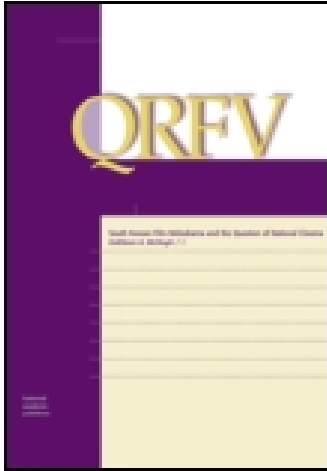


This article was downloaded by: [New York University]

On: 20 February 2015, At: 13:37

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Quarterly Review of Film and Video

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gqrf20>

The Feel-Good Film: A Case Study in Contemporary Genre Classification

Noel Brown

Published online: 20 Dec 2014.



CrossMark

[Click for updates](#)

To cite this article: Noel Brown (2015) The Feel-Good Film: A Case Study in Contemporary Genre Classification, Quarterly Review of Film and Video, 32:3, 269-286, DOI:

[10.1080/10509208.2013.811357](https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2013.811357)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2013.811357>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms &

Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

The Feel-Good Film: A Case Study in Contemporary Genre Classification

NOEL BROWN

“Feel-good film” has become one of the most widespread typologies in popular discourses on cinema in recent years. Although primarily North American in application, the “feel-good” label has been attached to films from numerous national cinemas (including Hollywood, British, French and Indian), and in its formal diversity encompasses several filmic modes (e.g. comedy, drama) and genres (e.g. romantic comedy, sports films, sci-fi and fantasies). Aside from its everyday usage, the term has become extremely prevalent in such discourses as print and online film criticism, blogs, forums, and, to a lesser extent, publicity materials deployed by major studios to sell their films.¹ There is an annual film festival held in Los Angeles devoted to feel-good films, and “the feel-good film of the year” has become a recurring phrase in discussions of particularly favored examples. Yet despite all this, academic film studies has shown very little interest in the format, whether as a mode of classification or arouser of powerful feelings of emotional uplift among mass audiences.

This essay is an exploration of historical usage of the “feel-good film” classification. Its aim is not to provide a rigorous definition of the feel-good film, nor to relate a history of the format itself. Nevertheless, it is allied with broader revisionist accounts of film genre that assert the importance of genre labels used in non-academic discourses, even when such popular classifications are difficult to conceptualize into a coherent theoretical framework. It adopts the “feel-good film” as a case study, exploring how a “new” genre—one not inherited from the classical literary studies arena or constituted on formal grounds, and which has come to prominence in the years since film studies began to establish itself in the late-1960s—has entered into common usage through a combination of social, cultural and commercial forces.

It is an exploration of the *processes* of film labeling; the perhaps more complex and problematic task of probing the genre for possible formal, ideological and emotive commonality is beyond its purview. Whilst I would contend that historical examination of the popular discourses that have promoted the feel-good film to its current status is, itself, valuable, there is a broader agenda here, namely to show that conventional genre labels—of the kind that have attained broad scholarly acceptance—have been superseded,

Noel Brown received his PhD in Film from Newcastle University, UK, in 2010, where he has taught several courses on film and literature. Currently an independent scholar, his primary research interests are classical and modern Hollywood cinema (particularly the historical dimensions of the family film), children’s film and television globally, contemporary youth cultures, and film genre. He is the author of *The Hollywood Family Film: A History, from Shirley Temple to Harry Potter* (I.B. Tauris, 2012), and the co-editor (with Bruce Babington) of the edited collection *Family Films in Global Cinema: The World Beyond Disney* (I.B. Tauris, forthcoming). He has written for several peer-reviewed journals, including *The Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, *Scope: an Online Journal of Film and Television Studies*, and *Trespassing: An Online Journal of Trespassing Art, Science, and Philosophy*.

in many cases, by labels used popularly, the prevalence of which have not yet been fully appreciated by scholars. Opening with a short section exploring some of the problems and inconsistencies of film genre theory, the essay will move on to an exploration of the socio-political origins of the “feel-good” label in North America during the 1970s. It will then trace critical usage (in newspapers and magazines, trade papers and other sources) of the feel-good film label from the late-1970s to the present, before considering its usage in Hollywood promotional discourses (such as trailers and movie posters).

Scholarly writing on the feel-good film has been extremely limited. One likely reason for this neglect is critical prejudice, stemming both from the fact that “feel-good” is a linguistic vulgarism, and the perception that, when applied to film, it is inherently reductive. Another major factor, I would suggest, is that historically, film genre theorists primarily have defined cinematic genres in terms of shared formal aspects—such as narrative patterns, situations, characters and locations, and symbols and iconography—or of recurrent ideological overtones. There is little scope for interpreting the feel-good film as a genre by either of these criteria; its genre-transcending fluidity seems actively to resist rigorous schematization.

There are two widely used alternative methods of genre classification. The first groups films by their intended audiences; examples include the teen film and the children’s film. Clearly, this approach, too, has little application to the feel-good film, the audience-base of which appears to be pluralistic and non-demographic-specific. The second groups films according to their *affective* (physical, cognitive, emotional) impact on audiences. Carol J. Clover and Linda Williams, respectively, originated and expanded the concept of “body genres”; that is, where the bodily responses of spectators mirror those of characters on screen, in such forms as horror, melodrama and pornography (Williams 2003). On first inspection, the idea that we might understand feel-good films in a similar way—through their shared agenda of emotional “uplift”—appears promising.

Unfortunately, “good feeling” is considerably harder to quantify than such affective responses to stimuli as shock, fear, revulsion or sexual arousal (to which the “body genre” idea seems most suited), because, as an emotional response, it requires a higher degree of cognitive processing. Studies have shown that “feeling good” is *not* simply an inevitable function of positive stimuli, and that pleasure may be derived from situations that are, on the surface, unpleasant (Schaller 2003). As Matt Hills has shown (2005), horror films are often materially disagreeable, yet promote diffuse pleasurable responses. We may legitimately wonder if any successful film, irrespective of content, ultimately induces predominantly *bad* feelings—even if certain films are particularly adept at arousing *good* feelings. Furthermore, films

do not “make” people feel. A better way to think of filmic emotions is that films extend an invitation to feel in particular ways [...] Film audiences can accept the invitation and experience some of the range of feelings proffered by the text, or they can reject the film’s invitation. (Smith 2005, 12)

None of this is to argue that feel-good films *cannot* be grouped in terms of shared uplifting emotive cues, but audiences’ responses to such films are harder to predict than in the prototypical “body genres” Williams outlines, and therefore more problematic for critical analysis.

It is unsurprising, then, that there are no articles about, or even index entries for, the feel-good film in Barry Keith Grant’s mammoth *Film Genre Reader* (2012), nor in other important recent books such as Nick Browne’s *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory*

and History (1998), Rick Altman's *Film/Genre* (1999), Wheeler Winston Dixon's *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays* (2000), Steve Neale's *Genre and Hollywood* (2000) and *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood* (2002), and Barry Langford's *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (2005). Although several scholarly books and articles have alluded to the "feel-good" film, most of the references have been cursory—and hence largely un-interrogative. Two notable, and relatively recent, exceptions to this rule are Charles Burnetts' article on Steven Spielberg's sentimentally "feelgood" endings (2009), and Kate Egan and Kerstin Leder Mackley's brief but illuminating sample of audiences' experiences of *Mamma Mia!* (Phyllida Lloyd, 2008) as a "feelgood" film (2013).

