Contentious Comedy:

Negotiating Issues of Form, Content, and Representation

in American Sitcoms of the Post-Network Era

Thesis by

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Abstract

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This thesis explores the way in which the institutional changes that have occurred within the post-network era of American television have impacted on the situation comedy in terms of form, content, and representation. This thesis argues that as one of television's most durable genres, the sitcom must be understood as a dynamic form that develops over time in response to changing social, cultural, and institutional circumstances. By providing detailed case studies of the sitcom output of competing broadcast, pay-cable, and niche networks, this research provides an examination of the form that takes into account both the historical context in which it is situated as well as the processes and practices that are unique to television.

In addition to drawing on existing academic theory, the primary sources utilised within this thesis include journalistic articles, interviews, and critical reviews, as well as supplementary materials such as DVD commentaries and programme websites. This is presented in conjunction with a comprehensive analysis of the textual features of a number of individual programmes. By providing an examination of the various production and scheduling strategies that have been implemented within the post-network era, this research considers how differentiation has become key within the multichannel marketplace. With a number of channel providers competing for specific niche segments of the audience, it further demonstrates how sitcoms have become more distinctive, original, and contentious in the process.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to William Gemmell (1924-2004)

Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction

> So have you heard? Sitcoms are dead. The headstone should read,
> 'Situation Comedy. Born 1947. Died 2007. Thanks for the laughs.'

Ray Richmond, *The Hollywood Reporter*

Situation comedy has been a staple of U.S. television since its inception but over the years there have been various proclamations in the media regarding the impending demise of the genre. Writing in *The Hollywood Reporter* in 2007, Ray Richmond identifies this as the year in which the sitcom appears to have been laid to rest. This assessment is largely attributed to the success of hybrid forms, such as the hour-long comedy drama, and the absence of any new half-hour sitcoms on NBC's 2007 primetime fall schedule (Richmond 2007; Gough and Wallenstein 2007). According to TV critic Jon Lafayette (2007), this latter development can be understood as an unprecedented move from the network that brought *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), *Cheers* (1982-1993), and *Seinfeld* (1990-1998) to the American public. Yet, it can also be viewed as the culmination of a debate that has been in circulation since the 2003-2004 television season. After experiencing a decade of success, two of NBC's self-styled 'must-see' sitcoms came to an end, in the form of *Friends* (1994-2004) and *Frasier* (1993-2004), along with HBO's critically acclaimed *Sex and the City* (1998-2004).[1] With reality programming dominating the ratings and almost fifty-percent less sitcoms being broadcast on network television than in 1993, *Newsweek*'s Marc Peyser

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[1] In October 2003, *Newsweek* ran a cover story about the problems faced by NBC on losing its top-rated sitcom and the lynchpin of its Thursday-night line-up. See M. Peyser (2003). The end of *Friends* was also commented on the other side of the Atlantic a year later when it's final season was broadcast in Britain. See L. Donegan (2004). These are just two examples of the type of media discourse surrounding the end of not just *Friends*, but also *Frasier* and *Sex and the City*. Many others have been published in newspapers, magazines, and online blogs and fansites. This debate was not limited to American programming as the British broadcaster Channel 4 also broadcast an hour-long programme in 2006 entitled, *Who Killed the Sitcom?*

was quick to announce that 'the future doesn't look great for the sitcom anywhere' (2003: 46).[2]

The reasons as to why this apparent decline in sitcom programming should be of interest to viewers of television, those who work in the industry, and critics and academics involved in the study of the medium, are complex. For example, Brett Mills (2005) puts forward a number of social, cultural, and institutional reasons as to why the sitcom is a significant form. Beginning with the financial rewards involved in the successful production of situation comedy, he goes on to outline how the form is used by competing television networks to target specific segments of the audience at particular points in the schedule. He also notes how sitcom is often examined for the way it reflects changes in society and for what it says about issues of representation: 'In these ways, sitcom becomes not only representative of a culture's identity and ideology, it also becomes one of the ways in which that culture defines and understands itself' (9).

As both Mills and David Marc (1994) note, the heightened interest in the status of the sitcom, particularly in relation to other television programming, can also be attributed to the longevity of the form:

> The situation comedy has proven to be the most durable of all commercial television genres. Other types of programming that have appeared to be staples of prime-time fare at various junctures in TV history have seen their heyday and faded (the western, the comedy-variety show, and the big-money quiz show among them). The sitcom, however, has remained a consistent and ubiquitous feature of prime-time network schedules since the premiere of *Mary Kay and Johnny* on DuMont in 1947 (Marc 1994: 11).

At the time of writing it is impossible to speculate on whether the popularity of hour-long comedy dramas or reality programming will be similarly fleeting. However, it is fair to say that the sitcom has survived previous death knells. In addition to the claims that the sitcom had met its end following the departure of *Friends* et al., Janet Staiger notes that *The Cosby Show* was widely described in the mid-1980s as having 'resurrected what appeared to be a dying genre' (2000: 21-26). What these recurring

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[2] In contrast to 1993, when the four major networks broadcast forty-six sitcoms between them, the 2003-2004 season consisted of just twenty-four. This was despite the fact that niche-networks UPN and The WB had since entered the marketplace.

declarations fail to take into account is both the changing nature of the American broadcasting landscape and the fact that the sitcom 'has had a widely varying history for over fifty years' (Mittell 2004: 5). Rather than disappear from television screens, the form has undergone a series of transformations over the years in response to changing social and cultural circumstances, developments in technology and, perhaps most importantly, transformations within the U.S. television industry itself. As Richmond goes on to acknowledge, '[the genre] hasn't actually expired so much as altered its DNA' (2007: online).

Since the aforementioned success of *The Cosby Show*, television in America has progressed from a three-network system set up to serve the mass national audience to a post-network era in which over a hundred broadcast, cable, and satellite channels compete for particular segments of the viewing public. Taking this shift as my starting point, the object of this thesis is to examine the way in which these institutional changes have impacted on television's most durable form. For the purposes of this analysis, I trace the advent of this era to the 1986-1987 American television season, a period in which Fox became the fourth network to enter the broadcast market, cable penetration reached over fifty percent, and the pay-cable channel Showtime began transmitting original sitcom programming in the form of *It's Garry Shandling's Show* (1986-1990).

While I have chosen to use the term 'post-network era' to refer to American television from the late-1980s onwards, there are various other descriptions in circulation. Located in what has been referred to as the 'TVII' stage of television's historical development (the period following 'TVI', in which television consisted of a closed system dominated by three major networks), these include the rather self-evident 'multichannel era' and John Ellis's 'era of availability' (Rogers, Epsetin, and Reeves 2002; Hilmes 2003c; Ellis 2000). A more complex notion has since emerged in the form of 'TVIII', which Glen Creeber and Matt Hills describe as 'a time of increased fragmentation, consumer interactivity and global market economics' (2007: 1).

The latter concept of TVIII is particularly useful when examining issues surrounding global and transnational developments in television, convergence and multiplatforming strategies, and the increasingly active agency of viewers and fan communities. Although I recognise the importance of these areas within the developing field of television studies, my analysis takes a more narrow approach by

focusing primarily on the way in which the proliferation of channels within the marketplace and the subsequent fragmentation of the television audience has impacted on the sitcom in terms of form, content, and representation. For Derek Johnson, there is a danger that within an era characterised by the emergence of multimedia, this type of work becomes too 'television-centric' (2007: 62). However, I believe that there has been a distinct lack of academic work carried out on the relationship between the post-network era and changes in programme production, particularly in relation to the sitcom. Moreover, perceptions of the sitcom within the academy and in journalistic discourse (if not always on the part of the industry and the audience) remain rooted in earlier incarnations of the form and thus need to be reassessed. Rather than moving ahead, therefore, to consider the way in which American sitcoms are distributed globally, how they are experienced on DVD, or, indeed, what their online presence consists of, I will instead concentrate on the programmes themselves and their context within the American television industry. What I am interested in is the way in which competing broadcast, pay-cable, and niche networks have introduced innovations to the sitcom form in an attempt to differentiate themselves in the marketplace and target specific segments of the audience. As such, the term 'post-network era' is appropriate.

As my analysis will concentrate on the development of the genre, it is important to first outline the conventions of the so-called 'traditional' sitcom form. I must stress that this is something of an 'ideal' category; a perception of the sitcom that has persisted over the years but which is often challenged when applied to actual programme examples. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study it is necessary to construct an archetypal version of the sitcom in order to demonstrate how post-network shows have developed in new directions while also revisiting and playing with more conventional aspects of the form.

Understanding the 'Traditional' Sitcom Form

Due to its status as one of television's most enduring genres, the sitcom has historically been understood as an established and easily recognisable form that has developed little since its inception. Despite my assertion that it has in fact undergone a series of transformations over the years, this has only begun to be properly recognised within the academy since the advent of the post-network era. This is particularly notable in the work of Steve Neale (2001), Brett Mills (2005), and Jason Mittell (2004), three scholars who challenge the idea that genres such as the sitcom

exist as static and ideal categories. Prior to this, academic attempts to examine the form have tended to focus on its narrative structure. For Lawrence Mintz (1985), the most important feature of the sitcom is that its episodes are closed off and finite. With a narrative that is circular rather than linear, the characters are returned to their original status by the end of each episode in preparation for a new situation to occur the following week. Even though this can be considered a trait of the episodic series in general, of which the sitcom is a subset, it has become somewhat synonymous with the latter form. The result is that sitcom characters are often described as learning nothing from their experiences within individual episodes and of having no memory from week to week (Kozloff 1992: 73-92). With no reference to past events, Mick Eaton describes this as 'the timeless nowness of television situations' (1978: 70).

This is reinforced by the stereotypical nature of the characters. As the sitcom has only a short time frame within which to present its characters and have them engage in humorous situations, they are often reduced to stereotypes (Medhurst and Tuck 1982: 43-55). As such, there is an emphasis on the fact that both the plot and the characters are not to be taken seriously, that they function as nothing more than entertainment. Yet, American sitcoms have actually complicated this perception of the genre since the early days of the medium. For example, following the emergence of the domestic family sitcom in the 1950s, two things occurred. First, the success of such shows resulted in the genre becoming inextricably bound up with the notion of the family, and second, the closed nature of each episode took on a different dimension, as a moral aspect was added to the narrative. In an attempt to teach viewers how to live together in a family by working through problems and 'talking not fighting', characters began to learn valuable life lessons from their experiences (Hartley 2001: 66). Admittedly, these lessons were to remain limited, as they continued to be confined to individual episodes. Gerard Jones explains that in order to preserve the domestic harmony of the family unit, any threat or disruption introduced at the beginning of the narrative must be resolved or expelled by the end of each episode (1992: 4). This means that rather than offer mere entertainment to the mass audience, the American sitcom became not only entertainment *for the family*, but entertainment that upheld and reinforced the importance *of the family*.

Discussing examples of the sitcom prior to the post-network era, Marc formulates an equation that represents the narrative structure of the form.

Episode = Familiar Status Quo → Ritual Error Made → Ritual Lesson
Learned → Familiar Status Quo (1997: 179).

Although the equation itself does not explicitly refer to the domestic nature of the form, Marc goes on to explain that 'this is the ritual mechanism by which the domestic family sitcom accomplishes its generic task: to illustrate, in practical everyday subphilosophical terms, the tangible rewards of faith and trust in the family' (191). The idea that sitcom characters must learn a valuable moral lesson in order to be reintegrated into the family has been conflated over the years into what has been described as a 'hugging and learning' format.[3] Despite the fact that other variants of the form have always been in existence, it is this particular type of domestic family sitcom that is generally conceived as the dominant genre norm.

The traditional sitcom, and indeed this thesis, is not just defined by narrative structure and representations of the family however. In both instances, other formal conventions such as shooting style and visual image, as well as the type of subject matter covered, are of equal importance. As Mary Dalton and Laura Linder note, the sitcom is generally presented within 'thirty-minute episodes, photographed in a three-camera studio set up in front of a live audience, and built around the situations in the program' (2005: 2). While the three-camera set-up has resulted in an intimate shooting style consisting of close-ups and reaction shots, the presence of a live studio audience has led to the inclusion of an audible laugh track which acts as a signpost for comic events. This mode of production has its basis in economics, but it has resulted in the sitcom being accused of being visually muted as well as formally rigid. The fact that the genre revolves around family-related problems that result in a moral lesson being learned has also placed limitations on the type of topics it can cover. Avoiding offensive and objectionable subject matter that may upset the mass family audience or potential advertisers, the sitcom has historically been understood as an inherently conservative form.

It is important to highlight these conventions at the outset of my study, as it is this perception of the genre that will inform my use of the term 'traditional sitcom' in

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[3] This description is derived from co-creators Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld's assertion that *Seinfeld* differed from its family-based predecessors by adopting a 'no hugging, no learning' approach. It has since been widely used in journalistic and industry discourse to describe 'traditional' American sitcoms broadcast prior to the post-network era.

the following analyses. In an attempt to differentiate themselves in the post-network marketplace and target those segments of the audience considered particularly desirable, I will demonstrate how many network and cable operators appear to have constructed their sitcom output in opposition to the family-based 'hugging and learning' format. Instead of revolving around a traditional family unit, there has been a shift toward sitcoms that feature young, single friends, who live and work in urban cities, and who are largely free of responsibilities. Moreover, rather than work through problems and resolve situations by the end of each episode, these sitcoms have begun to play with narrative structure either by refusing the moral learning process (in a similar manner to earlier incarnations of the form) or by incorporating serial techniques such as the cliffhanger. Developments in technology, government deregulation, and industry conceptions of the audience have also impacted on the production of the sitcom in terms of style and content. Moving away from the restrictions of the three-camera studio set-up and the presence of a live audience, many programmes have not only dispensed with the audible laugh track but have also begun to incorporate both the visual conventions of other television forms and the type of subject matter that was once considered off limits.

Discussing this latter point, Michael Tueth explains that in certain cases, this has resulted in 'bold new comedy that dares to offend, transgressive comedy that revels in shock and tastelessness' (2005: 26). This is an assessment that Nancy San Martin agrees with. Noting the way in which the removal of the family has allowed many post-network sitcoms to feature characters with non-normative identities and to explicitly link situation comedy and sex (amongst other previously taboo topics), she concludes that in the wake of *Friends*, the 8-9 p.m. slot previously reserved for family programming 'has become one of the most contentious hours on prime time' (2003: 37). This concept of 'contentious comedy' will frame my discussion of sitcoms in each of the following case studies. With a revised television landscape in which niche segments of the audience are targeted with material formulated according to their tastes, or rather, material formulated to challenge and question the *boundaries* of their tastes, sitcom can no longer be viewed as an inherently conservative form.

In relation to the visual aspect of the sitcom, I will also draw on John Caldwell's (1995) concept of 'televisuality' throughout my analyses. Describing what he regards to be as a new aesthetic sensibility that emerged in programming of the 1980s, Caldwell explains how television has become increasingly self-consciousness

with regards to visual style. Although aided by developments in new technology, this shift has more to do with the institutional pressures placed on the medium as a result of its transition from a three-network system to a multichannel landscape: 'Television has come to flaunt and display style. Programs battle for identifiable style-markers and distinct looks in order to gain audience share within the competitive broadcast flow' (5). This has had a significant effect on studio-based genres such as the sitcom, which were previously defined by their flat and muted visual style. As I intend to demonstrate, the sitcom has progressed from what Caldwell describes as a 'zero-degree' style to one of visual excess through the use of single camera filming, location shooting, sophisticated lighting techniques, non-linear editing, flashbacks and parodies, and the pastiche of other television forms.

Like San Martin, the sitcom *Friends* forms part of my study. However, there are certain shows that, despite meeting most of the above criteria, will not feature in the following analyses. The most notable of these are animated sitcoms such as *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-), *Beavis and Butt-head* (MTV, 1992-1997), and *South Park* (Comedy Central, 1997-). Before explaining my choices with regards to the sitcoms that are analysed, I will first point out the various reasons for excluding animated sitcoms. This is particularly important with regards to *The Simspons* because as well as being the longest-running sitcom and animated series in U.S. history to date, it has also attracted the most academic attention. As such, I will use *The Simpsons* to provide a brief overview of the various ways in which the sitcom genre has been studied within the academy.

Studying *The Simpsons*

In his discussion of television animation and the cartoon in particular, Mittell outlines how in the 1960s 'the transformation of what was once a mass-market genre with so-called "kidult" appeal into the kid-only Saturday morning margins led to some key shifts in our cultural understanding of the genre' (2004: 62). Over two decades later, this situation was reversed with the arrival of the Fox network and the half-hour animated family sitcom, *The Simpsons*. Broadcast in prime-time, the success of *The Simpsons* resulted in cable channels such as MTV and Comedy Central producing their own animated shows in the form of the aforementioned *Beavis and Butt-head* and *South Park*. Displaying the kind of transgressive humour highlighted by Tueth, these programmes did not target the mass market per se, but were rather aimed at a

young adult audience presumed to take pleasure from the crude language and offensive actions of the characters as well as the ironic and self-referential nature of the humour (2005: 33-34).

The respective channels that these sitcoms appear on work to exclude them from the following case studies. In an attempt to narrow my area of research and provide detailed analyses of the production, promotion, and reception context of the particular programmes examined, I take as my focus the sitcom output of three different types of television providers, namely the broadcast network NBC, pay-cable channel HBO, and niche-network UPN (which has since merged with The WB network to form The CW).[4] While I will provide a further explanation for this later in the chapter, the status of these programmes as animations has also influenced my decision not to include them in my analysis. This is because of the difficulties involved in comparing animated and live action sitcoms. Apart from the issue of performance, animated sitcoms adhere to different conventions than their live action counterparts, particularly with regards to verisimilitude. Thus, in order to carry out comparable case studies, I will concentrate solely on the latter form.

It is notable that despite the success of animated sitcoms on cable television, *pay*-cable channels such as Showtime and HBO have failed to produce any popular examples of the form. Due to the previous status of animated shows as low cultural texts primarily aimed at young viewers, it could be suggested that this type of programming is regarded as being devoid of the cultural cachet required to convince adult audiences to purchase it as a premium product. This is contested, however, by the success of these shows on DVD and the release of feature-length versions worldwide. Following the success of *Beavis and Butt-head Do America* (1996) and *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* (1999), *The Simpsons Movie* was released to critical acclaim in 2007, not long after Ray Richmond had declared the death of the sitcom on television. Again, this demonstrates that rather than experience inexorably decline, the sitcom has in fact diversified into other markets. Moreover, it proves the

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[4] Despite both UPN and The WB creating a number of popular programmes and achieving a certain amount of crossover success, each network was essentially competing for similar segments of the overall broadcast audience, a situation that became increasingly difficult to sustain. Ceasing to operate as individual networks in 2006, they merged to form The CW Network the same year, a move that suggests that the broadcast network landscape had, by this point, reached saturation. For the purpose of this thesis however, my analysis will concentrate solely on the sitcom output of UPN.

audiences are willing to pay for the form (or extended versions of the form), a development that Homer self-reflexively points out in the opening scene of the film. On sitting down to watch a big-screen version of *Itchy & Scratchy* (the fictional cartoon that features within the diegesis of *The Simpsons* television series), he interrupts the movie to declare 'I can't believe we're paying to see something we get on TV for free. If you ask me, everybody in this theater is a giant sucker. Especially you!' The concept of paying a fee to watch a traditional television genre is something that I will consider further in Chapter Five in relation to the sitcom output of pay-cable channel HBO.

At the time of writing, *The Simpsons Movie* has yet to be analysed in any detail by the academy, but the work that has been produced on the television series demonstrates the various ways in which the sitcom can be studied. For example, *The Simpsons* is often examined in relation to its postmodern features, as this demonstrates how the show plays with the conventions of the traditional sitcom form. While Mittell (2005) analyses its use of genre mixing and parody, Simone Knox (2006) draws on Charles Jencks's use of the term 'double-codedness' to explain how it functions as a commercial product at the same time as attaining critical success for its knowing humour and satirical wit. In addition to this, scholars such as Matthew Henry (2003), H. Peter Steeves (2005), and Jerry Herron (1993) have commented on its use of intertextuality and self-reflexivity, as well as its relation to the culture of nostalgia. *The Simpsons* has also attracted attention for its portrayal of race, ethnicity, and sexuality, and for its social effects. Both Hugo Dobson (2006) and Duncan Stuart Beard (2004) consider racial and ethnic stereotyping and depictions of global cultures within the show while Henry (2004) examines representations of homosexuality. Kevin Glynn (1996), on the other hand, analyses Bart's 'unruly image' in relation to its reception context.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, work has also been carried out on how *The Simpsons* fits into the tradition of animated comedy on television (Donnelly 2001; Stabile and Harrison 2003). What is missing, however, is an examination of the show's production context and how it fits in with the programming and scheduling strategies of the Fox network. It is this latter approach that will inform my readings of the sitcoms within this thesis. By providing detailed case studies of the sitcom output of NBC, HBO, and UPN, and by confining my research to the post-network era, I intend to provide an examination of the form that takes into account both the institutional

context of its production as well as the historical context in which it situated. This will occur in conjunction with an analysis of the textual features of each chosen sitcom.

Chapter Outline

Following on from my brief outline of some of the ways in which *The Simpsons* has been examined within the academy, Chapter Two addresses first the *lack* of work carried out on the sitcom in comparison to other television genres, and then the *limitations* of the work that does exist. Focusing on the problem of genre as a categorisation, I outline how the scholarly tendency to remove genre from history and understand it as a fixed theoretical category, must be replaced with a more dynamic, shifting model, in which genres are understood as temporal processes that develop in response to changing social, cultural, and institutional practices. With regards to the institutional context of television, I explain the differing theories of 'televisuality', 'least objectionable programming', and 'quality television' in relation to network positioning and audience demographics, before going on to consider the production of humour. As a relatively undertheorised area within the academy, I provide an overview of some of the key debates and theories in existence and consider how they relate to broadcast comedy in the form of the sitcom. This is important as despite being a comic form, many studies of the genre fail to address the production of humour and its relationship with the audience in any detail. I then conclude with a discussion of the methods and terminology employed within this thesis.

As I understand the sitcom as a flexible form that has developed over the years in response to changes within the television industry, Chapter Three provides an historical overview of the institutional structures of American television and its relationship to the various transformations that have taken place within the genre. Explaining how the television sitcom has its roots in both vaudeville and radio, I provide an extended analysis of two sitcoms from the early 1950s, *The Jack Benny Program* (CBS, 1950-64; NBC, 1964-65) and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (CBS, 1950-58). These programmes are significant as not only do they demonstrate some of the problems encountered in the genre's transition to television but they also contain the type of self-reflexivity and performativity that characterises a number of sitcoms in the post-network era.

On examining the 'classic network system' that was subsequently established within the industry, I explain how the Federal Communications Commission (FCC)

first sought to restrict the existence of a 'three-network oligopoly' before embarking on a deregulatory trend with a view to creating an 'unfettered marketplace'. Finishing with an examination of the impact that deregulation and the development of cable and satellite technologies have had on both the broadcast landscape and the sitcom form, this chapter outlines the arrival of Fox, UPN, and The WB to the marketplace. Providing a model for the others to follow, it explains how Fox positioned itself in opposition to the existing three networks by targeting young, urban, and ethnic viewers with sitcoms that offered an alternative version of the 'ideal' family.

From here on my thesis takes the form of three case studies in which I examine the sitcom output of the broadcast network NBC, pay-cable channel HBO, and niche-network UPN. The extended length of each case study allows me to combine detailed textual analysis with a consideration of the processes and practices involved in the production and reception context of each programme. This means that my work draws not just on academic theory but also on journalistic articles, interviews, and critical reviews, as well the occasional use of supplementary materials such as DVD commentaries and programme websites. The overall aim is to uncover what Mittell describes as 'the breadth of discursive enunciations around any given instance, mapping out as many positions articulating generic knowledge as possible and situating them within larger cultural contexts and relations of power' (2004: 13).

In Chapter Four, the focus of my analysis is the broadcast network NBC and the sitcoms *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Will & Grace* (1998-2006). As the top-rated network throughout the 1990s, I have chosen to concentrate on NBC because its success was largely based on a 'must-see TV' strategy that revolved around the back-to-back broadcast of sitcoms on a particular night (generally Thursday). Although in its earliest incarnation this revolved around programmes such as *The Cosby Show* and *Cheers* (with the latter followed by the spin-off *Frasier*), I will take as my starting point the sitcom *Seinfeld*, which was first broadcast in 1990. There are two reasons for this decision. First, the NBC sitcoms that preceded *Seinfeld* were either based on the domestic family format that has informed the genre since its inception or drew on the quality drama phenomenon that characterised American television in the early 1980s. *Seinfeld*, on the other hand, takes its influence largely from stand-up comedy and, as such, not only introduces innovations to the genre but also revisits, or reworks, those earlier examples of the form that drew on the traditions of the vaudeville stage.

Despite having its antecedents, I explain how *Seinfeld* functions as a model for subsequent post-network sitcoms through its focus on young, single adults living and working in the city and its use of interweaving narratives. I also examine the way in which it self-reflexively plays with notions of performativity and the sitcom 'look' by blurring the boundaries between the real and the fictional and by employing visual parody. Moving on to consider the narrative structure of *Friends*, I discuss how the show incorporates serial techniques to encourage the audience to form emotional attachments with the characters. I also consider the way in which it incorporates non-normative identities into its fictional world. This leads on to an examination of *Will & Grace*, the first network sitcom to feature a gay lead character. Beginning with an analysis of the shift in conceptions of the audience that led to the increased visibility of gay and lesbian characters on prime time television, I consider how *Will & Grace* functions as a site of contradiction through its attempts to appeal to a wide viewer demographic and the way in which power relations function within the show.

The pay-cable channel HBO, and the sitcoms *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992-1998), *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-), and *Sex and the City*, form the basis of my second case study in Chapter Five. I have chosen HBO as my focus because of the way in which it has sought to differentiate itself in the marketplace, and indeed validate its status as a subscription-based service, by constructing its original genre programming in opposition to that which is broadcast by the commercial networks. While this approach is underpinned with the marketing slogan 'It's Not TV. It's HBO.', the sitcoms broadcast by HBO are in fact primarily concerned with the nature of television and consistently work to showcase and pastiche its many forms.

In my analyses of *The Larry Sanders Show* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, I consider how each programme eschews the conventions of the traditional sitcom form in favour of the visual characteristics of the talk show and the documentary respectively. While this works to highlight the artifice of television conventions, I also explain how both programmes raise questions about the nature of performance by drawing on the real-life background of their creators and stars and by featuring well-known celebrities playing with their public personas. Although sharing many of its visual characteristics with quality drama, *Sex and the City* also uses the codes of documentary to create a type of confessional discourse similar to that which is found in women's magazines and on daytime talk shows. Describing how the show

transgresses boundaries by foregrounding the contentious subject of sex, I discuss its complex relation to morality, patriarchy, and debates around racial difference.

It is this latter debate that informs Chapter Six and my analysis of niche network UPN and the sitcoms *Girlfriends* (2000-), *Eve* (2003-2006), and *Everybody Hates Chris* (2005-). While the sitcoms broadcast by both NBC and HBO are primarily targeted at a white audience, the emergence of a multichannel environment has opened up space within the television industry for new channels to target niche audiences made up of specific racial and ethnic groups. For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to focus on the 'black-block programming' strategy of UPN, in which back-to-back sitcoms featuring entirely black casts are broadcast on a single night (generally Monday). Before considering three of these sitcoms in detail, this chapter offers an historical overview of the relationship between U.S. sitcoms and representations of blackness with regards to the discourses of 'assimilation', 'plurality', and 'multiculturalism' in particular.

Beginning with an analysis of *Girlfriends*, I explain how the show aligns itself with white notions of 'must-see TV' through the use of formal techniques such as direct address and freeze-frames. I also discuss the diverse characterisation of its main characters as well as the use of cross-promotional techniques employed throughout the series. The opportunities for cross-promotion in *Eve* rely on the off-screen status of its eponymous star as a successful black female rapper. In an attempt to align itself with hip-hop culture and encourage audience identification, I explain how *Eve* adheres to the maxim of 'keeping it real' through a strategy of 'stylised self-promotion' based on fashion and personal style rather than music. I also analyse how the show not only challenges negative black stereotypes but also reverses traditional sitcom gender roles through the use of flashback. This attention to the relationship between form and representation is taken further in my study of *Everybody Hates Chris*, the first sitcom in my analysis to offer a domestic family setting. Rather than indicate a return to the conventions of the traditional sitcom form, I demonstrate how the show examines past and present depictions of the black experience through the innovative use of voiceover narration, archive footage, non-linear editing techniques, and a retro popular music soundtrack.

In all of my analyses, I concentrate on the first few seasons of each sitcom. This is because each series develops over time and, in certain cases, the innovations that were present at the beginning of the show are replaced or appropriated as the

characters and storylines progress. This occurs most notably in *Sex and the City* and is therefore something that I will discuss further in Chapter Five. I also try to offer an examination of each sitcom's weekly set-up as well as those episodes that are marked out as 'must-see' or distinctive in some way. Although these latter examples may appear unrepresentative of the fictional world constructed in each show, they do demonstrate the dynamic nature of the form and the way in which innovative techniques are used to attract critical and audience attention to particular sitcoms in an increasingly crowded marketplace. Before moving on to consider the academic literature surrounding the sitcom in Chapter Two, I should point out that while I consider myself a fan of some of the programmes analysed within this thesis, others are not to my taste. In each instance, however, I believe that these texts continue to push the boundaries of the genre in terms of form, content, and representation.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Since the inception of television in the United States, the production of situation comedy has consistently been central to network success. With a proven ability to attract high viewing figures, the sitcom has maintained a prominent position within the prime-time schedule and has become what Hartley (2001) and Hamamoto (1989) describe as a 'staple' of television broadcasting. The importance of the genre within the industry, and its popularity with viewers, has led to it receiving a great deal of critical attention in the trade press and newspaper reporting in general. This level of analysis has not been replicated within the academy however. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, both Mick Eaton (1978) and Terry Lovell (1982) drew attention to the lack of academic work being carried out on the sitcom and, over two decades later, Mills (2005) continues to share a similar perspective. Given the longevity and popularity of the genre, Mills expresses surprise at such a situation and concludes that the persistent avoidance of sitcom analysis, 'clearly says something about the priorities which the academy is working from' (2005: 2).

In their study of American television genres, Stuart Kaminsky and Jeffrey Mahan argue that as a popular art, television is often considered to be lowbrow and therefore not worthy of 'serious study' (1985: 8). Although the existence of television studies as an academic discipline since then undoubtedly challenges this assumption, television scholars have similarly divided programming into high and low cultural texts. As a generic form that displays a clear intention to entertain its audience, sitcom has generally been regarded (alongside other forms of television comedy) as less important than programmes that are deemed to have cultural value or social relevance, such as news, documentary, and drama.[5] While this approach can be interpreted as an attempt to legitimate the study of television (particularly in relation to its more established counterpart, film studies), such divisions have also occurred within the

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[5] Although receiving less attention from scholars than many other television genres, situation comedy has tended to be the sole focus of academic analyses concerned with broadcast comedy. As a result, Mills notes that, 'academically, it appears as if stand-up, satire, radio comedy, or anything other than sitcom does not exist' (2001a: 61).

emerging discipline of cultural studies. This is highlighted by Mills who claims that despite the latter's intention to broaden academic analysis to include popular forms, 'it is clear that much work is still carried out on 'quality' texts' (2001a: 61).

The notion of what constitutes quality programming is something that I will return to later in the chapter. To begin with, however, I would like to consider briefly the way in which this apparent bias towards more serious forms of television has impacted on the study of sitcom. Discussing its position within the academy, Paul Attallah argues that situation comedy is widely regarded as an 'unworthy' discourse within an 'undeserving' medium, 'equalled only perhaps by the game show and the locally produced commercial' (2003: 95). While attitudes such as this have, unsurprisingly, limited the amount of work carried out on the form, Jonathan Bignell and Stephen Lacey suggest that even for those critics actively engaged in sitcom study, there is often a sense of 'muted embarrassment' displayed about the genre overall (2005: 12). Regularly identified as a 'known' and unimportant form that is easily understood by television practitioners and the viewing public alike, sitcom analysis has tended to suffer from the assumption that it is an established and straightforward genre that requires no further academic debate (Mills 2005: 1; 26).

Alongside such negative attitudes and commonplace assumptions, academic studies that focus primarily on the sitcom are often characterised by a somewhat simplistic view of the form. Despite scholars such as David Marc (1989), Ella Taylor (1989), and Joanne Morreale (2003) drawing attention to the way in which the sitcom has developed over the years, the prevailing perception would appear to be that of a fixed and stable genre that has developed little since its inception. For example, Hartley describes the sitcom as having a 'remarkably stable semiotic history, migrating fully formed to TV from radio [ ] and continuing to the present day with few fundamental changes' (2001: 65). This viewpoint echoes that of both Lawrence Mintz and David Grote and their analyses of the form in the 1980s. While Mintz contends that the 'basic formula' of sitcom was already established before it transferred to television (1983: 108), Grote suggests that within its short lifetime, sitcom has become an established and rigid genre that is easily recognisable to audiences: 'In less than thirty years, [sitcom] has appeared, tested some variations, settled on its basic rules, and perfected its form' (1983: 12).

When situating this viewpoint historically, it is perhaps unfair to castigate Mintz and Grote for an inability to envisage the numerous ways in which the sitcom

may continue to develop over the ensuing decades, particularly in response to new technologies. Hartley, on the other hand, has no such excuse. Writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century, he firstly fails to recognise the ways in which television sitcom differs from its radio antecedent and secondly, the manner in which the sitcom has changed and adapted over the years to differing institutional, social, and cultural practices. In contrast, Grote seems to be aware of the changing nature of the genre, which makes his statement all the more contradictory. On the one hand, he acknowledges that since its inception, the sitcom has been flexible, existing in various guises and adhering to a shifting set of rules. He also suggests, however, that by the dawn of the 1980s, the development of the genre was complete, with sitcom becoming a rigid form with a fixed set of conventions. This latter notion, that the sitcom has essentially been 'perfected' for some time, has tended to persist within the field of television studies. Existing alongside the belief that sitcom is an inherently conservative form, such attitudes have caused problems for the study of the genre.

Challenging Perceptions of the Sitcom as a Static and Conservative Form

Before going on to discuss the difficulties of genre analysis in more detail, it is important to acknowledge those scholars who have gone some way to change conceptions of the sitcom as a static form. Rather than view the sitcom as an ideal category with a fixed set of rules and conventions, an increasing number of scholars have begun to situate sitcoms historically in an attempt to demonstrate how the genre has developed over time. As briefly noted, Marc, Taylor, and Morreale are particularly representative of this approach, as is Mills, who provides a British perspective. Others, such as Jones (1992), view the sitcom in primarily commercial, rather than historical terms, but nevertheless recognise that in order to be successful in the marketplace, sitcoms must continually adapt to an ever-changing society.

Despite Mintz's assertion that it is 'rare that decades cooperate with the social historian to form periods in neat ten-year blocks', Morreale's anthology is arranged in precisely this manner (1985: 110). Presenting an overview of the sitcom from the 1950s to the end of the twentieth century, she collates a wide range of essays that include issues of class, race, and gender, and explains that by viewing sitcom chronologically, we are better able to witness its 'shifting ideological positions' (2003: xiii). Taylor and Marc also take the decade as their primary unit of analysis; an

approach that the former admits can be problematic. Concerned with the changing depiction of the family in prime-time sitcom, Taylor notes that the difficulty with 'decade thinking' is that it often seeks to impose historical issues on programming texts or to elevate minor shifts to the status of major development. This does not mean, however, that it cannot be useful. In fact, Taylor contends that while the process of 'naming a decade helps to shape it', it also appropriates elements from within the culture, thus highlighting the prevailing social and cultural concerns of the time (1989: 16).

This is what Marc aims to reveal when he attributes specific labels to the particular types of sitcom being produced in each distinct era. For example, characteristic of a period in which families began relocating from the city to the suburbs, the 'suburban domesticoms' of the 1950s aimed to teach viewers how to be part of an *ideal* family and ultimately how to be consumers. The 'fantasy sitcoms' of the 1960s, on the other hand, can be understood as an attempt to divert attention from real-life events, such as the Vietnam War, by offering the audience a period of 'deep escapism' instead (1989: 126). Although this suggests that programming trends are essentially reflective of changes in society, both Marc and Taylor recognise the way in which genre development has its basis in economics. Driven by the need to secure advertising revenue, the style and content of television programming is often dependent on which section of the audience is considered 'desirable' by advertisers. This approach is generally considered to have come of age in the 1970s, with the emergence of what Marc and Taylor respectively term 'literate' and 'relevant' sitcoms. In an attempt to appeal to a younger, urban audience in possession of a high level of disposable income, such programmes began to feature the type of controversial subject matter from which sitcoms had traditionally shied away. Moreover, they also played with the sitcom form as, for the first time in television history, 'the networks were faced with the problem of creating programming that would attract people who had been watching television all their lives' (Marc 1989: 165).

As each of these studies demonstrates, the style and content of the sitcom has developed over time in accordance with the type of audience being targeted. Moreover, as suggested by Morreale, so has its ideological position. Yet, with regards to the academy, the industry, and even the audience, the sitcom still seems to be understood as an inherently conservative form. This is directly related to the centrality

of the family within the genre and also the types of commercial pressures placed on the broadcast industry. Describing the nuclear family as an 'ideologically conservative social unit', Jane Feuer explains that the domestic sitcom has tended to 'affirm rather than question the status quo', thus compounding its image as a conservative form (2001a: 69). Although recognising that the emergence of workplace sitcoms allows the form to be seen as 'ideologically more contentious', she also points out that they too are often based along quasi-familial lines (2001a: 69). As well as affirming the dominant family ideology, the sitcom has also invited charges of patriarchy, due to the 'Father Knows Best' approach first adopted in the 1950s. Scholars such as Kathleen Rowe (1990) and Patricia Mellencamp (1997) have challenged this viewpoint, however, with their alternative readings of the 'unruly woman' in programmes such as *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-57), *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (CBS, 1950-58), and the more recent, *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988-97).

Existing within the commercial pressures of the broadcast industry, Jones (1992) views the sitcom as a mass construction commodity that must remain ideologically conservative if it is to appeal to the largest possible audience. Disregarding, or rather unable to foresee, the rise of niche broadcasters and narrowcasting, Mills explains that this is a commonly held viewpoint amongst theorists who believe that 'the pressures of commercialism have rendered the radical nature of comedy obsolete' (2005: 22). The most prominent exponent of this outlook is Grote. Describing the television sitcom as an entirely new form of comedy which is 'encouraged by the unique economic conditions of American broadcasting', Grote suggests that by relying on repetition and stability, the sitcom ultimately rejects the anarchic and progressive potential of the traditional comic plot (1983: 11). By rejecting change, therefore, the sitcom cannot be considered as anything other than a static and conservative form.

This rather neat theory is problematised by the work of both Eaton (1978) and Hamamoto (1989). Noting the way in which the narrative of the television series is different to that of the serial and the self-contained text, Eaton suggests that the repetitive nature of sitcom 'seems less to reflect a conservatism about the content of the shows' but rather must be attributed to 'the demands of the time-slotting system' (1978: 33). Likewise, Hamamoto attributes the popularity of the form to two *complementary* characteristics, namely 'its multivalent social ideologies and mores

that function within the large framework of liberal democratic ideology' and 'the commercial system that produces and distributes the product for private profit alone' (1989: 1). For Hamamoto, the sitcom has remarked upon the major developments in postwar American history and, as such, has often embodied oppositional *and* emancipatory beliefs. This emancipation, however, has at once been contained by the commercial nature of television.

These challenges to the notion of sitcom as a rigid television form that is resistant to change are lent further support through the work of Mills (2005) and Barry Langford (2005a), who both believe the sitcom to be more flexible and complex than the majority of academic analysis would suggest. Recognising that there are a number of core conventions that help define the genre, Langford nonetheless questions the 'apparent simplicities of the situation comedy' (2005a: 15). Mills also has difficulty with the definitions of the form on offer, drawing attention to a relatively recent trend in which many programmes have abandoned 'some of the genre's most obvious characteristics precisely because they're seen as so simplistically generic' (2005: 25). Significantly, he goes on to suggest that this abandonment has rarely led to confusion over whether these shows can be categorised and understood as sitcoms or not. This highlights an incongruity between the way in which the academy categorises programmes and the way they are experienced in everyday life. While audiences willingly accept changes within the form, the academy seeks to impose paradigmatic structures on the genre, perceiving it as a static, rigid, and 'known' quantity. This raises questions as to exactly how the academy defines the television sitcom and what problems are encountered when studying genre in general.

The problem of genre as a categorisation and as an analytical tool
As explained by Neale, the term genre is a 'French word meaning "type" or "kind"' that has come to occupy 'an important place in the study of the cinema for over thirty years' (2000: 9). Yet, the term itself has a much longer tradition and indeed is not restricted to a means of categorisation within the discipline of film. On the contrary, it is widely used to categorise texts and utterances within the fields of literature, media, music, and linguistics, amongst others. This does not mean, however, that understandings of genre, along with its uses as an analytical tool, are simple and

straightforward. For example, in his study of modern genre theory, David Duff notes not just the origins of the term but also its long and problematic history:

> Having functioned since Aristotle as a basic assumption of Western literary discourse, shaping critical theory and creative practice for more than two thousand years, the notion of genre is one whose meaning, validity and purpose have repeatedly been questioned in the last two hundred (2000: 1).

Tracing the modern debate on genre to the European Romantic movement, Duff states that this period has been 'typically characterised by a steady erosion of the perception of genre' and that, having undergone a series of redefinitions, the word 'now seems to have lost most of its negative charge' (1-2). This negative charge is related to the way in which genre has tended to be understood as 'formulaic' and 'convention-bound', and thus the opposite of originality and self-expression (Gelder 2004: 43). However, as Duff explains, anti-generic tendencies appear to have given way to 'an aesthetic stance which is much more hospitable to notions of genre, and which no longer sees as incompatible the pursuit of individuality and the espousal of "generic" identities, of whatever sort' (2000: 1). This shift in conceptions of genre supports Kress and Threadgold's claim that '*genre* is valorised very differently in different contexts' (1988: 219).

To this we could add that genre is also valorised (or understood) differently in different disciplines. Yet, it is important to note the sustained influence that work carried out within the field of literature has had on both film and television genre theorists. For example, although attempting to question some of the claims and assumptions surrounding this type of study, film theorists such as Rick Altman (1999) and Steve Neale (2000) nevertheless draw on the work of the literary scholars Wellek and Warren (1954), Northrop Frye (1957), Jonathan Culler (1975), and Tzvetan Todorov (1976), amongst others, to inform their debates. As Altman himself notes, 'much that is said about film genre is simply borrowed from a long tradition of literary genre criticism' (1999: 13). This, in turn, has impacted on the study of television, as rather than redefine genre theory in accordance with television as a medium, many scholars have been content to simply import existing terms, definitions, and approaches from film. This is problematic because there are many practices unique to television that established theories of genre fail to account for, and

this is something that I will return to shortly. First, however, I want to address some of the problems surrounding wider debates on genre and film in particular.

While Duff's aforementioned edited collection is concerned with presenting key essays on modern genre theory from a range of disciplines, Altman begins his comprehensive study of film genre with an analysis of classical genre theory, returning to Aristotle and the study of literature. With the Greek philosopher taking poetry as his object of study, Altman explains how Aristotle put forward the unsubstantiated claims that 'poetry exists "in itself" and that a kind can have an "essential quality"' (1999: 2). By neglecting to consider the question of who defined poetry and to what end, in addition to emphasising its internal characteristics at the expense of the kinds of experience it fosters, Altman believes that Aristotle's work 'concealed a set of assumptions tacitly adopted by virtually every subsequent genre theorist' (2). This involves taking an already defined object of study (rather than defining one's own) and focusing on textual analysis in an attempt to discover the components of individual genres. As such, theoretical questions about genre and the relationship between textual and experiential concerns tend to remain unanswered (3).

Altman then moves on to explain how Aristotle's understanding of literary works of 'tragedy' impacted on the history of genre theory:

> For the Greek philosopher, tragedies are defined by their essential properties, and because they share essential properties they can be expected to have similar effects on viewers (i.e. arousing pity and fear). How different the history of genre theory might have been had Aristotle taken the opposite position, identifying all texts that arouse pity and fear as tragedies (10).

This is something that can be considered in relation to comedy. For example, not all texts that produce laughter in an audience are considered by genre theorists to be works of comedy. Instead, all comic texts are believed to share essential qualities that work to produce laughter. Yet, as Mills notes, the identification of these 'essential qualities' remains a varied, individualised, and contested area (2005: 29).

While classical theorists were concerned with the broad categories of tragedy, comedy, and epic, and the neoclassical period dealt with the problem of mixed genres (such as the tragicomedy), film and television theorists take as their object of study more specific classifications, in the form of westerns, musicals, melodrama, sitcoms, soap operas, and so on. What is notable about these groupings is that they are

categorised according to different elements, something which Robert Stam discusses in relation to film genre:

> While some genres are based on story content (the war film), others are borrowed from literature (comedy, melodrama) or from other media (the musical). Some are performer-based (the Astaire-Rogers films) or budget-based (blockbusters), while others are based on artistic status (the art film), racial identity (Black cinema), locat[ion] (the Western) or sexual orientation (Queer cinema). Some, like documentary and satire might better be seen as "transgenres" (2000: 14).

It is also important to recognise that theorists need not necessarily agree that such groupings constitute a genre. For example, Astaire and Rogers films may be considered to be part of the musical genre while satire is described by Neale and Krutnik as a 'mode' of comedy rather than what Stam refers to as a 'transgenre' (1990: 19). To further complicate these categorisations, Langford notes the way in which video stores use classifications such as 'latest releases' (a 'time-dated cross-generic category') or 'classics' (both evaluative and temporal) to organise their stock while, in the earliest days of cinema, distributors tended to classify films according to length (in feet of film) and duration (2005b: 3-4). These various approaches raise questions about the supposed 'naturalness' of genres, and the way in which they come into being and indeed change over time.

With regards to the usefulness of generic categories as well as their function within the academy, Altman explains that the reason that genre theory endures is 'because of its ability to perform multiple operations simultaneously . . . Genre, it would appear, is not your average descriptive term, but a complex concept with multiple meanings' (1999: 14). Neale expands on this by quoting Tom Ryall's (1975/6) definition of film genre, something I believe can equally be applied to television:

> The master image for genre criticism [ ] is a triangle composed of artist/film/audience. Genres may be defined as patterns/forms/styles/ structures which transcend individual films, and which supervise both their construction by the filmmaker, and their reading by an audience (Ryall cited in Neale 2000: 12).

Thus, it is what Altman refers to as the 'polyvalence' of genres which makes them attractive to the academy, as they allow for studies that involve a consideration of

production and programming decisions, textual characteristics, and audience expectations and interpretations (1999: 14). In addition to this, Neale also emphasises the importance of '*historicizing* genre definitions', something that Langford's discussion of the early categorisation of films (according to duration and length) demonstrates (Neale 1990: 57). This is indicative of a shift within genre studies, as theorists move away from simply focusing on the text itself and the assumption that it has some sort of 'essential qualities', toward understanding genre as being culturally and historically relative.

This is something that Andrew Tudor drew attention to in his work on genre in the 1970s:

> The crucial characteristics that distinguish a *genre* are not only characteristics inherent in the films themselves; they also depend on the particular culture with which we are operating . . . The way in which the *genre* term is applied can quite conceivably vary from case to case. *Genre* notions – except in the case of arbitrary definition – are not critics' classifications made for special purposes; they are sets of cultural conventions. *Genre* is what we collectively believe it to be (1974: 139).

Tudor's final point that genre is 'what *we* collectively believe it to be' [my emphasis] is often cited to highlight the supposed naturalness of genre definitions (Mills 2005: 29). However, many scholars fail to draw attention to the fact that this naturalness is dependent on the cultural conventions in operation within a particular time and place (therefore, it is necessary to ask who 'we' are in each instance). Neale has gone some way to emphasise the importance of this by stating that genres are not static, ideal categories with essential qualities, but rather are dynamic processes that change over time and are informed by complex cultural practices. For example, discussing the way in which *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) is regularly considered to be an early and influential example of the western genre, Neale explains how Charles Musser (1984) puts forward a convincing argument that, on its release, the film was 'not primarily perceived in the context of the Western', as the term was yet to enter public use in this way (Musser cited in Neale 1990: 55). Thus, it was only retrospectively that the film began to classified as a western, rather than as part of the 'chase film' or railway genre' for example, demonstrating the way in which the generic status of texts can change over time.

Neale also argues that the role of institutional discourses should be acknowledged in the construction of genres, and genre expectations in particular. Using the term 'inter-textual relay' devised by Gregory Lukow and Steven Ricci (1984), he explains how promotional materials, such as advertisements, stills, reviews, and posters, work to provide 'sets of labels, terms, and, expectations which will come to characterize the genre as a whole' (1990: 49). As a result, Neale suggests that industrial and journalistic discourses are important in understanding how genres circulate within the public sphere, as opposed to simple being constructed in a 'theoretical' sense within the academy (52). With each of these points in mind, I will shortly go on to discuss the importance of understanding genre as a temporal process informed by cultural practices in my discussion of the sitcom. The significance of television's 'inter-textual relay' in characterising the sitcom genre will also be apparent through my examination of industrial and journalistic discourses in each of the following case studies.

Referring to what he refers to as the 'empiricist's dilemma', Tudor underlines another difficulty experienced by genre theorists with regards to selecting their object of study:

> To take a *genre* such as the western, analyze it, and list its principal characteristics is to beg the question that we must first isolate the body of films that are westerns. Bu they can only be isolated on the basis of the 'principal characteristics', which can only be discovered from the films themselves after they have been isolated (1974: 135-8).

Thus, the theorist often reproduces the initial assumptions that led to the selection of films in the first instance. Tudor's solution is to out forward an account of how genres operate in the 'interplay between culture, audiences, films, and filmmakers' (139)**.** It is this notion that informs Mittell's 'cultural approach' to television genre, which I will draw on throughout this thesis. Discussing the reasons why television programmes are not grouped according to their position in the schedule (such as '8.30 p.m. programmes'), Mittell explains that genres are more than just any categorical system: 'They must be culturally operative within a number of spheres of media practices, employed by critics, industries, and audiences' (2004: 10).

Developing alongside these approaches is another method which takes as its main focus the social and cultural significance of particular genres, or rather the functions that they perform. This socio-cultural theory tends to be divided into two, in

the form of the 'ritual' and the 'ideological' approach, and has been examined extensively in relation to film (see Cawelti 1976; Schatz 1981; Wright 1995). With regards to the former, Thomas Schatz has described genre filmmaking as 'a form of collective cultural expression', and hence, as Neale suggests, a vehicle for 'the exploration of ideas, ideals, cultural values and ideological dilemmas central to [American] society' (Schatz 1981: 13; Neale 2000: 220). In the case of the latter, on the other hand, Judith Hess Wright sees genre films as serving the 'interests of the ruling class by assisting in the maintenance of the status quo' (cited in Grant 1995: 41). These socio-cultural approaches to genre are discussed by Jane Feuer (1987), specifically in relation to the sitcom (with the addition of which she refers to as the 'aesthetic' approach). This is something that I will consider further in my discussion of sitcom as generic category, along with some of the problems associated with television genre more generally.

Television Genre and Defining the Sitcom

In his initial call for a cultural approach to television genre, Mittell states that 'every aspect of television exhibits a reliance on genre' (2001: 3). As Geraghty notes then, it is perhaps of 'no surprise that television genres have become central to popular discussion about television and to academic research (2005: 308). As such, there is a wide range of academic literature dealing with specific television genres. This includes the soap opera (Geraghty 1991; Allen 1985; 1995; Mumford 1995), drama (Nelson 1992; Caughie 2000), and the sitcom (Feuer 1987; Jones 1992; Mills 2005), along with Creeber's (2001) edited collection which also includes a range of non-fictional genres. This is not to say, however, that many of the aforementioned difficulties surrounding the study of genre have been solved. Indeed, the notion of genre is perhaps complicated further in relation to the medium of television. For example, in contrast to film or literature, a television genre such as the sitcom is defined according to a wide variety of factors, such as content, narrative structure, shooting style, performance style, types of actors, programme length, and scheduling (Mills 2005: 26). Moreover, Abercrombie also highlights the way in which the 'flow' of television makes it 'more difficult to sustain the purity of the genre in the viewing experience' (1996: 45).

By importing existing terms from film and literature, television genre analysis has failed to account for many of the practices unique to the medium of television,

such as scheduling, segmentation, and serialisation. Moreover, by failing to challenge existing theories and approaches, television genre analysis often suffers from being based on a number of assumptions. Taking sitcom as an example, Mittell explains the way in which the concept of genre circulates in everyday cultural experience: 'Genres are so common throughout various arenas of cultural practice that their definitions can often seem like givens – we all agree upon a basic understanding of what a sitcom is, so no further elaboration is needed' (2004: 1). While the aim of the academy should always be to 'question the categories that seem natural or assumed', the very ubiquity of television genre often obscures this objective, allowing common sense definitions to become accepted and circulated as the norm (1).

Situation comedy, in particular, is a prime example of a genre that is assumed to be 'known', not only by the industry and audience, but also by the academy. According to Feuer, sitcom is the most basic of television formats and, as such, 'we are all capable of identifying its salient features' (1987: 120). Outlining what she regards these features to be, Feuer specifies that the sitcom must be presented within a half-hour format, have a basis in humour, and revolve around a 'problem of the week' that is resolved by the end of each episode (120). Offering a structural definition with no reference to content (except for the vague indication that any content must be humorous), Feuer's definition is exceptionally broad. Apart from the fact that a large number of television programmes do not exceed thirty minutes and have some sort of basis in humour, the notion of resolution is an integral part of narrative structure in general.

Discussing the relationship between narrative and genre, Nick Lacey draws on the work of Todorov to explain the way in which most narratives can be fitted into a very simple structure, e.g., an *initial situation*; a problem that provides a *disruption* to the situation; a *resolution* to the problem (2000: 27). However, the *type* of resolution that is reached is dependant on whether the text itself is a single, hermetic text, such as a feature film or work of literature, or whether it is part of an episodic series or continuing serial and is thus open-ended. Highlighting the differences between the two in terms of narrative resolution, both Ellis (1992) and Neale and Krutnik (1990) point to the way in which closure in the single text is established through a new equilibrium that differs from that which was disrupted at the start. Focusing on what Lacey terms the 'transformational element' of narrative progression, resolution in the single text involves some sort of change taking place that impacts not only on the

situation but also on the characters, allowing them to learn from their experiences (2000: 29).

This is not the case with the majority of fictional television narratives, which are generally divided into series and serials.[6] As explained by Ellis, broadcast television is characterised by the segment and, as such, features programming that offers not a totalising vision or final closure as its distinctive mode of narration but a 'continuous reconfiguration of events' (1992: 147). Consisting of a narrative that is circular rather than linear, resolution in the episodic series sees a return to the initial situation as opposed to a progression toward 'a new harmony' (147). On restoring the original equilibrium, the programme is able to start again the following week, from the same point, with the characters experiencing no change in their situation and having learnt nothing from their experiences. As with the episodic series, television serials are also characterised by the segment, featuring a number of episodes that are broadcast in weekly instalments. However, in terms of narrative structure, the serial consists of one overarching narrative (excluding subplots) that unfolds over the course of the entire season. Although the characters in this instance do experience change as the narrative develops, resolution is postponed until the final broadcast, presenting viewers instead with a cliffhanger at the end of each episode rather than an overall resolution.[7]

In terms of academic study, the sitcom has historically been offered up as a prime example of the episodic television series and, as such, our understanding of the genre has become intrinsically bound up with its perceived circular narrative structure. According to Mintz, 'the formula is the key element in understanding television content (as distinct from the contexts of production-distribution-consumption, a separate and perhaps more than equal concern)' (1985: 114). Although Mintz offers a more detailed definition of the sitcom than Feuer by highlighting the use of recurring characters within the same premise and the presence of a live studio audience, he nevertheless stresses that the most important feature of

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[6] This is not to say that television does not feature a number of made-for-television movies, single plays, or one-off dramas. However, the large majority of fictional programming is long-running rather than self-contained and, as such, television is generally characterised by episodic narratives.

[7] It should be noted here that soap operas, which are another important staple of the television schedule, are slightly different in terms of narrative. As a continuing serial, each individual episode does indeed conclude with a cliffhanger. However, as soaps are structured to run indefinitely, there is no ultimate resolution that the narrative progresses toward.

the genre is its cyclical nature, in which the 'normal status quo' is restored by the end of each episode (1985: 115). This return to the status quo has led many scholars to characterise the sitcom as an essentially static form, a viewpoint that Feuer discusses in her influential analysis of television genre.

Taking sitcom as a specific example, Feuer identifies the three main approaches to genre as ideological, ritual, and aesthetic, and uses the work of (Grote 1983), Newcomb (1974), and Marc (1984) to illustrate each of these viewpoints respectively. Explaining the way in which the conception of the sitcom as a static form is important in each instance, she notes that different versions of the sitcom can be constructed according to whether critics interpret this static nature in either negative or progressive terms (1987: 120-132). For example, adopting a negative view of sitcom structure, Grote suggests that by refusing to incorporate change of any kind, sitcoms reject what he believes to be the anarchic aspect of traditional comedy, or rather, the ability of comedy to alter the social order by rebelling against the dominant authority. While Newcomb's ritualistic model sees the sitcom provide us with reassurance and security regarding the cultural status quo, Marc's analysis of the Paul Henning sitcom, *The Beverly Hillbillies* (CBS, 1962-71), offers the most progressive approach by suggesting that the static sitcom form can operate as a social critique, allowing us to challenge perceived norms and values as opposed to reinforcing them.

By understanding the sitcom as an essentially static form and by using this conception as a starting point for their analysis, each of these critics readily accept the circular narrative structure as an inherent part of the genre. This approach presents a problem however, as it relies on fixed theoretical categories that do not necessarily correspond with how genres operate in everyday life. As demonstrated by Mills, the notion that sitcom consists of a circular rather than linear narrative that must always return to the initial situation actually works to exclude certain programmes from the generic corpus (2005: 27). For example, how can we define post-network shows such as *Friends* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* as sitcoms when the former regularly includes developing storylines and cliffhangers and the fourth season of the latter consists of one overarching narrative that reaches its ultimate resolution in the final episode? Mills himself discusses this problem in relation to HBO's *Sex and the City*, which he initially refers to as a 'comedy drama', before going on to describe it as a 'genre-defining' sitcom (24; 48). While the reason for this shift can be found in his assertion

that hybrid forms are 'notoriously subjective', an observation that renders the term 'comedy drama' somewhat inadequate as a definition, he nevertheless states that the decision as to whether a programme is considered to be a sitcom or not, 'is in the end a personal matter' (24; 26). This is something that I will consider in more detail in Chapter Five when I include *Sex and the City* in my examination of the sitcom output of HBO.

The fact that programmes such as *Friends, Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and *Sex and the City* are indeed regularly understood and promoted as sitcoms suggests that although television scholars, executives, and audiences may appear to share a basic understanding of what a genre such as the sitcom is, in practice it is actually extremely difficult to define. Taking this into consideration, it is important for television genre studies to acknowledge that genre is not simply a scholarly or theoretical term but a term that also circulates within industry and audience discourses. As such, any analysis of a genre such as the sitcom should take into account not only the institutional context of its production but also the historical context in which it is situated.

Despite providing a limited definition of the sitcom herself, Feuer recognises that there is a tendency within academic theories to remove genre from history and to emphasise structure over development, thus making it 'impossible to explain changes or to see genre as a dynamic model' (1987: 125). Following on from this assertion, scholars such as Mittell have constructed an alternative approach to genre that emphasises the importance of 'historicizing genre definitions' while also considering 'the influence of forces outside generic texts', such as changing cultural circumstances, industrial motivations, and audience practices (2004: 6). Unlike those critics who attempt to provide an inherent meaning of a particular genre, this alternative approach refuses to view genres as ahistorical and static, understanding them instead as cultural products that are 'constituted by media practices and subjected to ongoing change and redefinition' (1).

By treating genres as 'timeless essences defined by an inner core', genre theory often focuses on the similarities between programmes that exist within a particular genre, rather than any differences they may feature (Mittell 2004: 9). Characterising the majority of US sitcoms as derivative, Mintz provides a good example of this by dismissing those programmes that adhere to the basic sitcom formula as uninteresting and by suggesting that any further work on them is

unnecessary. Instead, his analysis concentrates on sitcoms that he believes to be significant, namely *The Honeymooners* (CBS, 1955-56), *The Phil Silvers Show* (CBS, 1955-59), and *I Love Lucy*, because the quality of the talent and characterisations in each work to transcend sitcom conventions (1985: 109).

