

COMFORT VIEWING

Session One

The Comfort Viewing Mode

Department of Film Studies & Audiovisual Culture,

Masaryk University

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Course Details

Structure: 6 2-hour sessions [21.09; 05.10; 26.10; 09.11; 30.11; 14.12]

Methods: Integrated seminar discussions and framing lecturettes

Preparation: 2 x screenings & 1 x reading with preparatory questions

Organization: All screenings and readings will be discussed in depth

Slides: Uploaded to MS TEAMS soon after each session takes place

Assessment: 1 x 1500-2000-word essay (choice of five prompts)

Feedback: One-page grade explanation emailed soon after receipt

Topics and Goals

Topic: Anglophone Comfort Viewing (1980s to the present day)

Methods: Conceptual, textual, industrial, and social

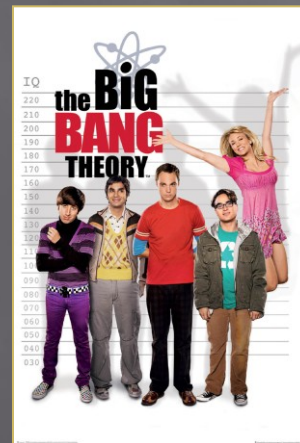
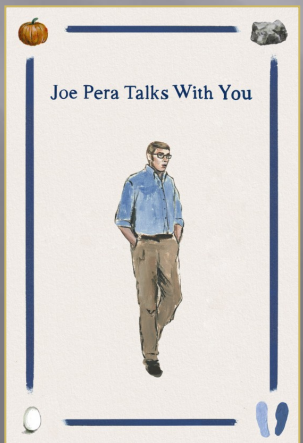
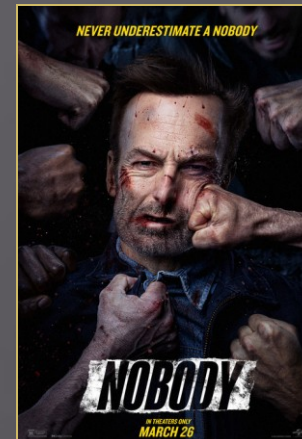
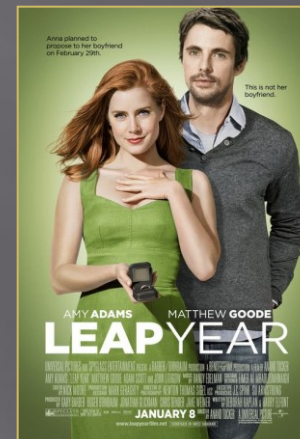
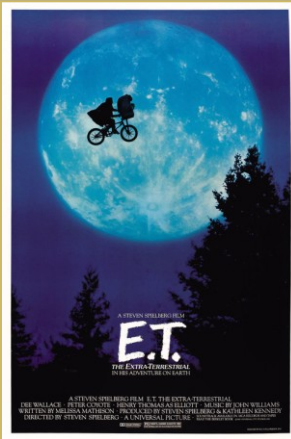
Aim: Explore how comfort viewing has operated as a mode of assembly

Approach 1: Spotlight the pastoral aspirations of key media output

Approach 2: How such objectives enrich understandings of media history

Outcome: Understand audiovisual media using a Comfort Viewing Mode

1. Mode; 2. '80s Feelgood; 3. Metamodernism, 4. Nerdom; 5. Travel; 6. Geriaction

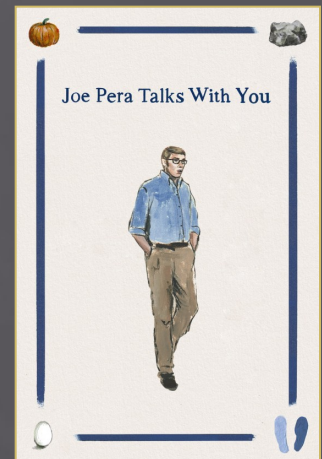


Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a demonstrable understanding of:

1. Comfort Viewing as a critical category

2. Comfort Viewing as a mode of media assembly



Film Culture & Fun

Elite/elitist audiovisual culture is historically unwelcoming to media that seeks to foster positive audience sentiments

Such subcultures deploy elevation strategies to legitimize their association with fairly low-prestige cultural products

This has led to stakeholders citing formal experimentation and sociocultural critique as indices of a media text's value

