Course Title	**Comfort Viewing**
Language	**English Instruction and Assessment**
Instructor	**Richard Nowell Ph.D.**
Email	**516779@mail.muni.cz**
Structure	**Six Seminars (21.09; 5.10; 26.10; 9.11; 30.11; 14.12)**
Semester	**Fall 2023**
Time	**Thursdays, 12:00–13:50**
Location	**Lecture Theater, C34**
Office Hours	**Online, by appointment, at a time of mutual convenience**.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

With hostility routinely directed at its alleged aesthetic, political, and moral shortcomings, it is easy to forget that filmed entertainment is oftent intended primarily to bring us joy. Accordingly, this course offers insights into an extreme manifestation of this culturally important but under-examined phenomenon, now typically known as "Comfort Viewing". The six sessions comprising the course aim to conceptualize and historicize Comfort Viewing as a calculated content-tailoring strategy, one that aims to generate a combination of themes and audience affects, including uplift, connection, and nostalgia. Students will examine how such phenomena are fostered across a range of case-studies drawn from American media of the last half-century: 1980s Feelgood like *E.T: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), Metamodernism like *Community* (2009–15), Nerdom like *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-19), Tourist Movies like *Leap Year* (2010), and even Geriaction like *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022). Through analyses of such case-studies, the course aims to furnish students with transferable concepts and frameworks that promise to enrich their understandings of how and why audiovisual entertainment often tries to make us feel better.

COURSE AIMS

This course uses the case of Comfort Viewing to promote critical and revisionist understandings of audio-visual formats, considering their industrial, aesthetic, and socio-cultural dimensions. The course familiarizes students with transferable frameworks, approaches, and skills that promise to deepen their engagement with media formats on and beyond this course. By the end of the course, students will be expected to demonstrate a

capacity to synthesize in argument-driven fashion their engagement of scholarly frameworks and textual and contextual analyses. Their proficiency in such areas shall be assessed with an original essay, one requiring direct engagement with the constitute discourses of Comfort Viewing. All of this requires students develop insights into the following areas:

- Comfort Viewing as a mode of media assembly
- Comfort Viewing and industry history
- Comfort Viewing and cultural history
- Comfort Viewing and character-types
- Comfort Viewing and media formats
- Comfort Viewing and media politics

For learning outcomes specific to each topic, please see individual session outlines below.

TEACHING METHODS

This course is built around six sessions combining elements of both traditional seminars and lectures, with student-focused discussions supported by brief framing, summarizing, and contextual "lecturettes". As preparation, students are expected to study the provided scholarship and the home screenings in relation to questions included in the syllabus; these will form the basis of discussions, to which students are invited actively to contribute. Such an approach is intended to maximize students' engagement and comprehension of the learning outcomes for each session.

SCREENINGS

Whenever possible, the example screenings included on this course should ideally be analyzed in conditions approximating students own favored circumstances of Comfort Viewing, such as in bed with your cat or curled up on the sofa in a beloved hoodie or with their favorite viewing companion.

ASSESSMENT

At the end of the course, students are to submit **one** circa. 1500–2000-word essay written in response to **one** of five prompts derived from the topics introduced on the course.

Value: 100% of Final Grade

Due Date: Midnight CET Sunday 14 January 2024

Note: examples screened on this course may **<u>NOT</u>** be used for final papers.

Advice and Learning Outcomes: Towards the end of the course, an advice sheet will be issued spotlighting the general qualities graded highly on this course. Time will also be set aside towards the end of the final session to discuss these matters.

<u>Prompt A</u>

Hollywood of the 1980s is typically presented in supremely cynical terms; as a cold corporate machine churning out mindless trash. However, as Noel Brown's work suggests, much of the most high-profile and enduring output of this decade was assembled to could now be considered the Comfort Viewing Mode. Accordingly, consider how an example of '80s Feelgood positions itself as Comfort Viewing.

Targeted Learning Outcomes/Areas of Assessment
1. 1980s Hollywood as soulless corporate machine.
2. Feel-good as a part of 1980s American culture.
3. 1980s feelgood as Comfort Viewing.