Their publication implies a burgeoning (but still extremely low-level) scholarly awareness of the feel-good film. Moreover, their respective focus suggests that both formal and affective examinations of feel-good films *are* possible when applied to specific films, if not the entire genre. Such promising studies aside, the feel-good film remains one of several generic orientations used widely in the popular sphere (by producers, fans, and non-academic writers)—the other most notable example being the "family film"—which have largely escaped productive scholarly engagement in spite of their demonstrable significance.² Little wonder, perhaps, that Lincoln Geraghty and Mark Jancovich's anthology, *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films* (2008), argues that genre labels actively inhibit productive engagement with the films to which they are applied.

However, even if we acknowledge certain difficulties in the way film genres are conceptualized, we cannot simply reject genre altogether. "Genre" may be, by its very nature, reductive, but it is also an essential diagnostic tool. More importantly, for better and for worse, it remains one of the primary ways by which films are understood in everyday life, from casual cinemagoers and fans, bloggers and critics, to producers, distributors and movie marketers. It is the primacy of *non-academic* discourses on the "feel-good film" that is at the heart of this essay. In his book *Genre and Hollywood*, Neale very usefully shifts much of the emphasis (and authority) for defining and enumerating genres from the professional scholar to popular discourses on film. He argues for greater scholarly engagement with the "discourses of publicity, promotion and reception" that surround popular films; following Lukow and Ricci, Neale calls these "inter-textual relays" (2000).

For Rick Altman, the inter-textual relay provides a useful means of identifying a genre and its core constitutive texts in order to facilitate further analysis, but should not be an end in itself (Neale 2003). Although Altman rightly rejects the notion of critical objectivity (since critics cannot separate themselves from the cultural forces they seek to illuminate), he identifies with those who regard popular genre labels with suspicion, on the grounds that "when one follows the history of generic terms as applied to film texts, one finds that industrial labels have time and again influenced critical terminology," and, moreover, that these terminologies are inventions of "an openly self-serving industry" (1987, 7, 1). The subsequent discussion will test the importance of inter-textual relays in the forming of generic canons, and question the validity of Altman's reservations towards it, by examining the processes by which the "feel-good film" attained prominence, first with reference to popular discourses (in newspapers, magazines, and the trade press), and second by sampling its employment as a commercial brand in industry discourse.

The Oxford English Dictionary's entry for "feel-good" lists it both as a noun ("A feeling of well-being, confidence, or ease; contentment; euphoria" or "A person or thing that induces such a feeling") and an adjective ("That induces or seeks to induce (often unwarranted) feelings of well-being, confidence, or ease"). The latter definition is most relevant to the "feel-good film," but also to what has been called the "feel-good movement," which itself predates initial identifications of the filmic genre by several years. The

feel-good movement—and it should be fully acknowledged that the word “movement” implies greater coherence and galvanization than actually existed—dates back to various late-1960s and early-1970s US socio-political subcultures including the hippie movement (with all its attendant associations of sensualism), the rise of New Age religion and Eastern mysticism, popular psychology (especially concepts of self-actualization) and liberal backlash against the political status quo. I will deal with each these interwoven currents in turn, ultimately arguing that, as the 1970s unfolded, together they influenced a broader socio-cultural embrace of good feeling and concomitant rejection of bad feeling in all its forms—including, most pertinently, a dominant stratum of popular cinema.

Although late-1960s America is recalled at least as much for its political activism as its hedonic impulses, the pursuit of sensual pleasure (i.e. feel-good) as an end in itself was often a primary motivator amongst young radicals and conformists alike. The earliest two direct references I have found for “feel-good” (or “feelgood”) pertain to the pleasurable bodily effects of narcotic substances. In 1970, young civil rights campaigner Peter de Lissovoy published his memoir, *Feelgood: A Trip in Time and Out*, which centered on his ‘two years as freedom fighter, confidence man and lover in Georgia’. Described in *Life* magazine as “glitter[ing] with talent and the rage of being young and lost,” the book describes de Lissovoy’s encounters with a black “herb healer” named Dr. Feelgood, who “carries a pouch of the finest grass [he] has ever blown” (Schott 1970). The following year, young investigative journalist Susan Wood published a lengthy expose in *New York* magazine of the apparently widespread phenomenon of wealthy (and chiefly young) “fashionistas” visiting private consulting physicians—colloquially known as “Dr. Feelgoods”—for regular, and expensive, injections of Amphetamines. According to Wood, this still-legal practice was “almost unavoidable” in the High Society scenes of such cosmopolitan cities as New York, Los Angeles and London, and one public health official questioned by Wood was largely unconcerned, observing that “it only affects a very small segment of our population—the very rich” (Wood 1971). According to Wood:

Nobody can say exactly how many Dr. Feelgoods now practice in New York City. Fashionable people—that is, those who get their names in the papers from time to time—seem to go to just four or five of them, including one [Max Jacobson, whose medical license was later revoked] who is said by his admiring patients to have attended President Kennedy and some of the nation’s best-known politicians, businessmen and entertainers. [. . .] The majority of his practice flock to him not for the sake of research but to find relief from what one observer calls “environmental and executive diseases.” The symptoms range from low-grade malaise to intense anxiety. The patient goes to him in response to an inner call. Some go daily. Most go three times a week. Appointments are not necessary; the patient need only show up during office hours, which tend to be long. [. . .] His patients are for the most part intelligent, educated, talented, affluent achievers. (ibid)

As may be gauged from these examples, at the turn of the 1970s, “feelgood” was apparently regarded as a somewhat illicit condition, attainable primarily through chemical mood therapy. This perception is reflected in films of the period, where drug taking is a therapeutic rather than simply hedonistic activity. In the now largely forgotten comedy *What’s So Bad about Feeling Good?* (George Seaton, 1968), universal happiness is the serendipitous result of a contagious disease in a society marked by divisions and deep feelings of dissatisfaction,

aggression and neurosis. In all these accounts, “feel-good” is an impermanent, artificially aroused condition inaccessible to the multitudes.

This was to change during the early-1970s, with the pursuit of new and alternative forms of spiritual salvation. From the mid-1960s, the self-esteem movement rapidly gained ground, as evidenced by the enormous sales of self-help books peddled by several prominent psychologists, who identified self-esteem as the primary determinant of happiness and self-fulfillment. Perhaps the two leading proponents of the social and psychological importance self-esteem (though their popular influence is far from equal) are social psychologist Morris Rosenberg, who in 1965 developed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and Canadian psychotherapist Nathaniel Branden, who popularized it in his *The Psychology of Self-Esteem* (1969), having previously contributed to Ayn Rand’s *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964). Branden’s and (especially) Rand’s books sold in the millions, as did self-help publications such as Mildred Newman and Bernard Berkowitz’s *How to be Your Own Best Friend* (1971).

All emphasized the socio-individual benefits of feeling good (even at the expense of others), the latter rhetorically enquiring, “do you want to lift yourself up or put yourself down? Are you for yourself or against yourself? [. . .] If you decide you want to help yourself, you can choose to do the things that make you feel good about yourself instead of the things that make you feel terrible,” and pre-emptively (against the conservative rejoinders of prior generations) pointing out that “doing what makes you feel good is really the opposite of self-indulgence” (Newman and Berkowitz, 9, 16). In 1974, a production company called Churchill Films produced a series of short films under the banner “Feeling Good,” comprising “The Eating Feel Good Movie,” “The Sleeping Feel Good Movie” and “The Washing Feel Good Movie,” each accompanied by a written guidebook. The rise of cognitive behavioral therapy was marked by the publication of David Burns’ best-selling *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* in 1979, which reinforced the simple but now-familiar message that “your feelings result from the messages you give yourself.”

