



Research Article

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Comfort: A Project for Cultural Studies

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Abstract: Taking as its provocation the recent observation by Larry Grossberg that “knowledge is relatively powerless to affect the conditions and directions of social change” (*Tilting at Windmills* 149-150) this paper will suggest that it is with the explication of *comfort* that a valuable response to the challenge of the current conjuncture can be found. Following a brief survey of the nature and purpose of Cultural Studies scholarship in this present moment, attention will turn to how comfort comes to be encoded into everyday practices and routines of lifestyle. Accordingly, this paper will assert that Cultural Studies, with its concern for “the quotidian experiences of lives lived” (Martin and Hickey 149), is well-placed to launch inquiry into the “conditions” of comfort—conditions that mark the dimensions of late capitalist social formation. A call for a research agenda within Cultural Studies that positions comfort as a prompt for scholarly attention will be outlined as an “activated” form of cultural inquiry focused on the clarification of the “everyday” dimensions of living now.

Keywords: comfort, aesthetics, consumption, lifestyle, late-capitalism.

A kind of critical consciousness is also necessary if people are to overcome all the forces that thrust them into indifference and inertia, the forces associated with a depersonalized society like our own. (Greene 153-154)

Positioning Cultural Studies

In a recent article discussing the challenge of the present and the place that intellectual labour holds in the current conjuncture, Lawrence Grossberg takes aim at the ways that knowledge (and its production) has been left wanting in recent times. Grossberg laments that familiar approaches to the sorts of “truth-saying” that intellectual/academics perform” (*Tilting at Windmills* 150) have fallen short in effectively responding to the catastrophe of the present, with the increasingly destructive transformations of the social spheres of everyday life providing imminent reminders of the challenges that living now present to intellectual work. This is, as Grossberg notes, echoing similar arguments advanced by Zygmunt Bauman, Henry Giroux, David Harvey, Naomi Klein, Juliet Schor and others, a situation that no longer abides by familiar rules:

Why does it feel that knowledge is relatively powerless to affect the conditions and directions of social change? Doesn't the very modernity of our world assume that knowledge is the condition of possibility for social improvement, for what Raymond Williams called “the long revolution”? (*Tilting at Windmills* 149-150)

Grossberg's concern is centred specifically on the role that Cultural Studies might play in such a dynamic. From the vantage point that these reflections provide, the question emerges: *what, exactly, is Cultural Studies to do in this situation?*

Ang pre-empts the situation outlined by Grossberg when observing that “ever more complex and proficient talk of power, race, class, gender, otherness, etc. could go on and on feeding on itself indefinitely,

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without ever having to be grounded within, or connected to, actual practices outside the walls of academia” (31). The problem for Ang rests with the conundrum represented by the formations Cultural Studies has found itself defined by—a conundrum all the more ironic for a discipline that holds as central to its mission engagement *with* the world. Ang’s argument echoes sentiments suggested in an earlier commentary by Stuart Hall, with Hall’s account providing a clue as to how this turn of events came to pass:

There is hardly anything in cultural studies which isn’t so theorised. And yet, there is the nagging doubt that this overwhelming textualization of cultural studies’ own discourses somehow constitutes power and politics as exclusively matters of language and textuality itself. (287)

The problem for Hall, Ang and Grossberg is not simply with how we think about politics but how such a politics translates into practice; as the “inquiry into the conditions of the possibility of agency” (Grossberg, *Identity and Cultural Studies* 102).

This paper takes as its concern the premise at the centre of these observations¹; that the challenge for Cultural Studies, now, is to (re)formulate a sense of its connectedness to the world and “the odious contradictions between how the social world is represented and how it is actually ordered and experienced” (Robbins xi). This is a call for a “language of critique and possibility” (Giroux, *Cultural Politics and the Crisis of the University* 495) that takes its cues from meaningful incursions into the ways “actual” people go about living “actual” lives, and that seeks the application of scholarly practice (as a specific form of knowledge production) as something more than a self-referential feedback-loop. Indeed, such a formulation of Cultural Studies would maintain a healthy dose of scepticism toward (particularly obtuse) over-theorisation—it would, in other words, not seek to outline “agreement about what the object of ...theory might be” (Hunter 78) but instead locate its concerns in the understanding of *how* lives are lived: an explanatory companion to otherwise bland empiricism² (with this in itself being a far from novel idea; see Hunter; Jameson; Latour). Comfortable scholarship is what is at stake here, and as Grossberg, Ang, and Hall each assert, Cultural Studies’ scholars might do well in asking questions of their own inherent contentment.