Output deemed to fall short in these areas is typically devalued as mindless trash unworthy of serious discussion

This phenomenon has intensified after #MeToo due to the mainstreaming of judgment-driven Marxist critical analysis



Comfort Viewing at Large

Perhaps in response, this period also saw Comfort Viewing proliferate as both a genre label and a loose set of meanings

Where Marxist analysis values social responsibility, Comfort Viewing stresses the therapeutic potential of certain media

It (re)imagines media output as a delivery system for personal wellbeing; as “me time”; as a deserved cultural “cheat-day”

Despite its prevalence in contemporary audiovisual culture, Comfort Viewing has received next-to-no scholarly attention

Yet, we can develop understandings of this topic by exploring work on an earlier but comparable topic: “feelgood cinema”



Egan & Mackley

A standout example of such work is Egan & Mackley's small-scale study of audience experiences of *Mamma Mia!* as a “feelgood film”

Their arguments furnish us with transferable insights into the qualities and affects that distinguish Comfort Viewing as a mode of assembly

- I. Why do the interview subjects consider *Mamma Mia!* a feelgood film/experience?
- II. Do these qualities also characterize your own experiences of Comfort Viewing?
- III. What other qualities characterize the content and consumption of Comfort Viewing?

An Intuitive Understanding of Feelgood/Comfort Viewing

Connection: Identifying similarities to the characters and their situations begat a rewarding sense of empathic fondness

Sincerity: Cheerful performances and imperfect vocals posited a sense of fun, authenticity, and unpretentiousness

Familiarity: Well-known songs and predictable scenarios offered a retreat from more challenging, downbeat media

Uplift: Joyful characters, no villains, and upbeat musical numbers generated a feeling of wellbeing for interviewees

Nostalgia: ABBA, and characters reflecting on their pasts, summoned positive memories of interviewees' own youth



From Experience to Template

While work on “feelgood” focuses on audience perceptions rather than media production and content, its findings still support this endeavor

As Janet Staiger famously argued, audience understandings of media are heavily determined by discourses industry stakeholders produce

Audience experiences are shaped by exposure to industrially produced artifacts, and industry seeks to serve the perceived needs of audiences

What genre theorists called “critical categories” (those designated by audiences) and “industrial categories” (formats) therefore often overlap

So, from Egan & Mackley (and others), we can identify a cluster of discourses that constitute a Comfort Viewing Mode of Media Assembly

Comfort Viewing Discursive Cluster (C. S. FUN)

CONNECTION: The CMV promotes building meaningful interpersonal relations as something that enriches human lives



SINCERITY: It promotes the superiority of honest, authentic expressions of an essential inner self devoid of pretense



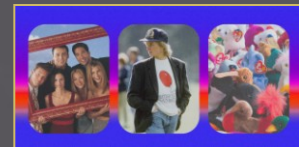
FAMILIARITY: It invokes a sense of predictability through well-known formats, tropes, inter-texts, and “rewatchability”



UPLIFT: It promotes understanding for others, by inviting us sympathetically to appreciate their overcoming life-challenges



NOSTALGIA: It positions an imagined (often media) past as superior to the present and capable of inspiring a better future



Comfort Viewing As Mode

These discourses are projected around a media text (via distribution and marketing) but crucially are also projected within the media text itself

Taken together, they represent a “Mode”; a filter or lens through which events are presented and through which viewers can experience them

This mode can be used to present myriad different stories, formats, aesthetic regimes, settings, characters, music, iconography (and so on)

It is built around a problem-solution model, wherein real-world problems are solved on the screen and thus potentially in front of it

The Comfort Viewing Mode therefore aligns the conduct and output of the commercial creative industries with that of the caring professions

Screening I: *Mamma Mia!* (2007)

- I. How does *Mamma Mia!* position itself as Comfort Viewing?
- II. Who do you think is the prime target audience for this film?
- III. To what extent did you experience the film as Comfort Viewing?



“I Have a Dream, A Song to Sing, to Help Me Cope with Anything.”

