Happy Trees in a Black Box: Elevated Escapism as Comfort Television in *The Joy of Painting with Bob Ross*

**ABSTRACT**
Using *The Joy of Painting with Bob Ross* (PBS, 1983–1994) as a case study, this article analyzes three vectors of elevated escapism—categorization as comfort TV, nostalgia for public media, and an art pedagogy drawing on medieval and picturesque traditions. These three vectors, which are applicable to the program and the discourse surrounding it in the late 2010s and were heightened in 2020, exemplify the discursive category of comfort TV in the 2020s, amplified by American television critics and journalists in such a way that further normalizes class-based tastes in the era of streaming television.

In March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic hit the United States, and stay-at-home orders and quarantine restrictions became the American norm. Social events were canceled; nights out were no longer possible. Streaming services quickly spotted an opportunity to gain new subscribers and establish their importance to American media diets. Some streaming outlets began offering extended free trials or even limited free-to-all content.¹ Netflix stock rose sig-

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nificantly, and the service was discussed as a necessity instead of an option. Entertainment and television commentary websites began publishing lists of what to stream while in quarantine. For example, *Entertainment Weekly* online offered staff round-ups using the context-specific portmanteau *quaran-stream* with titles such as “EW’s Favorite Feel-Good TV Shows, Episodes, and Characters to Quaran-stream” and “What to Quaran-stream If You’re Staying in to Avoid Coronavirus.” Increasingly, these lists took on the tenor of a prescription for well-being more so than entertainment offerings. “Comfort TV in the Age of Coronavirus,” “The Most Comforting TV Shows to Watch on Netflix,” and “Why You Can’t Stop Streaming *Seinfeld*. Or *Frasier*. Or *Bones*.” spoke to an anxious online readership who positioned quarantine television behaviors in the already-established lane of comfort TV. Jan Teurlings argues that contemporary TV criticism—a cottage industry of which these lists were part—has become “a form of shared knowledge . . . a socially produced commons.” As the pandemic wore on and articles about comfort TV multiplied, the concept became ossified in relation to streaming TV within that commons. It was an amplification of the popular idea of comfort TV, one that existed long before this period and that may attach to any program or way of viewing based on individual viewers’ affective relationship to the medium. This amplification highlighted patterns and assumptions about how the American TV commentariat was using the term in 2020. In this cycle of discourse, comfort TV became focused on streaming, emphasized nostalgia and familiarity, and operated to elevate the category following a decade of debates over quality and prestige.

Amid the quarantine, comfort TV attained a new prominence and, with it, a larger corpus of streaming options—even if little to no definition of the category was offered to discern why comfort TV was on the rise. Kathryn


VanArendonk offered the closest, comparing comfort TV to prestige TV: “Comfort shows are often faster paced, brightly colored, and repetitive; they’re united, though, in the way they disdain hidden meanings and emphasize clarity and immediacy over abstraction.” Surveying quarantine-era viewing—from the popular offerings of pandemic-era streaming to how TV critics conceptualized those shows—this article offers a clarifying sense of how comfort TV fits among other broad categories, such as prestige TV, with *The Joy of Painting with Bob Ross* (PBS, 1983–1994) as its case study. In particular, the term *comfort TV* has become a recognizable and readily used term to connote a category of offerings still bound within streaming television’s assumptions of access and affluence (time to binge, ability to afford high-speed internet and a subscription streaming service, and, increasingly, the privilege to work from home) that normalize upscale tastes. As Jason Mittell argues in “A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory,” when studying how we categorize television programs, “we should analyze the contextualized generic practices that circulate around and through texts.” This article uses this approach to study comfort TV as not just comforting television, but as a constructed category of distinction in the context of the 2020s.

Among the sitcoms, procedurals, and reality television mentioned in lists, a different kind of show was often highlighted, occasionally even presented as the paragon of comfort TV. *The Joy of Painting* ran for more than 400 half-hour episodes, each one presenting how to paint a new landscape to viewers. In popular press accounts of Ross, he found art instruction a calming job after leaving the air force, for which he was a drill sergeant. After finding popularity teaching classes, Ross transitioned to teaching on local television, first in Virginia, then in Indiana, where his studio remained as his show gained prominence on PBS stations across the country. Although his show was not the first of its style—Bill Alexander had a PBS series called *The Magic of Oil Painting* (1974–1982) that inspired Ross—*The Joy of Painting* became the exemplar in large part due to Ross’s calming and eternally positive persona. The show’s popularity continued even after it ended its run, with reruns populating many PBS stations over the years.

Following decades of reliable programming on PBS stations, the association between *The Joy of Painting* and comfort TV became amplified in the late 2010s and into 2020 as the show became available on streaming platforms. Ruby Anderson told *Thrillist* readers, “Now’s a Great Time to Tune into the...”

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Nonstop Bob Ross Marathon on Twitch”; Kelly Allen alerted readers to the full collection of episodes available on YouTube, described as providing “a calming effect as reliable as a weighted blanket”; John Jurgensen’s discussion of people’s quarantine watchlists closed with a description of a family watching The Joy of Painting on Amazon Prime Video; and Murray Whyte presented the show as “perfect pandemic television.” Accessible via Twitch, Amazon Prime Video, or YouTube, The Joy of Painting was available to millions of people eager to experience what Bob Ross could offer: his “world, a sealed capsule of uncomplicated wonder, [where everything] is OK. It’s better than OK. It is serenity itself.” In quarantine, The Joy of Painting’s “sealed capsule” of serenity presented a remedy to counteract a fraught milieu in which the outside world was particularly dangerous.

The cultural conditions of quarantine highlighted the exemplary status of the series as comfort TV while helping to elucidate key components of that category of programming. It is a point where three vectors of elevated escapism intersect: comfort TV in the streaming era as a classed category related to prestige TV while still distinguished from regular TV, the promises of public television to make nostalgia more acceptable, and a reality-eschewing approach to image-making that has a well-established foundation in art history. Though escapism normally is framed negatively, analyzing each of these three vectors demonstrates that the escapism of The Joy of Painting is framed positively in a way that raises it above its low culture connotations. Recognizing the cultural acceptability of the escapism of this show invites the questioning of hierarchies long associated with the discursive opposition of prestige and regular TV that the category of comfort TV fits between.