I want to broach this positioning of comfort as central to the current conduct of Cultural Studies from two (distinct) perspectives. The first positions comfort as itself a useful “object of inquiry.” Comfort manifests as a prominent marker of contemporary lifestyle and for this reason alone provides a worthy point of analysis. But equally, comfort might also be seen in the way that disciplines like Cultural Studies go about enacting their disciplinary formations and producing the sorts of knowledge that Grossberg identifies. It is this dual concern for how comfort might be considered in Cultural Studies scholarship that holds particular resonance in this paper, and I shall move in the next section to outline some initial observations of what it means to *do* Cultural Studies from this perspective of comfort. Although I acknowledge that this is a somewhat tired and dusty preoccupation, I will suggest that comfort offers a way of understanding the core workings of the discipline whilst also providing a point of inquiry—a provocation into the world—that might itself (re)ignite productive modes of scholarly practice. There are certain aspects of Cultural Studies, and certain elements in its conduct, that are in themselves deeply *comfortable* (Hickey), and it is with these that I wish to offer some consideration of what it might mean to practice a scholarship of comfort in a discipline like Cultural Studies.

A caveat is however noted; although I will argue that comfort presents as a *useful* focus for scholarly inquiry, it is far from being of singular importance as a conceptual vehicle for a renewed scholarship in

¹ These arguments also conjure echoes of E.P. Thomson’s seminal declarations on the place and purpose of theory in intellectual work. As a formative summary of the wider argument, Thomson’s clarion call on the purpose of intellectual engagement-with-the-world is particularly pertinent:

...it is easy to be respectful... if one’s theory can never do so much as bend a pin in the real political world; if one has to be called to account for one’s theories, since the gap between theory and actuality is so rarely crossed.... (292)

The “poverty” of theory as Thomson sees it resides with what I frame here as the comfort of a scholarly practice that remains “content” in its own conduct.

² I draw attention here to the exchange between Frederic Jameson and Ian Hunter in the pages of *Critical Inquiry* on the place, and value, of theory. In particular, reference here is made to Jameson’s critique of Hunter’s vision as “clinging to ‘empiricism’ and to a low-level version of ‘positivist-censorship’” (Lorenz 13).

Cultural Studies. This positioning of comfort as a focus of attention in Cultural Studies scholarship is not done to reify comfort as something fundamentally more important than other expressions of living and human interaction. One thinks here of the closely related concepts “convenience” and “consumption”, or indeed other notable markers of human relationality expressed at the intersections of race and class, sexuality and gender, “the environment,” ecological depletion, neoliberal market capitalism, the seeming failure of representative and democratic political systems and so on, and so forth, that work equally well in defining the pressing concerns of the present conjuncture. This list of conceptual candidates is potentially inexhaustible, and while I suggest that comfort is indeed valuable, it is not my intention to suggest that it should be positioned as having any singular importance; a sole focal point for *all* Cultural Studies inquiry in this present moment.

I will, however, suggest that comfort does provide *a certain way of understanding* the intricacies of living, lifestyle and human interaction in this moment, and that with this, a particularly useful way of understanding the world can be found. Comfort suggests certain things about the formation of the world and accordingly provides a particular lens for inquiring into what it means to be human, now. It is from this positioning of comfort as a “useful” prompt for enquiry that the argument outlined in this paper will proceed.

What all of this is trying to say is that enquiry into comfort can tell us something about the world as it is currently configured, *and*, how it is a discipline like Cultural Studies might reflexively go about taking account of its own formations when doing so. By virtue of this point of focus, this paper will outline a brief sketch of the major dimensions of comfort, and within the necessary constraints that a paper like this imposes, provide an initial (but consequently incomplete) consideration of the ways that “comfort” might accordingly figure in Cultural Studies scholarship. While resisting the application of a sentimental tone that implies that *this is a job for Cultural Studies* (or worse, the *only* job for Cultural Studies) I will argue that something valuable *for* Cultural Studies might indeed be found in the scrutiny of comfort. Via inquiry into the formulations that comfort works through, valuable insights into both the practice of living now, and the practice of “doing” Cultural Studies might be found.

Activating Cultural Studies

By seeking to (re)consider what it means to do Cultural Studies in this present moment and in ways that might expose the comfort of the discipline itself, comfort is positioned here as not simply something “out there” for scholarly colonisation—an “object of inquiry” alone—but more importantly, something that might indeed expose the workings of the discipline itself; a focus examined for the reflexive value it itself provides. Drawing on the assertion that Cultural Studies must define itself according to “sustained, rigorous and self-reflexive empirical research into the massive, power-laden complexity of contemporary culture” (Offord 55), Baden Offord makes the point that an “activated” Cultural Studies understands itself in relation to “connected, always contextualized...self-reflexive, social praxis” (55). It is in these terms that I argue that a consideration of comfort also has within its sights the questioning of scholarly conduct; a reflexive practice that positions “activation” as central to its purpose, and incursion *into* the world as vital to its scholarly remit.