These are isolated and formative examples of a much broader (and still-expanding) self-esteem movement. A major volume dedicated to the study of self-esteem noted that “articles and books employing self-esteem as a key variable or concept literally number in the thousands, with no slowdown in sight” (Owens and Stryker, 2001). William B. Swann noted in 1996 that

it is widely believed that self-esteem is the root cause underlying our personal and social problems. This conviction has not only sparked the emergence of a multimillion dollar self-help industry devoted to raising self-esteem but has also given rise to a self-esteem movement that is shaping public policy and altering some of the basic tenets of our educational system. (ix–x)

One need only examine the trajectory of the self-esteem movement since the 1970s to understand how the politics of “feel-good” have become pervasive in the United States. The term “feel-good,” with all its reductive and ambivalent connotations, is now rarely applied to the self-esteem movement, which itself bespeaks the latter’s socio-political-cultural legitimization. No matter that, as Swann argues (6–7), the uses to which theories concerning self-esteem have been put—which includes California’s Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and State Responsibility, developed during the 1980s—far outweigh the evidence offered by its proponents; that feeling good about oneself promotes social harmony now appears almost axiomatic. High self-esteem, in Swann’s words, has “become part of the American Dream” (7).

In such an affirmative context, “feel-good” has become a term loaded with contempt; a stick used to beat the self-esteem movement by its detractors, as with Maureen Stout’s book *The Feel-Good Curriculum: The Dumbing Down of America’s Kids in the Name of Self-Esteem* (2000), which traces the increasing influence of self-esteem ideology in US public education. Stout argues that “the current notion seems to be that we should all put a high value on ourselves, whether we deserve to or not. Put crudely, this view of self-esteem means feeling good for no reason. It is entirely divorced from any concept of merit” (12).

The self-esteem movement might be regarded as a primarily *secularist* feel-good manifesto, and its upsurge parallels the perceived decline (relative to its former influence) in organized religion in the United States during the same period. But if Christianity, the dominant Western belief system, is defined historically by its comparative asceticism, the emerging religions and pseudo-religions of the 1970s were marked more by navel-gazing, hedonism and spontaneity—again, all in the name of good feeling. In the same much-cited article in which he identified the 1970s as the “Me” decade, journalist Tom Wolfe identified a “Third Great Awakening” in the nation’s awareness of/relationship with religion:

By the early 1970s so many of the *Me* movements had reached this Gnostic religious stage, they now amounted to a new religious wave. Synanon, Arica, and the Scientology movement had become religions. The much-publicized psychedelic or hippie communes of the 1960s, although no longer big items in the press, were spreading widely and becoming more and more frankly religious. The huge Steve Gaskin commune in the Tennessee scrublands was a prime example. A *New York Times* survey concluded that there were at least two thousand communes in the United States by 1970, barely five years after the idea first caught on in California. Both the Esalen-style and Primal Therapy or Primal Scream encounter movements were becoming progressively less psychoanalytical and more mystical in their approach. The Oriental “meditation” religions—which had existed in the United States mainly in the form of rather intellectual and bohemian Zen and yoga circles—experienced a spectacular boom. Groups such as the Hare Krishna, the Sufi, and the Maharaj Ji communes began to discover that they could enroll thousands of new members and (in some cases) make small fortunes in real estate to finance the expansion. (Wolfe 1976)

Wolfe also observed that two protagonists in the 1976 presidential election, Jimmy Carter and Jerry Brown, were “absolutely aglow with mystical religious streaks”—and that this form of populist appeal was inextricably linked with the politics of good feeling.

Feel-good rhetoric became an ever-increasingly vital constituent of political communication in the United States, in an era seemingly marked by political failures in Vietnam and Watergate, alongside economic stagnation and a broader if indefinable “malaise”. Ironically, given that his presidential tenure later became inextricably linked with what he called a nationwide “crisis of confidence” that made him unelectable in the 1980 presidential campaigns, Jimmy Carter was one of the period’s foremost exponents of the art of feel-good communication, with *Los Angeles Times* William Schneider calling his popular appeal “a protest of good feelings” (ibid). The 1976 Bicentennial celebrations provided a temporary respite, according to columnist Saul Pett:

There was a disposition, a hunger, to feel good. Not just well, but good. We felt good. At long last, the grim clichés of more than a decade—“The American

malaise,” “The sick society”—were scarcely heard in the land, praise God. (Pett 1976)

The most popular politicians of the late-1970s—Ted Kennedy and, most notably, Ronald Reagan—were able to engender a similarly artificial sense of optimism.

Both figures were at a vanguard of an ongoing disavowal of ideology in politics, with the ability to motivate and galvanize privileged over normative political orientation. As Michael Kramer observed in a November 1979 edition of *New York* magazine:

Unfortunately for Carter, when it comes to raising expectations he is better at lowering them. How can he win at playing President Feelgood when he is up against a scion of the family that managed to make even FDR look like an amateur practitioner of the art?

Feel-good communicators such as Kennedy traded directly on anxieties regarding the United States’ feared economic, military and social decline. A *New Republic* editorial argued that “surely the important question is our ability to govern ourselves, not our *faith* in our ability to govern ourselves” (ibid), but these politicians communicated the idea that self-esteem is a quality transferrable from the individual to the collective. Kramer mused:

If America is indeed headed downhill, if we cannot recapture our past greatness, if we must in fact adjust to lower living standards, is it better to have our hands held during the decline or should we face the music up front, without a swirl of Feelgood bumpkin calling us to a past long gone? (ibid)

Of course, with his victory in the 1980 presidential elections, Reagan emerged as the pre-eminent feel-good politician. John T. Stinson argues that “rather than a strong leader, Reagan was a performer luring popular support through feel good rhetoric” (39). As one journalist remarked in 1981, “we didn’t elect this guy because he knows how many barrels of oil are in Alaska. We elected him because we want to feel good” (Schaller 2011, 12).

Of course, not *everyone* wanted to feel good. In May 1977, *New York Times* columnist Russell Baker described “the feelgood movement” as “the latest aberration in the American pursuit of happiness,” insisting that:

It is perfectly normal not to feel good. This does not mean it is normal to feel rotten all the time, or even to feel bad too steadily. [. . .] My misgivings about feelgoodness are heightened by the origins of its preachers. The chief exponents of psychic feelgood tend to come from Asia, California and the psychological sciences, none of which has an impressive record at making people feel good. [. . .] The feelgoodists are heretics who have turned the pursuit of happiness into a search for the endless smile, the total serenity, the complete fulfillment of self, the supreme orgasm and the perfect doughnut. Society becomes a service station to supply fuel and spark plugs for easy motoring from womb to tomb. Just thinking about it makes you feel bad. Poor Jefferson would have felt terrible had he suspected that the pursuit of happiness would come to this. (Baker 1979)

Baker further maintains that “what the entire gang [of feel-good practitioners] has in common is a faith in the individual servicing himself” (ibid).

Again, we return to the notion—also advanced by cultural critics Edwin Schur and Richard Sennett—that implicit in “feeling good” was a new ethos of privatism and selfishness hitherto unseen in North American society (Schur 1976; Sennett 1977). This charge was leveled most famously by Christopher Lasch in his bestselling book, *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), and subsequently reiterated on countless occasions in the 1980s. In such a context, the term “feel-good” attained an accusatory association, employed by cultural critics as an indicator of permissiveness. One journalist argued in 1987 that “the message of this popular culture is: ‘Feel good.’ What one thinks hardly matters” (Shannon 1987). Elsewhere, it was used more positively—especially in relation to uplifting movies. The main point, though, is that by the mid-1970s, “feel-good” had not only become a way of life, but had entered the popular vocabulary. Given its widespread application to everything from personal fulfillment and new religious forms to mainstream politics, it is not surprising that “feel-good” crossed over to the cultural arena; most prominently as a descriptor of a certain brand of popular cinema.