According to Langford, this is representative of a standard critical strategy within the academy, which he refers to as 'the redemption of the exceptional object' [author's emphasis] (2005a: 16). Seeking to discover an underlying seriousness, a depth of characterisation, or the use of high production values within individual programmes, this strategy aims to relieve the 'embarrassment' of studying sitcom (or boredom, as Mintz might describe it). This attempt to mark out certain programmes is also noted by Neale in his examination of the problems that arise with regards to definitional approaches to genre. Discussing the difficulty in producing an exhaustive list of the characteristic components that make up each individual genre, Neale argues that 'more elaborate definitions often seem to throw up exceptions', thus excluding certain programmes from the generic corpus (1990: 57). It is these 'exceptions', however, that seem to be of most interest to certain scholars. By adopting such an approach, it would appear that the overall aim of such scholars is to elevate specific programmes, and thus the field of study, to something more significant than mere sitcom or indeed entertainment programming.[8]

This contradictory approach can be avoided however if, following Mittell, genre is treated not as a static, ideal category with an inherent meaning, but as a process that is 'inherently temporal'. Instead of considering formula separately from the contexts of production, distribution, and reception, television analysis must examine the various cultural practices that inform our understanding of genre within a particular historical instance. This makes genre an altogether more complex proposition. Discussing this complexity in relation to sitcom, Mills argues that there has always been an element of flexibility 'not only within the industrial structures which produce sitcom, but also within audiences' reading techniques' (2005: 25). Yet, the academy has continued to treat genres as rigid and static, especially with regards to sitcom.

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[8] Perhaps aware of the contradictory nature of such an approach, Mintz attempts to distance himself by refusing to elevate the 1970s sitcom *M*A*S*H* to 'a higher status then mere sitcom'. This is despite his assertion that it 'departed significantly from several sitcom traditions and formulas' (1985: 112-113).

As an active process, Mittell explains the way in which genre can be 'fluid over time yet fairly coherent at any given moment' and criticises the academy for repeatedly failing to recognise this (2004: 16): 'Attempts to provide the inherent meaning of a genre such as the sitcom, which has had a widely varying history for over fifty years, seem automatically doomed to oversimplification and partiality' (5). By allowing genre to become a dynamic, shifting model, academic scholarship is finally able to progress towards conceiving of genre in ways that are comparable to how it is actually culturally produced and experienced. Taking this into consideration, my examination of sitcom will focus on a particular historical instance, namely the post-network era, in which American television has been transformed from a closed system dominated by three major networks to an open marketplace consisting of over one hundred competitors each targeting specific segments of the audience. As a result, rather than base my analysis solely on individual texts, I will also consider a wide range of institutional factors, including government regulation, developments in technology, programme production, channel segmentation, scheduling practices, and audience demographics. Before embarking on this analysis, however, I will first provide an overview of the type of institutional studies that exist with regards to American television and the genre of sitcom in particular.

Analysing Television Institutions

In addition to dismissing the notion of an 'inherent meaning' of a text, Robert Thompson and Gary Burns argue that, by the 1990s, academic criticism was also beginning to reject the concept of individual authorship:

> Once we recognize that every text – whether it be a novel, a painting, a poem, a symphony, or a TV show – is generated by a complex web of cultural, social, political, and formal conventions and expectations, it is irresponsible to continue to look at texts in the simplistic way they used to be looked at. The old idea that the lone artist-genius is the exclusive source of meaning in a text, and that the role of the critic is to find and explicate this meaning, is no longer tenable in light of the critical theory developed in the past twenty years (1990: ix).

While this statement is concerned with a wide variety of artistic texts, it is important to note that the conception of the author has always been somewhat problematic for television scholarship. Like film, television is, after all, a collaborative medium. Yet, while film criticism has historically assigned authorship to the director, this model has

not been easily transferable to television. In contrast, the medium of television has tended to offer numerous candidates for authorial accountability, from the producers, directors, and writers of particular programmes, to broadcast networks, television executives, and, in the case of a number of sitcoms, even the stars themselves.[9]

Rather than attempt to assign one author to the televisual text, Thompson and Burns suggest that it is infinitely more productive to 'examine how various authors work within the institutional, cultural, and economic settings that characterize the television industry' (1990: x) It is notable that this assertion makes no reference to the televisual text itself as television criticism has tended to remain divided between a theoretical approach drawn from film studies and an institutional approach derived from cultural studies. With the former concerned with critiquing the text in an attempt to explicate meaning, often at the expense of discussing production processes, the latter tends to examine modes of production without any reference to the final text.

While I have already provided examples of theoretical approaches in my discussion of television genre analysis, the work of both Mittell (2004) and Auletta (1992) is representative of scholarship that privileges institution over text. For example, although offering a valuable interpretation of genre as a dynamic shifting model that is grounded in a particular historical instance, Mittell also suggests that deep structural analysis of individual programmes should be dismissed in favour of 'surface manifestations and common articulations' (2004: 13). As a result, his analysis of the sitcoms *Soap* (ABC, 1977-81) and *The Simpsons* rely heavily on the testimony of writers and producers without examining whether the texts themselves support or challenge their outlook. Likewise, Auletta's work begins with a disclaimer of the kind that is often found in critical literature surrounding television institutions. Emphasising his intention to uncover the business nature of television and the people who reside behind the scenes, he acknowledges that he has been unable to probe the television shows themselves, or, indeed, the impact of television on our lives (1992: 5-6). Although I commend Auletta for actively engaging with members of the industry in an attempt to trace the decision-making process that occurs within

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[9] Beginning with *The Jack Benny Program*, *I Love Lucy*, and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, and continuing with *Roseanne* and *Ellen*, sitcoms have often been noted for the strength and style of their comic performances. The fact that these performers have also been involved in the production process, either as producer, writer, or showrunner, has led many scholars to produce studies in which the central performer is considered to be the overall author of the piece. See Putterman (1995) on Jack Benny; Rowe (1990) on Roseanne; Mellencamp (1997) on Lucy and Gracie.

television production, I do not believe that it need be at the expense of textual analysis or the oft-neglected issue of television aesthetics. Instead, I would suggest a more integrated approach to the study of television is needed, in which the textual features of a programme are analysed in conjunction with its institutional context.

In his discussion of what he terms 'televisuality', i.e., a new type of aesthetic sensibility that emerged in television programming of the 1980s, John Caldwell (1995) is one of the few scholars to demonstrate that an integrated approach to the study of television is possible. Indeed, Jeremy Butler argues that Caldwell is almost unique in his ability to bring together 'screen theory, industry discourse, and television aesthetics – a trail that was originally marked by John Ellis's *Visible Fictions* in 1982' (1997: 373-380). Describing televisuality as an 'important historical moment in television's presentational manner, one defined by excessive stylization and visual exhibitionism', Caldwell analyses the way in which the 'look' of television has been used within the post-network era to distinguish each network's programming from the ever-growing number of competitors in the marketplace (1995: 352). Moreover, as opposed to positioning television as a domestic medium characterised by sound rather than image and viewed in a passive or distracted manner, televisuality deliberately foregrounds the visual aspect of the medium in an attempt to provide programming with 'event-status' and to encourage repeated viewing and loyalty from viewers.

This is in contrast to the 'least objectionable programming' theory put forward by Todd Gitlin in the early 1980s (1983: 61). Concerned with the themes of 'power, politics, and the nature of the decision-making process governing prime-time television', Gitlin firstly contends that as a business funded solely by advertising, the aim of network television is not to create *purposeful content* for viewers but to create *appealing audiences* for advertisers (11; 56). His in-depth interviews with various members of industry personnel then go on to suggest that one of the main ways of achieving this is to avoid material that may be deemed offensive or objectionable by viewers and which would thus encourage them to switch over to another channel or turn off the television set altogether.

Grounded in particular historical instances, these two approaches are illustrative of the way in which different institutional structures work to produce different conceptions of the audience, thus impacting on programme production. For example, in its earliest days, television was understood as a broadcast medium

targeted at a mass national audience, much in the same way as its predecessor, radio. With advertising revenue coming from large companies that manufactured mass consumer goods, the most appealing audience that the networks could construct was generally the *widest* possible audience, e.g., an audience made up of the entire family. Due to the combination of a strict government licensing system and the high production costs of programming, the marketplace in the 1960s and 1970s was dominated by just three major networks (CBS, NBC, and ABC) and thus operated as a closed oligopoly (Mittell 2003b: 44; Curtain 2003: 122-123). With each network able to expect around a third of the available viewing audience, it was in their best interests to maintain the status quo by avoiding innovative and potentially objectionable programming in favour of conservative material that aimed to offer 'something for everyone' (Curtain 2003: 123).

While it is debatable whether such programmes have ever existed, the idea of television targeting a mass audience with undemanding programming tends to persist. This is despite the fact that Gitlin's 1983 study actually goes on to complicate the relationship between networks, audiences, and advertisers on two counts. For example, discussing the different histories of each network, Gitlin firstly suggests that, historically, CBS, NBC, and ABC's audiences have differed according to the size and location of each network's affiliate stations. As CBS signed up more affiliates first, its audience has traditionally been disproportionately older and more rural-based than that of its competitors while ABC, the third network to enter the marketplace, attracted a younger, more urban-based audience. Secondly, Gitlin goes on to explain the way in which television networks aim to segment the audience through the standard practice of scheduling. For instance, sitcoms have traditionally been broadcast at 8 p.m. prime-time in an attempt to attract a family audience while cartoons are regularly confined to Saturday mornings, a time when children are expected to be watching. This subsequently has an effect on programme content as each time-slot and target audience helps 'dictate different thresholds for censorship' (1983: 58).

With each of these factors able to be traced back to the inception of television, the straightforward perception that the widest possible audience has historically been the most appealing to advertisers is called into question. In addition, the established notion that demographic profiling was not applied within the television industry until 1970, when there was a shift by CBS in the conception of the audience, also becomes

problematic. Although each offering various explanations for such a shift, Feuer (1986), Taylor (1989), Thompson (1996), and indeed Gitlin (1983), all point to this as the moment when the television audience began to be viewed in terms of demographics. Despite being the top-rated network in the country, CBS executives recognised that theirs was an ageing audience based in less-populated, rural areas and if they were to remain in the top position there would have to be a radical overhaul of their programming strategy. Therefore, in an attempt to attract younger, urban-dwelling viewers with high disposable incomes, the popular line-up of rural, conservative sitcoms was dropped in favour of more ambiguous, liberal comedies dealing with socially relevant issues. While this narrative is indeed reflective of the period, Mark Alvey argues that instead of occurring as part of a sudden 'sea-change' in the conception of the audience, the shift that took place in 1970 was rather a 'culmination' of more than a decade of research and rhetoric (2004: 41-49). Undertaking a detailed and thorough analysis of available Neilsen ratings and audience research documents of the time, Alvey concludes that NBC had in fact embraced the notion of upscale demographics as far back as 1963. With a pronounced emphasis on both the quality of its audience for late-night programming and the aesthetic value of its output, it was this programming strategy that influenced CBS's later shift.

Alvey's use of audience ratings and research documents highlights the way in which the majority of academic analysis surrounding television institutions rely on personal interviews with key individuals to gain an insight into both corporate and creative decisions. As a result, such studies are often guilty of accepting 'official' versions of events that are both subjective and predisposed to framing the particular institution or individual in a positive light. Caldwell (1995) attempts to avoid this by using his experience as a video practitioner to underpin both his analysis of the text and his examination of technological developments within the industry. However, as noted by Butler, there are instances in which Caldwell presumes that 'secondary texts such as articles in *American Cinematographer* are not themselves highly processed and semiotically encrusted texts - as if these artefacts revealed the true motivations and raw intentions of the production personnel' (1997: 378). This is something that must be acknowledged within my own case studies. Although my work does not involve *personal* interviews with production personnel, I will make use of *published* interviews alongside other secondary texts such as DVD commentaries, critical

reviews and articles, and reports on audience demographics and viewing figures. In order to balance the findings of these 'semiotically-encrusted' texts, I will first outline the institutional position of each of the three networks considered in my thesis before going on to combine this with close textual analysis of specific programmes.

The Question of Quality

Since the advent of the post-network era, the term 'quality television' has become widely used by academics, industry executives, journalists, and members of the audience. Yet, despite being circulated within these various discourses, it still lacks a concrete definition. One reason for this is the fact that the word 'quality' has come to be interpreted in two ways. In the first instance, quality can be understood in a literal sense, e.g., something which has a degree of excellence or superiority. Following this approach, academics have used the term to discuss how we can begin to evaluate the content of television programming and make aesthetic judgements about specific texts (Mulgan 1990; Jacobs 2001; Geraghty 2003). Adopting a cultural studies stance, this viewpoint is of particular importance with regards to the public service ideals of British television broadcasting. The alternative use of the term has developed largely in relation to American television where it has been used to describe a new type of programming that came to the fore in the 1980s. In this instance, Thompson explains that 'the 'quality' in 'quality TV' has come to refer more to a generic style than an aesthetic judgement' (1996: 13). While the question of quality and aesthetics is something with which television studies must continuously engage, the latter notion of quality as a generic style is my concern in relation to American sitcoms in the post-network era.

Describing television of the 1980s and 1990s as a kind of 'second golden age', Thompson suggests that although the term quality first came into existence in the 1970s, it 'really caught on after the debut of *Hill Street Blues* in 1981' (12). This can be seen in the publication of *MTM: Quality Television* by Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi in 1984 and the establishment of the consumer advocacy group, Viewers for Quality Television, the same year.[10] Like Feuer et al., Thompson credits the production

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[10] Dorothy Collins Swanson originally set up the non-profit consumer advocacy group, Viewers for Quality Television, in 1984 as part of her campaign to save *Cagney and Lacey* (CBS, 1982-1988) from cancellation. The group went on to advocate network series that its members found to be of the highest creative quality and introduced the annual 'Q Award' for outstanding programming and acting. It ceased operating in 2000 (Swanson 2000).

company MTM Enterprises (which was originally formed around the sitcom *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in 1970) with 'going on to define the standard of quality in the television industry' (46). Yet, he also points out that since this development, quality has essentially become synonymous with television drama and therefore pays little attention to the types of sitcoms being produced from the 1980s onwards. This is unfortunate, because it would appear that something of a symbiotic relationship between the two genres has developed over the years. Just as the so-called relevant and literate sitcoms of the 1970s influenced the dramatic output of the 1980s, I would suggest that the quality drama phenomenon has equally gone on to affect sitcoms in the post-network era. Thompson acknowledges this when he states that 'no-one, of course, will argue that there weren't quality comedies on TV during the period in question' (1996: 17). However, apart from a few references to *Cheers*, *Seinfeld*, and *Mad About You* (NBC, 1992-99), his study fails to examine the sitcom in any great detail.

Rather than explore the development of the sitcom in relation to the notion of quality, Thompson contends that Quality TV has become a genre in itself and, as such, identifies twelve characteristics that help define its essence (see Appendix 1 - Table 1.1.). While these characteristics initially appear to be contrary to the traditional sitcom formula, they are in fact inherent components of a number of sitcoms in the post-network era. This is significant as it indicates that the sitcom formula, and our interpretation of it, has undergone a series of transformations over the years. Where once the genre could be described as the epitome of 'regular TV', it has now expanded and diversified as a result of the proliferation of channels within the marketplace and the subsequent increase in competition and differentiation.

Not all scholars concur with Thompson's notion of quality as a generic style. Mark Jancovich and James Lyons, for example, see quality as being synonymous with 'must-see' or 'appointment' television; a programming and marketing strategy adopted by the networks to distance certain programmes from the 'habitual flow' of the schedule and position them instead as 'essential viewing' (2003: 12). As such, their edited collection consists of a number of essays that view quality from an institutional standpoint. While Jennifer Holt considers it in relation to the deregulation of American television and the subsequent vertical integration of several media

conglomerates, Nancy San Martin restricts her analysis to NBC and its use of the phrase 'must-see TV' to promote its Thursday-night schedule and network brand in the 1990s.

In this latter instance, the phrase 'must-see TV' was largely built around NBC's sitcom output, thus reinforcing the notion that quality is not restricted to serial drama but can be applied to a wide range of popular texts. Moreover, San Martin suggests that with the emergence of quality sitcoms seeking quality demographics, the parameters of network television have changed, with the 8-9 p.m. time-slot (previously reserved for family programming) becoming 'one of the most contentious hours in prime-time' (2003: 37). By featuring character development, non-normative identities, and controversial subject matter and by transgressing traditional genre boundaries in a self-conscious manner, the network, pay-cable, and niche sitcoms discussed in this thesis can be understood not only as quality programming but also as 'contentious comedy'.

The notion of what actually constitutes comedy is an important one, yet this is a relatively undertheorised area within the academy. As I intend to redress this within this thesis, I will conclude this chapter with an extended analysis of academic literature that has advanced this area of research.

The Study of Humour

In his study of cinematic comedy, Gerald Mast suggests that the main difficulty surrounding academic work in this area is that 'no single definition adequately includes every work traditionally recognized as comic' (1979: 3). In addition to the absence of a comprehensive definition of comedy, there is also confusion over terms, with critics rarely distinguishing between the meaning of words such as comedy, humour, and laughter, or providing satisfactory explanations of what constitutes a joke, a gag, or a comic event. In fact, Neale and Krutnik (1990) are perhaps two of the only scholars to have made an admirable attempt to define these terms accurately. With studies of humour and laughter (two of the intended outcomes of comedy) still in their infancy, it is perhaps of little surprise that critical literature in this field is slight. This has undoubtedly had an affect on the analysis of television sitcom. As a comic form, it is notable that there are various studies of sitcom in existence that fail to deal with comedy and humour at all, and this is something that I aim to redress throughout this thesis. Despite this situation, there are certain key texts that have

made a contribution to our understanding of comedy and its relationship with the audience. Largely rooted in literary and, more recently, film theory, these studies can become problematic when applied to television. However, they are still worth considering, if only to note the way in which they must be reworked in relation to the sitcom.

One of the most influential studies to be carried out in this area is Henri Bergson's work on laughter, which emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. Seeking to discover what laughter can tell us about the human imagination (particularly in terms of the social, collective, and popular imagination), Bergson developed a theory based on three fundamental observations, namely that laughter is a strictly human phenomenon, that it takes place due to an absence of feeling, and that it occurs as part of a group. While each of these assertions has some merit, I aim to demonstrate the way in which they face challenges from subsequent studies of laughter and from the emergence of television sitcom as a comic form.

In relation to the first point, Bergson notes that while man has often been defined as 'an animal which laughs', he might equally be defined as 'a man who is laughed at' (Sypher 1956: 62). This distinction is important, as it implies that laughter is a two-way process; that in order to elicit laughter in one person, another must execute (knowingly or not) a comic event, and be consequently, *laughed at*. This argument encounters difficulty, however, when considered in relation to Susanne K. Langer's physiological theory of laughter. Discussing the way in which our bodies involuntarily react with laughter when we are tickled, for example, Langer explains that as a physical act rather than an external event, this is a predominantly physiological process that bears 'no direct relation to humor' (1953: 339). While Bergson's initial assertion that laughter is a strictly human phenomenon may well be the case, it is useful to determine that what he is essentially discussing here is the production of humour that results from something that is comic in nature, rather than laughter, per se. Humour is dependent on external processes and audience recognition and although it takes a particular form, it need not always result in actual laughter. Laughter, on the other hand, can take place without humour being present, as a simple involuntarily response to a physiological act. It would be more appropriate, therefore, to discuss Bergson's work in terms of the production of humour rather than as an attempt to determine what makes us laugh.

Critical Distance, Audience Identification, and the Collective Experience

Bergson's second observation involves the absence of feeling which usually accompanies laughter; a theory which suggests that a certain amount of critical distance must be present between spectator and comic event if laughter is to be encouraged. According to Bergson, *indifference* is the key to laughter (or rather, humour), while *emotion* is its foe. If we were to invest our interest in every object and act we encounter, he argues, then everything would begin to 'assume importance' and the result would be 'a gloomy hue spread over everything' (Sypher 1956: 63). This notion of critical distance is often seen to be integral to comedy in general, and Neale and Krutnik (1990) readily apply it to screen comedy in their study of popular film and television. While dramatic texts ask the audience to suspend their disbelief and empathise with the characters, their comedic counterparts highlight modes of production and emphasise that both plot and characters need not be taken seriously. Furthermore, comic texts are often characterised by a lack of consequences. In order for laughter to occur, viewers must not only put aside any feelings of pity or affection they may have for the characters and their on-screen plight, but they must also be assured that the characters will not suffer any adverse effects as a result of their actions (149).

Although the above arguments would appear to hold true for those shows that uphold the fourth wall, include an audible laugh track, and feature a circular narrative structure that allows everything to remain the same, there are an increasing number of sitcoms that have begun to actively encourage audience identification with characters in an attempt to attract and maintain loyal viewers in the post-network era. *Friends*, *Sex and the City*, and *Girlfriends* are just three examples of programmes that feature 'identification magnets' designed to appeal to specific members of the audience.[11] Rather than distance the audience from the situation, these shows work by encouraging viewers to form emotional attachments with each group of friends, the antithesis of an absence of feeling. Comic moments are often dependent not only on the audience recognising and empathising with the situation, but also identifying with a particular character's reaction (as is the case when Ross in *Friends* repeatedly retorts, 'we were on a break', to accusations that he cheated on Rachel). The turn toward serialisation in such sitcoms also problematises the notion of consequentiality,

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[11] This is a term Medhurst (1996) uses in relation to *Friends* and which I would also apply to *Sex and the City* and *Girlfriends*, two sitcoms derived from the *Friends* formula.

as do those shows that eschew the traditional look of the genre in favour of the visual conventions of other television forms, most notably that of reality television. By injecting ongoing narratives and by blurring the distinction between the real and the fictional, sitcoms have to deal with the notion of consequences in new ways, something that I will consider in more detail throughout the following case studies.

The group formation that occurs in the aforementioned sitcoms would appear to support Bergson's final observation that laughter always occurs as part of a collective: 'You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo' (Sypher 1956: 64). While Bergson's statement can be related to comic performance in the theatre or cinema, it has particular resonance with regards to situation comedy. The sitcom form was an attempt first by radio, and then television, to capture the vaudeville experience and transmit it directly into the nation's living rooms. As noted by Andy Medhurst and Lucy Tuck, the subsequent use of an audible laugh track in television sitcom is 'the vestigial reminder of the music hall audience, the electronic substitute for collective experience' (1982: 45). This peculiar convention would seem to validate Bergson's theory that laughter needs an echo, as it provides the illusion of a wider audience. It also acts as a signal as to when the viewer is supposed to laugh and, as such, has been described as a 'para-linguistic marker' by Jerry Palmer (1987) and as a 'metacue' by John Allen Paulos (1980) [my personal preference being for the latter term].

While it may signal the intention of a particular instance to be comic in nature, the laugh track cannot ensure that the audience at home will ultimately find the material funny. Nor can it account for instances in which the audience at home laughs but the accompanying laugh track remains silent. As a result of such contradictions, and also due to changes in the way audiences consume television in the post-network era, certain sitcoms have opted to dispense with the laughter track, leaving any 'joke' open to interpretation by the viewer at home. The comedy output of HBO is, in particular, evidence of this new approach. This development thus calls into question Bergson's theory that laughter stands in need of an echo. Television, and literature for that matter, are both art forms that can be enjoyed individually in the privacy of the recipient's own home (as can film, since the emergence of video and DVD). The fact that television characters are present in viewers' living rooms each week also raises questions regarding emotional attachment to the text. It is likely that a different type of relationship is constructed between text and audience from that which is created in

the theatre or cinema. The result is that the production of humour depends on a variety of different factors, and television sitcom in particular is not easy to place within general theories of laughter and comedy.

Establishing the Comic Climate

Discussing cinematic comedy in the late 1970s, Mast is not in the position to consider the role of the audience laugh track in television sitcom or its subsequent absence in a growing number of post-network sitcoms. Nevertheless, the traditional laugh track does help inform what Mast terms the 'comic climate' of a text, or rather, 'the notion that an artist builds certain signs into a work to let us know that he considers it a comedy and wishes us to take it as such' (1979: 9). For Mast, there are various other signals that can be applied in order to highlight whether a work is one of comedy. These can include the title, the presence of a well-known comedian, the subject matter, any hint of artistic self-consciousness, or the delivery of dialogue in a 'funny, incongruous, mechanical, or some other unnatural way' (10-11). The combination of such elements is important however. For instance, sitcoms such as *Seinfeld*, *Roseanne*, and *Ellen* (ABC, 1994-98), combine two of Mast's signals by not only featuring a well-known comedian as the main character but by naming the show after them. In contrast, the titles *Friends*, *Sex and the City*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* may hint at light-hearted subject matter but offer no immediate connection to a particular comic persona. This suggests that the title and cast alone is not a true indicator of the comic status of a particular programme.

With regards to subject matter, Mast borrows the concept of 'worthlessness' from Elder Olson's earlier theory of comedy. In a similar manner to Bergson's notion of critical distance, Olson states that comic action 'neutralizes the emotions of pity and fear to produce the contrary,' creating a katastasis or relaxation of concern through the absurd (1968: 36). For Mast, this suggests that by reducing action to the trivial, comedy can deal with important matters and still remain comic because 'it *has not been handled as if it were* a matter of life and death' (1979: 9) [author's emphasis]. Yet, I would suggest that the way in which different sitcoms handle serious subject matter is complex. *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is one example of a show that incorporates serious and even taboo topics, such as death and paedophilia, by reducing them to the trivial. *Sex and the City*, on the other hand, not only began dealing with more serious issues in its later seasons, but it also dealt with them in an

increasingly *dramatic* fashion, mainly by introducing consequences to the actions of characters. These two approaches are different from that of *Will and Grace* and the roster of black sitcoms on niche-network UPN. By featuring homosexual and African-American characters respectively, these sitcoms tackle issues of sexuality and race both implicitly (by featuring lead characters with non-normative identities) and explicitly (by highlighting topics such as sexual and racial discrimination within the narrative). Thus, it is not always useful to discuss serious subject matter simply in terms of 'worthlessness'.

Mast goes on to state that 'any hint of self-consciousness' serves to remind the viewer that what they are watching is an artifice and is therefore, once again, not something that should be taken seriously (10-11). However, he also notes that this has become a regular feature of non-comic texts, an argument shared by Thompson in his discussion of 'quality television' (1996). Drawing on the work of Mills (2004), I would suggest that there has been more than a hint of self-consciousness in sitcoms of the post-network era. However, rather than informing the comic climate of a text, these techniques often have a more serious function. Regularly used to blur the boundaries between the real and the fictional (by playing with notions of public and private personas) and to critique other television forms (through the use of parody, satire, or pastiche), this self-consciousness not only creates an 'insider' humour but also asks viewers to question what they are watching and to consider their own position with regards to the production of humour. According to Mills, this development is significant as it 'marks comedy's reengagement with an active social role (albeit in relation to the media social role) which sitcom has traditionally been criticized for abandoning' (2004: 78).

While I agree with Mast's final assertion, that the delivery of dialogue is an important signal of whether a work is comic or not, it is difficult to explain exactly what this means. For Neale and Krutnik (1990), it is something about the overall tone of a piece that cannot be easily defined. Although comic delivery, timing, quality of writing, and tone are important factors in whether material is perceived as funny by the viewer, Susan Purdie suggests that the viewer's own attitude is of equal importance, as it is 'possible to recognise a joking intention, yet not be moved to laughter' (1993: 13). Providing the example of an utterance that contains or implies an obscenity, she goes on to explain that

> we will not feel funniness unless we reproduce the transgression, in our own minds, as momentarily "permitted" [or] sometimes we just do not get the joke, probably because we lack some information (such as a particularly obscene term) on which its mechanism depends (13).

Unlike Mast, Purdie focuses on the reception of joking rather than its inception, an approach that is also adopted by Raymond Durgnat who states that 'in many ways the comic attitude is an acquired one' (1969: 25). For Durgnat, comedy and humour are culturally determined as people can be taught to find certain things humorous. For example, discussing the type of [violent] antics that are present in many forms of children's entertainment, from circus clowns to Tom and Jerry cartoons, Durgnat points out that within Western culture, children are often encouraged to see brutality as funny (25). This is something that I will explore further in relation to the types of humour prevalent in television sitcoms in the post-network era.

Theories of Humour

Taking on board the notion of comic climate and metacues, Neale and Krutnik go further with their attempt to describe the range of modes and techniques used to actually produce humour. Outlining what constitutes a joke, a gag, a wisecrack, and a comic event, they stress that while it is important to distinguish between these various techniques, it is also important to recognise that they all share a 'fundamental reliance on surprise' (1990: 43).[12] This argument is drawn from the work of Palmer (1987) and his 'logic of the absurd'. According to Palmer, there are two principal sources of comic surprise. The first is the contradiction of knowledge, values, or expectations about the outside world that the audience may be assumed to derive from everyday expectations, while the second involves the sudden contradiction of expectations in the narrative itself (46-48). For Neale and Krutnik, Palmer's thesis principally relates to

> the allied concepts of decorum and verisimilitude. Decorum means what is proper or fitting, verisimilitude what is probable or likely . . . all instances of the comic, of that which is specifically designed to be funny, are founded on the transgression of decorum and verisimilitude: on deviations from any social or aesthetic rule, norm, model, convention, or law. Such deviations are the basis of comic surprise (1990: 84-86).

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[12] Although jokes, gags, and wisecracks can exist in a self-contained form, it is more useful to focus on narrative comic surprise when discussing television sitcom.

From this statement, it would appear that comic surprise involves the creator of a text negotiating questions of taste (with regards to what they think the audience will permit and find funny), accompanied by an attempt to confound the audience's expectations regarding the plausible and implausible. This is the essential point of Palmer's model; the implausible is inserted into a narrative that has a degree of plausibility and as a result laughter should be produced when the audience recognises the absurdity of the situation.

Palmer's 'logic of the absurd' has much in common with the theory of *incongruity* which, along with *superiority* and *relief*, form the three traditional perspectives of humour as outlined by Mills (2001b) and John Morreall (1983). Discussing the oldest and most widespread theory first, Mills explains that the notion of superiority is based on the sense of 'sudden glory' that occurs when jokes confirm hegemonic ideologies (2001b: 63). For Morreall, this suggests that there is a 'certain malice' involved in our laughter, an outlook reinforced by Geoff King when he argues that 'we laugh at the misfortunes or incapacities of others as a way of asserting our own distanced superiority' (Morreall 1983: 4; King 2002: 10). While such feelings are likely to occur in certain cases, it seems rather reductive to propose that this sense of 'sudden glory' is able to account for all instances of humour. Furthermore, I would agree with Durgnat in his assertion that humour can equally be produced in instances where we both *recognise* comic misfortunes and incapacities and *identify* with them:

> Often we are half-aware, for all the comic unreality, that we have traits in common with the screen characters, that their weakness, rather than their immunity, is ours. But the humorous tone, the audience laughter, reassures us that we're forgiven, that everybody's in the same boat. Since weaknesses are inevitable and universal, let's relax and enjoy them (1969: 45).

Whether through feeling superior in the knowledge that it could never happen to us, or recognising something to which we have also fallen foul, it would seem that in both cases comedy works to reassure us, allowing the audience to express laughter (as opposed to distress or anger) at a particular situation.

The notion of reassurance cannot be so easily applied to relief theory. Located in Freudian analysis, Mills explains that within this perspective, 'humour functions socially and psychologically as a vent for repression and, by extension, questions social norms' (2001b: 63). Although noting the difficulty in relating this type of

analysis to broadcast comedy, Mills does suggest that it could be applied to texts that are satirical or political in nature. In contrast, Morreall contends that relief theory is best considered from a 'physiological point of view in which laughter is seen as a venting of nervous energy' (1983: 20). Citing the example of a comedian who breaks a cultural taboo by talking about sex, he argues that by releasing, through laughter, sexual energy that has hitherto been repressed, members of the audience are able to momentarily break free of societal constraints.

As the sitcom has traditionally been viewed as an inherently conservative form that shies away from controversial subject matter, Mills is correct in his assertion that the application of relief theory is problematic with regards to this particular type of television comedy. However, such an approach must be revised with the emergence of niche and subscription channels in the post-network era. Eschewing the masses in favour of specific segments of the audience, many sitcoms have begun to introduce narratives involving previously taboo and inappropriate material. While this would suggest that viewers release nervous energy as a result, the actuality is, in fact, more complex. This is because in certain cases the material is not unexpected. The target audience knows that such material will be present on particular channels and can choose whether or not they wish to tune in or subscribe. They are not constrained by broadcast norms and therefore have no need to vent repression. This suggests that the pleasure gained from such taboo and inappropriate material might actually have more to do with niche viewers asserting their superiority over the masses. Identified as the type of viewer who appreciates controversial and thought-provoking material, the viewer is reassured that they are being offered something different from the mainstream segments of society and laughs securely in this knowledge.

As noted, the incongruity theory is similar to Palmer's model of implausibility in that it results from a reversal of expectations or a clash of incompatible discourses. As these expectations and discourses 'are themselves socially constructed and learned', Morreall argues that incongruity shifts our focus from 'the emotional or feeling side of laughter to the cognitive or thinking side' (Mills 2001b: 62; Morreall 1983: 15). This means that while theories of superiority and relief are concerned with finding out what makes us laugh, incongruity best describes 'those laughter situations that are called humour' (Morreall 1983: 60). Moreover, humour that results from incongruity is considered to be both adult and sophisticated because it is based on experience. In order to find something incongruous, a person must be aware of what

they find congruous, and this knowledge is based on conceptual patterns that have been built up through experience. With regards to theories of humour, incongruity is the one that has most often been applied to broadcast comedy. While this is largely due to its cognitive and presentational manner, it is also because it is socially constructed and culturally determined. As Morreall succinctly notes, 'to share humor with someone we need to share a form of life with him' (60). It is therefore important to analyse the types of incongruous humour that are broadcast by the media because of what they are able to tell us about specific societies and cultures (as well as the more narrowly defined segments of the audience in the post-network era).

In addition to considering the social and cultural context of humour, Michael Billig (2005) argues that theories of laughter and humour must also have a historical dimension. Citing Daniel Wickberg's (1998) historical study of the ideas and meanings behind the phrase 'sense of humour', Billig explains that by recounting how the modern notion of humour has developed, some of the 'natural' and 'common sense' assumptions that surround academic theories on the subject can begin to be questioned:

> The purpose here is to use the past in order to make the present seem, at least momentarily, somewhat foreign. Some brief examples will help to reinforce the idea that what might have once seemed 'natural' now seems ridiculous – just as our common sense might seem ridiculous to past and future times' (2005: 13).

For Billig then, the historical context of the theories of superiority, incongruity, and relief have all too often been overlooked by scholars in their attempt to come up with a complete theory of humour. In contrast, the social critique that he puts forward does not seek to reduce either laughter or humour to a single cause, but rather aims to highlight the complexities and paradoxes inherent in both by placing them in an historical and cultural context.

Billig's social critique seeks to challenge what he refers to as the 'ideological positivism' that determines most approaches to humour (5). This involves understanding the negative aspect of humour, specifically in relation to the role of ridicule, instead of simply accepting the common sense notion that laughter is good and, by extension, that humour is always positive (1). What is important about this approach is that rather than trying to discover what stimuli or feelings make *individuals* laugh (which is what Billig sees as the aim of the 'classic' theoretical

approaches to humour, i.e., superiority, incongruity, and relief), the emphasis is on understanding humour in relation to the *social* order. For Billig, a distinction can be made between disciplinary and rebellious humour, with both being understood as forms of ridicule:

> Disciplinary mocks those who break social rules, and thus can be seen to aid the maintenance of those rules. Rebellious humour mocks the social rules, and in its turn, can be seen to challenge or rebel against, the rules. Disciplinary humour contains an intrinsic conservatism, while rebellious humour seems to be on the side of radicalism (202).

As I have discussed in relation to Grote (1983), the former is something that has often been associated with the domestic sitcom. For example, in order for the normal status quo to be restored by the end of each episode, any threat or disruption must be resolved or expelled from the narrative. Thus, drawing on the equation put forward by Marc (1997), the narrative structure of the sitcom involves a ritual error being made (in which a character breaks the 'rules' constructed within the fictional diegesis), only for a ritual lesson to be learned (through mocking and/or ridicule, the character learns a valuable life lesson and is thus reintegrated back into the family). Using ridicule as a means of discipline, the sitcom, according to Grote, refuses change and is thus an inherently conservative form.

Having complicated this theory (in relation to sitcom) earlier in the chapter, I will expand on Billig's latter point regarding rebellious humour in the following case studies. For example, in Chapter Four I will discuss how *Seinfeld* works to highlight and mock the seemingly arbitrary rules constructed by society. It is important to note that, unlike Grote, Billig asserts that 'one needs to be cautious about describing disciplinary humour as being unambiguously conservative, and rebellious humour as being objectively radical' (2005: 204). Discussing the use of racist or sexist jokes, he notes that those who partake in such humour 'often claim to be rebelling against the demands of "political correctness", placing themselves on the naughty, contestive, powerless side' (2005: 203). Thus, it is necessary to consider the context in which the humour is played out and the power relations between the characters involved.

What is notable about Billig's thesis is the way in which he draws attention to the role that embarrassment plays in supporting the moral order of everyday life, and this is something that Frances Gray (2006) considers in relation to the television sitcom. According to Gray, embarrassment is part of a particular sitcom tradition that

focuses on an individual at odds with the world, and in which the world inevitably wins. This type of comedy can be seen as being rather ethically dubious, as it relies on an element of 'cruelty, an assertion of superiority, an act of social exclusion, or a sign of shared embarrassment' (148). With this in mind, I will consider this further in Chapter Five with regards to *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and the character of Larry David. Examining the use of what I refer to as 'the comedy of social embarrassment', I will analyse both the privileged status of David within the text and the show's status as an HBO production that seeks to transgress decorum and challenge sitcom conventions.

While humour based on ridicule and embarrassment can be found in post-network sitcoms such as *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, this does not mean that it is necessarily applicable to all of the programmes discussed in this thesis. In fact, in his analysis of the rise of Jewish sitcoms in the multichannel era, Vincent Brook explains that in contrast to *Seinfeld*'s 'no hugging, no learning' premise (in which the characters challenge and complicate the disciplinary nature of ridicule), the sitcom *Friends* 'is unabashedly about togetherness' (2003: 120). In this sense, the latter is less about examining power relations and disrupting the social order than it is about providing 'a buffer, if not absolute protection, from the perils of the outside world' (121). With regards to the relationship between humour and power, it is also worth noting that in his study of ethnic humour around the world, Christie Davies states that while

> the members of the dominant ethnic group tell jokes only about others . . .
> members of subordinate ethnic groups, lower in the social scale or
> occupying a socially marginal position, regularly tell, invent, and enjoy
> jokes that mock the ethnic group to which they belong (1996: 317).

Although Davies is referring to humour based on ethnicity rather than race, and despite my reservations about whether his first point is indeed entirely correct, it is the case that in my final case study of African American sitcoms on the niche-network UPN, I will discuss the way in which the characters mock not only other members of their ethnic group but also the lower position of blacks within the social hierarchy.

This distinction between ethnic and racial humour is important because even though I will be considering the latter in relation to UPN's sitcom output, I will not be looking at Jewish humour, or indeed classifying certain programmes as Jewish sitcoms. This is because, in contrast to the 'black-block programming' strategy of

UPN, none of the texts I am considering have been explicitly promoted as being Jewish. This is something that Brooks draws attention to in his study of American sitcoms from 1989 through to the early 2000s.[13] Discussing *Seinfeld* and *Friends* in particular, he explains how the 'Jewish characters are literally *conceived*, more than *represented*, as Jews' (2003: 124). Conceding the fact that Jerry Seinfeld is represented as being Jewish due to his surname, Brooks nevertheless provides examples in which Jerry both asserts and distances himself from his Jewish identity. The character of George Costanza is even more problematic, as despite inhibiting a number of characteristics that mark him as stereotypically Jewish, 'diegetically-speaking, George is manifestly non-Jewish' (106).

For Brooks, the term 'conceptual Jewishness' is best reserved for *Friends*, and in particular the characters of Rachel and Monica. Arguing that the rise in sitcoms featuring Jewish characters has come at a time when 'identity politics and multiculturalism have put a premium on difference', Brooks discusses the reluctance of the show's creators to actually represent the characters in a specifically Jewish way (2). It is for this reason that I have chosen not to focus on the Jewish aspect of sitcoms such as *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, as well as *Will & Grace*, *The Larry Sanders Show*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*; although I am aware of the question posed by Lenny Bruce, which asks 'if you live in New York, or any other big city, [ ] are you Jewish?' (cited in Brooks 2003: 109).

Having examined the range of literature surrounding the television sitcom, genre theory, television as an institution, the concept of quality TV, and theories of humour, I will now conclude this chapter with a discussion of the methods and terminology employed within this thesis. This is before moving on to present an institutional history of the American sitcom in Chapter Three, followed by series of case studies analysing sitcoms in the post-network era.

Methods and Terminology

Television has traditionally been studied in an inter-disciplinary manner using a number of different methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks. As Charlotte Brunsdon points out, the discipline of television studies is itself relatively

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[13] In addition to Brooks, Johnson (1994) and Stratton (2006) also consider Seinfeld in relation to 'Jewishness'. For a wider discussion of the distinctiveness of American Jewish humour, see Whitfield (1986).

new, as 'most of the formative academic research on television was inaugurated in other fields and contexts' (1998: 95). This means that many of the key scholars that have contributed to the emergence and development of television as a discipline have actually been based in a range of academic departments, including sociology, politics, history, literature, drama, mass communication, media, and film studies. As a result of these circumstances, the study of television has followed what Creeber describes as 'a rather complex and elaborate route . . . a route that has confusingly included a whole manner of different (sometimes even contradictory) styles and methodologies' (2006a: 3).

In an attempt to outline the ways in which television studies has been conceived over the years, Creeber very helpfully summarises the various approaches that have been adopted, refined, and challenged by scholars of the medium. This includes the work of the 'Frankfurt School', the 'uses and gratifications' model, semiotic theory and structuralism, the rise of audience studies, and feminist television criticism (3-7). Noting the way in which the plurality of the field often makes it a difficult topic to study, he explains how the discipline can be broken down into four related but individual schools of approach: Textual Analysis; Audience and Reception Studies; Institutional Analysis; and Historical Analysis (see Appendix 1 - Table 1.2). While this may seem to be a rather schematic account of such a diverse field, it is useful for the purposes of this thesis, as three of these four categories inform my own methodological approach to varying degrees, namely, analyses of a textual, institutional, and historical nature. Before going on to outline my methods in detail and the reasons for choosing each approach, I will first consider some of the problems surrounding textual analysis, which has historically been one of the primary modes of study applied to television.

According to John Hartley, amongst others, the use of textual analysis in television studies has had something of a 'chequered history' (2002: 29). This is largely related to the different methodological approaches employed by arts and humanities scholars and those from a social science tradition. For example, while the former's 'qualitative' methods have often been criticised for being 'speculative in nature, allowing room for personal interpretation', the latter aim for a more scientific method of investigation that relies upon 'quantitative, generalisable findings' (Creeber 2006a: 3; Hartley 2002: 30). On noting these differing traditions, John Corner prefers to describe them in terms of 'criticism' and 'research'. While he suggests that the

research done by social scientists concerns the impact and influence of television in everyday life, arts-based television criticism revolves around 'an engagement with the significatory organization of television programmes themselves, with the use of images and language, generic conventions, narrative patterns, and modes of address, to be found there' (1999: 7). Without getting caught up in the semantics of Corner's viewpoint, it is the latter approach that I am interested in for the majority of this thesis. Throughout the three case studies to be presented here, I concern myself with how the various programmes examined are constructed and the particular meanings they can be seen to generate.

Despite taking textual analysis as my main methodological approach, I am aware of the various problems that are associated with it. As such, my position is similar to Creeber who, while mounting a defence for textual analysis in a number of his works, nevertheless considers the difficulties that may be encountered. For example, in an article entitled 'The Joy of Text? Television and Textual Analysis', Creeber explains how for many 'textual analysis became the remnant of an embarrassing [ ] tradition that was now despised and ridiculed, and was regarded by some as intellectually simplistic and passé' (2006b: 83).[14] The main reasons for this can be attributed to the emergence of post-structuralism and the subsequent rise of audience studies in the 1980s, a shift that Robin Nelson succinctly summarises:

> Post-structuralism, having established the multi-vocality, or slipperiness of the sign and the process of signification, was broadly disseminated in television studies through John Fiske's *Television Culture*. The idea of the "polysemic" text gave full rein to a range of readings from a variety of reading positions. The findings of 1980s audience research into how people actually read television seemed to confirm reception theory's emphasis on a lack of textual fixity (2006: 65).

Within television studies, therefore, scholars began to embark on ethnographic audience research as a way of not only producing findings based on empirical evidence (rather than subjective interpretations), but of also demonstrating the various ways in which a text can be 'read' and made sense of by viewers. As Creeber

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[14] It is worth noting here that a number of the articles published in the first issue of the journal *Critical Studies in Television: Scholarly Studies in Small Screen Fictions* will inform this section on methodology. This is because this issue offers up-to-date essays on a wide range of approaches to television studies, including textual analysis, television aesthetics, production studies, and institutional history.

explains, this complicated the traditional goal of textual analysis: 'Rather than suggesting that meaning is somehow *embedded* in a text waiting for the discerning critic to uncover it, audience studies argue that individual viewers bring meaning *to* a text' (2006a: 34). Once it was established that a number of 'readings' could exist for any one text, the validity of a supposedly 'correct' interpretation by a single scholar was brought into question.

Yet, drawing on the work of Creeber, and indeed other scholars such as Sarah Cardwell (2006), I would suggest that this 'embarrassment' previously felt in relation to textual analysis has been overcome to a certain extent, with its usefulness now beginning to be fully recognised, particularly for those interested in television aesthetics. As Cardwell notes, 'making our motivation for textual analysis explicit has historically been uncommon within television studies', as the field has tended to 'use' television to study something else, such as society, ideology, or gender politics (74; 72). However, the shift toward examining the aesthetic qualities of television as a medium, or of particular types of programming and individual programmes themselves, has placed an emphasis on questions of interpretation and evaluation and has also stressed the importance of being self-reflective with regards to the judgements being made and the methodological approach being adopted (Nelson 2006: 69). Moreover, while there is no longer a suggestion that there is one 'true' or 'final' meaning to be discovered within a text, this does not mean that interpretative readings are not valuable and do not offer valid insights into particular programmes. It is also the case that textual analysis not only takes a number of different forms, but it does not have to be the sole method employed, as specific readings can be 'supported and developed around a wider contextual or extratextual framework' (Creeber 2006a: 35). With this in mind, I will attempt to outline my own methods here in detail, explaining both the usefulness and potential difficulties in the process.

As noted by Creeber, textual analysis is 'partly defined by its tendency to analyse actual television programmes, particularly focusing on issues of form, content and representation (for example, the televisual construction of class, race, and gender)' (6). Adding a more aesthetic dimension, Cardwell expands on the first of these elements, stating that 'close textual analysis' means to 'focus on thematic, formal and stylistic elements, rather than simply content or "representation"' (2006: 72). As I have explained in my introductory chapter, one of the main aims of this thesis is to analyse a number of individual sitcoms with regards to their formal

qualities, the type of subject matter dealt with, and the issues of representation that arise, specifically with regards to sexuality, gender, and race (with class being something that I consider in relation to all three). As such, my interest is wider than simply a concern with the aesthetic quality of the television sitcom, although my consideration of form deals with this thoroughly. While I agree with Cardwell's suggestion that the analysis of individual programmes should cover form, style, and the various themes that arise, I do not believe that it need be at the expense of content or representation. Instead, the extended length of the three case studies presented within this thesis, allows me to focus on each of these areas in detail. This means that as well as being interested in television sitcom as an art form (for example, the way in which individual programmes are constructed and the pleasures offered by them), I am also concerned with the notion of taste formations in relation to the topics and subject matter covered, as well as the construction of cultural identities and the way in which the everyday world is represented. As Mittell (2004) notes, television as a medium is bound up with broader social and cultural processes and relations of power, and this is something which is considered most forcefully in the sections of each case study that deal with issues of content and representation. To do this, I draw on a number of approaches, including humour theory with regards to taste and subject matter, racial discursive practices as outlined by Herman Gray (1995), and (post) feminist television criticism with regards to the study of gender.

In terms of the formal aspects of the programmes studied, I analyse image, space, time, and sound, which are the four areas Karen Lury (2005) addresses in her examination of television style and form. Included within this is a consideration of shooting style, lighting, editing techniques, mise-en-scène, narrative structure, voiceover, laughter track, and music. In addition, I will also look at writing, dialogue, performance, and casting. Not all of these elements will be considered in relation to each programme however. This is a genre study and, as such, the characteristic components that help make up the sitcom genre will be examined (bearing in mind, of course, the various problems associated with this that I have already highlighted in this chapter). But I will also look at the way in which many of the chosen texts seek to produce 'innovations' which complicate their status within this particular generic corpus (a term that I will clarify shortly). Taking my cues from the elements that are readily discernable within each sitcom, my analyses are determined by the texts themselves rather than any preconceived model. For example, while sitcoms such as

Friends and *Will & Grace* do not feature voiceover narration, this technique is integral to *Sex and the City* and *Everybody Hates Chris*, and is therefore examined accordingly. On close consideration of these latter two texts, however, it becomes clear that voiceover is also employed in different ways and for very different ends, thus making it important to study these distinctions to find out how it impacts on understandings of, and engagement with, the overall text. This is an 'interpretive', rather than 'scientific', approach that arises from detailed readings.

Having said this, there is also an extratextual aspect to my decision on which elements of a text to focus. This involves the way the programme is promoted, or rather those elements that are foregrounded as 'special', 'distinctive', or 'innovative' in promotional material surrounding the broadcast of each programme, in order to differentiate it from its competitors and to place it in relation to a particular network brand. In this way, it could be suggested that my approach 'moves from close textual analysis outwards', a method put forward by Cardwell (2006) and Jason Jacobs (2001) amongst others. It a consideration of these extratextual factors that leads me to discuss my other main methodological approach, which is an analysis of the institutional context of the sitcoms studied, or what can also be described as a production study.

As I have already mentioned, due to many of the problems associated with textual analysis over the years, this approach tends to be 'supported and developed around a wider contextual or extratextual framework', rather than being the sole method employed (Creeber 2006a: 35). In fact, Jacobs goes further than this with an argument that suggests that the recent resurgence of close textual analysis might be in response to trends within the medium itself:

> The continued sense that the television text is mostly inferior to the film text and cannot withstand concentrated critical pressure because it lacks 'symbolic density,' rich mise-en-scène, and the promotion of identification as a means of securing audience proximity, has to be revised in the light of contemporary television (2001: 433).

In the American context, this idea of 'contemporary television' is bound up with the transition to the 'post-network' era, in which the proliferation of channels in the marketplace, the fragmentation of the audience, and developments in technology have led to fierce competition for viewing figures and the development of what has been termed 'Quality TV'. While the notion of quality is something that has already been

discussed in this chapter, it is important to note Nelson's statement that 'an understanding of institutional history informs the quality debate' (2006: 67). For Nelson, no matter what emphasis may be placed on the personal choice of the individual viewer (or critic) with regards to television viewing and evaluation,

> the major institutions of broadcast television systems, themselves related (mostly by regulation rather than direct interference) to government, have a major influence on what appears on people's screens and, by implication, the quality of programming (62).

The institutional context of television therefore helps shape what we see on screen. For example, as a mass medium that is regulated by government and which operates commercially (mainly relying on advertising for its income), television is bound by a number of conventions and restrictions. Without taking too much of a deterministic approach, the aforementioned 'trends' that Jacobs refers to can be considered to be related to efforts to target particular viewing demographics that are desirable to the advertiser at a certain time. After all, as Gitlin (1983) notes, U.S. television networks are not so much in the business of making programmes, but in creating and selling *audiences* to *advertisers*.

While I do not believe that this makes programming incidental to television and therefore something that can be considered unworthy of study, I do consider the institutional context of production and distribution to be something that is frequently overlooked by scholars of the medium and which should be afforded more importance. Again, this is something that has been touched on by Nelson, who not only agrees with Brunsdon's (1990) assertion that those engaged in the academic study of television should seek to undertake the difficult task of taking an everyday and ephemeral medium seriously, but also suggests that they aim to 'intervene in the institutional policy debate' (2006: 66). In light of the developments in technology that have led to a multichannel environment characterised by different types of television providers targeting specific niche markets, I would suggest that it is becoming increasingly difficult to discuss, for instance, a programme such as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007; which Nelson draws on to frame his debate), without referring to its status as an HBO product, or rather a production broadcast on pay-cable television and therefore subject to certain standards and practices. It is for this reason that my analyses of particular post-network sitcoms take the form of individual case studies in

which they are considered in relation to the institutional position of the network on which they are broadcast.

It is important to highlight that this research does not take the form of a 'classic' production study as such, or rather what Máire Messenger Davies refers to as 'research about people who make television programmes and how these people work' (2006: 20); something that I have already considered in relation to the work of Gitlin (1983) and Alvey (2004). While I discuss individual personnel involved in the production of each sitcom (with particular reference to creators, showrunners, and, to a lesser extent, certain network executives), my interest is much wider than this. In essence, this thesis is a textual study of the popular sitcom genre framed within the institutional context of its production and the historical context in which it is situated. Rather than conduct detailed interviews, therefore, with those involved in the production and distribution of each sitcom, my focus is on the *texts* themselves, the way in which they *continue*, *revisit*, or *play with* the conventions of the traditional sitcom form, and how this is both *influenced by* and *used to inform* the institutional position of the network on which they are broadcast.

By deciding not to conduct interviews, it could be suggested that my thesis does not satisfy the social science method of 'grounded theory', which seeks to apply 'triangulation' by combining 'different types of data collected by interviews, participative observation and analysis of documents' (Länsisalmi et al. 2004: 242). Yet, although my approach is more of an 'interpretive' one drawn from the arts and humanities rather then the 'scientific' methods of social sciences, I do make use of published interviews (as well as other types of documents and texts, as detailed below) that are publicly available and that are used by producers in order to position their programming in a particular way. According to Messenger Davies, this is a valid approach due to the relative availability of primary data via published books, interviews, industry journals, and accounts of company activities and finances, as well as promotional material, TV listings, magazines, programme reviews, and websites - to which I would also add DVD commentaries (2006: 28-29).

While it is necessary to view much of this material with caution, this is something that I would also advocate in relation to personal interviews with production and network personnel. For example, with regards to Gitlin's 'top-down' account of the television decision-making process, it is necessary to be aware that interviewees may have a certain investment in putting forward a particular viewpoint

of an organisation and its programming and treat it accordingly. Thus, interviews are still discursive texts that have to be 'read' in order for meaning to be uncovered. Moreover, there is also the question as to who should be interviewed? While Gitlin concerned himself with network executives, Messenger Davies and Pearson (2004) take as their focus a range of workers involved in the production of *Star Trek* at Paramount Studios, Hollywood, including a visual effects producer, a supervising designer with special expertise in make-up, and the actor Patrick Stewart. In a study such as this, in which I consider nine individual sitcoms broadcast on three different networks and produced by a large number of personnel, the decision as to who should and should not be interviewed is a complex one. Therefore, although I can see the value of both of these aforementioned studies, I believe that these approaches are ultimately unsuitable for this work not just due to logistical reasons, but because they move away from the text itself, which, in this instance, is my primary interest.

This move away from the text is something that Creeber also discusses in relation to ethnographic audience studies. Although welcoming the insight that such approaches have given the discipline of television, he nonetheless expresses a worry about the 'dominance of audience research in film and television in recent years' and instead puts forward an analysis of serial television that offers detailed readings of certain programmes in an attempt to consider the 'political, aesthetic, and generic possibilities of contemporary television drama' (2004: 17; 16). Corner also notes the way in which 'bottom-up' accounts often 'get trapped in a kind of *populist descriptivism* in which detailed documentation of popular experience takes on an affirmatory self-sufficiency unrelated to any general political or social theory' (1994: 145). Again, my primary concern here is not to observe and reveal how actual audiences 'read' particular sitcom texts, but rather how the desire to target particular audience demographics impacts on issues of form, content, and representation. It is for this reason that Audience Studies and Reception Studies do not inform my methodology.

Having outlined my methodological approach, I now want to clarify some of the key terms that will be employed throughout this thesis. The use of the terms 'post-network era' and 'traditional sitcom' have already been explained in Chapter One, while the notion of 'Quality TV' has been discussed in this chapter, with reference to surrounding academic literature. This section will therefore focus on my

understanding of the somewhat problematic terms 'contentious', 'innovative', 'media-savvy', and 'stereotype', and their relevance to the following study.

Contentious

I have already mentioned in my introductory chapter that I have borrowed the term 'contentious' from Nancy San Martin who, in her discussion of the sitcom *Friends*, states that the 8-9 p.m. slot previously reserved for family programming can now be considered as 'one of the most contentious hours on prime time' (2003: 37). This viewpoint is echoed by Feuer, who similarly employs it in reference to both 'friends-based' and 'workplace' sitcoms (2001: 69). In each instance, there is an assumption about the relationship between the nuclear family structure and the traditional sitcom; one that ties them both together in terms of conservatism and the ideological status quo. For example, Feuer states that

> one could argue that the workplace or 'friends' situation is distinct from the nuclear family setting; that it appeals to a different (younger, hipper) audience; that it is ideologically more contentious. Such an argument is based on the fact that the nuclear family is considered an ideologically conservative social unit that supports the status quo of 'family values'. Therefore, to base a sitcom on a nuclear family is to affirm rather than question the status quo (69).

With the exception of *Everybody Hates Chris* (which, as I will discuss in Chapter Six, plays with many of the conventions of the traditional sitcom form and, particularly with regards to race, works to question the status quo), the sitcoms analysed in this thesis are all based on alternatives to the nuclear family. Thus, drawing on Feuer's argument, each can be considered ideologically contentious. As will be examined in the following case studies, these sitcoms feature characters living within alternative social structures, many of whom exhibit non-normative identities and engage in or discuss previously taboo activities and subject matter. This sets them apart from the traditional family sitcom (or at least, as discussed in my introduction, *perceptions* of the ideal family sitcom).

Yet, there is also an institutional logic that underpins my use of the term contentious, which is indicated in both San Martin and Feuer's statements. The 8-9 p.m. slot is no longer a family slot because the mass audience is no longer the most desirable to advertisers or indeed pay-cable operators. The proliferation of channels

within the television landscape, alongside the development of other types of media, has led to a fragmentation of the audience and a turn towards niche demographics. The 'younger, hipper' audience that Feuer refers to, with less responsibilities and more disposable income, has therefore replaced the 'family' in terms of the target market for sitcom programming. This means that my use of the term 'contentious' can be understood in opposition to the 'least objectionable programming' approach put forward by Gitlin (1983) to describe the programming tactics of executives during the network era. Rather than broadcasting 'inoffensive' content that does not encourage the viewer to either turn the television set off or switch over to another channel, post-network operators attract viewers on the basis of 'contentious' material, or rather, material which is formulated according to the tastes of a particular niche demographic rather than the mass family audience.

Innovative

This leads on to my use of the term 'innovative', in relation to the post-network sitcom. Again, there is the perception that as an established and recognisable genre, the sitcom adheres to a fixed set of conventions which have remained firmly in place over the years. This means that as well as being regarded as *ideologically* conservative, it is also often regarded as being *formally* conservative. However, as I have already demonstrated in this chapter (in relation to both the problem of genre as a categorisation and the historical development of the sitcom), it is not the case that sitcom conventions have remained static over time. Analyses of generic programming such as the sitcom must be situated historically and, I would argue, institutionally, as popular understandings of it in any particular instance is 'constituted by media practices and subjected to ongoing change and redefinition' (Mittell 2004: 1). This means that new styles and techniques can be introduced and indeed are often foregrounded in order to differentiate a programme within the marketplace. I do not want this thesis to be interpreted as a study of sitcom that eschews the most conventional examples of the form (which are also generally popular) in favour of programmes that appear to bear little resemblance to their generic category. Instead, I consider how certain sitcoms can incorporate innovations that may at first complicate their status within the genre (particularly within academic discourse), but which are ultimately understood by audiences and promoted by the industry as fresh and original examples of the form. I must also stress that I am aware that many techniques that are

presented as innovative within contemporary discourse do in fact revisit, or play with, earlier sitcom forms. By carrying out an historical examination of the form in Chapter Three, this is something that I am able to draw attention to in the subsequent case studies.

Of course, there are those who argue that due to its mass, commercial, and incessant nature, there is little *true* innovation within television broadcasting, as creative personnel working within the medium have various limitations placed on them with regards to freedom of expression. This is something that David Lavery (2004) has sought to consider, particularly in relation to the medium's time restraints. In a keynote address entitled 'I Only Had a Week', which he delivered at the American Quality Television conference held at Trinity College, Dublin, Lavery went so far as to suggest that while the system which produces television would make the creative work of novelists, painters, composers, and filmmakers difficult, if not impossible, the restrictions and challenges involved in the medium can actually work to *stimulate* creativity.[15] The attempt to make something original within such restraints often leads to inventive new forms of storytelling, shooting style, editing, and indeed performances, a range of elements that I will touch on throughout this study.

Media-Savvy

Despite my interest in the process of television creativity and the creative personnel involved in the medium, this is not the primary focus of this thesis (although I do offer some insights into certain ways of working, signature styles, etc). Moreover, it is also not my intention to analyse how actual audiences read and respond to individual texts but rather how the desire to target particular audience demographics impacts on the sitcom genre. There is one assumption about the audience, however, that informs each analysis and that is the level of media competency or literacy possessed by the viewer; something that I refer to as 'media-savvy' (with 'savvy' being a term that Feuer (2007) uses to describe the pay-cable network HBO and which Nelson (2007) extends on).

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[15] Lavery cites Joss Whedon, the creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as using the phrase 'I only had a week' to describe the speed with which the creative process is expected to be carried out in American television (Wilcox and Lavery 2002b: 254); Lavery's abstract for his keynote address at the American Quality Television conference held at Trinity College, Dublin, in 2004 can be found at http://mtsu32.mt su32.mtsu.edu:11072/Pages/trinitycollege.htm (Accessed June 2006).

