

# COMFORT VIEWING

## Session Four

### The Nerd (In Us All)

Department of Film & Audiovisual Culture,

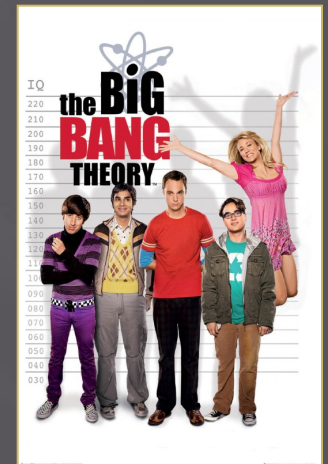
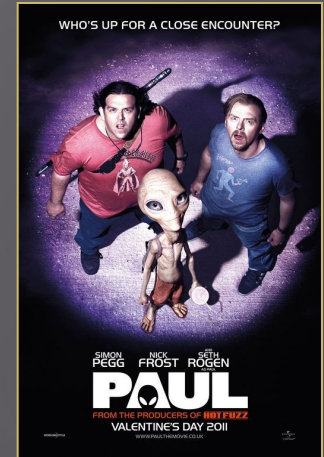
Masaryk University

Dr. Richard Nowell

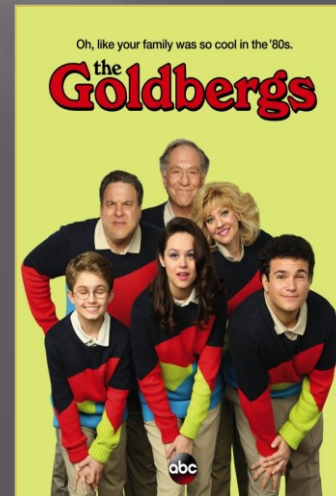
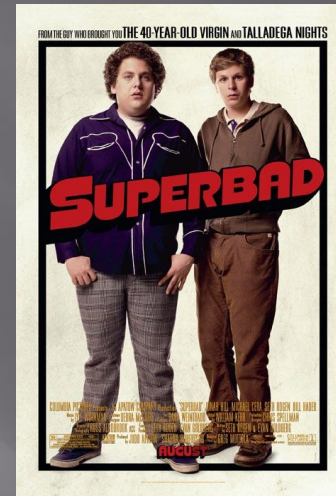
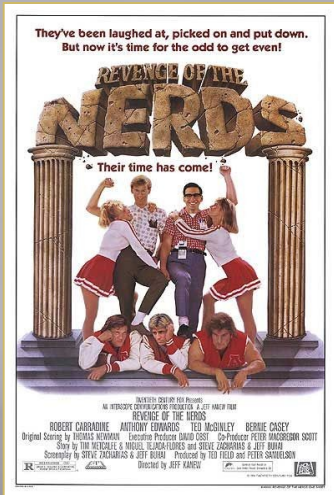
# Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a sound understanding of:

1. The construction of the nerd.
2. Nerd media as Comfort Viewing
3. The economics of nerd cultivation.



# Nerd-Themed Media



# “See You There, Nerds” !!



# **Comfort Viewing Mode & Character-types**

As well as revising understandings of industry history and cultural history, Comfort Viewing helps us better understand aspects of content

This is because it furnishes us with a different filter through which to examine media, based on media's pursuit of positive viewer sentiment

The CVM permits analyses that approach content as having been used so as to be relevant, appealing, and supportive for targeted audiences

Considering how such content speaks to these folks promises to provide a clearer picture of how it is meant to be understood and used by them

Referring to the CVM promises to enrich appreciation of a reoccurring but rather misunderstood Comfort Viewing character-type: the nerd

# **Comfort Viewing, Uplift, and Outsiders**

As surprising as it may sound, the figure of the nerd has been a prominent character-type in Comfort Viewing over the years

A reason for this tendency is that the emotional uplift central to comfort viewing derives from displays of achievement

Cognitive film theorists argued that sentiment was presaged on being touched by seeing characters overcoming challenges

And Media Psychologists showed actual viewers felt a greater connection to characters when they were pictured as outsiders

I submit that these two Comfort Viewing qualities converge when we witness outsiders challenge their outsider status



# Nerdom and Fan(BOY)s

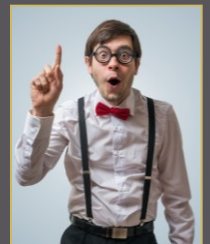
Before considering how nerds have been imagined in academic and industry circles, we need to consider an issue about gender

In the Anglophone world, Nerdom was seen to intersect with dedicated fandom and belonging to youthful subcultures

Both fandom and subcultural belonging were imagined as masculine phenomena, and thus in relation to men and boys

This led to traditionally feminine “girl nerds” being all but erased culturally, or presented as essentially in male-nerd-drag

The assumed maleness of the traditional nerd figure is a product of masculinized/patriarchal culture, albeit not a flattering one...



# Quail

Quail is among the scholars examining media representations of nerds, drawing negative conclusions of their depiction in 2000s reality TV

Drawn from fairly niche media texts, her findings still offer us a useful reference point to explore portrayals of nerds in more prominent output

1. What traits constitute US media depictions of nerds?
2. How is this social type related to US media depiction of other groups of people?
3. What changes do nerds often undergo in Quail's examples?