Equally, and far from suggesting that the response to this conundrum should be the dismissal of theory in a vague attempt to “get real” via unabashed empiricism, I will instead suggest that Cultural Studies would be well-placed in this current moment to consider what it indeed “does,” and how those objects of inquiry it casts as central to its theoretical, conceptual and methodological enactment might accordingly provide a point of activation into the world. In this sense, I argue for a version of Cultural Studies that “contributes” more than “explains,” and in doing so conjure Cultural Studies’ original purpose; the intellectual interest in what Hebdige refers to as that “something nasty down below” (37)—the explication of “the quotidian experiences of lives lived” (Martin and Hickey 149). It is with comfort that a *particular* (but I stress again, far from *singular*) focus for these concerns might be found.

The Discomfort of Knowledge

If the problem for Grossberg is that knowledge doesn't count as it once did, an immediate response might be to identify what formulation(s) of knowledge might indeed be more effective and how these formulations might then be generated. However, I posit that the problem perhaps isn't so much with the limitations of knowledge itself and that the issue is not one to be resolved with *more* or *better* knowledge. Rather, the problem for Cultural Studies emerges from a more ingenuous premise; that for many of us located in those parts of the globe referred to as "affluent," discomfort is simply not an option. When Cultural Studies speaks *uncomfortably*, saying things that are contrary to prevailing sentiment, the problem emerges.

Intellectual activities undertaken in Cultural Studies stand as fundamentally "critical" undertakings, with these often implemented to identify and define what might loosely be defined as the "horror" of an alienating public sphere. Although Cultural Studies is positioned well to advance certain ways of knowing and certain ways of speaking about the world as it is experienced, when it occurs that this way of knowing and speaking emerges as uncomfortable—when it stands as contrary to prevailing sentiment—it is, especially in this present moment, a little easy to dismiss this way of speaking as immediately distasteful, if not also a little too hard to handle meaningfully and fully. This is all to say that if the stock-in-trade of theoreticised cultural critique that Cultural Studies takes as core to its practice is found relegated as *not-so-useful* practice, then it is perhaps because of what Cultural Studies is saying that this rejection has emerged. Cultural Studies is (or perhaps, *should be*) uncomfortable. A way of reconnecting the value of what critical disciplines like Cultural Studies uncover hence stands as imperative.

As something of an attempt to get to the core of Grossberg's lament, it might well be that Cultural Studies needs to reconfigure itself from being rather *unfashionable* to a discipline that is of vital significance, regardless of the discomfort that may inhere in its message. I appreciate that this is a somewhat obvious observation; that, in effect, Cultural Studies might be well placed to ensure that its message is received. The intention underpinning this suggestion, however, stresses that it is within climates that relegate the sorts of knowledge that disciplines like Cultural Studies produce that the issue of Cultural Studies' relevance most forcefully materialises. In a world where comfort is paramount, saying things contrary—things that are *uncomfortable*—is not likely to win too many friends. How Cultural Studies might maintain its critical edge whilst also remaining relevant and valuable is the trick in this instance.

In an effort to illustrate a response to this conundrum, if not also provide a cautionary tale for how Cultural Studies might indeed "re-activate" itself in this light, I point toward a notable theme emergent in the literature of the airport book-store "self-help" catalogue.³ If this literature provides a sense of anything, it is with the insight it offers for a wider, populist sentiment about how the world "works" (if only from the perspective of its primary readership; predominantly well-to-do literates of the global north). This itself should be of note, as it is precisely with this audience that Cultural Studies might do its most meaningful work. Within the endemic narcissism and self-affirming individualism that this genre provides, a curious trend is evident.

Central to recent proclamations from authors who, perhaps sensing a moment to move a few copies whilst allaying widespread concerns about a world that grows increasingly dangerous, unstable and unsustainable, is the view that *things may not actually be as bad as might seem*. Prescriptions outlined in recent work by Steven Pinker and Hans Rosling stand as indicative of these sorts of accounts:

Think about the world. War, violence, natural disasters, man-made disasters, corruption. Things are bad, and it feels like they are getting worse, right? The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer; and the number of poor just keeps increasing; and we will soon run out of resources unless we do something drastic. At least that's the picture that most Westerner's see in the media and carry around in their heads. It's *stressful* and misleading. (Rosling 13; emphasis added)

³ I refer here broadly to the airport bookstore catalogue of self-help guides, and that emergent "market" of popular psychology literature that suggests that things are indeed not so bad as we might otherwise think. Indicative here are, as alluded to in this paper, works by Pinker (2018) and Rosling (2018). This is, from my perspective, a disastrous literature given its potential as a call to ignorance.

