SERIES TEACHING FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES

Teaching TV Sitcom

James Baker

Series Editor: Vivienne Clark

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bfi Education

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The British Film Institute gives everyone the opportunity to increase their understanding and appreciation of film and television from around the world.

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Introduction to the series

The recent rapid growth of both Film and Media Studies post-16 has inevitably led to a demand for more teachers of these popular courses. But, given the comparatively recent appearance of both subjects at degree level (and the limited availability of relevant post-graduate teaching courses), many new and experienced teachers from other disciplines are faced with teaching either subject for the first time, without a degree-level background.

In addition, the new post-16 specifications saw the arrival of new set topics and areas of study, and some of the specifications have changing topics, so there is a pressing need for up-to-date resources to help teacher preparation.

This series has been developed with these factors – and the busy teacher – in mind. Each title aims to provide teachers with an accessible reference resource, with essential topic content, as well as clear guidance on good classroom practice to improve the quality of their teaching and learning. Every author in the series is an experienced practitioner of Film and/or Media Studies at this level and many have examining/moderating experience.

Key features:

- Assessment contexts
- Suggested schemes of work
- Historical contexts (where appropriate)
- Key facts, statistics and terms
- Detailed reference to the key concepts of Film and Media Studies
- Detailed case studies
- Glossaries
- Bibliographies
- Student worksheets, activities and resources (available online) – ready to print and photocopy for the classroom.

Other titles in the series include:
Teaching Scriptwriting, Screenplays and Storyboards; Teaching Digital Video Production; Teaching British Cinema since 1990; Teaching Television News; Teaching Film Language; Teaching Television Language; Teaching British Television since 1990; Teaching Film Censorship and Controversy; Teaching Women & Film; Teaching Video Games; Teaching World Cinema; Teaching Television Soap Opera.

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Introduction

Assessment contexts

	Awarding Body & Level	Subject	Unit Code	Module/Topic
✓	OCR AS Level	Media Studies	2731	Textual Analysis – Gender & Television Sitcom
✓	OCR A2 Level	Media Studies	2735	Critical Research Study – Children & Television
✓	OCR A2 Level	Media Studies	2735	Media Issues and Debates – British Broadcasting since 1990
✓	AQA AS Level	Media Studies	MED2	Textual Topics in Contemporary Media
✓	AQA A2 Level	Media Studies	MED4	Texts and Contexts in the Media
✓	AQA A2 Level	Media Studies	MED6	Comparative Critical Analysis
✓	WJEC AS Level	Media Studies	ME1	Modern Media Forms
✓	WJEC AS Level	Media Studies	ME2	Media Representation and Reception
✓	WJEC A2 Level	Media Studies	ME4	Investigating Media Texts
✓	SQA Higher	Media Studies	D332 12	Media Analysis
✓	SQA Advanced Higher	Media Studies	D332 13	Media Analysis

This guide is also relevant to the teaching of Television Genre, Institution, Audience and Representation in the following Media/Communication/Film specifications, as well as Lifelong Learning and international courses:

- OCR – GNVQ and AVCE
- Ed-Excel – GNVQ and AVCE
- BTech National Diploma

All of the A level Media Studies specifications on offer to students contain elements which can be explored through the study of sitcom. The OCR specification for 2003 and 2004 offers AS students the option of studying TV sitcoms' representations of gender for the Textual Analysis paper (Unit 2731). TV sitcom might also be used as the basis of a research project in Unit 2734 (for example, looking at sitcoms which specifically target young audiences in the Children and Television topic or looking at the development and implementation of a new sitcom for the Concept to Consumption topic) or as an example of the changes in institutions witnessed in British TV, as part of the study of British Broadcasting since 1990, one of the topics in Unit 2735: Media Issues and Debates.

The AQA specification offers a wide variety of choice in the texts and topics areas that are taught to students across its six units. TV sitcom would be an appropriate example to use in a number of these. The Broadcast and Film Fiction option within Unit 2: Textual Topics in Contemporary Media could employ a comparative analysis of two sitcoms, perhaps accompanying a further comparison of two film comedies. At A level, sitcom could be used as the textual basis for a study of media representations in Unit 4: Texts and Contexts in the Media. Finally, in Unit 6: Comparative Critical Analysis you could explore an historical account of sitcom's development or recurrent themes and values.

The WJEC specification contains a number of general units which could be taught through specific textual examples of sitcom: Unit 1: Modern Media Forms and Unit 2 – Media Representations and Receptions could both accommodate some classroom work on sitcom. The comparative analysis required in Unit 4: Investigating Media Texts is based upon knowledge gained through a study of contemporary sitcoms or of sitcoms from different eras.

Why teach sitcom?

Have you heard the one about Jonny, who is reluctant to go to school on a Monday morning? 'I hate it there. I'm behind with all my work and no one wants to help me. The teachers hate me and the kids all laugh at me', he complains. 'Come on now', replies his wife. 'You *are* the Head of Media Studies.'

Try telling an old joke like that in class and you are more likely to raise a series of exasperated groans than hearty laughs. On the other hand, if your students are not getting too caught up with the gag, they may well be able to see more clearly how humour is derived from the conventional approach of setting up a stereotypical, but incomplete, situation and then filling the gaps to disrupt our expectations.

This example begins to illustrate some of the issues raised by studying comedy in the classroom, an undertaking which is most commonly carried out through the medium of television and the form of situation comedy. As teachers, we tend to have two objectives structuring our choice of material and approach. Firstly, we want to ensure that our students remain focused, interested and engaged by the topic; secondly, we have a series of insights, ideas and arguments which we want the students to understand and assimilate into their work. When situation comedy is the topic, it can be hard to make these objectives compatible. A tough choice has to be made. Using older sitcoms which we ourselves are familiar with and for which there may well be a range of secondary material available can risk the apathy or even hostility of our students. But using the sitcoms that our students watch leaves us with the problem of maintaining an objective and analytical atmosphere, while having to generate the material and resources from scratch.