# **Is Quail a Jock at heart?** **(Joking. Not Joking!)**

Quail argues that the nerd is a social and media type constructed around psychosocial and sexual failure, and by special interests

She posits that the nerd exists as a concept through contrast with the Jock (as a symbol of idealized white male heteronormativity)

She suggests several reality shows in the 2000s tried to rehabilitate nerds, transforming them into cool, detached, sexualized hipsters

Ultimately, Quail expresses her hostility to such efforts, arguing that they are misogynistic, racist, homophobic, and exclusionary

Her critique of nerd portrayals (ergo their makers) evokes a “Jock Gaze” that rendered nerds pathetic or pathological to begin with



# Justified Ridicule: Nerds as Social Outcasts

Nerds have been ridiculed as outcasts because their failure to realize dominant sociocultural norms supposedly merits rebuke

In this discourse, the threat nerds pose to the normative order is positioned as symbolic; they denaturalize social norms

This discourse casts onto others concerns that one's standing is vulnerable due to perceived social, sexual, psychological failings

In this discourse, nerds' special interests serve as supposed signs of immaturity and obsession; of failed masculine socialization

This logic is circular though: nerds are of low standing as their interests are of low standing because nerds are of low standing



# **Fear & Loathing: Nerds as Horrifying Threat**

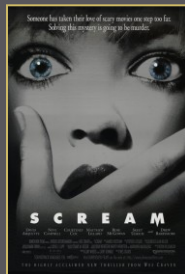
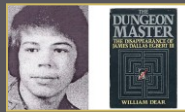
Nerdom has also been routinely cast as a cluster of disagreeable personality traits poised to tip into serious antisocial behaviors

This discourse summons sociopathy as it otherizes an inability or unwillingness fully to adhere to social, cultural, and sexual norms

Rather than being solely cast as a figure of low standing, such discourses render the nerd monstrous; fearsome and loathsome

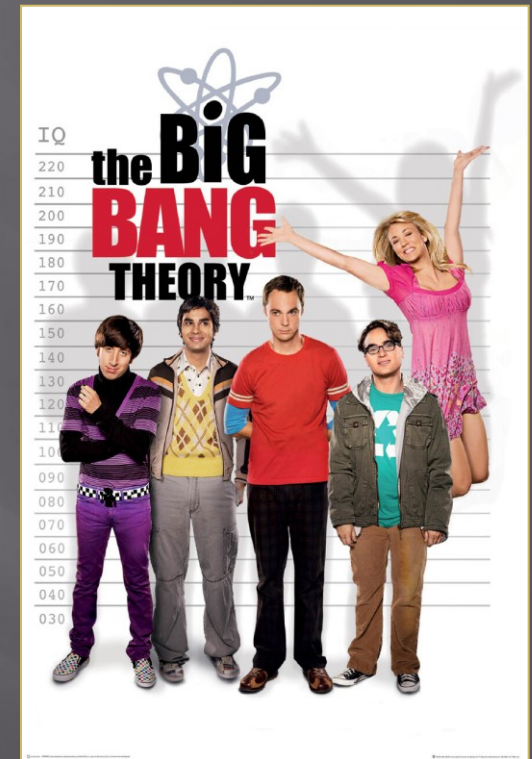
In this discourse special interests are not cast as pathetic or as juvenile per se, but as symptoms of an unhealthy obsessive mind

This discourse has been used to demonize fictional and real folks due to “inappropriate” devotion to what are deemed “bad objects”



# Screening I: *The Big Bang Theory*

1. What issues do nerds face in the screened episodes of this series?
2. What roles do the nerds special interests play in their lives?
3. To what extent do these episodes suggest nerds are really the “cool” people?



# Howard: A New Bread of Hero (?!?)

It invites the nerd in us all to join four nerds seeking to forge bonds while coping with their interpersonal and psychological challenges



It swiftly posits compassionate grounds for their awkwardness: social anxiety disorder, low self esteem, autistic spectrum disorder



Nerd sexualization is negotiated; the sexual focus of the pilot is diluted; Sheldon is coded as asexual, Leonard hopelessly romantic



It is also critiqued in the characterization of Howard, whose sexual bravado is presented as insincere, intrusive, unwelcomed, and rude

