ back to a golden age that never really existed.
4. As streaming took over, shops began to _____ out CDs from their shelves.
5. Fans tend to _____ aside the awkward parts of the decade they idealise.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. Which older habit would you bring back for a week?
2. Is using an old device a real break from modern life or another trend?
3. What makes an inconvenient object enjoyable to use?

9 Role-play: a phone-free weekend

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the friend with the idea

You want a phone-free weekend with your friend. You would use a film camera, play CDs and make plans on paper. Explain why you think it will be relaxing, and answer your friend's worries.

Student B · the friend with doubts

You like the idea a little, but you need your phone for work messages and for getting around. Ask questions, say what worries you, and try to agree a plan that you both like.

Useful phrases

I'd love to try a weekend without my phone.
It'd be nice to talk without any notifications.
But what if my boss needs to reach me?
We could check our messages once a day.
I'm not sure that's a good idea.
Let's give it a go and see what happens.

Afterwards, tell the class: did you agree a plan, and would you really do it?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 E · 2 A · 3 D · 4 G · 5 H · 6 C · 7 B · 8 F

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 toll · 2 commodity · 3 complicates · 4 mythology · 5 tensions · 6 stripping

6 Word forms

1 availability · 2 associations · 3 inequality · 4 representation · 5 authenticity

7 Language focus

1 shy · 2 factor · 3 hark · 4 phase · 5 brush

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