In his discussion of what he describes as 'comedy verité', Mills suggests that this type of sitcom is best understood as 'comedy for audiences raised on television formats' (2004: 78). While this is certainly something that I agree with (and not just in relation to the aforementioned verité-style shows that will be discussed in Chapter Five), I would go further than this by suggesting that many of the elements of the sitcoms examined in this thesis are targeted at an audience that is not only familiar with the forms and conventions of television, but also knowledgeable about other types of media and, indeed, popular culture more generally (Birchall 2004; Pearson 2007). As I have previously noted, the fragmentation of the audience in the post-network era has led both broadcast networks and pay-cable operators to narrow their conceptions of the desirable audience. For Ron Becker, this has resulted in a quality demographic being sought; one that consists of '"hip," "sophisticated," urban-minded, white, liberal, college-educated, upscale 18- to 49-year-olds with liberal attitudes, disposable incomes, and a distinctively edgy and ironic sensibility' (1998: 38). With increased demands on their time and a plethora of choices available from a range of media, this section of the audience can be understood as discerning and discriminatory with regards to their preferences, tastes, and pleasures.

The idea of a *popular* audience being active and aware in this sense is questioned by Mike Budd and Clay Steinman (1989), two scholars interested in the political economy of American television. Discussing John Fiske's (1987) notion that the production of meaning is a negotiation between the viewer and the text, Budd and Steinman argue that

> negotiation also implies a conscious and critical viewer, aware of the political implications of television discourses and prepared to define and defend his or her interests. Negotiation takes place between parties who are aware that negotiations are occurring and of what's at stake. Does anyone really believe that this situation obtains with the majority of North American TV viewers (1989: 14)?

While I understand this reluctance to attribute conscious and critical awareness to viewers with regards to the 'power of discursive and economic practices' (15), this is not to say that they cannot be discerning, discriminatory, and indeed knowing about their choices and the way in which they are being targeted. Indeed, Fiske's response stresses that the culture industries do not produce an essentially singular audience, and that these *audiences* are not dupes of the industry or of ideology. Instead, he suggests

that we must conceive of audiences as differentiated and understand the importance of popular discrimination, taste, and cultural capital (1989: 22). I would argue that this is of even greater importance in a post-network era in which choice is paramount. As Jane Roscoe notes,

> content is more dispersed across . . . platforms, and our engagement with it is more fleeting. Our experience of contemporary media is fragmented rather than unified or centralised. Instead of our viewing habits being controlled through the "flow" of schedules (Williams, 1974), our viewing is now clustered around events, and through technologies such as personal video recorders, DVDs, and subscription television services. Choice is the buzzword for both audiences and broadcasters (2004: 366).

Thus, particularly when considering those programmes that target the aforementioned 18- to 49-year-old 'hip', 'edgy', and 'upscale' audience, as conceived by Becker, there is a distinct attempt on the part of the producer and broadcaster to engage in and reward their knowledge of the media and popular culture by referencing other genres and texts, and alluding to popular culture in general (although this is not to say that all references will be recognised or understood by every viewer). What I am concerned with, therefore, in the following analyses, is the media-savvy audience as 'constructed' by the networks rather than the 'real' audience per se.

Stereotype

The final term to be clarified in this section is that of 'stereotype', a term that moves us away from the relationship between sitcom and the television industry, towards that of representation, comedy, and humour. Mills explains that the presence of stereotypes in sitcom has generally been bound up with the argument that 'as comedy is more likely to fail if it requires too much thought to work the jokes out, it has to draw on a range of simplistic character types which are easily understandable' (2005: 101). In fact, whilst recognising the importance of stereotyping in comedy, other scholars have suggested that this process is something that exists in all types of media representation:

> From a media industry perspective, stereotyping results from the need to quickly convey information about characters and to instil in audiences expectations about characters' actions . . . Stereotypes are important in comedy because not only do they help to establish instantly recognizable character types but such character traits and stereotype-based jokes also

constitute a source of humor (Hoon Park, Gabbadon & Chernin 2006: 158).

Stereotypes, then, are best described as 'a collection of trait-names upon which a large percentage of people agree as appropriate for describing some class of individuals' (Vinacke 1957: 229). This places them in opposition to fully-rounded, complex characters (which can, in fact, develop in sitcom over a number of series) or, as Katz and Braly note, 'a personification of the symbol we have learned to look down upon' rather than as an actual human being (1958: 41).

Dyer's (1984) description of 'a type' (a broad term within which he suggests we can make distinctions) is in fact remarkably similar to general perceptions of the sitcom. He states that 'a type is any simple, vivid, memorable, easily-grasped and widely recognised characterisation in which a few traits are foregrounded and change or "development" is kept to a minimum' (1984: 28; see also Perkins 1979). Thus, just as the sitcom is known for its half-hour format, basis in humour, and circular narrative that resists change by always restoring the status quo, so its characters are also understood as being rather flat and unchanging, having been reduced to a few recognisable traits. As I will argue throughout this thesis however, the sitcom is actually more complex than this perception suggests, as are its modes of characterisation.

I draw on Dyer's work here (which considers stereotypical representations of homosexuality in film), as, along with race and gender, stereotyping based on sexuality is one of the issues that I will be looking at in the following case studies. The prevalence of this approach is something that is noted by Mills, who stresses the importance of asking 'why some comic archetypes continue to be used without complaint, while others come to be defined as stereotypes and are seen to be feeding into broader social problems concerning representations and social power' (2005: 110). Indeed, this leads him to question why his own analysis of sitcom and representation is based on race, gender, and sexuality, rather than, for example, age, class, or intelligence. For Dyer, this is bound up with the difference between 'social types' and 'stereotypes'. He argues that while social types 'indicate those who live by the rules of society', stereotypes refer to 'those whom the rules are designed to exclude' (1984: 29). This means that those types that appear 'natural' and 'inevitable', do so because they are in the interest of the hegemonic group. It is

therefore not the 'inaccuracy' of stereotypes that should be attacked, but rather the attempt by the hegemonic groups in society (or, in this case, within the television industry) to define the 'other' in their own terms (1984: 31). Moreover, with regards to the comic process and the production of humour, Mills explains how 'comedy is seen to express power through the relationship between the joke-teller, the audience and the butt' (2005: 104). This means that, as Michael Pickering and Sharon Lockyer suggest, there is a difference between someone sending up their own culture or race and comedy that aims to produce humour at the expense of someone else's cultural identity (2005: 9).

Drawing on these ways of thinking, therefore, this thesis will consider not just the negative and positive aspects of the stereotypes perpetuated in post-network sitcoms, but also the gender, race, and sexuality of the personnel involved in their creation (or rather, the hegemonic group or those with the most power), in an attempt to examine whether this leads to more complex representations of particular social groups and how it impacts on the production of humour. Having provided a comprehensive review of the academic literature surrounding the issues to be discussed in this thesis, along with establishing my methodology and qualifying the terms to be used, I will now move on to consider the institutional history of the American sitcom before embarking on three case studies examining the sitcom output of NBC, HBO, and UPN.

Chapter 3

**An Historical Overview of the Institutional Context of American Television
and its Relationship to the Development of Situation Comedy**

In less than fifty years, the television landscape in the U.S. has developed from what
Ellis describes as 'an era of scarcity' to an 'era of availability' (2000: 39). Originally
consisting of a small number of channels broadcasting over-the-air for only part of
the day, there are now over a hundred channels in existence that broadcast
continuously using a variety of delivery methods. Following on from Staiger's
analysis of sitcoms in the classic network era, I aim to analyse the way in which these
institutional changes have impacted on what has thus far been considered to be the
quintessential network form.

Prior to examining a selection of post-network sitcoms in three separate case
studies, this chapter will provide an historical overview of the institutional structures
of American television and consider this in relation to the development of the genre.
To write a definitive history of situation comedy is, of course, beyond the realm of
this thesis and, in any case, it is debatable whether such a project would be possible.
Instead, I intend to highlight some of the key transformations that the genre has
undergone over time, and consider this in relation to developments in technology,
government regulations, changing social and cultural circumstances, and shifts in
conceptions of the audience. While my analysis will, in parts, draw on certain
established narratives of the sitcom, it will also provide new insights into the form.
Unfortunately, there will be certain sitcom sub-genres that will not be examined,
most notably the nostalgic and youth-oriented sitcoms kick-started by *Happy Days*
(ABC, 1974-84) in the 1970s. This is not only due to lack of space, but also because
of a wish to focus on those earlier sitcoms that have gone on to influence examples of
the form in the post-network era. As a result, I provide extended analyses of the early
1950s sitcoms, *The Jack Benny Program* and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen
Show*, as I believe that the self-reflexivity and performativity exhibited in such shows
are crucial to the post-network sitcoms examined later in the thesis.

Beginning with the birth of television as a medium, my analysis will outline
the transition from radio to television in an attempt to demonstrate the enduring effect

of the former on the televisual sitcom form. I will also consider the ways in which both radio and television had to deal with the problem of incorporating the live dynamics of the vaudeville stage into electronic programming, with the latter also having to develop its own distinct televisual aesthetic. With television quickly progressing to a 'classic network system' in which the airwaves were dominated by three major networks, I will move on to discuss the subsequent period of 'stable competition' that resulted in the domestic family sitcom becoming the genre norm. With the electromagnetic system designated a scarce resource, this section will consider how U.S. government regulation worked to first create, and then restrict, the existence of a three-network oligopoly that thrived by reducing competition and risk.

This will be followed by an examination of the deregulatory trend within the industry that was initiated by the government in the 1980s, with the view to creating an 'unfettered marketplace' (Holt 2003: 12). This period of deregulation coincided with the major technological developments of cable, satellite, and video, and with sitcom becoming firstly a more relevant and eventually a more contentious form. The proliferation of channels within the marketplace has ultimately led to increased competition for audiences between commercial, niche, and subscription-based networks. As a result, the notion of 'broadcasting' has began to be replaced with that of 'narrowcasting' as competitors target specific segments of the audience with niche programming. This chapter will therefore conclude with a discussion of the way in which the most recent broadcast networks to enter the marketplace have sought to combine national reach with niche appeal, by producing sitcoms aimed at young, urban, and ethnic audiences.

Vaudeville, Radio, and Television: Developing the Situation Comedy

Since the advent of broadcast television in the United States, situation comedy has generally been considered to be the medium's most established and durable genre. Yet, the sitcom was actually developed for radio in the 1920s and was not adopted by television until two decades later. For those who consider sitcom to be a rigid and stable form, it has become something of an accepted notion that the genre transferred 'fully formed' from radio to TV. However, the reality is in fact more complex. While the television sitcom did adapt many elements from its radio counterpart, it also went on to develop its own unique features, largely due to the differing institutional contexts of the two mediums. Moreover, the radio sitcom itself drew on the traditions

of vaudeville, a factor that created problems when the genre migrated to television. Before going on to discuss the way in which the 'classic network era' impacted on the sitcom genre, I think it is important to consider sitcom's initial transition from radio to television. As Barry Putterman suggests, 'in order to understand how the dynamics of the traditional situation comedy and variety show operated in this new medium, we must recreate their origins at the birth of network television itself' (1995: 8).

In their study of the institutional structure of American television, Gene Jankowski and David Fuchs stress that television rapidly became an established medium because it was built on top of the viable business of radio (1995: 12-13). Not only did radio have the technological systems required to sustain the television industry, but it also possessed transferable forms such as the sitcom. According to Jones, the successful transition of *The Goldbergs* (CBS, 1949-51; NBC, 1952-53; DuMont, 1954) from radio to television in 1949 was 'good news for everyone involved in producing programmes, since transferring an established property was easier and safer than creating something new' (1992: 48).[16] As the first situation comedy to make such a move, *The Goldbergs* was representative of a particular type of sitcom that was available at the time. Like its radio predecessor *Amos 'n' Andy* (which made the transition to television in 1951; CBS, 1951-53), *The Goldbergs* was an urban-based, ethnically oriented show that revolved around what Langford describes as 'character comedy' (2005a: 20). While the former was set in Harlem and featured two African American friends and their respective families, the latter took place in the Bronx and was concerned with the assimilation of an immigrant Jewish family into American life. In her assessment of *The Golbergs* published on the Museum of Broadcast Communications website, Michele Hilmes (n.d.) describes how the show 'pioneered the character-based domestic sitcom format that would become television's most popular genre'. This trajectory was by no means inevitable, however, as this type of show faced considerable competition from another kind of sitcom that was heavily influenced by the vaudeville stage.

Like most sitcoms of this period, *Amos 'n' Andy* and *The Goldbergs* had some basis in vaudeville. For example, in its radio incarnation, it was the two 'white'

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[16] While *The Goldbergs* was the first sitcom to successfully make the transition from radio to TV, the first network television sitcom to be broadcast was actually *Mary Kay and Johnny*, a fifteen-minute show that debuted on DuMont in 1947. In its three years on air, *Mary Kay and Johnny* was broadcast by DuMont, CBS, and NBC. DuMont ceased broadcasting in 1956.

creators of *Amos 'n' Andy* who provided the voices of the eponymous lead characters, a situation with more than a hint of minstrelsy tradition. Nevertheless, these programmes were primarily concerned with fictional characters that were, on television at least, portrayed by professional actors. This is in contrast to other successful sitcoms of the era, e.g., *The Jack Benny Program* and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. Rather than play entirely fictional characters, Benny, Burns, and Allen retained their individual names and based their on-air roles on their previous vaudeville personas. Furthermore, drawing on the variety tradition, these programmes also featured a host of other recognisable stars playing fictionalised versions of themselves. As such, these sitcoms were indicative of 'comedian comedy', a form that Langford describes as heavily performative, reflexive, and often gag-oriented (2005a: 20). While the performative nature of stand-up is something that I will consider later in the thesis, the important factors here are that these performers were readily acknowledged as 'comedians' both on-screen and off, and that they were able to incorporate elements of the vaudeville sketch into the sitcom form. These self-reflexive features separated them from their entirely fictional world, character-based counterparts.

As examples of 'mass market electronic media', Putterman explains that both radio and television comedy had to find ways to deal with the dynamics of live performance (1995: 22). Vaudeville largely consisted of variety and sketch-based comedy performed in front of local audiences who had made a conscious effort to attend. Radio and television programmes, on the other hand, were not only transmitted free over the airwaves but were also broadcast directly into peoples' homes and performance styles had to adapt accordingly. Radio made a deliberate effort to style itself on vaudeville but, in order for performances to successfully translate, it had to develop its own practices. For example, instead of playing and *reacting* to a live audience, Robert Toll contends that 'the empty studio' was the first major adjustment that all stage comedians faced (1982: 227). While character-based comedy was able to avoid this problem by modelling itself more on drama, variety and sketch-based performers demanded that live audiences be present in the studio during recording. This allowed comics to 'retain their physical humor and to assume that if they made the studio audience laugh they would also make the folks at home laugh, even though they couldn't see what was happening' (Toll 1982: 228). The other major problem for this type of radio comedy was the fact that comedians were

no longer playing to distinct, local groups of people but were performing to the mass, national audience. In order to target such a wide group of people, the style of comedy had to change. For Putterman, this meant that 'the more hard-edged material and many of the more exotic regional styles' were replaced by two generalised approaches (1995: 23). He describes these as being the immigrant and ethnic view of the outsider looking in and the midwestern, self-deprecating look at the foibles, blind spots, and excesses of American culture.

Due to the developments outlined above, radio comedy began to temper the variety and sketch-based elements of vaudeville with the inclusion of more consistent characters and regular storylines. Not only did the medium have to cater for a mass, national audience, but it also had to encourage that same audience to tune in on a recurring basis. One of the ways to achieve this was to create programmes that featured the same characters in the same setting every week. On identifying with the characters and their situation, audiences were expected to tune in for regular updates and become loyal listeners of the show. While this describes the approach of sitcoms such as *Amos 'n' Andy* and *The Goldbergs*, other shows became more of a hybrid of situation and variety. *The Jack Benny Program*, for instance, did not revolve around a domestic family setting per se, but rather created a substitute family from Benny's work colleagues; radio announcer Don Wilson, Benny's assistant (or rather, manservant) Rochester, and the singer Dennis Day.[17] Refusing to commit entirely to an imaginary world of fictional characters, the result was that shows such as Benny's were much more reflexive in their acknowledgement of the artifice of the studio setting and in their awareness of the status of the performers as comedians. This reflexivity has since become common within sitcoms of the post-network era and is therefore something that I will consider in more detail in the following case studies.

With the emergence of television, similar problems began to arise as producers and executives attempted to transfer the type of comedy developed for radio to the nascent visual medium. Of course, the visual aspect of television was, in itself, the cause of most of these problems. In the first instance, to add to the regular characters

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[17] Apart from the cast of *Amos 'n' Andy*, Rochester was one of the few African American characters on television at this time and, as such, his role within the programme warrants a longer discussion than I am able to afford within the confines of this thesis. I will briefly discuss the issue of race in relation to sitcoms later on in this chapter however, and it will also form the basis of Chapter Six, in which I present a case study of the black sitcoms produced by UPN.

and situations, television sitcom had to create a sense of place while still remaining economically viable. Rather than shoot on location, therefore, sitcoms were studio based with a small number of sets that could be utilised on a weekly basis. As the inclusion of the live studio audience was transported from radio (in a continued attempt to recreate the collective experience for the electronic medium), limits were also placed on both the physical layout of the studio and on the style of camerawork permitted. As Butler explains, the sitcom set has historically taken the form of a three-sided box, with the fourth wall being made up of the audience and the television cameras (2002: 95). This means that instead of developing its own televisual style from the outset, the television sitcom actually reproduced the theatrical nature of vaudeville in a number of ways. The one element it had difficulty with, however, was direct address, as for the majority of the narrative, the fourth wall, and thus the studio audience and the television cameras, remained invisible, with the characters refusing to make reference to the artificial nature of the setting.

This illusion was regularly shattered, however, in two ways. Firstly, there was the introduction to the show's sponsor, and secondly, there was the continued inclusion of vaudeville sketches at the beginning and end of each episode. Following on from radio, the main source of television funding at this time was single-sponsored programming. This involved a major company with a product to sell buying airtime on a network and then hiring an advertising company to produce shows suitable for the time slot. The programmes themselves were then intercut with infomercials for the particular product, with the oft-repeated phrase, 'and now a word from our sponsor', becoming the accepted norm. In these commercial inserts, the viewer would be addressed directly, as the programme announcer either demonstrated the various uses of the product or suggested that by buying this particular item, the audience could lead a similar life to the on-screen characters.[18] As the primary financiers, sponsors had a direct influence on the type of programming produced. While Lucky Strike cigarettes were aligned with Jack Benny's showbusiness lifestyle, most products were

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[18] In some instances, the sponsor's product was successfully incorporated into the show's plot. For example, in early episodes of *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, Gracie would demonstrate her various (illogical) uses for Carnation Milk in the middle of each episode, usually in the company of programme announcer and regular character, Bill Goodwin. The role of the programme announcer in early U.S. television shows was to read the opening and commercial pitches for the show's sponsor. In both *The Jack Benny Program* and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, the announcers Don Wilson and Bill Goodwin also acted as regular characters within the show, thus enabling the respective products, Lucky Strike cigarettes and Carnation Milk, to be incorporated into the plot more easily.

domestic or household purchases and thus suited to a family environment. It is for this reason that the domestic sitcom became increasingly popular. Before this domestic shift was complete, however, both Jack Benny and Burns and Allen continued to produce a hybrid form of variety and situation that made full use of their range of comic skills. While a domestic or workplace situation formed the core of the narrative, each show also featured some sort of vaudeville sketch delivered direct to the audience. For these segments, the performers abandoned the constructed studio sets and appeared centre stage instead, presenting their comic stories and one-liners in front of a simple curtain backdrop. Not only did this emphasise the comedians' vaudeville roots, but it also highlighted the artifice of the narrative and studio set-up at the same time as acknowledging the presence of the assembled audience.

Due to the hybrid nature of these programmes, both the performances and the narratives obtained a level of complexity rarely seen in subsequent domestic sitcoms. For example, in addressing the audience at the end of each episode, Jack Benny would introduce his guest and thank them for appearing on the show before announcing which stars would feature in the next episode. Although acknowledging that he was starring in a fictional sitcom, Benny nevertheless retained his on-screen persona as a somewhat cheap, vain, and self-congratulatory second-rate violin player.

George Burns took this further by seamlessly moving from direct address to character acting throughout each show. In the opening sequence of an episode entitled 'Income Tax Man', Burns appears onstage to audience applause and casually walks by the studio set of his and Gracie's fictional home to take his place in front of a curtain backdrop. He then delivers a short and highly reflexive comic monologue about the processes and practices involved in making a television programme. After discussing the role of make-up and props, he pauses to light the cigar of a camera operator (whom we see on-screen alongside his CBS-branded camera), explaining that his eagerness to keep him happy is due to the fact that 'he's the man who watches my close-ups'. It is only when the camera angle moves to a side shot of Burns, and we see Allen enter the kitchen in the background, that the action switches to the domestic situation narrative. As Allen begins to act out the plot, Burns remains in the role of observer, commenting occasionally on the absurdity of her behaviour from outside of the narrative. When the local baker arrives at their home however, he leaves his position to welcome him in, becoming part of the plot in the process. Once the narrative has reached its conclusion, the programme's announcer, Bill Goodwin,

welcomes Burns and Allen back on to the stage where they perform a short vaudeville routine before bidding the audience goodnight. It is only once this is completed that the programme comes to an end.

In his perceptive examination of *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, Eaton traces its development from a programme in which 'the situation comedy and the vaudeville routine exist side-by-side' to a show in which the vaudeville element has been removed and replaced by a new technique (1978: 66-67). Although in later series, Burns retains his outsider position and his tendency to address the audience directly, he no longer continues to observe his wife from the wings, as it were. Instead, he interrupts proceedings by turning to the audience and suggesting that he watch Allen's antics with them, before switching on a television set and apparently looking on as the next scene of the narrative unfolds.

With the element of vaudeville removed completely from the show, Eaton outlines the numerous ways in which this new technique can be interpreted. While the inclusion of the television set can be understood as an alienation device used to distance the audience and make them question their relationship with the medium, it can also be viewed as an instrument of play, a comic device that need not adhere to the conventions of the genre as its sole aim is to create humour. Arguing that neither of these explanations 'seem to deal adequately with this device and its historical location in the early days of television', Eaton finds the 'evolutionary model' put forward by Raymond Williams even more problematic (1978: 67). According to Williams, situation comedy evolved from both the solo turn and the variety sketch, with the latter two being adapted to fit in with the demands of the new technology. Following this theory, Eaton explains that it is possible to understand the removal of the vaudeville routines from *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* as a continuation of this evolution or adaptation; that 'the vaudeville routines disappear because they use up material too quickly, because they make for "uninteresting" television' (67). However, he ultimately dismisses this approach due to its reliance on technological determinism and its failure to adequately address the complex way in which Burns drew attention to, what Putterman describes as, 'the artifice in the theatrical presentation of normality' (1995: 33).

While I understand Eaton's reluctance to commit entirely to the notion of evolution and adaptation, I believe there is still an argument to be made for the way in which genres develop in relation to the particular technological demands of the

medium. For example, the removal of the vaudeville elements from early situation comedies can be understood as an attempt to develop a more televisual aesthetic that differentiated the genre from its theatrical predecessors. However, this must be considered in relation to other influencing factors, such as the wider institutional practices and social and cultural concerns of the time. As I have briefly mentioned, the use of single-sponsorship as the main source of funding for early network television had a direct effect on the type of programming produced. While the mass family audience was generally considered to be the most desirable target market, Caldwell notes the way in which 'advertisers at the time had promoted the idea that women were the chief purchasing agents in the home' (1995: 37). Therefore, in a continued attempt to sell household goods to housewives living in suburbia, it is perhaps understandable that Gracie's exploits in the kitchen (with its endless supply of Carnation Milk, the show's sponsor) became more important to the programme than the couple's vaudeville-style sketches.

This does not necessarily deal with the specific inclusion of a television set into the narrative however, particularly since Caldwell's analysis demonstrates the importance of TV to a number of other early situation comedies. In *The Honeymooners*, for instance, the lead character of Ralph is not only shown discussing the merits of purchasing a television set with his wife Alice, but we also see him attempting to produce his own commercial in one of his many get-rich-quick schemes.[19] This is in addition to an episode of *Leave it to Beaver (*CBS, 1957-58; ABC, 1958-63), in which the eponymous Beaver's appearance on a television quiz show leads to a discussion about the differences between live and pre-recorded programming (Caldwell 1995: 36-40). It is due to these types of narratives that both Caldwell and Eaton (1978) put forward an additional (commercial) objective for the replacement of vaudeville sketches in the television sitcom with narrative techniques involving television. They suggest that the appearance of the television set functioned, in the first instance, as an inscription into the text of the necessity of TV as a domestic appliance, and secondly, as a guide for viewers on how to deal with and accommodate the medium into their lives. In an attempt to convert an audience familiar with the forms and conventions of the vaudeville stage to the new electronic medium, early

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[19] The importance of television to these narratives is explicit in the episode titles, 'TV or Not TV' and 'Better Living through TV'.

television sitcoms sought to teach viewers how to use television and, more importantly, how to become consumers in a market-driven age.

As demonstrated, however, the complexity exhibited in 1950s television sitcoms runs counter to the notion that the genre arrived fully formed from radio. Throughout this period there were actually two types of sitcom on television, one that focused on ethnically-oriented, character-based comedy and another that featured direct address and drew on the performative nature of the vaudeville sketch. Due to the commercial logic of the industry, the latter soon gave way to the former as the live dynamics drawn from vaudeville were dispensed with in favour of family-centred narratives carried out in domestic settings (notably, the ethnic element was also removed). This approach was preferred as it allowed sitcoms to reflect the typical living arrangements of the desired mass audience, while promoting household products and family purchases in the process.

Scholars such as Mellencamp (1997) have rightly drawn attention to the key role played by *I Love Lucy* in this transition. Successfully retaining a performative element due to Lucille Ball's talent for physical comedy and her Cuban-born husband Desi Arnaz's bandleader role, *I Love Lucy* was nevertheless a domestic situation comedy with a distinct televisual aesthetic. Instead of being broadcast live from New York in the style of other sitcoms of the time, Ball's film career and family commitments required that the show be pre-recorded in Los Angeles. With the cinematographer Karl Freund hired to create a suitable shooting style using the recently available method of videotape, Putterman explains that the result was 'the three-camera set-up with studio audience format that freed television situation comedy from its stiff stage restraints' (1995: 15). Instead of the wide shots characteristic of the live sitcom, the use of multiple cameras meant that in a typical exchange between two characters, one camera could film both characters together while the other two focused on following the dialogue, capturing both action and reaction shots in close-up. By having three shots to edit between, the pace of the sitcom quickened and a rhythm could be established to complement the comic performances. Explaining the centrality of the reaction shot to the sitcom genre, Mills states that 'shooting comedy in this way highlights the cause-and-effect nature of the comic sequence' (2005: 39). Thus, despite upholding the fourth wall and retaining the presence of the studio audience, the television sitcom began to develop a shooting and performance style distinct from the theatrical nature of vaudeville.

I believe it is important to examine this particular historical instance in detail because it not only provides a starting point from which to trace the development of the sitcom but it also allows for a consideration of the way in which later technological and institutional changes impacted on the form. In the following case studies I contend that many of these early techniques began to resurface in the post-network era, at a time when many television networks and sitcom producers had to fight to either retain audience share or attract new viewers within a highly competitive multichannel landscape. Prior to this, however, I will discuss the emergence of the 'classic network system' in the U.S. television industry and the subsequent period of 'stable competition' that cemented the notion of the domestic family sitcom as the genre norm and resulted in the form becoming escapist in nature.

Spectrum Scarcity: Regulating the 'Classic Network Era'

On surveying the sitcoms examined in the preceding analysis, it is by no means a coincidence that the majority were broadcast by CBS television. With television adopting the network system previously favoured by radio, both the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) were well placed to enter the nascent television industry. As established radio broadcasters, each network had a number of 'owned and operated' stations (O&O's) in key markets across the country as well as affiliate agreements with local stations to broadcast their programming (Murray 2003: 35). Moreover, they were able to utilise both their existing studio facilities and ongoing contracts with talent to develop programming for the new medium. This meant that in the early 1950s at least, CBS and NBC dominated the market, with the former being particularly successful in the production of situation comedy. In contrast, the fate encountered by the DuMont Television Network served to highlight the importance of being able to draw on radio-network revenue and the support of affiliate stations while diversifying into the expensive television industry. Despite being the first commercial television network in operation, DuMont never became financially viable and ceased broadcasting by the mid-1950s. By this time, another network had cemented its place in the market, in the form of the American Broadcasting Company (ABC). Although it initially lagged behind CBS and NBC 'in terms of profitability and ratings', it was financially secure due to it also having originated from a radio network (Murray 2003: 37).

The emergence of a three-network system in America can in part be explained by economics. However, government regulatory decisions have also played a significant role in its development. With over-the-air systems providing the main mode of broadcast delivery, the number of broadcasters allowed to operate at any one time was limited due to what is known as spectrum scarcity. Although the use of radio technology was greatly enhanced by the military in the early part of the twentieth century, there was nevertheless a problem with congestion of the airwaves, with 'etheric bedlam produced by numerous stations all trying to communicate at once' (Fowler and Brenner 1982: 213). As a result of this impractical situation, the electromagnetic spectrum was recognised as a scarce resource and became subject to government regulation from then on. Licences for radio frequencies were introduced under the Radio Act of 1912 and, with the Communications Act of 1934, the powers of broadcast regulation (expanded to include television) were transferred to a new government agency, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Following the 'trusteeship model' of regulation, prospective broadcasters had to satisfy certain criteria as licences were awarded in accordance with 'public convenience, interest, or necessity' (213-214).

The first stations to secure licences under this system were either owned by, or affiliated to, the existing radio networks, CBS, NBC, and ABC, and, as result, these broadcasters were able to gain a foothold in the market from the outset. This meant that when the FCC issued a 'licensing freeze' in 1948 (to allow it to investigate signal interference), other companies were prevented from entering the industry. By the time the freeze was lifted four years later, the market was effectively closed, as the 'big three' networks, as they came to be known, had successfully capitalised on the 'years of artificially uncompetitive service' granted to them at such a crucial time in the development of the medium (Murray 2003: 36).

During this period of 'stable competition', which continued throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the perception of sitcoms as conservative and domestic became embedded in the public imagination and within the industry itself. The classic network system, in which the 'big three' functioned as a closed oligopoly, essentially 'thrived by restricting competition and avoiding risk' (Mittell 2003b: 44). As explained by Gitlin, the networks adopted a 'least objectionable programming' approach that allowed them to secure around a third of the available audience each by resisting material deemed offensive or controversial (1983: 61). Despite the fact that

spot advertising had replaced single-sponsorship as the main source of funding, the mass family audience was still considered to be the most desirable target market. It must be noted, however, that the working class and ethnic families of *The Goldbergs* and *Amos 'n' Andy* had long been exchanged for a resolutely white, middle class, and thus more 'aspirational' cast of characters.

Marc explains that while other genres, such as the drama anthology, the western, and the comedy-variety show, began to disappear from the schedules, the sitcom became ever more popular. This was despite, or perhaps as a result of, it being 'thoroughly isolated from current events' (1989: 126). In a slight variation on the 'suburban domesticom' of the 1950s, 'fantasy' and 'escapist' narratives began to dominate the form. In addition to *Mister Ed* (CBS, 1961-66) and its eponymous talking horse, the sitcoms *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964-72) and *The Addams Family* (ABC, 1964-66) featured witches and monsters respectively. Even *The Beverly Hillbillies* relied on a somewhat miraculous notion; that of a rural family discovering oil on their property and relocating to Los Angeles with the proceeds. Scholars have understood this development as either a consequence of the 'recombinant' nature of generic cycles or as a deliberate attempt to avoid engaging with the real-life unrest created by the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War (Gitlin 1983; Mittell 2003a; Alvey 1997; Marc 1989). I would suggest that while a *combination* of these factors influenced the shift toward fantasy-type narratives, the overarching commercial logic of the time, i.e., to attract the widest possible audience using the least offensive material, also worked to restrict the direction in which sitcoms could develop. Due to the stable oligopoly created by the 'big three', network programming was primarily directed at youngsters, parents, and the older, rural-based segments of the audience, who it was assumed came together to watch television as a family. Individual viewers seeking more relevant or challenging material were not catered for because they were considered to be in the minority; they did not represent the 'desirable' mass audience sought by advertisers.

The strict regulations implemented by the FCC in the early years of television broadcasting meant that the classic network system continued unchallenged for around two decades. Throughout this period, however, the FCC was aware that the dominance of the 'big three' was effectively suppressing competition and thus hindering the overall development of the medium. This was reflected in a speech delivered in the early 1960s by Newton Minnow, the FCC Chairman at the time, in

which he notoriously described TV as a 'vast wasteland' (Hilmes 2003b: 29). Therefore, in an attempt to increase programme diversity, benefit independent producers, and ultimately wrest control from the commercial networks, a series of rules were implemented in 1970. While there is no space to consider these in great detail here, both Jennifer Holt (2003) and Thomas Streeter (1996) discuss them within their respective studies of the relationship between government regulation and the industrial structure of the American television industry.

Two of these rules did indeed have a notable effect on the industry, although not in the ways anticipated. The first of these was the Financial Interest and Syndication Rule, which became known as Fin Syn. By prohibiting the networks from having an ownership stake in independently produced programming, and by restricting participation in the lucrative syndication market (i.e., the sale of programmes to local TV stations to be repeated off-network), Fin Syn attempted to separate production from distribution and open up the marketplace to independent producers. The Prime-Time Access Rule (PTAR) had a similar objective, in that by preventing the networks from broadcasting more than three-hours of entertainment programming during prime-time, it aimed to create space for an hour of independent or locally-produced content. While certain companies, such as Norman Lear/Tandem Productions and MTM Enterprises, took advantage of these new rules, the independent sector did not experience the radical change that was expected. Although the economic position of the networks was weakened (largely due to them no longer being able to profit from the success of re-runs), it was the Hollywood studios rather than independent producers who benefited most.

This was due to the system of 'deficit financing' in which the networks engaged, a system that saw producers unable to recoup production costs until the syndication rights to a show were sold. As demand for syndication did not generally occur until a show had reached around one hundred episodes, this meant that a programme had to run for at least four seasons before making a profit. Both the Hollywood studios and the more established independents had the financial resources required for this type of strategy and were able to strengthen their position within the marketplace as a result. Smaller independent companies, on the other hand, were not in the position to participate in this system and therefore had to focus their attention on producing more inexpensive programming, such as talk shows and game shows.

The introduction of Fin Syn and PTAR in the 1970s provides a useful example of the way in which regulators can instigate change within the marketplace, even though it may not always produce the desired results. Later on in this chapter, I will also consider how regulators have *reacted* to developments within the industry, particularly with regards to the introduction of new technologies. Although the television landscape did experience change following the implementation of the aforementioned FCC rulings, it is difficult to link this concretely to specific developments within programming. In order to determine how genres and programming trends shift over time, a wide range of other institutional factors have to be considered, such as production practices, channel segmentation, scheduling techniques, and audience demographics, as well as developments within technology.

The emergence of 'socially relevant' sitcoms at the beginning of the 1970s is a case in point. Academic analysis generally highlights *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977), *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-1979), and *M*A*S*H* (CBS, 1972-1983) as being the key programmes within this trend. It is therefore interesting that it was the independent companies MTM Enterprises and Norman Lear/Tandem Productions that were responsible for the two former shows respectively (the latter programme, which was based on the 1970 film *MASH*, was produced by the Hollywood studio, 20th Century Fox). While this supports the notion that FCC regulations did indeed open up the marketplace to new competitors, the reality is in fact more complex. For example, the fact that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* began broadcasting in 1970 suggests that the programme would have been in development prior to the regulatory shake up of the industry. Moreover, *All in the Family* was itself a remake of the British sitcom, *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC, 1965-75), and, as the pilot was originally commissioned by ABC, it was also in existence long before its NBC debut in 1971.

As briefly mentioned in my analysis of the literature surrounding the institutional context of American television, 'socially relevant' sitcoms were first introduced by CBS executives as a means of targeting a new, younger audience in the hope of retaining their top-rated position. With the notion of upscale audience demographics gradually being embraced following almost a decade of research and rhetoric, the mass family audience was no longer regarded as the most important target market by the industry. This presented a problem, however, as for the first time the networks were faced with attracting an audience that had grown up with the

medium as part of their everyday lives. The idea that these viewers had to be taught how to use television and become consumers, or indeed that they somehow expected TV to avoid engaging with real-life issues, became increasingly untenable. It was amidst these shifts in sentiment, along with the expectation of upcoming FCC regulations, that CBS decided to break out of the 'least objectionable programming' approach that had underpinned the era of stable competition, and adopt a new strategy instead; one that focused on relevant issues and challenging material.

The Mary Tyler Moore Show was a watershed for the sitcom genre as it featured a single woman in her thirties, living and working in New York. Instead of being confined to the domestic home and relying on a man to support her, the lead character of Mary Richards found work in the newsroom of a television station and formed a 'substitute family' comprised of co-workers and friends. Featuring an ensemble cast, the show not only helped to define the notion of the workplace sitcom but it also altered the conception of the static sitcom character. As explained by Feuer, the characters in The Mary Tyler Moore Show, and its subsequent spin-off, Rhoda (CBS, 1974-78), 'appeared to possess a complexity previously unknown to the genre' (1987: 128). As a result, MTM Enterprises was credited with introducing the notion of character development to the form, 'a quality prized by the upscale audience' (129).

All in the Family, on the other hand, was more concerned with making overt political statements. Taking as its focus the Bunker family from Queen's, New York, the show was essentially a continuation of the domestic sitcom form. However, by centring on the confrontations between father Archie, who was something of a bigot, and his liberal son-in-law Mike, it was far removed from the gentle familial humour associated with the genre. Highlighting social concerns and prejudices, the show was notable for its inclusion of racial and ethnic epithets, but it also caused controversy for breaking less serious taboos, such as acknowledging that its characters used the bathroom by including the audible sound of a toilet flush (a first for U.S. TV).[20]

While The Mary Tyler Moore Show introduced character development to the sitcom form and All in the Family dealt with social and political issues, M*A*S*H

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[20] All in the Family produced two spin-offs in the form of Maude (CBS, 1972-78) and The Jeffersons. While the former caused controversy by being the first sitcom to feature a storyline in which the lead character decides to have an abortion, the latter was one of only three sitcoms to feature African Americans in starring roles since the cancellation of Amos 'n' Andy in 1953. The other two were Sanford and Son and Good Times.

differentiated itself from its predecessors through its visual aesthetic. Set during the Korean War (which, in itself, had political overtones), *M*A*S*H* was shot on film, rather than videotape, and used outdoor locations as well as a closed studio set. By abandoning the fourth wall and the presence of the studio audience, it achieved a distinct cinematic style (a nod to its previous incarnation as a feature film), while successfully combining comedy with character depth.

Given their innovations, the amount of scholarly attention that these particular sitcoms have attracted over the years is understandable. Nevertheless, rather than view these developments as part of a series of transformations that the sitcom has undergone over time, they have been regarded as unique breaks from tradition. This latter approach has become problematic since the emergence of the post-network era. With deregulation and the introduction of cable and satellite technologies resulting in a proliferation of channels within the marketplace, the differentiation of programme output has become a key means through which numerous channels seek to target specific segments of the audience. With this in mind, I will examine the impact these developments have had not only on the television landscape, but also on the sitcom form.

The Era of New Technologies: The Impact of Cable and Satellite

Since as early as 1949, cable technology was used within the television industry 'to bring local and network transmission to those rural or mountainous areas where over-the-air signals could not be received clearly' (MacDonald 1994: 220). As such, it was considered a 'reception improver' rather than a 'content provider' and the FCC took a hands-off approach with regards to regulation. This changed over the years with the introduction of microwave signals in the 1960s and then the development of satellite links a decade later. By selecting a range of signals from a variety of sources, cable operators were able to provide subscribers with a package that included standard network programming alongside more specialised output, such as live sporting events from other states. Until this point, television in America had consisted of programming supplied by the networks to a series of inter-locking stations and, as such, programme content was limited to what the networks produced. According to MacDonald, 'national television never offered viewers what they wanted; it offered what most accepted' (1994: 218). Cable, on the other hand, may have required

viewers to pay for a monthly fee for the service but, in return, it was able to tailor its programme output to the needs of the subscriber.

With cable providing an alternative source of broadcasting, the FCC sought to restrict the growth of the industry and protect the interest of the broadcast networks by implementing a series of Reports and Orders. This included a ban on distant signal importation and the specification that cable providers originate their own local programming (Blumenthal and Goodenough 1991; Mullen 2003). As the industry was in its infancy, however, the infrastructure was not in place to fund high quality content and the resulting output was unable to compete favourably with the 'big three'. In an attempt to enable cable to gain a foothold in the marketplace, the FCC decided to repeal its regulations in the early 1970s. The result of this flurry of deregulation was that instead of creating entirely new forms of programming distinct to cable, the industry simply offered its subscribers reruns of established network fare, such as sitcoms, dramas, and movies. As this type of material, along with the broadcast of sports and other live events, was enough to attract viewers, cable gradually developed into a viable business. This meant that it was to be over a decade before the industry moved into the original production market and finally began demonstrating an ability to provide high-quality niche programming that differed from its network counterparts.

The first company to capitalise on both the emergence of satellite links and the development of original programming was Home Box Office (HBO), which was launched by the media conglomerate, Time Inc., as a pay-cable channel in 1972. Operating as a premium-tier service, subscribers had to pay an additional fee to receive HBO programming on top of that paid for a basic cable package. As a result, it was expected to provide programming that was sufficiently different from the broadcast networks and other, cheaper, cable options. With the outlay for original programming initially considered too expensive, HBO instead focused on commercial-free movies and live sports events (later followed by stand-up comedy specials), in the hope that viewers would be willing to pay for such material.

Once an audience for pay-cable was established, more competitors entered the market and began to challenge HBO for the broadcast rights to the most sought after sports events and movies. Thus, in an attempt to stay ahead of its rivals, HBO became involved in film financing at the beginning of the 1980s. By making deals to finance films that were in pre-production, HBO's objective was twofold; it not only ensured

that content was being produced, but it also gained exclusive access to the most popular movies (Hollins 1984: 257). This was only the first step in a wider strategy however. If pay-cable operators were to diversify programme output, attract new subscribers, and maximise profits in the long term, then possessing the ability to produce a wide range of original material seemed a sensible, if expensive, option.

During the 1980s, both HBO and Showtime, a pay-cable service formed by the media conglomerate Viacom, began 'putting money into non-theatrical films, specials, and series' (257). The most desirable genres within the industry, at this time, were the television mini-series and quality drama, and pay-cable operators following this trend were rewarded handsomely for their efforts, both in terms of subscription fees and critical acclaim. As noted by MacDonald,

> made-for-cable programming moved into the artistic mainstream in 1988 when shows from Turner, HBO, Showtime and Disney were nominated for 15 Emmy awards. This was the first time in the History of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences that cable products had been permitted to compete against broadcast TV. Importantly, the HBO production *Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam* won two awards (1994: 250-251).

As a result of this success, cable channels soon embarked on producing original comedy, with a number of sitcoms, in particular, being developed. As well as Showtime's innovative *It's Garry Shandling's Show*, both HBO and MTV created dedicated comedy channels by the end of the decade, in the form of Comedy Central and Ha! The TV Comedy Network respectively.

The move into sitcom production by pay-cable channels had a significant effect on the perception of the genre as a conservative and rigid form. Free of the influence of advertisers, operators such as HBO were not obliged to align their programming with conventional products aimed at the mass market. Moreover, their actual audience consisted of adult viewers who had paid for the privilege to receive programming that differed in some way from the broadcast networks. As a result, sitcoms such as *The Larry Sanders Show*, *Sex and the City*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* were able to play with the conventions of the form, by delivering adult themes and strong language alongside a knowing sense of self-parody. This is indicative of what I would term the shift toward 'contentious comedy' in the post-network era, a development that acknowledged the 'socially relevant' sitcoms of the

1970s while rejecting the 'least objectionable programming' theory that had historically underpinned network television. While I believe that subscription-based programming has the capability to epitomise 'contentious comedy' in the extreme, I am by no means suggesting that this phenomenon is limited to pay-cable. In fact, with the television landscape experiencing irrevocable change following the introduction of new technologies and government intervention, I intend to demonstrate in the following three case studies the way in which commercial, pay-cable, and niche channels have each incorporated the notion of 'contentious comedy' into their sitcom output in an attempt to target specific segments of the audience.

Deregulation: The Creation of an 'Unfettered Marketplace'

The developments occurring in American television at the dawn of the 1980s signalled the biggest change in the industry since its inception. For example, by providing alternatives to over-the-air distribution, the proliferation of cable and satellite systems not only resulted in a more competitive marketplace, but also challenged the importance of spectrum scarcity and, as a consequence, the limitations placed on the industry through government regulation. Other technological advancements also affected the industry during this period, most notably the widespread application of the remote control and the videocassette recorder (VCR). These two appliances ultimately provided audiences with more control over their viewing habits by allowing them to switch channels more easily and time-shift programming. In addition, the latter was also utilised to create a video rental market for films and certain types of television programmes. As a result of these new technologies, audiences had a wider range of content to choose from and were able to arrange programmes in whichever sequence they desired.[21] They were also able to avoid watching advertisements if they wished. By turning the channel, using the fast-forward device, subscribing to pay-cable, or renting a movie, viewers were beginning to escape the advertiser; a situation that caused problems for broadcast networks relying on advertising as their main source of revenue.

Rather than move to protect the status of the broadcast networks within the American television landscape, as it had done in the past, the FCC embarked on a

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[21] The introduction of TiVo (a brand of Digital Video Recorder) over a decade later further consolidates the notion of the viewer as programmer. The device not only allows users to capture television programming to an internal hard drive as required, but its sophisticated software is also able to record other material that they are likely to be interested in.

deregulatory trend that opened up the marketplace to even more competitors. With Ronald Reagan appointing Mark Fowler as chairmen of the FCC following his inauguration in 1981, Holt notes the way in which the two men 'shared a vision of an unfettered marketplace' (2003: 12). This was confirmed a year later when Fowler outlined the FCC's aims for the broadcasting industry in an article entitled, 'A Broadcast Approach to Market Regulation': 'Our thesis is that the perception of broadcasters as community trustees should be replaced by a view of broadcasters as marketplace participants' (1982: 209). With Fowler viewing television as a commercial business that should operate according to market forces like any other, the FCC swiftly embarked on a period of deregulation. As Holt explains, the aim was to eradicate structural and content regulations while placing an 'emphasis on competition and profit as opposed to scheduling mandates or programming requirements' (2003: 12). As a public trustee, television was expected to combine entertainment with informative programming and, as such, had historically been subject to certain content regulations, in the form of percentage guidelines for news, public affairs, and local programmes. By abandoning such policies, Fowler aimed to leave programming decisions in the hands of public demand, allowing broadcasters to 'satisfy consumer desires based on their reading of what viewers want, from all-news to all-entertainment programming' (1982; 245).

The FCC's new approach to regulation was also based on what was regarded as the failings of spectrum scarcity. While Fowler recognised that there was 'no room for additional full-power VHF stations in the large markets under current levels of permitted interference', he suggested that the process of buying an existing station be made simpler (225). In addition, he questioned the overall importance of spectrum scarcity due to the growing number of 'substitutes for over-the-air distribution', i.e., cable television, low-power television, multipoint distribution services, videocassette recording, and direct broadcasting satellite (225). Under the control of Fowler, therefore, the FCC began to repeal the structural restrictions that had been put in place over the years, from Fin Syn and PTAR to the Anti-Trafficking provision, a rule that prevented owners from selling stations within three years of purchase (although in the case of Fin Syn, lobbying from the Hollywood studios prevented the rule from being completely eliminated until 1995). The aim was that broadcasting should be characterised by competition rather than regulation, and the initial result of the

ongoing process of deregulation was that several new licences were allocated to independent stations across the country.

The existence of a growing number of unaffiliated stations across the country opened the door for the creation of a new television network that could link them together, an opportunity that was seized by media mogul Rupert Murdoch with the launch of the Fox Broadcasting Company in 1986. The arrival of a fourth competitor to the broadcast market complicated what was already an unsettling time for CBS, NBC, and ABC. While the combined prime-time network audience had averaged a 56.5 rating/90 share during the 1979-80 season, this number had fallen to 48.5 rating/77 share by 1984-85 (MacDonald 1994: 224).[22] This decline was in direct contrast to the rising number of households receiving cable, which, by 1986, stood at forty million (Negrine 1988: 7). As a result of this downward trend in network viewing, Fox positioned itself as 'a sort of mini-network, a cross between a traditional over-the-air operation and a cable channel' (Hilmes 2003c: 64). Instead of trying to attract viewers that were already catered for by the 'big three', it targeted audiences that had previously been overlooked by network broadcasting, namely young, urban, and ethnic viewers.

This strategy was indicative of the turn toward 'narrowcasting' that had occurred within American television. While the broadcast networks had traditionally adopted a generalist approach in an attempt to satisfy a wide range of interests and needs, cable television focused on the tastes and values of specific segments of the audience. (This is demonstrated, in the extreme, by channels such as MTV, Black Entertainment Television (BET), and Comedy Central, which were launched in the 1980s and took as their focus music, African American programming, and comedy respectively.) Recognising that the mass national audience was fragmenting due to the increased level of choice within the marketplace, Fox attempted to combine national reach with niche appeal by targeting a clearly defined segment of the audience. This approach allowed it to develop programming that was distinctive from its network competitors, something that was most visible within its sitcom output.

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[22] Drawing on the definitions used by A.C. Nielsen (the company that measures and compiles statistics on U.S. television audiences), Janet Staiger helpfully differentiates between ratings and shares in her study of 'blockbuster sitcoms'. She explains that while ratings are based on the 'percent of U.S. TV households tuned to the program', shares are the 'percent of households using television at the time of the program's principal telecast'. Ratings therefore measure the size of the total audience while shares measure the percentage of the *available* viewing audience (2000: 180).

The first successful Fox sitcom to result from this strategy was *Married . . . With Children* (1987-97), which was constructed in direct opposition to the most popular programme on air at the time, *The Cosby Show*. Despite revolving around an 'ideal' family with an upper-middle-class lifestyle and a strong sense of family values, the latter had in fact been considered groundbreaking when it premiered in 1984. This was because the aspirational family at the centre of the show happened to be black. Unlike the previous black sitcoms of the 1970s, such as *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1975-85), *Good Times* (CBS, 1974-79), and *Sanford & Son* (NBC, 1972-77), *The Cosby Show* was not 'ghetto-centric' and did not rely on confrontation and the trading of insults between family members to create humour. Instead, it favoured saccharine over cynicism, in its efforts to portray a black family in a positive light. This attempt at a type of affirmative action faced controversy from critics however, as it was seen as regressing back to a time in which sitcoms upheld the 'ideal' family as the dominant norm. Furthermore, as the characters within the show rarely had to deal with the effects of racism and discrimination, it appeared to reverse the progress made by the socially relevant sitcoms, with regards to engaging with real-life issues and presenting challenging and uncomfortable material (Jhally and Lewis 1992; Hunt 2005). Nevertheless, such criticism did not necessarily affect the show's popularity. In fact, Darnell Hunt notes that in a time when audiences were readily deserting network programming for cable and other media options, Entertainment Weekly described *The Cosby Show* as 'the last show everyone watched' (2005: 14). It must be noted, however, that for NBC, the most desirable segment of the *Cosby* audience continued to be the middle-class, *white* family, as opposed to young, ethnic viewers.

It was this latter audience that the upstart network Fox actively sought and, as a result, *Married . . . With Children* was consciously developed as a counter to *The Cosby Show*, even earning the nickname 'The Anti-Cosby Show' by its cast members (Lusane 1998: 15). For a sitcom aimed at young, urban, and ethnic viewers, it is perhaps somewhat surprising that the Bundy family of *Married . . . With Children* was, in fact, white. However, Clarence Lusane puts forward a number of reasons as to why the show was successful in attracting an African-American audience in particular. These include the presence of a black executive producer 'whose cultural mark is evident in many of *MWC*'s episodes', the 'strength, consistency, and relevance of the narrative regarding issues of class, race, and circumscribed opportunities', and the type of 'insult-driven humor that is popular in the black

community' (15). As Fox sought to present programmes that 'reflected the MTV generation ethos and values', *Married With . . . Children* led the way with its exchange of insults, cynicism, popular culture references, and ability to push the boundaries of morality (14). The result was that the show consistently appeared in the top ten programmes watched by black viewers in its ten years on the air (and this was despite the growth during this period of the cable channel BET, the only television network dedicated to attracting African American viewers).

Capitalising on the relative success of *Married . . . With Children*, Fox followed this with *The Simpsons*, another sitcom that subverted the notion of the 'ideal' family but which this time presented them in animated form. As the majority of the characters were coloured yellow, race could again be considered an implicit aspect of the show. However, apart from the presence of one recognisably Indian character named Apu, *The Simpsons* did not appear to aggressively target, or attempt to become representative of, a predominantly ethnic audience (although it was situated within a similar class milieu). This was in contrast to other comic programming broadcast by Fox at the time, most notably the sketch show *In Living Color* (1990-94) and the sitcom *Living Single* (1993-98), two programmes featuring entirely African American casts. As an emergent network, Fox's motive in targeting a black audience was to carve itself an initial niche in the marketplace rather than try to compete directly with the 'big three' from the outset. However, on establishing itself as a purveyor of challenging, urban comedy, and, following the crossover success of *The Simpsons* (which, to date, remains the longest-running sitcom and animated series in American television history), Fox began to transfer its attention to a more desirable audience segment, in the form of 18- to 49-year old white male viewers. A solid African American viewership was advantageous to Fox as it tried to establish itself as a major competitor within the broadcast landscape, but in order to be considered a viable fourth network, wider audiences and higher ratings were required. Thus, in an attempt to transform its image, the network diversified its output to include programming with wider appeal, namely sports events and male-oriented reality television shows such as *Cops* (1989-) and *America's Most Wanted* (1988-).

The overall prime-time network audience had undoubtedly declined since the advent of what has now become known as the post-network era. Nevertheless, Fox's success ultimately demonstrated that it was still possible for a new network to gain a foothold in the marketplace by targeting a clearly defined segment of the audience.

This was largely because of the dramatic change in the economics of the broadcast networks. As explained by Amanda Lotz, the increase in competitors within the multichannel landscape, led to both 'smaller profit margins' and a 'reconfiguration of [programme] strategies', as the major networks sought to compete with cable companies that were able to maintain profits despite attracting smaller audiences (2006: 25). For example, prior to the post-network era, ratings for the top-rated shows in the U.S. ranged from the mid-twenties to the upper thirties, i.e., programmes had to attract over twenty to thirty percent of *all* available households in order to enter the top thirty. By the 1998-99 season, however, 'the highest rated series (*E.R.*) earned a 17.8 rating, while a program could rank in the top thirty with a rating of nine' (26). Staiger understands this shift as an indication of the way in which ratings have become less meaningful over the years, due to practices such as time-shifting (2000: 18). Lotz on the other hand, suggests that if a show attracting nine million viewers can now enter the top-thirty, then this 'gives smaller segments of the overall audience more significance' (2006: 26).

It is this latter logic, along with the eventual repeal of the Fin Syn rule in 1995, that led to the creation of new, self-styled 'niche-networks', in the form of United Paramount Network (UPN) and The WB Network (The WB). As noted by Jason Gay (1998), the eventual repeal of Fin Syn meant that the broadcast networks were now in the position to develop and sell their own programming, as opposed to having to purchase it from Hollywood Studios or independent production companies. As a result, both Paramount and Warner Bros. became 'fearful of losing a market for their own shows' and decided to diversify into network broadcasting, with Fox as their model (Gay 1998: online). The production of sitcom was, of course, an attractive proposition for these new networks, as it allowed them to fill their schedules with programming that was relatively cheap and easy to produce, and which was familiar to the audience. While their primary audiences were African Americans and young, female viewers, UPN, in particular, embarked on a 'black-block' programming strategy that centred on the broadcast of a number of black sitcoms back-to-back over the course of a single night. With a number of short-lived sitcoms that depicted black males as urban, single clowns, e.g., *Malcolm & Eddie* (1996-2000), *Homeboys from Outer Space* (1996-97), and *Sparks* (1996-97), UPN appeared to eschew the attempts made by *The Cosby Show* to present black characters as role models. As the century

drew to a close, however, its sitcom output began to diversify into something more challenging, a shift that I will consider in detail in Chapter Six.

In the crowded and fiercely competitive environment of the post-network era, it would appear that a generalist approach, in which the most effective programming is that which is aimed at the widest possible audience, is no longer viable. Instead, commercial networks, pay-cable channels, and emergent niche-networks have each had to create distinct brand identities and programming strategies in an attempt to position their output within the marketplace (Caldwell 1995). Significantly, this has had an effect on the sitcom genre, as a number of channels have employed innovative techniques, within what has generally been regarded as television's most durable and popular form, in order to differentiate themselves from their competitors and target new viewers. While Fox, as the fourth network to enter the marketplace, was the first broadcaster to adopt such an approach, other networks and pay-cable operators have followed suit, creating a number of sitcoms that challenge the dominant norm and which are directed at specific segments of the audience. Divided into three case studies, my thesis will consider the development of sitcom in this era in relation to three different networks. In the first instance I will analyse the sitcom output of commercial network NBC, with regards to its 'must-see TV' strategy. I will then examine the way in which pay-cable channel HBO positions its sitcoms as something 'other' than television, before concluding with an exploration of 'black-block' programming in relation to niche-network UPN.

Chapter 4
NBC Case Study: 'Must-See TV'

From the mid-1980s onwards, NBC rose to dominance in the television industry by creating a distinctive brand identity based on the marketing slogan 'must-see TV'. Although Lotz attributes the network's continued success to a 'complex range of programming approaches', the most prominent of these was the back-to-back broadcast of sitcoms on a Thursday night (2007: 262). NBC's initial sitcom success was particularly significant because in the early part of the 1980s, the only example of the genre to feature in the Nielsen Top Ten was the CBS broadcast *Kate & Allie* (1984-1989), a show that focused on the ups and downs of two single-parent families. By the 1987-1988 season, however, NBC's sitcom line-up dominated, with *The Cosby Show*, *A Different World* (1987-93), *Cheers*, and *The Golden Girls* (1985-92) securing the top-four places in the ratings. Each of these programmes was initially praised for its originality, either due to a focus on marginal characters (such as African Americans and older women), or for a sophisticated style of comedy that utilised an ensemble cast. However, as the decade drew to a close, NBC's line-up began to face increasing competition from the emergent fourth network Fox and the pay-cable channel Showtime.

With Fox embarking on a campaign to aggressively target young, urban, and ethnic viewers (who had continuously been overlooked by the 'big three') and with Showtime offering original sitcom programming to its subscribers, NBC found itself in a similar position to CBS in the early 1970s. Despite high viewing figures, the network was failing to target the most desirable segment of the audience, namely 18- to 49-year-old urban-dwellers with high disposable incomes (Auletta 1992: 256). For NBC to *retain* its audience share, therefore, while also attracting *new* viewers in an increasingly competitive marketplace, its programming strategy had to be rethought, particularly with regards to its sitcom line-up (Lotz: 2007).

In this chapter I will demonstrate how NBC has attained success by broadcasting sitcoms that reflect the lifestyles of the viewers it seeks to attract. While still adhering to the 'must-see TV' approach, NBC has gradually replaced its family-based and sophisticated ensemble comedies with sitcoms that revolve around young,

single friends who live and work in the city, and who are largely free of responsibilities. To illustrate this argument I shall consider three of the most popular and critically acclaimed examples of the form: *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Will & Grace*. Through an analysis of each programme, I explain how these sitcoms feature characters whose relationships are based primarily on friendship as opposed to family or workplace ties. With a number of main characters to showcase, I also discuss how they create an interweaving narrative structure that takes place at a hectic pace and which incorporates a wide range of urban locations.

In each instance, I demonstrate how an 'insider group' is constructed in an attempt to appeal to those segments of the audience deemed desirable. While in *Seinfeld*, this involves the development of insider references based on language and visual parody, *Friends* incorporates serial techniques to encourage its audience to both identify with and form emotional attachments to its central group of characters. As the first network sitcom to feature a gay character in a lead role, *Will & Grace* produces pleasures for both gay and straight audiences through the contradictory mechanisms of 'straight acting' and 'queer living'. By examining each of these shows in relation to form, content, and representation, this chapter illustrates how NBC sitcoms from the 1990s onwards are demonstrative of what Tueth describes as 'the *mainstreaming* of a new comic attitude previously displayed only in *marginal* settings' [my emphasis] (2005: 28).

Seinfeld: The Creation of a 'Show About Nothing'

Following the arrival of Fox to the marketplace and Showtime's move into original programme production, the production of *Seinfeld* was the first sitcom by NBC to display a distinct change of direction. In addition to commissioning a number of new sitcoms from tried and tested writers for the 1988-1989 season, NBC's head of entertainment, Brandon Tartikoff, also contacted the stand-up comedian Jerry Seinfeld about the possibility of creating an original sitcom for the network. On forming a partnership with fellow stand-up Larry David, the resultant pitch was for 'a show about nothing', or rather, a sitcom that would revolve around the minutiae of everyday life and which would feature Seinfeld playing a semi-fictionalised version of himself. Network publicity surrounding the programme stressed the unconventional nature of this commissioning process, as neither Seinfeld nor David had a substantial television track record on which to be judged. According to the executive Warren

Littlefield, who went on to replace Tartikoff in 1991, all the traditional rules regarding the production of network programming were broken from the outset. With NBC commissioning the nascent independent company Castle Rock Entertainment to produce a pilot of the proposed *Seinfeld* production, none of the people involved in the show had any television credentials; 'nobody was from TV's elite circle of success' (Littlefield 2001).