In any case, is there likely to be any agreement within the class as to which are the 'best' or funniest sitcoms on television? Preparing myself for an A level unit on TV Sitcom, I sat through some marathon sessions of the various programmes available to audiences in 2001. I laughed my way through *Frasier*, *Spaced*, *The Office*, *Black Books*, but maintained a stony silence while enduring *Sam's Game*, *Beast*, *Barbara* and *My Family*. Looking through various newspapers, in order to find some suitable secondary material, indicated further disagreements. On the one hand, there were a number of articles discussing how this year's crop of comedy on British TV had earned several prestigious awards at the Montreux Festival of TV; on the other hand, several of the broadsheets covered the release of a recent ITC report on the state of TV in 2001, lamenting the commercial channels' lack of commitment to comedy programming.

None of these contradictions should come as much of a surprise to us. Comedy has always been a notoriously subjective topic of discussion in academia, lacking the kind of canonical agreements that drama and

documentary enjoy. In addition, the pleasures of comedy texts – particularly the laughter – are much more likely to crumble in the face of analysis than the pleasures generated by other forms of TV. Presumably, this has been one of the reasons that comedy, and situation comedy in particular, has lagged behind other modes of popular culture in the amount and the quality of academic writing produced about it. When the *bfi* produced their first sitcom pack in 1984, the authors identified the lack of serious attention given to this television genre and set out to begin an academic debate which they hoped would blossom through the teaching of the media. (Bazalgette *et al*, 1984)

The situation has improved dramatically over the past 20 years, but many teachers are still reluctant to deal with this kind of material in class. This reluctance is no longer generated by worries about the *value* of the texts studied. I hope that we have come far enough in Media Studies not to have to justify the study of popular cultural forms as a worthwhile exercise in its own right. However, sitcom is one of those subjects, like popular music or new technologies, where generational differences are brought into sharp focus and we often worry that our students will not understand or appreciate the material that we find funny and vice versa.

How to use this guide

This guide has been put together as an introduction to materials and methods that will help with the teaching of sitcom to Media Studies students at a range of levels. I have deliberately chosen to focus on contemporary examples. There is a range of material relating to TV sitcoms of the 1970s and 1980s already available and those teachers wishing to offer a more historical perspective will find this referenced in the bibliography. I have tried to use sitcoms which students will have watched, or at least been aware of, and which have been successful in my own teaching. The sitcoms referred to are also available on videos and/or DVDs. The approaches, concepts and skills employed can be applied to a wider range of texts, allowing you to explore some of your own favourite texts and interests as well.

The guide begins with an account of the development of sitcom as a genre and an examination of the key elements of form and style. It looks at the institutional context of the sitcom and suggests some approaches which might be adopted in a study of genre texts. Finally, three case studies examine a selection of British and American sitcoms and attempt to demonstrate how an analysis of these programmes can be interesting and fruitful. This guide is supported by a variety of online resources, many of which I have used very successfully with a range of students.

The worksheets to support these exercises are available at www.bfi.org.uk/tfms/handouts. To access the pages, when asked, enter username: **sitcom** and the password: **te1211si**. If you have any problems, email: education.resources@bfi.org.uk.

Schemes of work

The following schemes of work have been prepared to serve the various contexts and concerns of post-16 study and can be extrapolated for a number of different aims and outcomes. In this topic, as with all areas covered in Media Studies, it is important that as teachers we have a clear understanding of the concepts, skills and debates which we wish to focus on. The complexity of media texts and the range of approaches to which they lend themselves can sometimes encourage a scattershot process in which we throw a variety of material at our students from diverse perspectives and somehow expect them to make sense of the arguments. I believe that it has to be the teacher's role to prioritise the ideas considered and to signpost these to students in order to provide a clear and logical argument as a pathway. Both of these schemes begin with specific texts and work outwards to larger concepts and debates; this is not a prescriptive decision but I have always found it to be more helpful to ground students in some specific analysis in order to give them the confidence to move into more abstract areas of study.

One of the advantages of this topic is the wide range of material available for use in the classroom. Most major retailers of video and DVD have sections devoted to television comedy and the BBC have been particularly good at releasing some of their most popular comedy series in DVD format, providing useful commentaries and other material to supplement study. If your budget is tight, there are still plenty of opportunities for gathering material. Access to a multi-channel television platform will allow you to find a range of TV comedy from the 1960s to the present day on channels such as UK Gold, Granada Plus and the Paramount Comedy Channel. If this is not possible at school or at home, it is always worth asking your students whether they can tape some examples to bring into class. Listed below are some suggestions for UK and US sitcoms which can work well in the classroom.

British Sitcoms	US Sitcoms
Hancock's Half Hour	I Love Lucy
Steptoe and Son	Bewitched
Till Death Us Do Part	The Dick Van Dyke Show
Dad's Army	The Mary Tyler Moore Show
It Ain't Half Hot Mum!	Rhoda
Fawlty Towers	Happy Days
Love Thy Neighbour	Laverne and Shirley
On the Buses	Roseanne
Man about the House	Taxi
George & Mildred	Cheers
The Likely Lads	The Cosby Show
The Liver Birds	The Golden Girls
Terry and June	M*A*S*H
Are You Being Served?	The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air
Butterflies	Frasier
The Good Life	Ellen
Rising Damp	Cybill
To the Manor Born	Grace Under Fire
'Allo, 'Allo	Seinfeld
Only Fools and Horses	Friends
Two Point Four Children	Sister, Sister
Yes, Minister	The Simpsons
As Time Goes By	Married with Children
Absolutely Fabulous	Will and Grace
Blackadder	Malcolm in the Middle
Men Behaving Badly	
One Foot in the Grave	...among many others
Waiting for God	
Keeping up Appearances	
Father Ted	
The Vicar of Dibley	
Gimme, Gimme, Gimme	
The Royle Family	
Spaced	
Dinnerladies	
My Hero	
My Family	
The Office	
The Young Ones	

Compiled by Vivienne Clarke

Scheme of work 1: TV sitcom and gender

This unit has been designed as a six-week block to introduce students to the notion of representation within the media, focusing on the sitcom and its role in our understanding of gender. The unit works well with AS students in particular, since it draws a great deal upon their existing knowledge and understanding in order to frame debates about gender and the sitcom genre.