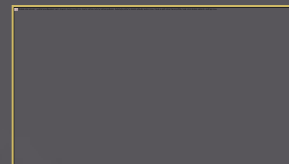
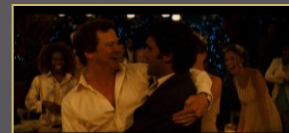
MM! reflexively promotes Comfort Viewing, offering a heart-pounding, mood-lifting experience akin to taking stimulants

It does so by showing otherwise scattered individuals uniting around, and solving life problems with, upbeat media (ABBA)

It promotes inclusivity, picturing an international community comprising viewer surrogates like women, girls, and LGBTQ+

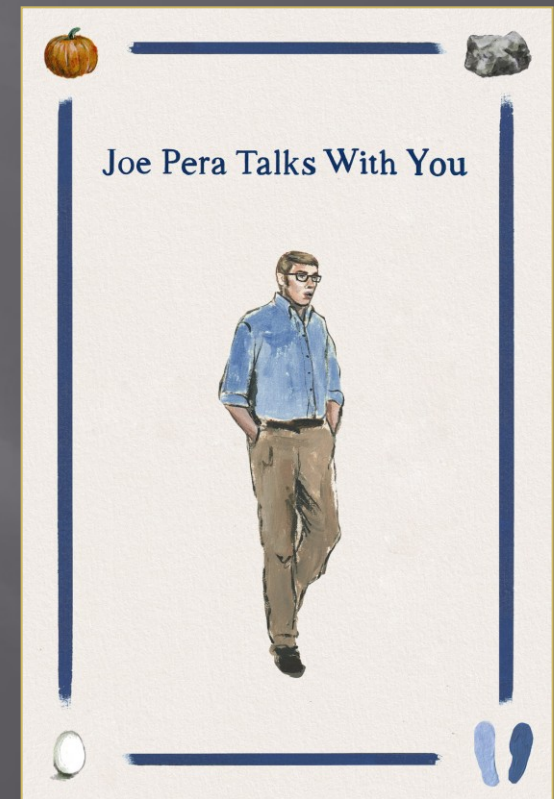
It encourages mother-daughter viewing, addressing concerns they face alone and together: aging, loneliness, separation, love

Lest we miss these point, the film boasts myriad songs whose lyrics promote the psychosocial benefits of comfort media



Screening II: *Joe Pera Talks With You* (2017)

- I. How does *Joe Pera Talks With You* position itself as Comfort Viewing?
- II. Who do you think is the prime target audience for this series?
- III. To what extent did you experience the series as Comfort Viewing?



“The Tradition of Decorating the Xmas Tree with Nana was Familiar Yet New Thanks to The Who”

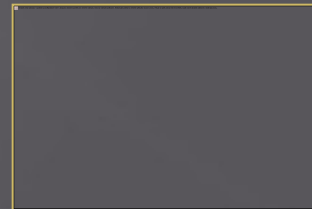
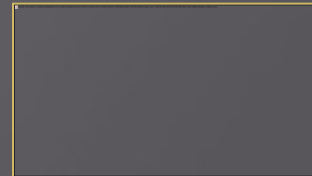
This series uses the Comfort Viewing Mode differently, aiming to be less an audiovisual stimulant than a sedative

It promotes striking a balance between a life built on comfort (viewing) and self-betterment through very mild risk-taking

It focuses on a unassuming man’s sincere efforts to connect with his community (and us, as the audience he addresses)

Joe has struggled to adapt to modern life due, it is implied, to childhood bullying, familial bereavement, and social anxiety

His retreat into a life of comfort (viewing) is offset by his embracing new experiences like The Who songs and romance



Joe Pera (and Friends) on Comfort Movies **(and Soup)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxIvVunSZZk>
(8:50 – 12:13)

In Sum

Comfort Viewing is usually associated with consumer choices that permit media experiences characterized by relaxation, coziness, and wellbeing

Yet, it is important we recognize that the concept of Comfort Viewing also describes a mode of calculated media production and assembly

This Comfort Viewing Mode is characterized by efforts to invoke an intersecting, complementary, mutually supportive collection of ideas

These media texts invoke Connection, Sincerity, Familiarity, Uplift, and Nostalgia so as to position themselves as mood-enhancing experiences

They seek to foster a sense of belonging, inspiration, hope, honesty, and security in order to help viewers manage real-world concerns and issues

Next Time...

The Comfort Viewing Mode enriches our understanding of industry history, including a period often reduced to cold, calculated profiteering

Topic: 1980s Feelgood

Readings: Brown, Feelgood Cinema.

Home Screenings: *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982)
The Goonies (1985)

[Preparatory Questions on MS TEAMS and in the Syllabus]

Meeting: Thursday 5 October