This move was not as exceptional, or indeed risky, as it originally appeared however. For example, although Jerry Seinfeld may not have had substantial television *sitcom* experience (apart from a small recurring role in ABC's *Benson* which ran from 1979 to 1986), he had in fact made regular stand-up appearances on NBC's *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* (1962-92) and was therefore familiar to viewers. Moreover, the pay-cable network Showtime had recently provided a model for NBC to follow. Initially recognised for its sports and movie coverage, Showtime had branched into original production in the mid-1980s and scored a critically acclaimed hit with the innovative sitcom, *It's Garry Shandling's Show*, which featured the eponymous stand-up comedian playing a fictionalised version of himself. On the BBC's Guide to Comedy website, Mark Lewisohn (n.d.) explains how Shandling's sitcom broke the conventions of the genre in two ways. First, all of the characters in the show 'were aware that they were in a sitcom and often discussed plots and occurrences, sometimes with themselves and sometimes aloud to others', and second, Shandling regularly broke through the fourth wall, 'to involve viewers and his studio audience in the fictional antics'. Unlike other recent sitcoms which had sought innovation through subject matter (socially relevant and contentious issues) and representation (black, upper-middle-class families, older female characters, and single parents), *It's Garry Shandling's Show* subverted the formal conventions of the genre in a way that was similar to that of Benny, Burns, and Allen. As noted by Marc, within the early days of network television 'several shows toyed with mutant forms that crossed elements of stand-up with situation comedy', a description that could equally be applied to the Showtime sitcom (1989: 19).

While I will suggest in Chapter Five that cable networks provide a more suitable platform for such formal innovations, NBC nevertheless followed Showtime's lead with regards to approaching a stand-up comedian to create a sitcom based on his everyday experiences. However, this strategy existed in tandem with the conventional network commissioning process. If the resultant sitcom proved a success

then the network would reap the rewards; if not, then it would simply fall back on the clutch of traditional sitcoms that had been produced for that season. Placed within this context, the risks associated with the production appear minimal.

Even though I am suggesting that it was *It's Garry Shandling's Show* that initially signalled a formal departure from the traditional sitcom form in the post-network era, this does not mean that *Seinfeld* was not also innovative. In fact, the latter sitcom was original in a number of ways. This is particularly evident in the way the series plays with language and location to create an idiosyncratic set of rules and conventions that the main characters live by. Moreover, in an attempt to mark out specific episodes as distinctive, it also plays with the look of the sitcom through the introduction of visual parody. While I will consider each of these elements in detail later in the analysis, it is important to outline how *Seinfeld* also continues to display more traditional aspects of the genre. By blurring the boundaries between the off-screen and on-screen status of its eponymous star, and by incorporating elements of stand-up into its situational narrative, *Seinfeld* shares many of its characteristics with the vaudeville-influenced sitcoms of the 1950s. This is in addition to adhering to the closed, circular narrative of the traditional domestic sitcom.

Continuing the Conventions of the Traditional Sitcom

Taking its title from the stand-up performer in the lead role, *Seinfeld* can be placed within the long running tradition of 'comedian comedy' (Langford 2005a: 20). However, unlike a sitcom such as *Roseanne*, in which the eponymous star plays a purely fictional character with which she shares a first name but little else, Jerry Seinfeld's on-screen character is a stand-up comedian whose routines form part of the show. Moreover, by opening and closing each episode, Jerry's comic monologues work to bookend the situational aspects of the narrative. In this sense, the series is reminiscent of *The Jack Benny Program* and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show,* as well as its more recent counterpart *It's Garry Shandling's Show*. Where it differs from these programmes is that its characters never acknowledge that they are starring in a sitcom, either by directly addressing the studio audience or the viewers at home.

It is impossible to say whether the structure and premise of *Seinfeld* was influenced by its creators' lack of experience within the industry and a subsequent desire to write about a field they knew well, or whether it was a knowing attempt to

reference an earlier time in the history of the genre. Seinfeld and David have indicated, however, that their original intention was to differentiate the series from its immediate predecessors by breaking the conventional sitcom mould. As a result, the series operates according to what Seinfeld and David describe as a 'no hugging, no learning' philosophy. Rather than feature a typical nuclear family in a domestic setting or a group of colleagues situated within the workplace, *Seinfeld* revolves around four single, thirty-something friends who live and work in New York. Ostensibly a 'show about nothing', it takes as its primary concern the minutiae of everyday life and bases its storylines on the type of minor occurrences and strange coincidences that inform the comic material of observational stand-up. As such, it refuses to work through a particular problem within its thirty-minute cycle or present its characters with a valuable life lesson. At the same time, however, it also adheres to the closed nature of the traditional sitcom form. With Jerry's comic monologues working to bookend the situational aspects of the narrative, each episode is self-contained. Beginning with a stand-up routine in which Jerry introduces a general theme or subject area, the situational narrative goes on to illustrate or complicate this theme via a number of interweaving storylines. In the concluding sequence, Jerry is then returned to his stand-up position to offer a final comic monologue, or coda, before the episode comes to an end.

With four main characters to showcase, *Seinfeld* adopts a multi-plot structure that unfolds at a hectic pace. Although the narrative strands often appear unrelated to one another, part of the pleasure derived from the series is the way in which they are elaborately woven together for the denouement of the plot. This offers a resolution of sorts. By adopting a 'no hugging, no learning' approach, Teuth explains how the comic plots and schemes carried out in each episode generally 'end in frustration and disaster' with the characters refusing to learn from their mistakes (2000: 103). At the same time, however, the unity of the group is upheld in a manner similar to the domestic family sitcom, as each week a succession of friends, romantic partners, work colleagues, and family members enter the narrative, only to find themselves dismissed by the episode's end. The key difference between *Seinfeld* and its family-based predecessors is that in *Seinfeld* the supporting characters are generally expelled due to a failure to meet the superficial standards set by the central four characters.

Rather than adhere to an established set of (family) values, the four characters in *Seinfeld* develop their own set of idiosyncratic rules and conventions over the

course of each season. Beginning with an examination of the pilot episode, I will consider how this 'insider group' is constructed through the show's innovative use of language, location, and insider sign systems. I will then move on to analyse 'The Boyfriend' from Season Three, a one-hour episode that functions as an example of 'must-see' or distinctive programming. My analysis of this episode not only demonstrates how the insider references continue to develop throughout the series, but it also explores two other areas of innovation within the show, namely the blurring of the boundaries between the real and the fictional, and the emergence of stylistic excess through visual parody.

Language, Location, and Insider Sign Systems in the Pilot Episode of *Seinfeld*

Two of the key features that mark *Seinfeld* out as distinctive are its inventive use of language and location. This is apparent from the very first episode, which was originally broadcast by NBC in 1989 as *The Seinfeld Chronicles*. Opening with the interior of a comedy club where Jerry is performing a stand-up routine, the pilot initially serves to indicate the broadcast of a live stand-up show. This is because there is no title sequence to introduce us to character or location in the typical manner of a sitcom. Instead, the viewers are immediately presented with a comic monologue, and it is only once this is underway that the titles are slowly interspersed with the action. Jerry's opening monologue is noteworthy as it concerns socialising outside of the home, which he describes as 'one of the single most enjoyable experiences of life'. This helps establish a self-reflexive and playful tone from the outset, as the show's primary audience is, of course, at home, watching TV.

Following the initial stand-up segment, the action quickly moves to an everyday location, in the form of a diner, where Jerry is having coffee with George Costanza (a character loosely based on co-creator and writer of the show, David). This move is significant as it demonstrates that, despite being a sitcom, the production does not feel the need to introduce the viewer to a domestic home or workplace as the main site of action. As the characters are single and with varying professions, *The Seinfeld Chronicles* takes advantage of what Richard Zoglin describes as 'a kind of in-between world' made up of halls, doorways, and taxicabs (1995: 74). This is in addition to public places such as the Laundromat and the airport (two of the other locations in the pilot episode). This means that, in terms of plot, the show is not restricted to showcasing the type of problems and situations that arise within the home

or the workplace. Instead, it prefers to use public places and urban spaces to consider the absurdity of social conventions. This not only widens its narrative possibilities but also exploits its New York setting to the full.

The one location that adheres to the established tradition of domestic sitcoms is Jerry's apartment, which features regularly within the series. A constant location such as this is important to the form for two reasons. Firstly, the apartment serves as a space where each of the main characters can congregate and with which the audience can become familiar. As Jerry is the title character, it is his apartment into which the viewers are invited and this acts as a base from which the rest of the characters are introduced. In the pilot episode this includes Kessler (renamed Kramer in the subsequent series), his eccentric neighbour who frequently drops by to look in Jerry's fridge or watch his television, and George, his best friend who regularly comes to pick him up or discuss his latest relationship or employment worries. The Elaine Benes character, a former girlfriend of Jerry's who continues to be his confidante, does not actually feature in the pilot episode, but was added to the subsequent series to provide a female perspective on events.

In the second instance, Jerry's apartment is also important in terms of budget. The sitcom genre often consists of a few, recognisable locations that can be utilised every week at a low cost. *Seinfeld*, however, attempts to move away from the traditional set-up by featuring an array of alternative spaces. As this requires new sets to be constructed and then dismantled on a weekly basis, it is important to the economics of the production that there is at least one regular set that can be utilised each week, such as Jerry's apartment. This indicates that in order to be inventive with its overall use of location, *Seinfeld* must continue to make certain concessions with regards to the traditional sitcom form if it is to remain within budget.

Jerry's apartment is also interesting in terms of layout. Due to its open-plan nature, the living room, dining room, kitchen, and office combine to form one space, and even though the bedroom is positioned out of view, the bathroom appears at the back of the set and is thus clearly seen by the audience when the door is open. The open-plan layout of Jerry's apartment is not unique, as sitcoms as diverse as *All in the Family*, *Happy Days*, *Roseanne*, and *Married . . . With Children* also feature sets in which the kitchen and living areas are combined. Nevertheless, the tight, cramped nature of the space, along with the attention to detail, works to signify not only Jerry's single status but also the quirky obsessiveness that informs his stand-up routines. As a

single man without a partner, children, or even a roommate to accommodate, all of Jerry's amenities and artefacts are close by and on display, including the bathroom. The fact that the kitchen is visible from almost every shot highlights both the tightness of living conditions in a city such as New York (were space is sold at a premium), as well Jerry's status as a struggling stand-up (although this becomes complicated as he gains more success over time). It also allows viewers to pick up on the details of Jerry's life, such as the alphabetised cereal boxes and Superman figures that indicate a fastidious but juvenile character. By being familiar with these accoutrements and personality traits, viewers are given an insight into the character of Jerry and, as a result, his style of comedy, which generally consists of a concern with the minutiae of everyday life.

It is the tightness of space that essentially differentiates the show's use of location not only from its predecessors but also from many of its descendants. For example, much of the humour in *Seinfeld* comes from cramming characters into elevators, car interiors, and even their favoured booth in the diner (which can only accommodate four). Their inability to find suitable personal space in New York reinforces a misanthropic streak in each of the characters and their proximity to each other creates a bond that places the four in conflict with the rest of the society. The 'insider' group mentality that is constructed in relation to the show's use of location also extends to its use of language, as the characters establish a particular form of reference that is recognisable only to them (along with its millions of loyal television viewers). This play of language is key to all plotlines in *Seinfeld*, as it is to stand-up comedy, and thus emphasises the attempt to bring a stand-up perspective to the show.

The storyline of the pilot episode involves Laura, a female acquaintance of Jerry's, calling to say that she is visiting New York on business and that 'maybe' they should meet up. This raises the question of what does she mean exactly? Is she just being polite or would she like to go on a date? Does she want to have a relationship with him? It is questions such as these that are the crux of all *Seinfeld* plots. As explained by Jerry Seinfeld (2004) himself in an interview that features on the DVD release of the first three seasons, when writing the sitcom both he and David were drawn to the 'gaps in society were there were no rules. How do you find this out, how do you ask this, what does this mean, there was no indication'. The dynamic between the characters of Jerry and George, therefore, generally involves George (who often

features as the comic butt of the jokes) explaining to Jerry how to interpret various social and linguistic signs only to continually get them wrong.

George's initial interpretation of Laura's request is that she is simply using Jerry: 'You're a back-up, you're a second-line, a just-in-case, a b-plan, a contingency.' However, when Laura calls again and asks Jerry if she can 'stay at his place', George changes his mind and decides that she is definitely interested in his friend: 'What do you need? A flag? [*Waving his handkerchief*] This is the signal, Jerry. This is the signal!' On Laura's arrival, Jerry begins to think that George may have interpreted the situation correctly as she makes herself comfortable by slipping off her shoes, dimming the lights, and asking for some wine. But this impression is quickly shattered when, in the final scene of the situation segment of the narrative, Laura receives a phone call from her fiancé, thus putting an end to a possible relationship with Jerry.

Following his surprise at Laura's engagement, the episode concludes with another of Jerry's stand-up routines at a comedy club, where he announces his confusion over interpreting what women say and what they mean:

> I don't get it, okay? I, I, I admit, I, I'm not getting the signals. I am not getting it! Women, they're so subtle, their little...everything they do is subtle. Men are not subtle, we are obvious. Women know what men want, men know what men want, what do we want? We want women, that's it!

This closing monologue suggests that the humour in this episode of *Seinfeld* is primarily about gender distinctions. However, this is the terrain of many traditional sitcoms and I would argue that in the case of *Seinfeld*, the humour created has more to do with the possibilities of language.

It is in his stand-up performance that Jerry finally takes command of the language he uses by expressing his opinion in an open and direct way, i.e., men want women and men make this sentiment obvious. Yet, instead of accepting the literal meaning of Laura's request, both Jerry and George assume that her words contain signals that must be interpreted. In the situation context of the programme, social manners and conduct prevent Jerry from asking Laura what she actually means. In a culture in which words and actions are loaded with significance and social status is of utmost importance, the characters' constant fear of public embarrassment and rejection leads to an avoidance of asking straightforward questions. Of course, by

doing so, they usually interpret situations wrongly, thus intensifying their embarrassment further and creating humour in the process.

In the stand-up section of the show, Jerry is able to transgress these social conventions and be candid about his own (and by extension, what he regards as the male population's) intentions toward women for humorous effect. By performing directly to the assembled club audience, Jerry is able to express his feelings more openly as his words and actions do not result in consequences as they do in his everyday life. His only aim is to make the audience laugh, an objective that places him in a different position to the Jerry we see in the situation segments of the programme. While the stand-up section articulates the complexity of the social context of language, the situation element of the programme goes on to illustrate it.

Seinfeld also emphasises the difficulties surrounding social manners and rules by imbuing seemingly insignificant details with importance. During the aforementioned scene in the diner, Jerry chastises George for the placement of the second button on his shirt: 'Seems to me, that button is in the worst possible spot. The second button literally makes or breaks the shirt, look at it. It's too high! It's in no-man's land; you look like you live with your mother'. For a show that proclaims to be about nothing in particular, *Seinfeld* is in fact highly concerned with the way in which seemingly minor details can actually act as an important signifier into someone's character or personal circumstances. These details are, of course, only of interest to the four central characters and, as such, they concoct their own terms for everyday items and actions.

In the pilot episode, for example, George tells Jerry he does not want to accompany him to the Laundromat to which Jerry replies, 'oh, come on, be a "come-with guy,"' insinuating that both George and the audience at home knows what a 'come-with guy' means. Other terms invoked throughout the series include 'close-talker' to describe someone who invades people's personal space during conversations, the 'shrinkage factor,' which is George's preferred defence when Jerry's girlfriend accidentally walks in on him while naked, and 'bizarro', a term used to refer to the opposite of something or someone, as in 'bizarro Jerry' or 'bizarro world'.[23] The characters also interpret non-verbal signs to express meaning. When asked how her latest relationship is going, Elaine answers, 'yeah, you know' while

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[23] For a full description of these *Seinfeld*ian terms, see the glossary provided by B. Lee (2006).

scratching her face. Jerry interprets it as a 'tell,' e.g., a tell-tale sign, to which George concurs. Jerry explains to Elaine, 'when you ask someone about their relationship and they touch their face, you know it's not going too well'. He then demonstrates his claim that 'the higher up on the face you go the worse the relationship is getting' by scratching his chin and nose before covering his eyes with his hands.

By attributing basic labels to both specific actions and supporting characters, Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer create their own type of 'insider' vernacular and sign system that once again works to distance them from the rest of society. While this distancing effect occurs within the diegetic confines of the narrative, their use of language performs a different function outside of the sitcom's fictional world. As specific terms and references are developed over the course of each season, the show's most loyal viewers are expected to become familiar with their meanings, thus allowing them to identify with the characters and become part of the (fictional) group. As well as gaining added pleasure from their knowledge of the language and the way in which it functions within the diegesis, those who understand and recognise the complex and sustained references also become part of a privileged fan community that operates outside of the confines of the sitcom.[24] Due to the show's exceptional success, however, this community has become rather substantial, with many so-called 'Seinfeldian' terms entering the popular consciousness and becoming part of (a certain segment of) society's everyday lexicon.

Despite the eventual level of success attained by the programme, its trajectory toward becoming a mainstay of commercial television was not always easy. With just four episodes being commissioned for its first season and thirteen for its second, Seinfeld was not regarded as a top priority for NBC and was continually moved around in the schedules. While this meant that any progress regarding audience and ratings was gradual, it also meant that it was largely produced without network interference. The level of autonomy afforded to the creators slowly made an impact on the style of the sitcom and by Season Three Seinfeld had not only developed specific stylistic markers but had also become highly self-reflexive in doing so. With this in mind, I will move on to examine in more detail 'The Boyfriend' from Season Three.

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[24] The fan website *Seinology* compiles lists on the various references used within the show. These range from references to movies, TV shows, and real people, to the episodes in which George refers to his alter-ego, Art Vandelay, and in which co-creator Larry David's voice appears. It also features the full transcripts of each episode. See *www.seinology.com* (Accessed January 2006).

'The Boyfriend': Blurring the Boundaries Between the Real and the Fictional

From its third season onwards, *Seinfeld* began to feature a number of one-hour specials, a development that brought with it various stylistic innovations. For the purpose of this analysis, I am going to concentrate on the first of these episodes, 'The Boyfriend'. This analysis will discuss the way in which the episode works to incorporate a multi-plot structure and play with the sitcom 'look' through the use of flashback and parody. It will also consider notions of performativity in relation to the blurring of the real and fictional personae of the actors/characters and the worlds they inhabit. My analysis seeks to outline the shift towards what Caldwell (1995) terms 'televisuality' within what has historically been regarded as the visually muted and formally rigid sitcom form.

Broadcast as a one-hour special midway through *Seinfeld*'s third season, 'The Boyfriend' begins and ends with Jerry's stand-up routine and, as such, the overarching structure of the narrative adheres to the previous two seasons of the show. In a departure from the show's established set-up, however, this particular episode features no less than four guest characters. This means that, in conjunction with the extended time-frame, the episode unfolds at a hectic pace as a number of narrative possibilities are opened up. With additional characters to accommodate, 'The Boyfriend' adopts a multi-strand plot that aims to generate humour through the collision of the various storylines. Even though the appearance of numerous guest characters is in no way typical of all *Seinfeld* plots (one or two generally feature), this episode demonstrates the fact that as well as challenging the conventions of the sitcom genre, the show is also able to play with the structure laid out in previous seasons.

One of the key features highlighted in this episode is the way in which the show interacts with the real world. Rather than play a fictional character, the celebrated New York Mets baseball player Keith Hernandez appears as himself, and the narrative plays with his status as a sporting hero of Jerry and George. After discussing in his stand-up monologue the quintessential urban leisure activity of going to the gym, the action cuts to Jerry, George, and Kramer getting changed in the locker room after a game. As Kramer leaves to meet his friend Newman, Jerry and George spot Keith Hernandez and the seeds of the storyline are deftly sown:

JERRY: Hey, should we say something to him?

GEORGE: Oh, yeah I'm sure he loves to hear from fans in the locker room.

JERRY: Well he could say hello to me. I wouldn't mind.

GEORGE: He's Keith Hernandez. You're Jerry Seinfeld!

JERRY: So?

GEORGE: What, are you comparing yourself to Keith Hernandez? The guy is a baseball player Jerry, baseball!

JERRY: I know what he is. I recognized him. You didn't even notice him.

GEORGE: What, . . . you are making some wisecracks in a nightclub . . . wo, wo, wo. The guy was in game SIX two runs down two outs facing elimination.

Somewhat inevitably, George's opinion is undermined yet again (and humour is subsequently created) when Hernandez interrupts their conversation to greet Jerry: 'Excuse me. I don't want to disturb you, I'm Keith Hernandez and I just want to tell you what a big fan I am. I love your comedy.'

This exchange is significant as it demonstrates the way in which *Seinfeld* blurs the boundaries between the real and the fictional. By playing a semi-fictionalised version of himself, Jerry lends credibility to the way the programme interacts with the outside world, as real-life personalities and events can feature without upsetting the fictional world of the narrative. This aligns the show with those sitcoms that originally drew on the vaudeville tradition. For example, the recognition of Jack Benny's status as a well-known vaudeville comedian within the narrative of his eponymous sitcom enabled a string of recognisable stars to appear as themselves, such as Lucille Ball, Bob Hope, and Milton Berle, to name but a few.

Like Benny, Jerry Seinfeld assumes what Caldwell terms a 'dual-purpose' role in the way his real-life celebrity is enacted fictionally. Discussing *The Jack Benny Program*, Caldwell explains how the show 'forms both a populist alliance with viewers who can empathize with uninteresting people, and a mythological showcase for the exclusive world available only in Hollywood (1995: 39). The same dual function is demonstrated in the locker room exchange between George, Jerry, and Hernandez. Even though George appears to function as the comic butt of the joke in the scene in the locker room, his comments are important as they make clear the fact

that Jerry and Keith Hernandez occupy different levels of status within the narrative. This is crucial to the show's success. Jerry's profession (both on-screen and off) may allow the programme to interact with elements of real-life, but if the audience is to continually identify with his character over the course of each season, his diegetic status must remain at a low-level. As noted by Marc, 'sitcoms depend on familiarity, identification, and the redemption of popular beliefs'; thus, in order to achieve sustained success, Jerry's character and lifestyle must remain easily recognisable to the average viewer at home (1989: 24). By adopting such a role, Jerry provides a bridge between viewer and celebrity. His profession may provide the audience with a welcome glimpse into the world of celebrity but, on the other hand, George reminds Jerry that he is insignificant in comparison to a 'real' star like Heranndez; he is essentially one of us.

The plot of 'The Boyfriend' is reminiscent of that which was played out in the pilot episode, as it initially appears to be concerned with gender distinctions. Following their meeting at the gym, Jerry becomes friends with Hernandez but soon finds himself becoming concerned when he has not received a phone call from Keith in over three days. Discussing this predicament in the diner, Elaine suggests that Jerry contact him first.

> JERRY: You don't understand, Elaine. I don't want to be overanxious. If he wants to see me he has my number, he should call.
>
> ELAINE: Yech, look at this ashtray. I hate cigarettes.
>
> JERRY: I can't stand these guys. You give your number to them and then they don't call. Why do they do that?
>
> ELAINE: I'm sorry honey.
>
> JERRY: I mean, I thought he liked me. I really thought he liked me. We were getting along. He came over to me I didn't go over to him.

As the discussion carries on in the same vein, Elaine soon points out the absurdity of the situation by proclaiming, 'Jerry, he's a GUY!' To which Jerry replies, 'this is all very confusing'. On the surface, this scene reverses the traditional male and female roles by having Jerry wait by the phone in a passive manner. However, as with the pilot episode, I propose that even though this exchange appears to traverse the gender

terrain of many traditional sitcoms, it is actually more concerned with the rituals of social engagement and the various rules implemented by the central characters.

In the first instance, Jerry's subservient position in the relationship is not determined by gender but social status, i.e., as a sportsman, Hernandez is more important and holds more power than Jerry, a mere stand-up comedian. These roles change, however, in the second part of the episode, as Keith begins to make more demands on Jerry's time. On being asked to help his new friend move house, Jerry expresses his discomfort with this request to Kramer: 'I said yes, but I don't feel right about it. I mean I hardly know the guy. That's a big step in a relationship. The biggest. That's like going all the way.' Unable to reconcile these feelings, he eventually seeks to resume control by 'breaking-up' with Keith and ending their relationship. Unbeknownst to Jerry, Elaine (who has since become romantically involved with Hernandez), has taken similar action by also breaking up with him when she finds out that he smokes, a trait she cannot stand. This sequence of events suggests that it is not the gender of the characters that it is important, but the fact that Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer belong to an 'insider group' with its own rules and conventions. As I have previously mentioned, in order for the relationship between the central foursome to remain intact, any threat to the group's existence must be expelled by the end of the episode. Thus, in traditional *Seinfeld*ian style, Hernandez is dismissed for violating the group's own particular set of principles and standards.

While Hernandez has no knowledge of Jerry's feelings regarding moving house, or indeed Elaine's hatred of smoking, the viewers at home are expected to possess some level of awareness, as various references and allusions are built up not only within this episode but throughout the previous seasons. For example, in the aforementioned exchange between Jerry and Elaine in the diner, there is a fleeting nod to her dislike of smoking when she pushes aside an ashtray and declares, 'I hate cigarettes'. With regards to Jerry's discomfort, on the other hand, regarding helping an acquaintance move house, the references are more implicit. As four self-absorbed characters living within the hectic and fast-paced environment of New York, Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer spend their time avoiding activities that may inconvenience them. Although they occasionally make exceptions for one another, this is particularly true if said activity involves someone who is not part of their inner circle. This means that Hernandez's request is considered inappropriate to Jerry and his friends, as well as to the regular viewer at home. The audience is alerted to this by

Kramer and George's reactions. When Jerry informs them both separately that he is helping Hernandez move house, they each inquire whether he will be driving him to the airport next, to which Jerry replies in frustration, 'I'M NOT DRIVING HIM TO THE AIRPORT'. The 'airport pickup or drop-off' is the activity the group detests the most because it invariably involves being stuck in traffic, which is another of their pet hates. As such, airport references appear as a recurring joke within the series and, in this case, it is used to highlight why the characters find Hernandez's request unacceptable.[25]

With regards to insider references, George's role within this episode is particularly significant. For large parts of the narrative, George is separated from the rest of the group as his plot revolves around his visits to the Department of Labour. Having enjoyed his recent spell of unemployment, he is determined to hold on to this status and seeks to convince Mrs Sokol at the unemployment office to give him a thirteen-week extension. An extension is dependent, however, on him being able to prove that he has indeed been looking for work. Placed on the spot, George informs Mrs Sokol that Vandelay Industries are thinking about employing him as a latex salesman before providing her with the address of Jerry's apartment and his phone number. Vandelay is in fact an alias first used by George in the 'The Stakeout' episode in the first season and then employed intermittently throughout the entire run of the show. Small details such as this may seem insignificant within the context of the episode, but they are often used as reference points for fans of the series. As a sitcom, *Seinfeld* is densely layered in an attempt to provide audiences with a vast range of pleasures. While on the surface, first-time or casual viewers can tune in to watch stock comic characters engage in tightly constructed storylines, dedicated fans can interpret the subtleties of the script and spot references to previous episodes and occurrences.

This level of detail is important in a multichannel era. As Caldwell (1995) notes, with increased competition and increasingly fragmenting audiences, viewers must be given an incentive to return to the show and this kind of referencing of its own past provides a possible spur for continued engagement. Of course, the humour surrounding George's plotline in this particular episode arises from his thwarted

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[25] To emphasise this point further, it is notable that in Season Four there is an episode entitled 'The Airport', in which George and Kramer drive to first JFK and then LaGuardia in an attempt to meet Jerry and Elaine from their flight. It is unlikely that any of the foursome would perform what they regard to be a particularly arduous task for someone outside of their inner circle.

attempts to ensure that Jerry knows of his scheme and colludes with him. Unfortunately, due to occupied phone booths, New York traffic, taxi-cab drivers, and Kramer answering Jerry's phone, George's plan fails to succeed (this was, of course, in the days before mobile phones were obligatory). Ultimately, *Seinfeld* concentrates on the development of in-jokes throughout each show rather than character development. As the characters never learn from their mistakes, the only progression that occurs is with regards to the growing number of recognisable insider references.

It is not only through its use of language, however, that *Seinfeld* provides viewers with a collection of references. It also inserts wider cultural references through its stylistic and presentational manner. As such, I will now examine Kramer's storyline within 'The Boyfriend' in order to demonstrate the way in which the show challenges the notion of sitcom as being muted in style by incorporating visual parody

The Zapruder Parody: From Zero Degree Style to Visual Excess

According to Caldwell, television genres such as the sitcom have historically been 'defined by the fact that their narrative formulas were fundamentally static and repetitious', with only the situations changing from week to week (1995: 92). As I have demonstrated, *Seinfeld* challenges this with a tangential structure that refuses the problem/resolution structure in favour of interweaving apparently disparate narratives together for the denouement of the plot. Discussing sitcoms of the 1960s and 1970s, Caldwell also notes that sitcoms have traditionally exhibited what he terms a 'zero-degree' style, with innovations either coming in the form of 'true characterisation', courtesy of MTM Productions, or through the 'topicality' of the Norman Lear-produced programmes (92). In each case it was content, not form, that primarily defined the genre and, as a result, sitcom has tended to suffer from a flat and muted visual style.

It must be noted that although taking sitcom as his example, Caldwell argues that prior to the post-network era, this 'zero-degree' style was representative of television in general. The idea that, in comparison to film, television is characterised by sound rather image has been contested in academic theory. Nevertheless, Caldwell suggests that this only began to change in the 1980s when the stylistic and presentational aspects of television were brought to the fore. Discussing the epic miniseries, primetime soaps, and quality drama in particular, Caldwell suggests that these programmes undercut academic theories concerned with 'television's essential

mundaneness or day-to-day regularity' by seeking to distinguish themselves above the 'mind-numbing flow' through spectacle, distinctiveness and originality (163). The visual parody in 'The Boyfriend' demonstrates the way in which *Seinfeld* began to exhibit its own stylistic markers in an attempt to differentiate itself from its competitors.

In terms of stylistic excess, the most original feature of 'The Boyfriend' occurs within the segment that ties Kramer and his friend Newman to Jerry's relationship with Keith Hernandez. Unlike Jerry, George, and even Mrs Sokol, who profess a shared admiration for the sportsman, Kramer subverts the expectation of the audience when he reveals, 'I hate Keith Hernandez - hate him', to which Newman agrees. With Jerry, Elaine, and the audience eager to find out why, Newman sets the scene by saying, 'June 14, 1987 . . . Mets [versus] Phillies' before going on to explain how a crucial Hernandez error cost the Mets the game. 'Our day was ruined' interrupts Kramer who takes over the tale as we witness a flashback to the incident. This flashback is unusual because due to the conventional circular structure that relies on repetition and familiarity, sitcoms are largely set in the present. With characters rarely referring to or learning from past experiences, Eaton refers to this as 'the timeless nowness of television situations' (1978: 70). As already noted, *Seinfeld* differs in this respect as it develops over time and plays with the show's history with regards to language and sign systems. However, while these references are communicated by the characters in the show, the flashback is more visually striking, consisting of video footage inter-cut with the studio-based action to represent the movement back in time.

The flashback is essentially a parody of both the real-life video footage of the assassination of President Kennedy, which came to be known as the Zapruder film, and the feature-film *JFK* (1991), a fictional account of the subsequent police investigation. By reproducing the look of 8 mm film, the Zapruder film is signified from the outset. With a grainy image full of saturated colour, a constant whirring is heard on the audio track to replicate the sound of an 8 mm camera. This emphasises the silent nature of the original film while at the same time allowing the *Seinfeld* audience to hear Kramer and Newman recount their story via the use of voiceover. Of course, as a parody of such a notorious event, what we see and hear is not a description of the actual assassination but of Kramer and Newman's encounter with Hernandez after the game:

KRAMER: Now we're coming down the ramp. Newman was in front of me; Hernandez was coming toward us. As he passes us, Newman turns and says, "nice game pretty boy". Hernandez continued past us up the ramp.

NEWMAN: Then, a second later, something happened that changed us in a very deep and profound way, from that day forward.

ELAINE: What was it?

KRAMER: He spit on us.... and I screamed out, "I'm hit!"

NEWMAN: Then I turned and the spit ricochet off him and it hit me.

ELAINE: Wow! What a story.

As Newman and Kramer relay their story, the image cuts back and forward from the flashback to the present, where the four characters are gathered in Jerry's apartment. While the flashback parodies the Zapruder film, the scene in the apartment unfolds as an exact replica of Kevin Costner's courtroom scene in *JFK*. Just as Costner goes on to present an account of the 'second shooter' theory, Jerry assumes this role in the *Seinfeld* parody when he explains that, 'unfortunately the immutable laws of physics contradict the whole premise of your account. Allow me to reconstruct this if I may for Miss Benes, as I've heard this story a number of times.' After reconstructing the incident in his front room, Jerry concludes that the spit could not have come from behind, but rather 'that there had to have been a second spitter . . . behind the bushes on the gravelly road'.

This parody demonstrates the innovations within this particular episode of *Seinfeld* in a number of ways. In the first instance, there is the departure from the show's usual visual style and the level of detail that exists in both reproducing the look of the Zapruder film and in recreating the courtroom scene in *JFK*. As noted, flashbacks are rare in sitcom due to the emphasis on the present. However, they also tend to be avoided for production-related reasons. Sitcoms are generally filmed using only a few stages that are laid out side by side, as this not only keeps production costs down but also allows the studio audience to witness all of the action. For those scenes that prove difficult to film 'as live' within the confines of the studio, the solution has been to pre-record them and then broadcast them on screens for the audience to view within the context of the narrative. By adopting this technique, the production team

involved in 'The Boyfriend' had more time to carefully reproduce the look and sound of the 8 mm Zapruder film.

With regards to the 'second shooter' parody that follows, the role of Newman is particularly important. Not only did the actor Wayne Knight feature in the scene's original source material, *JFK*, but he also inhabits the exact same position in both instances. Unlike the general parody of the Zapruder film, which has become such a part of American popular consciousness that it is likely to resonate with most viewers, this specific reference to Knight's character in *JFK* is not expected to translate to everyone who watches the show. Thus, it serves to indicate the way in which *Seinfeld* offers different kinds of pleasure for different segments of the audience.

On establishing a distinct visual style in its third season, *Seinfeld* was scheduled to follow *Cheers* in the prestigious 'must-see TV' slot the following year. With *Seinfeld* achieving both critical acclaim and mass ratings, it became the centrepiece of NBC's 'must-see TV' programming strategy and helped the network retain its top-rated position from the mid-1990s onwards. However, following the loss of *Cheers*, the network was once again faced with the challenge of developing equally successful shows in order to remain ahead of its competitors. Recognising the value of the *Seinfeld* demographic, i.e., 18- to 49-year-old urban-dwellers, largely free of family responsibilities and in possession of high disposable incomes, NBC sought to capitalise on this by producing a number of sitcoms in a similar vein. While the development of *Seinfeld* can be placed within the 'innovation' stage of the generic cycle, the sitcoms that followed became part of a wave of 'imitation', as NBC effectively positioned itself as the network for young, single, and urban-based viewers (Mittell 2003a). The first of these, and arguably the most successful, was the sitcom *Friends*, which I will now go onto discuss.

Friends as *Seinfeld* Clone: Establishing Innovative Practice through Imitation

In his discussion of the second stage of the generic cycle, Mittell notes that while some imitations of successful shows are direct spin-offs, others are 'direct clones designed to copy the original's formula' (2003a: 48). This is similar to the type of criticism faced by the sitcom *Friends* on its initial broadcast in 1994. Set in the same Manhattan milieu as its predecessor, *Friends* took as its basis the everyday lives of six twentysomethings living and working in New York and, as such, was quickly dismissed as nothing more than a *Seinfeld* clone. This assessment is underlined by

television critic Richard Zoglin, in a *Time* article aptly titled 'Friends and Layabouts'. Discussing the characters' predilection for meeting regularly in their local coffee shop to discuss inane questions such as, 'what would you do if you were omnipotent?', Zoglin complains that 'no one seems to be doing much of anything except hanging out' (1995: 74). This is trait that he traces to *Seinfeld*, the 'prototypical hang-out show' (or rather, the original 'show about nothing').

Despite acknowledging this influence, Zoglin nevertheless makes an interesting distinction between the two sitcoms. While the characters in *Seinfeld* do indeed lead a laidback lifestyle, he notes that at least they 'always seem to have someplace to go' (74). As both the narrative and humour is derived from the everyday observations that inform Jerry's stand-up routines, the characters inevitably have to be shown enacting various experiences by engaging with the world around them. This leads to the weekly events and predicaments being played out in a number of in-between spaces and public places. In *Friends*, on the other hand, the characters appear to be more interested in self-analysis, as they pore over their own personality traits and examine each other's interconnecting relationships while gathered on the coffee shop sofa. In each instance, there is an 'insider group', but while in *Seinfeld* the characters define themselves in opposition to the outside world, the characters in *Friends* appear to be primarily concerned with one another, and the role that each of them plays in maintaining the dynamic of the group.

Friends differentiates itself from its predecessor, therefore, through the presentation of its characters. While *Seinfeld* refuses character development, *Friends* embraces it in an attempt to establish an emotional connection with the audience. Moreover, rather than encourage its loyal viewers to identify with the central group through the recognition of the numerous rules and references at work within the narrative, *Friends* asks viewers not just to identify *with* the characters, but to aspire to *be* them. As such, their 'dual-purpose' is to function as both 'identification magnets and objects of desire' (Medhurst 1996: 18). Before discussing these elements in more detail, I will consider the way in which *Friends* progressed from a *Seinfeld* clone to a prestigious product through the use of cross-promotional strategies.

Cross-Promotional Techniques across the NBC Schedule

As touched upon in my discussion of genre cycles, NBC's initial aim was not to differentiate the production of *Friends* from *Seinfeld*, but rather to establish links

between the two programmes. This meant that instead of seeking out new talent from outside of the television industry to create an original sitcom, NBC commissioned an established team to produce the show, in the form of Bright/Kauffman/Crane Productions. With six central characters to showcase within each half-hour episode, a multi-strand narrative was again presented at a hectic pace. Furthermore, by occupying the same New York location as its predecessor, and by refusing the conventional family or work-based sitcom set-up, many of the storylines touched on familiar *Seinfeld*ian terrain. For example, not only are we treated to a succession of romantic partners for each of the friends on a weekly basis (along with various trips to the airport), but we are also party to more mundane, everyday tasks, such as Ross and Rachel doing laundry and Chandler and Monica waiting for a table in a restaurant.[26] In addition, both Joey and Pheobe utilise a number of aliases throughout the series, thus creating insider references for the audience in a similar manner to *Seinfeld*.

While these similarities may seem superficial, or indeed inconsequential, they can actually be understood as a type of cross-promotional technique. Eager to capitalise on the success of *Seinfeld* as an urban sitcom focusing on the desirable demographic of young, single adults, *Friends* employed similar situations and references as a badge of its likeminded sensibility. Of these plots, one of the most interesting involves the character of Ross, who reveals in the pilot episode that his marriage has failed because his wife Carol is in fact a lesbian who is in love with a woman named Susan. This is reminiscent of a storyline within Season Four of *Seinfeld*, in which George is convinced that he is responsible for 'driving Susan [his ex-girlfriend] to lesbianism'. Although it is here that the similarity between the characters and their subsequent storylines ends, there is a sense when watching *Friends* that it is at times referencing its predecessor. This could, of course, simply be a consequence of the limited number of stories that sitcoms based on single friends living in New York can tell. However, the fact that they generally involve the type of material that sitcoms tend to shy away from (whether that is with regards to mundane, uninteresting chores and activities or non-normative identities), suggests otherwise.[27] Nevertheless, it is important to note that although there is continuity between the two

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[26] While *Seinfeld* dedicates an entire episode to all four characters waiting for a table in a Chinese restaurant (a storyline that seems to demonstrate the very essence of 'a show about nothing'), *Friends* only features it within one strand of its overall plot.

[27] See Marc (1997) for a discussion of the way in which the post-network era has widened the range of programming available.

sitcoms, *Friends* often approaches the material in a different way. This is particularly true of the show's handling of Ross's ex-wife, which I will discuss later in the analysis in relation to the concept of 'otherness'.

As well as aligning itself with *Seinfeld*, *Friends* also indulges in wider cross-promotional techniques through the use of celebrity cameos. On the programme's initial broadcast in 1994, a number of NBC quality shows were reaching an end. Thus, in addition to establishing links between *Friends* and its immediate predecessor, the new sitcom was also associated with NBC's nascent medical drama *ER*, which accompanied both sitcoms in the Thursday-night 'must-see TV' line-up. This association took place midway through the debut season of *Friends*, in the second segment of a two-part episode aptly titled, 'The One With Two Parts'. With George Clooney and Noah Wyle from the cast of *ER*, guest starring as doctors who date Rachel and Monica, it would appear that the aim was to mark the episode out as distinctive in an attempt to attract high viewing figures while linking both shows together in terms of prestige.

The appearance of Clooney and Wyle in *Friends* differs from the aforementioned celebrity cameo in *Seinfeld*, in that the actors neither play themselves nor reprise their *ER* roles, but rather adopt two new fictional personas. The fact that they are still cast as doctors, however, means that the narrative undoubtedly plays on their respective roles as a paediatrician and medical student in *ER*. This approach is perhaps unsurprising, as there is no narrative motivation for Monica and Rachel, who are based in New York, to meet Dr. Ross and Dr. Carter from *ER*'s County General Hospital in Chicago. Instead, the aim of the episode is to link the two shows together in terms of prestige by highlighting the attractiveness of their cast members. This is achieved by pairing the two good-looking, single doctors with the equally good-looking and single Monica and Rachel:

RACHEL: Aren't you a little cute to be a doctor?

DR. ROSIN: Excuse me?

RACHEL: I meant young, young, I meant young, young to be a doctor.

The result is that although *Friends* displays a similar sensibility to *Seinfeld*, it does so with a younger and more attractive cast. As noted by Michael Schneider, both *Friends* and *ER* were designed to attract desirable upscale young viewers rather than the mass

family audience and, as such, 'their casts looked like the kind of audience that media buyer's salivated over. In other words, they didn't just want to sell a show featuring Ross, Rachel, Joey, Chandler, Monica and Phoebe – they wanted to sell to Ross, Rachel, Joey, Chandler, Monica and Phoebe' (2004: 1).

Selling an Aspirational Lifestyle and Image: The Characters of *Friends* as 'Identification Magnets' and 'Objects of Desire'

It has been argued by a number of scholars, most notably Caldwell (1995), Jones (1992), and Marc (1989), that sitcom was initially developed in the U.S. to sell domestic goods to housewives and to demonstrate how to live in suburbia within a consumer society. This was largely due to the use of single-sponsorship funding. For example, with Hotpoint Quality Appliances acting as the sole sponsor for the 1950s sitcom *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (ABC, 1952-1966), each episode was interspersed by adverts encouraging viewers to buy the same type of fridge freezer or king-size oven as the Nelson family. In *The Honeymooners*, on the other hand, Ralph and Ed's quick rich schemes often involved trying to sell new consumer goods and appliances to their friends and neighbours. In one episode they even went so far as to appear in their own television commercial, in which they attempted to sell can openers to housewives.

In addition to this relationship with consumer culture, Caldwell explains how early examples of the form also dealt with the threats of high culture, showbusiness, and fashion, by either finding a way to morally discipline them or by positioning them as foreign. Discussing an episode of *The Donna Reed Show* (ABC, 1958-1966), in which Donna admires her old high-school friend for becoming a chic fashion designer while she is a stay-at-home mother, he explains that Donna ultimately accepts her domestic position by adopting the philosophy that 'marriage means being a season behind in waistlines' (1995: 39). Although it could be argued that sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy*, and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* work to incorporate showbusiness into their narratives rather than position it as foreign, it is indeed the case that in each instance it is the domestic home, rather than the stage, that is the main site of action. For the early sitcom character, it would seem that the security and comfort of the home and family is more important than the unfamiliar and risky worlds of high culture, showbusiness, and fashion.

The female characters in *Friends* are faced with no such dilemmas. Rather than sell white-goods and domestic appliances to a family audience, *Friends* sells a *lifestyle* to a specific audience demographic. Unlike the suburban homes favoured by Harriet and Donna, the characters in *Friends* live in stylish and spacious open-plan apartments that their salaries are unlikely to afford. In fact, on recognising that viewers were aware of a discrepancy between Monica's fitful career as a chef and her ability to afford such a desirable apartment, it was revealed within the narrative that she had in fact inherited the lease from her grandmother and that it was subject to rent control.[28] Moreover, in contrast to *Cheers*, where the cast assembled at a local bar to drown their sorrows, *Friends* replaces alcohol with caffeine and the bar stool with comfy sofas in its other main location, the Central Perk café. This is indicative of a society that repackages everyday consumables, such as tea and coffee, and sells them as an experience for a premium price.

Even though four of the friends live in adjoining flats, they prefer to meet in the café drinking cappuccinos (and paying for them) while lounging on the sofa; an activity usually reserved for the privacy of one's own home. Furthermore, rather than disciplining showbusiness and fashion or positioning them as *foreign*, *Friends* celebrates them by having two of the main characters work within these worlds. Joey's status as a B-list actor and sometime model facilitates his womanising ways, and for this the script never apologises. Rachel, on the other hand, is seen embarking on a journey from spoilt little rich girl, whose daddy pays her credit card bills, to a struggling waitress who wants to break into the fashion industry. It could be argued that as she has no relevant qualifications, Rachel's natural sense of style is seemingly all that is needed to first secure her a position as a personal shopper at Bloomingdales, and then as a buyer for fashion designer Ralph Lauren. However, she does suffer rejection along the way. What is important about these storylines is that the characters are not confined to the domestic space but are able to work within fields that were once considered too exotic for audiences to relate to.

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[28] This suggests that viewers expect a certain degree of verisimilitude to be apparent in sitcoms such as *Friends*. It is also indicative of the fan communities that have built up around *Friends*. Three years after the show ended, fans can still discuss the monetary status of each of the characters in a number of website forums. In a *TV.com* thread entitled, 'The Richest Friend', one fan notes that despite the fact that Pheobe was shown busking at the beginning of Season One, she could still easily afford food, rent, clothes, etc. http://www.tv.com/friends/show/71/the-richest-friend/topic/186-807824/msgs.html (Accessed July 2007)

This is achieved because even though the characters are undoubtedly presented as aspirational figures, *Friends* is careful to ensure that they also fulfil Caldwell's 'dual-purpose' role. According to Medhurst, this occurs through the way in which the characters function as both 'identification magnets and objects of desire', and also through 'the fantasy that becoming an adult doesn't have to mean growing up' (1996: 16-18). With regards to the first point, the media furore surrounding the haircut sported by Jennifer Aniston who played Rachel in the show is particularly significant. Dubbed 'The Rachel', acres of space was devoted to it as 'must-see' TV translated into a 'must-have' haircut. Rather than feeling distanced from the characters (a position that Bergson insists is essential if humour is to be produced), viewers identified with them to the point where they felt they could achieve similar status by having the same haircut. This sense of identification is connected to Medhurst's second observation. No matter how attractive the cast, and no matter what the characters do for a living, they still make mistakes, drink too much coffee, and draw on popular culture references. This is perhaps most apparent in the character of Ross. Despite the fact that he is a respected university lecturer in Palaeontology, this does not prevent him from indulging in foolish and embarrassing behaviour at times. As well as buying tight leather trousers in order to look 'cool' and getting a spray-tan on just the front of his body, Ross is also shown 'accidentally' speaking in an English accent in front of his students, in a desperate attempt to appear more intelligent. Thus, *Friends* draws on Durgnat's assertion that for all the comic unreality, viewers are aware that they have traits in common with the on-screen characters, 'that their weakness, rather than their immunity, is ours' (1969: 45).

The complexity of the characters in terms of their apsirational status and their recognisable and identifiable traits is developed further through the use of flashback. While this is a technique that the show shares with its predecessor *Seinfeld*, its objective is different. As demonstrated, *Seinfeld* uses flashback to showcase stylistic excess and reference popular culture rather than reveal significant details about the past experiences of Kramer and Newman. *Friends*, on the other hand, employs flashback in a number of episodes to achieve this exact objective. The most significant of these occurs in an episode from Season Two entitled 'The One with the Prom Video', which I will now analyse.

Character Development Through the Use of Flashback

In 'The One with the Prom Video', viewers are offered a glimpse into the past lives of the characters not through a conventional flashback, but through an old home video of Rachel and Monica preparing to attend their high-school prom. With the six friends gathered around Monica's television set to watch the video, the positioning of the characters serves to indicate their relationship to this past memory. Monica and Rachel sit together, closest to the television, with their arms intertwined ready to relive their prom experience, while Joey, Chandler and Phoebe take their places on the sofa and chair, respectively. As both groups did not meet until after high school, the latter are preparing to watch the event for the first time, much like the audience at home. Ross, on the other hand, stands uncomfortably in the background. As Monica's brother, Ross was also present the night of the prom and is therefore privy to what is about to unfold. However, his awkward reaction and exclusion from the group suggests that he has different memories or feelings towards the event than either his sister or Rachel.

As I have already proposed, *Friends* is primarily concerned with highlighting the attractiveness of its cast, therefore it comes as a surprise when the first thing the audience learns from the video is that both Monica's and Rachel's appearances have undergone significant change in the intermittent years. Rachel is first to appear on screen causing Joey to exclaim 'what is with your nose?', to which she sheepishly replies 'they had to reduce it because of my deviated septum' (or, in other words, she has had cosmetic surgery). Ross interjects to say 'you know what you guys, we don't have to watch this' only to be greeted by a resounding 'oh yeah we do'. With the action returning to the prom video, Mrs Geller can be heard asking her husband to 'get a shot of Monica. Where's Monica?' As the camera pans around, a torso takes up the entire screen as Mr Geller struggles to operate the zoom lens. Once he has finally zoomed out, we see an overweight Monica eating a sandwich. The long-established technique of comic surprise is expressed by Joey's reaction to this revelation before Chandler follows it up with a joke:

JOEY [*pointing at the television screen*]: Some girl ate Monica!

MONICA: Shut up, the camera adds ten pounds.

CHANDLER: Ahh, so how many cameras are actually on you?

In comparison with *Seinfeld*, the objective of this sequence is not to parody the outside world or a media event, but to comment on the development, in terms of style and appearance, of the friends. Rachel, who was considered one the 'pretty girls' at school, has bought herself a new nose and a better haircut, thus becoming even more attractive. She has also become independent in the process now that she is emancipated from her wealthy father and has secured herself a job. Monica, who was fat, is now thin, and presumably happier now that she is equal to Rachel in terms of beauty. However, she still has her own neuroses to deal with, a fact that I will return to later.

The friends are initially surprised that Monica could have been so overweight, but they refrain from dwelling on this presumably because she now looks the acceptable way, i.e., thin and stylish. She has demonstrated that it is possible to assert control over your eating habits and lose weight in order to conform to an ideal image. All of the central characters in the show conform to society's ideal in terms of physical attractiveness. Unlike *Seinfeld*, where the physical shortcomings of the actors are constantly referred to (George is stocky and balding while Kramer is lanky with crazy hair), the actors in *Friends* function as 'objects of desire' for the audience. Thus, when Courteney Cox and Jennifer Aniston take on the teenage roles of Monica and Rachel, they rely on prosthetic make up and layers of padding as a comic device. The result is that the characters can poke fun at one another's appearance, and the viewers at home can laugh, safe in the knowledge that they will ultimately become sought-after adults.

This glimpse into the past also allows *Friends* to establish a history for its characters and provide reasons for their individual traits and behaviour. Monica's main characteristics within the series are that she is obsessive and controlling, factors that are somewhat explained by her substantial weight loss in her teens and her subsequent struggle to remain slim. Furthermore, her occupation as a chef suggests that she is still preoccupied with food but channels this into cooking for her friends and customers. It is the development of Ross's character, however, that provides an even greater insight into the overall ethos of the show, namely that it aims to produce not just humour but also emotional attachment.

The 'Soapification' of Sitcom: Incorporating Emotional Attachment, Suspense, and a Sense of History

Unlike the development of Monica and Rachel, which is represented in terms of appearance, Ross's development is emotional. The revelation contained within the home video is the depth of Ross's long-held affection for Rachel. On discovering that her date, Chip, has failed to arrive to escort her to the prom, Ross borrows his father's tuxedo and prepares to offer himself as a companion to the distressed Rachel. Nervous that she will reject him, he plucks up the courage to descend the stairs only to witness the girls happily leaving due to the sudden appearance of the wayward Chip. Ross is left alone on the stairs as his mother and father hastily try to switch off the camera.

As this denouement is played out, we see a close-up of Rachel leaning towards the television screen as she witnesses this gesture for the first time. The camera then cuts to Ross who, standing with his head bowed, sheepishly glances over at her. Monica is the first to speak, saying to her brother 'I can't believe you did that', as the friends all turn around to look at Ross who mutters 'yeah, well'. As he moves towards the door, his alienation within the video is replicated by the way he positions himself at the furthest possible point from the friends. The use of the close-up and Ross's separation from the group is accompanied by an unusually silent audio track. The sitcom's function is to create humour and the action is generally punctuated with jokes and funny moments, thus resulting in laughter from the studio audience, but no such attempt is made in this case. Instead, it appears as it the audience is almost holding its breath in suspense as the camera focuses intently on Rachel as she walks across the room towards Ross before kissing him. It is only then that the audience then into a cheer.

The ups and downs of Ross and Rachel's relationship lie at the core of *Friends*. As described by Medhurst, the key to what makes the show refreshing and original as a sitcom is that it 'invites not just amused admiration but also emotional attachment. It takes the gamble of straying into soap territory and succeeds in making you care. *Friends*, if you'll pardon the sentimentality, has a heart' (1996: 17). Emotional attachment is achieved through the creation of dramatic suspense and by establishing a sense of history for the characters. For example, 'The One with the Prom Video' is not the first episode in which the audience are made aware of a connection between these particular two characters and neither is it the first episode in which they share a kiss. In fact, their shared history is revealed from the outset of the

show when, in the pilot episode, Ross confesses to Rachel that he had a crush on her at high school. This is then continued in an earlier episode in Season Two, when the characters embrace for the first time. The use of video as a form of flashback therefore, does not establish their relationship, but rather allows it to intensify.

The ongoing storyline between Ross and Rachel contradicts two supposed truisms regarding situation comedy that are regularly put forward by academic critics, both of which are discussed by Sarah Kozloff (1992) in her discussion of narrative theory. First, Kozloff suggests that because the episodic series requires each storyline to be resolved by the end of the episode, the audience is aware that the lead characters face no significant threat and that they will return to the screen the following week with very little change. As such, 'critics have argued that we rarely feel the same anxiety with TV, as we do with a film or novel, about whether the hero and his love interest will triumph' (73). If we take this to be the case, then this means that 'suspense is diluted' within the series format (although this does not account for the fact that other pleasures may be available within such narratives). This is challenged, however, by the aforementioned relationship in *Friends*.

By adopting a long-running narrative that develops over time, *Friends* continually keeps the audience in suspense with regards to the outcome of the union between Ross and Rachel. Although they initially become a couple in Season Two, they go on to split up and get back together on a number of occasions. Moreover, each break-up is shown to have a significant effect on the characters. This is in stark contrast to the longest-running relationship in *Seinfeld*, which is the pairing of George and Susan. After apparently driving her to lesbianism in Season Four, George and Susan are reunited in the opening episode of Season Seven when, on a whim, he proposes to her. In the season finale, however, Susan is poisoned after licking the poor-quality glue on the cheap wedding invitations that George convinced her to buy. On learning that his fiancée has died, George displays a combination of relief and apathy, as he turns to his friends and says 'let's get some coffee'. This indifference is confirmed when he goes on to use the tragic situation as a pick-up line on various women.

George and Susan's relationship demonstrates that, despite *Seinfeld* incorporating developing storylines into its narrative, the characters themselves do not develop, and neither do they exhibit emotional depth. The developing relationships in *Friends*, on the other hand, are treated in a more dramatic fashion. As the

aforementioned scene between Ross and Rachel is free of jokes, the viewer is drawn into the situation and placed in a state of anticipation regarding what will happen next. The emotional depth exhibited by the characters also encourages the audience to form attachments with them, so that they care about their wellbeing. This is indicative of the 'soapification' of the sitcom. As early as 1986, Feuer recognised that in an attempt to encourage loyal viewers to indulge in repeat viewing on a weekly basis, episodic programming such as the sitcom began to incorporate certain characteristics of the serial, including an ensemble cast, narrative development, and melodrama. Feuer discusses this in relation to the 'relevant' programming of the 1970s, which pushed a social agenda through controversial storylines involving abortion, divorce, racism and homosexuality. Kozloff, however, points out that 'the line between series and serial may have been blurry to begin with', and cites the example of Lucy's pregnancy in *I Love Lucy* as a storyline that was necessarily carried over from week to week (1992: 92). Nevertheless, this 'soapification' has becoming increasingly visible within the highly competitive post-network era. Thus, while *Seinfeld* rewards loyal viewers through the development of insider references, *Friends* does so by offering characters that we can care about.

This leads to the second truism considered by Kozloff, namely that characters in the episodic series have 'no memory and no history: amazingly, they don't notice that they said and did exactly the same things the previous week' (1992: 91). Again, the ongoing Ross and Rachel storyline contradicts this assertion. The longest-running joke in the series refers to an incident that occurs following one of the couple's numerous rows. Under pressure from work and irritated by Ross's jealous attitude toward her colleague Mark, Rachel suggests they 'take a break' from their relationship. Quickly changing her mind, she attempts to make up with Ross the following day only to discover that he spent the night with another woman. Proving to be a pivotal moment in their relationship, Ross and Rachel's opinion on this apparent transgression differs enormously: 'Look, I didn't think there was a relationship to jeopardise. I thought we were broken up' is Ross's defence, to which Rachel definitively retorts 'we were on a break!' In an exchange reminiscent of the use of language in *Seinfeld*, this neatly demonstrates the way in which the two characters obviously have different interpretations of what it means to 'take a break' from a relationship. Of course, unlike *Seinfeld*, these interpretations appear to be based primarily on gender distinctions.

The confusion over the status of their relationship prior to Ross's misdemeanour serves as a mechanism to keep the couple apart, as Rachel is unable to forget what she regards as Ross's betrayal. As such, the statement 'we were on a break' resurfaces in several episodes over a number of seasons. One such example occurs at the end of Season Four, when Rachel decides that she does love Ross even though he is about to marry someone else. As the wedding is taking place in London, she boards a plane determined to tell him the truth, and unburdens the saga of her and Ross to the passenger on her right, only for the man on her left to interrupt and tell her that she is 'a horrible, horrible person'. After informing her that she is going to ruin what should be the happiest day of Ross's life, he concludes by saying, 'and by the way, it seems to be perfectly clear that you were on a break'. This offhand reference signifies that viewers are expected to be familiar with the 'we were on a break' storyline, as well as the implied meaning of the phrase each time it is uttered. It is also indicative of the way in which viewers can seek to align themselves with either Ross or Rachel depending on their reading of the initial situation. It is fitting, therefore, that even when the couple finally get together in the show's finale, Ross cannot resist one final reference as they at last declare their love for one another:

> RACHEL: I do love you.
>
> ROSS: I love you too, and I'm never letting you go again.
>
> RACHEL: Okay. 'Cause this is where I wanna be, okay? No more messing around. I don't wanna mess this up again.
>
> ROSS: Me neither, okay? We are - we're done being stupid.
>
> RACHEL: Okay. You and me, alright? This is it.
>
> ROSS: This is it . . . Unless we're on a break.

Ultimately, in contrast to the typical circular sitcom narrative, in which the main situation is not allowed to change, *Friends* displays a developing narrative that can be traced from the pilot episode to the finale. Rather than forget what was said and done the previous week, the friends can never escape their actions, as past mistakes are not only continually referred to, but also have an effect on subsequent storylines.

A *Friends* Guide to 'Otherness': Non-Normative Identities and Liberal Inclusiveness

Despite the fact that *Friends* creates a central group of characters that viewers are expected to simultaneously aspire to be like and identify with, another of the features apparent within the show is the way in which it deals with difference and a sense of otherness. Unlike its family-based predecessors, the show incorporates otherness into its narrative by representing homosexuality, divorce, single-parent families, and promiscuousness as an accepted part of everyday life. Television critic James Poniewozick suggests that, unlike the nuclear family of the traditional domestic sitcom or the surrogate family of the workplace (which generally consisted of authoritative parental figures surrounded by supposedly naughty children), *Friends* shows us that 'there is no normal anymore' (2004: 68). More importantly, it resists presenting otherness as controversial:

> Beginning in the Norman Lear 1970s, we decided that great sitcoms must not be simply funny; they must also document social progress (*Mary Tyler Moore*). They must have a sense of satire (*M*A*S*H*) or mission (*The Cosby Show*). They must be about something. Even *Seinfeld*, the "show about nothing," was about being the show about nothing; its nihilism was so well advertised as to beg cultural critics to read deep meaning into it (2004: 68).