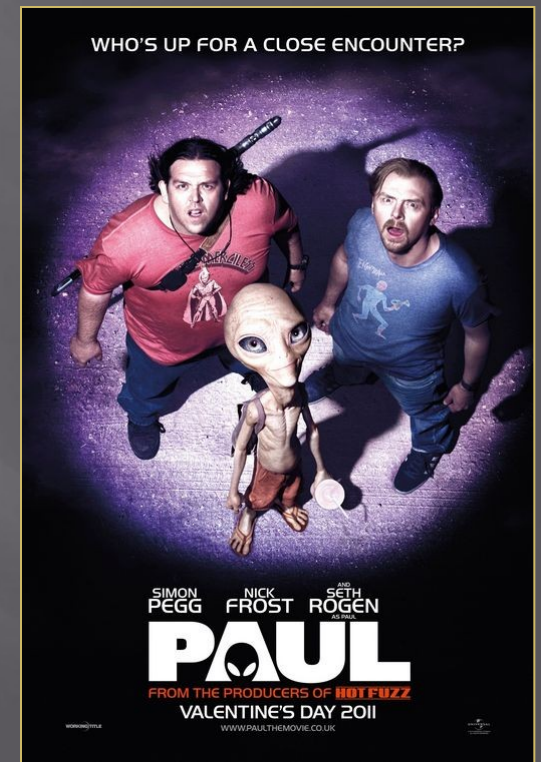


Their interests, like comfort media, are presented as nostalgic, social, rewarding, joy-giving (and preferable to antisocial jocks)



# Screening II: *Paul* (2011)

1. What issues do nerds face in this film?
2. What roles do the nerds' special interests play in their lives?
3. To what extent does this film suggest nerds are really the “cool” people?



# “What Do You Mean, Alien?”

This film allegorizes how Comfort Viewing helps lonely nerds forge a global imagined community based on taste and values



Paul is less the hipster-as-facilitator-of-socialization than a symbol of media industries' capacity to enrich this community



Via engagement with Paul, and shared special interests, the outsiders come together and improve their unhappy lives



The film transforms nerdism into a facet of a fairly inclusive humanism that is contrasted to villains cast as jock-ish bullies



Linking *Paul* to earlier comfort viewing like *E.T.* emphasizes the film's psychosocial ambitions and promise to its viewers



# Viewing Nerds as Nerds

As these examples suggest, approaching nerd-centered media as comfort viewing begets different readings of the character-type



By considering how such media tries to foster positive sentiments in the nerd (in us all), we can avoid the pitfalls of a jock gaze



Approaching media from a nerd's perspective suggests that such depictions cultivate this audience through sympathy and flattery



This calibrates the Comfort Viewing Mode to the needs of viewers thought to struggle to connect with others beyond special interests



Special interests are transformed from unhealthy to comforting, much like the media in which they feature is for nerd viewers



# **Nerds as High-Investor Role Models**

Efforts to rehabilitate the nerd in the popular imagination have transformed this figure into an industry-friendly role model

Such conduct imagines nerds less as lost social causes than as folks needing more time and help to achieve social integration

Special interests are in turn transformed from a sign of pathology into on-screen vehicles for the psychosocial development of nerds

The celebration of special media interests offers a reflexive guide to interpreting content, and an embodiment of brand loyalty

Media industries stand to profit from constructing viewers as nerds, because nerds are distinguished as high-investors in media



# Nerds and (Liberal) Media Branding

Relatively flattering portrayals of nerd characters also serve the branding strategies of Anglophone media industries as inclusive

Since about 2016, these industries have mobilized progressive branding to maximize consumption, especially among the young

Poised to become media industry ideology, this logic has seen flattering centralizations of hitherto neglected or maligned folks

The white male outcast or deviant nerd has now been supplanted by a range of demographics struggling to make their way in life

Nerdom is recast as a facet of identity coexisting with others, from aging academic to fun-starved girl to grieving action hero



# Of Autism and Incels

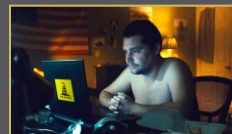
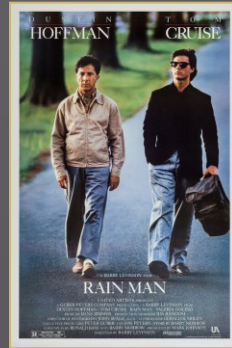
These industrially-driven shifts have been rendered viable by, and helped to cement, recent cultural and epistemological shifts

Consequently, popularized – and improved – understandings of Autism suggested that the nerd demanded rethinking culturally

These interventions indicated that negative portrayals of nerds risked amounting to insensitive caricatures of neurodiversity

The prominence of the incel subculture facilitated conceptual decoupling of deviant sexual failure from the nerd as autist

Hence a conceptual split into socially awkward but sympathetic media fans, and threatening sexually unsuccessful outcasts



## **In Sum**

Approaching media as comfort viewing helps to develop a better sense of key aspects of content, including prominent character-types like the nerd

Defined by psychosocial and sociosexual struggles, and special interests, the nerd has been largely otherized in popular and academic discourse

Where on-screen nerds are imagined as pathetic or pathological, scholars have demonized efforts to elevate nerd representation as sexist and racist

But the CVM indicates depictions of nerds are meant to support the nerd (in us all), recasting special interests as tools of personal development

Such practices represent an effort to depathologize nerds to protect high-investors, maximize consumption, and support media branding strategies

# **Next Time...**

The Comfort Viewing Mode also enriches our understanding media formats, including one of the most prominent and persistent types of comfort viewing

Topic: Tourist Movies

Readings: Negra, Tourist Movies.

Home Screenings: *Leap Year* (2011),  
*The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013)

**[Preparatory Questions on MS TEAMS and in the Syllabus]**

Meeting: Thursday 30 November