

COMFORT VIEWING

Session Two

1980s Feelgood

Department of Film & Audiovisual Culture,

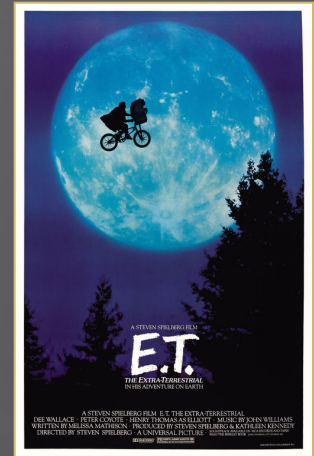
Masaryk University

Dr. Richard Nowell

Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a sound understanding of:

1. 1980s Feelgood & Hollywood History
2. Amblin and the Comfort Viewing Mode
3. The Commercial Logic of 1980s Feelgood



Comfort Viewing Mode & US Media History

As we saw last time, the label “Comfort Viewing” only recently emerged to describe media that offers psychosocial support to viewers

Yet, we should note that US media using the Comfort Viewing Mode – connection, nostalgia, uplift, sincerity, and familiarity – is nothing new

For example, the American director Frank Capra specialized in such output in the 1930s and 1940s, including *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946)

Similarly, feel-good sitcoms have been a staple of US television for generations, from *MASH* (1972–83) to *Friends* (1994–04) and beyond

But the 1980s is the period most associated with what we may now call calculated Comfort Viewing, esp. the Hollywood cinema of this decade

Comfort Viewing & Cinema Historiography

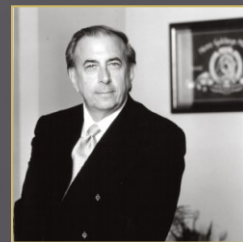
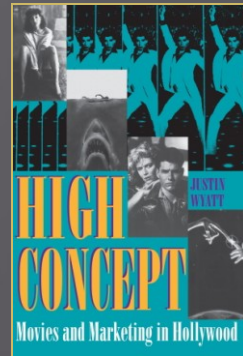
Recognizing the prevalence of the Comfort Viewing Mode at this time enables us to revise understandings of 1980s Hollywood

Film historians tend to portray 1980s Hollywood as a place where emotionality was eclipsed by cold commercial calculation

They argue that financial pressures of the day led Hollywood to sharpen its business practices in order to maximize returns

This imperative gave rise to High Concept, which paired slick, accessible content with clear brand images and merchandising

Such histories emphasize corporate rationality, marketability, and profitability, usually saying little of a film's themes or uptake



Noel Brown

Brown's study of the US trade and popular press in the late 20th and early 21st centuries explains why the term "feelgood cinema" emerged

In so doing, helps to appreciate why a major production trend in 1980s Hollywood amounts to a topical variant of the Comfort Viewing Mode

- 1. To what social phenomena does Brown link Hollywood feelgood films of the 1980s?**
- 2. What does he suggest feel-good cinema meant to stakeholders at this time?**

Feeling Good Feeling Good (Man)!

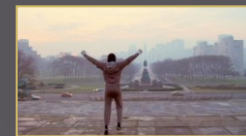
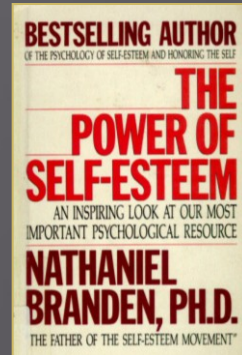
Brown suggests that imagining some films as feelgood derives from social and industrial phenomena of the late 20th century

He argues that the pursuit of sensory pleasure driving many Americans, motivating commercial sectors to serve this need

He explains the self-esteem movement motivated drug culture, psychotherapy, politics, self-help media, and film reception

He shows discussion of uplifting films as Feelgood films began in the 1970s, increasing in the '80s in response to industry shifts

He also shows us that, by the mid-1970s, Hollywood studio heads adopted feel-good as a calculated film production strategy



The Master of 1980s Feelgood

Much Hollywood output of the 1980s – including many High Concept properties – were used the Comfort Viewing Mode

Steven Spielberg was the most prominent practitioner of 1980s Hollywood feelgood; less as director per. se. than as a producer

Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment patterned its Comfort Viewing approach after its mega-hit *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*

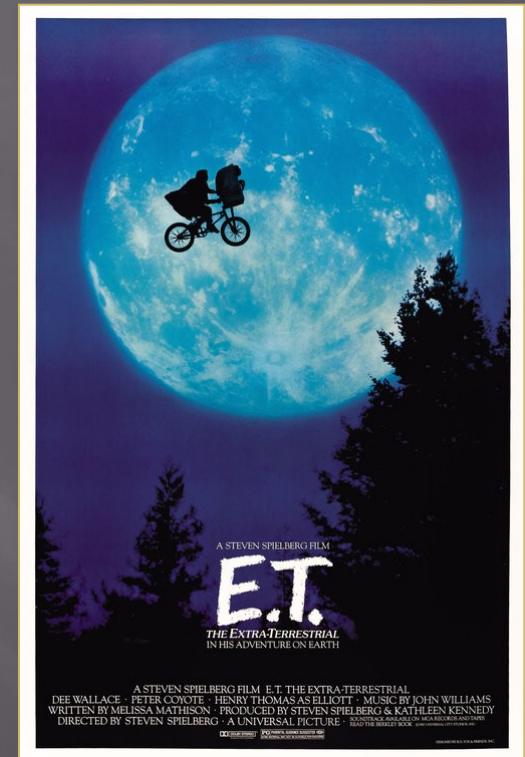
Subsequent hits including *Gremlins* and *The Goonies* led to its approach being adopted by myriad filmmakers across the 1980s

Amblin's flagship output was assembled around a textual model positing the films themselves as solutions to real-world issues



Screening 1: *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982)

1. What issues complicate the lives of the protagonists in this film?
2. How do encounters with remarkable phenomena change them as individuals?
3. How does this material suggest this film can improve viewers' lives?



“The Connection has been Made”

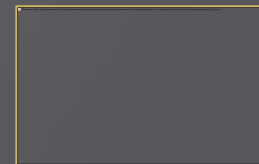
This reworking of *Close Encounters* offers a promotional allegory of how Amblin hopes its output may benefit viewers

It centralizes a sad boy from a broken home who struggles to develop emotionally, leaving him lonely, cynical, and alienated

His life changes when he meets an empathic alien bearing the name of the film and realized through “movie magic” effects

This transforms him into a sincere empath whose yearning for the return of his father is redirected into connecting with others

As E.T. leaves and the film ends, both boy and audience alike are reminded these lessons will stay with us; “I’ll be right here”



Branding E.T. (the Character in the film) and E.T. (the Movie in the Real-world)

“I’m gonna make a movie about little children: what kids do between the the hours of three in the afternoon and seven in the night, when they leave school and go home for dinner; when they – eight-, nine-year-olds – are little adults.” – Steven Spielberg, 1977

“I saw this as a story about a family, a dysregulated family in disrepair after suffering the tragedy of divorce, and how E.T. was able to give so much esteem back to Elliot and to Gerdy and to Michael; and in a sense pull that family together. It had given such a gift to that family ... that was the intention and that’s the role E.T. played and continues to this day to play” – Steven Spielberg, 1997



Screening II: *The Goonies* (1985)

1. What issues complicate the lives of the protagonists in this film?
2. How do encounters with remarkable phenomena change them as individuals?
3. How does this material suggest the films can improve viewers' lives?



“Oh God am I Depressed”.

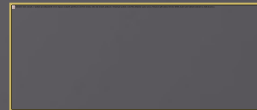
This film exemplifies Amblin’s reapplication of the Comfort Viewing Mode to the the textual model derived from *E.T.*

The kids have developed coping strategies to deal with familial and interpersonal issues, and the destruction of their community

Thrust into an old movie-like adventure, their spirits are raised as they save the community by becoming sincere empaths

This self-reflexivity posits encounters with the film can help younger viewers cope when such issues affect their own lives

Perhaps for this reason this moderate hit is now perhaps the most beloved example of 1980s Hollywood feelgood cinema