Taking this into consideration, Poniewozic asks whether it is time to redefine the notion of 'important TV' (68). With its lightweight manner and liberal sensibility, *Friends* is able to depict once shocking issues as everyday realities and, with its continuing presence in the upper echelons of the Nielsen top ten, it would seem that a large part of the American television audience share its attitude. As such, it could be argued that the show 'may have done more to show how American values and definitions of family have changed – and to ratify those changes – than its peers' (68).

One example of what Medhurst describes as the 'soft-liberal inclusiveness' of *Friends* is the storyline surrounding Ross, his lesbian ex-wife, and her lover (1996: 18). After establishing the situation in the pilot, the second episode reveals a further twist to the plot, which Ross succinctly describes to his parents over dinner.

> Look, I, uh- I realise you guys have been wondering what exactly happened between Carol and me, and, so, well, here's the deal. Carol's a lesbian. She's living with a woman named Susan. She's pregnant with my child, and she and Susan are going to raise the baby.

While both Ross and his parents may not be particularly happy with the situation, it is not presented as an issue that is up for discussion. It is recognised that there is nothing that any of them can do to change the situation and, as such, it is something that they simply have to learn to deal with. As Ross himself says, 'no matter what I do, though, I'm still gonna be a father', thus emphasising the fact that despite the unconventional circumstances, he is going to assume his role within this non-normative family.

Friends often revolves around the typical sitcom traditions of weddings and births, yet none of these events occur in the conventional manner. Ross has a son with his lesbian ex-wife and then a daughter with Rachel in Season Eight, who is subsequently identified as a single mother when both she and Ross decide not to resume their relationship. Phoebe carries her half brother and his older wife's triplets for them, as they are unable to conceive. Chandler and Monica, after several years of a strictly platonic relationship, fall in love and get married only to discover that they also have fertility problems. This leads them to adopt twins from the teenage Erica, who is unsure of the children's paternity. With regards to marriage, the overall message seems to be that it is not everlasting. Chandler's mother and father divorced when he was aged nine and his father revealed he was a cross-dresser. Ross, on the other hand, has been married and divorced three times, one of which was a drunken wedding to Rachel in Las Vegas for which they later sought annulment. It is of particular note, therefore, that one of the more stable relationships within *Friends* is the pairing of Carol and Susan, who show their commitment to one another in Season Two by marrying in a civil ceremony.

Of course, this union does not take place without difficulty. When Ross decides that he cannot attend the ceremony, Monica asks whether he has ever really come to terms with Carol's sexuality, to which he replies, 'look, that has nothing to do with this, ok? She's my ex-wife. If she were marrying a guy, none of you'd expect me to be there'. As a result, Ross's reaction indicates that his attitude stems from the failure of his marriage rather than Carol's choice of partner. Carol's parents are not as understanding, however, and refuse to attend, thus prompting their daughter to consider calling off the ceremony. To his surprise, Ross finds himself agreeing with Susan, who had reminded Carol that they 'were doing it for us' not for her parents.

>ROSS: Look, do you love her? And you don't have to be too emphatic about this.

CAROL: Of course I do.

ROSS: Well then, that's it. And if George and Adelaide can't accept that, then the hell with them. Look, if my parents didn't want me to marry you, no way that would have stopped me. Look, this is your wedding. Do it.

As a result, Ross puts his own feelings aside to emphasise that if two people are in love then that is what matters and others should be more accepting of this fact. He then walks Carol down the aisle, thus giving her his blessing to marry Susan.

This episode also deals with generational differences when Rachel's mother Sandra, played by Marlo Thomas, comes to visit. In a nod to sitcom history, Thomas is best known for her role in the 1966 comedy series *That Girl* (ABC, 1966-1971), in which she played an independent woman struggling to make it on her own in New York City without the help of her parents. With Rachel in an almost identical situation, the presence of Thomas allows *Friends* to acknowledge its debt to earlier series that advanced the position of young, single women on screen. Furthermore, as the daughter of the famed comic actor, Danny Thomas, Marlo is steeped in comic tradition and receives a cheer of recognition from the audience when she first appears on-screen.

Unlike the 1960s role of Ann Marie, Sandra Green is a middle-aged woman who has never experienced independence. Arriving at Central Perk where Rachel is working as a waitress, Mrs Green exclaims, 'this is just so exciting. You know, I never worked. I went straight from my father's house to the sorority house to my husband's house. I am just so proud of you'. Inspired by her daughter's new found way of life, Mrs Green confides in Rachel that she is thinking about leaving her father, much to her daughter's distress. This episode thus contrasts the disintegration of a conventional marriage with the eventual happy outcome of the lesbian wedding. While Mrs Green confesses that she never loved her husband but married him for security and to conform to the expectations placed on her by society, Ross convinces Carol that as long as she loves Susan then nothing else matters.

Ultimately, *Friends* portrays parent figures in an uncompromising light. In fact, Andrew Billen goes so far as to suggest that the 'unspoken morality of the show is that friends are God's apology for relations' (1997: 41). As such, the characters use their friends as a replacement for a secure and happy family. Pheobe and Chandler in particular have been affected by the actions of their respective parents. As described

by Billen, 'Phoebe, the most obviously damaged of the dramatis personae was brought up by her grandmother, her father having walked out on the family, her stepfather a criminal, her mother a suicide' (41). The result is that the eccentric Phoebe has an unusual view of the world, often using her skewed vision to protect herself from the realities of everyday life. Chandler on the other hand, is shown to have an overtly sexy mother, played by Morgan Fairchild, and a transvestite father, played by Kathleen Turner, both of whom he is embarrassed by. Unable to understand the relationship between his parents and their unconventional lifestyles, Chandler is often portrayed as feeling sexually inadequate. Furthermore, the script also plays with the notion of Chandler's own ambiguous sexuality and his relationship with roommate Joey, although this is ultimately abandoned when Chandler marries Monica.

This issue was also touched on in *Seinfeld*, when a journalist interviewing Jerry mistakenly thinks that Jerry and George are a gay couple in an episode entitled 'The Outing'. By punctuating each comment about homosexuality with the phrase, 'not that there's anything wrong with that', *Seinfeld* highlights the difficulties of dealing explicitly with what can be considered a contentious issue within the confines of a network television sitcom. It also comments on the complex negotiations that take place within a supposedly liberal society that nevertheless has problems dealing with non-normative identities. *Friends*, on the other hand, does not feel the need to highlight such political correctness. It simply deals with the subject matter as part of everyday life. Of course, many critics have been quick to put forward alternative readings of previous sitcom relationships, most notably Alexander Doty's (2003) queer reading of *Laverne and Shirley* (ABC, 1976-1983). However, *Friends* is one of a new group of sitcoms that not only foregrounds such issues, but refuses to categorise them as unusual.

It may seem that one of the most enduring features of *Friends* is its ability to incorporate otherness within the sitcom form but ultimately the non-normative characters are peripheral figures within the show. The result is that any sense of inclusiveness is somewhat undermined by the fact that the primary characters remain distinctly heteronormative and it is these six figures that the audience are encouraged to identify with. Gay characters are brought to the fore, however, in *Will & Grace*, NBC's next 'must-see' sitcom, which I will now examine.

Will & Grace: Gay and Lesbian Visibility in Prime-Time Television and the 'Myth of Gay Affluence'

Since the emergence of the post-network era, there has been a shift from the relative invisibility of gay and lesbian characters in prime-time television to one in which sexual difference is increasingly acknowledged. While this can be attributed to a number of social, cultural, and political factors, it is also connected to changing industry conceptions of the 'quality' audience. By the end of the 1990s, the intense competition brought on by the proliferation of channels in the marketplace and the increasing fragmentation of the audience, forced the networks to further narrow their conception of the most prized segments of the viewing public. Ron Becker explains that in this period

> the quality demographic that has become the most widely sought after isn't simply upscale adults, but more specifically, "hip," "sophisticated," urban-minded, white, liberal, college-educated, upscale eighteen-to-forty-nine year olds with liberal attitudes, disposable incomes, and a distinctively edgy and ironic sensibility (1998: 38).

While this may appear extremely narrow, it is worth bearing in mind John Fiske's assertion that television texts must appeal to more than one kind of audience if they are to prove popular (1999: 84). While this is something that I will consider in more detail later in the chapter, it also fair to note that in order to attract suitable advertising, network programming must be able to reach the most prized or desirable segments of the audience. As I have explained in relation to _Seinfeld_ and _Friends_, this has resulted in NBC producing prime-time programming that reflects the lifestyles of the type of viewer it seeks to attract. For Becker, this means portraying a world that 'in many cases, includes gays and lesbians' (1998: 38).

The gay and lesbian audience itself has also become sought after, largely due to what Danielle Mitchell refers to as 'the myth of gay affluence' (2005: 1057). As explained by Becker, Chasin (2000), and Fejes (2002), the emergence of a number of national gay (and glossy) magazine titles in the 1980s and 1990s, led research and advertising firms to produce favourable statistics on gay and lesbian consumers in order to create a valuable (and viable) commercial niche market. Becker provides a detailed assessment of the various claims put forward by the surveys carried out, including that as well as being reported to spend over five billion dollars annually, America's eighteen million gay and lesbian consumers were also more loyal to those

companies that courted their custom (1998: 41). Yet, as Mitchell acknowledges, this research was erroneously flawed as 'the design ensured the conflation of LGBT subjectivity, in general, with a particular demographic of persons holding yearly subscriptions to mainstream magazines' (2005: 1058). As a result, the lifestyles and interests of many lower income and ethnic gays and lesbians have been effectively erased from the media industry's conception of this particular segment of the market. While this (mis)representation may have led to increased visibility for non-normative identities on our television screens, it has also resulted in a specific stereotype being perpetuated: 'Instead of images of nelly queens or motorcycle dykes, we are presented with images of white, affluent, trend-setting, Perrier-drinking, frequent-flier using, Ph.D.-holding consumer citizens with more income to spend than they know what to do with' (Becker 1998: 43). Following on from *Friends*, which created a cast for media buyers to salivate over, NBC drew on this desirable stereotype for the sitcom *Will & Grace*, in which the eponymous male character is attractive, intelligent, affluent, and gay.

In a fiercely competitive marketplace, the existence of a gay lead character helped differentiate NBC's newest sitcom from the various *Seinfeld* and *Friends* imitators on American television screens. In the following analysis, however, I intend to demonstrate that *Will & Grace* is a contradictory site of incorporation that works to include and normalise homosexuality while at the same time reproducing conservative and dominant ideologies in relation to power, race, ethnicity, and class.

A Site of Contradiction: 'Straight Acting' or Articulating the 'Lived Arrangements of Queer Life'

As an Emmy award winning show lasting eight seasons, *Will & Grace* is undoubtedly the most successful sitcom to feature a gay lead character on network television. In fact, it can be described as the *only* 'gay' sitcom on American television, as the majority of its predecessors confined gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters to supporting or marginal roles. The one exception to this is ABC's *Ellen*, which caused controversy in 1997 with the coming-out of its lead character Ellen Morgan. The difference between the two shows is, of course, that for the majority of its run, the eponymous character of *Ellen* was identified as a heterosexual woman. This means

that only *Will & Grace* has been constructed specifically around a gay lead character, in the form of Will Truman.[29]

  Will & Grace centres on the relationship between the eponymous lead characters, the capricious Grace Adler, a flame-haired interior designer, and her best friend Will Truman, an uptight attorney who just happens to be gay. That Will's sexual orientation is incidental to the plot is something that the team behind the sitcom would have the mass audience believe. According to Debra Messing who plays Grace, it is not what can be termed a 'gay' programme: 'The heart of the show is the life and times of two best friends. Being gay is an essential element of who Will is. But it is not the main issue' (Natale 1998: 33). Yet, it is this particular aspect that the co-creators and the network have relied on to distinguish the series from its competitors. Messing's comments were made in the national gay and lesbian magazine *The Advocate,* demonstrating the direct attempt made by the show to target a specific gay and lesbian audience. Furthermore, in the same article, NBC's programming chief Warren Littlefield stated that he was looking forward to the controversy expected to accompany the sitcom's initial broadcast (1998: 32). The result is that *Will & Grace* is somewhat contradictory in its execution. On the one hand it plays on the homosexual nature of its lead character to create the type of controversy typical of previous sitcoms such as *All in the Family*. At the same time, however, it ultimately centres on the (platonic) relationship between a man and woman so as not to alienate the mainstream American audience, which mainly consists of families with relatively conservative values.

  This duality is especially problematic with regards to the characterisation of Will. Many television critics and academics have highlighted his inoffensive nature, with one going so far as to describe him as a 'straight acting' homosexual (Mitchell 2005: 1058). Played by the heterosexual actor Eric McCormack, Will is a serial

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[29] The coming-out episode of *Ellen* was an exceptional occurrence for two reasons. First, the sexuality of the on-screen character correlated with the real-life sexuality of the stand-up comedian Ellen DeGeneres who played her. Second, the decision to out the fictional (and real-life) Ellen was an attempt to rejuvenate the show by giving it 'the much-needed "identity" required to attract the [desired] demographics' (Becker 1998: 39). Despite this apparent desire for gay-themed programming in the 1990s, however, and the show's subsequent attempt to differentiate itself in the market by creating a gay identity, *Ellen* was ultimately unsuccessful in the ratings and was cancelled the following season. It must be noted that the reasons for this are not solely attributable to the lead character's sexual preference. Although there is no space to consider this in detail within the confines of this thesis, McCarthy (2003), Gross (2002), and Hubert (1999) offer insights into some of the problems the show encountered both prior to and following its new 'gay' direction.

monogamist who has just come out of a seven-year relationship when the series begins. He also happens to be another white, upscale twentysomething residing in Manhattan. This poses the question of how representative this portrayal is with regards to the experiences of America's diverse gay community. Looking indistinguishable from the characters of *Friends*, Will has a desirable lifestyle which is perhaps not shared by lower-class, ethnic, or rural-dwelling gays and lesbians. Moreover, unlike his straight sitcom counterparts, he is unlikely to be seen sharing an onscreen bed with a partner, a privilege awarded to both Rachel and Ross (who went so far as to act out a Princess Leia fantasy), and Chandler and Monica (both before and after they became a married couple). While the unobjectionable Will can be seen as an attempt to avoid a camp and flamboyant stereotype, he can also be viewed as a straight person's acceptable representation of homosexuality, or, in the case of some viewers, as not even a gay character at all.

It is here that it is important to return to Fiske's assertion that in order to prove popular and thus gain success, television texts must remain open enough to 'enable a variety of viewers to negotiate an appropriate variety of meanings' (1999: 88). In terms of *Will & Grace*, Mitchell suggests that 'to secure the largest market audience possible, gays need to feel represented, straights must feel included, and the audience needs to laugh' (2005: 1053). As a result of this logic, the character of Will fulfils Caldwell's dual-purpose role. He is identified as gay, yet he refrains from having a gay (sexual) partner. Instead, his most important relationship is with a woman, in the form of his best friend Grace. As they go on to share a flat together and, at one point, even consider having a child together, Will is generally placed within a (hetero)normative environment.

In comic terms, Will is also a 'straight' man to the zany Grace, with her impulsive nature and out-of-control curly red hair. This carries on a tradition established in early television sitcom by both Gracie and George and Lucy and Ricky, with the main difference being that in each of these situations, the straight-man-zany-woman dynamic took place within a husband and wife relationship. In fact, the name Grace can also be understood as a nod to her sitcom predecessor. Just as academics have produced queer readings of the relationships between sitcom characters such as Lucy and her neighbour Ethel and the eponymous flatmates in *Laverne and Shirley*, the recognisable dynamic between Will and Grace means that they can just as easily

be read as a straight couple (Mellencamp 1997; Doty 2003). This is a fact that is recognised many times within the text itself.

For example, in the pilot episode, the opening scene features the two characters engaged in a late-night phone call. With the lights in each apartment dimmed and both of them curled up in a chair in their nightwear, Will asks Grace suggestively to 'come over . . . you know you want to'. When she declines, he tells her that 'it'll be a good one', to which she replies 'it's always good'. With the scene set-up as an exchange between two lovers, Grace suddenly reverses the audience's expectations by saying, 'I think I'll watch *ER* here'. From then on their conversation becomes less suggestive and more routine, as Grace talks about going sale shopping that day. When she explains that she bought a camisole (which she appears to be wearing), the camera pulls back from a close-up to a mid-shot to reveal a man walking behind her on his way to bed. The presence of Grace's boyfriend Danny is therefore presented as the real reason Grace has chosen to stay at home. When she jokingly asks Will if he is jealous, he replies 'honey, I don't need your man, I got George Clooney' (in reference to the *ER* actor). They then conclude their conversation with the exchange, 'OK, say goodnight Gracie', 'goodnight Gracie', before the title sequence starts to roll.

This scene is interesting on a number of levels. In the first instance, it succeeds in immediately introducing the audience to the closeness of the relationship between the two characters while also signalling their sexual preferences. It also succeeds in comic terms through the reversal of audience expectation and the way in which their conversation can be read as having various double meanings. On the surface, the reference to the medical drama *ER* works as a cross-promotional technique that aligns NBC's newest sitcom with its Thursday-night 'must-see TV' line-up. In addition to this, however, it also functions as a subtle nod to the various rumours surrounding the sexuality of the *ER* actor George Clooney (although Grace obfuscates this somewhat by clearly stating, 'he doesn't bat for your team', to which Will replies, 'well . . . he hasn't seen me pitch'). Finally, it references its own sitcom history by signing off with the 'goodnight Gracie' statement made famous by Burns and Allen. As such, the scene offers a range of pleasures and spectatorial positions to a variety of audiences. While mainstream viewers can focus on the friendship between the two main characters, 'queer' viewers can appreciate the insider jokes and double meanings (by 'queer' I mean those segments of the audience who do not wholly conform to

heteronormative society). Moreover, for those with knowledge of television history and network scheduling techniques, the scene offers a number of intertextual references.

Even though the platonic nature of their relationship is made clear from the outset, this does not prevent the show from continuing to play with the notion that they can still be read as a straight couple. This is most notable at the end of the first episode when, after encouraging Grace not to go through with her impending wedding, the couple retreat to a bar (with Grace still wearing her wedding dress) only for the fellow patrons to assume that they are newly married.[30] By consistently playing with the idea that Will and Grace not only look and act like a straight couple but that, at some point, their relationship could develop into something more than friendship, Karen Quimby contends that some straight-identifying viewers may resolve the issue of Will's homosexuality by invoking the psychic mechanism of disavowal:

> Disavowal, which might be understood through the phrase 'I know . . . but all the same,' allows some audience members both to acknowledge gay male difference . . . and to disavow this difference through the heterosexual fantasy that visualizes Will and Grace's eventual coupling (2005: 717).

For Quimby, *Will & Grace* is ultimately successful as a sitcom because of this central dynamic of disavowal or contradiction. As viewers are able 'to know Will simultaneously as gay and as not gay', the show is able to attract a wider audience than just gay and lesbian spectators and thus make sexual difference visible within mainstream television (717).

Quimby is one of the few positive voices to be heard in relation to the possible double readings within the show. This is because she understands the central relationship of Will and Grace as not just an attempt by the sitcom's creators to divert attention away from exploring Will's homsexuality fully, but as an example of what Michael Warner terms 'the lived arrangements of queer life' (2005: 714; Warner 1999: 116). Describing the main characters as being involved in an 'in-between' relationship, she credits the show with addressing 'straight women's desire for

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[30] This storyline references the pilot episode of *Friends*, in which Rachel first appears in the Central Perk coffee shop wearing her wedding dress, having just run out on her husband-to-be Barry.

relationships with men that exist outside the norms of the heterosexual contract' (Quimby 2005: 715). Yet, there are problems with this representation, as it is always Grace who is positioned as the one who desires some sort of commitment from Will. This is indicated in the aforementioned kissing scene, when Grace seems to require affirmation that Will is attracted to her. It is also apparent when she first becomes reluctant to move out of Will's apartment, and then worries that, if Will meets a partner, he will no longer have time for her. In contrast, Will does not demand the same in return. He is shown as being loyal to his friendship with Grace while at the same time retaining his independence.

This means that although the show can be read as an example of 'straight women's dissatisfaction with the norms of masculinity and the kinds of relationships that such gendered conventions demand', the two characters ultimately conform to stereotypical gender representations (715). Grace is depicted as needy, insecure, and erratic, while Will appears independent and in control. Moreover, instead of offering Grace a different type of relationship, her and Will are often depicted (in negative terms) as a typical married couple. In the episode 'Head Case' from Season One, the twosome attempt to entertain one of Will's clients, Harlin Polk, even though they are not speaking to each other as they have had an argument. Noticing the tension between the pair, Harlin enquires, 'Will, are you sure you're gay? 'Cause this felt exactly like a night between me and the Mrs'. With this statement the suggestion is that the couple are experiencing many of the negative aspects of a traditional marriage with none of the sexual benefits.

Of course, sexual relationships further complicate the dynamic between the main characters and their individual roles. Despite the fact that I have suggested that it is Grace who has more invested in this 'in-between' relationship, she is the one who is shown to have several sexual partners while Will is generally forced to remain single. The absence of any displayed sexuality on the part of Will is one of the key problems that gay and lesbian commentators have with the show. In order to offer a realistic portrayal of a good-looking, male lawyer living in New York City at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there is a need for Will to be shown having a proper homosexual relationship. This does not occur until the sixth season of the show however, at a time when the programme had significantly dropped out of the top ten. As such, it can be argued that while *Will & Grace* was attracting a fairly wide

audience, Will's sexuality had to remain a site of contradiction or disavowal, regardless of whether this appeared as disingenuous to queer viewers.

'Acting Out': Network Restrictions on Gay Men Kissing

The difficulties surrounding this issue is something that the show itself highlights in a self-reflexive episode from Season Two entitled 'Acting Out'. The episode begins with Will, Grace, and Jack gathered around the television set in anticipation of a gay kiss that is to appear in the fictional sitcom *Along Came You*. Rather than reveal this 'show within a show' to the viewer, the camera instead focuses on the reaction of the three characters as they are drawn into the storyline on-screen. Perched on the edge of his seat, Jack indicates the significance of the occasion as he exclaims, 'he's moving in. It's gonna happen. Oh my God. Do you understand, this is bigger than the Moon landing', to which Will replies 'one giant step for *man on man*kind'. As the three friends hold hands, Grace says, 'this is it, this is it. This is *not* it. Where's the camera going? Why are we looking at the fireplace?', at which point it becomes clear that the network has chosen not to show the gay kiss. When Jack condemns the decision as 'a crime against humanity', Will takes a more laissez-faire attitude by quipping, 'Jack, two guys didn't kiss on a sitcom. I don't think that warrants reconvening the Nuremberg jury'.

The initial reaction to this scene is that the show appears to be engaging in double standards by having the characters complain about the absence of a gay kiss on a fictional sitcom, when the real sitcom *Will & Grace* has steadfastly avoided the same thing. However, at the same time, the programme's creators use the fictional (non)kiss to highlight the restrictions placed on network programming. With Jack refusing to back down on the issue, Will accompanies him to NBC studios so that he can make a complaint. On speaking to Craig, the President's assistant, they are told that 'this network has a responsibility to its audience . . . you will never see two gay men kissing on network television'. As this statement appears within a network sitcom based around an openly gay lead character, the suggestion is that despite the best efforts of both NBC and the show's creators, the American public is not yet willing to bear witness to a gay male kiss on prime-time television (although there has been gay female kisses in the past). Noticeably, there is no mention of the role of advertisers in this decision.

In an attempt to circumvent this apparently self-imposed network restriction (in relation to both *Will & Grace* itself, and the show's fictional diegesis), the episode then sees Will and Jack take part in a live outside broadcast by Al Roker for the *Today* show (NBC's daily news programme). While Jack seizes the opportunity to campaign against what he sees as a discriminatory practice employed by the network, Will, realising that they are appearing *live* on *network* television, takes Jack's face in his hands and kisses him. As such, viewers are presented with the image of two gay men kissing for the first time on both *Will & Grace* and NBC. Despite the landmark status of this occurrence, it does appear that by indulging in such self-reflexivity, the show evades the real issue of the lack of any displayed homosexuality on Will's part. The fact that the viewers have to wait a further four seasons before Will is allowed to have a proper boyfriend only confirms this. By having the first gay male kiss on network TV take place between two platonic friends, *Will & Grace* again functions as a site of contradiction. Although it tries to raise awareness of discriminatory practices surrounding gay and lesbian representation, it does so by stripping it of its power, i.e., it substitutes a staged kiss for any evidence of actual homosexual feelings or activity.

Although I have argued here that 'straight acting' is essential to the show's success and that gender-based stereotypes are often reinforced, it is not only Will and Grace's relationship that can be understood in queer terms. In fact, it is often argued that the show primarily exhibits a queer sensibility through the supporting roles of Jack and Karen. As well as discussing how the characters of Jack and Karen are signified as 'camp' within *Will & Grace*, I will also consider the role of Karen's maid, Rosario, and the way in which the show reproduces conservative and dominant ideologies in relation to power, race, and ethnicity.

Power Relations: Campness, Superiority, and Racial Discourse

With Will generally considered to be both the 'straight' man in comic terms, and 'straight acting' in relation to his sexuality, it is the characters of Jack and Karen that explicitly exhibit 'gay' and 'camp' qualities within the show. In relation to Will, Jack is portrayed as a flamboyant gay man. This is established within the very first episode when both characters are shown playing poker with some of Will's male friends. While Will and the other men smoke cigars and drink beer, the camera focuses on Jack who, with a sweater casually slung around his shoulders, deliberates his next move while singing to himself. Unlike Will, who is seemingly indistinguishable from

his other (straight) poker buddies, Jack is immediately characterised as different through his actions, style, and overall demeanour. As he proclaims 'OK. FYI folks, most people that meet me *do not* know that I'm gay', his statement is greeted by resounding laughter as Will first quips, 'Jack, blind and deaf people know you're gay', before adding, 'dead people know you're gay' to reiterate his point.

It is therefore apparent from the very first episode that it is the character of Jack who inhabits a camp, flamboyant, and some would say, stereotypical personality. This is demonstrated through his appearance (sweater slung over shoulders), language (the use of the acronym FYI to represent the phrase 'for your information'), and his actions (his propensity for singing showtunes and making exaggerated movements with his hands). In comparison to Jack, the character of Will can be seen as a refreshing attempt to reject the typical camp stereotype of a gay man. Yet, in doing so, Will becomes indistinguishable from the other straight men in the room, while Jack stands out not only as different and distinctive, but also as being more comfortable with his sexuality. As the series progresses, Jack's overt campness and flamboyance allow him to indulge in the kind of homosexual relationships and sexual activity that is continually denied to Will.

Despite Jack's displayed campness and the fact that he is sexually active, he is not always considered the gayest character on the show. Instead, many fans award Grace's assistant Karen with that title. Married to sugar daddy Stan (who like Nile's wife Maris in *Frasier*, we never get to see), and step-mum to two children who she takes no interest in, Karen works at Grace's office to pass the time between shopping trips and even refrains from cashing her salary cheques. With scant regard for her job and no outward desire to make friends (although the reason she continues to work with Grace is because she has come to enjoy spending time with her), Karen is extremely candid about her opinions and, as such, generally delivers a string of comic one-liners. Discussing the difference between Jack and Karen, David Kohan, the show's co-creator along with Max Mutchnik, states that he thinks Karen is the 'gayest thing on television' due to the way in which she 'speaks her mind and is very funny and in love with her own shallowness and artifice' (Kirby 2001: 8). In contrast, he describes Jack as 'more wide-eyed, which to me is less campy' (8). While there is no doubt that both Jack and Karen exhibit 'camp' qualities, Kohan's comparison is problematic as he fails to distinguish between the terms 'gay' and 'camp'. Instead, he uses these words interchangeably. I would suggest that it is important to differentiate

between these two terms and how they manifest themselves in each character because, ultimately, it is only Jack who is truly gay.

This confusion of terms indicates that the writers of *Will & Grace* equate 'gay' with 'campness', i.e., having deliberately artificial, vulgar, banal, or affectedly humorous qualities or style. As a result, the levels of characterisation within the show are somewhat one-dimensional. In order for a mainstream audience to identify with the lead characters, Will rejects this camp stereotype in favour of a 'straight-acting' role while Grace assumes the tried-and-tested 'zany' woman act. Jack, on the other hand, exhibits a stereotypical campness, which provides no space to portray a complex homosexual character. This 'campness' is also Karen's main attribute; however, in her case it is not bound up with her sexuality. Karen can simply be camp for its own sake and while this makes her one-dimensional it also frees her to produce humour imbued with cattiness and bitchy put-downs.

While this may be considered acceptable with regards to queer humour, it takes on a different tone when the object of Karen's bitchiness is her Salvadorian maid Rosario. In her discussion of *Will & Grace*, Feuer describes queer humour as embracing both identification and parody and cites Dyer's description of combining 'the most extreme feelings of empathy and the bitchiest kind of detached amusement' (Feuer 2001b: 72; Dyer 1986: 154). My analysis of the central foursome in *Will & Grace* suggests that the audience is supposed to empathise and identify with the more conventional sitcom characters of Will and Grace, while the parodic Jack and Karen are left to create humour and amusement with their biting remarks. According to Mitchell, much of the show's appeal comes from what she describes as the 'comedic structure of "gay bashing"' (2005: 1054). This means that as well as inviting viewers to identify with a gay protagonist, 'it also uses humor and invoked difference to mediate that identification with heterosexist, patriarchal, racist, and classist values integral to securing social division of power' (1055). In this section of my analysis, I want to concentrate on the latter two divisions of race and class in relation to the character of Rosario and her relationship to Karen within the show.

As a sitcom that tackles homosexuality and features camp characters, *Will and Grace* appears to subscribe to the notion that discriminatory references are acceptable due to the non-normative status of the characters and their high level of artifice. Yet, I would suggest that the success of comic insults and put-downs are dependent on the power relationship between the teller of the joke and the person it is aimed at, namely

the comic butt. It can be argued that such humour functions according to the relief theory of humour and I believe that, in the case of *Will & Grace*, this is in part true. For example, as both Mills (2001b) and Morreall (1983) explain, this type of humour can function as a way of releasing nervous energy that has hitherto been repressed. As homosexuality is an issue that is generally avoided on prime-time network television (a situation which the aforementioned 'Acting Out' episode undoubtedly works to highlight), the double entendres and bitchy references to gay life that are played out between the central characters in *Will & Grace* can be understood as instances in which the show attempts to break free momentarily from societal restraints. Even though I am not entirely convinced that this humour is not in itself offensive on occasion, I do believe that the power relationships between Will, Grace, Jack, and Karen are relatively even. Karen may have more economic power than the other three characters, but all four are depicted as living a similar type of lifestyle. In fact, they are not far removed from Becker's description of the desirable 'quality' audience, namely 'white, affluent, trend-setting, Perrier-drinking . . . consumer citizens'.

When considering the relationship between Karen and her maid Rosario, the power relationship becomes markedly different. Due to a marriage of convenience, Karen is a wealthy white woman who can afford to obtain Rosario's services as her hired help. Yet their relationship is more than that of employer and employee. Incapable of showing her true feelings, the numerous insults and put-downs Karen directs at her maid are ultimately supposed to be a sign of affection on her part. Following Quimby's logic, it could be argued that Karen and Rosario are engaged in another 'queer' relationship that operates outside of the heteronormative contract. However, the insults and put-downs are also indicative of the type of comedy that Lusane traces to the black sitcoms of the 1970s and the white, working-class sitcom *Married With . . . Children* that followed in the 1980s. In each instance, these programmes incorporated 'the insult-driven humour that is popular in the black community' to attract young, urban and ethnic audiences frequently overlooked by the major television networks (1998: 15). The difference between these shows and *Will & Grace*, is that in the case of the former, the characters were marginalised in society through race or class and their insults were either directed at other members of their social group or at those with more power. In *Will & Grace*, this situation is reversed.

As Karen has power over Rosario, the resultant humour is less a vent for repression and more about asserting her superiority.[31]

One of the show's most contentious moments involving race relations occurs in an episode entitled 'Guess Who's Not Coming to Dinner?' from Season Two. Despite being a play on the Sidney Poitier film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (1967), in which liberal parents are forced to question their attitudes when they find out that their daughter's partner is black, this particular episode is not overtly concerned with the issue of race. Instead, it deals with Grace's attempts to become less dependent on Will by throwing a dinner party to which he is not invited. The point of contention therefore is not part of the major plotline but rather a throwaway reference from Karen to Rosario: 'Hey. Hey, you're on the clock, tamale. Get to work!' This use of the word 'tamale' (a traditional Hispanic dish) to refer to Salvadorian maid Rosario attracted a host of complaints from ethnic minority groups and led to it being removed from the subsequent re-run of the episode.

James Burrows, who is both an executive producer and director on the show, has discussed this issue only in relation to *Will & Grace*'s portrayal of homosexuality: 'The one problem we had last year was with (Karen's calling housekeeper Rosario) "tamale." They were doing a show about gay people and homosexuality, and the problem is with the word "tamale," so that will show you how far the show has come' (Rosenthal 2000: 40). Using this as an example of how uncontroversial the programme is in terms of sexuality is rather unhelpful. This is because, as I have already noted, it is possible to attribute this perceived lack of opposition to the lead character's inoffensive nature and the fact that he does not openly engage in any form of sexual activity. Moreover, it also refuses to address the possibility that, in an attempt to offset the show's 'queerness', the programme works to reproduce dominant ideologies of race, ethnicity, and class.

My reading of this is not confined to the relationship between Karen and Rosario or the furore surrounding the 'tamale' reference. While this may have been one of the few occasions in which *Will & Grace* faced criticism with regards to its treatment of race, there are a number of other incidents in which dominant social divisions of power are played out. For example, as highlighted by Mitchell, Karen

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[31] For a wider discussion of power, race, and ethnicity in relation to the production of humour see D. Howitt & K. Owusu-Bempah (2005).

regularly treats Rosario as an object and a possession. This is taken to the extreme in 'My Uncle, the Car' when she 'attempts to ensure Rosario's labor by wagering possession of her in a game of pool' (2005: 1056). For mainly selfish reasons, Karen also convinces Jack to marry Rosario so as she can escape deportation back to El Salvador and continue working as her maid. This means that even though Jack, as a gay man, has considerably less power in society than the wealthy Karen, he is still placed in a superior position in relation to Rosario, the show's only regular ethnic character. In the same episode, Jack also proclaims that he himself is black, after receiving a postcard from his mother stating that 'his father was a black boy'. While this storyline presents the show with an opportunity to consider how racial identity can be more than just the colour of someone's skin, Karen simply understands it in superficial and tokenistic terms, 'I'm happy for you and I'm happy for me. I've always wanted a black friend'. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the narrative refuses to see this through when it is revealed that it was not Jack's father's skin colour that was black but rather his surname.

It must be noted that *Will & Grace* is not the only sitcom to have faced criticism in recent years for perpetuating racial stereotypes. In his detailed analysis of *The Simpsons*, Hugo Dobson (2006) discusses the various accusations of racism directed at the writers of the animated sitcom, particularly with regards to episodes based in Brazil, Australia, and Japan. While agreeing that in certain instances these accusations may be valid, Dobson nevertheless suggests that, on the whole, such criticism fails to recognise and understand the sophisticated nature of the show's comedy. His reasons for this are twofold. First, he cites Bakhtin's theory of the 'carnivalesque' in his assertion that the racial stereotypes put forward in the show function as 'an opportunity to ridicule and let off steam against the piety of current political correctness but without going too far' (2006: 58). Second, he draws on the work of Melissa Hart to explain that humour in *The Simpsons* is actually making fun at the people who both recognise and buy into 'the ignorance-based stereotypes that humanity has cultivated' (Dobson 2006: 60; Hart 2002). This seems to be the approach adopted by *Will & Grace*. By basing its humour on insults and put-downs, the aim is to draw attention to stereotypes in society (whether they are based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, or sexuality) while at the same time using them as a vent for repression. Yet, Dobson's analysis fails to take into account how the power relationships involved in such humour impact on its intention and reception.

Will & Grace constructs a world in which ethnic minority groups, rather than sexual minority groups, lack the most power. This is highlighted in an episode from Season Six in which Karen, Will, and Jack fly to Las Vegas in Karen's private jet for her marriage to Lyle. Jack remarks, 'I haven't been on your plane since we flew down to Mexico to smuggle in some new staff for you'. While the overall objective of the show may be an attempt to introduce the largest possible audience to the experience of gay people, it simultaneously perpetuates 'the myth of gay affluence' while reproducing dominant ideologies with regards to race. Ultimately, on-screen depictions of homosexuality would seem to be safe as long as it is with regards to upscale, white, city-dwellers. This privileged social status also means that such characters are shown to have more of a voice in society than lower-class ethnic minorities. I would suggest, therefore, that a real risk for the networks would be to produce a sitcom about working-class Black or Latino gay characters living in a small town in the Midwest. This is an issue that I return to in more detail in Chapter Six when I examine the use of 'black-block' programming by the niche-network UPN.

Differentiating NBC Sitcoms in the Post-Network Era

I have chosen to focus on issues of gay representation and power relations within *Will & Grace* rather than formal innovations and visual style because I believe that the show's creators and NBC have primarily used its gay sensibility and biting camp humour to differentiate it within the marketplace. This is not to say that it does not continue some of the narrative and stylistic techniques adopted by its 'must-see' predecessors. For example, as well as showcasing interweaving storylines, *Will & Grace* also features an integral 1980s flashback scene which reveals the moment Will told Grace he was gay (even though the pair were dating at the time). In addition, Grace's competitiveness is highlighted in an episode entitled 'Alley Cats' through the use of a brief parody of the film *Chariots of Fire* (1981). In these instances, however, the show is not adopting new formal innovations but rather following in the footsteps of *Seinfeld* and *Friends*.

Feuer (2001b) has also discussed the way in which *Will & Grace* presents 'insider' forms of humour that are common amongst gay men while also aligning itself with the gay cultural practice of celebrity worship through the appearance of numerous guest stars. With regards to this latter point, this is largely achieved through the presence of various female celebrities who are known for their 'camp' excesses or

'diva' tendencies, such as Madonna, Jennifer Lopez, Cher, Joan Collins, and Sandra Bernhardt. Unlike *Seinfeld* (which uses Jerry's on- and off-screen stand-up persona to introduce real-life celebrities to the narrative), and *Friend*s (which aligns itself with other fictional characters in the NBC schedule), *Will & Grace* employs numerous narrative strategies when incorporating celebrities into its narrative. While Lopez, Cher, and Bernhardt appear as versions of themselves, Madonna and Collins play fictional characters that, in some regards, play on their off-screen personas. In each instance, however, the status of the celebrity within gay culture is readily acknowledged.

Despite the differences between the sitcoms discussed in this chapter, all three are representative of a distinct programming shift on the part of NBC to target a more narrow and desirable segment of the audience. As stated by Lotz, 'during these years, NBC more openly branded itself as the network of "upscale," college-educated, eighteen- to forty-nine-year-old viewers' (2007: 270). As part of the network's 'must-see TV' Thursday night sitcom line-up then, *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Will & Grace* reflected the friendship groups, interests, and lifestyles of the quality demographic described by both Lotz and Becker. Moreover, in an attempt to attract and retain an audience familiar with the forms and conventions of the traditional sitcom, each show employed a number of innovative techniques with regards to narrative structure, visual style, and blurring the boundaries between the real and the fictional. According to Lotz, NBC has successfully produced 'a programming brand of distinction by delicately balancing the need for popular success with the need for artistic innovation and critical excellence' (2007: 272). The network's hold on upscale, 18- to 49-year-olds came under pressure however as pay-cable operators such as HBO began to aggressively target a similar segment of the audience. With the latter service only available for a fee, Chapter Five will demonstrate how HBO has sought to position its sitcom output in opposition to that produced by the broadcast networks.

Chapter 5

HBO Case Study: 'It's Not TV. It's HBO.'

Conceived by its founder, Charles Dolan, in 1972, as a 'subscription pay channel focusing on sports and movies', HBO has successfully differentiated itself in the marketplace from its inception by actively avoiding the production of standard genre programming that appears on network television (Mair 1986: 4). Instead of the half-hour sitcom, the hour-long drama, and the mini-series, HBO became known for broadcasting live sports events from around the country and overseas along with commercial-free movies. With the addition of stand-up comedy specials to its line-up, featuring comedians such as George Carlin and Steve Martin, the pay-cable network concentrated on bringing (live) events that viewers had previously enjoyed outside of the home and were accustomed to paying for, into the comfort of one's own living room.[32] Such programming tactics came under pressure at the beginning of the 1980s, however, with the advent of the video rental and pay-per-view markets providing similar services. For HBO to attract new customers, retain loyal audiences, and increase market share in a fiercely competitive post-network era, it had to diversify its output. Thus, it began to develop original series programming.

The key to continuing its differentiated status in the marketplace was to produce series programming that was distinctive from its commercial network counterparts and that viewers were willing to pay for. To this end, it advertised itself as the producer of something 'other' than conventional television, an ethos crystallised in 1995 with the marketing slogan 'It's Not TV. It's HBO.' Yet, with regards to sitcom, it appears that HBO is in fact primarily concerned with the nature of television. Rather than reproducing sitcom's popular and somewhat rigid style, HBO shows challenge the conventions of the genre by appropriating the looks and

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[32] Unlike sports events, stand-up shows were not broadcast live but they were filmed in actual venues in front of live audiences. As HBO is free of restrictions with regards to language and subject matter there was a tension inherent in such broadcasts. As explained by current HBO chief executive Chris Albrecht at the *Media Guardian Edinburgh International Television Festival*, 'there was a fair amount of creative license that could occur on HBO enabling Robin Williams, Billy Crystal or Robert Klein to do things that they could only do live.' Thus, such shows were presented to the viewer uninterrupted in exactly the same format as the live performance. See www.geitf.co.uk/news/article.php?id=59 (Accessed April 2005)

styles of other television forms, such as the late-night talk show, reality TV, and the quality drama.

In this chapter I illustrate how HBO has situated itself in opposition to the commercial networks by producing sitcoms that challenge the formal and visual conventions of the genre and which emphasise the differences in standards and practices between the two providers. In addition, I also consider the way in which these sitcoms blur the boundaries between the real and the fictional by playing with the perceived public personas of well-known celebrities and by utilising a confessional mode of discourse. To explicate this argument, I shall examine three of its most popular and critically acclaimed examples of the form: *The Larry Sanders Show*; *Curb Your Enthusiasm*; and *Sex and the City*. Through an analysis of the visual qualities of each programme, I highlight the ways in which these shows do not *look* like sitcoms. While *The Larry Sanders Show* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* showcase the documentary look through the continued use of what Caldwell (2002) refers to as the 'docu-real' and Mills (2004) terms 'comedy verité', *Sex and the City* exhibits high production values more typical of the quality drama series or Hollywood film. In addition, the latter programme also employs a range of innovative formal techniques, such as the use of voiceover, direct address, and the presence of a non-linear narrative.

Following on from my analysis of *Seinfeld* in the previous chapter, I consider how each of these sitcoms purposely blur the boundaries between the real and the fictional in an attempt to highlight the artifice of television conventions and raise questions about the nature of performance and authenticity. Again, both *The Larry Sanders Show* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* achieve this in a similar manner. Not only do both shows draw on the real-life background of the show's creators and stars but they also feature well-known celebrities playing with perceptions of their perceived public personas. *Sex and the City*, on the other hand, blurs the boundaries between the real and the fictional by adopting a confessional discourse that is akin to the daytime talk show.

There is another key difference between *Sex and the City* and the other two sitcoms discussed in this chapter and that is the way the former foregrounds the presence of its four *female* and *single* lead characters as a badge of distinction. As such, my analysis of the series will conclude with a discussion of representation and debates around difference. Although I focus on the role of women within the sitcom

form, I also consider the issue of race. This is largely because, like the NBC 'must-see' sitcoms examined in the previous chapter, HBO appears to produce shows primarily for a desirable white audience.

In each instance, the pay-cable network targets a media-savvy viewer from which a certain level of knowingness is expected. In addition to consciously drawing attention to generic conventions and referencing specific texts and cultural goods, the three sitcoms discussed in this chapter highlight the restrictions that are placed on broadcast networks in terms of language and subject matter by exhibiting strong language and storylines that tackle adult themes. By emphasising the difference in standards and practices between commercial television and pay-cable, HBO attempts to place itself outside of the political and economic realities of broadcast television and assure viewers that they are receiving something 'other' than the standard fare offered to the mass audience. As such, the slogan 'It's Not *Network* TV. It's HBO.' would perhaps be more appropriate.

The Larry Sanders Show: The Emergence of a Reality Aesthetic

Following HBO's decision to embark on original series programming at the beginning of the 1990s, *The Larry Sanders Show*, which began in 1992, was the first cable sitcom to become a breakthrough hit. This was evident in the level of critical acclaim the show attracted from television commentators and the numerous award nominations it received from within the industry (it is one of the few cable sitcoms to have received Emmy nominations in every year of its broadcast.). Created by stand-up comedian Garry Shandling, who also stars in its title role, *The Larry Sanders Show* did have a number of predecessors, however, most notably in the form of *Seinfeld* and, of course, Shandling's earlier sitcom, *It's Garry Shandling's Show*, which appeared on HBO's pay-cable competitor Showtime.[33]

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[33] HBO also produced some comedies in the 1980s. *Not Necessarily the News* began in 1983 and featured a combination of actual news footage, comedy sketches and satirical comedy while the sitcom *1st & Ten*, first broadcast in 1984, revolved around the antics of a fictional football team and their new female owner. It was Showtime that was seen as producing distinctive programming at this time however. The comedy *Brothers* (1984-1989) quickly gained attention due to its subject matter - the series began with the youngest of three brothers interrupting his wedding to announce he is gay and cannot go through with the marriage. But it was the formally innovative *It's Garry Shandling's Show* that set a template for both NBC and HBO to follow with *Seinfeld* and *The Larry Sanders Show* respectively.

As I have discussed, both of these shows were distinctive due to the way in which they incorporated the conventions of stand-up into the sitcom genre. Nevertheless, they each made use of the comic monologue and the presence of the studio audience in different ways. In *Seinfeld* the studio audience was there to bear witness to the performance and its recording, while also providing diegetic laughter cues to the viewer at home. *It's Garry Shandling's Show*, on the other hand, made the studio audience part of the performance, as Shandling was shown interacting with those present. As indicated in the following observation by Joan Stuller-Giglione (n.d.) published on the Museum of Broadcast Communications website, it is possible that this technique created some confusion on the part of the viewer, as it was not always clear whether those involved in such sequences were true audience members or paid extras:

> In one episode, Garry told the audience to feel free to use his "apartment" (the set) while he was at a baseball game. Several people from the audience (perhaps extras) left their seats to read prop books and play billiards in front of the cameras as the program segued into its next scene.

This is not the interpretation put forward by Mark Lewisohn (n.d.) on the BBC's Guide to Comedy website, however, who insists that 'even with the departures from conventional disciplines, and the often extreme plots, the show still worked and the viewers managed to take this new TV reality in its stride'. For Lewisohn, the most important aspect of the show was that it 'didn't underestimate its audience', but rather expected its viewers to possess a prior knowledge of other TV programmes and genres. In what he refers to as a 'new TV reality', *It's Garry Shandling's Show* was not grounded in an attempt to make the characters, situations, and visual aesthetic a reflection of the real. Instead, it relied on both actors and audience displaying an explicit awareness of the conventions of the fictional format and their place within it. This notion was taken further when Shandling went on to team up with HBO to create *The Larry Sanders Show*, a sitcom that blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction in a distinctive formal and visual style.

    The Larry Sanders Show can be characterised as a workplace sitcom by virtue of the fact that it revolves around the everyday occurrences of the cast and crew of a late-night talk show. Yet, it eschews many of the conventions associated with the format and adopts characteristics from both the talk show and documentary instead.

The result is that is in parts a talk show parody and a satire on the inner workings of the television industry. Offering its audience a look at the goings-on in front of camera as well as the rivalries, conflicts and insecurities that take place behind the scenes, the divide between these two elements is marked visually through the use of videotape and 16 mm film. While the off-air antics of the cast and crew are shot on film, the on-air segments are videotaped in the same manner as the late-night talk show genre. Such production techniques not only help distinguish the show from its competitors but also play with the notion of authenticity and performance.

The use of videotape authentically recreates the look of the late-night talk show and Larry's self-effacing on-air manner replicates that of the amiable talk show host. The use of 16 mm film for the behind-the-scenes footage, on the other hand, evokes the verité style of observational documentary and in these scenes we are presented with another side of Larry's personality, that of an egotistical, neurotic control freak. The outcome of such contrasting techniques is that the show, in the words of critic Andrew Clark, 'strips away the superficial niceness of the talk-show format to expose a nest of ambition and insecurity' (2004: online). What we see on videotape is regarded as a performance, as the viewer is able to watch as both the visual image and Larry's behaviour change when the cameras begin to turn over. Stepping into his role as a 'television personality', Larry begins to 'play' a version of himself on screen (Langer 2006: 185). When the show reverts to film, however, and the action moves backstage, the implication is that this off-air footage of Larry and his attendants presents a true depiction of the personalities behind the late-night talk show genre and the production processes involved in creating television programming.

This conclusion is lent further credibility due to the way the show blurs reality and fiction with regards to Shandling's own background and the appearance of real-life celebrities as 'guests' on Larry's show. In the early 1980s, Shandling not only made regular stand-up appearances on TV talk shows, but he also gained experience as a frequent substitute for the host of *The Tonight Show*, Johnny Carson. Consequently, the comedian has knowledge of such an environment and his performance as a talk show host is one that audiences are expected to be familiar with. Moreover, each episode features one or more real-life celebrities as guests of the fictional Sanders. Not only do we see them interviewed during the talk show segment of the programme, we also see them prepare for their appearance in the green room and interact with Larry and his production team. In this instance, the line is blurred

between the perceived public persona of the celebrity guests and their comic performance within the sitcom.

Although still a performance, this depiction could be considered more authentic than the polished appearances on real-life talk shows made by celebrities eager to promote their latest product (Langer 2006: 190-192). As a satirical programme produced by a pay-cable network, *The Larry Sanders Show* is free of many of the restrictions and limitations placed on network programming and, as a result, numerous possibilities are opened up in terms of performance and playing with conventions. However, it must be emphasised that *The Larry Sanders Show* also offers a promotional platform (albeit in a different form), and that essentially a performance is required. It is significant that there is no shortage of celebrities willing to participate in the programme, even if the end result is somewhat unflattering. This is a question that I will return to later in the chapter, with regards to the relationship between self-parody and HBO's prestige status.

Framing the Image: The Multi-Camera Set-Up and the Single-Camera Approach

Another significant convention of television sitcom that *The Larry Sanders Show* challenges is the use of the multiple-camera set-up filmed in front of a studio audience. Whether shot on videotape (*The Cosby Show*) or 35 mm film (*Friends*), the sitcom form is generally recorded using three cameras in fixed positions. This allows each scene to be played out in front of the audience without the camera moving position. By switching between medium shots and close-ups during the performance, the director is able to capture both the comic moments that occur and the reaction to such events by the characters involved.

This also has an effect on the type of lighting that can be used for sitcom. As the director has to be able to cut between cameras at any time, the lighting must be consistent from every angle. The easiest and most economical way of achieving such a standard look is to use high-key lighting. Karen Lury explains that a deliberately non-atmospheric and apparently neutral look is created when

> the main light sources are fixed at a set distance from the subjects and the
> scene, with the main concern being visibility and legibility rather than
> "atmosphere". [ ] This kind of lighting, where colours are generally bright
> and saturated and subjects evenly lit, is associated strongly with

"daytime" television and conventional sitcoms, which are shot in a television studio (2005: 39).

Despite being economically effective, this camera set-up and lighting style places a number of limitations on the sitcom with regards to form and visual style. For example, in the first instance, the television viewer is only ever given access to a limited number of camera angles, as the illusion of the fourth wall is rigorously upheld in order to accommodate the camera crew and the studio audience. The limited depth of the sets also restricts the movement of both cameras and actors, requiring them to manoeuvre from side-to-side rather than *through* spaces (Butler 2002: 95-96). Furthermore, although the use of a fixed rig directly above the set produces lighting that is consistent from every angle, the overall result is a flat effect that lacks dimension (Lury 2005: 39).

Lury goes on to point out that high-key lighting is 'no longer universally applied within television (not even within specific genres such as the game show)' (40). Instead, many genres that were once defined by this set-up now employ different looks, such as the single-camera approach and a range of lighting techniques. Nevertheless, high-key lighting, and the multi-camera set-up it accompanies, is still a look that is often invoked by the media to *imply* 'television' (Lury 2005: 40).[34] As a result, there are instances where television programmes apply conventional methods in an attempt to comment on how television is constructed. *The Larry Sanders Show* is significant because it employs both of these looks, one innovative and one conventional. As a sitcom, it breaks with convention to film using a single-camera, but it is also a sitcom that parodies the talk show and, as such, must imitate the key characteristics of that genre. Just as it remains faithful to the use of videotape within its talk show segment, it also features multiple-cameras and high-key lighting, which are seen as defining signifiers of the genre. This means that in an attempt to draw attention to the conventions of the talk show, *The Larry Sanders Show* features a complex layering of different camera styles.

As the behind-the-scenes element of the sitcom is filmed using a single camera, *The Larry Sanders Show* dispenses with the studio audience and creates a fully realised set that the camera can move through without restriction. Backstage, it

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[34] Lury explains that Peter Weir's film *The Truman Show* uses this style of lighting to create a saturated colour that automatically highlights the constructed nature of Truman's world, which is actually, unbeknownst to him, a television set.

follows the characters as they go about their everyday business, capturing Larry having a massage in his office, Paula (the talent booker) and Beverly (Larry's personal assistant) grabbing a coffee in the kitchen, and numerous celebrities nervously fretting in the green room. It then moves with the characters as they walk through the corridors of the building and onto the studio set where the fictional talk show is filmed. It is here that the three-camera set-up and high-key lighting rig is on display, along with the autocue, television monitors, floor manager, producer, and the assembled studio audience. The viewer at home is then repeatedly exposed to two contrasting images, as the programme cuts between the talk show (shot on videotape using fixed cameras and flat lighting) and behind-the-scenes footage (captured on film using a range of camera angles and lighting). Moreover, there are also moments when the viewer is exposed to both images within the same frame.

In an episode entitled 'Larry's Big Idea' from Season Four, viewers are introduced to the filming of the fictional talk show approximately four minutes in. Shot on videotape, Larry emerges from behind a curtain and walks toward the camera while the studio audience of the fictional talk show clap and cheer. The action then cuts to a shot of Artie, Larry's producer, observing proceedings from the far side of the studio. As Artie is not part of the recording of the talk show, he is shot on 16 mm film and this film image contains a number of different elements. Artie is positioned in the foreground of the frame with a television monitor to the left of the image. In the background we can see a side view of Larry, as he stands onstage in front of the studio audience. The television monitor simultaneously relays this image through the use of fixed multi-cameras, thus allowing both Artie and the viewer at home to see a medium shot of Larry's performance on the television monitor. The studio audience can also be seen in the background, as can Hank, Larry's sidekick, who stands behind a microphone waiting to be invited by Larry to join in proceedings. To complete the image, the fixed cameras that are recording Larry are also visible, along with the numerous lights attached to a rig above the stage.

The complexity of this shot is not characteristic of the conventional sitcom. Instead of the characters and the action being compressed within a narrow and shallow frame, *The Larry Sanders Show* presents a much wider picture, with a greater depth of field, as what is being performed in the background is also replicated on a television monitor in the foreground. Viewers are therefore exposed to the process of making television and are made conscious of the artifice involved. This has

implications for the humour produced in the sitcom. By exposing the audience to the making of the talk show, the comedy performed within such segments has less impact. The viewer knows, for example, that it is the show's writer Phil who provides Larry with his on-screen jokes because it is revealed with the backstage footage. Earlier in the episode, Phil informs Artie that he has not had enough time to write any new, topical gags for that evening's show but is confident that those he has included are 'good, solid jokes'. Artie replies, 'you know, there's a reason they sell day old bread at half price. I want twenty new jokes on Larry's desk in one hour'. Revealing such production practices may result in the jokes having less of a punch when they are delivered on-stage but it aims to create humour in another way. Comedy in *The Larry Sanders Show* is based on the incongruity between what we see on-air within the fictional talk show and the behaviour we witness backstage. The humour does not come from the traditional jokes, puns or wordplay that are often employed in the talk show genre or from the contrived situations that are customary in sitcom.

Although ostensibly a critique of the talk show, *The Larry Sanders Show* nevertheless assumes many of the characteristics of the form. Once the viewpoint from the side of the stage has been established in the aforementioned scene, the action cuts back to Larry's monologue. Again, the viewer at home experiences this as if it were an actual talk show, with saturated colour, bright lighting and a simple curtain as backdrop. The shot remains on screen long enough for Larry to deliver his opening anecdote before cutting to a wide shot of the studio. This time the single camera is positioned behind the audience and Larry's image is replicated on numerous monitors throughout the studio. This constant return to 16 mm footage of studio areas that are usually kept from view is an attempt to remind viewers that what they are watching is in fact a pastiche. It must be noted that my understanding of pastiche differs from Jameson's much-cited dismissal of it as 'blank parody' (1991: 17). In contrast, my analysis draws on Hoesterey's more positive assertion that although pastiche may involve the affectionate imitation and synthesis of 'different styles and motifs', this does not necessarily mean that it is uncritical (2001: 46).

The use of 16 mm film also allows the show to take on many of the characteristics of observational documentary.[35] Mills (2004) has referred to this mode

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[35] By the 1960s technology had advanced and cameras became smaller and lighter. This meant that filmmakers were able to document life in a less intrusive manner. In the observational documentary the social actors are free to act and the documentary-makers free to record without interacting.

of filming as 'comedy verité' and cites British sitcom *The Office* (BBC, 2001-2003) as an example. Caldwell (2002), on the other hand, does not limit this approach to comedy but rather sees it as an emerging genre in episodic television, one that he refers to as 'docu-real' fiction or the 'docu-stunt': 'By these terms I refer to episodes in entertainment programs that self-consciously showcase documentary units as part of their narrative and plot/or documentary looks and imaging as part of their mise-en-scène' (259). I would suggest that *The Larry Sanders Show* is indicative of Caldwell's 'docu-real' fiction, as it knowingly showcases the documentary look to complicate the notion of genre while also employing it as a badge of prestige that helps distinguish the show from its commercial network counterparts.

The Docu-Real as Continuous Programming Stunt

According to Caldwell, there are many ways in which U.S. prime-time programming has 'performed, masqueraded, and stunted as documentary' over the years (260). On the whole, such production practices have offered 'extended meditations on the nature of television' by considering the 'relations between fiction and documentary; tensions among entertainment, art, and reality; phenomenological issues of television experience; and aesthetic questions of program quality' (260). Caldwell describes how as early as 1954, the sitcom *Leave it to Beaver* deliberated the nature of live versus taped television in an episode in which the teenage Beaver is asked to take part in a local television discussion show that is being 'recorded as live'. In addition, the 1970s sitcom *M*A*S*H* drew attention to the relationship between fiction and documentary in a sweeps-week episode that featured the diegetic presence of a documentary unit, thus altering the look of the show. A more recent example is provided by Caldwell's discussion of *The Real World* (MTV, 1992-), a reality show that he suggests is in fact a staged fiction that 'narrativizes its participants' and which is 'textually managed and dramatically orchestrated' (260-276). For Caldwell, therefore, the docu-real is neither reserved for sitcom or fiction, or for a one-time event or the continuing series. Instead, it is a practice that can be employed within a range of programming in a continual attempt to raise questions about fact and fiction, entertainment and reality, and how we experience and value the medium of television.

With such a variety of docu-real permutations, the one that best categorises *The Larry Sanders Show* is that of a programme that appropriates the docu-real look as its fictional house style. Caldwell cites the 1980s drama *Hill Street Blues* (NBC,

1981-1987) as an example of this approach. Unlike *M*A*S*H*, which showcases a documentary unit as the plot of a particular episode, programmes such as *Hill Street Blues* 'appropriate some experiential part of documentary for their series look' while using a 'verité gaze to position the audience of the series in explicit documentary terms' (268-269). This means that there is no diegetic basis for the documentary look in *Hill Street Blues*; it simply utilises jerky, handheld camerawork and lighting practices as a visual representation of the show's gritty narrative content (Gitlin 1983: 273-324). Likewise, *The Larry Sanders Show*. Although the level of behind-the-scenes access that is provided regularly positions the audience in documentary terms, the characters never acknowledge the single camera and a documentary crew is never referred to or seen on screen. The docu-real look is simply appropriated to convince the audience that the events they are witnessing have an 'aura' of authenticity. Thus, by combining Shandling's talk show history and the appearance of real-life celebrities with a look that typifies the observational gaze of non-fiction programming, *The Larry Sanders Show* brings a certain level of gravitas to the production. It is through the suggestion that the humour created within the programme contains some level of truth, in both form and content, that *The Larry Sanders Show* is able to position itself as a prestige product distinct from conventional sitcom.

