COMFORT VIEWING

Session Three

Metamodernism

Department of Film & Audiovisual Culture,

Masaryk University

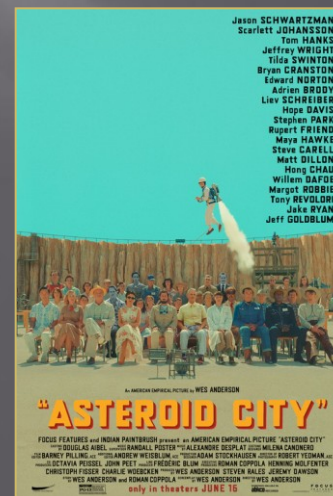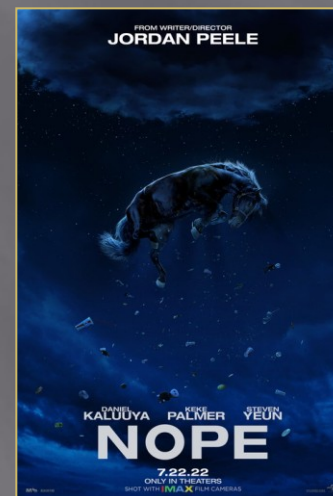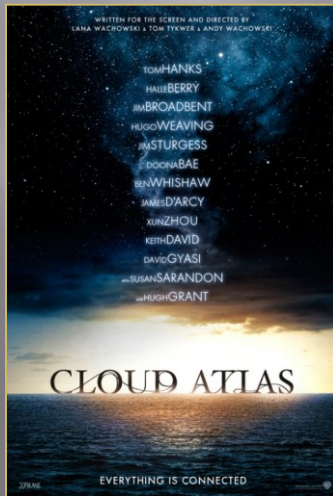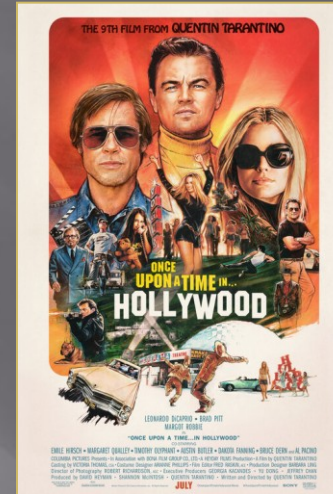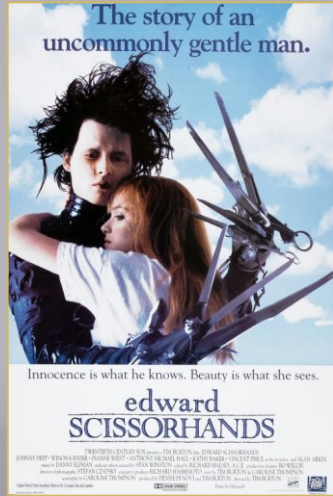Dr. Richard Nowell

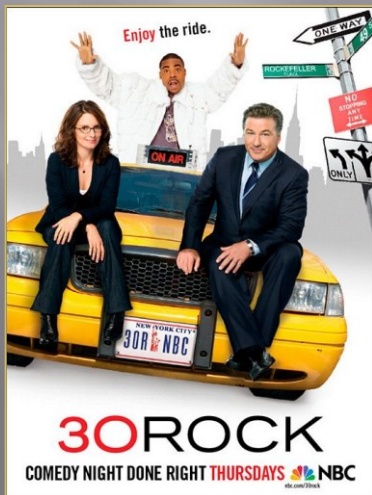# Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a sound understanding of:

1. The roots of Metamodernism

2. The dynamics of Metamodern media

3. Metamodernism as industry strategy

Metamodernism (Cinema)

Metamodernism (Television)

The Comfort Viewing Mode & Structures of Feeling

Consideration of the Comfort Viewing Mode (connection, nostalgia, uplift, sincerity, familiarity) allows us to revise understandings of media

As well as providing a different perspective on industry history (like 1980s Hollywood), it permits a richer understanding of cultural history

It enables us to develop new insights into the most important macro force shaping western popular culture this century: Metamodernism

Metamodernism is considered to be a Structure of Feeling; a widely shared set of values giving a cultural formation its character (for a time)

Theorists argue that Metamodernism represents a successor to both Modernism and Postmodernism; and that it combines elements of both

Rustad & Schwind

This essay is one of several in recent years analyzing the different ways metamodern media balances postmodern elements with other content