THE JOY OF PAINTING AS COMFORT TV

Television discourses have gone through various cycles defining certain programs as quality, creating clear oppositional framing between two poles: quality, or prestige, and regular TV. From the 1980s to the present, notions of quality have incorporated serialization, different-from-the-norm aesthetics, and high production values. Key to all these distinctions was that quality shows were not-TV; that is, they were distinct from the norms of television and thus better than the popular medium. In the late 2010s, quality television forms had become so widespread—and after years of criticizing the inherent valuation in the term—that prestige TV became the preferred term for highly serialized, dark (both aesthetically and tonally) dramas that


13 Whyte, “Perfect Pandemic Television.”

dominated the original offerings on cable and streaming outlets. Prestige TV shows required commitment, focus, and a willingness to sit with some bleak aspects of life. It was decidedly not comforting or escapist.

Comfort TV, however, is also partially distinct from what is considered regular TV. Because of its affective connotation and the classed focus on subscription-based streaming options, comfort TV is somewhat elevated from the regular TV against which prestige TV is distinguished. Comfort TV—and The Joy of Painting’s position within it—is a discursive category that is still operating through legitimating discourses, elevating the palliative escape by associating it with streaming television options, a distinction from mass-appeal regular TV of the moment, and actively choosing familiarity and nostalgia in classed forms. The prominence of the notion of escape in comfort TV recalls central aspects of television’s ontology and the negative criticisms that have hounded the medium for much of its existence.

The negative valuation of commercial television as a site of uncritical, passive absorption has played a role in establishing binaries of good and bad in TV that have been instrumental in articulating notions of legitimacy and prestige as the industry expanded. Television scholars Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine reference the dialectic when they argue that “[l]egitimation is deeply invested in discourse of progress and improvement, and it works by elevation of one concept of television at the expense of another. For some kinds of television to be consecrated as art, other kinds must be confirmed in inadequacy. New is elevated over old, active over passive, class over mass, masculine over feminine.”15 They argue that in the twenty-first century, the turn to quality television operates to distance television from this feminine past by masculinizing certain aspects of television in order to legitimate the medium, or at least the most notable programming on it.16 Watching prestige TV requires viewers to pay close attention and withstand watching disturbing actions such as violence, murder, and gore.

Prestige dramas such as Breaking Bad (AMC, 2008–2013), True Detective (HBO, 2014–), House of Cards (Netflix, 2013–2018), The Handmaid’s Tale (Hulu, 2017–), and Game of Thrones (HBO, 2011–2019) were nominated for awards and lauded by television critics, but they did not exactly make their viewers feel good. VanArendonk honed the current definition of prestige in a way that makes clear comfort TV is a distinct reaction: “the word prestige, with its snobbish implications, was indicative of a perhaps unintentional truth about these shows. It is a classist assessment, one that implies inaccessibility, scarcity, but also widespread influence and importance. It’s not easy or fluffy or fun because, somewhere deep in the American psyche, there’s still a puritanical belief that fun things cannot also be serious.”17

Comfort TV, however, is decidedly, avowedly easy. Michael Mooney articulated this edgy aspect to twenty-first-century entertainment in his article about Ross’s popularity: “Much of our entertainment is loud, suspenseful, tense. Bob Ross, in all his gentle simplicity, is an antidote to all of

15 Newman and Levine, 5.
16 Newman and Levine, 11.
17 VanArendonk, “Peak Comfort.”
that.” When the active, classed viewers of these shows wanted something less intense to watch, something somewhat palliative, they turned to comfort TV, a distinction still separate from TV more generally.

The assumption of class and distinction from regular television have been key elements to streaming television platforms’ branding since the 2013 premiere of *House of Cards*. Following from cable channels such as HBO’s, AMC’s, and FX’s framing of their original dramas as separate from the norm, the major streaming platforms sought their own version of *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007–2015) or *The Americans* (FX, 2013–2018) that would provide legitimacy within the TV criticism commons. Netflix built its brand in the 2010s around prestige shows such as *House of Cards*, *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–2019), and *Ozark* (2017–2022). Hulu finally gained significant attention with *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and Amazon Prime Video sought prestige with the critical darling *Transparent* (2014–2019) and the high production values in series such as *The Man in the High Castle* (2015–2019) or *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017–2023). Critical attention, so the thinking went, would draw subscribers to the platforms. Meanwhile, these platforms built their vast streaming libraries by licensing older broadcast programs, international productions, and reality TV, as well as producing more original television without the prestige, such as *Fuller House* (Netflix, 2016–2020) and *East Los High* (Hulu, 2013–2017). In short, while TV commentariat discourse focused on prestige television as a way to legitimate streaming platforms similar to cable channels in previous decades, the platforms quietly built themselves into comfort TV powerhouses.

As streaming television options, including a preponderance of prestige TV, ballooned in the later 2010s, the popularity of older, familiar television became notable and in need of categorization. Netflix released statistics showing that older network programs such as *The Office* (NBC, 2005–2013) and *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004) were among the most watched shows on the platform in 2018; Hulu’s acquisition of streaming rights for HGTV and Food Network shows in 2017 made it a destination for watching what was increasingly being called comfort TV as well. In article after article throughout the late 2010s, writers framed low-stakes shows such as *Cupcake Wars* (Food Network, 2009–2018) as “the ultimate in comfort TV.” There was very little

18 Mooney, “Bob Ross.”


21 Schmitz, “Hulu.”
exploration of what comfort TV meant, although most uses assumed multiple streaming subscriptions. The term was used as a self-evident descriptor of a wide variety of shows that shared an affective experience for the viewer. In the context of the significant social upheavals and culture wars of the late 2010s and into 2020, the term comfort TV began to appear even more regularly in television articles, social media posts, and streaming suggestions. By the time of the stay-at-home orders to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, the term was so prevalent that lists of comfort TV streaming options were published by many entertainment and news websites, such as Oprah.com, Entertainment Weekly, Variety, Thrillist, Vulture, Slate, HuffPost, and the New York Times.\textsuperscript{22} Statistics of internet usage and streaming platform use during the stay-at-home orders in 2020 further supported that many Americans turned to streaming entertainment during that time, with some reports of an average of eight hours of streaming per day for people with access to streaming platforms.\textsuperscript{23}