Of course, the only truth apparent in *The Larry Sanders Show* is an acknowledgement of the impossibility of the media to provide a transparent window on reality. The programme exhibits the contradictions between the public and private and continually blurs the distinctions between reality and fiction and authenticity and performance. Moreover, in order for humour to be created in the show, the audience must be aware of such genre conventions and recognise the contradictions being played out within the image and the narrative. As a result, *The Larry Sanders Show* not only exhibits a level of insider knowledge on the part of its creators and celebrity guests, but also expects a similar level of knowingness from a media-savvy audience. This is important for HBO's brand image. As a subscription-based network, HBO works to attract a wide range of viewers who are willing to pay a fee for television even though it is available free of charge from commercial networks. Thus, it must provide distinctive programming if it is to attract and retain subscribers.

Caldwell explains how commercial networks employ 'programming stunts' during sweeps week (the quarterly intervals in which advertising rates are set) in order to boost viewing figures (2002: 259). As demonstrated in my analyses of *Seinfeld*,

Friends, and *Will and Grace*, these stunts can take many forms; celebrity guest appearances, a distinctive visual aesthetic that differs from the norm, and the development of character relationships are but a few examples. In the case of *ER*, NBC's successful medical drama, programming stunts include an episode directed by the film director Quentin Tarantino and an episode that was broadcast live. Notably, the latter episode's conceit was that a PBS documentary crew was filming a typical day in the emergency room, thus bringing 'liveness' and the 'docu-real' together within one stunt.

With regards to network broadcasting, these stunts are confined to one-time events that aim to elicit widespread coverage before the programme returns to its standard format (at least until the next quarter). This is not the case for a pay-cable channel such as HBO. As a subscription service, sweeps week is not important to HBO. Instead, the pay-cable network must produce series programming in which every episode offers something distinctive from its broadcast network competitors. Therefore, *The Larry Sanders Show* uses the docu-real look as a type of 'continuous' programming stunt; a 'must-see' event that delivers something distinctive in each episode through its ability to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction and present celebrities in ways that are counter to their public image.

Breaking Through the Clutter: Self-Parody, Adult Themes, and Strong Language

The use of the docu-real house style as a continuous programming stunt can be considered a success in terms of eliciting media coverage and critical acclaim for *The Larry Sanders Show*. As explained in the trade publication *Broadcasting & Cable*, the HBO sitcom quickly became 'the kind of show that every cable network hopes for – something that can break through the clutter and get the kind of attention usually reserved for shows on the more widely distributed broadcast networks' (Brown 1994). The breakthrough success achieved by *The Larry Sanders Show* was important not just to HBO, but to the cable industry in general. As one of the earliest attempts by a pay-cable network at original series production, the show had a limited platform in terms of potential reach (with regards to both the number of viewers available and the amount of media exposure given to cable programming at the time). While this placed HBO at a disadvantage in comparison to the commercial networks, there were also certain benefits that could be exploited.

For example, as a pay-cable network, HBO was afforded a significant amount of freedom when it came to language and subject matter. This was because the FCC did not feel the need to regulate content that viewers were paying a subscription fee for, preferring instead to concentrate its efforts on material that was freely broadcast over-the-air to the majority of American homes. Furthermore, as a pay-cable channel free of advertising, HBO did not have to bow to pressure from companies keen to align their products with conventional programming aimed at the mass market. This meant that *The Larry Sanders Show* was able to deliver adult themes, strong language, and an innovative visual style to a discerning audience expecting distinctive programming. Moreover, due to the way in which it blurred the boundaries between the real and the fictional, it also became an attractive prospect for celebrities wishing to indulge in self-parody by playing with notions of their perceived public and private personas.

As *The Larry Sanders Show* is set within the television industry, the presence of celebrity guests playing versions of themselves in each episode is crucial in maintaining the reality conceit. Despite the fact that it rarely attempts to mock its guest stars, preferring instead to make the recurring characters the butt of any joke, self-parody is still a risky strategy for well-known celebrities. This is because any change in the public's perception of them could be detrimental to their career. In an episode entitled 'Everybody Loves Larry' from Season Five, *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993-2002) actor David Duchovny features within a narrative that raises questions about his sexuality. When Larry becomes convinced that Duchovny has a crush on him, the actor deftly toys with the talk show host in an attempt to unnerve him before finally admitting that he is not gay but wishes he was because he finds Larry so attractive. Rather than damaging his image, Duchovny's appearance on the show was rewarded with an Emmy nomination and an American Comedy Award for the Funniest Male Guest Appearance in a Television Series.

This level of acclaim can on some level be attributed to the fact that the show operates as an industry satire. By adeptly parodying the media industry, whose own members vote for and choose such award-winners, the show targets the type of industry tastemakers who strongly influence trends and approval. This means that two types of 'insider' viewers are targeted by the show. On the one hand there are those who actually operate within the television system while on the other there are those

outside the industry who nonetheless recognise and understand the conventions of the various forms and different levels of performance on display. In each instance, a type of inside pleasure is expected to be derived in which viewers laugh knowingly and affectionately at the double-standards and contradictions inherent in the portrayal of public and private personas.

HBO sitcoms are therefore an attractive prospect for celebrities because they are free of many of the restrictions and limitations placed on network programming. Even if the end result is less than flattering, actors are offered a certain amount of credibility by appearing on such shows as it demonstrates that they are willing to stand outside the confines of network programming and challenge conventions. For example, in 'I Was a Teenage Lesbian', Brett Butler, star of the ABC sitcom *Grace Under Fire* (1993-98), plays a semi-fictionalised version of herself as a self-obsessed diva who once had a homosexual affair with Larry's talent booker Paula. In the same episode, Paula has found a lump in her breast and finds herself more uptight and bad-tempered than usual as she nervously awaits the results of her biopsy. The egotistical Butler assumes that her tense attitude is directed at her and a row ensues, with Paula eventually apologising to the self-centred Brett, despite having done nothing wrong.

This storyline demonstrates that in addition to incorporating serious, and in some cases, contentious subject matter into its storyline (in the form of cancer and homosexuality), *The Larry Sanders Show* feels no need to portray them in a sensitive way. Nor does it attempt to redeem Butler at any point, by highlighting that her arrogant persona and her seemingly lesbian tendencies are all part of the performance. In fact, the episode ends with Brett taking Paula's head in her hands in an attempt to look at her tonsils, after the latter has told her that she has a sore throat. Viewing this situation from behind, Larry and Artie perceive this as a lesbian embrace. This ambiguous ending leaves it to the audience to decide whether they agree with Larry and Artie's assertion or whether they understand the events in purely fictional terms.

Performances such as this are in contrast to the polished appearances made by celebrities on real-life talk shows. According to Frances Bonner, the talk-show format generally functions as a 'prime site where celebrities are able to promote their most recent cultural products' (2003: 14). Despite these differences, it must be emphasised that HBO sitcoms also offer a promotional platform, albeit in a different form. In another episode of *The Larry Sanders Show* entitled 'The Talk Show', which aired in

1992, both Catherine O'Hara and Billy Crystal appear on the fictional programme to discuss their real-life film releases *Home Alone 2* and *Mr. Saturday Night* respectively. This is significant for two reasons. First, it lends authenticity to the conceit that the viewers at home are witnessing the actual taping of a talk show in which the celebrities are appearing as themselves. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it acts as a space for product promotion that is not offered elsewhere in the HBO schedule. As a pay-cable network, HBO offers no advertising and neither does it produce the type of light entertainment programmes that invite celebrities to discuss their latest cultural product. It does offer an opportunity for product endorsement however, and, due to its exclusive nature, this is considered to have a different type of value to network advertising. This technique of featuring well-known celebrities playing with their real-life personas is something that is continued in the HBO sitcom *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. I will now go on to consider this in detail through an examination of the way in which the show blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction and stand-up and sitcom.

Curb Your Enthusiasm: Blurring the Boundaries between Reality and Fiction and Stand-Up and Sitcom

In 1999, HBO broadcast a one-hour comedy entitled *Larry David: Curb Your Enthusiasm*, a programme that not only blurred generic boundaries and the distinction between reality and fiction but also combined the comic disciplines of stand-up and situation. Drawing on HBO's tradition of comedy specials, the aim of the show was to document the eponymous Larry David, the co-creator of the hugely successful NBC sitcom *Seinfeld*, as he prepares to return to the stand-up comedy circuit. However, rather than film a straightforward documentary that culminates with a live stand-up performance, David introduced a fabricated element to the format. While part of the programme did indeed centre on David's stand-up routines in the comedy clubs of Los Angeles and New York, the off-stage footage was fictional, featuring actors playing the roles of his wife and manager. Further complications were added in the form of real-life celebrities appearing as themselves and the fact that the narrative self-consciously revolved around the making of a Larry David HBO special. In keeping with the nature of stand-up comedy, all of the dialogue within the show was improvised, with David providing selected cast members with only a general outline for the fictional segments. The result was a curious hybrid that fused reality and

fiction, documentary and sitcom, and authenticity and performance. Although intended as a one-off programme, HBO went on to commission a series of ten episodes and, with a newly shortened title, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* became the first show to apply the improvisational methods of stand-up comedy to the television sitcom.

As a one-hour special, *Larry David: Curb Your Enthusiasm* is based on the conceit that it is a literal documentary and, as such, the show applies the rules of the fly-on-the-wall format to its modes of production. Shot on location and in sequence (a highly unusual practice in fictional programming), David regularly acknowledges the camera as it follows his everyday life, and the occasional boom microphone appears in shot to highlight the presence of a diegetic documentary crew. The verité action is also interspersed with a number of talking head interviews of various performers and production personnel discussing their actual experiences of working with David. The director, Robert B. Weide, is a documentary filmmaker, whose previous films include *Lenny Bruce: Swear to tell the Truth*, broadcast in 1998 as an HBO special, as well as documentaries on Mort Sahl, W.C. Fields, and the Marx Brothers. Weide was hired to provide the production with a documentary sensibility and, as a result, approached it in the same way as his previous projects. He began by interviewing people who had worked with David and knew him well. As explained by Weide (n.d.) on the website for his production company, those who participated in the talking head interviews were never explicitly informed that the show would be a hybrid of documentary and fiction: 'These were the real recollections of these people, talking about a real person they know.' While it is impossible to know if this was indeed the case, the performances were improvised rather than scripted.

Improvised action and dialogue are also a key element of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* the sitcom, along with the docu-real look that was established in the one-hour special. There is a narrative shift within the series, however, that inevitably impacts on the style of the show. The diegetic presence of a documentary crew and the talking head interviews had been attributed to HBO's comedy special on Larry's return to stand-up, which ended when Larry reneged on the final live performance by pretending that his stepfather had been involved in an accident (the joke being that Larry does not have a stepfather). In Season One of the sitcom, on the other hand, Larry has once again retired from the stand-up circuit and is in no need of

employment due to the wealth he has accumulated following the success of *Seinfeld*.[36] With the presence of a documentary unit no longer required within the diegesis of the show, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* did not have to be filmed like a literal documentary. This meant that conventions such as the talking head interview and the acknowledgement of the camera and production crew were abandoned. Nevertheless, the 'docu-real' style of the show had been established, and Weide continued to apply many of the basic rules of documentary to the production, albeit in a more relaxed form:

> For instance, if Larry entered a room, the camera would follow from behind as it might if you were just documenting his actions. But we finally relaxed on that stuff and just put the camera in the room, in anticipation of his entrance if it made for better coverage (n.d.: online).

I would suggest that the docu-real look was crucial in capturing the improvisational nature of the show. As explained by Putterman, in the early days of television many radio stars were faced with the task of 'translating their own particular comedy style and series format to television' (1995: 14). If David and the production team were, in this case, to successfully translate the methods of stand-up to the situation comedy, a less rigid style of filmmaking was required than that of the standard multi-camera studio set-up.

The Logistics of Shooting Improvisational Comedy

Improvisation is a key technique for stand-up comedy, in which comedians have to be able to interact with, and react to, a live audience. As a result, stand-up comedians often assume the multiple roles of writer, editor and performer while onstage. A large pool of writers, on the other hand, have traditionally been responsible for scripting situation comedy, mainly due to the high volume of episodes required and the limited production turn around time. Even variety shows, sketch shows, and the stand-up segments featured on late-night talk shows offer little opportunity for improvisation, as the demands of television production require a rehearsed performance that can be executed quickly and efficiently. David describes his time working on network sitcom *Seinfeld* as 'like putting on a play every week – a huge production, a big night' (Bianculli 2000). Stand-up comedy, on the other hand, consists of a more informal

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[36] In 'The Shrimp Episode', Larry David's personal wealth is reported to be $475 million.

performance, in which adjustments can be made to the material depending on the response from the audience. By applying this ethos to the television sitcom, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* represents a move toward placing control of the comic material in the hands of the performers who, in the absence of an audience, interact with and react to one another. Moreover, by dispensing with the audience laugh track, it also refuses to tell the viewers at home when and what to laugh at, preferring them instead to experience and react to the comedy in an unprompted manner.

While the director and camera operator can attempt to anticipate the action, their role generally consists of reacting to the material, a task that is more easily executed using lightweight, hand-held cameras. Reaction shots are essential to the filming of all television sitcom. Just as the response of the audience is instrumental in determining the success of material performed by a solitary stand-up comic, much of the humour created in sitcom is dependent on a character's reaction to a comic line or event. The comic reaction in the traditional sitcom is something that is pre-planned and rehearsed with the camera primed to capture the shot. The director blocks the action before filming and the script is subjected to numerous read-throughs to ensure the actors are familiar with the material and the camera shots before performing in front of an audience. While this is beneficial in terms of the logistics of television production, it leaves little space for spontaneity or genuine comic surprise. *Curb Your Enthusiasm* adopts a different approach however. While a literal documentary would generally require only one hand-held camera, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* uses two, one to follow the *action* and one to capture the *reaction* of Larry David. On his website, Weide (n.d.) describes this as a necessity for an unscripted show, in which both the cast and crew have no knowledge of how each scene will play out and there is no opportunity for a second take: 'So much of the comedy comes from Larry's reaction to his situation that I make certain no matter what else is happening, Larry's face is always covered.'

Although concessions must be made (in the form of two cameras) to accommodate the fact that the show is a sitcom, the verité style of filmmaking is suited to capturing the improvisational nature of the series. This is only made possible, however, by the fact that the action is recorded in sequence. This allows the actors space for genuine spontaneity as each event can be weaved into the storyline as filming progresses. The logistics of shooting in sequence, on location, and without a script are problematical and expensive, especially when compared to the economical

efficiency of the conventional sitcom set-up. But HBO's status as a pay-cable channel allows the production team certain flexibility.

For example, each season of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* consists of just ten episodes in comparison to the twenty-plus week season required for network programming. As a subscription channel showing sports and movies alongside original programming, HBO's schedule is different to that of the broadcast networks in that it does not have to fill prime-time slots throughout the year. This means that unlike network sitcoms, which adhere to a strict shooting schedule in order to produce over twenty episodes a season, the creative team behind *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is afforded additional space in terms of preparation, filming, and editing.

Curb Your Enthusiasm is also shot using Digi-Beta before being run through a process that makes it look like film. Digital technology is often synonymous with the many forms of reality television, including observational and performative documentary, in which low-cost, lightweight cameras are required to follow a subject over a period of time and in hard-to-control spaces. As such, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*'s docu-real form is suited to the aesthetic of digital filmmaking but, in this case, both the creator and director of the show have opted for the look of film. According to Weide, this is simply a matter of personal preference. However, drawing on my analysis of *The Larry Sanders Show*, I would suggest that this decision has further consequences. For instance, as I have demonstrated, the use of video in *The Larry Sanders Show* works to signify the constructed nature of entertainment television while 16 mm film is used to evoke the verité (and therefore 'authentic') style of observational documentary. By choosing to recreate the look of film, it would appear that the creative team behind *Curb Your Enthusiasm* aims to position the show within the wider tradition of 'documentary' rather than 'reality TV' terms. This is in keeping with both HBO's marketing ethos, 'It's Not TV. It's HBO.', and its schedule of programming, which does not include a history of broadcasting reality TV shows. Although *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is essentially a television sitcom masquerading as an observational documentary, it attempts to distance (and also perhaps elevate) itself from the 'regular' generic programming broadcast on commercial network television by adopting the look of film.

In general, shooting this type of improvisational production on either 35 mm or 16 mm film stock would be prohibitively expensive. However, advances in technology allow this preferred look to be achieved as the digital master copy is

subjected to a process that makes the finished product look like film. Thus, even with unorthodox filming methods, shooting ten episodes per season using digital technology is economically feasible for HBO, particularly when taking into consideration the way in which innovative genre programming such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* enhances the brand equity of the pay-cable channel. Before examining further how the show works to differentiate HBO from is competitors, particularly in relation to status and taste, I will outline its comic structure and the way in which it plays with the established conventions of the sitcom.

Challenging Sitcom Conventions and Comic Structure

As the three main characters of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* consist of Larry David, his wife Cheryl David (played by Cheryl Hines), and manager Jeff Green (played by Jeff Garlin), there is a suggestion that the show is concerned with Larry's life at both home and work. However, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* eschews many of the conventions associated with the traditional domestic and workplace sitcoms. First of all, the fifty-something Larry and his much younger wife Cheryl are child-free. Unlike network sitcoms that have generally sought to attract the entire family, HBO targets an adult audience and, as a result, need make no concession to children. While network sitcoms from *Leave it to Beaver* to *The Cosby Show* have often been restricted to situations in which precocious children are taught a moral lesson from their understanding parents, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* has no such moral or familial code to adhere to.

Secondly, Larry does not have a permanent job and nor does he need one. Many workplace sitcoms have been more concerned with the relationships between co-workers rather than the actual workplace environment itself. In Larry's case, his work life consists of an office that he occasionally visits and regular contact with his manager Jeff, who also happens to be one of his best friends. As a result, the show does not feature a group of colleagues who function as a substitute family and neither does it establish a specific environment from which humorous situations can arise, such as the newsroom in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* or the Boston bar in *Cheers*.

In the third instance, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* does not function within the friends-as-family format that David helped establish with *Seinfeld* and its numerous followers such as *Friends* and *Will & Grace*. The characters are generally older than the twenty- and thirty-something characters typical of such sitcoms and they reside in

the sprawling suburbs of Los Angeles rather than the dense city apartments of New York. Moreover, while Larry and Cheryl may exist within a child-free family, Jeff and his wife Susie have a young daughter named Sammy and many supporting cast members are also shown to have children. This means that the characters do not share their living space with one another and that they generally have different interests and responsibilities from their single counterparts. However improbable the living arrangements in the New York-based single sitcoms of the 1990s may be in reality, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* explicitly draws attention to the fact that its characters are no longer in a similar situation for humorous effect. For example, a number of episodes revolve around the way in which social manners dictate that there is a cut-off time for making phone calls to other characters at night, as they presumably have work to go to the following day or have children to look after. When Larry calls Jeff's home at 10.20 p.m. in the episode 'The Wire' from Season Two, Susie insists that the cut-off is 10 p.m. and chastises him (in her typical foul-mouthed way) for flouting the rule.

The construction and flouting of social conventions forms a large part of the humour created in both *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Similarly, much of the action within *Curb Your Enthusiasm* occurs in the so-called in-between spaces and public places that were characteristic of *Seinfeld*, i.e., the car, restaurants, waiting rooms, and the cinema, to name but a few. As a studio-based network sitcom, *Seinfeld* consistently made use of the familiar settings of Jerry's apartment and Monk's diner. *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, on the other hand, lacks a stable setting due to the disparate Los Angeles locale and the fact that the show is shot on location. Even Larry and Cheryl's home cannot be relied on as a regular setting as it is dependent on the availability of suitable locations. For this reason, the narrative frequently involves the couple moving house and, in Season Two, they even live in a hotel for a number of episodes. By basing *Curb Your Enthusiasm* in Los Angeles, shooting on location without a script, and by focusing on older characters who do not all reside together, David seems to consciously create obstacles that prevent the creation of the inexpensive and relatively easy-to-produce traditional network sitcom.

Despite such unorthodox production techniques, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is essentially a comedy and, more importantly, a comedy in which humour arises from everyday situations. Yet it is still not easily categorised within the traditional definitions of U.S.-based television sitcom. As well as being divided according to domestic family or workplace settings, the comedy in American sitcoms has been

classified into two types, namely 'comedian comedy' or 'character comedy'. Once again, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is notable for the way in which it blurs the boundaries between both. Langford describes 'comedian comedy' as heavily performative and often physical or gag-oriented, while 'character comedy' is 'mediated through the relatively realistic rendering of dramatic characters and situations' (2005a: 20). Putterman makes a similar observation by contrasting the theatricality and distancing of comedian-centred comedy with the naturalistic tone of the character-based form (1995: 18-19). The focus on stand-up comedian Larry David and the showcasing of both the improvisational talents of the actors and the docu-real look suggests that the show is indicative of the former category. But the unscripted nature of the show and the use of lightweight cameras and real-life locations are also based on a desire to create a naturalistic type of comedy, in which the humour comes from recognisable everyday occurrences and social conventions (rather than straightforward gags or jokes), and is met with a genuine reaction of surprise and laughter from the actors involved. *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is contrived to a certain extent as David's outline of the general trajectory of each episode consists of a number of specific incidents that must be included in the show. But how the actors then arrive at each incident is left open to interpretation and provides the series with a naturalistic quality.

One sitcom convention that *Curb Your Enthusiasm* initially seems to adhere to is that of the circular narrative. Each episode is structured around a series of confrontations that have generally been set in motion due to Larry speaking his mind and challenging social conventions, often at an inappropriate moment. However, unlike the conventional sitcom structure of dealing with a specific moral dilemma (and perhaps a minor subplot) within each episode, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*'s complex narrative is never restricted to one plot. Instead, a number of storylines and incidents are intertwined throughout the episode, with the final sequence culminating in Larry receiving some sort of comeuppance for daring to rebel against society's rules. For example, in 'Porno Gil' from the first season of the show, Larry and Cheryl attend a party by an acquaintance named Gil who happens to work in the porn industry. After refusing to take off his shoes at the request of the host, Larry proceeds to accidentally break a lamp and then, on leaving, forgets his watch, an action that forces him to return to the house and indulge in what he calls a dreaded 'double goodbye'. When Jeff is then hospitalised for emergency bypass surgery, he asks Larry to retrieve his porn videos from home so that Susie does not find them. While carrying out the task,

Larry recognises Gil on one of the covers and decides to watch the film, only to be caught doing so by Jeff's mother and father. In a circuitous way, Larry's refusal to adhere to the house rules implemented by Gil and his wife does not go unpunished, as ultimately he is humiliated in front of Jeff's parents. This circular structure occurs in each episode as the various offences that Larry commits over the course of the narrative always return to punish him in some way. In order for this to happen, a number of coincidences have to occur so that Larry is continually placed in awkward situations. As such, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* draws on the narrative conventions of *Seinfeld* to produce humour.

Although regularly on the receiving end of such ritual humiliation, Larry never learns from his experiences. He continually challenges social conventions because he cannot understand why we choose to live by rules that have seemingly been arbitrarily constructed by society. As a result, Larry is representative of the static sitcom character rather than the characters of many domestic family sitcoms that aspire to greater dimensionality. In both forms, however, the characters are required to be trapped in a particular situation, primarily due to the responsibilities of family or employment (Neale and Krutnik 1990). As an independently wealthy man living in the opulent suburbs of Los Angeles and free of parental responsibilities, Larry David does not have this problem. His wealth and status mean that, in theory, his character is not restricted to a particular situation. What prevents his situation from changing, or his character from developing, is his own outspoken attitude, his refusal to recognise the appropriateness of a situation, and his lack of guilt for his actions. While there are indeed humiliating consequences to his actions, Larry experiences no sense of guilt. He lives a rarefied existence that, unlike those who are employed for a living or who are responsible for families, allows him to think that the rules of society do not apply to him. Moreover, he has his own set of rules that he lives by, a fact that I will return to later in relation to audience identification.

The first season of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* closely adheres to the circular sitcom form in which characters are returned to their initial situation. In the following seasons, on the other hand, Larry's situation begins to change, as a sense of narrative development is injected into the form. While each episode still follows a similar structure that consists of Larry's inappropriate actions followed by a series of confrontations, there is also a metanarrative that develops over the course of each season. This begins in Season Two when Cheryl asks Larry if he is ever going to

return to work as he sits on a hotel bed, eating chips, and watching daytime talk shows. After an ill-informed stint as a car salesman, the rest of the season follows his attempt to write a sitcom as a vehicle for first Jason Alexander, and then Julia Louis-Dreyfuss (the actors who played George and Elaine respectively in *Seinfeld*). The project is abandoned however when Larry goes on to offend both an HBO and ABC executive.

Unemployed again by the end of Season Two, the third season of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* sees Larry become a shareholder in a restaurant venture that also includes his manager Jeff and the actors Ted Danson and Michael York (who appear as themselves). Although Larry often acts as a hindrance to the project, the final episode concludes with the opening of the restaurant and serves as a platform on which to gather all of the supporting cast members that featured throughout the series. The season finale is particularly notable for its use of very strong language. The opening night is momentarily interrupted when the chef, who suffers from Tourettes Syndrome, suddenly unleashes a string of expletives. Not one to be embarrassed by the flouting of social conventions, Larry joins in, only for everyone in the restaurant to participate also. This results in comic veterans such as Shelley Berman, Mina Kolb, Louis Nye, and Paul Sand indulging in what is generally regarded as inappropriate language, within both the sitcom form and commercial television in general.

It is Season Four, however, that demonstrates the range of possible situations that can be depicted by *Curb Your Enthusiasm* due to its general disregard for sitcom conventions. Following an unscheduled karaoke performance in the first episode that is witnessed by Mel Brooks, Larry is offered the part of Max Bialystock in the musical production of *The Producers*. The subsequent episodes follow Larry as he not only learns to sing and dance but also offends his co-stars, first in the form of Hollywood actor Ben Stiller who eventually quits the project, and then former *Friends* star, David Schwimmer. In the one-hour season finale, the action shifts to New York where the majority of the episode is given over to Larry's performance on Broadway. We see Larry perform a number of musical sequences and eventually win over a sceptical audience before the real reason Mel Brooks hired him is revealed. Echoing the original film of *The Producers* (1968), Brooks chose Larry to star in the musical as he wanted the show to flop, allowing him to break his ties with the production and move on to other projects. The scale of Season Four is much greater than the traditional sitcom (with its fixed sets, rigid camerawork, and circular

narrative) allows. Yet, although it operates as a pastiche of both the film and musical version of *The Producers*, the show still retains a degree of verisimilitude due to the way in which it blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction by drawing on Larry David's real-life position within the entertainment industry. Therefore, although Season Four demonstrates how *Curb Your Enthusiasm* has progressed as a sitcom by showcasing its ability to operate on a grander scale, the narrative and the humour still emerge from Larry's comic persona and his situation as part of the entertainment elite in Los Angeles.

Constructing *Curb Your Enthusiasm* in Opposition to Network Sitcom

As detailed, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* challenges the conventions of the sitcom genre and in doing so is symptomatic of HBO's wider approach to television programming. The slogan 'It's Not TV. It's HBO' is an explicit attempt by the pay-cable network to situate its programming in opposition to that which is produced by the commercial networks. However, as demonstrated by my analysis of both *The Larry Sanders Show* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, HBO sitcoms are in actual fact primarily concerned with the nature of television and consistently showcase and pastiche its many forms. In the first instance, the initial one-hour special of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* operates as a pastiche of a particular strand of HBO's comedy programming, namely stand-up comedy specials. This is followed by Larry attempts at writing a new sitcom in Season Two. Operating as a critique of the network television system, the narrative of Season Two does not omit the fact that the successful and original sitcom *Seinfeld* was created within that system. In contrast, the audience is expected to have an understanding of the restrictions placed on network television and the different standards applied to pay-cable. Moreover, those with a prior knowledge of *Seinfeld* are better placed to appreciate the different levels on which the narrative operates.

For example, in 'The Car Salesman' Larry meets with Jason Alexander, who played the part of George Costanza in *Seinfeld*, to discuss a possible idea for a sitcom. Jason informs him that he is having trouble finding interesting roles, as he cannot seem to 'shake this George thing'. This comment is based on the notion that network executives often commission programming that is founded on a tried-and-tested format. For this reason, actors who are associated with a particular character tend to be offered similar roles in the hope that they can replicate past successes. As John Langer explains, television performers have trouble being 'extricated from their past

lives' (2006: 190). When Larry points out the fact that, in real life, Jason is not even close to the character of George, the actor agrees but explains that those in the industry do not view him that way: 'They see the idiot. The schmuck.' Although this exchange can be understood within the context of this particular narrative, further pleasure is to be gained if viewers not only have prior knowledge of *Seinfeld* as a text, but are also aware of some of the extratextual information that circulates around the creation of the show.

Media discourse surrounding the programme has highlighted the fact that the character of George is largely based on Larry David himself. Thus, when Jason denounces the character as an idiot, Larry takes offence, a sentiment that is registered by the way the camera closes in on his face as he contemplates what he has just heard. As Jason goes on to list a number of unbelievable incidents that George was involved in, such as eating an éclair out of the garbage can and taking part in a masturbation contest, Larry protests that these were all things he has done in real life. Again, the fact that many of the situations featured in *Seinfeld* had a basis in reality is part of the media discourse surrounding the show and, in addition, this awareness also informs the comic situations of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. As if to highlight this fact, Larry uses Jason's unhappiness at being seen as George as inspiration for a new sitcom:

> LARRY: I just had this, just had this idea. I don't know, I'll just throw it out at you. For a series, an idea for a series, ok. You play a character based on what you're going through now. In other words, you play an actor and the actor is having a tough time getting work because he was in this megahit series, like a *Seinfeld* kinda series.
>
> JASON: Uh, huh.
>
> LARRY: And now, this actor, after the series goes off the air, he can't get work anywhere because he's so identified with this character, that they won't let him do anything else. And he becomes embittered and grows to hate the character.
>
> JASON: That's pretty funny. That's pretty funny. You sonofabitch you, that's pretty damn good. Alright, let's do it, let's do it. Come on, let's go. You wanna do it?

In this one scene, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* demonstrates both the problems and the process of creating network television comedy through its use of intertextual and extratextual references.

When the relationship between Larry and Jason breaks down in subsequent episodes, Larry decides in 'The Shrimp Incident' to work with Julia-Louis-Dreyfuss (Elaine Benes from *Seinfeld*) instead. On presenting his concept, Larry refers to the proposed sitcom character as Evelyn, a similar-sounding substitute for Elaine, and explains how the conceit of the show would revolve around people constantly calling out 'aren't you Evelyn?', which the two decide would make a great title. The narrative then becomes even more self-conscious as Julia suggests that they pitch the concept to HBO. Although a similar situation occurred in the one-hour special, this time Julia offers a candid reason for choosing HBO over a broadcast network: 'I want to be able to say fuck, you know . . . cocksucker.' In this scene, Julia's character explicitly highlights the distinction between pay-cable and network programming in terms of the type of language permitted. Furthermore, by doing so, she also suggests a sense of frustration that occurs within the creative process (and perhaps also on the part of the audience), when writers and actors are institutionally restricted by the type of language they can use. When writing *Seinfeld*, David was often able to find creative solutions to the problem of language. For example, with regards to the aforementioned masturbation contest, the characters never uttered the word 'masturbation'. Instead, both the act and the word were alluded to through the use of the phrase 'master of your domain'. HBO's status as a subscription channel, on the other hand, means that strong language is not prohibited, as the service is only available to an adult audience who request and pay a premium fee for it. This is not only demonstrated in this episode, but in the aforementioned Season Three finale, in which the notion of strong language is pushed to the extreme.

The relationship between HBO, strong language, and the creation of humour, is referred to later in 'The Shrimp Episode' when Larry expands on the reason behind their decision to a group of friends during a game of poker:

> JULIA: The main thing I'd like to add is that on HBO you can say fuck.
>
> LARRY: You throw in a fuck, you double your laughs.

Television sitcom is bound by a number of conventions and restrictions, therefore the incongruity of hearing an obscenity within what is considered a conservative and lightweight format injects an element of comic surprise to a scene. In the case of HBO audiences, however, strong language is not always unexpected. Hence, the comic

element of this scene has more to do with its self-reflexive nature. By highlighting the language restrictions placed on network television it assures the audience that they are receiving something 'other' than the standard fare offered to the mass audience. Moreover, it flatters viewers into thinking that only a select audience shares their tastes and that as they are not easily offended by strong language and taboo subject matter then they are offered more thought-provoking and sophisticated material as a result.

The notion of HBO as something 'other', and therefore 'better', than standard television programming, is challenged by Larry near the end of the episode however. After calling a male HBO executive 'the C word' at the aforementioned game of poker, the project is shelved after the executive takes a leave of absence as a result of the incident and the women at HBO label Larry a misogynist. This demonstrates that if certain language is used in inappropriate situations then it can still cause offence. Discussing the incident with wife Cheryl over dinner, Larry questions HBO's approach to programming and announces that he'll go to ABC instead: 'It's not TV? It's TV. Why do they think people watch it? You watch it on TV don't you. You don't go to the movies to see it?' With this statement Larry highlights the fact that HBO does produce television programming and that to suggest otherwise is simply a marketing ploy to differentiate itself from the broadcast networks. What he does not mention, however, is the fact that if he were to take his sitcom project to ABC then he would most certainly be restricted with regards to the type of language he could use. This distinction between the broadcast networks and pay-cable is implicit within the text through the consistent use of strong language. Thus, although the episode mocks HBO to a certain extent, it also clearly demonstrates to the audience the different boundaries within which network and pay-cable programming operates.

Audience Identification, Relief Theory, and the Comedy of Social Embarrassment

At the same time as it differentiates itself from network sitcom, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* also establishes a relationship with stand-up comedy. Just as the audience is expected to be aware of Larry's involvement in *Seinfeld*, they are also expected to know about his background as a stand-up comedian; a stand-up who was not afraid to simply walk-off stage if he did not like the look of the audience. Putterman explains that, over the years, many comedians have chosen the stand-up circuit over television

because it offered the opportunity to 'look and dress as you pleased and be as political and profane as you chose . . . without having to worry about the next act on the bill or the upcoming commercial break' (1995: 133). As a pay-cable channel, HBO offers a similar platform for *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. While the pleasure of sitcom is derived from its familiar, repeatable, and, some would say, inherently conservative formula, the style of stand-up comedy preferred by David is based on the shock of the unknown. By improvising the action and dialogue, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* introduces an element of surprise and spontaneity to the production. Unaware of which direction the comedian will take, the audience is often presented with the unexpected and even the inappropriate.

While Larry occasionally experiences humiliating consequences as a result of his inappropriate actions, they do not trouble him too much and he never feels a sense of guilt. According to Palmer (1987), the production of humour is generally reliant on the audience being 'emotionally insulated' from events due to their knowledge that they are implausible. The result is that we, the audience, '"don't take it seriously", that we have the emotional certainty that all will be well immediately after' (55-56). This is partly the case in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. On the one hand, the audience can be confident that Larry's wealthy status and general misanthropic nature will somewhat insulate him from retribution and remorse. However, the situations that occur in the show attempt to produce humour by being plausible and by containing a degree of verisimilitude. Larry's lack of guilt is due to the fact that he always believes he is right to question social conventions and voice his opinions. I would suggest that for pleasure to be gained from such situations, the audience must be able to identify with this particular trait of Larry's; that his actions, for the most part, have to be understandable rather than outlandish. His privileged position within the text and the show's status as an HBO production allows him to transgress decorum and challenge conventions by being able to say and do things that everyone else is thinking but that are unacceptable in everyday life. As a result, much of the humour in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is rooted in relief theory, in which 'humour functions socially and psychologically as a vent for repression and, by extension, questions social norms' (Mills 2001b: 63).

Nevertheless, there is another type of humour that occurs in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, one that I would term the 'comedy of social embarrassment'. In some instances, Larry says or does something that is incomprehensible to the other

characters and presumably also the audience at home. For example, in 'Chet's Shirt', after seeing a young boy being dried by the side of a pool, Larry congratulates his father on the size of his son's manhood before going on to describe him, later on in the episode, as 'porn boy'. In situations such as this, Cheryl often adopts the perspective of the audience by asking, 'why would you do that Larry?' Her husband's reply in this instance is simple, 'I took a risk'. This statement perhaps encapsulates not only Larry David's approach to comedy but also the overall objective of the discipline, namely to take a risk and 'say the unsayable'. *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is unafraid to both *appeal to* and *appal* audiences in equal measures.

It is this approach that differentiates the sitcom from its more conventional predecessors. According to Neale and Krutnik, television comedy must exhibit a sense of responsibility when choosing its subject matter:

> Particular problems, issues, and scenes are geared to a comic rather than dramatic elaboration, although, of course, certain subjects are regarded as 'unfitting' for a comic treatment, for a 'light' approach. For the play of comedy to function there has to be some consensual boundary between the 'light' and the 'serious' (1990: 149).

This notion of a 'consensual boundary' is different to Purdie's assertion that in order for humour to be produced, the audience must 'reproduce the transgression, in our own minds, as momentarily "permitted"' (1993: 13). For the latter, the decision as to whether to find comic material funny is both an individual and personal one. The former, on the other hand, suggests that a general agreement must be reached between comedians, producers, and the audience, as to what kind of material is suitable for comic material and what is deemed inappropriate. Of course, it is exactly this sort of tension that contributed to the 'least objectionable programming' theory developed in the network era, in which, due to pressure from advertisers, the 'big three' sought the widest possible audience by avoiding controversial or taboo material. While it is debatable whether this was ever actually possible, the idea of creating consensual boundaries is more problematic in the post-network era, as broadcast, cable, and niche networks attempt to differentiate themselves in the marketplace, often by challenging previously established boundaries. This means that, in some cases, all subjects become available for comic treatment. This is demonstrated in Season Five of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, which features episodes involving a sex offender moving to the

neighbourhood, Larry's friend Richard Lewis needing a kidney transplant, and a parody of the crucifixation.

Of course, as I have discussed in relation to the use of strong language in the show, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is able to treat such issues in a comic manner because of the contract that is in place between the pay-cable channel and its subscribers regarding the fact that all subject matter is up for grabs. HBO's status as a subscription channel means that it does not have to court either the mass audience or potential advertisers. Instead, it relies on attracting those who are willing to pay for access to the type of material that is not available on commercial network television. In terms of the pleasures gained from such material, I would suggest that it is similar to the recent 'gross-out' phenomenon in film comedy. As explained by Geoff King, gross-out sequences

> seek to evoke a response based on transgression of what is usually allowed in 'normal' or 'polite' society. They test how far they can go, William Paul suggests; 'how much they can show us without making us turn away, how far they can push the boundaries to provoke a cry of "Oh, gross!" as a sign of approval, an expression of disgust that is pleasurable to call out' (2002: 67).

In the case of HBO sitcoms, this response is based on the transgression of what is usually allowed on 'regular' or 'commercial network' television. It is funny precisely because it is not the type of material usually found on our television screens. This is something that is also evident in *Sex and the City*, the next HBO sitcom in my analysis.

Sex and the City: 'Comedy Drama' or 'Genre-Defining Sitcom'?

Adapted from Candace Bushnell's best-selling book, which in turn was based on her regular columns for the New York Observer, *Sex and the City*'s foregrounding of the contentious subject of sex can be seen as an attempt to distinguish the show from its network sitcom competitors and carve itself a niche in the marketplace. Much like *The Larry Sanders Show* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, it utilises the pay-cable status of HBO to deal with subjects previously considered taboo for television in an explicit and frank manner. While the content of the show will indeed inform my reading of it, I intend to demonstrate that its use of formal techniques such as voiceover, direct address, and a non-linear narrative also mark it out as innovative in relation to its

commercial network counterparts. In addition, my analysis will discuss the continuities between *Sex and the City* and the other HBO sitcoms discussed in this chapter, primarily with regards to its use of a confessional discourse drawn from daytime talk shows and women's magazines. Finally, I will examine issues of representation within *Sex and the City* in relation to patriarchy and debates around 'difference'.

Before considering each of these elements in detail, I think it is important to first outline my reasons for classifying *Sex and the City* as a sitcom rather than as an example of an HBO quality drama. As indicated in my discussion of some of the problems surrounding genre definition in Chapter Two, Mills acknowledges the hybrid nature of the show by first describing it as a 'comedy drama' and then a 'genre-defining sitcom' (2005: 24; 48). This example highlights the tensions that exist between individual interpretations of programming and the way in which genre circulates within a wider cultural context. While hybrid terms, such as 'comedy drama', may solve problems of definition for the audience, they are less successful in other contexts. For example, the importance of defining genres clearly and unambiguously is brought into focus when awards are bestowed on particular programmes. Despite wining an Emmy two years running for Outstanding Drama Series, Mittell makes a case for some viewers reading *Northern Exposure* (CBS, 1990-95) as a sitcom, primarily because it makes them laugh (2004: xi). In contrast, Mills describes the bafflement experienced by the producers of HBO's *Six Feet Under* (2001-05) on being awarded the accolade of Best International Comedy at the 2003 British Comedy Awards. This is because the show was promoted, experienced, and honoured in the United States as primarily a *drama* with *moments* of black humour, rather than as a *comedy* with the *occasional* dramatic interlude (2005: 18-19).

In terms of awards, there is no such confusion over *Sex and the City*, as its numerous accolades have been presented for its achievements as a comedy series. Yet, as indicated by Mills's differing descriptions, as well as Bignell's assertion that the 'mixed form' of the programme makes it difficult to place generically, I have personal experience of justifying its status as a sitcom when presenting papers at conferences and research seminars (Bignell 2004: 162). This is primarily related to the fact that the show does not 'look' like a sitcom, but rather shares many of its visual characteristics with quality drama. Shot on film and on location, its high production values are indeed similar to the costly drama series and even Hollywood

film. However, as I have demonstrated in relation to *The Larry Sanders Show* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, there are an increasing number of sitcoms in the post-network era that adopt the looks and styles of other television genres, and this does not appear to result in the audience, critics, or those within the industry being confused as to whether they are sitcoms or not (in both of these cases the programmes have been publicised and received awards as sitcoms). I would suggest with regards to *Sex and the City*, this confusion only began to occur later in the series, as the formal techniques used to highlight its modes of production and produce comic irony were dispensed with in favour of narrative progression, character development, and more serious subject matter. While I will consider some of the reasons for this shift later in my analysis, it is the show's earlier incarnation that I am particularly interested in here. This is because it is in its first few seasons that it succeeds in both exhibiting and playing with the characteristics of the traditional sitcom form.

Focusing Attention on TV Form: Voiceover, Direct Address, and Narrative Structure

In his analysis of the pilot episode of *Sex and the City*, Tom Grochowski (2004) compares the show's visual and narrative strategies to the films of Woody Allen and suggests that the techniques employed are more cinematic than televisual. As well as featuring specific Allen stylistic traits such as voiceover narration and inventive editing techniques that play with time and space, the series also replaces the multi-camera studio set-up of the traditional sitcom with 'moving cameras, cinematic shot-countershots, long takes and sophisticated nighttime (and day-for-night) photography' (154). Despite the presence of these features, Grochowski concludes that *Sex and the City* ultimately works to 'transform them into a TV format by playing out the weekly plots in 30 minutes rather than 90, the standard length of a Woody Allen film' (155).

The importance of the thirty-minute time-slot to the sitcom genre is something that has previously been raised by Eaton. Discussing the form's narrative structure, he suggests that the repetitive nature of sitcom 'seems less to reflect a conservatism about the content of the shows' but rather must be attributed to 'the demands of the time-slotting system' (1978: 70). Unlike the hour-long drama (or indeed the Hollywood film), which has time to portray complex characters and situations, sitcom has to present its characters quickly and effectively within an easy-to-resolve narrative structure. This means that the genre has tended to consist of stereotypes engaged in weekly 'problems' that are ultimately worked through by the end of the

episode. This is what occurs in the first episode, and indeed in the first few seasons, of *Sex and the City*.

Like its predecessor *Seinfeld*, the formal structure of the show is innovative in that involves a question being posed at the beginning of each episode followed by the use of voiceover narration as the storyline develops. Carrie Bradshaw, the show's main protagonist, writes a newspaper column about sex and each episode is constructed around the question or problem she is addressing that week. For example, in the pilot, the theme of Carrie's column and thus the resulting storyline is 'why are there so many great unmarried women, and no great unmarried men?' On establishing this enigma, the episode then goes on to consider this in relation to Carrie's own life and that of her three friends, Miranda, Charlotte, and Samantha. In each instance, Carrie's musings and opinions on the subsequent events are made known through her voiceover narration.

Discussing the show's use of voiceover, Bignell explains how 'the sophisticated character comedy, witty phrases, moments of insight and minor revelations that Carrie's voiceover presents distance the viewer from the issues that are the subject of the narrative and instead focus attention on the TV form in which they are communicated' (2004: 171). This is keeping with the theories put forward by critics such as Bergson (1956), Olsen (1968), and Neale and Krutnik (1990), who contend that maintaining critical distance is an integral aspect of comedy. Of course, I have already discussed the ways in which *Friends* challenges this notion by actively encouraging audience identification with characters in an attempt to attract and maintain loyal viewers in the post-network era. Yet, although *Friends* does so by incorporating continuing storylines and character development, it nevertheless conforms to the theatrical staging of the traditional sitcom. This means that the show involves a careful play between 'identification and distanciation' (Neale and Krutnik 1990: 149). Viewers may be drawn into the world of the characters but their suspension of disbelief is soon disrupted by the sound of audience laughter, cheers of recognition, or the insertion of a reaction shot primed to produce a comic response. This is not the case with *Sex and the City*. At the same time as adopting the visual techniques of drama, *Sex and the City* uses Carrie's witty voiceover as a distancing device that signals its comic intent to the viewer, much in the same way as the voiceover functions in Woody Allen films.

Voiceover narration is not the only distancing device showcased within the pilot, as titles, direct address to camera, and innovative editing techniques are also present. Tying in with the first person narrative of the voiceover (as well as that of Bushnell's original newspaper column), Carrie directly addresses the camera when posing the aforementioned question regarding the differences between unmarried men and women. The image then cuts to a close up of her column in the fictional New York Star, before a visual screenwipe unfurls from right to left as if she is turning the page of the newspaper. The following shot presents us with a thirty-something man working out at the gym while delivering a monologue to camera. As one of the 'unmarried men' Carrie is writing about, he explains how he believes that the (sexual) power relationships between the genders change when men reach their thirties, leaving them 'holding all the cards'. As the frame freezes, a title appears which reads 'PETER MASON. Advertising Executive. Toxic Bachelor.' The narrative goes on to introduce several other 'Toxic Bachelors' in the same way as well as two of the central female foursome. This includes Miranda Hobbs, who is described as a 'Corporate Lawyer' and an 'Unmarried Woman', and Charlotte York, an 'Art Dealer' and also an 'Unmarried Woman'.

This sequence succeeds in not only introducing the audience to the characters and their social status in a short period of time, but also in presenting a snapshot of the fictional world that they inhabit. It also makes no attempt to mask their stereotypical or one-dimensional nature, especially with regards to the male bachelors. The central female characters are, however, differentiated from on another as the narrative progresses. Even though Samantha Jones is similarly referred to as a 'Public Relations Executive' and an 'Unmarried Woman', her opinions on sex and relationships differ from that of her friends. For Samantha, the key to being happy is not to secure a successful relationship *with* a man, but to have sex *like* a man, i.e., without feeling. As each woman takes on board Samantha's advice, the narrative shifts in time and space as the audience is presented with their various encounters with men. This non-linear narrative is again held together by the continued presence of Carrie's voiceover.

In keeping with the circular narrative structure of the traditional sitcom, each of these men disappoint the women in some way and are thus expelled by the end of the episode (although in Samantha's case her pursuit of sex rather than a relationship leads to her being satisfied by a string of one-off encounters). By repeatedly returning the women to their single status, the situation never changes as the characters are once

again free to embark on another round of dates the following week. While this return to the status quo is generally regarded as an essential element of the sitcom genre, it has been viewed as controversial in relation to *Sex and the City*. Critics such as Lee Siegel have raised concern about the way in which the show's female characters are depicted as being able to divide the sexual act from emotion and commitment: 'As the series rolled along, you became aware of a damning artifice, an un-mimetic quality startling in a series that was supposed to be a candid look at urban life: none of these women are hurt by sex' (2002: 30). The female characters are serial daters, sleeping with men and casting them aside by the end of each episode. Even on occasions when it is the men who do not return their calls, the women waste little time in moving on to their next encounter. The main problem that critics appear to have with this approach is that the characters experience no consequences as a result of their actions. This problematises the moral boundaries usually invoked by the traditional sitcom form, i.e., 'deviant' behaviour is supposed to be punished in some way, characters are supposed to learn from their mistakes, and the family is generally presented as the dominant 'ideal'.

In contrast to *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, in which Larry's wealth and privileged lifestyle allow him to experience no guilt despite his inappropriate actions, the characters in *Sex and the City* are expected to face consequences for their promiscuous attitudes to sex. This is because, as women, they are regarded as indulging in unacceptable behaviour. This is of related to the historically conservative nature of the sitcom and its propensity for reinforcing patriarchal norms. Yet, both *Seinfeld* and *Friends* featured similar attitudes toward sex and relationships. As both shows were populated with single men and women, Becker acknowledges that the narratives of these post-network sitcoms generally revolved around 'the trials of urban living, dating, and sex' (Becker 1998: 38). Moreover, as I have discussed in relation to *Seinfeld*, Jerry, Elaine, George, and Kramer regularly used labels to describe their various sexual partners before dismissing them for failing to meet the group's superficial standards.

The difference between the two sitcoms appears to be that while in *Seinfeld* partners were rejected according to the absurd standards of the insider group, the judgements meted out to characters in *Sex and the City* work to undermine dominant discourses by being based on 'topics deemed taboo by a patriarchal discourse'

(Chambers 2005: 176). According to Jane Arthurs, aesthetic boundaries replace moral boundaries within the show so that 'men who can't kiss very well, who smell, who are too short, or whose semen tastes peculiar are rejected on those grounds' (2003: 93). By combining a cinematic look with a lack of consequences for female characters and topics previously considered taboo, the first few seasons of *Sex and the City* succeeds in bringing both innovation and controversy to the sitcom form. Before discussing how this began to change as the series developed, I will consider some of the continuities between *Sex and the City* and the other HBO sitcoms discussed in this chapter.

The Institutional Logic of HBO: Confessional Discourse and Character-Based Comedy

On the surface, the cinematic look showcased by *Sex and the City* appears to distance it from the 'docu-real' or 'comedy verité' approach adopted by both *The Larry Sanders Show* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Yet, both Grochowski and Bignell suggest otherwise in their individual readings of the show. Discussing the 'vox-pop' style interviews and the accompanying titles that are presented in the opening episode (and which appear occasionally throughout the rest of the season), Grochowski explains how they 'give us the feel of an ethnographic document' while Bignell notes the way in which these sequences 'use the codes of documentary' (Grochowski 2004: 156; Bignell 2004: 169). Bignell takes this further in his assertion that *Sex and the City* is essentially a mixed form that 'blurs the boundaries between sitcom, talk show and (occasionally) current affairs genres in TV' as well as drawing on the confessional discourse of women's magazines and the 'pro-filmic realities' of drama (2004: 174).

This mixing of factual and fictional discourses is significant as it highlights the fact that *Sex and the City* has its origins in the weekly newspaper column (or exposé) written by Candace Bushnell in the mid-nineties. Akass and McCabe note that the subsequent links to the confessional discourse of women's magazines is, for one critic, simply 'another example of television catching up with women's magazines, which have been blathering inanely about sex for years' (2004: 13; Hoggart 1999: 2). While the confessional aspect of the show, the labelling of characters, and the question posed at the beginning of each episode, do indeed evoke the style of writing presented in such magazines, it also brings to mind 'the factual and specifically televisual form of the talk show' (Bignell 2004: 161). Focusing on a particular issue

(or several issues) in each episode, the talk show both attributes snappy titles to the topic, such as 'Sexy Secrets Revealed' or 'My Husband is Gay', and to those who take part. As such, the titles 'Toxic Bachelor' and 'Modeliser' (which appears in episode two of *Sex and the City* and refers to men who only date models) are easily envisioned as being attributed to the participants of such shows.

It is therefore the confessional aspect of *Sex and the City*, and the way in which it plays with different forms and visual styles to complicate the notions of authenticity and performance, that link it to its fellow HBO sitcoms. By contrasting the look of the talk show with that of the observational documentary, *The Larry Sanders Show* plays on the incongruity between what we see on-air and the supposed 'authenticity' of the behaviour we witness backstage. Likewise, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* adopts not just the look of the docusoap but also its production practices, so as to produce a more informal shooting style that can accommodate the improvisational (and thus more 'authentic' and contentious) style of stand-up comedy. By drawing on the modes of confession and stylistic devices found in talk shows featuring the 'real' problems of 'real' people, *Sex and the City* is able to deal with taboo subject matter while allowing the audience to 'bear witness to the tribulations of the (feminine) self' (Bignell 2004: 161).

The key difference between *Sex and the City* and the other two shows however, is that while the latter can primarily be described as 'comedian comedy', the former conforms to Langford's description of 'character-based comedy' (2005a: 20). This means that instead of revolving around the performance of a stand-up comedian in the lead role (and thus blurring the boundaries between the actor/comedian and their on-screen persona), *Sex and the City* consists of comic actresses playing entirely fictional roles. This difference becomes significant in the fourth season of the show, when a notable shift in terms of tone, structure, and subject matter takes place. With the exception of Carrie's long-running relationship with Mr Big (which itself is perpetually deferred due to a number of narrative obstacles), the first few seasons of *Sex and the City* present the characters as somewhat static and lacking in psychological depth, destined to remain single through a repeatable narrative that consists of numerous fruitless dates. As the series progresses, however, the repeatable narrative steadily acquires a serial element, as the focus of the show becomes less on its formal structure and more about the lives of the individual characters.

This first begins in Season Three when Charlotte meets and marries Trey MacDougall. As noted by Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson, 'Charlotte is the one main character who consistently stresses her wish for the conventional feminine role of wife and mother' (2004: 126). Thus, there is a certain acknowledgement throughout the series that Charlotte's active search for a husband places her in opposition to the other three characters, who agree that 'being single is preferable to faking happiness with a man' (Chambers 2005: 173). In Season Four, there is a further shift, as all four characters are confronted with more serious subject matter and begin questioning their attitudes to life and relationships. This can be traced to the death of Miranda's mother, which occurs midway through the season in 'My Motherboard, My Self'. Up until that point, the four women exist independently in New York with no reference to family or childhood, a technique that helps sustain the circular sitcom narrative. The death of Miranda's mother, however, emphasises that the characters do in fact have a past and that there is a possibility of change in the future. Moreover, it is the first incident in which the friends have to provide emotional support for each other.

This sense of emotional attachment and recognition of mortality provides a basis for the subsequent storylines of Season Four, which involve testicular cancer and an unplanned pregnancy on the part of Miranda and her boyfriend Steve, and the revelation of a past abortion and a broken engagement for Carrie. Even Samantha experiences an emotional epiphany when she falls in love with her new boss Richard only to be betrayed by his infidelity. These examples are in stark contrast to Seigel's assertion that the characters in *Sex and the City* are never hurt by sex. They also contrast with the circular structure, static characterisation, and lack of consequences put forward by the show in previous seasons. According to Langford, a number of episodic sitcoms go on to incorporate identifiable serial elements in the form of 'ongoing narrative threads whose unfolding and resolution has consequences for the characters and situation' (2005a: 19). While this shift can be considered in ideological terms, Langford echoes Feuer's analysis of character development and psychological depth in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* by highlighting its institutional logic (Feuer et al. 1984: 35). Reading the serial form in terms of market positioning, he explains how pretensions to greater character dimensionality and growth mark 'both a claim on the kinds of sophistication and complexity traditionally valorised in "serious" drama and an appeal to a specific and desirable audience demographic – upscale, affluent,

sophisticated – whose own tastes are presumed to privilege 'depth' (Langford 2005a: 20).

This theory is significant when we consider the schedule of original programming broadcast by HBO alongside *Sex and the City*. From its inception, the pay-cable network has been associated with innovative comedy due to its stand-up specials, and the influence of this particular strand of programming is evident in the formal structure and visual style of both *The Larry Sanders Show* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. This tradition for innovative comedy was continued by *Sex and the City* in its first few seasons. By the year 2000, however, HBO began to gain critical acclaim and crossover success with its production of original drama in the form of *Oz* (1997 – 2003) and *The Sopranos*. The result was that HBO now had a recognisable schedule from which it could promote shows as a package. As a result, its impressive line-up of quality drama could be seen to have had a significant effect on the tone and structure of the sitcom best placed to incorporate serial elements, i.e., the character-based *Sex and the City*. It is perhaps not surprising therefore, that Season Four of the show premiered alongside the pilot episode of *Six Feet Under*, a new flagship drama for the pay-cable network.

Even though this shift suggests that HBO was beginning to regard the complexity of the serial drama as the most efficient way of targeting desirable, upscale audiences, it is worth noting that as well as the continued production of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, the pay-cable channel has also gone on to transmit *Entourage* (2004-) and *The Comeback* (2005). While the former is more akin to the comedy drama style of *Sex and the City*, the latter adheres to the docusoap format adopted by both *The Larry Sanders Show* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. In both instances, however, the shows deal with the entertainment industry, by focusing on Hollywood film and network TV respectively. This indicates that in terms of its sitcom output, HBO appears to be primarily concerned with producing self-reflexive comedies that blur the boundaries between reality and fiction and authenticity and performance while playing with the characteristics of the traditional sitcom form.

Issues of Representation: Patriarchy, Fashion, and Debates around 'Difference'

Sex and the City is a sitcom that foregrounds the presence of its four *female* and *single* lead characters as a badge of distinction and, as such, I will conclude this chapter by examining issues of representation surrounding the programme. As I have discussed

at length in relation to *Will & Grace*, the post-network era has seen the socially liberal, urban-minded, upscale white viewer become the most prized segment of the audience for networks and advertisers alike; a situation that has led to non-normative characters becoming more visible on U.S. television screens (Becker 1998). Despite being funded by subscription fees, the analyses in this chapter indicate that the audience sought by HBO sitcoms is no different, as the characters and fictional worlds presented in each show are also liberal, urban, affluent, and white. (This is not to say that HBO original drama does not occasionally offer more diverse representations, particularly in the case of *The Wire* (2002-), a police drama that is set in a deprived area of Baltimore and which is made up of a predominantly black cast.) In the case of *Sex and the City*, the non-normative status of the characters is related to the fact that they are female and single. As Chambers explains, the 'long history of labelling unmarried women as deviant confirms the deep unease with which female autonomy has been traditionally regarded in Western societies' (2005: 16).

Sex and the City is often discussed in relation to 'feminist' or 'feminine' discourses. For example, while Arthurs understands the show as an example of 'postfeminist, woman-centred drama', Bignell highlights its ability to 'engage with feminine identity' (Arthurs 2003: 83; Bignell 2004: 171). Both Chambers and Rebecca Brasfield (2006) discuss the ways in which the characters demand equality with regards to their careers, economic spending power, and their intimate relationships. Implicit in this discourse is that this demand for equality is based on their wish to be equal to white, affluent men: '*Sex and the City*'s master narrative is that the women's aim is to gain equal power to white, heterosexual, middle-class men within the existing hegemonic structure' (Brasfield 2006: 133). Drawing on this assertion, I intend to demonstrate that the show perpetuates inequality by ignoring differences of race, class, and social oppression. I will also discuss some of the contradictions within the show with regards to its depiction of women. For example, despite featuring strong, liberated, financially secure, and fashionable single women, *Sex and the City* nevertheless focuses on their continuous search for a suitable male partner. This means that the sitcom simultaneously challenges and confirms patriarchal discourses.

As I have discussed, *Sex and the City* is often regarded as problematic by critics due to the lack of consequences faced by the women over their attitudes to sexual relationships. Although their indulgence in meaningless sex can be attributed

to the demands of the sitcom narrative (by the end of each episode, any threat to the group's existence must be expelled in order to maintain the status quo), it also offers a challenge to patriarchal discourse. By conforming to the traditional sitcom structure, the women are repeatedly returned to their single status ready to embark on further sexual activity the following week. There is apparently no hugging or moral lesson to be learned, just the realisation that they are free to move on their next encounter. Yet, even before the show began to introduce serial elements and consequences to its formal structure, the reality of this situation was in fact more complex than it first appeared. This is because at the same time as attempting to challenge patriarchy, the narrative of the show also worked to confirm it by failing to seriously question 'the pursuit of Mr Right as a worthwhile goal' (Chamber 2005: 173). Like Grace in *Will & Grace*, the women are continually defined with regards to their relationships to men. Rather than offer an alternative to the heterosexist contract of marriage and cohabitation, *Sex and the City* positions it as an 'ideal' to aspire to, as each episode involves the characters' various attempts at trying to secure (and eventually maintain) a heterosexual relationship.

Chambers carefully considers the contradictory elements exhibited within *Sex and the City* in her discussion of the way in which the sitcom deals with sexual morality and female singlehood. For example, with regards to the seemingly liberated status of the characters, she suggests that the consistent presence of unrequited love within the show can in fact be understood as a 'punishment for female independence' (2005: 172). Moreover, she goes on to explain that rather than celebrate the single status of the characters by inviting identification with them, the sitcom's satirical humour works to encourage the audience to 'laugh at the retribution delivered to smug, self-satisfied single women who seem to "have it all", who appear to be succeeding in a man's world at a man's game' (2005: 174). The notion that these women 'have it all' only adds to the complexity and paradoxical nature of the programme. In *Sex and the City*, the economic power of the characters is not only revealed through their respective careers (despite being identified as having aspirational jobs, they are very rarely shown actually working), but also through their lifestyles and consumption practices. As such, the programme works in a similar manner to *Will & Grace*, in that it moves the equality debate 'into the realm of consumption' (Becker 1998: 44).