Oh, thank goodness for that—things are rather better than they appear! But it does, however, strike as peculiar that, in this period of extravagant consumption and excess, sentiments like these find such a wide audience.⁴

Grossberg's worry again surfaces in this situation—that “knowledge” and more particularly, the sort of knowledge Grossberg has in mind as produced by Cultural Studies (because, after all, Rosling's is “knowledge” too) no longer carries weight as the last word on the matter. Cultural Studies does not hold the monopoly (and never did) on explaining the world, with enticing visions of a “not-so-bad” prescription for the state of the globe, writ-through with sardonic catchlines that things are actually going to be all OK (apart from what all other evidence might suggest), offering a captivating, albeit deeply problematic, alternative to the sorts of things Cultural Studies would otherwise say. That this is at once a little nuts (so, we should *not* be worried about the major challenges confronting our globe, really?!) whilst also being drastically anathema to the central remit Cultural Studies has set for itself as an engaged, activated and critical discipline is not of concern here. It is from the affirmation of this particular brand of social commentary that its audience can rest-easy that the real worry emerges. The view that *it'll be all ok* if we simply “don't sweat the small stuff” or accede to the sentiment that “you, too, can be happy,” present as good enough reasons to not think things through too deeply.⁵ What views like Rosling's and Pinker's assert is that we can *all* (well, the affluent amongst us at least) just rest comfortably, safe in the “knowledge” that these soporific accounts provide.

To worry is, after all, an uncomfortable position to assume, and one that runs counter to the versions of the “good life” that authors like Pinker and Rosling outline. To be in any way uncomfortable is no longer an acceptable condition to endure; this is a world that actively expunges discomfort (albeit, ironically enough, within contexts of marked social and ecological upheaval that have as their defining feature increasing discomfort). For Grossberg, there is something profoundly problematic at play in such a dynamic, whereby “people expose themselves to information, knowledge and sources they already largely agree with” (*Tilting at Windmills* 152), geared as this is toward “feeling good.” Within a global context that even Rosling notes contains “huge challenges” (13), dealing in what is familiar and recognisable presents as an always more palatable option. In this sense, I draw from Bauman's remark that “one should hardly be taken aback or puzzled by the evident lack of would-be revolutionaries” (5); in such a context that too would be an uncomfortable position to maintain.

This is where Cultural Studies might not only activate a useful line of critique and sustained analysis, but also (re)consider its own modes of address and formulations of knowledge. For a discipline that takes the quotidian experience of the everyday as its stock-in-trade, what does it mean to consider comfort as both a mode of scholarly conduct—a way of being a scholar—and a significant expression of everyday life(style)? Further, what might Cultural Studies do in proclaiming its responses in such a climate of knowledge, and how might those practising within the discipline meaningfully re-engage the challenge of *difficult* knowledge?

Comfort is Now

I want to change tack slightly at this point and turn attention to how comfort, as a conceptual locus and prompt for scholarly inquiry might be considered. I have asserted that it is with “comfort” that a principal feature of living now emerges and that as a marker of the sorts of lifestyle that come to be lived (at least) in the more affluent parts of this late-capitalist, globalised world, comfort stands prominently as an indicator of our collective existence. Over the past few years I have come to think of comfort as a central component for the living of a “good life,” and in these terms, argue that comfort maintains what might be considered an “aesthetic” arrangement. When witnessed in terms of the ways that comfort takes shape in the more affluent parts of the globe—where excess and consumption mark its dimensions—comfort stands as core

⁴ With endorsement from Bill Gates and *New York Times* “bestseller” status, no less.

⁵ I have, of course, drawn upon titles of popular works within the genre singled-out here. These include such affirming titles as Richard Carlson's *You Can Be Happy No Matter What*, and *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*. Perhaps indicative of the entire problem at stake here is Scott and Davenport's egregiously titled *Declutter Your Mind*. Indeed.

to the very logic by which living and lifestyle are understood. Comfort is sought-out and indulged, saved-up-for and consumed, shown proudly and hoarded away. Comfort surfaces in the ways that lifestyles are organised and marks the measure of the individual. Comfort stands as central to the way social interactions are established and how practices of consumption function as “relational” undertakings in this period of global exchange. Comfort also inscribes personal, quotidian encounters with the world with meaning, but equally exposes how the “geography closest in” (Rich)—the formulation of the Self—too finds expression within and through far larger, global structures.