Although the comparatively downbeat films of Kubrick, Penn, Altman, Scorsese, Coppola and others were widely lauded in journalistic film criticism of the early-1970s, we can also perceive an incipient countervailing appreciation of uplifting narratives that only later coalesces into a generic terminology. In his review of the romantic drama *Love Story* (Arthur Hiller, 1970), for instance, *Los Angeles Times* critic Charles Champlin advised, “If you have forgotten you could leave a movie theatre feeling good rather than depressed, you might just want to join the queue outside” (Champlin 1970). However, the earliest direct usage of the “feel-good film” term I have discovered is in film critic Judith Crist’s 1974 year-end review in *New York* magazine, where she observes:

That we are ready for the feel-good movie is heralded by the pleasures of Mel Brooks’ *Blazing Saddles* and *Young Frankenstein*, Billy Wilder’s *The Front Page*, Robert Altman’s *California Split*, and Brian De Palma’s *Phantom of the Paradise*. (Crist 1974)

The observation is revealing in its implications that the feel-good movie has not yet arrived, and the movies referenced are positioned more as harbingers of an impending trend than feel-good movies in their own right. Also perceptible in this extract is a sense of fatigue with the primarily downbeat film fare typical of early-1970s Hollywood. The feel-good/feel-bad dyad was subsequently drawn sharply by critic Jim Moorhead, writing about the Oscar success of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (Milos Forman, 1975) in *The Evening Independent* in April 1976:

I loved it, but when people—especially older persons—ask me about it, I praise it with qualifications. I tell them it is about the inside of a mental asylum. I tell them that its language is abundantly obscene. I tell them that while there is only a flash of nudity, the references to sex are many and frank.

To those millions of people who at any given time will tell you, “I like to go to the movies for one thing—to be entertained,” I’m not so sure that “Cuckoo” is for them. (Moorhead 1976)

The following year, Marvin Goldman, the president of the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO), was quoted in *Variety* urging a return to a more inoffensive, family-friendly mode of popular cinema:

What is their [moviegoers'] choice? A psychotic cab driver? A teenage prostitute? Dope? Rape? Gutter language? Internal organs spilled on the giant screen? Is it any wonder they're staying home watching movies on TV? (as qtd. in *Variety*, 11 May 1977)

Goldman insisted that the public desired “anything that makes them *feel good* when they leave the theatre” (ibid).

It may appear from these responses that feel-good films were viewed almost synonymously with family films—both forms concerned, to varying degrees, with strategies of emotional uplift—and it is true that some commentators conflated them. However, the dichotomy is exposed by the wide recognition of *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976)—a narrative in which Sylvester Stallone's deadbeat boxer gets a shot at the world heavyweight title—as a feel-good film. Despite its violent content, *Rocky* was the first mainstream Hollywood film to which the “feel-good” label was directly applied on a widespread basis (Fottler 1977). In fact, its feel-good effects seemingly mediated against (if not altogether effaced) the more seedy aspects of the film, with newspaper columnist Dick Kleiner going so far as to call it a “pleasant movie” (Kleiner 1977). The unanticipated success of *Rocky* proved something of a turning point, both in the production of films consciously designed to make audiences feel good, and in critical usage of the feel-good label.

In August 1978, critic Aljean Harmetz wrote an article for the *New York Times* exploring the recent tendency among Hollywood studios towards feel-good entertainment, in which several studio heads were interviewed (Harmetz 1978).

Each executive admitted that a strategic re-orientation had taken place. Paramount chairman Barry Diller claimed that, eighteen months previously, the studio had “made a decision to make positive films, films that make people feel good” (ibid). Universal's Charles Powell believed that “the public is starving for escapist entertainment films,” while Fox's Ashley Boone believed that the trend

started at Christmas, 1976, when you had in the marketplace “The Enforcer,” “A Star is Born,” a Pink Panther movie, “Silver Streak” and the play-off of “Rocky”. People went to the movies and enjoyed the experience. (ibid)

Harmetz explained that “because retooling a movie assembly line from heavy to light films takes approximately as long a time as retooling an automobile assembly line from heavy to light cars, ‘Rocky's’ inheritors did not start reaching theatres until last fall” (ibid). By this point, the popularity of George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977)—which was later attributed by Lucas to its alchemical ability to “ma[k]e people feel good” (Scheff 1999)—had signaled the death knell (at least as a broad production policy) for films which, in Diller's words, “made people feel bad” (Harmetz 1978).

A further industry-wide embrace of the feel-good film in Hollywood was identified by writer Bob Thomas in an August 1985 article. Thomas argued that “realism is out, feel-good movies are in” (Thomas 1985), while his interviewees pointed to a cultural palliative need for uplifting narratives in a period of socio-political anxiety. A wide variety of films were identified in this vein, including *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (George P. Cosmatos, 1985), *Cocoon* (Ron Howard, 1985), and *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985). Screenwriter Philip Dunne felt these films to be “remarkably silly,” theorizing that “the movement started last summer with the Olympic Games,” as “a reaction to the defeats in Vietnam and Lebanon, people wanted to bust out and yell ‘USA!’” (ibid). Director Irving Kershner believed that the feel-good cycle constituted a cultural response to “a

psychic depression” that also manifested itself in a desire “to believe in God and Reagan” (ibid). Sheila Benson, film critic of *The Los Angeles Times*, argued that films with a happy ending—a post-1970s characteristic, she claimed—should not be confused with feel-good films; “Even *The Killing Fields* and *Gandhi*, despite their tragic undertones, made you feel good because of the spirit of the film” (ibid).

Since the late-1980s, the concept of the feel-good films has become so well-embedded in popular understanding of mainstream cinema that their commercial success is no longer regarded as aberrant (or especially newsworthy). A 2001 article by Chris Vognar in *The Hour* explored the ways in which, increasingly, Hollywood films are designed to maximize their feel-good impact:

Thanks largely to the increasingly scientific “advancements” of studio test screenings, select groups can pick the ending that makes them feel better, the one that will make them feel the most comfortable about an increasingly confusing world [...] “The game is the production of human emotions for profit,” says Jim Brancato, associate professor of communications at Cedar Crest College in Allentown, Pa. [...] Brancato argues that Hollywood movies have no more of a “feel-good” mandate than in the past. The studios have simply perfected their methods for determining the safest possible choices.

“What has changed is the use of social scientific techniques, like the focus group, measuring test audiences’ reactions in an attempt to ensure that only those films that can appeal to our emotions get produced.” (Vognar 2001)

It also remains *de rigueur* to link the preponderance in feel-good films with anxiety-producing social currents. Geoffrey Macnab, in British broadsheet *The Independent*, argues that “the best feel-good movies have often been made at the darkest times” (2009).