<u>Prompt B</u>

While postmodern irony, distance, and apathy are often cited as the preeminent mode of the last half century, Gry C. Rustad and Kai Hanno Schwind argue that a significant cultural variant is in fact characterized by oscillations between apparently incompatible ideas, especially ironic distance with emotional sincerity. Accordingly, consider how an example of Metamodern entertainment uses this approach to Comfort Viewing in order to raise serious issues within an audiovisual safe space.

Targeted Learning Outcomes/Areas of Assessment
1. Characteristics of Metamodernism.
2. Metamodernism as coping strategy.
3. Metamodern entertainment as Comfort Viewing

Prompt C

As Christine Quail's work indicates, the figure of the "nerd" or "geek" is pathologized for a variety of reasons including its supposedly unhealthy relationship to media products. However, it is clear that the cultivation of this high-investor audience has incentivized more flattering portrayals of the nerd. Accordingly, consider how an example of nerd-centered entertainment uses Comfort Viewing to offer support to the nerd (in all of us).

Targeted Learning Outcomes/Areas of Assessment
1. Characteristics of the nerd/geek.
2. The logics of cultivating nerd consumers.
3. Nerd media as Comfort Viewing.

Prompt D

Diane Negra's analysis of 1990s women's tourist movies, suggests that such films promote expatriation as a fantasy solution to middle-class problems. However, it is clear that this format often promotes media depictions of tourism as a preferable alterative to the real thing. Accordingly, consider how an example of tourist media uses the Comfort Viewing Mode to invite audiences to reflect on the relative merits of home and abroad.

Targeted Learning Outcomes/Areas of Assessment
1. Tourist movies as fantasies of retreat.
2. Tourist movies as reflexive allegories.
3. Tourist movies as Comfort Viewing.

Prompt E

By reading Geriaction in relation to extremist political rhetoric, Gregory Frame and others have argued that this format amounts to little more than inflammatory reactionary propaganda. However, the concept of Comfort Viewing suggests that this format is oftentimes used to encourage aging conservative American men graciously to accept their diminishing

social and economic status. Accordingly, consider how an example of Geriaction encourages this target audience to adapt to progressive social changes.

Targeted Learning Outcomes/Areas of Assessment

1. Geriaction as reactionary hate.

2. Geriaction and inclusivity.

3. Geriaction as Comfort Viewing.

All Essays are to be submitted in PDF or word format to MS TEAMS or to 516779@mail.muni.cz. **Please include your name and the course title in the name of the file.**

NB: Extensions can be arranged with the instructor in advance, based on health, humanitarian, and other grounds.

Tutorials

Students may arrange one-on-one tutorials to discuss any issues arising from the course, including the assessment. Meetings can be arranged by email and will take place online at a time of mutual convenience or after a teaching session.

Feedback

Each student will be emailed individually with detailed personal feedback on their paper. This feedback is designed to be constructive, so will spotlight strengths, shortcomings, and suggestions on how the paper might have been elevated.

Plagiarism Information

It is the duty of every student to ensure that s/he has familiarized him- or herself with the following details pertaining to plagiarism.

(A) Any use of quoted texts in seminar papers and theses must be acknowledged. Such use must meet the following conditions: (1) the beginning and end of the quoted passage must be shown with quotation marks; (2) when quoting from periodicals or books, the name(s) of author(s), book or article titles, the year of publication, and page from which the passage is quoted must all be stated in footnotes or endnotes; (3) internet sourcing must include a full

web address where the text can be found as well as the date the web page was visited by the author.

(B) In case the use of any texts other than those written by the author is established without proper acknowledgement as defined in (A), the paper or thesis will be deemed plagiarized and handed over to the Head of School.

General Evaluation: Grades from A-F will be awarded based on the following general criteria. Please see above for the specific areas of assessment for each prompt. Please note that appropriate leeway will be afforded to students using a second language.