Of course, streaming many hours of TV during these orders assumed the audience for these lists was composed of white-collar workers who could work from home and had multiple streaming subscriptions. The term covered a variety of genres that appeared in these articles: reality television (e.g., Fixer Upper [HGTV, 2013–2018], The Great British Baking Show [PBS, 2014–2019; Netflix, 2018–]), nostalgic sitcoms (e.g., The Golden Girls [NBC, 1985–1992], Seinfeld [NBC, 1989–1998]), current sitcoms (e.g., Schitt's Creek [CBC, 2015–2020], One Day at a Time [Netflix/PopTV, 2017–2020]), and occasionally dramas (e.g., The West Wing [NBC, 1999–2006], Friday Night Lights [NBC, 2006–2011]). There was no unifying genre, format, era, production company, country of production, platform, or taste culture for these shows. Instead, comfort TV was understood as a know-it-when-you-see-it category, one that would make a viewer feel good through uplifting narratives, positive tone, or


familiarity and nostalgia but that presumably would not make a viewer feel guilty for watching. During the pandemic, comfort TV was framed not for its content or quality but rather in terms of its function for viewers who might otherwise watch prestige TV on streaming platforms.

The entertainment articles discussing comfort TV focused on streaming, on-demand, and bingeable TV offerings that didn’t necessarily require a viewer’s full focus. Kerr Castle studied viewer relationships to what they considered comfort TV in the UK in 2019, differentiating a comfort TV show from a person’s favorite TV show by the lack of intense engagement: “With comfort TV the sensation of being ‘caught up in’ a programme is not necessarily absent but is not usually marked by the same intensity or excitement [as with a favorite TV show]. The comfort text appears more controllable (it does not incite specific viewing behaviours), reliable, and responsive to the whims of the viewer.” On-demand streaming television provides the control of the viewing experience that Castle describes, but, in the American context, it also implies access to the streaming platforms that require subscriptions and the consistent broadband internet to be able to stream such shows even at times of high internet traffic (as when schools and businesses abruptly moved online in the spring of 2020). The US stay-at-home orders in 2020 mostly affected white-collar workers, while workers in online retail, delivery, food service, and food processing—among others—still had to work and many hourly waged workers lost their jobs entirely. The economic recession that accompanied the pandemic is “the most unequal recession in modern US history, delivering a mild setback for those at or near the top and a depression-like blow to those at the bottom.” Thus, the popular press articles listing comfort TV, most often with the streaming service listed alongside the title, to watch during the early pandemic period in the United States implicitly were speaking to a specific class of audience, one with money, time, and access to choose comfort TV among their streaming options. They offered a version of comfort TV that appealed to that type of viewer in the American pandemic milieu, one that could use streaming television as an escape, assuming their basic necessities were stable.

The affective component of comfort TV evokes theories of television’s therapeutic potential. In his analysis of the relationship between media and everyday life, Roger Silverstone argues, “The media . . . in their own forms of ordering, in narrative and schedule above all, . . . provide a framework for the resolution of ambiguity, the reduction of insecurity, and the creation of a degree of comfort.” Though focused on the media more broadly, his discussion highlights the particular facets that are most prominent on television. Media scholar Patricia Mellencamp examined television more specifically in response to catastrophe in the 1980s, focusing on the shared experience of

watching linear television. She argues that “TV pinpoints our loneliness by providing companionship, advice, consolation, prayer, and therapy, assuring us that we are not alone by assembling audiences who have fun together.”

By consuming comfort TV via streaming, the idea of assembled audiences having fun together is even more removed from the present than was possible with broadcast television, even if most of the shows watched in this mode originated on broadcast. Streaming negates even “the potential and promise of disruption [due to catastrophe]—a shift between the safe assurance of successive time and story and the break-in of the discontinuity of the real in which the future hangs in the balance, the intrusion of shock, trauma, disaster, crisis—that TV’s spectatorial mechanism of disavowal, which is retroactive, operates most palpably.”

Comfort TV is not necessarily therapy; in allowing the viewer to control totally the mode of viewing and the temporality of its consumption, the potential for confronting reality is gone. There is no working through the trauma of the ongoing pandemic, only alleviating the stress in the knowledge that the catastrophe of the coronavirus is ongoing not acute. Contra the offerings of comfort TV, some TV critics presented lists to “lean in” to the traumatic moment and watch series about political crises that “can still be diversionary—and offer a useful pressure-release valve for all sorts of thoughts and feelings many of us are having now.”

Confronting reality, even askance, was offered far less often in the public commons of television criticism, but in “Go Ahead, Binge TV That Isn’t Escapist,” for example, Zack Stanton concedes that escape was “all but impossible.”

Comfort TV may not be framed as therapy, but its escape is also not wholly objectionable.

Escapism has a legacy of negative connotations associated with “narcotizing” metaphors, but comfort TV elevates the idea of escaping through television to a positive prescription because it is a category focused on streaming subscribers who actively choose to watch these shows, controlling the temporality of viewing. As Newman and Levine describe in their analysis of the processes of television legitimation: “Technologies of agency, as constructed through convergence-era discourses, transform television viewing into a more worthwhile and artistic endeavor, effectively ameliorating many of the medium’s most enduring and disparaged flaws. These include the debased commercial functions of the television text, the ephemerality and lack of enduring value, and the domestic setting of its consumption.”