It is here that I disagree slightly with Chambers, as instead of resenting the characters for their affluent lifestyle, I would suggest that viewers are in fact encouraged to identify with them through their use of fashion. In her discussion of the interplay between fashion and characterisation within *Sex and the City*, Anna Konig notes that 'the characters of the show have all evolved in such a way as to facilitate diverse audience identification' (2004: 137). I would take this further by suggesting that instead of *evolving* into their roles, their distinct identities were apparent from the very first episode in which they were each defined by their mode of dress. As explained by Bruzzi and Church Gibson, the pilot episode of *Sex and the City* 'abides by Hollywood's dominant tradition of typage, of delineating character directly through a broadly stereotypical use of appearance and dress' (2004: 115). For example, while the tutu worn by Carrie in the opening title sequence presents her as the quirky romantic heroine with an innovative fashion sense, Miranda is depicted as a power-dressing career woman through her sharp suit and short hairstyle. The cream cardigan and string of pearls worn by Charlotte not only signifies her preppy and conservative outlook, but also places her in opposition to the flamboyant and brazen Samantha, who is seen wearing a revealing halter-neck dress. By focusing on, and drawing attention to, the women's individual fashion styles, *Sex and the City* is similar to *Friends* in that it encourages female viewers to both identify with and aspire to be like the on-screen characters. Just as Rachel's haircut became a 'must-have' for fans of the latter series, the various fashions showcased on *Sex and the City* have become sought after in real life.

This crossover highlights the way in which the programme simultaneously represents and targets white, affluent, single women in their thirties, who are in possession of high disposable incomes. By equating equality with having the means to consume (and to purchase a subscription for HBO), Arthur's positioning of the show in relation to postfeminism becomes somewhat problematic. In her analysis of female-centred drama after the network era, Lotz (2006) aligns postfeminism with the notion of 'difference'. Citing bell hooks and Ann Brooks, amongst others, she describes it as a conceptual shift from debates around 'equality' to debates around 'difference', in the form of gender, race, class, or sexual orientation (Lotz 2006: 21-22; hooks 1981; Brooks 1997). *Sex and the City*, however, is primarily concerned with the former. As such, it conforms to Brasfield's assertion that 'white women focus upon their

oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class and age'
(2006: 133).

Of course, it is not just *Sex and the City* that depicts a world that is inhabited
by white, upscale, characters. Each of the sitcoms I have discussed thus far in this
thesis has chosen not to take as their main focus lower class, ethnic, or black
characters. Even though *Will & Grace* can be considered groundbreaking due to its
focus on the contentious subject of homosexuality, it is significant that it opted to
represent its lone, ethnic, supporting character in a largely stereotypical and derisory
manner. The lone African-American character in *The Larry Sanders Show*, Beverly, is
also placed in the subordinate position of Larry's secretary, rather than as a character
in a position of power. With the majority of the fictional characters inhabiting a
similar world, issues surrounding race, class, and social oppression are rarely
discussed within these programmes. This does not mean that the programme-makers,
networks, and cable channels have not faced criticism for their narrow representations
however.

In their analysis of the relationship between *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your
Enthusiasm*, David Lavery and Marc Leverette note the way in which the former
sitcom was often 'chided for its obliviousness to matters of race' (2006: 213). Taking
this on board, Larry David attempted to address this in his subsequent HBO sitcom.
As well as including a number of African-American comedians as supporting
characters throughout the series (most notably Wanda Sykes as one of Cheryl's best
friends), he also dealt with the issue explicitly in an episode from Season One entitled
'Affirmative Action'. On being introduced by his friend Richard Lewis to a black
dermatologist, Larry jokingly questions the doctor's medical ability by implicitly
suggesting that he only attained his qualifications as a result of 'the whole affirmative
action thing'. When he is subsequently made aware that what he said was offensive,
Larry defends himself by explaining 'I tend to say stupid things to black people
sometimes'. Later on in the episode, he is confronted by an African American woman
who accuses him of racism for not hiring her for his real-life movie *Sour Grapes*
(1998). In an attempt to confirm her accusation, she cites the fact that his sitcom
Seinfeld was devoid of black people. In typical *Curb Your Enthusiasm* style, both
storylines converge as Larry apologises to the dermatologist in front of a gathering of
black people, only for the woman who confronted him earlier to appear and castigate
him once more.

This example is significant not only because of its rarity but also because of its self-reflexive and overt nature. David acknowledges the absence of black characters in *Seinfeld* and, rather than apologise for it, attempts to highlight his own difficulties with the issue, from his perspective of a white, wealthy, privileged man. *Sex and the City* also sought to address some of the criticism levelled at with regards to the way in which it appeared to ignore racial difference. However, this did not occur until the final season of the show when Miranda began a short relationship with her neighbour, Dr. Robert Leeds, played by the well-known African American actor Blair Underwood. With Miranda eventually choosing her ex-partner Steve over her new neighbour, the character of Dr. Leeds did not play a significant part within the series and, unlike *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, the narrative did not explicitly deal with the problem of racial difference.

My reasons for considering the issue of race, in particular, with regards to *Sex and the City*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and indeed *Will & Grace*, is to provide an insight into the way in which racial difference is dealt with, or ignored, in mainstream network and quality pay-cable programming. With a predominantly white, affluent audience comprising the target market for both NBC and HBO, my analysis demonstrates the impact this has on the ability of such programming to provide diverse representations. Targeting a similar audience demographic has also resulted in the three HBO shows discussed within this chapter sharing many similarities with NBC's 'must-see TV' sitcoms. This includes the absence of the family, a focus on urban locations and desirable lifestyles, playing with formal and visual conventions, and blurring the boundaries between the real and the fictional. In the case of HBO, however, these techniques work to not only highlight and challenge the forms and conventions of television as a medium, but also the restrictions placed on network broadcasting in particular. Moreover, in an attempt to convince viewers to pay for such programming, they are also employed continuously and not just as an occasional stunt to mark out specific episodes as distinctive.

With NBC and HBO competing for upscale, white viewers, it is perhaps unsurprising that one of the newest networks to enter the marketplace, UPN, positioned itself as a niche channel aimed at those segments of the audience overlooked by the broadcast networks and pay-cable. The following chapter will consider this in detail by examining the sitcom output of UPN and its 'black-block' programming strategy.

Chapter 6

UPN Case Study: 'Black-Block' Programming

Thus far my analysis has focused on innovative sitcoms in the post-network era that have been created for a primarily white 'quality' audience. In contrast, this chapter will discuss how the emergence of a multichannel environment within the U.S. television industry has opened up space for new channels to target niche audiences made up of specific racial or ethnic groups. While my focus will be on the 'black-block' programming strategy adopted by niche broadcaster UPN in relation to its sitcom output, I will begin by providing an overview of the historical relationship between sitcoms in the United States and representations of blackness. This will be presented in conjunction with a discussion of some of the key academic theories that have been developed in this area.

As detailed in Chapter Three, in the late 1980s Fox became the first broadcaster to target African-American viewers aggressively. This coincided with the rise of Univision and Telemundo, two Spanish-language broadcast networks transmitting programmes to a wide Hispanic audience, as well as Black Entertainment Television (BET), a basic cable network targeting African Americans with a range of acquired material. While the targeting of racial and ethnic audiences is intrinsic to the institutional make-up of these latter channels (a factor particularly evident within the names of Telemundo and BET), Fox's motive in targeting black viewers was to gain a foothold in the competitive broadcast market. Once the network became established as part of the 'big four' however, it diversified its programming output to include material targeted at the more desirable, and thus more profitable, white male audience.

In spite of this shift, Fox created a model for other nascent networks to follow and this occurred in 1995 with the launch of UPN and The WB network. Although both The WB and UPN adopted similar strategies, the former initially targeted a slightly younger African American audience, with sitcoms such as *Sister, Sister* (ABC, 1994-95; The WB, 1995-99), before achieving substantial success with the white teen dramas *Dawsons Creek* (1998-2003) and *Gilmore Girls* (2000-). UPN, on the other hand, consistently programmed black sitcoms using a scheduling technique

that Caldwell refers to as 'black-block' programming, namely the broadcast of back-to-back sitcoms featuring entirely black casts on a Monday night (2004: 68). This strategy has not been without criticism. For Robin Means Coleman, the sitcoms broadcast by UPN, The WB, and Fox are part of what she terms a 'neo-minstrelsy' era of black programming in which negative stereotypes are propagated through the use of broad comedy and 'hyper-racialized' representations:

> These latest upstarts learned well from Fox – racial programming, set in urban centers, with a spunky hip-hop feel not only attracted African American viewers hungry to see themselves on television, but piqued the interest of white teens and young adults who find the Black urban lingo, dress, and music trendy (2000: 119).

While I agree in part with Means Coleman's assessment, I aim to demonstrate that by the end of decade, UPN had produced more innovative sitcoms, in terms of both formal conventions and racial representations. To illustrate this argument I shall consider *Girlfriends*, *Eve*, and *Everybody Hates Chris*, three sitcoms that eschew negative stereotypes and broad comedy in favour of diverse and complex depictions of the black experience.

One of the major problems associated with prime-time portrayals of African Americans is that they are often depicted in extremes. As Frutkin (2005) explains, they are either the educated and well-to-do Huxtables of NBC's *The Cosby Show* or the urban single clowns seen in the Fox sitcom *Martin* (1992-1997). UPN has generally been criticised for its depiction of the latter, due to sitcoms such as *Malcolm & Eddie* (1996-2000), *Sparks* (1996-98), and *Homeboys in Outer Space* (1996-97). Yet, it has also broadcast a number of domestic sitcoms that seek to produce positive representations of black family life in the form of *Moesha* (1996-2001), *The Parkers* (1999-2004), and *One on One* (2001-2006). By adopting such seemingly diametric positions, black programming has been criticised for offering no room for a range of representations depicting the diversity of the black community. As noted by Caldwell, diversity of channel choices in the post-network era has often been 'conflated with cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity, per se', despite the fact that the reality suggests otherwise (2004: 67).

While examinations of representation inform a large part of the analyses within this case study, I recognise that most academic work carried out on black sitcom programming focuses on representation at the expense of formal analysis.

Although black sitcoms have historically tended to use their racial status to differentiate themselves within the marketplace, there is no reason as to why formal innovations should be limited to white sitcoms. As such, I intend to demonstrate the way in which each of these sitcoms employ a range of inventive techniques that not only portray the kind of diversity sought by Caldwell but also provide an insight into past and present depictions of the black experience. These include the use of direct address and voiceover, playing with narrative structure and temporal conventions, the incorporation of visual parody, archive footage, and a musical soundtrack, and the blurring of the boundaries between the off-screen and on-screen personae of eponymous stars and celebrity guests.

Before discussing each of these sitcoms in detail, I will provide a historical overview of black representation on American sitcoms as well as a short analysis of some of the academic work carried out in this area, with particular reference to Means Coleman (2000), Herman Gray (1995), and J. Fred MacDonald (1992).

Historical Representations of Blackness in Prime-Time U.S. Sitcoms

The relationship between the sitcom format and black representation has been a lengthy and problematic one that precedes even the creation of television. As explained in Chapter Three, a number of early television sitcoms were based on successful radio shows, the most popular and long-running of which was *Amos 'n' Andy*. Often credited with constructing the traditional sitcom structure that still remains today, the show followed the everyday antics of the eponymous pair and their crafty friend George 'Kingfish' Stevens. Means Coleman acknowledges that the programme was formally innovative in that it employed 'end-of-program and end-of-week resolution, as well as some expertly scheduled cliff-hangers' (2000: 53). However, as explained by Gray, it was essentially representative of 'the racially stratified and segregated social order of the 1950s' (1995: 75). *Amos 'n' Andy*, along with other sitcoms from the 1950s such as *Beulah* (ABC, 1950-53) and *The Jack Benny Program*, presented blacks in stereotypical and subservient roles that did not allow them to partake in the 'social and civic responsibilities of full citizenship as equals with whites' (14-15).

MacDonald, Gray, and Means Coleman all provide descriptions of the kind of stereotypical portrayals of African Americans perpetuated in U.S. radio and television programming of the early 1950s. For example, many of the caricatures presented in

Amos 'n' Andy were either derived from literature or considered 'classic minstrel figures'. These included the 'low-key, compliant Uncle Tom' figure, the dim-witted 'Sambo', and the domineering 'Sapphire' (a term derived from the name of the 'shrewish' wife of the Kingfish). To this we can add the eponymous 'mammy' character in *Beulah*, who was housekeeper and cook to the white Henderson family, and Rochester from *The Jack Benny Program*, who was also in the 'service of domesticity' as Benny's general manservant (Gray 1995: 75). According to MacDonald, the naturally harsh voice of Eddie Anderson, the actor who portrayed Rochester, gave him a 'vocal quality akin to the throaty "coon" dialect developed by minstrel endmen', a trait that did 'little to advance the cause of the realistic portrayal of African Americans in popular culture' (1992: 24). Despite the fact that these characters did not provide a fair representation of the black community and, as such, faced great criticism from the National Advancement of the Association of Coloured People (NAACP), these sort of stereotypes began to resurface in the so-called 'neo-minstrel' sitcoms of the post-network era.

The process of stereotyping is one of the main problems regarding representations of blackness in the television sitcom. The sitcom is a genre that, due to its half-hour structure and circular narrative, relies on stereotyping as the quickest way to establish identifiable characters within a repeatable situation with the aim of producing lighthearted humour. While this also occurs in relation to white characters, it is generally counterbalanced across the schedule with a range of imagery that appears within drama, lifestyle, current affairs, and documentary programming. In contrast, black representation is consistently confined to the sitcom genre, a process that both Caldwell (2004) and Hunt (2005) refer to as 'ghettoization'. As such, black sitcoms cannot be understood or evaluated in the same way as white sitcoms, as it is the white perspective that is considered the dominant norm in a society (and indeed within a media institution such as television) underpinned with racist ideology.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that black viewers have consistently been attracted to sitcoms such as *Amos 'n' Andy* and its numerous descendants. Discussing this in relation to early television sitcom, Gray attempts to understand this apparent contradiction by emphasising the polysemic nature of the texts:

> As racist and stereotypical as these representations were, the cultural and racial politics they activated were far from simple; many poor, working-

class, and even middle-class blacks still managed to read against the dominant discourse of whiteness and find humor in the show (1995: 75).

Situated against the racial politics of the 1950s, he goes on to suggest that the tastes, pleasures, and voices in support of such sitcoms 'were drowned out by the moral outrage of many middle-class blacks' (75). While this resulted in the cancellation of the aforementioned programmes, the furore surrounding the 'neo-minstrel' sitcoms broadcast by Fox, UPN, and The WB was not so easily revolved. This is because in addition to facing criticism, sitcoms such as *Martin* also received praise for their portrayal of black characters. In a move that caused controversy within the NAACP itself, the organisation awarded *Martin* and its lead actor Martin Lawrence (who Means Coleman describes as the 'king' of minstrelsy for his array of one-dimensional and limited character types), with a number of Image Awards (2000: 123). This not only indicates that these programmes can be read both positively and negatively, but it also draws attention to the complex processes involved in the production of humour.

As noted by Michael Pickering and Sharon Lockyer, there is a difference between someone sending up their own culture or race and comedy that aims to produce humour at the expense of someone else's cultural or racial identity (2005: 9). This does not mean, however, that people from the same cultural or racial background cannot disagree over what is considered offensive. In an attempt to first avoid and then engage with this problem, Gray suggests that three discursive practices have emerged within American television over the years in the form of 'assimilation and the discourse of invisibility', 'pluralist or separate-but-equal discourses', and 'multiculturalism/diversity' (1995: 85-91).

Discursive Practices and Black Representation

It is perhaps unsurprising that some members of the black community welcomed the emergence of the neo-minstrel sitcoms, as they offered a sustained representation of blackness on U.S. television screens. Even though the production of black sitcoms is not a new phenomenon, their existence has been both intermittent and contentious. Gray provides an excellent overview of this history at the same time as identifying the three discursive strategies that have structured black representation on commercial TV.

Following the controversy surrounding *Amos 'n' Andy* and the birth of the civil rights movement, African Americans, along with minority groups in general, were ignored by fictional programme-makers for over a decade. As a popular format offering escapist entertainment, the sitcom in particular was unsure of how to best represent blackness and deal with the issue of race within the confines of the genre. As a result, African-American characters were excluded from the form until the mid-1960s. It was during this period that Gray's assimilationist discourse came to the fore. As sitcoms began to once more incorporate black characters, thus making them *visible* on-screen, their blackness remained *invisible*, as issues of racial difference, prejudice, and inequality were largely ignored within their narratives. In the sitcom *Julia* (NBC, 1968-71), for example, the eponymous black female was presented just like a white person. This meant that on the (limited) occasions that racial issues did feature within the narrative, they were positioned as 'extraordinary' events rather than as reflective of 'structured social inequality and a culture deeply inflected and defined by racism' (1995: 86).

This changed in the 1970s when the 'big three' networks began targeting specific segments of the audience with socially relevant programming. Norman Lear/Tandem Productions was the first independent company to take advantage of this with regards to black programming with the production of *Sanford & Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons*. Again, these sitcoms made African Americans more visible on screen, and presented them as equal to their white counterparts. However, this was largely due to the fact that they depicted a world in which blacks and whites remained separate from one another. Moreover, in these black-populated worlds, many negative stereotypes resurfaced. For example, the sitcom that faced the most criticism in this respect was Lear's *Good Times*. Described as a landmark series by Means Coleman due to its depiction of an 'intact, stable, loving traditional African American family', *Good Times* was also guilty of 'representational failure' in its depiction of eldest son, J.J. Evans (2000: 91-92). According to MacDonald, J.J.'s use of blackvoice (as witnessed in his stock phrase, 'Dy-no-mite!'), along with his ghetto attire and womanizing ways, presented a throwback to 'those demeaning coons of another century' (1992: 188). J.J. was nevertheless popular with the viewing public, a situation that again points to the many ways in which both black and white audiences can gain pleasure by reading against the dominant (or negative) discourse.

I must stress that although it may appear that my analysis of these discourses is based on Taylor's concept of 'decade-thinking', both of these strategies continue to be present in black programming from the 1980s onwards (1989: 16). This is particularly noticeable with regards to *The Cosby Show*. For Means Coleman, the phenomenal success of *The Cosby Show* is reflective of the way in which it revolutionised the black sitcom and paved the way for an era of diversity. Yet, Gray notes that despite it being one of the first sitcoms to mark an aesthetic and discursive turn away from assimilationist and pluralist practices, it remained to a certain extent, 'rooted in both sets of discourses' (1995: 89). This is largely due to the contradictions inherent within the programme. At the same time as challenging negative black stereotypes by portraying an upper-middle-class family with a desirable lifestyle and a strong set of values, it failed to engage with the problems of racial difference. In addition, it worked to separate blacks and whites by focusing on a largely black world populated by characters that were just like white people. Hunt suggests that as a result of its ambiguous approach to issues of race, 'the show seemed to "strike a deal" with white viewers, absolving them of responsibility for racial inequality in the United States in exchange for welcoming the affluent black family into their living rooms every Thursday night' (2005: 14-15).

Jhally and Lewis point out that 'to attack [*The Cosby Show*] because it panders to the needs of a mainstream white audience is to attack its lifeblood' (1992: 3-4). As ratings and profits define television in the United States, programmes must operate within an institutional context that creates audiences for advertisers. This is in addition to operating within the confines of a particular genre, of which sitcoms are regarded as the most rigid. Such a system makes any innovation with regards to form, content, or representation, difficult to achieve. Yet, there are a number of black programmes that have achieved just this. Discussing the discourse of multiculturalism and diversity, Gray cites the sitcoms *A Different World*, *Frank's Place* (CBS, 1987-88), and *Roc* (Fox, 1991-94) as being representative of an innovative approach to black sitcom programming.

Central to the multiculturalist discourse, as described by Gray, is an engagement with the cultural politics of difference:

> Television programmes operating within this discursive space position
> viewers, regardless of race, class, or gender location, to participate in
> black experiences from multiple subject positions. In these shows viewers

> encounter complex, even contradictory, perspectives and representations
> of black life in America. The guiding sensibility is neither integrationist
> nor pluralist, though elements of both may turn up (1995: 90).

Set within the fictional world of the historically black Hillman College rather than the confines of the domestic family, *Cosby* spin-off *A Different World* achieved this by featuring a diverse range of characters that emphasised differences in racial background, class, and politics. In effect, 'the show's producers broke with television's conventional construction of African Americans as monolithic' (98). This approach was further complicated by *Frank's Place* and *Roc*, two sitcoms that deviated from the traditional conventions of the form. In a similar manner to *Sex and the City*, these shows blurred the boundaries between comedy and drama through 'the use of different visual and narrative strategies' (90). As well as adopting a cinematic look in terms of their lighting and production style, they also failed to conform to the circular sitcom narrative by refusing resolution and closure. As such, each series used formal conventions to offer a complex view of the black experience.

In the case of *Roc*, Means Coleman describes how the show became even more daring in its second season when it began transmitting live, a practice that was adopted for a single episode of *ER* five years later in 1997 (2000: 114). While the former failed to garner much mainstream attention, the live episode of *ER* operated as a showcase for the NBC medical drama's 'quality' status and received both critical acclaim and high audience ratings. Unfortunately, for all their innovation, programmes such as *Frank's Place* and *Roc* were short-lived, with the former lasting a single season and the latter stretching to three. Significantly, *Frank's Place* fell victim to Fox's emerging roster of 'neo-minstrel' sitcoms, a shift that Means Coleman has criticised. As I intend to demonstrate, however, the discourse of multiculturalism and diversity continues with the sitcoms *Girlfriends*, *Eve*, and *Everybody Hates Chris*, three programmes that combine the presence of black creative personnel with a range of formal innovations to complicate representations of blackness.

Girlfriends as a 'Black *Sex and The City*'

Following the lives of four independent female friends living and working in Los Angeles, the UPN sitcom *Girlfriends* takes the concept behind HBO's *Sex and the City* ands places it within an African American context. Pitched to network executives and consequently referred to within media discourse as a 'black *Sex and the City*', it

provides a candid look at the attitudes of black women to love, sex, and relationships. This approach is undoubtedly signified in its title, which foregrounds its focus on female relationships in a more explicit manner than *Sex and the City*. However, the choice of title also suggests other connotations. For example, as well as indicating a distinct move away from the male-oriented, sexist programmes that characterised UPN's initial sitcom output and which possessed names such as *Malcolm & Eddie* and *Homeboys in Outer Space*, the title also manages to evoke a sense of blackness. This is because the term 'girlfriend' is often used by black women when addressing their contemporaries, just as 'homeboy' is a type of male equivalent. As such, it is possible for viewers to interpret the show as either a continuation of the neo-minstrel tradition or as a move away from such practices. By rejecting the traditional domestic setting that has characterised many of its black sitcom predecessors, the title *Girlfriends* also aligns the sitcom with its white 'must-see' counterparts, such as *Friends*, that focus on friendship rather than family. What it does not do is exhibit the frankness of the programme that it was modelled on, namely *Sex and the City*, a title which has no qualms with displaying to its audience the show's particular concern.

As discussed in relation to the use of language in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, one of the reasons for this can be attributed to the differing institutional and production contexts of each show. As a niche-network, UPN is bound by the standards and practices of commercial network television and therefore faces different restrictions from its pay-cable predecessor. With the tastes and values of advertisers and the mainstream audience being of more significance than they are to HBO, *Girlfriend*s is unable to feature the type of strong language and explicit scenes that characterise *Sex and the City* (although it continues to take sex and relationships as its main focus). Moreover, each show differs in terms of production values. As a relatively new network with restricted coverage, UPN's production resources are limited in comparison to HBO, a channel that took over a decade to establish its position in the marketplace with movies and sports events before finally embarking on original programme production. Thus, while *Sex and the City* is renowned for its distinctive visual aesthetic, *Girlfriends* takes the form of the more conventional multi-camera set-up with a fixed studio setting, live audience, and audible laugh track.

However, as I will demonstrate in the following analysis, the first season of *Girlfriends* retains some of the formal techniques introduced by *Sex and the City*, most notably the use of direct address and freezeframe. Moreover, rather than offering

a purely ghettocentric or unattainable depiction of the black experience, it provides a diverse range of characterisations that highlight racial and social differences. While I will suggest that this development can in part be attributed to the increased agency afforded to black creative personnel within the industry, it is important to recognise that the involvement of African Americans in decision making roles is still limited. This is something that I will discuss further in relation to the production team behind *Girlfriends*.

Black Women, Male Sponsors, and White Notions of 'Must-See TV'

In his discussion of what he describes as the '*raced* processes' involved in the commissioning of network television, Hunt explains that it is white males who have 'traditionally occupied nearly all of the industry "green-lighting" positions' (2005: 17). This is a situation that is similarly replicated on the production side, where 'white executive producers or "showrunners" have a stranglehold on the development and day-to-day creation of television programs' (17). This has gradually begun to change, however, with regards to the latter point at least. As I will demonstrate, the existence of UPN, its niche-network counterpart The WB, and cable channels such as BET, have begun to open up the industry to black and ethnic writers, directors, and producers who had previously been restricted to lesser roles on primarily white programming. By providing a (limited) platform for the production of black programming, these operators have helped to facilitate the participation of non-white groups within the industry, albeit on a small scale.

This is evident in the production of *Girlfriends*. Mara Brock Akil is one of a small number of black females in the industry to create a hit sitcom. Beginning as a writer on *South Central* (1994), another acclaimed Fox dramedy that nevertheless failed to last a full season, Akil went on to write for the UPN sitcom *Moesha* before becoming a supervising producer on The WB sitcom *The Jamie Foxx Show* (1996-2001). Given her background, it is perhaps somewhat surprising that Brock Akil's co-executive producer on *Girlfriends* is Kelsey Grammer, the actor who first appeared in *Cheers*, a sitcom that Thompson describes as 'the most obvious example of "quality comedy"', before starring in the spin-off *Frasier* (1996: 17). Garnering consistently high ratings and critical acclaim, both of these shows ran for eleven seasons, providing Grammer with an enviable reputation within the industry. Within such a competitive environment it is standard practice that having a known 'name' attached

to a project helps when pitching to network executives. As I have discussed in relation to *Seinfeld*, this often involves the presence of a comedian in the lead role who is in some way familiar to television audiences. However, in this case, Grammer's involvement with *Girlfriends* is restricted to behind-the-scenes involvement.

Discussing the role of black female writers and performers within another male-dominated institution, the music industry, Rana Emerson explains that many black women artists are 'presented to the public under the guidance of a male sponsor', i.e., a male producer, songwriter or fellow artist (2005: 215). By foregrounding this masculine presence in promotional material such as music videos, the implication is that the female artist is not the 'creator of her own success' and can only gain legitimacy within the industry through a male producer (215). Such a role could be attributed to Grammer and his involvement with *Girlfriends*. Produced by his company Grammnet, it could be suggested that he acts as Brock Akil's male sponsor within the network television system. Yet, in this case, his presence is not so visible with regards to the show's promotional strategy. In much of the media discourse surrounding the show, there is an emphasis on the fact that Brock Akil is both the creator and showrunner of *Girlfriends*. As a black sitcom about four black women, it appears to be important to emphasise the fact that it is a black female who determines the narrative direction and the character types that feature within the show.

Bearing in mind Grammer's involvement in the show, the look and structure of *Girlfriends* appears to have more in common with the stylish and sophisticated *Cheers*, *Frasier*, and other 'must-see' NBC sitcoms from the 1990s, than with HBO's *Sex and the City* with its distinct aesthetic. Throughout the first season of *Girlfriends*, however, the central character of Joan is similar to Carrie in that she regularly breaks the fourth wall by directly addressing the camera (and, by extension, the viewer at home). Such techniques are often central in positioning programming as 'must-see' or 'quality' television. Discussing the 'celebrated formal features' of so-called quality television, Jancovich and Lyons note the way in which these techniques are informed by the cultural values and taste dispositions of the 'white, affluent, urban middle classes' (2003: 3). By using *Sex and the City* as a model, therefore, *Girlfriends* could be described as operating according to white notions of 'must-see' television rather than reworking the concept of quality within a black context. However, as I intend to demonstrate, the show incorporates innovative formal techniques within a discourse that emphasises the diversity of its black female characters.

Race, Gender, and Formal Innovation in G*irlfriends*

In the first episode of *Girlfriends*, the stylish but disparate backdrop of Los Angeles serves as a fitting location to explore the lives of the four central characters. With their relationships based on friendship and work rather than familial ties, the characters are distinct from one another in terms of social position and racial heritage and these differences are emphasised through their occupations, attitudes, and mode of dress. For example, the level-headed and reliable Joan is an attorney for a prestigious law firm and serves as a point of identification for both the viewers at home and the other characters. Sharing a similar status and lifestyle is Joan's childhood friend Toni, a successful real-estate agent with a penchant for designer labels. Despite possessing the means to be economically independent, Toni judges each potential boyfriend according to their wealth and is depicted as being self-obsessed and image conscious. This places her in contrast to married mother-of one Maya, who works as Joan's assistant. With her husband Darnell employed as a baggage handler and Maya having dropped out of school on becoming a teenage mother, Toni consistently draws attention to Maya's lower social status. As well as correcting her grammar by explaining that Maya's use of the phrase 'why you looking at me?' is missing a verb, Toni mockingly refers to her as 'ghetto superstar' and 'ghetto fabulous'.

This is significant as both Maya's speech patterns and the aforementioned 'ghetto' terms are categorised as being a sign of her 'blackness'. By criticising these, Toni can be understood as trying to erase signifiers of her own racial identity and any discrimination she may have faced in favour of positioning herself as sophisticated and successful (or rather, just as successful as 'white' people). At the same time, however, the differences between the two women could also be seen as refreshing, given that it avoids depicting the black community as monolithic; as neither ghetto-centric nor comfortably well-off in the form of the 'neo-minstrel' sitcoms or *The Cosby Show*.

The character of Lynn makes up the central foursome and is the least easily categorised. Refusing to embark on a full-time career, Lynn holds a number of postgraduate degrees and, as such, is positioned as an eternal student. The only biracial character, she was born to a black father and white mother before being adopted by a white couple at birth. Her biracial status means that the notion of racial difference is constantly present within the fictional world that the four friends inhabit

and it sets her apart somewhat from the other black characters. Much in the same way as dress is used to delineate character in *Sex and the City*, each of the characters in *Girlfriends* inhabits different fashion styles. Significantly, Lynn is shown wearing a long tulle tutu skirt in the first episode of the show, which is reminiscent of Carrie's costume in the opening credits of *Sex and the City*. Unlike Carrie, however, whose tutu serves to position her as the quirky, romantic heroine of the narrative, Lynn's dress signals her non-conformative status. In comparison to Joan's business suits, Toni's designer dresses, and Maya's array of short skirts and tight leather pants, Lynn sense of style refuses to be linked to either her career or social status but rather to her sense of 'otherness'.

As well as using dress to reflect the status of the characters, the narrative of the first episode highlights some of the pressures placed on women with regards to image and appearance. On wishing Joan a happy birthday, her work colleague William asks her how old she is, to which she immediately replies, 'twenty-six'. The image then freezes as the centre of the screen dissolves into an enlarged circular close up of Joan's face. Directly addressing the camera she confesses 'I lied. I'm twenty-nine. According to my life-state planner I should have it all by now. The career, the husband, the kids. So if I say I'm twenty-six, I bought myself some time ok'. Again, this technique is reminiscent of Carrie's direct address to camera in *Sex and the City*. In this case, however, Joan steps outside of the narrative to confess her true age to the audience. While Carrie's direct address ties in with the first person narrative of her voiceover and newspaper column, Joan interrupts the narrative to present the audience with information that the other characters within the fictional diegesis are not aware of.

This entry into Joan's personal psyche allows the storyline to digress in other ways. When she finds out that Toni is dating her ex-boyfriend Charles, we witness a flashback that informs us of the reason why they broke up. While her friends believe that it was Joan who split up with Charles, the flashback reveals that this decision was based on his reluctance to get married. As noted in her direct address, Joan is symptomatic of the type of woman discussed in relation to *Sex and the City*. On the surface she appears to 'have it all' in terms of career, friendship, and social status, but her punishment for these achievements is the consistent presence of unrequited love.

Lynn questions this desire for a man later in the episode when she chides Joan for wearing a revealing dress to her birthday party and for insisting that she is only

twenty-six: 'You gotta stop it with this age thing. We have to combat this patriarchal, chauvinistic, "all women should be young and dumb and perked-up" mindset.' While her advice seems to be ignored when Joan tries to impress Charles and thus validate her attractiveness, the episode does end with both Joan and Toni rejecting Charles for fear of damaging their friendship. The notion that female friendships may be more satisfactory than romantic relationships (a situation that echoes Quimby's concept of 'queer living'), is nevertheless offset by another freeze frame/circular close up of Joan in the episode's final scene. Although enjoying dinner with her three friends, she once again has a confession to make to the viewer at home: 'This is probably where I should be talking about the value of friendship and how my girls fill out my life, but, and I hate to admit it, I'm thinking about Charles'.

This parting comment suggests that while *Girlfriends* works to challenge traditional representations of race, it is less successful with regards to challenging patriarchal discourses. In a similar manner to *Sex and the City*, any attempt to situate the female characters as strong, independent, financially secure, and content, is undermined by the continual search for a suitable male partner. Having said that, Joan's candid acceptance of this apparent contradiction in those moments when she directly addresses the camera can be understood as an attempt to avoid the type of criticism levelled at the early episodes of *Sex and the City*. Although she may not reveal it to her friends, Joan admits to the viewer at home that she is hurt by the failure of her sexual relationships and that marital status and motherhood are just as important to her as a successful career. Significantly it is Joan that the audience are encouraged to identify with, rather than the character of Lynn, who explicitly challenges this way of thinking. As a more marginal character, it is Lynn's storylines that generally work to complicate not only the notion of gender but also of racial difference and the concept of blackness.

Racial Difference and Signs of Blackness

Lynn's inter-racial background may indicate a degree of racial and ethnic integration within *Girlfriends*, but this is not free of complexities. In an episode from Season Two entitled 'Sister, Sistah', a visit by Lynn's adoptive white sister Tanya results in friction between the central group of characters. Like the name *Girlfriends*, the title of this episode is particularly significant. In the first instance, it invites comparison with The WB's black teen sitcom, *Sister, Sister*, a show with which the audience are

expected to be familiar. While the former sitcom was tame with regards to its subject matter and depiction of race relations, *Girlfriends* displays its intent to challenge this by replacing the second 'sister' with the colloquial black term 'sistah'. As a result, the title draws attention to the fact that this episode is explicitly about race and the difference between blacks and whites in particular.

In order to be assimilated into Lynn's lifestyle, Tanya attempts to appropriate what she regards to be signs of blackness. This is coded through her tightly braided hair, her use of street slang vernacular, and her liking for hip hop and rap music. While Maya befriends her, Joan and Toni feel uncomfortable by such an outward display of blackness and their reaction can be interpreted in a number of ways. First, the fact that Tanya is white yet adopting black signifiers can be seen to contribute to the overall feeling of awkwardness amongst the existing group of friends. Second, the actual signifiers of blackness that are used can be understood as stereotypes that have no bearing on the lives of the characters within the show. Another argument to be made, however, is that Joan and Toni reject these explicit signifiers of blackness as they do not fit into their sophisticated (or rather, white) lifestyles.

The women are made to reflect on their attitude to racial difference when Tanya, in the midst of singing along to a hip hop song, utters the word 'nigger' and is subsequently ostracised from the group for crossing the boundaries of acceptability. Surprised at their response, Tanya defends her actions by citing the fact that as it is a black person using the word within the context of the song, she believed that it was able to be repeated free of negative connotations. By having the other characters explain its history and significance and the connotations that accompany it (especially when used by a white person), *Girlfriends* provides a context with which to understand its offensive nature. This is something that is missing from many other uses of the term in popular culture, with rap and hip-hop music being a notable example. By considering the cultural and social furore surrounding its use, this episode of *Girlfriends* raises numerous questions about the way in which historically offensive words are now used within black culture. It also highlights the way in which black culture is routinely assimilated by the white mainstream and how cultural products either attempt to erase racial differences or repackage and sell them back to consumers as a signifier of hipness.

While one of the reasons that Tanya adopts the word is so that she can fit in and look hip amongst her sister's black friends, she also offers an alternative reason

later in the episode. On telling her sister Lynn that she never meant to offend her, she explains that she adopted what she perceived to be acceptable black signifiers in an attempt to make blackness the dominant norm and therefore prevent Lynn from being characterised as 'other'. Lynn is not the only character portrayed in this manner within the series. Toni's husband is a white Jewish doctor who she originally rejects because of his lack of height, an example of an ethnic stereotype. There are also various recurring homosexual characters that appear on the show, most notably Maya's male cousin Peaches. The inclusion of non-normative sexuality is particularly significant when placed within a black context. As noted by Emerson, the 'frequently homophobic rhetoric in hip-hop and R&B songs' is evidence of the way in which 'sexual difference and nonconformity are still not legitimized in Black popular culture'(2005: 214). By featuring a range of ethnic and homosexual characters, *Girlfriends* attempts to make visible the concept of 'otherness' within the confines of the black sitcom genre. In a similar manner to *Friends*, however, these characters remain marginal within the overall context of the show.

Cross-Promotion and Celebrity Cameos

As a black sitcom, *Girlfriends* does not operate in isolation from the wider UPN schedule. There are a variety of cross-promotional techniques employed within the show that links it not only to other black sitcoms and programming but also to other signature UPN programmes. The sitcom is also situated within black popular culture in general, featuring cameo appearances from a number of successful black artists within the fields of film, television, and music, and dealing with black-related issues. For example, UPN's Monday night of 'black-block' programming is similar to NBC's 'must-see' strategy in that it fosters links between each show through the use of celebrity cameos. When Joan needs a well-known celebrity to appear at the opening of her restaurant in Season Five, her three friends approach the comedienne Mo'Nique who stars in *The Parkers*, a sitcom spin-off from *Moesha* and one of UPN's most successful black family sitcoms. Playing on the fact that the restaurant is in Los Angeles, Maya, Lynn, and Toni turn up outside Mo'Nique's palatial home and ask her to help out a fellow 'sister'. Maya points out that 'I've given that woman five years of my life watching *The Parkers*. She can spend an hour eating some damn tapas'. By having Mo'Nique appear as a version of herself and by having the characters explicitly refer to their consumption of *The Parkers*, *Girlfriend*s aligns its

fictional world with that of the viewer, creating a link between their viewing experience and the characters in the show.

The programme also associates itself with black music and artists through the use of celebrity cameos. After making contact with her birth father, Lynn's younger half-brother Matthew comes to visit her and asks for help in establishing a music career. When he attends an audition to become the lead singer in a band, one of the other band members is played by British trip-hop star Tricky. Unlike Mo'Nique, Tricky plays a fictional character named Finn, but the type of music played by the band and his dress and image all draw on his known persona as a critically acclaimed musician. Again, this particular cameo appearance is expected to be understood by a knowing audience familiar with a range of black music genres (although as Finn is a fictional character, it does not exclude those without knowledge of the singer and his music). The episode also works to debunk the myth that black people are inherently musical, as Matthew displays a distinct lack of ability during his audition. When Lynn steps in to provide encouragement for her younger brother, it is her who ends up being offered the role of lead singer in the band, thus allowing black music to become an integral part of her character and the narrative for the rest of the season. The UPN sitcom *Eve*, which I will now go on to discuss, takes this association between music and sitcoms one step further by featuring a successful female hip-hop artist in the lead role and by associating itself with the hip-hop notion of 'keeping it real'.

Analysing *Eve*: The Influence of Hip-Hop Culture on Black Sitcom Programming

Following the success of *Girlfriends*, and debuting in the same season as reality show *America's Next Top Model* (2003-), the sitcom *Eve* formed part of a distinct strategy by UPN to add a fresh demographic to its 'long-standing success with African American viewers' and produce programming directly aimed at a young female audience (Rogers 2006). This was not representative of a shift away from its core urban and ethnic audience however. In the case of *America's Next Top Model*, Tyra Banks, one of America's most successful black models, adopts the role of host and is also credited as executive producer of the show. *Eve*, on the other hand, operates as a starring vehicle for the black female rapper Eve Jeffers and also features a multiracial cast. While Jeffers is not the first hip-hop artist to appear in a network sitcom (Will Smith and LL Cool J starred in NBC's *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-96) and *In*

the House (1995-99) respectively, while Queen Latifah appeared in Fox's *Living Single*), she is the only one to have a sitcom named after her. Unlike the character of Jerry in *Seinfeld*, however, Jeffers does not play a fictionalised version of herself but rather a fashion designer named Shelly Williams. Nevertheless, the series does play with the relationship between the fictional world exhibited in *Eve* and the off-screen celebrity status of its eponymous star.

Originally known by the working title *The Opposite Sex,* Jeffers is quoted as saying that the title change was a 'corporate decision' taken in an attempt to maximise the show's potential in its first season (Christian 2003: 61). This account is representative of the way in which, due to increased competition within the post-network marketplace, each programme has to be distinctive in some way if it is to 'break through the clutter' and attract viewers. In this case, the implication is that the show's initial success was dependent on viewers recognising Jeffers's name as a successful recording artist.[37] In both her recording career as a hip-hop artist and in her subsequent film and television roles, Jeffers is credited only by her first name, Eve, suggesting a level of familiarity with her target demographic, namely those with an interest in black popular culture.

Although linking the programme with Jeffers's off-screen status as a rapper works as a promotional tool, the issues addressed by hip-hop appear incongruous to those put forward by the network sitcom. As a musical style, hip-hop and rap music is generally understood in two ways. In the first instance, it is seen as confronting notions of white institutional power and black male oppression and is readily associated with male violence and material excess, to which I would also add casual misogynism (Cashmore 1997; Ramsey 2003; Rose 1994). These are characteristics that are unlikely to be found in the rigid and inherently conservative traditional sitcom form**.** In contrast, there is another account that portrays hip-hop and rap music as an example of how black culture has been safely packaged as a commercial product to be sold to a white mainstream audience. In this sense, it is less difficult to imagine how hip-hop could be appropriated to fit in with the standards and conventions of the network sitcom.

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[37] Prior to the starring in the sitcom *Eve*, Jeffers also appeared in the film *Barbershop* in 2002, a comedy with a predominantly African American cast, therefore viewers may also have recognised her as a promising actress.

Tricia Rose explains that in an attempt to differentiate their musical output from the former, male-dominated style of rap and hip-hop, many female rappers take as their focus 'the arena of sexual politics' (1994: 147). While this can be interpreted as a generalisation, Rose contends that race and gender are inextricably linked for black women, and that rather than place themselves in direct opposition to the discourses of power, sexuality, and violence espoused by male rappers, they work in dialogue with them (148; 177). This means that they find ways of creatively addressing 'the logic of heterosexual courtship', along with questions of sexual power and freedom in their music (155). This focus on male-female relationships and sexual politics is true of both Jeffers's lyrical raps, as signified in songs such as 'Gotta Man' and 'Let Me Blow Ya Mind', and the humour produced in her eponymous sitcom, as the working title *The Opposite Sex* suggests. Moreover, just as Jeffers plays with traditional gender roles in the song 'Gangsta Bitches', the sitcom *Eve* also uses the central male-female relationships within the show to consider various power struggles between the sexes and to re-evaluate traditional signifiers of masculinity and femininity. As a result, there is not such a disjunction between the issues addressed by Jeffers's rap lyrics and those addressed in her eponymous sitcom, even though the conventions of each genre may initially suggest otherwise. It must be noted, however, that while Jeffers is both credited with and promoted as being the author of her own musical output, the sitcom *Eve* is in fact the creation of producer Meg DeLoatch (an African-American woman), and each episode is written by a team of writers.

Perhaps due to the fact that Jeffers is not the author of the show, there is a complex relationship between her on-screen fictional character and her off-screen persona. In contrast to both Will Smith and Queen Latifah who performed the title theme for their respective sitcoms, the hip-hop theme music that accompanies the opening titles of *Eve* is written and performed not by the star herself but by her fellow female rapper Missy Elliott. This simultaneously distances Jeffers from, and associates her with, the hip-hop music scene. By not appearing on the song, Jeffers appears to be disengaging from her hip-hop persona, a tactic that can be interpreted as an attempt to prevent her off-screen image from interfering with the fictional narrative of the show. Nevertheless, the presence of Missy Elliott on the title music undeniably works to connect Jeffers with the hip-hop scene.

As a critically acclaimed female rapper, Elliott is an unlikely candidate to be providing the theme music for a television sitcom. In fact, sitcom theme music tends

not to be identifiably authored, although there are a few exceptions, most notably in the aforementioned *Fresh Prince* and *Living Single*, as well as *Married With Children*, which utilises Frank Sinatra's 'Love and Marriage', and *Friends*, which uses The Rembrandts' 'I'll Be There for You' to good effect. Missy Elliot's contribution to *Eve*, therefore, can be viewed not only as a promotional tool used to draw attention to the show, but also as an attempt to implicitly endorse Jeffers as a credible rap artist within the music industry.

On the whole, the style of Jeffers music appears incongruous with the standards and practices of network television, as it contains numerous obscenities and takes the form of what Ellis Cashmore calls 'street poetry', or rather 'the language of "niggas," "bitches," "hos" (whores), slinging dope and icing cops' (1997: 154). As I will go on to demonstrate, however, signifiers of Jeffers's hip-hop persona remain present within the sitcom. This not only occurs with regards to subject matter, but also in relation to her character's style, image, and personality traits. Although strong language is off-limits, *Eve* does feature the continued use of street dialogue, albeit in a less explicit manner. Moreover, it questions the traditional gender roles exhibited within both hip-hop music and the traditional sitcom at the same time as adhering to the black cultural notion of 'keeping it real'.

'Keeping It Real' Within the Boundaries of the Sitcom

This attempt to both distance and associate herself with the hip-hop scene appears to be indicative of a concerted effort on the part of Jeffers not to compromise either of her career choices while at the same time adhering to the hip-hop maxim of 'keeping it real':

> I'm coming from a different world. I'm coming from music, and whatever
> I do on my TV show can't be too far from what my music fans know as
> Eve the rapper. It can't jeopardize (sic) or make me look like, 'What the
> hell was she thinking when she said that or with what she was wearing?'
> For me it has to be as real as possible (Christian 2003: 65).

According to Christopher Holmes Smith, 'keeping it real' is closely linked to notions of representation in hip-hop terminology, i.e., 'to become a "walking signifier", the self-embodiment of one's value system concerning power, success, and individual/communal acclaim' (1997: 345). As discussed in relation to her music, Jeffers expresses her opinions and values through the use of explicit language and

aggressive imagery, characteristics that are incongruous with network sitcom standards and practices. Although the majority of her single releases avoid using controversial titles, songs on her albums include 'My Enemies', 'We on that Shit', 'Thug in the Street', and the aforementioned 'Gangsta Bitches'. Judging from these examples, it would appear to be inordinately difficult to, as Jeffers suggests, marry the two worlds of hip-hop and sitcom together. Yet, as also noted by Holmes Smith, identity construction in hip-hop culture relies heavily on the articulation of 'stylised self-promotion', a practice that is readily incorporated into the sitcom *Eve* (1997: 345).

As well as achieving remarkable success as a female rapper in a male-dominated industry, Jeffers is also recognised as something of a 'high status fashion symbol in hip-hop', due to her unique personal style and daring fashion choices (Christian 2003: 61). While this creates a *perceived* link between her televisual role as a fashion designer and her off-screen persona, the association is taken further due to Jeffers's announcement, around the same time as her television debut, of her debut clothing line named Fetish. This not only provided a more tangible link between the musician and her character Shelly, but it also opened up cross-promotional opportunities for both the television sitcom and the fashion line.

Co-owner of the DivaStyle fashion boutique, along with her friends Janie and Rita, Shelly is credited as head designer of their in-house fashion label and often refers to the three years she spent studying design at college. Fashion and style therefore inform the visual look of *Eve*. Like *Girlfriends*, it is a multi-camera sitcom filmed in a fixed studio setting and accompanied by an audience laugh track. However, while *Girlfriends* aims for sophisticated chic with regards to its mise-en-scène, *Eve* opts for visual excess in relation to both its studio set and costume selection. In terms of decoration, the DivaStyle set is intricate and elaborate. Along with its plush carpet, drapes, and brightly coloured mannequins in the window, the boutique is littered with shiny and luxurious fabrics. It is these fabrics that make up the designs that are regularly showcased by the character of Shelly. While *Sex and the City* is similarly concerned with showcasing designer clothes, other sitcoms such as *Friends*, *Will & Grace*, and *Girlfriends* have foregone the opportunity to make an up-to-the-minute fashion statement by generally adopting a more classic and timeless style. That is not to say that consumerism has not played a huge part of each of these shows, and that the styles featured have not been presented as something that viewers

should identify with and aspire to. However, the emphasis has generally been on a more everyday and casual style of dress rather than the flashy and individual designs of either *Eve* or *Sex and the City*.

This is in part due to the fact that *Eve* and *Sex and the City* both highlight a single life free of responsibilities by focusing specifically on sex, consumerism, and partying. Just as *Sex and the City* takes viewers on a tour of the various hip restaurants and bars of New York, the other main setting in *Eve* is the fictional Miami nightclub Z Lounge. With a fashion boutique and nightclub as its two main settings, there appears to be a dual-focus on ostentatious display and music that links the show to hip-hop culture. Yet, music plays a minor role in the club. Hip-hop is not showcased and the music is neither identifiably black nor white, mainstream nor underground, a sound that suits the ostensibly 'mixed-race' clientele. Moreover, I would suggest that *Eve* also stops short of fully representing the hip-hop notion of 'ghetto fabulous', which Holmes Smith describes as a contemporary taste in hip-hop culture for expensive designer goods:

> Paradoxically, the very rappers who claim to be "keeping it real" most fervently are frequently also the very ones who proudly talk about the Gianni Versace shirts, Tommy Hilfiger sportswear, Armani jeans, down-field Polo jackets, Gucci watches, and Dolce & Gabbana suits garnered from their various commercial endeavours (1997: 362).

As the clothes showcased by the female characters in *Eve* are purported to be the in-house designs of DivaStyle, the sitcom refuses to act as an advertising platform for recognisable fashion designers, and instead encourages viewers to identify with Eve/Shelly's unique personal style. This is a strategy that acts as both 'keeping it real' and 'stylised self-promotion' on the part of Jeffers.

Hip-hop has increasingly informed cinematic representations of the black experience in recent years, most notably in the films of Spike Lee and John Singleton. As well as popularising the image of the 'streetwise, urban-based, ghettocentric African American', Means Coleman highlights the way in which they 'also house definable character types that appeal to young, Black and White, ghetto-enamored teens and "twenty-something" viewers, the same target audience for UPN and WB comedies' (2000: 131). As demonstrated, hip-hop culture has indeed begun to permeate black sitcom programming. However, even though UPN's *Eve* features a female hip-hop artist in its lead role, it tends to reject the (romantic) 'ghettocentric'

stance adopted by numerous black feature films and other black sitcoms, in favour of a more diverse range of character types (Guthrie 2003: 168).

Drawing on the work of Nelson George, Means Coleman identifies the B-boy and B-girl as the 'rap/hip-hop aesthetic incarnate', and the main feature of the type of films directed by the aforementioned directors (Means Coleman 2000: 132; George 1992). Representing the struggle against poverty and street-smart savvy, the B-boy/girl is hyper-racialised, exhibiting blackvoice, urban dress, and a loud and trashy personality intrinsically linked to 'class status' (Means Coleman 2000: 132). This particular hip-hop aesthetic is notable for its absence in *Eve*. As a black sitcom featuring a hip-hop artist, *Eve* unexpectedly eschews the urban ghetto environment in favour of an upmarket boutique and a beachside townhouse in Miami. While it is regularly noted that Shelly is originally from Philadelphia (the inner-city environment that Will was 'rescued' from in *The Fresh Prince*), Janie ridicules her when, in the episode 'Self-helpless' she uses the phrase 'housing projects of pain', to which her friend replies, 'projects? I grew up three doors down from you and my momma had a Cadillac'. Accompanied by Shelly's educational background and status as an independent businesswoman, Janie's comment implies that Shelly is not a B-girl from the ghetto and that she has not experienced the pain of poverty or violence. Instead, she has been able to achieve an admirable level of success in a city known for its carefree lifestyle rather than its crime rates. Nonetheless, the diegetic world constructed in *Eve* is not without conflict. This conflict arises from class tensions *between* blacks, however, rather than from racial tensions between blacks and whites.

The Buppie character type, or black urban professional, is represented in *Eve* through the characters of Frances and Andrew Hunter, the parents of Shelly's on-off boyfriend, J.T. (or Jeremiah Thurgood to give him his full name). Middle-class, conservative, and ambitious, the Hunters are respected members of the community (Frances is the president of an exclusive social club) and have high expectations of their son. In an episode entitled 'Hi Mom', J.T. frequently points out how his mother 'is still getting over me not going to med school'. As a result of their apparent assimilation into normative culture, Frances and Andrew are often coded as white by failing to recognise black speech patterns and cultural references. Worried about the type of people her son is socialising with, Frances states in a later episode that 'you might think I am out of touch but I know all about at-risk, inner-city youth. I've seen *Cooley High*'. This suggests that her knowledge of the black inner-city experience is

drawn only from media images, such as the aforementioned 1975 comic film set in the projects of downtown Chicago. She also refers to Shelly as a 'round-the-block girl. Those girls JJ Cool L sings about', only to be corrected by J.T. who informs her 'LL Cool *J*, and it's round-the-way girls'. This is in keeping with Means Coleman's assertion that 'Buppies are often presented as out of touch with their roots or disconnected from "real" black culture and have to be reoriented to Blackness by a more valued, freer-style B-boy or girl' (2000: 133). As such, it is the impoverished ghetto that is assumed to produce 'real' or rather street-smart and savvy black character types rather than the sun-kissed sidewalks of Miami.

Although *Eve* resists the B-boy/girl stereotype by refusing to perpetuate a romanticised notion of the ghetto, it does situate the character of Shelly (with her displayed tattoos and revealing clothes) in opposition to J.T.'s mother, the more traditional, uptight, and assimilated Frances. Having first encountered Shelly in a sexually intimate position with her son, Frances consistently makes it known to J.T. that she considers Shelly to be an unsuitable partner, a position that Andrew appears to concur with in 'They've Come Undone' when he points out to his son that there is a difference between 'girls you date and girls you marry'. What is most notable about Frances's opinion of Shelly is that it is based entirely on the latter's style and appearance, and thus ignores the fact that she is a successful and determined businesswoman. By refusing to change her appearance for either J.T. or his mother (or, for that matter, her leap from the controversial genre of hip-hop to the more conservative form of network sitcom), Shelly/Eve reinforces the sense of 'keeping it real'. Moreover, *Eve* also attempts a sort of 'dual-attack' on both the racial and gender stereotypes perpetuated in both the traditional sitcom and hip-hop culture.

Revising Racial Stereotypes and Traditional Sitcom Gender Roles

With his parents assimilated into the normative culture, J.T. is a complex character with regards to negotiating a sense of blackness. As a handsome, middle-class, physical therapist, J.T. represents a positive black male image. According to his parents, he possesses the capabilities to attend medical school and become a doctor. Whether or not this is the case, he has indeed made his own career choices and has worked hard to achieve his current position. As such, he is situated in contrast to the type of black male stereotypes that have historically been perpetuated in sitcoms from *Amos 'n' Andy* to UPN's neo-minstrel shows, namely the trickster, the workshy, the

unprofessional, and the street-smart character. This position is reinforced when, during an argument in the episode 'Over', he tells Shelly 'don't you know there's a shortage of good black men'. While this statement suggests that J.T. views himself as a desirable catch due to his achievements and his middle-class status, it can also be interpreted as J.T. adhering to the dominant discourse that African-American men are criminal, unreliable, and dysfunctional, with no consideration of the social context of prejudice and inequality that may inform their experiences.

J.T. is a *privileged* black male and, as such, is often depicted as disconnected from 'real' black culture. This occurs in a variety of ways, although in the majority of incidences the narrative focuses on the comic element of J.T. being, like his parents, similarly 'out of touch' with the black experience. For example, when a DJ is needed to fill a slot at the club in 'Party All the Time', J.T. offers his services and proceeds to invoke numerous clichés regarding black music. Rather than playing contemporary music, as might be expected in a fashionable club, J.T., dressed in a suede jacket and with a banner that reads 'DJ Fine. "Blowing Ya Mind"' draped over the DJ booth, opts to play Lionel Richie's 'All Night Long' while attempting to speak to the crowd in a soulful voice. J.T.'s *performance* as a 'black' D.J. is a specific kind of interpretation that has become successful within the white mainstream (as supported by Richie's huge international success). As noted by Means Coleman, J.T. is a character that is 'not born of the rap-hip-hop notion of the street' and therefore his 'Blackness is called into question' (2000: 133). Of course, by performing so badly at the club, J.T. can also be considered to be calling into question the assumed notion that black people are intrinsically musical or 'cool', a belief that was similarly challenged by the experiences of Lynn's half-brother Matthew in *Girlfriends*.

As a character, J.T. represents a patriarchal view of society that the traditional sitcom has often been criticised for propagating. In a similar manner to the title of the 1950s situation comedy, *Father Knows Best* (CBS, 1954-1955, 1958-1960; NBC, 1955-1958), J.T. routinely ignores his mother's protestations regarding Shelly's suitability as a partner but pays attention when his father reveals that he is of the same opinion. Not wanting immediately to end the relationship, he accepts that compromises have to be made. However, he believes that Shelly is the one who must make changes to her lifestyle and thus asks her to reduce her work schedule, party less, and alter her appearance:

J.T.: I mean, maybe you could stop wearing the short, short skirts.

SHELLY: What?

J.T.: No, you could still wear them at home for me, just not out in public.
No need to keep throwing out bait when you already caught the big one.

Refusing to comply with J.T.'s requests, Shelly explains that her work, party lifestyle, and style of dress inform her character and that J.T. should accept this if their relationship is to continue. Rather than being played for laughs, this scene is coded as important through the absence of any audible audience laughter on the soundtrack. With the distinction between the sexes being *Eve*'s main thematic focus, the sitcom appears to signify, through the character of Shelly, that the sexes are 'different but equal'. This is similar to the 'separate but equal' discourse adopted by many black sitcoms from the 1970s onwards. Yet, I would suggest that rather than construct a pluralist discourse in which men and women/blacks and whites remain discrete from one another, *Eve* succeeds in constructing a multidimensional discourse that sees the characters integrate with one another regardless of sex, race, or class divisions. Interestingly, there is an episode in the third season of *Eve* entitled, 'Separate, But Unequal', which suggests an acknowledgement and sense of self-reflection on the part of the programme-makers regarding the history of black sitcom programming.

Prior to the episode 'Over', in which J.T. asks Shelly to change her lifestyle, both characters question their commitment to one another in 'They've Come Undone'. When Janie points out to her friend that relationships change once you are married, the camera slowly zooms in to a close-up of Shelly's face as she considers this statement. The image then dissolves into an alternative scene in which J.T. is preparing dinner in an elegantly furnished home as Shelly returns home from work in a smart suit. Shelly's vision of the future both draws on and subverts many conventions surrounding the traditional domestic sitcom. She announces 'honey, I'm home' as she enters the room, a phrase so associated with the genre that it forms the title of Gerard Jones's 1993 analysis. In this instance, however, it is the female character that arrives home from a day at the office while her husband stays at home to cook, clean, and look after the children. While I have suggested that *Eve* falls short of representing the hip-hop notion of 'ghetto fabulous' due to the way in which it showcases Shelly's personal style rather than recognisable designer fashions, success for Shelly in the future appears to be represented by material wealth. As she embraces

J.T., the audience's attention is drawn to the large diamond engagement ring she is wearing by an exaggerated visual sparkle and the use of the 'bling' sound effect. As a result, this scene attempts to literally represent the idea of 'bling', a term used within hip-hop culture to refer to the 'imaginary "sound" that is produced from light reflecting off a diamond'.[38] By showcasing the 'acquisition, ostentatious display, and defence of mainstream trinkets of success, whether in the form of clothes, jewellery, cars, or sexual partners', African American rappers attempt to demonstrate that they have escaped the economically disadvantaged confines of the ghetto (Holmes Smith 1997: 350). Yet, Shelly is not defined by the ghetto. Instead, her focus on material wealth is bound up with her status as a female.

In relation to hip-hop music, Rose highlights a dichotomy that often takes place in female raps. While women are often depicted as 'taking advantage of the logic of heterosexual courtship in which men coax women into submission with trinkets and promises of financial security', there are also many female raps that actually 'challenge the depictions of women in many male raps as golddiggers' (1994: 155). This particular example from *Eve* is indicative of the latter point, as it is made clear that it is Shelly's business acumen that has paid for her expensive 'trinkets' rather than her husband's money. After congratulating her on her twentieth franchise in Thailand, J.T. says 'and by the way, I just read in Forbes that you are now one of the richest women in the country . . . and I'm not threatened at all'. For Shelly, financial security is arrived at through her own hard work and on her own terms, even if it means questioning J.T.'s perceived notion of masculinity.