Perhaps the two most striking inferences from critical discourse on the feel-good film in subsequent years is i) the sheer range of formal styles the mode encompasses, and ii) the capriciousness of the labeling processes (which, of course, mirrors a similarly casual approach to categorization on the part of mass audiences) in the absence of guiding studio publicity. These two aspects are worth considering in turn, starting with the generic broadness—which is to say, formal (as opposed to emotive) irrelevance—of the feel-good film. The following list, drawn from contemporary trade and press reviews, is indicative, rather than comprehensive:

- 1) The Sports Film (*Rocky*; *One on One*, Lamont Johnson, 1977) (Fottler).
- 2) The Animal Film (*The Magic of Lassie*, Don Chaffey, 1978) (Moorhead 1978).
- 3) Science Fiction (*Star Wars*; *Back to the Future*, Robert Zemeckis, 1985) (Thomas).
- 4) Fantasy (*Superman*, Richard Donner, 1978; *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, Steven Spielberg, 1982; *The Astronaut Farmer*, Michael Polish, 2006) (Roth 1978; *The Philadelphia Enquirer*, 8 April 1983: E18; “Astronaut Aims for Stars”).
- 5) The Romantic Comedy (*Chapter Two*, Robert Moore, 1979; *Terms of Endearment*, James L. Brooks, 1983; *While You Were Sleeping*, Jon Turteltaub, 1995; *Chocolat*, Lasse Hallström, 2000) (*Chapter Two*; Paseman 1983; Maslin 1995; Vognar 2001).
- 6) Drama (*Inside Moves*, Richard Donner, 1980); *Local Hero*, Bill Forsyth, 1983; *Billy Elliot*, Stephen Daldry, 2000; *Slumdog Millionaire*, Danny Boyle, 2008) (*Inside Moves*; *The Philadelphia Enquirer*, 8 April 1983: E18; Vice 2000; Foundas 2008).
- 7) The Biopic (*Coal Miner’s Daughter*, Michael Apted, 1980; *Gandhi*, Richard Attenborough, 1982) (Burgess 1980; Thomas 1985).

- 8) The Action Film (*Rambo: First Blood Part II*, George P. Cosmatos, 1985) (ibid).
- 9) The Musical (*Footloose*, Herbert Ross, 1984; *Purple Rain*, Albert Magnoli, 1984; *Mamma Mia!*) (“New Films: *Footloose*,” Denby 1984; Bradshaw 2008).

This list omits several of the most famous feel-good movies, partly for reasons of economy, but also because several films now regarded as iconic feel-good texts were not received as such on initial release. Nonetheless, it conveys the extent to which the feel-good film is seen to transcend normative generic boundaries.

Also strongly apparent in critical responses is the lack of consensus as to whether the feel-good term carries positive or negative connotations. Such a determination typically depends whether a film’s agendas of emotional uplift are felt to be legitimate or purely exploitative. Implicit within such an assessment are questions concerning the artistic validity of texts predicated on the arousal of affirmative emotional responses, and, as we shall see, the contexts of a given film. Romantic drama *Chapter Two* was viewed by *New York* as too calculated in its uplifting intent, the movie seeming “to have been concocted by fashionable feel-good therapists of the Newman & Berkowitz variety” (*Chapter Two*). Similarly, Richard Donner’s drama about the disabled people, *Inside Moves*, was criticized by *Variety* as “eschew[ing] any intimations of tragedy, better to stress a naively optimistic, feel-good attitude” (*Inside Moves*). In contrast, *Coal Miner’s Daughter* was lauded in *The Robesonian* as “a Cinderella adventure with all the rough spots left in,” asking of the reader, “Want to feel good when you come out of a movie theatre? See ‘Coal Miner’s Daughter’ without delay” (Burgess 1980). The lowly critical status of the feel-good film was highlighted in *The Philadelphia Enquirer’s* review of British comedy *Local Hero* (Bill Forsyth, 1983), which was heralded as perhaps “the first ‘feel good’ classic” (*The Philadelphia Enquirer*, 8 April 1983: E18). A similar sentiment was expressed in *The Register-Guard’s* review of romantic comedy *Terms of Endearment*, which “may come to represent a ‘type’ of its own: A feel-good movie that makes you laugh and makes you cry but never insults your intelligence” (Paseman 1983).

The most hostile critical applications of the feel-good label have been in relation to films where emotional uplift is thought—usually for reasons of insensitivity to the subject matter—to be inappropriate. An extreme example is Owen Gleiberman’s review of family drama *Radio Flyer* (Richard Donner, 1992) in *Entertainment Weekly*: “If nothing else, *Radio Flyer* is an original: The first feel-good movie about child abuse [...] The movie starts out by evoking the primal, disturbing emotions of familial discord; it ends up telling you to have a nice day” (Gleiberman 1992). Steven Spielberg has been a particular target for such criticism. *The Color Purple* (1985), an adaptation of Alice Walker’s 1983 novel which focuses on the difficulties faced by black women in the 1930s Deep South, was thought by *New York* magazine’s David Blum to arrive at “a rousing, uplifting conclusion in the simplest way possible,” whilst *Wall Street Journal* critic Julie Salamon accused Spielberg of “turn[ing] a wrenching, painful book into a feel-good movie” (Blum 1986). This accusation reared its head once again—but with far greater force—following the release of Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993).

The Village Voice’s former film critic, J. Hoberman, argued that the filmmaker “Spielbergized” the Holocaust, and in the process made “a feel-good entertainment about the ultimate feel-bad experience of the 20th century,” while Ilene Rosenzweig, writing in Jewish newspaper *The Forward*, found *Schindler’s List* to be a “feel good movie of Christian redemption and Jewish defeat” (Rainer 1994). As Rosenzweig’s response suggests, “feel-good” is relative; the producers of *Slumdog Millionaire*—perhaps the quintessential

post-millennial feel-good film—later discovered this after widespread complaints in the Indian media that it had willfully distorted life in the Mumbai slums (Magnier 2009).

One of the most interesting, and significant, recent developments in critical discourse on popular cinema has been the emergence of a shorthand antithesis to the feel-good film: the so-called “feel-bad film.” This term has entered the vocabulary of trade and journalistic writers within the last ten years, or so. Hitherto, films that had made audiences “feel bad” had been regarded with antipathy, as with the 1970s anomic trend against which productions such as *Rocky* and *Star Wars* were successfully positioned. Recent usage has tended to celebrate the mode, as with Richard Corliss’s exhortation, “Feel Good? No! Feel Bad!” in *Time* magazine (Corliss 1996). Feel-good films and “feel bad” films are often positioned adversarially in relation to one another; i.e. cyclically, one as an antidote to the other, whether what is being repudiated is excessive sentiment and hollow emotional uplift, on the one hand, or excessive grit, debasement and perversity on the other. Critic David Roberts described *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005) as “not at all the feel-good film of the year,” a laudatory affirmation, since he regarded it as “the rare film for adults” in “a pop-culture landscape dominated by the aesthetics of adolescents” (Roberts 2005). This opposition is perceived not only in Hollywood. In her review of the notoriously violent and sexually explicit *Baise-Moi* (Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000) for *Third Way*, Catherine von Ruhland argued that the film, as with other recent French productions such as *La Haine* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995) and *The Dream Life of Angels* (Erick Zonca, 1998), served as “a gritty and important riposte to feel-good movies like *Amelie* and *Chocolat*” (2002).