Choosing comfort TV is a return to formerly ephemeral shows and formulas, but in the on-demand context, it is still an active choice, at least in the discourse

28 Mellencamp, 244.
30 Stanton.
32 Newman and Levine, Legitimating Television, 133.
of legitimation. Comfort TV shows are available via streaming and with the knowledge that their completeness is accessible for as many times as you want to watch them (until their licensing deal ends, at least). Streaming platforms recontextualize these commercial hits as primarily commercial free and subscription based, not free over the air as they were in their initial broadcast runs. Even as streaming platforms increasingly offer ad-supported tiers, the norm for Netflix or HBO Max remains uninterrupted and controlled by the subscriber. The shift to active, streaming viewing undergirds the press and online discussions of comfort TV. Thus, broadcast-era shows can be retextualized in the 2010s and early 2020s. According to Taylor Cole Miller’s study of syndication, “retextuality is a concept that allows us productive ways of analyzing ‘old’ shows in the present moment, not so much as dead or residual, but rather as current, living texts worthy of study.”

The nostalgia of these older shows combines with the new, active way of watching, the different type of audience assumed of streaming platforms, and the chaotic context of the late 2010s and early 2020s to retextualize these shows as palliative, but acceptably so. They are not pure escape, not narcotizing; instead, nostalgic comfort TV gains a degree of legitimation in the context of streaming TV. Comfort TV is not associated with low-brow, mass-appeal programming or viewers; in fact, it has very little presumed audience overlap with the television forms against which quality TV defines itself. Comfort TV is a category that requires the continued existence of low-brow television. Shows that have been or still are considered guilty pleasures tend not to appear in the popular press lists of comfort TV. Docusoaps from Bravo TV, dating shows, and more contemporary multi-cam broadcast sitcoms are largely absent, and their absence further illuminates how comfort TV still fits legitimate TV schemas. Newman and Levine address these topics in their articulation of the exclusions to the legitimation process: “There is little talk of soap opera amidst the praise of cable’s serialized dramas; little mention of ‘mass appeal’ multicamera sitcoms (except to note their baffling popularity or to disparage them and their audience) amidst analyses of contemporary comedic art.”

Comfort TV exists between that which has been legitimizated (prestige TV) and that which prestige is defined against. In comfort TV, legitimation of television is still at work and is rewriting values through streaming TV norms established over the 2010s.

Prestige TV might promote its legitimacy by claiming to be “a 70-hour movie” for example—a highly serialized, high-value production that is often watched in a binge without commercial interruption. In contrast, many of the shows that are categorized as comfort TV are rerun commercial successes that have parlayed that commercial appeal to streaming success. By offering

34 Newman and Levine, Legitimating Television, 35.
viewers the option to binge these reruns as comfort TV, the streaming context adds a degree of active viewing distinct from cable marathons. Episodic home renovation or cooking shows on HGTV or the Food Network are rerun regularly on their respective cable channels (and other channels in the Discovery Inc. cable channel conglomerate), but when discussed as comfort TV, they are recontextualized within the Hulu interface. Also typical of comfort TV is the preponderance of decades-old broadcast network sitcoms such as *The Golden Girls* or *Friends* that continue to make significant revenue through syndication. Securing exclusive streaming rights to these shows can launch a platform such as HBO Max, as *Friends* did. Anne Gilbert argues that streaming distribution ascribes new value to reruns: “‘Reruns’ are effectively absorbed into the proliferation of content . . . reducing their essential difference from other types of programming. Their incorporation into a larger media matrix reconfigures how viewers engage with older content . . . complicating the understanding of reruns as passive content.”

The act of choosing to watch these comfort shows and the curation process inherent in streaming libraries both contribute to elevating older broadcast shows as comfort TV shows. Hulu even had separate categories for “Comfort TV” and “Easy-to-Watch TV” in this author’s interface during the summer of 2020; both categories had significant overlap of mostly twenty-first-century sitcoms, but older shows such as *The Twilight Zone* (CBS, 1959–1964), *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951–1957), and *The Golden Girls* were unique to the former, emphasizing older, lauded television’s role in establishing the category.

Comfort TV based in streaming remains the domain of an elevated taste culture, one that is perhaps too educated or self-conscious to fully escape but still wants comfort from their entertainment options. Comfort TV is not high art, but it also is not low art or artless in this discourse. VanArendonk describes it as “a corrective to prestige and a return to the past.” Familiarity isn’t wholly dismissed. As Derek Kompare argues, “repetition is actually the primary structuring factor of commercial television in the United States. The promise of continual exploitation offered by televisual repetition [is] ‘bottled time.’” Comfort TV relies on that sense of “bottled time” and familiarity—if not of the show specifically, than of its beats and format—to undergird its affective appeal as “light and diversionary.” Repetition provides the familiar structure of television that is then amplified through binging via streaming video, but it is also chosen by the viewer through their own agency instead of stumbling on it while channel surfing, legitimating even the repetition.

*The Joy of Painting* is a show particularly organized around fulfilling the promises of familiarity, repetition, and escape into bottled time. Each half hour is entirely episodic, presented aesthetically in a black (or occasionally

37 Schmitz, “Hulu.”
39 VanArendonk, “Peak Comfort.”
41 Stanton, “Go Ahead.”
white) backgrounded studio, and features little variation in Bob Ross’s personal presentation. Everything is basically the same for each episode, including Ross’s “distinctive hairstyle and dress-down costuming of open-necked shirt and jeans.” As will be discussed later in terms of Bob Ross’s art pedagogy, it is repetitive and without any tension or conflict to be resolved. By design, each half hour eschews context. Occasionally, clips of Bob Ross’s rescue squirrels (e.g., series 21, episode 2), a friend’s rescue birds (e.g., series 21, episode 6), or, in the starkest break of the format, a live painting event in New York City’s Central Park (series 21, episode 5) intercede in the studio setting, but only rarely and briefly. Attributing part of Ross’s appeal to this seclusion, Murray Whyte writes, “He lives nowhere but in this very moment.”

More than other PBS successes that continue to draw attention in a streaming context, such as Sesame Street (1969–) or even The French Chef (1963–1966, 1970–1973), neither of which is regularly discussed as comfort TV, The Joy of Painting presented time and art within a closed circuit, a comforting escape for the viewer from the world of place and time outside the studio.