	Argumentation/Understanding	Sources/Evidence	Communication
A **90<**	Insightful, vigorous, and demonstrating considerable depth of understanding and a significant amount of original thought; addressing prompt directly through a wholly coherent synthesis of ideas; demonstrating a degree of mastery over subject; demonstrating a deep and thorough understanding of key concepts.	Full range of set resources consulted; sources employed with significant discrimination and sound judgment; thorough assessment of evidence; use of a broad range of examples.	Near-Faultless typography and layout; near-flawless turns of phrase and expression; sophisticated and precise vocabulary; clear structure; exemplary citation and bibliography.
B **80 – 89.99**	Perceptive and insightful; some evidence of original thought; for the most part addressing prompt directly; mainly coherent synthesis of ideas; thorough and somewhat critical understanding of key concepts.	A fairly wide range of set resources consulted; solid assessment of evidence; sophisticated use of a fairly broad range of examples.	Very Solid typography and layout; few errors in grammar; mainly sophisticated turns of phrase and expression; mostly clear structure; strong citation and bibliography.
C	Solid understanding addressed, for the most part, to the prompt; good	Some sources consulted; evidence	Good typography and layout; comprehensible

70 – 79.99	synthesis of ideas; reasonably solid understanding of key concepts; evidence of gaps in knowledge and some minor misunderstandings of key concepts.	of some assessment of evidence; use of mostly workable examples.	and largely error-free grammar, turns of phrase, and expression; reasonable clearly structured; some attempt to provide citation and bibliography.
D **60 – 69.99**	Indirectly addressed to prompt; no real synthesis of ideas; mainly descriptive rather than analytical; patchy understanding of key concepts; significant gaps in knowledge.	Restricted range of sources consulted; superficial understanding of evidence; limited range of examples, many of which are inappropriate.	Poor typography and layout; numerous errors of grammar; limited vocabulary; ambiguous or inaccurate turns of phrase; weak or missing citations and bibliography.
E **50 – 59.99**	Barely addressed to the prompt; largely disconnected series of points; poor understanding of key concepts; major gaps in knowledge.	No sources consulted; poor understanding of evidence; few useful examples.	Poor typography and layout; numerous errors of grammar; limited vocabulary; ambiguous or inaccurate turns of phrase; no citations or bibliography.
F **<50**	Not addressed to the prompt; largely incoherent; little evidence of an understanding of key concepts; demonstrating little knowledge of subject.	No sources consulted; poor understanding of evidence; no useful examples.	Poor typography and layout; numerous errors of grammar; limited vocabulary; ambiguous or inaccurate turns of phrase; no citations or bibliography.
ZERO	No paper submitted; Plagiarized submissions; or paper showing little or no effort to respond to the prompt.		

<p style="text-align:center"><u>**COURSE OUTLINE**</u></p>

SESSION 1   **THE COMFORT VIEWING MODE**   **21 SEPTEMBER**

While Comfort Viewing is typically ascribed to consumer choices – viewers decide what constitutes their own personal Comfort Viewing – it is important to remember that Comfort Viewing is also a form of content-tailoring. This session invites students to consider how the Comfort Viewing Mode summons a cluster of interlocking themes to encourage audience responses. Conceptualizing Comfort Viewing in this way furnishes students with a flexible and transferable framework in which to imbed their analyses of the five case-studies introduced in subsequent sessions.

Targeted Learning Outcomes

A sound understanding of:

1. Comfort Viewing as a critical category.
2. Comfort Viewing as a mode of assembly.

<u>**Preparation**</u>

Reading: Egan & Mackley: 127–144.

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

Home Screening I: *Mamma Mia!* (Phyllida Lloyd, 2007)

Available at: https://m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-mamma-mia-2008-9531.html

Home Screening II: *Joe Pera Talks with You,* Season 1 (9 x 10 Minute Episodes,) (Marty Schousboe, 2018)

Available at: https://m4uhd.tv/watch-tvseries-joe-pera-talks-with-you-2018-2021-269194.html

Questions:

1. How does these media texts position themselves as Comfort Viewing?

2. Who do you think is the prime target audience for them?

3. To what extent did you experience these media texts as Comfort Viewing?

SESSION 2   **1980s FEELGOOD**   **5 OCTOBER**

An appreciation of the Comfort Viewing Mode helps us to revise our understandings of media history. Accordingly, this session focuses on an industrially important instance of historical Comfort Viewing: Hollywood's feelgood cinema of the 1980s, and in particular the flagship output of Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment. Students consider how this company's tales of troubled Americans transformed by remarkable events reinstates the importance of emotionality into a period typically associated with cold, corporate profiteering.