When teaching this kind of unit, it is essential that you have a clear idea of the kinds of knowledge that you wish your students to take from their learning. Representation is a complex process and our natural inclinations are often to provide as many different perspectives, arguments and viewpoints as possible in order to cover the topic comprehensively. However, it is often more appropriate to limit the material provided to a particular debate or set of ideas that can be focused upon in depth. This allows the students a clear argument to connect with, a purpose for the analysis and a structure for any written work they may produce. In this case, the scheme of work has been set up to demonstrate that there are a number of stereotypical ideas about gender in our culture and that the form and style of TV sitcom generally reflects these ideas through a number of elements. For a more detailed account of this topic, turn to Case study 2.

The scheme of work refers to a number of worksheets which are available in the online resource collection for this guide.

Aims: To promote understanding of

1. the processes of representation in the media;
2. the role of television within these processes;
3. the concept of gender and its social significance;
4. the form and style of situation comedy.

Outcomes:

1. Close analysis of two sitcom episodes;
2. Comparison of the construction of representations of gender in essay format.

Week 1 Introduction to sitcom.
Brainstorm sitcom titles and begin to organise into categories: UK, US, domestic, workplace, mainstream, non-mainstream
Pair work: Draw up list of similarities in form and content
(**Worksheet 1**)
Is this show a sitcom?: List 15 shows and get students to explain why each is or isn't a sitcom.

Recommended screening 1: *Men Behaving Badly* (Case Study 2 uses Episode 2 from Series 5, 'The Good Pub Guide' as an example)
Discussion of form and style. What makes it sitcom?
Initial discussion of gender in the show – is it 'realistic'?

Issues of representation and mediation. Stereotypes
Stereotyping of gender – masculinity and femininity in different genres of TV
Discussion: Why is TV influential in the formation of stereotypes?
(**Worksheet 2**)

Week 2 Sex and gender – definitions. Dominant views and ideologies
Recommended sitcom clips – examples of gender representation in 'buddy' sitcoms:
Hancock's Half Hour
Steptoe and Son
The Likely Lads
The Young Ones
Rising Damp
Only Fools and Horses
Brief account of history and development
Analysis and discussion of each sequence

Four key sequences from *Men Behaving Badly* ('The Good Pub Guide' from Series 5)

Close analysis of gender representations – masculinity and femininity. Look at:
Narrative
Form and style
Mise en scène
Construction of character
(**Worksheet 3**)

Week 3 Group practical exercise – script, storyboard, film/perform three-minute sequence from *Men Behaving Badly* using four main characters

Men Behaving Badly in the US. Case study of the show's conversion and broadcast. Why did it flop?

Recommended screening 2: *Absolutely Fabulous* (Case Study 2 uses Episode 3, 'A Small Opening', from Series 4)

Discussion of form and style. What makes it sitcom?

Discussion of gender representations and initial comparison with *Men Behaving Badly.*

Essay: Representation of gender in *Men Behaving Badly.*

Week 4 Look at excerpts from recommended 'female' sitcoms:
The Liver Birds
Butterflies
The Golden Girls
Ellen
Roseanne
The Vicar of Dibley
Brief account of history and development
Analysis and discussion of each sequence

Four key sequences from *Absolutely Fabulous.* ('A Small Opening' from Series 4)

Close analysis of gender representations – masculinity and femininity
Look at:
Narrative
Form and style
Mise en scène
Construction of character
(**Worksheet 3**)

Week 5 *Absolutely Fabulous* in the US
Case study of the show's export and broadcast
Why was it a success?

Comparisons of *Men Behaving Badly* and *Absolutely Fabulous*
Look at key sequences again for comparison
Bring together representations of masculinity from both shows
Bring together representations of femininity from both shows
To what degree do these representations fit into dominant values

Essay: Representation of gender in *Absolutely Fabulous*

Week 6 Summarise issues of sitcom form and style, issues of gender and analysis of key texts
Specimen question: How can this material be used in each case?
Essay planning skills
Timed essay skills
Essay: Compare gender representations in *Men Behaving Badly* and *Absolutely Fabulous*

Show episode of *The Simpsons* – as a treat!

Scheme of work 2: TV sitcom and institutions

This is another six-week unit, which is designed to look at the role of sitcom within the specific institutional context of UK television and to use this knowledge to think about how the genre (and perhaps the medium as a whole) is used to communicate a particular notion of national identity. It is probably more appropriate to use this unit with older, A2 students since it demands an understanding of a number of related fields, some of which may have been touched upon earlier in your course. In this way, an historical perspective of the sitcom genre is related to the institutional demands of British broadcasters and changes to both sitcom form and broadcasting contexts can be seen side by side. The unit takes representations of 'Britishness' as a recurrent concern in the study of sitcom and of British TV, but would still function effectively if this element was not emphasised as much.

Much of the factual information required for this unit can be found in Unit 2 of the guide – Origins of US and UK Sitcom and Sitcom Producers and Audiences. As before, a number of worksheets are referred to throughout the scheme of work. These are available in the online resource collection.

Aims: To understand:

1. the development of sitcom form and content since the 1950s;
2. the importance of sitcom to UK broadcasters between 1950 and 1990;
3. the changing role of sitcom since the Broadcasting Act of 1990;
4. representations of Britishness and the way these are explored through TV sitcom;

and to assess the potential of sitcom in a multi-channel environment.

Outcomes:

1. Comparative historical analysis of TV sitcom in the UK;
2. Analysis of how notions of Britishness have altered over time using various examples of sitcom.

Week 1 Origins of radio sitcom in US and UK
Recommended audio excerpts: *Hancock's Half Hour*, *The Goon Show*
Discussion of form and style. Relationship to TV sitcom

Origins of TV sitcom in the UK
Recommended screening: *Hancock's Half Hour*
Conventions of sitcom
Institutional determinants

Ideological analysis – representations of Britishness
(**Worksheet 4**)

Week 2 Sitcoms of the 1960s and 1970s
Development of genre over two decades.
Recommended excerpts:
Steptoe and Son
Till Death Us Do Part
Dad's Army
Are You Being Served?
Rising Damp
Fawlty Towers
Institutional contexts. Scheduling and branding of mainstream channels

Notions of Britishness in sitcom – analysis of excerpts
Changes since the 1950s?