While Shelly may not adhere to the traditional notion that the male partner in a relationship should be the main breadwinner, her vision of family life represents the dominant ideology of mother, father, and two children. This can be interpreted in two ways. In the first instance, it can be considered reflective of another dichotomy that Rose suggests exists with regards to hip-hop culture, namely that although there are predominantly resistant voices within female rap, there are also times in which dominant discourses are asserted: 'Critical commentary on female rappers rarely confronts that ways in which some of their work affirms patriarchal family norms and courtship rituals' (146-147). However, it can also be understood as a parody of the traditional sitcom family and, more notably, the 'perfect' black sitcom family

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[38] See *www.urbandictionary.com* for a definition of the term bling. http://www.urban dictionary.com/define.php?term=bling (Accessed July 2006).

constructed by *The Cosby Show*. As her (future) children enter the scene, Shelly greets them by saying 'Hello Martin Luther. Hello Coretta'. Taken in isolation, Shelly's decision to name her children after the black civil rights leader and his wife appears to be an explicit attempt to evoke a sense of black history. But for a knowledgeable audience, the chosen names also evoke the decision to name Cliff's twin grandchildren in *The Cosby Show* Nelson and Winnie, after the Mandelas.

As I have previously discussed, *The Cosby Show* was routinely criticised for its portrayal of a privileged black family, seemingly untouched by racism, prejudice, or a sense of social and economic disadvantage. The programme-makers countered such comments, however, by highlighting the way in which more subtle signifiers of blackness were incorporated into the show. For example, along with the naming of the twins, the presence of an ANC poster on Theo's bedroom door caused great debate between Cosby and the NBC network. In the case of *Eve*, the children's names are made explicit within a scene of heightened artifice, thus drawing attention to their significance. Everything in the scene operates as a parody of the sitcom family. As the entire family gather on the sofa, Coretta informs her parents that she and her brother received straight A's at school once again. She then asks, 'mommy, are we perfect?' only to be told by Shelly, 'no sweetie, only God is perfect. But we're close'. At this statement, both the characters and the studio audience laugh, as if at the absurdity of the situation. Yet, both the pleasures derived from, and the problems created by, *The Cosby Show* stemmed from its depiction of a seemingly perfect family. On the one hand, this allowed black people to be depicted as functional, loving, and successful, but by doing so, it ignored the pressures and the prejudices faced by black families in real life. Through the use of the flashforward technique, *Eve* presents the perfect 'nuclear' family as something that can only be achieved in a dream, or within the confines of the traditional sitcom genre, and which therefore bears no relation to reality.

Later in the episode, when Shelly asks J.T. how he sees their relationship developing, the image once more dissolves into an alternative scene of their possible future together. Again, J.T.'s vision is informed by past sitcoms, however, rather than the perfect Huxtable family, it is the dysfunctional Bundys from *Married . . . With Children* that are brought to mind. As he arrives home, J.T. finds the house in a mess and the children, who are now named Pammy and Tommy Lee after the infamous actress and her rock star husband, running wild and being disrespectful. When he asks

where their mother is, Tommy Lee replies, 'she's at work. She's always at work'. This sequence reinforces J.T.'s patriarchal outlook, suggesting that a woman should stay at home and look after her children rather than go out to work. When Shelly arrives home minutes later, she is depicted as a distant and selfish mother, feeding her children fast food and taking little interest in their development. Moreover, while the diamond ring remains, it is J.T.'s earnings that are now paying for it. Like Al Bundy in *Married . . . With Children*, he is simply needed to provide money for the rest of the family to spend on frivolous consumer items. It is significant that J.T.'s daydream draws on the white sitcom *Married . . . With Children*, as the Fox show was originally conceived in opposition to the functional vision of family life put forward by *The Cosby Show*. By naming the children after a notorious white couple, however, the programme-makers seem to be avoiding any controversy with regards to black racial stereotyping. Overall, I would suggest that these sequences are an attempt by the programme-makers to reflect on sitcom history and the position of blacks and women within that history. With a black, female hip-hop artist in the lead role, *Eve* is illustrative of a niche sitcom that complicates the notion of racial and gender-based representation.

Despite the fact that both *Girlfriends* and *Eve* were indicative of a distinct programming strategy on the part of UPN to target young, ethnic, and female viewers, the series that was to receive the most promotion in the 2005 schedule was the family-based sitcom *Everybody Hates Chris*, which I will now go on to consider.

Everybody Hates Chris: Voiceover Narration and the Visible Star Persona

Premiering on Thursday night, as opposed to the Monday-night 'ghetto' previously reserved for black programming, *Everybody Hates Chris* is primarily a family sitcom, narrated and executive produced by the successful African-American comedian Chris Rock. In contrast to *Girlfriends* and *Eve*, which were conceived as black alternatives to the urban-based sitcoms of the 1990s concerned with single friends, the show's domestic setting would seem to indicate a return to the conventional set-up of the traditional network sitcom. However, in terms of its form, narrative structure, and visual and aural aesthetic, *Everybody Hates Chris* is stylistically innovative, utilising a range of techniques such as voiceover narration, flashbacks, archive footage, and a retro popular music soundtrack within a non-linear narrative.

Set in Brooklyn in 1982, the show can be described as one of a new breed of 'high concept' sitcoms based around a central theme. For example, in the case of NBC's *My Name is Earl* (2005-), the premise involves Jason Lee's character Earl attempting to atone for all the misdeeds he has committed in his life. Compiling a list of the people he has affected with his actions, each episode sees Earl attempt to right his wrongs in a specific instance. The central conceit of *Everybody Hates Chris* is its focus on the childhood experiences of stand-up comedian Chris Rock. Beginning in 1982, the year Rock turned thirteen, each season of the show takes the viewer through a year in the life of young Chris as he deals with growing up in a notorious area of Brooklyn and attending a primarily white school.

In itself, the programme's title can be read as an explicit attempt to differentiate the sitcom from its commercial network counterparts; *Everybody Hates Chris* is a deliberate play on the title of CBS's hit sitcom, *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005). With its studio setting, audience laugh track, and conventional portrayal of the extended Barone family, the latter became one of the top-rated network sitcoms following the demise of urban-based comedies such as *Seinfeld* and *Friends*. While the title can be read as ironic (each member of the family does not always 'love' the main character Ray), it can also be seen as representative of the traditional domestic sitcom in which the patriarchal character is positioned at the centre of the family and harmony is restored by the end of each episode (Gray 2005: 148). In contrast, the title of *Everybody Hates Chris* attempts to be less ambiguous. By replacing 'love' with 'hate', the UPN sitcom establishes a more cynical and self-reflexive tone from the outset, offering itself as a niche network alternative to the more commercially-friendly *Everybody Loves Raymond*. However, given the show's reliance on Chris Rock's extratextual popularity, this title can also be read as ironic, as in a similar manner to its predecessor *Eve*, it plays on the assumption that viewers are familiar with the eponymous comedian and, more importantly, enjoy his particular style of comedy.

The subject of the title is, in this case, the stand-up comedian Chris Rock, but unlike *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and its depiction of Larry David, *Everybody Hates Chris* does not take as its main focus the everyday life of the well-known comedian and film star. Instead, it is the fictionalised version of Rock's life as a teenager that forms the central premise. While each episode is narrated aurally by Rock himself through the use of voiceover, his thirteen-year-old incarnation is played on-screen by the young actor Tyler James Williams. Lury describes the voiceover in television as

an 'acousmatic presence . . . a voice that is heard by the audience (and sometimes, by the people in vision), but which does not appear to be attached to a source (a body or an object) that can be seen on-screen' (2005: 59). For this reason, she contends that the voiceover generally works to 'make any performer, however well-known, relatively invisible' (62). This assertion may hold true for a number of programmes with voiceover but it is not, I would argue, the case in *Everybody Hates Chris*.

Although voiceover narration is not regarded as a generic characteristic of the sitcom, there have been a number of precedents, most notably that of *The Wonder Years* (ABC, 1988-1993),[39] the show that *Everybody Hates Chris* most resembles in terms of its central conceit, and more recently *Sex and the City*, which I have discussed elsewhere in this thesis. Lury's argument holds true for the former programme, in which viewers are introduced to the trials and tribulations experienced by the young Kevin Arnold (played by Fred Savage) in the 1960s through the voiceover narration of Kevin's adult self (provided by Daniel Stern). In this instance, Kevin is an entirely fictional character, unrelated in real life to either of the actors involved in his portrayal. Stern was hired to provide the narration with a voice that evokes the experience of adulthood and viewers are expected to suspend their disbelief by accepting the fictional illusion that the voice heard is that of the grown-up Kevin. As a result, Stern's presence is never visualised on-screen and, as a character actor rather than a film star, it is unlikely viewers are familiar with his image from other media. *The Wonder Years* does, therefore, render Stern relatively invisible.

The use of voiceover in *Sex and the City*, on the other hand, is markedly different. Unlike Kevin in *The Wonder Years*, the central character of Carrie Bradshaw does not provide the show's voiceover narration from a vantage point in the future, but rather narrates as the story unfolds. As the Carrie we see on-screen and the Carrie we hear on the soundtrack are one and the same, the audience is inevitably aware of her physical appearance. The fact that Carrie is played by Sarah Jessica Parker, an actress who received a modicum of attention through her film work and became a high-profile celebrity through her role in *Sex And The City*, means that her voice is not only recognisable to fans of the show but also intrinsically linked to the

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[39] *The Wonder Years* is difficult to classify as it introduced a number of innovations to the sitcom genre. Although broadcast in half-hour instalments, it was shot on film and dispensed with both the laugh track and the studio audience. Like *Sex and the City*, a programme that it shares a number of formal features with, the term 'dramedy' has often been used to describe it.

fashionable persona that she inhabits both on-screen and off. Parker is therefore anything but invisible.

While Lury's argument may be directed primarily at the use of voiceover within television commercials and documentaries rather than within the fictional series, it remains problematic when considered in relation to a multimedia era characterised by convergence and the cult of celebrity. The way in which stars now cross over from one form to another and gain exposure through a variety of different media means that their voices become an increasingly marketable commodity. Actors such as Samuel L. Jackson are not asked to lend their voices to computer games, for example, in order to be invisible.[40] Such voices are sought after precisely because they are 'recognisable' and thus bring with them a certain cultural cachet and credibility that producers hope will be transferred to their particular product.

Audience recognition of Chris Rock's voice is an essential component of *Everybody Hates Chris*, as the show is promoted not as the everyday life of an ordinary teenager growing up in Brooklyn, but as a retelling of the teenage life of the highly successful and well-known comedian Chris Rock. It is Rock's star persona that makes the show of particular interest to a wide audience. Informed by his personal experience, it features not only his name in the title but also his voiceover narration. These three elements indicate to the audience that Rock is the author of the text, regardless of whether this is in fact the case (a point that I will return to later).

For Caldwell, authorial intent is now used regularly within the television industry to market programming as a prestige product to a knowing and discerning audience (1995: 10). Producers and networks increasingly aim to attach a known 'name' to a show (from the world of film or stand-up comedy for instance) in order to target a desirable niche segment of the audience.[41] UPN's objective is slightly different however. As the term niche network suggests, UPN already targets a niche section of the audience with its programming in the form of young, urban and ethnic minority viewers. Although Hunt points out that black Americans watch a considerable amount of television on average and 'spend a larger share of their

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[40] As well as lending his voice to the video games *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* and *The Incredibles* (thus reprising his roles in the cinematic versions), Samuel L. Jackson also voices Officer Frank in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. His involvement with such successful video games led to him hosting the 2006 Spike TV VGA Video Game Awards.

[41] This is in contrast to what Gitlin terms, the 'least objectionable programming' approach, or rather, the production of featureless programming aimed at the masses without fear of controversy (1983: 61).

disposable income on the types of consumer items marketed in television commercials', they are frequently overlooked by advertisers as they fail to constitute a large enough segment of the market (2005: 279). While undoubtedly 'niche', it would seem that black audiences are not particularly 'desirable' in terms of advertising revenue.

The key advertising demographic for both UPN and its commercial network competitors is adult viewers in the 18- to 49-year-old age group, of which only a small segment can be identified as a minority. UPN sitcoms such as *Girlfriends* and *Eve* have a limited reach as they are primarily targeted at female minority viewers. Rock's involvement in *Everybody Hates Chris*, on the other hand, widens its potential viewership. For a black stand-up comedian, Rock has gained exceptional success through his television work (*Saturday Night Live*, NBC, 1975- ; *In Living Color*, Fox, 1990-94; and a number of HBO specials) and his film roles (*Dogma*, 1999 and *Down to Earth*, 2001, amongst others). His crossover potential was confirmed when he lent his voice to the Dreamworks animated film *Madagascar* in 2005 and was chosen to present the Academy Awards to a global audience in the same year.[42] By broadcasting a sitcom with Rock's name attached, UPN's objective is to target a 'wide' rather than 'niche' audience, less restricted by racial or class divisions. The niche network's belief in *Everybody Hates Chris*'s ability to attract a broader than average audience is signified by the fact that it was scheduled on Thursday evening opposite NBC's *Friends* spin-off *Joey* (2004-2006); a decision that was rewarded when the show went on to achieve the highest ratings in that time slot. Not only did *Everybody Hates Chris* beat *Joey* in total viewers (7.8 million to 7.5 million) but it also triumphed in the all-important 18- to 49-year-old demographic share (3.2 rating to 3.0 rating) (Consoli 2005: 4). Moreover, the premiere of *Everybody Hates Chris* drew the 'largest audience ever for a UPN comedy' (Frutkin 2005: 30).

The fact that it is only Rock's *voice* that appears within the programme is significant for two reasons. In the first instance, Rock's voice has a recognisable quality, as shown with his work on *Madagascar*. As a comedian, he is not particularly physical. He does not contort his face in the manner of Jim Carrey or swagger and stumble like the Wayans Brothers. Instead, he is characterised by his hugely

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[42] Rock's selection to present the Oscars created a huge media storm, as the ceremony is generally considered to be conservative, in terms of humour, and a product of the establishment, neither of which Rock is considered to be. However, his performance failed to ignite further controversy and was deemed relatively successful.

expressive voice, which manages to be distinctively black without lapsing into stereotypical blackvoice. Discussing Rock's stand-up performance, David Bennun remarks on the commanding stage presence of the comedian: 'The space unaffected by his skinny body, and that's most of it, is filled by his voice. Rock's voice rises in pitch and volume from a high tenor to his inevitable falsetto howls of righteous fury, drowned in the ensuing storms of laughter' (1999: online). By featuring only his voice, the production of *Everybody Hates Chris* is able to capture the distinctive essence of the comedian without requiring the commitment and capital that physically starring in a network sitcom entails.

Secondly, although it is a common practice for comedians to cross over from stand up to television to create or star in their own sitcom, it is often problematical in terms of transferring their stage persona to the small screen. As stand-up is a live medium with relatively few restrictions in terms of taste and language, comedians are able to react to each particular audience and deal with controversial subject matter in their routine. Television, on the other hand, is bound by a number of standards and practices that work to contain comic performance. Thus, comedians that are known on the stand-up circuit for challenging material may find themselves limited within the sitcom form. *Everybody Hates Chris* avoids this dilemma somewhat by having Rock provide voiceover narration from a future vantage point. Rather than playing an agreeable fictional character or a sanitised version of his stand-up persona, Rock's voiceover fulfils a dual purpose in moderating between the two. As such, it is similar to the use of Jerry's stand-up performances in *Seinfeld*. Before discussing this further, I will examine Rock's stand-up persona in more detail by looking at the type of issues that inform his material and considering how such contentious subject matter is received and interpreted by the audience.

Complicating Race through Stand-Up Comedy

Chris Rock's stand-up material often involves the difficult subject of race relations, a topic that many sitcoms have repeatedly failed to incorporate in a satisfactory manner over the years. His most infamous and controversial comic routine, entitled 'Niggas vs. Black People', first appeared in his 1996 HBO special, *Bring the Pain*, and centres on the suggestion that black people can also be considered racist because 'we hate black people too'. The routine takes the form of a nine-minute critique of a certain segment of the black community that Rock refers to as 'niggas'. Dividing the black

community in two, Rock describes the majority of blacks as law-abiding and hard working with high expectations for themselves and their children. 'Niggas' on the other hand, perpetuate stereotypical images of black people by propagating violence, pleading ignorance, and living on welfare:

> Niggas always want some credit for some shit they're supposed to do. For just some shit that they're supposed to do, a nigga will brag about some shit that a normal man just does. A nigga will say some shit like "I take care of my kids". You're *supposed* to, you dumb motherfucka. What you talking about? What you bragging about? What kind of ignorant shit is that? "I ain't never been to jail". What do you want, a cookie? You're not *supposed* to go to jail, you "low-expectation-having" motherfucka.

This extract demonstrates the complexity of Rock's approach to race. On the one hand, his viewpoint seems explicit and surprisingly close to the dominant norm; he dislikes black people who indulge in the type of behaviour that is detrimental to society and the image of other black people. What is controversial about this stance is that he refuses to depict the black community as monolithic or as a victim of circumstance. Moreover, his anecdotes seem to support many of the longheld stereotypes that have circulated about black people in society, namely that they are lazy, ignorant, and irresponsible. However, he also posits the hard-working black man or woman who has two jobs to support his or her family as the norm: 'Get a job, I got two, you can't get one?' he barks at the audience in frustration.

In contemporary black culture there has been a concerted attempt to reclaim the word 'nigga' and its use in gangsta rap and hip-hop music in particular can be seen as an attempt to repackage racial difference and sell it to consumers as a signifier of hipness (some of the difficulties of which I discussed in relation to *Girlfriends*). For Rock, however, the term 'nigga' is a social construct that is not only used by both blacks and whites to propagate negative racial stereotypes but which also serves to absolve black people from a sense of social responsibility. Rock's routine, therefore, implicitly critiques the racist society that created the term 'nigga' while also (somewhat controversially) berating those who perpetuate it.

What also makes Rock's comments complex is the way in which the audience interprets them. Throughout the show, there are numerous shots of the assembled crowd, which seems to be primarily made up of black people.[43] For the first half of

the routine, in which Rock talks about 'niggas' shooting up cinemas and acting dumb, it is fair to say that the audience find it humorous as they can be heard laughing uproariously at Rock's claims. However, their actual cheering is reserved for the section in which Rock discusses the black men and women who are working two jobs to support their family. It is at this point that, rather than *laughing at* the crude stereotypes of black people that may, in some cases, ring true, the audience seems to cheer in *recognition of* Rock's assertion that the average black person is, in fact, responsible and diligent. Rock goes on to point out that as black people only make up a small percentage of the American population and are concentrated in a few large cities, 'the other forty states are filled up with broke-ass white people'. This declaration is accompanied by both cheering and clapping, as Rock suggests that blacks are not responsible for all of society's problems and that whites are not automatically better off than their black counterparts.

Of course, it is likely that black and white audiences will interpret the material differently, as will racist and non-racist audiences. This does not stop Rock from sarcastically suggesting that 'I love black people but I hate niggas . . . boy, I wish they'd let me join the Klu Klux Klan'. Rock's stand-up material is challenging and thought provoking, and refuses to tell the audience what to think. While historically it would have been difficult to transfer such a contentious and unapologetic stage-persona to the sitcom form, I have already demonstrated through my previous analyses how sitcoms in the post-network rely on contentiousness to differentiate themselves within the marketplace and target knowing and discerning segments of the audience.

Dual-Status Narrator: Operating both Within and Outside of the Fictional Diegesis

By featuring only his voice, Rock is situated at a distance from the narrative of *Everybody Hates Chris*. As such, he is able to self-consciously comment and reflect on events in a knowing and playful way, often discussing issues that are not normally considered within a family sitcom. For example, in the first episode of the show, 'Everybody Hates the Pilot', we see the Rock family move to the Brooklyn neighbourhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, otherwise known as 'Bed-Stuy, Do or Die'.

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[43] While Rock's live audience may be primarily made up of black people, his stand-up show is also broadcast to a wider racial demographic by HBO.

As Rock's voiceover cynically points out, 'if we had known Bed-Stuy would be the centre of a crack epidemic I guess we would have picked somewhere else'. From the outset, Rock makes it clear that the show is not going to depict an ideal family in comfortable surroundings. When his mother insists that the teenage Chris attends a white school situated halfway across town in order to get a better education, Rock's voiceover informs the viewer, 'not a Harvard type education. Just a "not sticking up a liquor store" type education'.

The topic of crack epidemics is not something generally featured within a network family sitcom while middle-class black sitcoms, such as *The Cosby Show*, have consistently avoided the issue of crime in black neighbourhoods. *Everybody Hates Chris* is able to incorporate such topics, however, because they are not part of the actual storyline. Rather than being played out within the narrative, they are presented as knowing remarks by Rock on the voiceover. As the viewer is expected to be familiar with Rock's stand-up material, in which such topics are an essential component, they are not deemed incongruous within the sitcom. Instead, they bestow the domestic narrative with a critical edge and credibility that is in keeping with Rock's off-screen persona.

It is not simply his 'stand-up' voice that features within the show, as Rock's narrator is also subject to characterisation due to the way in which he is presented as an adult version of the child whose adventures we follow on-screen. As a result, Rock also satisfies Kozloff's definition of a homodiegetic narrator, or that is a character that is 'situated within the world they tell us about' (1992: 82). This dual status means that Rock's narration functions in two distinct ways. In the first, as detailed in the aforementioned example, Rock stands outside of the fictional world of the narrative and is able to deliver unrestrained comments in the manner of his contentious stand-up material. In the second, however, Rock's narration helps contain what we see on-screen by acting as a moderating influence rather than an inflammatory one. Although the narrative of *Everybody Hates Chris* avoids such topics as drugs and crime, it does tackle Rock's favoured subject of race relations and it is in these instances that the voiceover tempers what we see played out on-screen.

As the only black child at Corleone Junior High (it is not until episode nine that both Chris and the audience are introduced to a Puerto Rican child at the school) Chris is faced with prejudice and bullying on a daily basis, primarily from the chubby,

red-haired Joey Caruso, the school's chief bully.[44] Following a heated exchange in the school corridor, which is subsequently broken up by the principal, Caruso warns Chris, 'this isn't over nigger'. As I have noted, while there have been attempts to reclaim the word nigger and alter its meaning, it is still regarded as a taboo term with such an array of connotations attached that it is unlikely to be found in most prime-time drama much less a domestic family sitcom. Even within the realm of stand-up comedy, Rock's (derogatory) use of the term is one of the reasons that his aforementioned routine attracted so much controversy. While Chris refuses to react to Caruso's insult on-screen, the viewer is informed of the consequences that face those who use such language by the voiceover: 'Oh, he got away with calling me a nigger that day but later in life he said it at a DMX concert and almost got stomped to death'.

The potential harm and upset caused to the young Chris sits incongruously with the production of humour within the sitcom. The camera lingers on a close-up of the teenager's face as he considers the enormity of the word and the way it has been used to attack him. However, the uneasiness created in this scene is undercut by Rock's assertion that Caruso got his comeuppance at a later date, thus allowing the audience to laugh cathartically at this 'insider' information. *Everybody Hates Chris* is thus able to tackle serious and contentious subject matter in this instance because Rock's adult voiceover humorously counteracts the pain inflicted on his teenage self.

By featuring an omniscient narrator that is recognisable to the audience and is privy to such information that occurs outside of the narrative, *Everybody Hates Chris* moves toward 'foregrounding the discourse', and reminding the viewer of the 'apparatus that intervenes between them and the world on screen' (Kozloff 1992: 83; Allen 1992: 117). Even though he does not appear physically on-screen, Rock is continuously made visible through these techniques and viewers are thus made aware that what they are watching is fiction, albeit fiction that is loosely based on Rock's real-life teenage experiences. As viewers are also expected to know that Rock has achieved a certain level of success in real life, their reading of events within the show is likely to be affected. For those who are not aware of his stand-up success, the opening sequence of the pilot informs the viewer that the young Chris grew up to be a

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[44] The fictional high school is named Corleone, in reference to the family in *The Godfather*. Along with Caruso, the name of the school bully, this suggests that the school is in an Italian neighbourhood and conjures up images of the mafia. This subtle reference reminds viewers that it is not just African-Americans who face negative stereotyping. Different races and ethnicities, such as Italian- or Mexican-Americans for example, are regularly labelled in a certain way by society and are subsequently typecast within the media.

stand-up comedian. For example, it is Rock who ultimately gets the last laugh, not Caruso the bully, as it is Rock's fame that allows him to relay his story on screen. As such, viewers are able to laugh at the misery that befalls the young Chris, safe in the knowledge that he not only lived to tell the tale but also became extremely successful in the process.

Reconfiguring the Sitcom Shooting Style

Chris Rock is not only positioned as the author of the text through the show's title and his role as narrator, but he is also promoted as the show's author through UPN's marketing strategy. The attraction of *Everybody Hates Chris* and its unique selling point is the involvement of Rock in the production. Launching the 'most ambitious marketing and promotional campaign in its ten-year history', UPN arranged for the pilot episode of the show to be available on American Airlines flights, emblazoned adverts on every New York City bus for a month, and ran trailers in cinemas across the country (Adalian 2005). The overall strategy was underpinned, however, by Rock appearing on the talk show circuit to promote the show and his role within it. Without Rock's fame and notoriety, it is unlikely that UPN would have embarked on such a widespread campaign costing, according to *Mediaweek*, fifteen million dollars (Consoli 2005: 4). Yet, as Frutkin (2005) notes, Rock's position as sole author of the text is problematic as he is actually credited as co-creator of the show alongside Ali LeRoi, who he established a creative partnership with on HBO's Emmy-award winning *The Chris Rock Show* (1997-2000). Rock's persona may be essential to *Everybody Hates Chris* in terms of marketing, promotion, and attracting a wide audience, but it is LeRoi who assumes the title of showrunner and who is thus responsible for the overall look and direction of the sitcom. It is this look and visual style that, I would suggest, makes the show distinctive from its network counterparts. With regards to presentational style, *Everybody Hates Chris* dispenses with the rigid form of the traditional domestic sitcom and instead adopts an array of visual techniques that initially evoke the look of MTV. However, I intend to demonstrate that the visual aspect of the show actually works in conjunction with the voiceover to create an innovative aesthetic that fulfils a commercial purpose while also being socially progressive.

Opening with a title page that reads 'Brooklyn, 1982', each episode of *Everybody Hates Chris* immediately situates the action, in terms of time and place, in

Rock's childhood environment and creates a distance between Rock's adult self (the narrator) and the events depicted on screen. Set in the past and featuring voiceover narration, the show does not conform to the multi-camera shooting style of the traditional network sitcom but is filmed using a single camera instead. Due to the complicated nature of single camera filming, this means that the show also dispenses with the presence of a live studio audience and the subsequent audible laugh track. However, the use of voiceover also negates the necessity of a laugh track due to the way in which it adopts some of the functions of the latter, such as guiding the viewer in accepting the humour of a particular situation. At the same time, the voiceover also works to produce humour, as demonstrated in the aforementioned exchange between Chris and Caruso.

Robert Allen posits that there are two primary modes of address in television, the *cinematic* mode and the *rhetorical* mode. Drawn from the conventions of Hollywood, the former aims to hide its operation and engage its viewers covertly, 'making them unseen observers of a world that always appears fully formed and autonomous' (1992: 117). It is this mode of address that allows a sitcom such as *That 70s Show* (Fox, 1998-2006) to be both set in the past and filmed 'as live' in front of a studio audience, as the actors perform each scene in the manner of a theatrical play, without reference to the viewer or the technical apparatus that intervenes. The latter mode, on the other hand, directly addresses the audience and explicitly acknowledges the performer's role as storyteller and the viewer's role as listener (Allen 1992: 117). *It's Garry Shandling's Show* was able to adopt this mode of address while filming in front of a studio audience by having Shandling's character acknowledge that he was starring in a sitcom and regularly break the fourth wall to converse with the assembled audience. This approach is not possible within *Everybody Hates Chris*, as Rock does not physically star in the show but features only as a disembodied voice. Like *The Wonder Years*, which was also shot using a single camera and without a studio audience or laugh track, the presence of voiceover ultimately impacts on the programme's shooting style, creating a self-conscious narrative that is relayed from a distance rather than presented 'as live'.

It is not just the use of a title page and single camera that make *Everybody Hates Chris* visually distinctive. The show also utilises a number of formal techniques that are rarely seen within the recognisable and rigid style of the three-camera, live-tape sitcom, e.g., fast-cut editing, screenwipes, animated inserts, archive footage, and

slow motion. While Rock's self-conscious commentary establishes the comic tone, it is not in itself the only source of humour. Freed from the restrictions of the multi-camera set-up, *Everybody Hates Chris* attempts to visualise Rock's jokes, creating an innovative visual aesthetic in the process. Although filmed using a single camera and drawing on the real-life experiences of a well-known celebrity, the show does not reproduce the 'comedy verité' approach of HBO sitcoms. Instead, it experiments with camera angles and editing style while featuring a soundtrack that includes not only Rock's voiceover but also several recognisable pop songs from the era in which the programme is set.

Accompanied by the sound of 'Get Down On It' by Kool and the Gang, the pilot begins with a shot of posters for the Sugarhill Gang and Grandmaster Flash on Chris's bedroom wall as Rock's voiceover informs us that 1982 was the year that he turned thirteen: 'Before I became a comedian, I thought the coolest thing that would happen to me was being a teenager. I was gonna have women, money, stay out late. I was gonna be the bomb' says Rock as the camera pans across the room before settling above the young Chris sleeping. The image then dissolves as we enter a dream sequence depicting young Chris's vision of his teenage life, in which he looks cool wearing a leather jacket, hat, and shades, and gains entry to exclusive nightclubs. This incongruous vision, in which a young boy lives an adult lifestyle, begins with a tracking shot as we follow Chris into the club, and features a number of quick pans across the vibrant dancefloor before zooming into Chris striking a tough-guy pose as the crowd chant his name. It is immediately interrupted however by teenage reality when his door slams open and his mother yells, 'Chris. Get in the bathroom and wipe the pee off the toilet seat. Dis-gusting'.

Lasting only forty-five seconds, this opening sequence establishes the show's overall objective, namely to reconfigure the mundanity of everyday family life through the eyes of a teenager. In this short space of time, it also demonstrates the centrality of music and a striking visual style to this process. This is evident through the way various camera angles are used and the manner in which the music is incorporated into the diegetic narrative. In an attempt to both depict a teenage version of the world and attract a coveted youth audience within the desirable 18- to 49-year-old demographic, *Everybody Hates Chris* adopts a stylised aesthetic that owes more to

music television than domestic sitcom.[45] However, the innovative formal features applied within the sitcom do in fact serve a narrative purpose. While the pop music soundtrack works to situate the narrative in the 1980s, it also comments on the storyline and offers us a more detailed insight into the events depicted on-screen. Animated inserts appear to divert from the narrative, while archive footage is seemingly presented out of context, but by playing with the show's temporal conventions these episodes do in fact offer an insightful analysis of race relations. Before discussing these elements further, I will consider the programme's non-linear narrative and the way in which screenwipes and sound effects are used to both bracket shifts in time and establish character traits.

Time-Shifts, Character Development, and Institutional Posturing

As this is Chris's story that we are being given access to, *Everybody Hates Chris* does not take the form of a conventional linear narrative. Instead, we are often presented with a series of incidents (past and present) in which the traits of family members are revealed in non-linear, cumulative manner. For example, when Tanya the youngest member of the Rock household refuses to eat her oatmeal for breakfast because 'Chris made it too lumpy', Julius, Chris's father, instructs him not to throw it away: 'Eat that, that's thirty cents worth of oatmeal' he tells his eldest son. Rather than signify the end of the incident, what follows is a series of short scenes supporting Rock's claim on the voiceover that 'my father always knew what everything cost'. In the first instance, we hear Julius declare, 'that's a dollar nine cents in the trash', as the camera, which is situated inside the bin, shoots him from below retrieving a chicken drumstick. He then directly addresses the camera and says 'that's two dollars on fire' before the shot quickly pans down to the left to reveal a tray of burnt cookies on top of the cooker. Finally, the camera perches alongside Julius at table height as he despairingly states 'that's forty-nine cents of spilt milk dripping all over my table'.

While each episode features a central plot, the action is continually interrupted with short sequences like the one described. This is due to the fact that each storyline is presented from Rock's perspective and is therefore structured according to his memories of a variety of situations rather than as a single linear narrative. Throughout the series, Julius is frequently seen discussing the value of things. In 'Everybody

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[45] For a more detailed discussion of the aesthetics of music television see K. Dickinson (2001).

Hates Halloween' for example, he inspects a bag of candy that his wife Rochelle has bought for the kids in the neighbourhood and declares, 'that's almost twenty-three dollars worth of stuff'. When Rochelle proceeds to throw the cheap candy that Julius has bought in the bin (*Nickers* instead of *Snickers*, *M&N's* instead of *M&M's*), a number counter appears on screen and we hear a till ringing when it reaches one dollar ninety-nine. 'That's almost two dollars worth of candy in the garbage' is Julius's response as he kneels beside the bin to watch his money literally being thrown away. In the first instance, Julius's obsession with money is presented in a stereotypical manner. He is characterised as a 'mean' father and his ability to place value on everything can be interpreted almost as a kind of comic catchphrase. As the series progresses, however, we are offered an insight into why Julius is so anxious about money.

Working two jobs in order to provide for his family (a knowing reference to Rock's stand-up material), Julius is upset in 'Everybody Hates The Laundromat' when Rochelle calls him cheap for refusing to buy a new television set: 'You think I wanna be cheap? I'd love to come in here and buy you everything in the store but I don't have it like that Rochelle. I don't.' This statement is accompanied by soft soul music, signifying Julius's genuine love for Rochelle and the fact that he is a caring man who has to be tough on his wife and children due to the family's financial restraints. It is also accompanied by Rock's voiceover explaining, 'my father wasn't bald when he got married but one hair fell out for every bill he got!' as the camera zooms in on Julius's hairless head. The young Chris is given a further insight into his father's responsibilities when he joins him at his night job delivering newspapers across New York in 'Everybody Hates A Part-Time Job'. To the sound of Lionel Richie's 'All Night Long', we see Chris lifting heavy bundles of newspapers in front of a backdrop of Time Square. As Rock's voiceover lists the places they covered that evening, the image is intercut with tracking shots of the city at night, trailing car lights, and motorway signs. By the end of the episode, Rock declares that, 'after everything I'd been through, I understood my father a lot more. Because when you work that hard, you think about every dime you spend. And I was thinking about how I was gonna spend mine'.

These jumps in time between the past and present or between location and characters are signified with a visual screenwipe, quickly moving across the screen from the left or right, or as you would turn the pages in a book. As the soundtrack is

as important as the visuals in *Everybody Hates Chris*, each transition is also accompanied by a relevant screenwipe sound effect. As demonstrated, this merges formal innovation in sitcom terms (unusual camera angles, numbers and titles on screen, cutaways to tracking shots, fast-paced editing to musical accompaniment) with character development. It also allows Rock's narrator to dip in and out of the central narrative, and discuss events that are not directly linked to the storyline.

One such example of this occurs in the pilot episode when Chris asks his (only) friend Greg what happened to the previous school principal after being introduced to his replacement. Before Greg can answer a screenwipe replaces the colourful, vivid image of the two boys in the school hallway with a blue-tinged scene drained of all other colour in which two policemen escort a man out of the school building. In a relatively solemn voice, Rock's voiceover states:

> Mr Palmer was accused of doing something that we can't tell you about because of the network censors. The school settled a lawsuit out of court and he's not allowed to teach anymore. If he moves to your neighbourhood, you'll get a warning.

This sequence is interesting on a number of levels. First, Rock's voiceover relays the story of the previous principal in both an oblique and highly self-conscious manner. Careful not to discuss the supposed incident itself, he instead draws attention to the restrictions placed on network broadcasters and the way in which it limits what type of narratives programmes can and cannot tell. The image and the background music tell a different story however. In contrast to Rock's evasiveness, the scene itself shows Palmer struggling with police and shouting, 'I didn't touch her' before running down the street with the police in pursuit. The background music, which is barely audible in comparison to the musical accompaniment in other scenes, is a song by The Police called 'Don't Stand So Close To Me', which was written by former English teacher Sting about a schoolgirl's crush on her teacher and his ambiguous feelings about the situation. As a result, the implication is that the former principal has been accused of an inappropriate relationship with a pupil and may even, due to the severity hinted at by Rock's voiceover, be guilty of paedophilia.

Like the comments by Rock about crack epidemics and liquor store robberies, paedophilia is a taboo topic unlikely to be found in domestic network sitcoms (although it does feature in an episode of the HBO sitcom *Curb Your Enthsuiasm*).

With this sequence, however, there is a suggestion that, as a niche-network that is not available to the entire mass audience, UPN is able to push boundaries in a way that is not always possible for its major network counterparts. Contrary to Rock's assertion that 'we can't tell you about [it] because of the network censors', *Everybody Hates Chris* does in fact tell us about the incident through the use of visual images and background music. While UPN advertisers and audiences may be more accepting of such sequences, due to fact that it targets a specific demographic of 18- to 49-year-olds rather than the mass family audience, I propose that it is incorrect to suggest that UPN is subject to different standards and practices from the major networks. This is because, as I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, commercial network sitcoms have increasingly begun to deal with taboo and contentious subject matter in a variety of innovative ways. As a result, this sequence in *Everybody Hates Chris* is best described as a type of institutional posturing that attempts to position UPN in opposition to the major networks and differentiate *Everybody Hates Chris* from rival sitcoms.[46]

Merging the Past and the Present to Pursue an Analysis of Race Relations

What does differentiate *Everybody Hates Chris* from both its contemporaries and predecessors is the way in which it plays with the temporal conventions of the sitcom (through the use of animated inserts and archive footage) in an attempt to pursue an analysis of race relations. Two such examples of this occur in the pilot episode of the show. The first takes place at the end of the school day when Caruso challenges Chris to a fight. Confident that it will only last a minute before someone comes along and breaks it up, Chris turns towards his aggressor as the opening bars of 'Eye of the Tiger' by Survivor strike up, a song that is recognisable as the theme to *Rocky III* (1982) and as a popular sporting event anthem. With the song's main refrain occurring in conjunction with Chris's first punch, its presence underscores the competitive and potentially harmful nature of the fight. Contrary to Chris's assertion that an adult or authority figure will intervene, the fight continues as the schoolchildren look on and Caruso backs Chris into a corner with his well-aimed punches. The action then cuts to a series of images, each less than a second long,

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[46] Like *The Simpsons*, the show works on a variety of levels offering different types of information to different kinds of viewers. Young viewers are not alienated due to the oblique nature in which taboo issues are dealt with, while media-savvy viewers are rewarded with information overload in each scene, such as intertextual and musical references, visual imagery, and voiceover commentary.

depicting the passage of time. There is a clock with a shadow passing over it, clouds moving in the sky, a sunset and sunrise, and a red rose flowering in bloom. The final image in the sequence dispenses with the visual metaphors and instead reads 'THIRTY MINUTES LATER' over an animated still of the Manhattan skyline. This humorous and visually innovative sequence detracts from the violence of the scene whilst simultaneously signifying the extent of Chris's beating by highlighting the duration of the fight.

The music also changes from the aggressive 'Eye of the Tiger' to Paul McCartney's more saccharine 'Ebony and Ivory', featuring Stevie Wonder. Alluding to racial integration, we hear the lyrics 'ebony and ivory, live together in perfect harmony' as the action returns to the fight, which now appears in slow motion in an attempt to drive home the disparity between the song's idealised vision and the everyday reality. Moreover, the sight of a policeman leisurely walking by destroys the notion put forward by Chris that an adult authority figure would rescue him. It is also suggestive of the black community's distrust of the police, as Chris is left on his own to defend himself against a baying crowd made up entirely of white people.

The second example occurs in the pilot's final scene when Julius checks on his son just before he goes to sleep. When asked if everything is going well at school, Rock's voiceover explains, 'I didn't tell him about the fight. My dad went to school during the civil rights era' as the camera lingers first on Chris's face looking up at his father before zooming in slowly to Julius who is calm and contemplative. He continues, 'after hoses, tanks, and the dog bites on your ass, somehow Joey Caruso didn't compare'. As Rock discusses his father's childhood experiences, we see three black and white archive images from the period, depicting intimidating tanks on the streets of an unnamed city and black men and women being set upon by hosepipes and dogs. Minus the loud and flashy screenwipes that usually introduce such sequences, this montage concludes with a black and white image of a menacing Joey Caruso, thus merging the past with the present as Chris compares his own dilemma with that of his father. Rather than dealing with the black experience in a primarily humorous manner, *Everybody Hates Chris* includes sequences such as these that force the audience (whether black or white) to confront past situations and consider them in relation to the present. The present, in the case of the *Everybody Hates Chris* narrative, may be 1982, but the inclusion of Rock's voiceover means that the show also asks viewers to consider the present in which the show is broadcast. As this

present is informed by Rock's stand-up success as a stand-up comedian, there is a suggestion that African Americans are no longer subject to the kind of discrimination and lack of opportunity associated with the past. However, Chris's childhood experience complicates this, as the image of Caruso's looming presence indicates that the threat of racism is never far from his mind.

There is a suggestion in this scene that Chris should not, or does not feel able to, complain about his bullying at the hands of Caruso, as previous generations of African Americans have had to deal with what may be considered worse or more extreme situations (although Rock the narrator is able to speak out). This is in contrast to the traditional sitcom convention that requires some sort of moral lesson be reached at the end of each episode. For example, in *The Cosby Show*, it is likely that a bully such as Caruso would receive his comeuppance and be dealt with by a person in authority, thus removing any threat within the narrative to the Huxtable family and providing narrative closure to the episode. *Everybody Hates Chris*, on the other hand, does not posit an idealised, safe domesticity as the norm. Although it rejects the neo-minstrel tendency of depicting urban single clowns in favour of portraying a domestic family set-up, it is not the family set-up of *The Cosby Show*. In the latter programme, racial and economic discrimination seemingly play no part in the day-to-day lives and experiences of the Huxtables. While Cliff Huxtable's successful career as an obstetrician never interferes with his ability to be on hand to provide advice, support, and money to his children whenever they need it, Rock's voiceover conveys a different reality in his final monologue. Unaware that Chris is being bullied at school, Julius says to his son 'I'll see you in the morning' before heading off to his night job: 'My father wasn't the type to say I love you. He was one of four fathers on the block. I'll see you in the morning meant he was coming home. Coming home was his way of saying I love you.' While this contains a certain sentimentality in itself, it is different to that posited by *The Cosby Show*. This ending does not provide resolution or reintegration. It simply draws to a close as the night ends, with the only thing Chris being clear about is that his father will still be there the following day.

Memory, History, and Nostalgic Pleasure

One of the defining characteristics of sitcom as a genre, or, as Kozloff describes it, one 'truism of television criticism', is that characters have 'no memory and no history: amazingly they don't even notice that they said and did exactly the same

things the previous week' (1992: 91). As I have demonstrated in my analyses of *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Eve*, however, a number of post-network sitcoms have tested this convention, and *Everybody Hates Chris* continues this trend. In the first instance, memory is integral to *Everybody Hates Chris* because the show itself is based on Rock's own (fictionalised) memories of growing up in 1980s Brooklyn and this is made apparent through Rock's voiceover. Secondly, Rock's memories are presented in a non-linear narrative, in which we are given access to the past and present actions of the characters. As illustrated in relation to Julius's attitude to money, characters in *Everybody Hates Chris* are not allowed to forget what they say and do from week to week as their previous actions are constantly called into play to support Rock's version of events.

In addition to evoking the notion of memory, *Everybody Hates Chris* also provides the characters with a history, albeit one that is recognised and discussed only by Rock's narrator. For example, in 'Everybody Hates the Laundromat', we are offered a flashback of the moment when Rochelle first tells Julius, seen in this instance with a full head of hair, that she is pregnant with Chris. Such references to the prior history of characters are rare in sitcoms and when they are mentioned they are usually given more prominence. For instance, flashback episodes in *Friends* are presented as 'must-see events', rather than in the ephemeral manner that they appear in *Everybody Hates Chris*. Along with the history of the characters, the show also refers to social history by including archive footage of real-life events that have occurred within American society, such as the previously discussed black and white images of the civil rights era.

The show's period setting and the references to memory and history work to serve both a commercial and political function. In the first instance, *Everybody Hates Chris* is concerned with reproducing the past style of the 1980s. Carefully recreating the fashions, hairstyles and décor of 1982, it also showcases the music and cultural objects of the era with Chris dressing as Prince for Halloween, asking for a personal stereo for Christmas, and longing for a leather jacket to make him look cool. As a result, *Everybody Hates Chris* functions as a nostalgic text that invokes a longing for an earlier time. Outlining the commodification of nostalgia, Paul Grainge notes that it is 'not about the past, per se, but about niche marketing and the taste and value differentials of particular demographic segments' (2000: 30). The fashions displayed in *Everybody Hates Chris*, and the 1980s pop soundtrack, act as a reference point for

viewers who remember the era and/or recognise the cultural objects, thus creating a nostalgic rather than narrative pleasure for certain segments of the audience.

By taking the 1980s as its setting, *Everybody Hates Chris* aims to attract viewers that would not generally watch black programming broadcast on UPN. While a sitcom featuring Chris Rock set in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, is likely to appeal to the network's core black viewership, its 1980s domestic family setting succeeds in widening its appeal to capture a 'market where pastness is a value', i.e., the key advertising demographic of 18- to 49-year-olds (Grainge 2000: 30). In addition, it also succeeds in appealing to a younger audience due to the presence of a 13-year-old main protagonist and the way in which the narrative is presented from his perspective. The strong language that informs Rock's stand-up is absent and references to taboo subject matter are suitably oblique, thus making it appropriate for children. According to Jerry Herron, this appeal to different demographic segments of the audience creates a 'separate-but-unequal experience of nostalgia – one for parents and one for kids' (1993: 14). Children are given access to past styles, images, and cultural artefacts through *Everybody Hates Chris* but they are not able to verify, like an adult can, whether such images are '"genuinely" historical' (14).

With regards to targeting younger viewers, therefore, *Everybody Hates Chris* could be accused of ripping images, most notably those of the civil rights era, from their context by simply presenting them in a fast-paced, visually stimulating manner rather than interrogating the social issues that inform such situations. However, I would suggest that alongside its commercial purpose, the show also pursues a political agenda due to the ways in which it plays with the temporal conventions of sitcom and uses editing to generate different meanings. *Everybody Hates Chris* does not provide the audience with a detailed history lesson regarding the civil rights era because, like Rock's stand-up material, it refuses to tell the audience what to think. Instead, it courts the viewer by assuming that they are already informed, politically aware, and media-savvy and thus able to recognise the significance of the images themselves. Moreover, it uses montage sequences to provoke associations between the past and present to force the viewer to confront the difficult issue of race relations in society.

The analyses presented within this chapter demonstrate the way in which UPN's sitcom output has moved away from the 'neo-minstrel' tendency to propagate negative stereotypes through the use of broad comedy and 'hyper-racialized'

representations toward a more diverse and complex depiction of the black community. While this has not wholly solved the problems of 'ghettoization', the presence of white males in high level decision-making roles, or the fact that the established commercial and broadcast networks continue to target desirable, *white* segments of the audience, the crossover success of *Everybody Hates Chris* in a Thursday night slot does indicate that a shift may be taking place. With young, liberal, and urban-based viewers being aggressively targeted by competing networks, the American television landscape has begun to reflect a world in which characters of varying race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, exist side-by-side. Moreover, rather than erase or ignore the differences in power and the prejudices faced by such characters, such issues are beginning to be raised in inventive, knowing, and challenging ways.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

I began this study with a discussion of the recurring media discourse surrounding the apparent death of the situation comedy. On establishing the resilience of the sitcom in a series of case studies mapping out the various transformations that the genre has undergone in the post-network era, it could be suggested that the only thing to have been laid to rest is traditional perceptions of the form. As I have demonstrated, the sitcom has always been a dynamic and flexible form that has shifted over the years in relation to changing conceptions of the target audience, network positioning strategies, technological advances, and social and cultural conditions in the outside world. While these developments have largely been related to subject matter and representation, the advent of the post-network era has led to an increasing number of formal innovations within the genre. In an attempt to attract viewers who have grown up watching television and who are therefore familiar with its forms and conventions, Mills notes how some of the sitcom's most obvious conventions have been abandoned and replaced with 'the formal characteristics of other, distinct genres' (2004: 68). Moving away from its vaudeville roots, the sitcom has begun to 'interact with aspects of television [and other media] to create meaning' (78).

Just as the producers of sitcom have begun to complicate our understanding and experience of the genre, television scholars similarly have to reassess how they deal with the enduring form. By importing existing terms, definitions, and approaches from literature, and more recently film studies, Neale explains that there has been 'a tendency to conceive of [television] genres as single, self-contained entities, and a corresponding tendency to limit the scope of the concept of genre itself' (2001: 2). What I hope to have demonstrated with this study, however, is that within a multichannel environment in which differentiation is key, this approach is no longer tenable. As various broadcast, cable, and niche networks compete for specific segments of an increasingly fragmenting audience, different interpretations of the genre exist alongside one another. For example, textual analysis has shown that sitcoms found on cable channels, and which are directed at teen and ethnic viewers, differ from earlier commercial network examples of the form. Moreover,

subscription-based services offering generic programming for a price, provide sitcoms that are sufficiently different from those offered free by commercial networks. The result is that sitcom can no longer be understood as a fixed theoretical category with an inherent meaning, but as a cultural product constituted by differing institutional practices and subject to ongoing change and redefinition.

This means that any analysis of the sitcom should take into consideration the historical context in which it is situated as well as the processes and practices that are unique to television. This is the approach that I have adopted here. Offering detailed analyses of the sitcom output of three differing television providers in the post-network era, this thesis examines the way in which the changing television landscape has allowed the genre to open up in terms of form, content, and representation. By embarking on a wide range of production and scheduling strategies, NBC, HBO, and UPN have sought to target specific niche segments of the audience with sitcoms that are distinctive, original, and contentious in nature. Having said that, it is the case that many channels have found themselves competing for a particularly desirable (and narrow) segment of the overall viewing public. Driven by a need to secure advertising revenue or subscription fees, this primarily consists of young, urban, upscale viewers in possession of high disposable incomes and liberal and edgy attitudes. While this appears to have led to sitcoms replacing depictions of the ideal, nuclear family with non-normative characters and lifestyles, this approach is not without problems. For example, with such a narrow focus, prime-time sitcom programming fails to cater for those groups that fall outside of this demographic, i.e., older viewers, those based in rural areas, blue-collar workers, and, indeed, those with more conservative values. Moreover, as I have discussed throughout this thesis, the racial composition of this desirable demographic is largely white. With the 'big four' and pay-cable channels in particular targeting this segment of the audience, representation of ethnic minority groups becomes confined to the smaller, niche networks, thus creating a division between black and white audiences.

While I have stated in my analysis that the crossover success of *Everybody Hates Chris* suggests that this is not always the case, there still remains the notion that prime-time programming is a relatively exclusive arena. Of course, this is not to say that other (less desirable) segments of the audience do not watch these sitcoms, take pleasure from them, and are even targeted by them, especially with regards to escapism and the need to foster aspirational desire. Nevertheless, they fail to reflect a

wide range of lifestyles. Instead, they present a world in which in order to participate you must be able to consume. As Becker asserts, this moves the equality debate into the 'realm of consumption' (1998: 44). Yet, with regards to American television, this is nothing new, as the industry has always been based on selling products to consumers. The only difference is that where once the aim was to sell household goods to housewives living in suburbia, the objective in the post-network era is to sell desirable lifestyles to specific niche audiences with the means (or aspirations) to consume.

With the emergence of pay-cable and, to a lesser extent, niche networks, the opportunity to move away from this approach and create original, independent, and special interest programming has become a possibility. In the case of HBO and UPN, however, the production of existing generic formats offers more economic appeal. Distinctiveness has therefore been created by explicitly positioning their genre output in opposition to that which is produced by the commercial networks (an approach that is highlighted in HBO's promotional campaign). With regards to sitcom, I have demonstrated that this involves the critique and pastiche of other television forms, playing with the institutional restrictions placed on strong language and adult themes, employing creative talent from disciplines that adhere to different conventions (such as stand-up comedy and rap music), and highlighting and challenging some of the negative racial and gender stereotypes that have historically been perpetuated within the sitcom form. The network sitcom has also undergone significant changes in the post-network era, with NBC in particular creating a roster of sitcoms in the 1990s that incorporated interweaving narratives, serial techniques, and a collection of intertextual references. Moreover, I have shown how its sitcom output also worked to make (sexual) difference visible within a mainstream arena. The result is that developments within broadcast, cable, and niche network sitcoms have adopted a somewhat symbiotic relationship, as they each produce material formulated to challenge and question the boundaries of the genre.

Although I recognise that post-network sitcoms have their difficulties and limitations, particularly with regards to issues of social power, academic analysis of the form can no longer work on the assumption that due to the commercial outlook of television, generic programming such as the sitcom is for the most part formally rigid, visually muted, and inherently conservative. While it is debatable whether this was ever the case, what I hope to have demonstrated within the three case studies

presented here is that increased competition has led to a number of significant innovations within the form. It is important to note that I am not trying to isolate in some way the programmes analysed within this thesis and position them as exceptional. On the contrary, what I am suggesting is that far from being laid to rest, the sitcom is a continually evolving process that differs according to the institutional status of its production and reception.

This leads me to consider the value of this approach and how it stands in relation to wider theories of television and genre analysis. First, the aim of this work is not to produce a grand theory of sitcom, or indeed of post-network television, but rather to provide a detailed examination of a specific period in the history of America's most enduring genre. In this respect, my work draws closely on that of Mittell. Explaining traditional approaches to television genre analysis, Mittell (2004) suggests that there has either been a tendency toward providing a concrete definition of a genre or to uncover its inherent meaning(s). Yet, as the analyses within this thesis indicate, this is not always possible or indeed productive. Just as elaborate definitions tend to result in a number of exceptions, genres can be interpreted in a number of (often contradictory) ways. This means that any attempt to define or interpret the core elements and meanings of a genre can only offer up generalisations. A more useful approach is to consider how a genre operates within a specific instance, i.e., how do we understand sitcom as a generic category in an era of increased competition and niche broadcasting. While this often results in certain patterns or trends emerging, this is not the central goal of the analysis.

Second, this move away from theories of definition and interpretation has impacted on what elements of a genre are actually studied. For example, scholars have generally taken as their focus the circular narrative structure of the sitcom, its theatrical look, and its need for stereotyping. While each of these elements is important, they alone do not account for how the sitcom is culturally produced and experienced. Again, drawing on Mittell (2004), television genre analysis must account for the specificities of the medium by considering a wide range of industrial practices, textual features, and, what Neale refers to as the 'inter-textual relay' of publicity, marketing, and journalistic discourses (1990: 49; Lukow and Ricci 1984). As demonstrated in the preceding case studies, this includes an extensive study of production techniques, star personae, scheduling strategies, channel positioning, government regulation, critical reviews, published interviews, programme websites,

and DVD commentaries. In addition to the traditional textual elements of content, narrative, and setting, it also involves an examination of visual characteristics, shooting style, recording format, audio conventions, and editing techniques.

With a number of 'other sites of genre articulation' in existence, Mittell contends that 'it is up to the genre critic to hunt these out and incorporate an array of these sites to create a broad and rich genealogy of generic operation around any specific example' (2004: 26). My approach has been especially wide-ranging due to my decision to focus on broadcast, pay-cable, and niche network sitcoms. However, it could be argued that it is not always necessary (or indeed possible) to consider each of the elements listed above in detail. Scholars seeking to offer a more limited analysis, for example, may instead choose to focus on one particular television outlet or programme, or to concentrate on a specific issue (such as the representation of ethnic or sexual minorities within a specific genre). While a relatively short analysis of *The Sopranos* or *Deadwood* (2004-2006) may not require a detailed history of television regulation or an examination of the star personae of the leading actors, it would appear rather incomplete without some sort of acknowledgement of the status of each programme as an HBO product. This is because the strong language, challenging content, complex characterisation, and intricate narrative structure exhibited in such shows is directly linked to the pay-cable channel's distinctive position within the industry.

This becomes problematic when we consider the way in which many American television programmes are distributed globally and are therefore experienced by viewers outside of their original broadcasting context. If an American series is positioned within new schedules and promoted as part of another channel identity, how do scholars begin to analyse its various sites of articulation? In the first instance it is important to consider why certain programmes are bought to be distributed abroad over others. This is generally related to the institutional status of its original production and circulation, e.g., the British broadcaster Channel 4 has acquired a number of NBC's 'must-see' sitcoms because of their record of achievement in the U.S. It is also useful to examine how a programme functions within another national context. As Paul Rixon explains, two of the smaller British channels, BBC 2 and Channel 4, have 'used some American material as important scheduling cornerstones attracting minority niche audiences' (2003: 54). In Britain at least, Rixon contends that American programming plays a dynamic role within the

television schedule (59). Again, this emphasises that it is important for scholars to examine how genres are culturally circulated and experienced.

I want to conclude this examination by returning to one of the key points of Caldwell's theory of televisuality. In his discussion of the new aesthetic sensibility that emerged in U.S. television in the 1980s (and which has subsequently been present throughout the post-network era), Caldwell explains how this was partly a function of the audience: 'Many viewers expected and watched programs that made additional aesthetic and conceptual demands not evident in earlier programming' (1995: 9). In order to attract and retain loyal viewers within a competitive multichannel landscape, television texts have to operate on a variety of levels and offer different pleasures to different segments of the audience. With regards to the sitcoms discussed here, this has been achieved through the use of irony and pastiche, intertextual references, and serialised techniques, as well as the acknowledgement of the interplay between the public and private personas of comic performers and also of the history of sitcom itself. Moreover, as the American audience no longer has to simply accept what the commercial networks offer, they must negotiate a range of extratextual material in order to make their viewing selections. This includes knowledge of the various programme providers and their position within the industry, along with the interpretation of promotional strategies and critical reviews. If viewers are able to recognise, understand, and partake in these various processes and practices, it is reasonable to expect academic analysis to be similarly detailed and wide-ranging. Taking sitcom as an example, this thesis offers a starting point for other television genre analyses to follow. By understanding genre as a temporal process that is constituted by a number of institutional practices rather than as a fixed, theoretical category, we can come closer to determining how such programming is culturally circulated and experienced.

Appendix 1

1. Quality TV is best defined by what it is not. It is not 'regular TV'.
2. Quality TV usually has a quality pedigree. Shows made by artists whose reputations were made in other, classier media, like film, are prime candidates.
3. Quality TV attracts an audience with blue chip demographics.
4. Desirable demographics notwithstanding, quality shows must often undergo a noble struggle against profit-mongering networks and nonappreciative audiences.
5. Quality TV tends to have a large ensemble cast. The variety of characters allows for a variety of viewpoints since multiple plots must usually be employed to accommodate all the characters.
6. Quality TV has a memory. Though it may or may not be serialized in continuing story lines, these shows tend to refer back to previous episodes.
7. Quality TV creates a new genre by mixing old ones.
8. Quality TV tends to be literary and writer-based.
9. Quality TV is self-conscious. Oblique allusions are made to both high and popular culture, but mostly to TV itself.
10. The subject matter of Quality TV tends toward the controversial.
11. Quality TV aspires toward 'realism'.
12. Series which exhibit the eleven characteristics listed above are usually enthusiastically showered with awards and critical acclaim.

Table 1.1. Twelve Identifying Characteristics of Quality Television.

R. J. Thompson (1996) *Television's Second Golden Age*. New York: Continuum, pp. 13-15.

1. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

   This approach to television has its origins in subjects such as Literary and
   Cultural Studies. It is partly defined by its tendency to analyse actual
   television programmes, particularly focusing on issues of form, content and
   representation (for example, the televisual construction of class, race, and
   gender). In terms of methodology it can take a number of critical forms that
   include semiotics, genre theory, narrative theory, ideological analysis,
   discourse analysis, feminism, postmodernism and so on. Although
   undoubtedly 'qualitative' in approach this interest in programmes can also
   assume slightly more 'quantitative' methodologies such as content analysis.

2. AUDIENCE AND RECEPTION STUDIES

   This approach generally originated from Sociology and tends to look for more
   'verifiable' evidence in its analysis of television. This type of methodology
   tends to look at the 'extratextual' dimensions that help audiences produce
   meaning. (While audience analysis tends to concentrate its focus on audience
   response, reception studies generally look at the way the programmes are
   marketed, distributed and discussed). In terms of methodology, audience and
   reception analysis both tend to use elements of ethnography, anthropology and
   ethnomethodology (observation of routine behaviours), particularly relying on
   questionnaires, interviews, discussion groups, participant observation and so
   on. Important fields of audience enquiry have included 'media effects', 'uses
   and gratifications' research, 'public opinion analysis' and 'fandom'.

3. INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS

   This approach generally originated from politics and mass communication
   research and takes a more political or socio-economic approach to television
   as a whole. In particular, it tends to focus on issues of industry, institution,
   policy and regulation. In terms of methodology, it therefore tends to
   concentrate much of its focus on the analysis of government legislation and
   the political nature of the media industries. As such, political and cultural

theory may play an important part in its overall assessment of television's role in the production of the private and public sphere.

4. HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Not surprisingly this approach originated from historical studies and tends to focus on the historical development of television. It therefore relies a great deal on archival research, viewing old programmes and analysing and assessing the written archives that TV channels and other public institutions have kept. As one might expect, interviews with past practitioners, government bodies or even past audiences may also provide further areas of research. This type of analysis may therefore employ all three approaches above to generate and construct knowledge. This may include an historical analysis of its audiences and modes of reception, its social and political context and detailed programme (textual) analysis.

Table 1.2. Four Schools of Approach in Television Studies.

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