Targeted Learning Outcomes

A sound understanding of:

1. 1980s Feelgood & Hollywood History

2. Amblin and the Comfort Viewing Mode

3. The Commercial Logic of 1980s Feelgood

<u>Preparation</u>

Reading: Brown, 269–286.

Questions:
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?

Home Screening I: *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982)

Available at: https://m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-et-the-extraterrestrial-1982-9482.html

Home Screening II: *The Goonies* (Richard Donner, 1985)

Available at: https://m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-the-goonies-1985-21941.html

Questions:

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

SESSION 3   **METAMODERNISM**   **26 OCTOBER**

An appreciation of the Comfort Viewing Mode also enriches our understandings of cultural history. Accordingly, this session focuses on a most culturally important recent iteration of Comfort Viewing: Metamodernism – an approach distinguished by oscillations between detached irony and immersive sincerity that has gathered momentum in the last twenty years. Students consider how the mobilization of the Comfort Viewing Mode sets apart Metamodernism from the postmodernism dominating the late twentieth century.

Targeted Learning Outcomes
A sound understanding of:
1. The roots of Metamodernism
2. The textual dynamics of Metamodern media
3. Metamodernism as an industry strategy

Preparation

Reading: Rustad & Schwind, 131–146.

Questions:
1. What sets apart metamodern sitcoms like *Community* from earlier ones like *Seinfeld*?
2. How do metamodern sitcoms handle emotional material?

Home Screening I: *Community*, Season 1, Episodes 1, 3, and 10 (Anthony Russo, 2009)
Available at: https://m4uhd.tv/watch-tvseries-community-2009-2015-224622.html

Home Screening II: *The Muppets* (James Bobin, 2011)
Available at: https://m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-the-muppets-2011-21061.html

Questions:

1. To what extent do these media texts thematize cynicism?

2. To what extent do they remind you are watching a television show or a film?

3. How do they use sincerity to position themselvs as Comfort Viewing?

SESSION 4   **THE NERD (IN ALL OF US)**   **9 NOVEMBER**

An appreciation of the Comfort Viewing Mode also helps us to better understand character-types used across media formats. Accordingly, this session focuses on a much maligned and misunderstood staple of Comfort Viewing of the last forty years: The Nerd. Students consider how Comfort Viewing invites us to view nerds less as symbols of failed psychosocial and sexual development, than as vanguards in a media environment where high-investor fandom is nurtured as an optimal form of consumption.

Targeted Learning Outcomes

A sound understanding of:

1. The construction of the nerd.

2. The economics of nerd cultivation.

3. Nerd media as Comfort Viewing

Preparation

Reading: Quail, 460–482.

Questions:

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?

Home Screening I: *Paul* (Greg Mottola, 2011)

Available at: https://m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-paul-2011-21545.html

Home Screening II: *The Big Bang Theory*, Season 1, Episodes 1-3 (2007)

Available at: https://m4uhd.tv/watch-tvseries-the-big-bang-theory-20244.html

Questions:

1. What issues do nerds face in these media texts?
2. What roles do nerds' special interest play in their lives?
3. To what extent do these examples suggest nerds are really the "cool" people?

SESSION 5   **TOURIST MOVIES**   **30 NOVEMBER**

An appreciation of the Comfort Viewing Mode also enriches our understandings of industry formats; those loose frameworks upon which producers draw to marshal the creative and commercial dimensions of media. Accordingly, this session focuses on one of the most enduring comfort viewing formats: tourist movies. Students will consider how the Comfort Viewing Mode invites us to reconsider the themes of such films, from a promotion of real-life tourism as life-changing tonic to the real-world benefits of tourist movie consumption.

Targeted Learning Outcomes

A sound understanding of:

1. Tourist movies and fantasies of repatriation.
2. Tourist movies as vacation substitute.
3. Tourist movies as Comfort Viewing.

<u>Preparation</u>

Reading: Negra, 82–97.