Week 3 1980s. Channel 4 and alternative comedy
Challenges to mainstream comedy and targeting new audiences
Recommended excerpts:
The Comic Strip Presents …
Girls on Top

Alternative styles and values
Recommended screening: *The Young Ones*
Discussion of formal elements and content. How different is it to mainstream?

Responses of mainstream broadcasters to alternative comedy

Representations of Britishness through alternative comedy

Week 4 The Broadcasting Act of 1990. Changes to British TV and their effects on institutions and their programming
Role of sitcom in new environment

Sitcom in the 1990s. Declining audiences, declining standards?
American imports and scheduling practices
Recommended excerpts:
Friends
Frasier
Differences to UK sitcom. Institutional context of series

Changes in scheduling and institutional practice in UK
Themed nights and comedy zones
Experiments in sitcom: new writing, new forms and styles
Recommended screening: *The Royle Family*

Ideological analysis
Comparison with *Hancock*
Representations of Britishness

Week 5 Digital TV platforms – challenging broadcast hegemony
Audience patterns – end of channel loyalty

Role of sitcoms for major broadcasters
Recommended screening: *My Family*
Changes in production practices. Institutional contexts

Digital channels. Narrowcasting and the audience
Case study 1: UK Gold
(**Worksheet 5**)

Week 6 Case study 2: Paramount Comedy Channel
Globalisation of sitcom market. Are notions of Britishness redundant?

Future TV, future sitcoms? Developments in technology and programming

Summary of historical and ideological arguments

Essay: In what ways has the development of the sitcom been related to the changes in its institutional context?

Essay: How have notions of Britishness altered through the development of sitcom since the 1950s?

2

Background information

The development of sitcom

Like many of television's genres, the roots of sitcom lie in the development of radio programming during the 1930s and 1940s. In turn, radio comedy owes a huge debt to the content, if not the form, of the vaudeville and music hall shows of the early 20th century. As with many media, the development of US and UK TV sitcom are closely related to one another. However, there are sufficient differences in their backgrounds to make it worthwhile looking at their histories separately.

• The origins of US sitcom

The commercial imperative of US broadcasting is often seen as a threat to innovation and quality in programming choices, but paradoxically the presence of programme sponsorship and large advertising revenues allowed radio stations to take some risks in the formats that they devised. If shows were not successful, they tended to be dropped after short runs, but the amount of programming required to fill airtime accounted for a wide range of shows. Many of these were not merely copies of popular film or theatre of the time, but skilful adaptations embracing the demands of an aural medium, as well as the institutional requirement to build large, loyal audiences for their stations.

Amos 'n' Andy (1928) was an early example of 'appointment programming', a show around which families tended to structure their domestic arrangements because they did not want to miss an episode. The show was inspired by minstrel vaudeville (a form of variety theatre popular in the early decades of the 20th century in which white entertainers 'blacked up' in order to perform musical numbers and sketches from African American popular culture for white American audiences). Despite the ideologically suspect premise, the radio show developed the notion of a loosely connected series of jokes and songs into a structured duologue, in which consistent and coherent characters progressed

through a series of familiar situations and environments, allowing audiences to become familiar with the personae and eager to know what happens to Amos and Andy next. The show was broadcast in ten- or fifteen-minute episodes, several times a week.

The success of *Amos 'n' Andy* encouraged further shows and developments of this format. The centrality of female audiences in the success of radio programming is evidenced by the change of focus to domestic situations and middle-class couples in the most popular shows. In *Easy Aces*, *The George Burns–Gracie Allen Show* and *My Favourite Husband*, a conservative, but understanding husband becomes the straight man to the comic misadventures of a scatterbrained wife.

When television began to supplant radio as the major domestic medium, TV networks carried many of the radio genres over wholesale. *My Favourite Husband* transmogrified into *I Love Lucy* (1951). This show became one of the fledgeling medium's first great popular successes. The comic skill of the star, Lucille Ball, and the slickly shot and mixed (later edited) slapstick created a combination which would become a template for all the networks' situation comedies, as well as a guarantor of the genre's survival as a prime-time format.

• The origins of UK sitcom

The BBC's monopoly, its government funding and its commitment to the Reithian ideals of Public Service Broadcasting during the 1930s created a very different situation to that of its US cousins. Radio comedy tended strongly towards the variety show format, following a strong British tradition of music hall, seaside variety shows and pantomime. The closest thing to situation comedy was a short sequence in the weekly variety show *Band Wagon* (1938), which had Arthur Askey and Richard Murdoch playing an 'odd couple' who lived at the top of Broadcasting House.

With the onset of World War II radio became the predominant medium in British cultural life, particularly following the closure of many of the country's cinemas and theatres. Radio played an important role in the dissemination of information (or propaganda), but was equally important in its role of building and maintaining national morale. One of the major successes of wartime radio was *ITMA (It's That Man Again)*, a variety and sketch show, which relied upon quick-fire gags, topical humour and familiar characters and catchphrases. In its pacing and relentless quick-fire gags, it betrayed the influence of US radio and signalled that the BBC was learning lessons from across the Atlantic.

Another variety-style programme, *Ray's a Laugh*, fronted by real-life husband and wife Ted Ray and Kitty Bluett, gradually dropped its sketch format and musical numbers in order to concentrate on the domestic comedy of Ted and

Kitty. Its popularity led to a number of other similarly themed situation comedies such as *Life with the Lyons*, *Meet the Huggets* and *A Life of Bliss*. At the same time, *The Goon Show* presented audiences with ITMA-style humour, filtered through a surreal sensibility, but structured into a self-contained (if often nonsensical) narrative.

If *My Favourite Husband*/*I Love Lucy* represented a defining moment in US sitcom, *Hancock's Half Hour* (1956) played a similar role in the UK. The programme, scripted by Ray Galton and Allan Simpson and starring comedian Tony Hancock, adopted the domestic setting of its contemporaries but was marked by a decisive shift away from gag-based humour towards character and environment as the defining features of its comedy. Like Lucille Ball, the character transferred easily to television. The format of the show allowed the skill of the writing and acting to carry the comedy. In its reliance upon a few familiar locations and characters, its uneventful narratives and its staid visual style, *Hancock's Half Hour* provided an economical, but hugely successful piece of programming that would help to influence both the institution's and the audience's conception of the British sitcom for the next twenty years.