While focused on US sitcoms of the 2010s, its findings echo much of the other scholarship on metamodern media, suggesting their transferability

1. What sets apart metamodern sitcoms like *Community* from earlier ones like *Seinfeld*?

2. How do metamodern sitcoms handle emotional material?

A Degree of Sympathy and … Community

Rustad & Schwind suggest a spate of Metamodern sitcoms has largely supplanted postmodern sitcoms of the '90s like *Seinfeld*

They argue Metamodern sitcoms invite viewers not just to laugh **at** characters, but also **with** them, forging emotional connections

This approach involves combining material that invites viewers to adopt a detached, cold perspective **and** an engaged warm one

They suggest that the inclusion of serious material presented in a sincere fashion distinguishes these sitcoms from earlier ones

In so doing, these sitcoms are able to thematize painful issues amid the "safety" of their more traditional humorous content
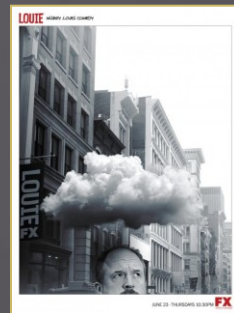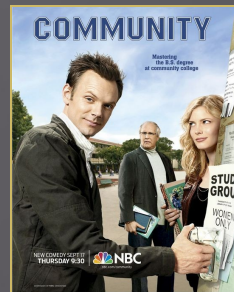
Metamodernism as Cultural Movement

Metamodernism represents a compromise "I know, but still" view that sincerity and hope can still enrich a fucked up world

It borrows early-to-mid-20th century modernism's optimism that secular rationality will lead to improved, enlightened societies

But it also incorporates the detached cynicism that characterized postmodernism's skepticism of modernism's utopian impulses

Metamodernism oscillates between these two poles, swinging between extremes of sincerity and extremes of ironic detachment

Metamodernism therefore pairs the emotional detachment and flat affect of postmodernism with the Comfort Viewing Mode
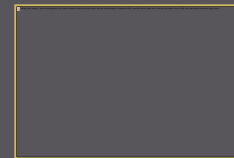
Metamodernism and/as Comfort Viewing

Acknowledging the Comfort Viewing Mode enables us to revise this strict linear historical trajectory assigned to Metamodernism

While its rise to prominence may be a fairly recent development, Metamodernism has existed as a "competing" mode for decades

Metamodernism is often traced to the uplifting New Sincerity of the late-1980s and early-1990s; films like *Field of Dreams* (1989)

However, oscillating between irony and sincerity characterizes a wider range of earlier media using the Comfort Viewing Mode

As we have seen, the 1980s feelgood of Amblin and others used depictions of ironic detachment to showcase emotional growth
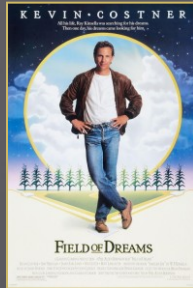
Screening I: *Community* S01E1, 3, 10 (2013)

1. To what extent does this show thematize cynicism?

2. To what extent does it remind you you are watching a television show?

3. How does this show use sincerity to position itself as Comfort Viewing?
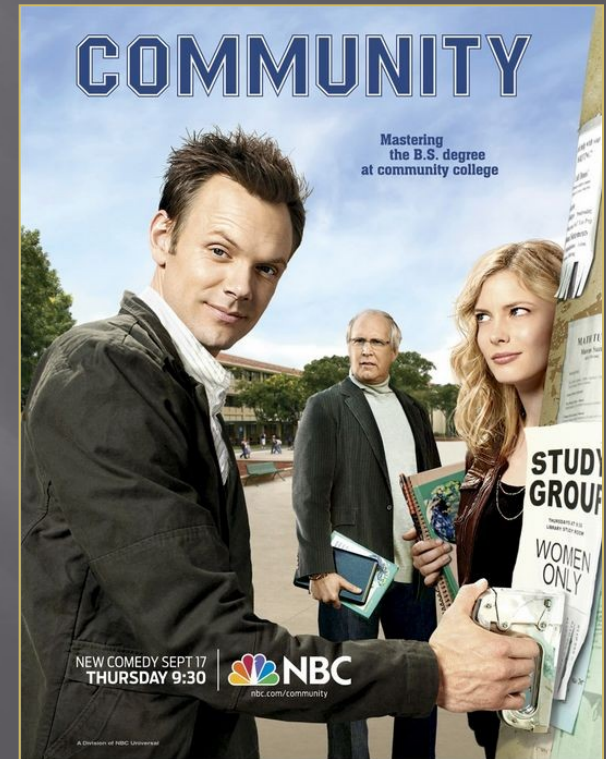
"Yeah, Well, You Have Asperger's"