BOB ROSS AS PUBLIC TV NOSTALGIA

Nostalgia plays a significant role in the construction of comfort TV as a unique category, but the type of nostalgia The Joy of Painting activates includes distinction from regular TV. It is not the obviously commercialized nostalgia that leads to reboots and remakes like Fuller House. In its twenty-first-century context, The Joy of Painting is a consumer good, making money from digital commercials, subscription fees, and/or Bob Ross Inc. branded goods. However, the program itself originally was made for PBS’s non-commercial reasons; its raison d’être as a show is education and uplift, made obvious by its pared-down style. Thus, while it operates as a commercial good, viewers can experience the show as public good, an artifact of a bygone era of public media. Gary Cross explains that consumed nostalgia “is a longing for the goods of the past that came from a personal experience of growing up in the stressful world of fast capitalism.” The capitalization on nostalgia is paramount to The Joy of Painting’s success in the context of comfort TV. The public broadcasting history of the show and its form distinguish The Joy of Painting from other nostalgic fare by offering a public media past that has been lost but that can be reclaimed for thirty minutes at a time in his studio. As Paul Grainge notes, “The nostalgia mood articulates a concept of experience. . . . As a form of idealized remembrance, the nostalgia mood emerges from and is made to relate to a grounding concept of longing or loss.”

What is longed for through The Joy of Painting is not only escape into bottled time wholly separate from the politics of now and of then but also, we argue, a time when public media was able to deliver on its promises. The Joy of Painting

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43 Whyte, “Perfect Pandemic Television.”
exemplifies comfort TV’s position within the classed hierarchies of television’s historical norms and how public television’s nostalgic attributes also operate to elevate certain shows into the 2020s ideation of comfort TV.

*The Joy of Painting* is clearly non-commercial in its look, pacing, format, and Ross’s personality and thus can represent what a PBS show is meant to be. The show is an exemplar of public television. In her study of PBS origins and evolution, Laurie Ouellette articulates the “dual cultural reform logics that warranted and guided the creation of public broadcasting . . . show[ing] how the desire to reach educated viewers and uplift the mass audience converged to establish public television’s taken-for-granted cultural boundaries.” Along with the tension between uplift-the-masses and appeal-to-elites, PBS is paradoxically public broadcasting that is mostly funded by corporations. The lines between public media and commercial media blur significantly as certain shows or formats from PBS cross over to cable and streaming. *Sesame Street*, perhaps the greatest PBS success, had to move its initial run to HBO and then HBO Max to stay in production. Unlike other successful instructional programs from PBS’s heyday such as *The French Chef*, the art instruction format of *The Joy of Painting* has not developed similar commercial descendants, so it remains an artifact of PBS and the past.

Ross presents an escape to an imagined past presented through the uplift of public television, a past necessarily cut off from reality of both the 1980s and the 2020s. Reality for PBS included repeated efforts to defund the government-supplied portion of its budget since its earliest days. Reality for American television viewers has evolved significantly as certain shows or formats from PBS cross over to cable and streaming. *Sesame Street*, perhaps the greatest PBS success, had to move its initial run to HBO and then HBO Max to stay in production. Unlike other successful instructional programs from PBS’s heyday such as *The French Chef*, the art instruction format of *The Joy of Painting* has not developed similar commercial descendants, so it remains an artifact of PBS and the past.

47 Ouellette, 6–7.
into a vast, unwieldy, niche-oriented abundance of commercial programming with fewer non-commercial options.\textsuperscript{52} Reality for current PBS programming includes losing some of its core educational programming to streaming-first deals and facing potential cuts to funding (again) exacerbated by pandemic budget shortfalls.\textsuperscript{53} Escaping into the black box of Ross’s television studio and into the worlds of his paintings is a retreat from a world that is far more complicated and far less prone to happy accidents. That difficult world is paused for the half hour of painting instruction, a time bubble in which the viewer is framed as having power over the canvas. Ross tells the viewer, “This is your world, so you can create any type of illusion in your world.”\textsuperscript{54} Acknowledging the illusion of the painting does not undermine Ross’s earnestness, but it does point to the understanding of the appeal of escape into a world purely of your (or Ross’s) imagination. The nostalgia of Bob Ross is further a kind of escape into a world created by the viewer because the show, as PBS perpetually acknowledged, was presented thanks to “viewers like you.” The foundational positivity of \textit{The Joy of Painting} gains an extra layer of comfort through knowing its origin as a public good, even if it is now a consumer product. The purity of Bob Ross within the show itself relies on its association with a past in which public television could meet its goals.

Like Bob Ross’s art instruction, discussed below, the format of \textit{The Joy of Painting} relies heavily on pattern replication. That is, each episode is identical. Though the oil paintings produced differ slightly, the show and its beats never changed or evolved. The real-time painting took form within thirty minutes, but each thirty minutes was mostly the same as any other episode’s thirty minutes. The contained time of the show both within the episode and relative to other older television content corresponds to characteristics of nostalgic escape. Svetlana Boym argues that “nostalgia appears to be a longing for a place, but it is actually a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress.”\textsuperscript{55} \textit{The Joy of Painting}’s evocation of the artistic past through both pedagogy and painted image is compounded by Ross’s persona that remains tied to the late 1970s despite his program’s 1980s and 1990s production. Ross threads multiple invitations to nostalgia through his commentary, emphasizing its potential for an escape from—or in Boym’s words, rebellion against—the current moment.


\textsuperscript{54} \textit{The Joy of Painting with Bob Ross}, season 10, episode 1, “Towering Peaks,” aired September 3, 1986, on PBS, viewed via Amazon Prime Video.