• Alternative comedies?

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, British television experimented and innovated in a number of different comedy genres, such as the sketch show and the satirical revue. However, sitcom remained a comparatively stable form. The term 'alternative comedy' gained currency during the 1980s, as a way of categorising new breeds of comedy performer and comedy shows that presented themselves in opposition to the tradition of mainstream comedy in the UK. This was not the first time that these traditions had been challenged; a number of programmes during the 1970s attempted to introduce formal innovation and more daring subject matter into TV comedy, particularly the sketch show. Programmes such as *Monty Python's Flying Circus* or Spike Milligan's *Q* offered their small but loyal audiences a surreal and intellectually engaging experience, whose absurdity helped to deconstruct the established conventions of sketch comedy. However, they were not able to challenge the dominance of the more traditional comedy shows which were being shown in prime-time schedules.

The creation of Channel 4 in 1982, led by a remit to provide new and challenging programming to a diverse range of audiences not catered for by BBC1 or ITV, provided the opportunity for a new generation of comedy performers to gain television exposure. The Comic Strip were a group of actors and stand-up comedians who had caught the attention of commissioning editors while working the London stand-up comedy scene. Their series, *The Comic Strip Presents ...* was not a sitcom, but a number of self-contained

short films which indicated the team's skill at integrating challenging comedy, political awareness and narrative expediency. Subsequently several members of The Comic Strip team were invited, along with writer Ben Elton, to produce an 'alternative' sitcom for BBC2, *The Young Ones*.

The Young Ones deliberately sought to undercut many of the conventions of sitcom, through self-referentiality, through constant digressions and the inclusion of other variety elements, such as brief stand-up routines and musical numbers. It also sought to shock through its rejection of the conservative, middle class ideas and values which characterised most of the mainstream sitcoms of the time. However, the basic structure remained in place and despite its nods towards anarchy, the show remained indebted to the formal devices of the genre. Again, the show's transmission on BBC2 built up a cult audience, but the show had little immediate effect upon mainstream sitcoms on BBC1 and ITV. (In fact all of the main stars of the show – Rik Mayall, Adrian Edmondson, Nigel Planer and Christopher Short – went on to star in mainstream sitcoms following the demise of *The Young Ones* after two series).

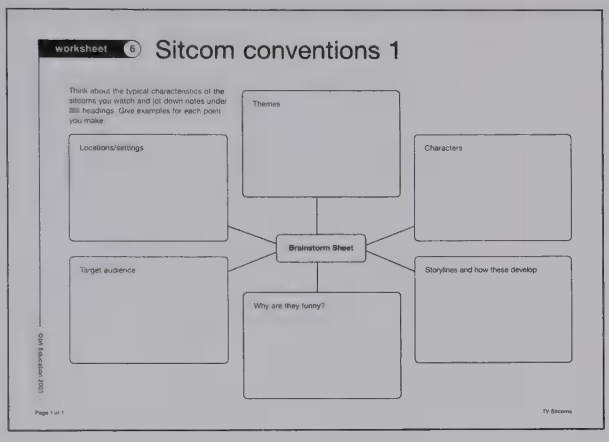
Forms and conventions of TV sitcom

This resilience of sitcom form has been noted by many academics. Jane Feuer in *The Television Genre Book* argues:

> 'The question of what counts as an innovative feature in the development of a sitcom is difficult because in some ways we are talking about a framework so simple and so easy to recognise that the sitcom is, literally, child's play. And yet the form shows no sign of being exhausted or of not being adaptable to all kinds of socially and comically complex circumstances.' (Jane Feuer, 2001, p69)

In other words, it is the very stability and simplicity of the formal qualities of sitcom which have ensured its longevity. The basic structure of sitcom not only allows it to deal with a seemingly endless variation in terms of social groupings or cultural conflicts, but also allows it to merge easily with other TV genres in order to reinvigorate and inflect the genre further. So, we have examples of hybrid sitcoms which cross over into the crime series (*Police Squad*, *The Thin Blue Line*), the medical series (*Only When I Laugh*, *Scrubs*), the war drama (*M*A*S*H*), science-fiction (*Red Dwarf*) and soap opera (*Soap*, *Friends*), as well as examples where sitcom has borrowed from non-fiction TV forms, such as *People Like Us*, *The Office* and *The Garry Shandling Show*. It is the range of social and ideological issues and conflicts to which sitcom is adaptable that should strike us in any list of sitcom that we can draw up.

Worksheets 6 and **7** have been designed to help students look at the adaptability of sitcom form and to encourage them to think about the diversity of sitcoms available on UK and US screens. They may also be used to begin the discussion and study of sitcom as an ideological agent, by looking at the kinds of recurring beliefs and values which emerge from apparently contrasting programmes.



worksheet 6

Sitcom conventions 1

Think about the typical characteristics of the sitcoms you watch and jot down notes under [illegible] headings. Give examples for each point you make.