This series shrouds sincere material in an ironic cloak, using extremes of "postmodern" pastiche, inter-textuality, self-reflexivity


It centralizes the psychosocial roles media plays for a man on the autism spectrum who uses comfort viewing for various reasons


He uses this media sincerely, whether as a short-term retreat from stress, a means of coping with trauma, or as a source of uplift

His comfort viewing enables him to form connections with fellow students, including those whose retreat into irony starts to crack
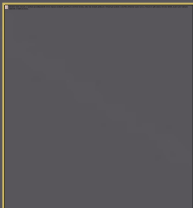
This content offsets formulaic aspects, showing viewers how media helps connects them to others on the screen and in-front of it
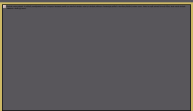
Screening II: *The Muppets* (2011)

1. To what extent does this film thematize cynicism?

2. To what extent does it remind you you are watching a film?

3. How does this film use sincerity to position itself as Comfort Viewing?

"I'm Having a Me Party!"

This film mediates the industrial, creative, and emotional nature of Metamodernism as a new(ish) form of Comfort Viewing

It offers a detached, ironic critique of the corporate greed and textual recycling associated with recent Hollywood franchising

It is hyper-ironic as this partial remake of *The Muppets* (1979) was promoted as Disney debuting a newly licensed property
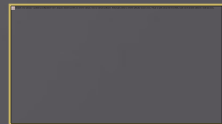
But it adds sincere content wherein characters use the *Muppets* property nostalgically to foster uplift, growth, and connection

This subplot uses the Comfort Viewing Mode to counter outrage at the film's shameless, mercenary, hypocritical self-promotional
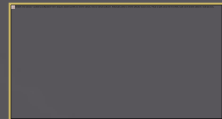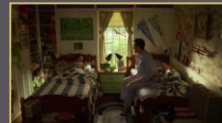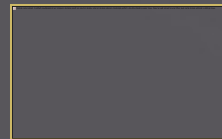
Metamodernism as Industry Solution: Or What would Tyler Durden Have Said?

Analysis of metamodern media is at present limited to its social and textual aspects, but we may also consider its industrial value

The challenges of creative exhaustion and cynical consumers can be countered with Metamodernism's we know, but still approach

Metamodernism provides an inbuilt defense of industrial-creative conduct industry feared Gen-Xers would reject as crass and lazy

Gen-X identity was seen to derive from superiority over formula, conservativeness, and sentimentality of sincere modernist media

Shifting focus to the emotional rewards of sincere media, enables industry confidently to reuse such hitherto "outdated" strategies

Metamodernism as Audience Primer

Metamodernism therefore not only amounts to a format or a template, but also a medium-term public relations strategy

Its defense of audience rewards over commercial exploitation and recycling builds acceptance for corporate media conduct

It preempts criticism of the sequels, remakes, and spinoffs now very widely used to manage risk and maximize returns

It protects an industry rejecting textual innovation in favor of rapid cycles of similar slates aimed at new viewing cohorts

In a n era of "we know, but still", potential viewer cynicism is silenced by acquiescing to the Comfort Viewing Mode

In Sum

Just as it enables us to revise industry history, so can an understanding of Comfort Viewing enrich our understandings of macro cultural forces

Metamodernism is a cultural movement that responds to an age of existential angst by oscillating between seemingly incompatible ideas

In relation to filmed media, Metamodernism is usually understood as switching between cynical ironic distance and warm sincere engagement

It famously characterizes US sitcoms that were differentiated from earlier ones by fostering of a sense of community between shows and viewers

It is also used for Hollywood films, which too aim to strike a balance between commercial formula and media's capacity to lift audience spirits

Next Time ...

The Comfort Viewing Mode also enriches understandings of character-types, such as a much-maligned misunderstood Comfort Viewing staple

Topic: The Nerd (In Us All)

Readings: Quail, Nerds.

Home Screenings: *Paul* (2011),
The Big Bang Theory, S01 E01-03 (2007)

[Preparatory Questions on MS TEAMS and in the Syllabus]

Meeting: Thursday 9 November