The aesthetic dimensions of comfort are evident not only in the ways that comfort is “played out” as a defining marker of the sorts of lives considered worth living in this present moment of late capitalist excess but also in the ways interactions between individuals proceed. This is a derivation of the aesthetic that moves away somewhat from Kantian “conditions of sensuous perception” (a way of understanding *the* aesthetic via manifestations of beauty and form), and instead emphasises “apprehension through the senses” (Williams). Comfort in these terms is configured as something *felt* and when in the form of “material things...perceptible by the senses” (Williams) provides a useful point of “apprehension” in scholarly (and particularly Cultural Studies) inquiry. It is with the way that these apprehensions of comfort surface in a range of permutations in this current moment, and how these, in turn, configure the logic of late-capitalist lifestyle, that a mode of inquiry materialises; one that by its very configuration, takes its focus on the ways comfort functions aesthetically *through* the senses.

Frogs In a Pot: Comfort in this Period of Social, Ecological and Intellectual Upheaval

If it is true that comfort marks a central feature of the “good life” in this present moment, and further, that it provides a useful object of inquiry for an activated Cultural Studies, how should comfort be thought about? What dimensions does it carry, and how should an inquiry into its function be undertaken?

Herbert Marcuse, some time ago, made the point that:

As to today and our own situation, I think we are faced with a novel situation in history, because today we have to be liberated from a relatively well-functioning, rich, powerful society. (176)

Marcuse was, of course, referring to the dilemma that confronted revolutionary thinking in a time of affluent excess. The key to Marcuse’s suggestion is that living too well—*too* comfortably—results in an insulation from the world. Alienation from community and collectivity and indeed, the capacity for *critical* appraisal of the social and political formations of the moment have at their core an intimate association with comfort. What Marcuse alludes to is that, in being too comfortable, ambivalence surfaces and the steady acceptance that, while it might be felt “on the pulse” that things are not quite “right,” they are nonetheless good enough to accept. As an initial prompt for considering comfort, this association between comfort and what might be referred to here as an *anaesthetised* sense of agency stands as a useful point of insight and one that an activated Cultural Studies might take up.

As a momentary aside, the use of term *anaesthetised* is recognised here as conjuring a particular state of aesthetic association. Williams highlights that the etymology of the concept identifies “a defect of physical sensation,” and when contemplated in terms of the aesthetic outlined above, gives further reference to the notion that late capitalism, following Marcuse, alienates the individual from the world. Maxine Greene’s argument that this is a “depersonalized society” resonates here, with Greene’s claim that such a context requires a special kind of critical consciousness to overcome the “inertia” of the present conjuncture inherent in this formulation (154). In laying bare the *anaesthetised* state of the present, Greene so provides a call-to-arms for scholarly work. Following Marcuse and Greene’s claims, comfort associates closely with the *anaesthetised* state that late-capitalist societal structures provoke, and it is with this that a particularly valuable consideration of comfort takes shape.

A defining feature of the present age might then be, when considered in terms of the widespread outrage at any number of catastrophes—human, ecological, political and social—one wherein outrage is matched only by a seeming inability to meaningfully respond to these catastrophes in any coordinated fashion. This is a period of comfortable resignation, an anaesthetised state of acceptance in the face of otherwise terrifying conditions. I assert here then, in an attempted response to the stultifying excess that prompted Marcuse’s observations, that positioning comfort as something tangible, materially present and symbolically mediated as a human condition provides a useful lens for thinking about what it means to live now and what an activated, critical and incursive intellectual project might look toward.

Further, accounting for relative levels of comfort that extend into modes of lifestyle and *ordinary* patterns of living offers a first point of inquiry for this form of Cultural Studies. As has been central to Cultural Studies from the outset, quotidian accounts of the “practices of everyday life” remain as useful points of investigation. When mobilised around an explication of something like “comfort,” the possibility for an incisive critique of the current conjuncture begins to emerge. Comfort stands, in these terms, as both an object of inquiry—expressed in the material conditions of living—but equally as a conceptual analogue for thinking about the world and its current formulations.

Dimensions of Comfort

Comfort is expressed in manifold formations of everyday life and those ordinary interactions human beings have. Comfort defines how individuals go about the living of lives, even if not always in explicitly realised ways. Comfort in this sense corresponds to lifestyle; we frequent those places that promise (if not always provide) comfort and willingly pay for its benefits. Comfort is also sought in times of need and doled-out in moments of consolation. Comfort may be cast as noble and affirming. Comfort abounds (at least for some) as part of the fabric of everyday life, and for this reason, provides a useful touchstone for considering what it means to live, now. I (re)assert that it is with comfort that the world now might best be understood and that a response to the insulation from “the conditions and directions of social change” (Grossberg, *Tilting at Windmills* 149) might be found.