Themes

Locations/settings

Characters

Brainstorm Sheet

Target audience

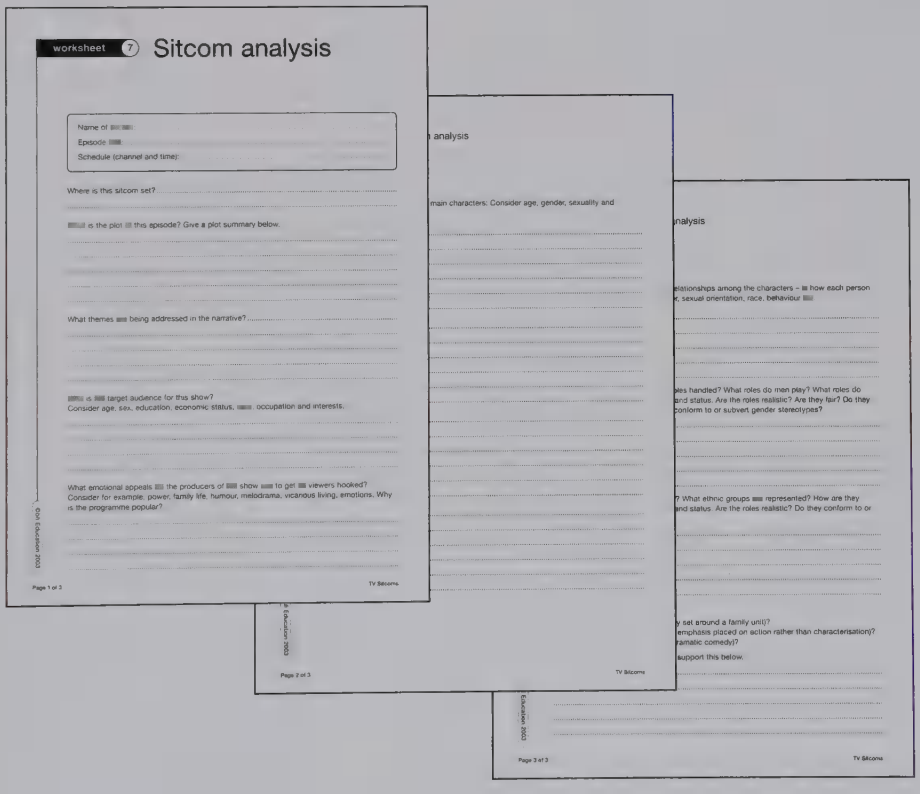
Storylines and how these develop

Why are they funny?

[illegible] Education 2003

Page 1 of 1

TV Sitcoms



worksheet 7

Sitcom analysis

Name of [illegible]:

Episode [illegible]:

Schedule (channel and time):

Where is this sitcom set?

[illegible] is the plot in this episode? Give a plot summary below.

What themes are being addressed in the narrative?

[illegible] is [illegible] target audience for this show?
Consider age, sex, education, economic status, [illegible] occupation and interests.

What emotional appeals do the producers of [illegible] show use to get its viewers hooked?
Consider for example, power, family life, humour, melodrama, vicarious living, emotions. Why is the programme popular?

[illegible] Education 2003

Page 1 of 3

TV Sitcoms

analysis

main characters. Consider age, gender, sexuality and

Page 2 of 3

TV Sitcoms

analysis

elationships among the characters – how each person
r, sexual orientation, race, behaviour

les handled? What roles do men play? What roles do
and status. Are the roles realistic? Are they fair? Do they
conform to or subvert gender stereotypes?

? What ethnic groups are represented? How are they
and status. Are the roles realistic? Do they conform to or

y set around a family unit)?
emphasis placed on action rather than characterisation)?
ramatic comedy)?
support this below.

Page 3 of 3

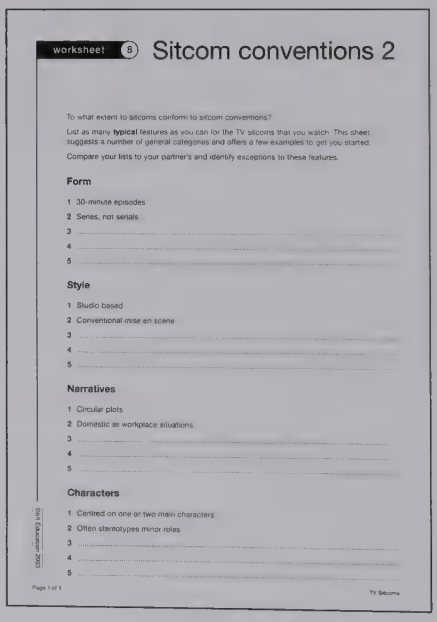
TV Sitcoms

Despite many differences in their origins and in the tones of US and UK sitcom, there are sufficient similarities between the programmes to be able to identify a number of defining features. Of course, an undertaking such as this invites argument and exception. The fluid nature of genre, the dynamic that exists between institution and audience ensures that there will always be shows which break the rules and set up their own agenda and tradition to be followed by others. Nevertheless, it helps if we have some basic elements of form in order to begin our discussions of the significance of sitcom. Sitcoms:

- tend to be between 24 and 30 minutes, with self-contained narratives (series format);
- have regular characters and familiar locations, often interiors;
- are often 'centred' narratives (based around an individual or a pair), with other characters subordinated to the protagonist(s);
- tend to use stereotypes for minor characters;
- are commonly set in domestic and work-based environments. Often the workplace will function as a surrogate for the home, or the two environments will intermingle;
- feature families or symbolic families as common elements and themes
- have a 'classical' narrative structure within episodes: equilibrium, dis-equilibrium, resolution;
- feature circularity of narrative: the situation and character are returned to their original states;
- have synchronising motifs: repeated actions, catchphrases, costume etc.

Before you give a list of elements such as this to your students, see how many of these formal devices they can come up with themselves from their own knowledge of sitcom. **Worksheet 8** can be used as part of this process of reflection.

Student notes on forms and conventions of TV sitcoms are available at www.bfi.org.uk/tfms. User ID: **sitcom**; Password: **te1211si**



worksheet 8

Sitcom conventions 2

To what extent to sitcoms conform to sitcom conventions?

List as many **typical** features as you can for the TV sitcoms that you watch. This sheet suggests a number of general categories and offers a few examples to get you started.

Compare your lists to your partner's and identify exceptions to these features.

Form

1 30-minute episodes
2 Series, not serials
3 .....
4 .....
5 .....

Style

1 Studio based
2 Conventional mise en scène
3 .....
4 .....
5 .....

Narratives

1 Circular plots
2 Domestic or workplace situations
3 .....
4 .....
5 .....

Characters

1 Centred on one or two main characters
2 Often stereotypes minor roles
3 .....
4 .....
5 .....

Inevitably, students will come up with a large number of exceptions and contradictions to any 'rules' that are established. It is a good idea to see if these exceptions can be 'explained' by progression within the genre or within the institutional context of the programmes. Make sure that students understand that exceptions do not invalidate the generalisations made; rather the generalisations are being used precisely so that we can identify and explain those texts that do not fit into them.