... Even by this Old Goonie



The Amblin Approach to Comfort Viewing

Amblin's specialty approach to Comfort Viewing positioned its films as a timely means of support for discontented Americans

It applied the Comfort Viewing Mode to tales of small-town Americans growing from encounters with remarkable things

This approach advanced the notion that folks benefited from such encounters: even when only viewing them on the screen

Amblin conflated the roles of the remarkable phenomena of its films and the brand-name filmmaker fronting the company

Such conduct encouraged audiences to welcome Amblin films into their lives as regular emotional support ... like a therapist



Amblin and Domestic Consumption

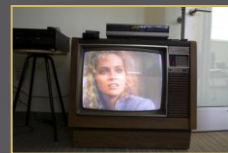
Amblin's approach to Comfort Viewing exploited a technology innovation so as to address growing psychosocial issues stateside

Home video recalibrated US film consumption from a structured, social leisure activity into a flexible, domestic, private encounter

It also destigmatized lone viewing, transforming it from a visible sign of failed socialization into a deeply personal experience

Pornographers thrived as early home video adopters by aiming to avoid consumer discomfort of consuming porn publicly in theaters

Lest we forget, both porn and (other) Comfort Viewing monetize intimate, immersive, emotionally intense media engagement



Amblin and Social Work

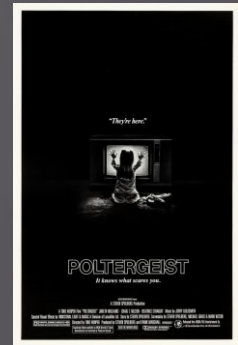
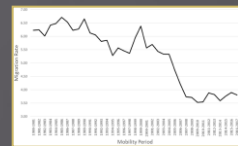
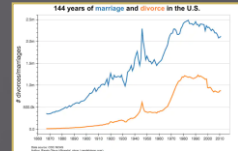
Amblin's approach to Comfort Viewing capitalized on home video to position its output as supporting viewers psychosocially

Its Comfort Viewing brought the structure and support of a postwar middle-class upbringing to Americans deemed at risk

For, as Brown suggests, the 1980s witnessed increased concern about the impact of American life on Americans' mental health

These included prominent concerns about children's wellbeing amid increases in divorce, internal migration, and absent parents

Such concerns were encapsulated in the figure of latchkey kids; children who looked after themselves as their parent(s) worked



1980s Feelgood Beyond Amblin

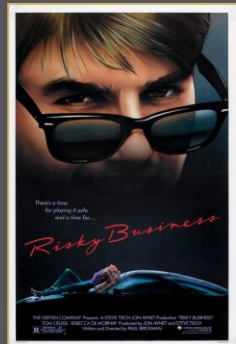
Commercial success catapulted Amblin to the forefront of the American movie business, inspiring a surge in feelgood films

Many mimicked Amblin, by depicting troubled Americans improving their lives after encountering remarkable phenomena

Others developed different ways of applying the Comfort Viewing Mode, while still promoting their real-world value

Thus, John Hughes specialized in cultivating young adults with films that invited them to join his therapeutic *Breakfast Club*

Others still offered uplift by fashioning celluloid equivalents of the cocaine sweeping the American media industries at the time



In Sum

While the label “Comfort Viewing” is quite new, media employing the Comfort Viewing Mode boast a long history in Anglophone cultures

Approaching these films as Comfort Viewing revises dominant histories of a period often characterized by corporate calculation, not emotionality

This is exemplified by Hollywood’s feelgood films of the 1980s, esp. those of Steven Spielberg’s production company Amblin Entertainment

Amblin specialized in feelgood films about troubled Americans being transformed through their encounters with remarkable phenomena

These allegorized the psychosocial benefits the films offered to lonely people, especially latchkey kids newly able to view them in the home

Next Time...

The Comfort Viewing Mode also enriches our understanding of cultural history, including one of the most prominent movements in recent times

Topic: Metamodernism

Readings: Rustad & Schwind, *Metamodern Sitcoms*.

Home Screenings: *The Muppets* (2011)

Community, Season 1 Episodes 1, 3, 10, (2009)

[Preparatory Questions on MS TEAMS and in the Syllabus]

Meeting: Thursday 26 October