Interestingly, and in light of the centrality that comfort has to lifestyle, remarkably little has been written on and about comfort as a human condition. Whether it is because comfort stands as so absolute in its quotidian character, or indeed, as something that is altogether expected, it remains that far more attention to comfort (and the effects it exerts as an expression of living at this point in history) is warranted.

As a first prompt, Bourdieu’s accounts of lifestyle and distinction offer a useful initial (albeit passing) consideration of comfort. In Bourdieu’s specific case, comfort corresponds specifically to the demonstration of class position:

...the working classes, reduced to “essential” goods and virtues, demand cleanness and practicality, the middle classes, relatively freer from necessity, look for a warm, “cosy”, *comfortable* or neat interior... (244).

Bourdieu gives further dimension to this sense of comfort when noting:

In the main living-room the comfort is more emphatic, dominated by the big corner sofa in velvet calfskin. In front of it stands a simple green lacquer coffee-table with steel trimmings. (323)

Central to this articulation is a sense of the materiality through which comfort is experienced. This is an important theme and is something that stands as crucial to broad conceptions of comfort; that it is encountered physically; that comfort is *experienced*.

For Bourdieu, comfort is observable in the material culture of the home, but equally (and importantly) is experienced as an affective *condition*. There is no specified universal standard of comfort for Bourdieu, with the arrangements of lifestyle, dictated as these are by social position and “taste,” defining how comfort materialises. In these terms, comfort is something not only physically-corporeally *experienced* but also a “condition” that maintains a *cognitive-intellectual* dimension. The following gives reference to this formulation:

[Taste] is also an opposition between two world views, two philosophies of life, symbolized, for example, by Renoir and Goya (or Maurois and Kafka), the centres of two constellations of choices, *la vie en rose* and *la vie en noir*... the opposition between *material* and *mental comfort*...(289: emphasis added).

Although this account must be read from the perspective of its context—1960s France—and in terms of the peculiarity and particularity of those homes from which Bourdieu undertook his observation, it remains that Bourdieu's comfort contains two distinct features that provide broad categories for consideration. The first corresponds to, again broadly speaking, the physicality of the “experience” of living (and in this instance, as an attribute of those living spaces of the private homes Bourdieu visited). Secondly, comfort is also evident in the “intellectual,” or what might more accurately be termed the “cognitive,” dimensions of psychic-intellectual composure. This function of comfort is defined by and enacted through “taste.”

These two dimensions of comfort offer a useful lens for considering how comfort “works” and how it comes to be “practiced” as an everyday undertaking. Comfort in this sense carries capacity as both an *experience* and *disposition*. Comfort is practiced but also stands as a way-of-being, enacted in terms of, and according to, the cognisant assertion of certain formulations of lifestyle. While it must be recognised that these dispositional and experiential formations of comfort will materialise according to the logics of those different social contexts, times and places comfort manifests within, it remains that comfort, regardless of its material form, can be understood in terms broadly defined as *experiential* and *dispositional*.

De Certeau, Giard and Mayol identify similar formulations of comfort in their accounts of the domestic spheres of “everyday life.” Following similar cues to Bourdieu, de Certeau, Giard and Mayol outline the following in a discussion of the transformation of household kitchens through the twentieth century:

The removal of coal or wood stoves eliminated the handling of a heavy, dirty fuel that required regular and tiring maintenance. The distribution of hot and running water sinks improved comfort and hygiene conditions... (212)

Further, de Certeau, Giard and Mayol note:

The kitchen can be the blessed place of a sweet intimacy, of rambling chatter pursued without having to be spelled out with the mother who pirouettes from the table to the sink, her hands busy but her mind available and *her speech quick to explain, discuss, or comfort*. (191: emphasis added)

A significant further dimension of comfort is offered in this insight. Following a similar track to Bourdieu, de Certeau, Giard and Mayol raise mention of the corporeal aspects of comfort—as something experienced—but notably, extend a vision of comfort via the identification of its *relational* nature. The “intimacy” of the kitchen as a shared space offers a crucial insight into how comfort functions; comfort is necessarily social. Beyond the sheer physicality and corporeal realities that the experience of comfort (or discomfort) prescribe, comfort is also socially mediated. It is *relational*.