Aided by the inherent nostalgia of *The Joy of Painting*, the potential for escape from the current world became a core aspect to the Bob Ross brand, heightened in recent years by Bob Ross Inc.’s reiteration of the show as a comfort removed from the present. Executives at the company leaned into the hermetic seal as an asset of the Bob Ross brand as the brand became more pronounced in digital and social media spaces. To *Washington Post* reporter Theresa Vargas, “Joan Kowalski, the corporation’s president, said every once in a while, someone on social media will try to theorize what side of the political spectrum Ross would fall on today and others inevitably cut that conversation off quickly. ‘Don’t ruin him,’ Kowalski said they say. ‘He was nothing. He was everything.’” Like his public media context, Ross is meant to be beyond politics. Another worker at Bob Ross Inc. told Vargas even more explicitly, “He is an escape for a lot of people.” The role of Ross as an escape from harsh reality became more pronounced during the pandemic in 2020. As one parent said of turning on *The Joy of Painting* for hours at a time for her and her three children, “His voice, the pacing of the show, seeing the art develop—it’s a very simple way to reset when you’re feeling stressed.” *The Joy of Painting* owes its quarantine-era success to the particularly potent quality of the show’s strategies of elevated escape, including nostalgia. How *The Joy of Painting* operationalizes elevated escapism is evident not only in the show’s framing as comfort TV and its utilization of nostalgia as a PBS artifact but also in the art pedagogy itself.

**BOB ROSS’S ART AND PEDAGOGY**

*The Joy of Painting with Bob Ross* ran on PBS from 1983 to 1994, presenting a half-hour landscape painting instructional series hosted by Ross. Ross’s large, curly hairdo, open-necked shirts, and bell-bottoms evoked a peaceful hippie style, but otherwise all viewers saw was an easel in a mostly empty studio. Each episode begins with a blank canvas prepared to take on oil paint and Ross gently telling viewers the type of topography he will be painting. Ross then spends the next twenty-seven or so minutes demonstrating how to paint the landscape and producing the image for the viewer while talking through the process and commenting on any brushstrokes, color combinations, or variations that strike his fancy. The image is meant to be reproducible and easily replicable by amateurs, and, as a result, the art itself has often been derided, even as the show has maintained a degree of popularity for decades.

In *Happy Clouds, Happy Trees: The Bob Ross Phenomenon*, Kristin G. Congdon, Doug Blandy, and Danny Coeyman put Bob Ross in the context of the professional art world, and the many points of contact they discover work to refute an artistic condemnation of Ross. They explore, for instance, Ross’s position in the gray area differentiating amateur and professional, Ross’s

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57 Vargas.

58 Jurgensen, “Quarantine Watchlist.”
derivativeness in terms of traditional esteem for and imitation of old masters, and even parallels with Andy Warhol’s questioning of the boundary of high art and popular culture. Their point is to identify Ross’s status as an artist.

If, however, we examine not Ross but his pedagogy and evaluate it critically from the perspective of the history of artistic instruction, it becomes possible to recognize principal instructional elements and to identify their historical origins and implications that operate to elevate the escape provided by The Joy of Painting. One element is Ross’s choice of model: the nineteenth-century “picturesque”–type landscape painting that, as explained below, is firmly associated with longing for a bygone past. This model situates Ross’s chosen form within the nostalgic elements of the show’s retextualization in the context of 2020s television commentary. A second element is copying patterns and codes rather than physical objects, with an accompanying emphasis on materials and techniques. This type of image-making is the essence of medieval technical instruction. As detailed below, the educational demands of Ross’s instruction align with those of the pre-scientific episteme of medieval instruction, which eschews engagement with the actual world. These elements give Ross’s pedagogy a historical imprimatur and, in particular, one that is also consistent with the elevated escapism and nostalgia characterizing the version of comfort TV we are examining here. Analyzing the visual and verbal text of typical programs reveals how Ross’s two pedagogical elements function and recur regardless of the image. Repetition breeds familiarity and allows The Joy of Painting to be understood as dependable in a way that further associates it with comfort TV as we have identified it thus far.

A typical episode consists of ongoing demonstration at the canvas, and the verbal accompaniment constantly repeats the message that making art is not difficult but is joyful and fun. Instead of terms artists actually use, he narrates his demonstrations with a jargon of enchantment and playful anthropomorphism. For instance, the wet canvas primer is called “magic”; creating transparencies is called “hypnotizing”; and, of course, the clouds are “happy.” Ross reassures student-viewers that they do not need the kind of knowledge they imagine artists must have, and they do not have to ponder or problem-solve design. Every episode repeats some variation on the creed of mental ease: as a typical example, Ross narrates that “[w]e use no patterns; we do no sketching. We let this flow right out of our heart to the canvas. . . . We don’t have to worry about it or think about it, let it happen” and “[y]ou don’t have any tracings on here you have to follow, any lines you have to stay inside of.” The creed is not entirely true, however. A very specific design is at the heart of his instruction: the compositional schema used to construct a picturesque landscape. Ross does not identify it as such, but he performs it by laying down the shapes on the canvas for student-viewers to reproduce. Granted it is not a tracing, per se, but it certainly is a pattern. However, Ross

60 The Joy of Painting with Bob Ross, season 2, episode 1, “Meadow Lake,” aired August 31, 1983, on PBS, viewed via YouTube.
does not discuss it as such and thus helps to keep the tone of his instruction in the realm of creativity and art and away from the perceived lower forms of art such as tracing or paint-by-numbers. Thus, Ross's use of pattern continues the theme of discursive framing that keeps *The Joy of Painting* from being dismissed as unengaging.

Ross replicates the compositional schema in a series of more-or-less sequential steps underlying the production of a typical Ross landscape. The first is the division of the pictorial space, in which he guides student-viewers to create an overall two-dimensional pattern, usually defined by the shape of the sky and the horizon line. Beginners seldom start this way. Most start with some object—a tree, or a flower, or a person, for instance—and then fill in the rest. The second step is using color and contrast, applied in opposing diagonal shapes and/or objects (like trees or ponds or distant mountains), to transform the two-dimensional pattern into an illusion of receding planes. The third step is adding highlights, shadows, and lines to define details and to give volume to foreground components, such as foliage, rocks, or water. The paint is applied *alla prima* (wet-on-wet), and the selection and use of brushes and palette knives to create a wide variety of irregular shapes and paint textures are important parts of the process. Each episode repeats the demonstration of this pattern accompanied by aforementioned adages of encouragement and abundant commentary about paint and tools, described below. Thus, in the half-hour episode, one painting is completed in a way that emphasizes a viewer’s potential accomplishment.