Sitcom producers and audiences

The development of sitcom form was not simply a result of arbitrary choices, nor was it determined purely by virtue of its radio antecedents. Rather, it came about, like many media products, from a dynamic relationship between the demands of the institution and the pleasures of the audience.

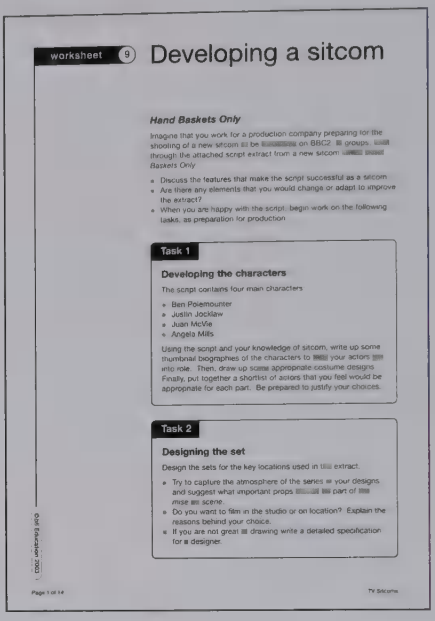
As we have already suggested, the limited characters and locations of sitcom serve an economic function, keeping costs down by efficiently reusing the same resources from episode to episode and series to series. In addition, most locations tend to be studio sets, which are cheaper and more controllable than exterior locations.

The self-contained nature of sitcom developed as part of the broadcaster's need for flexibility in scheduling. With no reference made to previous episodes and no progression in character or situation, it is possible for broadcasters to choose the order of transmission and to experiment with scheduling so as to attract the biggest possible audience. This kind of programming also lends itself more easily to repeat transmissions and, in US television, to syndication of the show across local networks. The length of sitcom episodes and the narrative structure employed are optimised for advertising, allowing (on US television) at least three advert breaks per episode. US sitcoms often end with a coda – a gag or comic situation which occurs after resolution, but does not destabilise the closure. These sequences are designed to allow an advertising break between the end of the narrative and the credit sequence; students will probably be familiar with this element from *Friends*, where the final joke is often based on an episode's secondary narrative, or with the wordless codas (many of which use Eddie the terrier) that bring *Frasier* to a close.

Finally, the structured and predictable nature of sitcom form, as Hartley points out in *The Television Genre Book*, is part of a strategy to ensure that products can be easily exported overseas, 'using a formula so transparent that they could stand in for the indigenous programming for the local audience' (John Hartley, 2001, p65). Again, US sitcoms have been particularly successful in other territories, as a glance at UK weekly schedules will reveal, but the BBC

has also successfully sold a number of its own sitcoms to English-speaking markets in Asia and Australasia, as well as to European broadcasters.

In order to begin looking at the relationships between sitcom producers and their audiences, it is worth asking students to do some research into the production and reception of TV sitcoms. The BBC website is packed with behind the scenes features which offer accessible insights into the various phases of the production processes of all of their programmes, including sitcoms. If you wish to take students to watch the filming of a sitcom, you can apply for tickets online at tv.ticket.unit@bbc.co.uk or apply in writing to BBC Audience Services, PO Box 300, BBC Television Centre, London W12 7RJ. **Worksheets 9** and **10** provide students with a series of simulation exercises based upon the production of a new TV sitcom for BBC2 in which they can test out their knowledge and understanding.



worksheet 9

Developing a sitcom

Hand Baskets Only

Imagine that you work for a production company preparing for the shooting of a new sitcom to be [illegible] on BBC2. In groups, [illegible] through the attached script extract from a new sitcom [illegible] *Baskets Only*

- Discuss the features that make the script successful as a sitcom.
- Are there any elements that you would change or adapt to improve the extract?
- When you are happy with the script, begin work on the following tasks, as preparation for production.

Task 1

Developing the characters

The script contains four main characters:

- Ben Polemounter
- Justin Jocklaw
- Juan McVie
- Angela Mills

Using the script and your knowledge of sitcom, write up some thumbnail biographies of the characters to help your actors get into role. Then, draw up some appropriate costume designs. Finally, put together a shortlist of actors that you feel would be appropriate for each part. Be prepared to justify your choices.

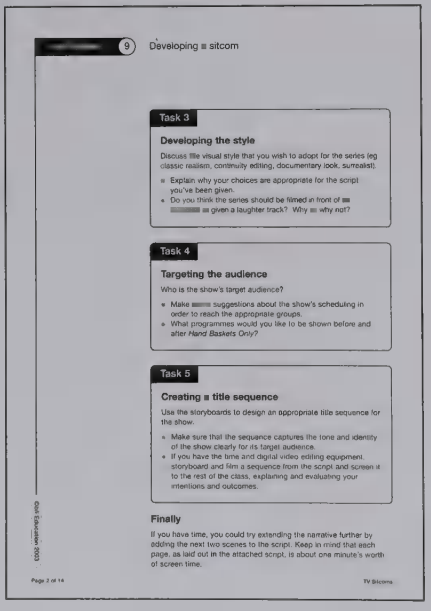
Task 2

Designing the set

Design the sets for the key locations used in the extract.

- Try to capture the atmosphere of the series in your designs and suggest what important props [illegible] part of the *mise en scene*.
- Do you want to film in the studio or on location? Explain the reasons behind your choice.
- If you are not great at drawing write a detailed specification for a designer.

Page 1 of 14 TV Sitcoms



9 Developing a sitcom

Task 3

Developing the style

Discuss the visual style that you wish to adopt for the series (eg classic realism, continuity editing, documentary look, surrealist).

- Explain why your choices are appropriate for the script you've been given.
- Do you think the series should be filmed in front of [illegible] given a laughter track? Why or why not?

Task 4

Targeting the audience

Who is the show's target audience?

- Make some suggestions about the show's scheduling in order to reach the appropriate groups.
- What programmes would you like to be shown before and after *Hand Baskets Only*?