This aspect of comfort gives a nod to early usage of the concept and the etymology of the term. Derived originally from Latin *confortāre* and mediated through the French *confortor* and *conforten*, effectively meaning to “cheer up,” comfort was originally associated with notions of consolation and strength; or indeed, “to strengthen” *through* consolation. In some ways, this does make sense in terms of current understandings of comfort, and as Heijs notes, when considered in terms of an adoption from “Middle English with the meaning of mental or physical strength, encouragement or consolation” (43) a sense of comfort that is familiar to contemporary usage emerges. Further, when applied to describe an action (as in *to comfort*), early senses of *confortāre* are raised. In a useful summary of this point, Elizabeth Shove highlights that “such interpretations live on when giving someone a comforting hug or when writing words of comfort in times of trouble” (23).

Extending this association between comfort and consolation as an expression of a relational dynamic *between* individuals, Joanne Paul in her survey of the usage of the idea of “counsel” in early modern literature identifies that comfort broadly equates as a form of *care* for Other. This builds on the earlier derivation of the concept witnessed in *confortāre*, but importantly provides a distinct sense of the relationality comfort prescribes; as a form of humanism, or indeed, as an ethics of interpersonal association. To “give” comfort

necessitates the presence of the Other as the recipient of counsel and point of consolation. It is the relational nature of this interplay between individuals that stands as an important expression of comfort in this sense, with comfort providing insight into how this relationship proceeds. As an example, take the following from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*:

Break off thy song, and haste thee quick away:
Here comes a man of comfort, whose advice
Hath often still'd my brawling discontent.
(*Measure for Measure*: IV, 1)

Apart from invoking the early Latin definition of comfort-as-consolation (“here comes a man of comfort”) something else is also imbued here—a theme that I think is central to a consideration of comfort; that of the *relative* nature of comfort. Comfort may indicate a relational characteristic in that it is between individuals that comfort-as-consolation emerges, but it also suggests that comfort and discomfort work in roughly equal measure. The capacity to deliver consolation-as-comfort is indeed proportional to the Other's discomfort. In this regard, and beyond being something that is felt corporeally, affectively negotiated as an expression of dispositional acuity and mobilised relationally, comfort also maintains a relative capacity between those *with*, and those *without*, comforts.

The Value of Comfort: Comfort as Commodity

Sociologist Elizabeth Shove has been particularly active in considering how comfort corresponds closely to regulated and “quantified” measures, largely as these relate to the engineering of domestic spaces. Shove and Shove, Chappels and Lutzhenhiser's sociologies of artificial heating and cooling of the interior spaces of homes and workplaces—via the air-conditioner as appliance and symbol of modern convenience—offer particularly useful considerations of the corporeal conditions of comfort; conditions that Shove highlights as the “experiences of cosiness and wellbeing” (2). Shove charts both the environmental and social effects of comfort in terms of the way the mechanical manipulation of interior spaces is undertaken to afford *a sense of comfort*, and in doing so outlines a compelling case for considering comfort as both an experience of the body, but equally as an outcome of industrialised consumption:

There is a further co-evolutionary relationship to consider, namely that between the air-conditioned house and its occupants' habits. In thinking about how this operates it is useful to refer back to the notion that technologies script the practices and actions of those who use them...This happens on a number of levels. The sealed windows of air-conditioned homes prevent occupants from opening them just as the lack of a veranda prevents anyone from sitting on it. Taken together, such features tie homeowners into an air-conditioned way of life, like it or not. In other words, the “normality” of such a life is established by virtue of its unavoidability as well as through marketing, advertising and social comparison. (Shove 54)

For Shove, such a dynamic incorporates the logics of market capitalism. As Shove notes, the “science” of thermal comfort—a field that grew through the 1920s—worked in hand with the burgeoning market of the domestic appliance. In the case of the air-conditioner specifically:

The research-based quantitative specification of comfort had the further, perhaps more significant, effect of creating and shaping markets. For air-conditioning manufacturers the basic challenge was not so much that of meeting human need (whatever that might be) but of turning comfort into a mass commodity and making it into a consumer product that could be actively promoted, desired and delivered. (Shove 30).

This is a further vital dimension of comfort—comfort functions as a commodity *with* economic value. In light of the consideration outlined earlier in this paper on the aesthetic dimensions comfort maintains, I suggest that it is with the commodification of comfort that further, specific expressions of comfort emerge. Bourdieu and de Certeau, Giard and Mayol allude to this, but in the form of a commodity, comfort takes on

a particular character hinged to practices of consumption and functions of prestige and display. As Shove highlights, the rise in the use of the air-conditioner in most parts of the world in recent decades provides an initial example for considering this linkage of comfort, consumption and commodification, and is something that I suggest corresponds as an aesthetics of comfort-consumption. But further, one's capacity to express the consumption of comfort carries a social dimension; it is as Crowley argues, a "sensibility" that is "learned and demonstrated as a sign of social progress" (292).