Variety’s then-editor (and former movie producer) Peter Bart viewed the phenomenon in rather less complimentary terms:

The abundance of *feel-bad films* has become downright oppressive [. . .] A strike looms, the war seems unrelenting and the country is fragmented politically. So here’s Hollywood’s response: a new genre called the *feel-bad* movie. The plots of the *feel-bad genre* focus on revenge-seeking crime victims, terrorist assaults, disappearing Iraq vets and lovers who’ve learned to hate each other. (Bart 2007)

This outline also seems to imply, in contrast with the previously cited responses, that the “feel-bad film” is defined less by emotional and affective impact than story-type. In this way, it associates the form with more traditionally formally derived genres such as the musical or western. These impressionistic construals of the form should, of course, be regarded critically. As with its obverse, the “feel-bad film” label is reductive and somewhat anti-intellectual—and thus similarly unlikely to gain scholarly approval. It is also psychologically suspect, given the widespread (though not universal) assumption that *all* commercial films are ultimately geared towards providing a pleasurable experience. Moreover, even if a film’s ultimate affective impact *were* to make viewers “feel bad,” it would differ from the “feel-good” film in two important regards: no producer would make a film for that express purpose, and no studio would market it as such. However, increasing usage of such categorizations in the popular sphere cannot be ignored.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, I have found little evidence that studios actively market their productions as “feel-good” films. In the course of this research, I assembled a list of 50 prominent feel-good films released between 1976 and 2012, with reference to such centers of discourse as trade reports, press reviews, IMDB genre classifications and listings, and lists of feel-good films on various websites and blogs. The majority (36) are Hollywood productions, but the list also includes films made in Britain (9), France (3), Italy (1) and

India (1). Nevertheless, each film has attained notable popularity in the key Anglophone film markets (especially North America and the United Kingdom). I was particularly interested in studio publicity materials that communicate a short, epigrammatic description of the film, especially its generic orientation. To this end, I concentrated on theatrical trailers (of which several are typically produced for each film, depending on territory), movie posters and home video blurbs.

None of the films' theatrical posters contain any reference to their feel-good emphases; until fairly recently, trailers and home video blurbs have been similarly devoid of such marketing. Most movie poster taglines offer a short description of the film's content, rather than its presumed emotive qualities. Examples include: *Rocky* ("His Whole Life Was a Million to One Shot"); *Star Wars* ("A Long Time Ago in a Galaxy Far, Far Away. . ."); *Chariots of Fire* ("With Wings on their Heels and Hope in Their Hearts"); *Cinema Paradiso* ("A Celebration of Youth, Friendship, and the Everlasting Magic of the Movies"); *The Full Monty* ("The Year's Most Revealing Comedy"); *Chocolat* ("One Taste is not Enough"); *Mamma Mia!* ("Who Said a Wedding couldn't be This Much Fun?"); and *Slumdog Millionaire* ("What does it Take to Find a Lost Love? A. Money B. Luck C. Smarts D. Destiny"). A significant minority of posters hint at the film's feel-good functions, but only indirectly, such as: *Saturday Night Fever* ("Catch It," which perhaps suggests contagious feel-good); *Terms of Endearment* ("Come to Laugh, Come to Cry, Come to Care, Come to Terms"); *Top Gun* ("I Feel the Need, the Need for Speed"); *Dirty Dancing* ("Have the Time of Your Life"); *As Good as it Gets* ("A Comedy for the Heart That Goes for the Throat"); and *Hairspray!* ("This Summer, when you Follow your Own Beat, There is no Limit how Far you can Go").

A similar picture emerges with regard to trailers and home video blurbs, both of which have considerably greater latitude to identify the film's feel-good orientation. Amongst the 50 trailers under investigation, only two—*Amelie* and *Slumdog Millionaire*—explicitly promote the films' "feel-good" qualities. Revealingly, on both occasions this identification takes the form of extracts from journalistic reviews overlaid at the end of the trailer. *Amelie*'s UK trailer cites a critic's determination of the film that it "will become one of the definitive feelgood movies." *Slumdog Millionaire*'s UK trailer—in contrast to its North American trailer, which cites several reviews by the likes of Roger Ebert and Richard Corliss, but none of which refer to the film as "feel-good"—cites Robbie Collin's review in now-defunct British tabloid newspaper *The News of the World*, which praises it as "The feel-good film of the decade." An interesting recent case is the promotion of the Brad Pitt-starred baseball movie, *Moneyball* (Bennett Miller, 2011). Based on Michael Lewis's bestselling non-fiction book of the same name, *Moneyball* was heavily marketed by distributor Columbia, but no attempt was made to situate it as a feel-good film. This changed abruptly shortly after theatrical release in October 2011, presumably in response to numerous reviews positioning it as such; subsequent promotional materials proclaimed it "the feel-good movie of the year" (Koo 2011).

The obvious inference is that studios publicity departments are unwilling to deploy the feel-good label to help sell a film *unless* that orientation has been established by critical consensus—and only then on certain occasions. Of course, the fact that the term "feel-good" (or such variants as "feelgood") are not widely used in trailers does not mean that this association is not implied in other, less direct ways in marketing and publicity materials. A similar message can be (and often is) communicated implicitly through language as well as imagery. But the question remains as to why this reticence exists. Several possibilities present themselves. The most likely reason is that the "feel-good" label has ambiguous connotations, having been used both to praise and to denigrate. Therefore, producers

are disposed to invoke the label only on occasions where its affirmative context (i.e. a positive review) is clearly apparent. A further possibility is that the term is not considered to possess sufficient precision. It may be considered more desirable to stress the film's stylistic orientation than affective impact; this is especially likely with movie posters and home video covers, where such vital information is necessarily abbreviated. With the prominent placement of the feel-good label in post-release publicity for such box office hits as *Slumdog Millionaire* as *Moneyball*, it may be that this reticence is becoming less pronounced, although further historical perspective is clearly required.

At its most basic, this brief examination of popular usage of the "feel-good film" confirms its prominence—and hence significance—as an orientating genre label. The attempt to understand the historical origins of the "feel-good film" as a generic descriptor is a worthwhile occupation in itself, but such interrogation prompts further inferences. Firstly, it seems clear that the feel-good film is defined equally by its socio-political *contexts* as by its emotive *content*. Materially, what we now would consider to be feel-good films have existed since the mass emergence of cinema in the early years of the twentieth century. The avowedly sentimental films of Frank Capra are obvious examples. But it is clear that the "feel-good film" is more than just a convenient shorthand descriptor of a type of film that already had existed long before the label was applied. It could be argued that a majority of studio-era Hollywood productions were feel-good films, and what demarcates the post-1970s examples are the contextual meanings affixed to them.

That is, a "feel-good film" is not simply one that makes audiences feel good; such cinematic entertainment has always existed, as the in-retrospect identification of such classical Hollywood productions as *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) demonstrates (Koch 1986). Rather, "feel good" derives its meanings from its unpalatable reverse (i.e. "feel bad"). As we have seen, the 1970s feel-good movement was, to some degree, a reaction against enervating socio-political currents, serving to emphasize the feel-good/feel-bad dyad. It is equally true of popular cinema, with the disintegration of the Hollywood Production Code in 1966 allowing the penetration of violent, sexually-explicit and otherwise unpleasant, discomforting, degrading kinds of film.

But perhaps we find ourselves with a chicken-and-egg situation. It may be that progressive consumer awareness of the feel-good film since the mid-1970s has led audiences—such as those surveyed by Egan and Mackley in response to *Mamma Mia!*—to understand films more strongly within that specific context. That is to say, the primary identification of a film as "feel-good" (rather than musical or fantasy, for example) is not made entirely independently, but is informed by the discourses that surround that film. On the other hand, the emergence and subsequent proliferation of the label surely reflects appreciation of certain qualities *within* such films that arouse powerful feelings of emotional uplift. We may not be able to pin down what invites these emotions within the spectator to a precise formula (although producers try very hard), but we recognize them as we experience them.