While it is true the student-viewers are not rigidly following a tracing, they are not operating as freely as Ross asserts. Creativity is lauded but also contained; the art and the process are meant to be comfortably easy, not mechanically or intellectually challenging. By creating a diagonal pattern of receding planes and loading the landscape with irregular shapes and textures, they are implementing the pictorial conventions of picturesque landscape, developed in England and America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Defining formal conventions are a low horizon with framing elements in the foreground; interlocking, receding diagonal planes, often creating a visual path; irregular outlines of all objects throughout and variegated shapes and surface textures; and, in terms of subject matter, the omission of anything indicating modernity or labor.

The picturesque landscape developed as a nostalgic response to the transformations of rural English scenery and society arising from industrialization. Moreover, the form was meant to be easily teachable and therefore to spread idealized versions of the past through both professional and amateur landscape art. Well-known professional artists such as John Constable in England or Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand in America painted picturesque landscapes, and through manuals such as William Gilpin’s *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape* (1792), instruction was available to the public. Applying the principles of picturesque

form, the artist tames nature into a cozy and welcoming environment and eliminates the inhospitable aspects of the topography as well as the harsh effects of development.

Thus, Ross teaches his student-viewers to reproduce a type of painting whose essence is nostalgia and escape, but that essence is legitimated through the art historical context and popular proliferation of picturesque landscapes. There is an important distinction between a Ross landscape and the model it is derived from, however. Perceiving real-life landscapes played a key role in the original picturesque. It was taught and practiced as principles for mediating real sight and real experience into art. In Ross’s method, however, looking at real landscapes and establishing critical distance on sight and perception are not part of using the model. The outcome of his teaching is not for students to tune their perception to the world but rather to replicate the formula. In the context of the historical picturesque, it is evident that Ross’s basic and repetitive instructional schema embodies distancing from the world with art historical legitimacy. Its peculiar distinctiveness is seen when contrasting the Ross student-viewer production (as seen in the episode featuring the live painting event in Central Park) with the art in a more recent popular TV art show, Grayson’s Art Club (Channel 4 [UK], 2020–), in which viewer production is above all about engaging with diversity in modern identity and boundaries defining art.

Ross does not share with student-viewers information about design and division of space and says nothing about the picturesque landscape schema. However, he is quite talkative about paint and its application. Each episode begins with the hues needed scrolled on screen and identifying necessary brushes of different sizes and shapes and palette knives. As the painting progresses, Ross narrates and demonstrates how to mix colors and how to apply a repertoire of stroke types and pressures (cross-stroking, tapping, scraping, impasto, for examples). Using a derivative prototype coupled with instructional emphasis on technical properties of media and instruments is the essence of his instruction. The elevating notions of uplift and education are inherent in this way of teaching art; Ross is providing the information and practice needed for accomplishing art.

Ross’s focus on technique more than vision is also the essence of pre-modern art instruction. We know the procedure of artistic instruction in medieval Europe from the two types of texts that survive: one similar to a cookbook and the other to a dictionary. The former provides recipes about what materials to use and how to use them: grinding colors and mixing paints, qualities of various brushes, preparing surfaces, applying gold leaf,


and so on. Cennino Cennini’s *Il Libro dell’Arte* (c. 1400) is a fine example of a text that is essentially a collection of recipes from Trecento Italian artistic practice. The second type of text is the model book, which provides an archive of ready-made images and pattern sheets for artists to copy. *The Göttingen Model Book* (c. 1450) is a good example of such a text, providing images and patterns for artists producing manuscript illumination and other images in medieval Germany. Copying images from model books or from other artists’ work was a basic technical element, and copying had no negative connotations in the premodern context.\(^5\) Indeed, with certain types of Christian imagery, faithful copying of authoritative images often contributed to sacredness. Medieval art instruction was thus a tactical technology, an approach complementing the anonymity of artists and patronage patterns normal in medieval society. That artists relied so heavily on copying prototypical models, rather than making images of the world known through the sense of sight, is also consistent with the medieval mindset. Since everything one needed to know was provided by authoritative cultural sources (such as religion or rule), investigating the world was not important and hence of marginal interest.\(^6\) Medieval instruction is the acquisition and implementation of specialized knowledge. Analysis, evaluation, and other complex cognitive processes are absent from instruction. As such, it contrasts dramatically with approaches to learning art dominating European art from the Renaissance forward, and, as explained below, this contrast is relevant to understanding Ross’s method.

Renaissance art was a radical departure from medieval precedent because, above all, it was an encounter with the physical world; correspondingly, the emphasis in learning to make art shifted to analysis and judgment. Beginning in Florence in the fifteenth century, art was reinvented as a lofty, theoretical enterprise rather than merely a manual skill. The originating text was Leon Battista Alberti’s 1435 *Della Pittura* (*On Painting*). Alberti’s text establishes “imitation” as the goal—making images that imitate the physical world. He announces, “Since painting strives to represent things seen, let us note in what way things are seen,” and proceeds to present the three parts of painting (circumscription, composition, and reception of light) derived from critical analysis of sight.\(^7\) Far from a how-to guide, Alberti’s text is infused with abstract ideas such as proportion, perspective, judgment, and rhetorical effectiveness. A new type of instruction appeared, based in learning to draw by applying these analytic and abstract principles to a critical examination of sight. A curriculum of learning to draw the human figure and other objects was codified and became the bedrock of artistic instruction in royal academies of art established in the centuries following the Renaissance.\(^8\) Analysis, judgment, and precision were essential educational outcomes,


supplanting the value of replication in medieval art. By the nineteenth century, in many parts of Europe, the general educational value of learning to draw was espoused, and drawing instruction became part of an elementary educational curriculum. Learning to draw accurately—that is, to reproduce precise and correctly proportioned representations of physical reality—was believed to exercise and improve discernment. According to this view, the learning outcome of art instruction was enhanced cognition and judgment and an increased ability to discern truth.\(^69\) Ross’s art instruction embodies a renunciation of central tenets defining post-Renaissance European art: that making art is an undertaking more of the mind than manual labor, and, consequently, artists, like scientists, express their understanding of the world. However, the post-Renaissance valuation of the practice of art still motivates *The Joy of Painting.*