Shove is careful to highlight that the corporeal, experiential and commoditised aspects of comfort must be read intersectionally. Comfort relies on more than the basic "experience" of comfort (or of *being* comfortable), with comfort hinged to social expectation and "trends" in consumption habit. In making the point with regard to furniture, Shove notes:

The fact that conventionally comfortable chairs and sofas rarely provide support of the kind that the human body "requires" points to a rift between concepts of comfort as represented in the popular aesthetics of furnishing and those based upon the systematic study of backs and bones. (25)

All of this points to a complex dynamic within which comfort is enacted according to "things, conditions and circumstances" (Shove 24). This leads Shove to assert that comfort presents as a "sociotechnical regime" where "peoples' practices and conventions change from one day to the next" (12) according to changing assumptions around what counts as comfort, and how these formulations materialise. Yet it remains that comfort holds distinct commodity value in this present moment, and more directly still, provides the impetus for practices of consumption and the demonstration of social position, prestige and status.

Each of the iterations of comfort outlined here, drawn from their distinct literatures, offer useful insights into the ways that comfort materialises as, i) physically experienced, ii) dispositionally mediated, iii) relationally enacted, and iii) relatively afforded. Comfort presents as a "condition" in this regard and is experienced at the level of the body, but equally is made sense-of dispositionally and infused with meaning as a relational undertaking, afforded in different ways to different people. A Cultural Studies *of* comfort in this sense would take interest in this relational, consumptive and corporeal nature of comfort and, in doing so, would set out a project that charts the experience of living now via the explication of those material practices that mark contemporary lifestyle.

The Task for Cultural Studies

It is with consideration of these broad dimensions of comfort that a "project" for Cultural Studies emerges. Explorations of how comfort is experienced and consumed provide the opportunity to unpick the workings of lifestyle, consumption and relational sociability in this present moment. How comfort takes shape as an idea and as an expression of lifestyle provides a useful point from which to make sense of such challenges as rampant (over)consumption, the systematic destruction of natural ecologies, and the strained relationships human beings have with the material world and each other. Comfort, too, provides a lens for considering what it means to live socially (and sociably), within a relational dynamic of global economic formations. Inquiry into comfort might also include examination of the inverse condition of *discomfort* with this itself opening possibilities for the scrutiny of comfort as relationally mediated, economically prescribed and physically experienced.

In the closing sections of *Liquid Modernity*, Zygmunt Bauman, reflecting on Bourdieu's approach to sociology, suggests that:

...the exit from politics and withdrawal behind the fortified walls of the private—is no longer prepossessing and, above all, no longer an adequate response to the genuine source of the ailment [of contemporary lifestyle]. And so it is at this point that sociology, with its potential for explanation that promotes understanding, comes into its own more than at any other time in history. (214)

It is with this sentiment that I suggest that the sort of activated Cultural Studies alluded to earlier in this paper might gain its impetus. This is, apart from the views expressed by Pinker and Rosling, a moment of stark

excess, almost irreversible ecological decline and widespread economic and social crisis. Any formulation of Cultural Studies that takes itself seriously in this moment should not only seek to acknowledge this state of affairs, but also seek to contribute to the rectification of its conditions. This is where an activated Cultural Studies finds purpose.

It is in this light that I have argued that comfort provides a useful point of inquiry and that in focussing on the minutiae of expressions of comfort in everyday interactions, Cultural Studies has particular utility as a critically engaged discipline well-primed to consider these dimensions of living, now. But equally, the interrogation of comfort might also work to reactivate a discipline that risks being overly theoreticised and itself sometimes too content to look inward. Comfort might provoke a renewed empiricism whilst offering scope for engaged explication of the world, and it is from this secondary perspective that I suggest inquiry into comfort has something to offer Cultural Studies. The point here is to not provide yet further terrain for the sorts of over-theorising that Ang, Grossberg and Hall identify as a problem, but to engage with the world in ways that seek to contribute to its (re)formation. It is on this point that Murphy's suggestion that the focus of intellectual work should be to provoke a "certain productive *discomfort* that is quite distinct from the familiar, agreeable, and often sterile theorizing" (208-9; emphasis added) that a useful call for practice can be heard. As intimated earlier, the problem is not only one whereby Cultural Studies has "become overly theoretically sophisticated ...[where] that theoretical sophistication had become an end in itself" (Ang 31), but equally of how comfortable this position is. Accordingly, a Cultural Studies of comfort would set its sights not only on how comfort materialises in-the-world, but equally seek to unsettle those comforts that mark the practice of the discipline.

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