The post-1970s popularity of the feel-good film label bespeaks both the continuation of the anxieties that originally it expressed—seemingly every generation believes that it abides in a period of social fragmentation—and the fact that, as a term of generic orientation, it has become commonly understood and widely expressed. To an extent, it has taken on a life of its own. Furthermore, it appears that popular terms such as "feel-good film" (and even "feel-bad film") have begun to supersede—or, at the very least, challenge—traditional generic labels derived from recognized formal aspects (comedy, fantasy, drama, thriller, etc.) or audience address (children's film, teen film, chick flick, etc.) in their generically-encompassing implications of emotional affect. These labels may underpin a broader critical trend to categories screen entertainment more in terms of their emotional/cognitive effect on

audiences, rather than (or possibly in addition to) narrative/thematic/iconographical type or intended demographic. But this is largely speculative, and the ultimate extent of this perceived trend is impossible to gauge at present.

This essay represents a case study in how genres are received and understood in contemporary culture. Earlier, I suggested that it would test the theories of film genre propounded by Neale and Altman. In this regard, the very fact that the feel-good film has clearly become a concept in which so much has been invested serves as further evidence that Neale was correct in his emphasis on the importance of the inter-textual relay in scholarly conceptions of genre. As various critics have pointed out—and as Altman’s otherwise admirable analysis of the American film musical testifies, at several points³—genres are frequently *incoherent*, resisting attempts to impose order on the chaos that they represent. This appears particularly true of genres constructed through popular, rather than scholarly, discourses (such as the feel-good film and the family film).⁴

The evidence gathered here also serves to refute Altman’s claim that genre labels adopted in the non-academic arena are necessarily self-servingly advanced by producers. Any argument against recognition of such categorizations is dubious enough when applied to labels that *are* commercially derived—such as the family film—because it disempowers consumers. But there is little evidence to suggest that the feel-good label *has* been widely used by Hollywood for commercial purposes. While the feel-good association may boost the commercial prospects of the films to which it is applied, studios have generally avoided the term in pre-release publicity materials.

To date, the critical tendency in film studies—with very few exceptions—has been either to ignore the feel-good film altogether, or to overlook the extent to which it has become an orientating genre (or, perhaps more aptly, master-genre). Egan and Mackley’s study, small-scale though it is, suggests that audiences interpreted *Mamma Mia!* primarily as a feel-good film. Yet the majority of scholarly discourse on the film either fails to mention its “feel good” emphasis, instead resorting to the more conventional genre labels (such as musical or romantic comedy),⁵ or else trivializes it with only passing references (Marsh 2008), as if “feel-good” somehow resides outside questions of generic orientation. Given its demonstrable popularity as a genre descriptor, there is considerable potential for productive engagement with the feel-good film from several theoretical and methodological perspectives.

As Burnett’s article demonstrates, we cannot rule out the possibility that useful formal connections can be drawn between (groups of or individual) feel-good films. Alternatively, since the feel-good film draws its specificities from the socio-cultural environment, culturalist approaches would prove highly revealing. Finally, as a primarily affective genre, there is pressing need for studies that explore how consumers *experience* these films. Such investigations could take many forms: they may explore the initial processes of identification, and the associations that the label invites; they may be founded more on ethnographic data; or, they might explore audiences’ cognitive and affective responses to these films. Scholarly distaste for what remains an extremely diverse and incoherent format—and a neologistic label—may endure, but there are excellent reasons why such prejudices should be put aside.

Notes

1. Usage of the “feel-good film” label in film criticism and studio publicity materials is discussed later in the essay. For indicative examples of usage among the vast array of amateur online discourse, see the website *Feel Good Movies*; the IMDB list; and the thread “A Question of Genre” on the

- forum *Done Deal Professional*. Also pertinent are the production companies Feelgood Fiction, Feel Good Films and Planet Feel Good.
2. On the subject of scholarly neglect of the family film, see Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film: A History, from Shirley Temple to Harry Potter*, and Peter Krämer, “‘The Best Disney Film Never Made’: Children’s Films and the Family Audience in American Cinema since the 1960s.”
 3. The over-specifications of Altman’s definition of the musical become apparent when he excludes several children’s musicals from “the genre’s major tradition” on the grounds that they “systematically avoid courtship,” and thus “fit music into an entirely different framework, one which does not correspond to the methodology” he develops. See *The American Film Musical*, 104–105.
 4. Of course, just as popular discourses produce their own genre labels, so do film scholars continue to advance labels of their own. An interesting recent example (since its usage, currently almost wholly restricted to academic discourses, is almost the reverse of the feel-good film) is the so-called “smart film.” In a 2002 article in the journal *Screen*, Jeffrey Sconce proposed the “smart film” as a term to describe a stratum of recent North American cinema characterized by “a predilection for irony, black humor, fatalism, relativism, and [. . .] even nihilism.”
 5. Ironically, this is true of most of the chapters in the collection in which Egan and Mackley’s essay is contained.

Works Cited

- “Astronaut Aims for Stars, Dreams in Feel-Good Movie,” *The Eagle*, 21 February 2007. Web. Accessed 21 May, 2013.
- “A Question of Genre”. *Done Deal Professional*. Web. Accessed 21 May, 2013.
- Altman, Rick. *The American Film Musical*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987. Print.
- _____. *Film/Genre*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print.
- Baker, Russell. “The Pursuit of Happiness,” *The New York Times*, 15 May 1977: 202. Print.
- Bart, Peter. “Hollywood Invents the Feel-Bad Film,” *Variety*, 13 October 2007: 1–2. Print.
- “The Best Feel Good Movies.” *IMDB*. Web. Accessed 21 May, 2013.
- Blum, David. “Steven Spielberg and the Dread Hollywood Backlash,” *New York Magazine*, March 1986: 52–64. Print.
- Bradshaw, Peter. “*Mamma Mia!*,” *The Guardian*, 10 July 2008. Web. Accessed 21 May, 2013.
- Branden, Nathaniel. *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*. Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1969. Print.
- Brown, Noel. *The Hollywood Family Film: A History, from Shirley Temple to Harry Potter*. London and New York, I.B. Tauris, 2012. Print.
- Browne, Nick, ed. *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. Print.
- Burgess, Harvey. “Spacek as Lynn is Viewed as Proof of Top Acting Talent,” *The Robesonian*, 31 March 1980, 7. Print.
- Burnetts, Charles. “Steven Spielberg’s ‘Feelgood’ Endings and Sentimentality,” *The New Review of Film and Television Studies* 7.1 (2009): 79–92. Print.
- Burns, David D. *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999. Print.
- “Censors, Certificates; Trends & Viewpoints,” *Variety*, 11 May 1977, 25. Print.
- Champlin, Charles. “*Love Story* Tells it Like it Always Was,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 20 December 1970: M1–2. Print.
- “Chapter Two,” *Review, New York Magazine*, January 1980: 18–19. Print.
- Corliss, Richard. “Feel Good? No, Feel Bad!,” *Time*, 22 January 1996. Web. Accessed 21 May, 2013.
- Crist, Judith. “The Best and the Worst, Then and Now,” *New York*, 30 December 1974: 84–87. Print.
- Denby, David. “Dr. Feelgood” [*Purple Rain*], *New York Magazine*, 13 August 1984: 50–51. Print.
- de Lissovoy, Peter. *Feelgood: A Trip in Time and Out*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1970.
- Dixon, Wheeler Winston, ed. *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2000.
- Egan, Kate and Kerstin Leder Mackley. “The Same Old Song? Exploring Conceptions of the ‘Feel-good’ Film in the Talk of *Mamma Mia!*’s Older Viewers,” *Mamma Mia! The Movie: Exploring*