Ross’s instructional practices and learning outcomes align with those of medieval instruction rather than the post-Renaissance. That is, he emphasizes copying prototypes, with an accompanying emphasis on recipe-like instruction in media and technique rather than critical analysis of the visual world. The preceding overview of the historical opposition of art instruction clarifies the essential episteme that the medieval approach and Ross share. Neither value connecting with the world in a scientific way, and, consequently, neither demand challenging mediation and problem-solving in representation and design. Typical practices in Ross’s instruction manifest this episteme. As already noted, no encounter with the actual world of physical reality is required. There are no windows in Ross’s empty studio. Students are never asked to look at and analyze the appearance of actual trees, sky, water, or mountains. Objects and topographies are simulated by a variety of different types of paint application. Stippling with rounded brushes produces foliage; opaque smears with a palette knife produce mountain faces; and a flat brush loaded with two colors and pulled vertically produces surface reflection on water. Along with rejecting critical engagement with physical reality, Ross’s instructional axioms also manifest this approach. He clearly communicates the epistemological position underlying his pedagogy by statements that mind is not for problem-solving; it is a container from which painting effortlessly flows out. A typical example is, “Just let this happen. You really just sort of let it flow right out of our mind right onto the canvas. . . . Just let it go.”\(^70\) By “letting it happen,” Ross asserts, student-viewers are bypassing any potential cognitive difficulties. Furthermore, the avoidance of engaging with the world is regarded as a source of value and power, as evidenced by typical statements such as the following: “On this canvas you can do anything that you want to do. You have absolute and total power. Here I can create any kind of world that I wanted.”\(^71\) Ross’s instructional practices embody the combination of an uncritical episteme and avoidance of the world of physical


reality that historically characterized medieval art instruction. Like those of medieval practice, Ross’s instructional practices deliberately and purposefully tune out the world.

On the level of pedagogy, *The Joy of Painting* is quite literally an escape. As argued earlier, escape and nostalgia also manifest in the pattern replication fundamental to the picturesque landscape schema Ross uses as his model. Pedagogically speaking, Ross teaches viewer-students how to make art that is sealed off from the physical, spatial world and the need to mediate its complexities. Just as the show’s half hour is bottled time, fundamental instructional practices within the show inevitably lead to pictures in which the space, too, is bottled. But it is still instructing in the relatively rarefied form of oil painting as a fine art. The escape offered by Bob Ross in *The Joy of Painting* is fundamentally educational, elevating the process of turning off one’s engagement with the outer world into a necessity for learning.

CONCLUSION
Television has long been linked with escapism; turning off the brain and turning on the idiot box remain familiar refrains associated with watching television. Different forms of television with different value positions determined by gendered, classed, and raced hierarchies frame escape in different ways. Prestige television claims engagement that requires avoiding the passive associations with escapism. Less well-regarded genres such as soap operas or some reality television get categorized as obsessions or guilty pleasures, contrasting with the positive engagement of prestige TV. The vast sea of regular TV can include these low genres as well as mass-appeal contemporary shows. And in between those two poles yet still distinguishable from regular TV is comfort television. Associated with classed viewers choosing to retreat from the world and the intensity of prestige TV but not totally mindless, comfort TV has arisen from the sea of streaming options as a form of elevated escapism. Familiarity, distraction from the world as it is, and some cultural value converge in the category’s popular use and appear epitomized in *The Joy of Painting*. Through the format, aesthetics, dialogue, and persona of Bob Ross, *The Joy of Painting* presents a half-hour escape from reality, retextualized as acceptable comfort TV. Thus, the show has garnered renewed attention in the late 2010s and especially during the coronavirus pandemic.

The second vector of culturally acceptable escapism operating in *The Joy of Painting* is nostalgia. This nostalgia operates on both personal and industrial levels. Individual viewers may feel nostalgic for the early-1980s fashion Bob Ross sports throughout the show or for the memories they have watching it on PBS. More significantly, it also represents a time of public television’s promise lost to commercialization, even as Bob Ross Inc. has exploited the persona of Bob Ross for myriad commercial goods in recent decades. *The Joy of Painting* represents the ideas of uplift and accessibility—public good—that public television seeks to provide. However, as it is re-articulated in streaming platforms and in a streaming TV context, the purity of that public good is only possible through the nostalgic imagination. Fittingly, an illustration of imagination is precisely what Bob Ross promised to provide with each episode of *The Joy of Painting*.
In addition to the televisual markers of comfort TV as elevated escape that *The Joy of Painting* embodies, the artistic production featured on the show further underscores the escapist core. Each painting is an example of a picturesque landscape, a nineteenth-century form composed of pictorial conventions that express a harmony of society and nature and an absence of intrusions from modern development. Ross’s pedagogy relies on replication of image codes and patterns rather than on critical visual analysis of the actual world. Consequently, Ross’s instruction resembles medieval image-making, that is to say, a technical approach corresponding with a society for which the importance of the material, historical world as a source of knowledge was marginal. The art and art pedagogy on *The Joy of Painting* have remarkable high art bona fides and at the same time are exquisitely escapist both in the subjects he paints and in the very skills he teaches.

Together, these three vectors of elevated escapism illustrate not only the appeal of Bob Ross and *The Joy of Painting* in the 2020s but also some of the defining characteristics of comfort TV. Familiarity, repetition, nostalgia, and cultural elevation appear through the series’ art, teaching, format, aesthetics, and twenty-first-century branding. Comfort TV claims an affective centrality, a palliative form of entertainment to console stressed or pained viewers, but by analyzing the category through *The Joy of Painting*, the discourses of elevated escapism around comfort TV emphasize the classed nature of the category. Like prestige TV, comfort TV is still measuring itself against regular or mass-appeal TV by utilizing digital agency, nostalgia, and implied audiences for subscription-based streamers to elevate the category itself alongside its escapist mode.


Joyce B. Howell is a professor of art history at Virginia Wesleyan University. She has published on Eugène Delacroix, with a focus on his drawings and nineteenth-century drawing instruction, and more recently on Paul Klee’s art pedagogy.