Questions:

1. What problems facing American women does Negra suggest tourist movies address?
2. What solutions do 1990s tourist films offer their primary female audience?
3. How does the Comfort Viewing Mode help us better to understand these films?

Home Screening I: *Leap Year* (Anand Tucker, 2010)

Available at: https://m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-leap-year-2010-4419.html

Home Screening II: *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013)

Available at: https://m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-the-secret-life-of-walter-mitty-2013-21986.html

Questions:

1. What problems are the protagonists of these films facing?
2. What solutions do the films offer to these problems?
3. What do they say about the role tourist media might play for actual viewers?

SESSION 6 **GERIACTION** **14 DECEMBER**

And lastly, the Comfort Viewing Mode enriches our understandings of media politics. Accordingly, this session focuses on format typically discussed as far-removed – at odds to a greater extent – from the values and qualities of Comfort Viewing: tales of older American men taking up arms, known otherwise as geriaction. Students consider how the Comfort Viewing Mode invites us to rethink the politics of a format routinely lambasted as reactionary and hateful, considering how such fare typically encourages aging men to adapt to a rapidly changing world.

Targeted Learning Outcomes

A sound understanding of:

Questions:

1. Geriaction as a supposedly reactionary format
2. Geriaction as Comfort Viewing
3. The economics of cultivating older viewers

Preparation

Reading: Frame, 168–180.

Questions:

1. How does Frame read the politics of Geriaction?
2. How does this reading characterize the films prime target audience?

3. How does the concept of Comfort Viewing challenge Frame's ideas about Geriaction?

Home Screening I: *Nobody* (Ilya Naishuller, 2021)

Available at: https://m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-nobody-2021-254776.html

Home Screening II: *Top Gun: Maverick* (Joseph Kosinsky, 2022)

Available at: https://m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-top-gun-maverick-2022-266912.html

Questions:
1. What challenges do the aging male protagonists of these films face?
2. How do the films suggest this demographic might adapt to social changes?
3. Are these films as hateful as Frame suggests?

READINGS:

Brown, Noel. "The Feel-Good Film: A Case-Study in Contemporary Genre Classification", *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*, 32.3 (2015): 269–286.

Frame, Gregory. "Make America Hate Again? The Politics of Vigilante Geriaction", *Journal of Popular Film & Television*", 49.3 (2021): 168–180.

Negra, Diane. "Romance And/As Tourism: Heritage Whiteness and the (Inter)National Imaginary in the New Women's Tourist Film". In *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies*. Eds. Matthew Tinckom and Amy Villarejo. London, Routledge: 2002: 82–97.

Egan, Kate, and Mackley, Kerstin Leder. "The Same Old Song: Exploring Conceptions of the 'Feelgood' Film in the Talk of *Mamma Mia!'s Older Viewers*". In *Mamma Mia!* The Movie: Exploring a Cultural Phenomenon: London: I.B. Tauris, 2013: 127–144.

Quail, Christine. "Nerds, Geeks, and the Hip/Square Dialectic in Contemporary Television", *Television and New Media* 12.5 (2011): 460–482.

Rustad, Gry C., and Schwind, Kai Hanno. "The Joke that Wasn't Funny Anymore: Reflections on the Metamodern Sitcom". In *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth*

After Postmodernism. Eds. Robin Van Der Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen. London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017: 131–146.

SCREENINGS:

Big Bang Theory, *The*, Season 1, Episodes 1-3 (James Burrows; Mark Cendrowski, 2007)

Community, Series 1, Episodes 1, 3, 10 (Seth Gordon; Anthony Russo, 2009)

E.T.: The Extra-terrestrial (Steven Spielberg, 1982)

Goonies, *The* (Richard Donner, 1985)

Joe Pera Talks with You, Series 1 (Marty Schousboe, 2018)

Leap Year (Anand Tucker, 2010)

Mamma Mia! (Phyllida Lloyd, 2007)

Muppets, *The* (James Bobin, 2011)

Nobody (Ilya Naishuller, 2021)

Paul (Greg Motolla, 2011)

Secret Life of Walter Mitty, *The* (Ben Stiller, 2013)

Top Gun: Mavrick (Joseph Kosinsky, 2022)