- a *Cultural Phenomenon*, eds. Louise Fitzgerald and Melanie Williams. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013: 127–44. Print.
- Feelgood Fiction Website. Web. Accessed 21 May, 2013.
- Feel Good Films Website. Web. Accessed 21 May, 2013.
- Feel Good Movies Website. Web. Accessed 21 May, 2013.
- Fottler, Marsha. “One on One is a Feel-Good Film,” *The Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, 29 August 1977: 6B. Print.
- Foundas, Scott. “*Slumdog Millionaire*: A Feel-Good Movie that Actually Works,” *The Dallas Observer*, 20 November 2008 Web. Accessed 21 May, 2013.
- Geraghty, Lincoln and Mark Jancovich, eds. *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films, Television Shows and Media*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008. Print.
- Gleiberman, Owen. “Movie Review: *Radio Flyer*,” *Entertainment Weekly*, 28 February 1992. Web. Accessed 21 May, 2013.
- Grant, Barry Keith, ed. *Film Genre Reader IV*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012. Print.
- Harmetz, Aljean. “Studios are Giddy with Surprise as Summer Crowds Jam Movies,” *The New York Times*, 1 August 1978: A1. Print.
- Hills, Matt. *The Pleasures of Horror*. London: Continuum, 2005. Print.
- “*Inside Moves*,” *Review, Variety*, 10 December 1980: 32. Print.
- Kleiner, Dick. “Ask Dick Kleiner,” *Williamson Daily News*, 24 May 1977: 18. Print.
- Koch, Howard. “*Casablanca*? They’ll Play it Forever, Sam,” *The New York Times*, 23 February 1986. Web. Accessed 21 May, 2013.
- Koo, Ben. “*Moneyball*: The Feel Good Movie of the Year? The Oddities of Movie Marketing,” *Awful Announcing*, 1 October 2011. Web. Accessed 21 May, 2013.
- Kramer, Michael. “Ted Kennedy and the Psychological Presidency,” *New York*, 26 November 1979: 67–71. Print.
- Krämer, Peter. “‘The Best Disney Film Never Made’: Children’s Films and the Family Audience in American Cinema since the 1960s,” *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale. London: British Film Institute, 2002: 185–200. Print.
- Langford, Barry. *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005. Print.
- Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991. Print.
- Macnab, Geoffrey. “Top 20 Films That Make You Feel Good,” *The Independent*, 16 January 2009. Web. Accessed 21 May, 2013.
- Magnier, Mark. “Indians Don’t Feel Good About *Slumdog Millionaire*,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 24 January 2009. Web. Accessed 21 May, 2013.
- Marsh, Clive. “Is It All About Love Actually? Sentimentality as Problem and Opportunity in the Use of Film for Teaching Theology and Religion” *Teaching Religion and Film*, ed. Jeffrey J. Watkins. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008: 155–64. Print.
- Maslin, Janet. “*Sleeping*: First Summer Movie Hit,” *The Herald-Journal*, 23 April 1995: C16. Print.
- Moorhead, Jim. “Movies Doing a Turnaround,” *The Evening Independent*, 1 April 1976: 3B. Print.
- . “Lassie’s Back—Just to Make You Feel Good,” *The Evening Independent*, 17 August 1978: 2B. Print.
- Neale, Steve. “Questions of Genre,” *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2003: 160–184. Print.
- . ed. *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*. London: BFI Publishing, 2002. Print.
- . *Genre and Hollywood*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.
- “New Films: *Footloose*,” *New York Magazine*, April 1984: 82–84. Print.
- Newman, Mildred and Bernard Berkowitz. *How to Be Your Own Best Friend*. New York: Random House, 1971. Print.
- Owens, Timothy J. and Sheldon Stryker. “The Future of Self-Esteem: An Introduction,” *Extending Self-Esteem Theory and Research: Sociological and Psychological Currents*, eds. Timothy J.

- Owens, Sheldon Stryker and Norman Goodman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001: 1–9. Print.
- Paseman, Lloyd. “Terms of Endearment Abounds With Good Feeling,” *The Register-Guard*, 1 December 1983: 5D. Print.
- Pett, Saul. “America, America: And for a Moment—Didn’t it Feel Good?,” *The Deseret News*, 5 July 1976: A1. Print.
- Planet Feel Good Website. Web. Accessed 21 May, 2013.
- Rainer, Peter. “Spielberg Backlash Strikes ‘Schindler,’” *The Toledo Blade*, 30 January 1994: E2. Print.
- Rand, Ayn. *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept in Egoism*. New York: New American Library, 1964. Print.
- Roberts, David. “Gaghan’s *Syriana* Not at All The Feel-Good Film of the Year,” *Grist.org*, 10 December 2005. Web. Accessed 21 May, 2013.
- Rosenberg, Morris. *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965. Print.
- Roth, Dominique Paul. “Up! Up! And Awry!,” *The Milwaukee Journal*, 15 December 1978: 1, 9. Print.
- Schaller, Mark. “Feeling Bad to Feel Good: Comments and Observations,” *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 14.3 (1993): 285–94. Print.
- Schaller, Michael. *Ronald Reagan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.
- Sconce, Jeffrey. “Irony, Nihilism and the New American Smart Film,” *Screen* 43:4 (Winter 2002): 349–69. Print.
- Sheff, David. “George Lucas” [1987], *George Lucas: Interviews*, ed. Sally Kline. Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 1999: 145–55. Print.
- Schott, Webster. “The Rage of Being Young and Lost: *Feelgood* by Peter De Lissovoy,” *Life* 4 September 1970: 10. Print.
- Schur, Edwin. *The Self-Awareness Trap: Self-Absorption Instead of Social Change*. New York: Quadrangle, 1976. Print.
- Sennett, Richard. *The Fall of Public Man*. London: Faber, 1977. Print.
- Shannon, William V. “Our ‘Feel-Good’ Culture is Destroying Our Children—As Well as Our Nation,” *The Spokesman-Review*, 4 June 1987: 4. Print.
- Smith, Greg M. *Film Structure and the Emotion System*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Print.
- Stinson, John T. *The Reagan Legacy*. Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2009. Print.
- Stout, Maureen. *The Feel-Good Curriculum: The Dumbing Down of America’s Kids in the Name of Self-Esteem*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2000. Print.
- Swann, William B. *Self-Traps: The Elusive Quest for Higher Self-Esteem*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1996. Print.
- “This May Be The First ‘Feel-Good’ Classic” [*Local Hero*], *The Philadelphia Enquirer*, 8 April 1983: E18. Print.
- Thomas, Bob. “Realism Out, Feel-Good Movies In,” *The Albany-Herald*, 17 August 1985: 15B. Print.
- Vice, Jeff. “*Billy Elliot* is Farfetched—and Charming: ‘Feel-good’ Film Avoids Contrived Tear-Jerking,” *The Deseret News*, 10 November 2000: W2. Print.
- Vognar, Chris. “The ‘Feel Good’ Factor: Increasingly, Movies Take a Calculated Emotional Approach,” *The Hour*, 22 March 2001: C1–2. Print.
- Von Ruhland, Catherine. “Reviews: *Baise-Moi*,” *Third Way*, July 2002: 30. Print.
- Williams, Linda. “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Genre Reader III*, Barry Keith Grant, ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003: 141–59. Print.
- Wolfe, Tom. “The ‘Me’ Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” *New York Magazine*, 23 August, 1976. Web. Accessed 21 May, 2013.
- Wood, Susan. “*Doctor Feelgood, Are You Sure It’s All Right?*,” *New York*, 8 February 1971: 26–35. Print.