Task 5

Creating a title sequence

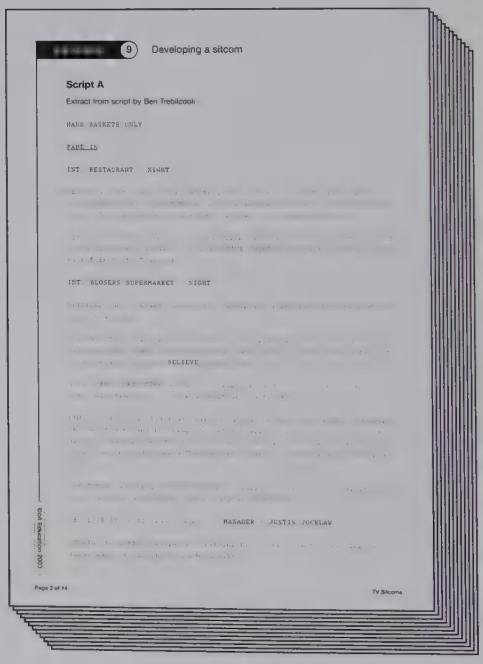
Use the storyboards to design an appropriate title sequence for the show.

- Make sure that the sequence captures the tone and identity of the show clearly for its target audience.
- If you have the time and digital video editing equipment, storyboard and film a sequence from the script and screen it to the rest of the class, explaining and evaluating your intentions and outcomes.

Finally

If you have time, you could try extending the narrative further by adding the next two scenes to the script. Keep in mind that each page, as laid out in the attached script, is about one minute's worth of screen time.

Page 2 of 14 TV Sitcoms



9 Developing a sitcom

Script A

Extract from script by Ben Trebilcook

HAND BASKETS ONLY

FADE IN

INT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT

[illegible]

INT. BLOGGS SUPERMARKET - NIGHT

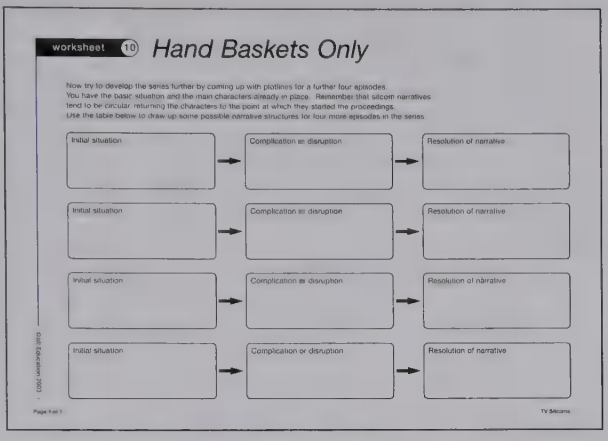
[illegible]

BELIEVE

[illegible]

[illegible] MANAGER - JUSTIN JOCKLAW

Page 3 of 14 TV Sitcoms



worksheet 10 *Hand Baskets Only*

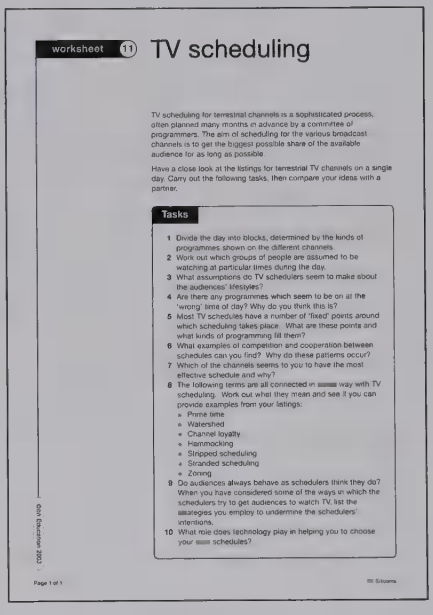
Now try to develop the series further by coming up with plotlines for a further four episodes.
You have the basic situation and the main characters already in place. Remember that sitcom narratives tend to be circular, returning the characters to the point at which they started the proceedings.
Use the table below to draw up some possible narrative structures for four more episodes in the series.

Initial situation	Complication or disruption	Resolution of narrative
Initial situation	Complication or disruption	Resolution of narrative
Initial situation	Complication or disruption	Resolution of narrative
Initial situation	Complication or disruption	Resolution of narrative

Page 1 of 1

TV Sitcoms

Information about the ratings of TV programmes can be collated through the BARB website – http://www.barb.co.uk/. This kind of data is useful for comparative study across various channels and across various genres of TV programming, allowing students to put sitcom into a wider viewing context. It can also be related to any work which they might do on the scheduling of sitcom on TV – **Worksheet 11**.



worksheet 11 TV scheduling

TV scheduling for terrestrial channels is a sophisticated process, often planned many months in advance by a committee of programmers. The aim of scheduling for the various broadcast channels is to get the biggest possible share of the available audience for as long as possible.

Have a close look at the listings for terrestrial TV channels on a single day. Carry out the following tasks, then compare your ideas with a partner.

Tasks

1 Divide the day into blocks, determined by the kinds of programmes shown on the different channels.
2 Work out which groups of people are assumed to be watching at particular times during the day.
3 What assumptions do TV schedulers seem to make about the audiences' lifestyles?
4 Are there any programmes which seem to be on at the 'wrong' time of day? Why do you think this is?
5 Most TV schedules have a number of 'fixed' points around which scheduling takes place. What are these points and what kinds of programming fill them?
6 What examples of competition and cooperation between schedules can you find? Why do these patterns occur?
7 Which of the channels seems to you to have the most effective schedule and why?
8 The following terms are all connected in some way with TV scheduling. Work out what they mean and see if you can provide examples from your listings:
   - Prime time
   - Watershed
   - Channel loyalty
   - Hammocking
   - Stripped scheduling
   - Stranded scheduling
   - Zoning
9 Do audiences always behave as schedulers think they do? When you have considered some of the ways in which the schedulers try to get audiences to watch TV, list the strategies you employ to undermine the schedulers' intentions.
10 What role does technology play in helping you to choose your own schedules?

Page 1 of 1

TV Sitcoms

Changes in the role of sitcom

During the 1970s and 1980s, both of the major UK broadcasters relied heavily upon comedy programming to shape and stabilise schedules during prime-time television. Many of the biggest successes came from a small group of writers such as Johnny Speight, Jimmy Perry, David Croft, Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais. This exclusive group was joined for the first time in the 1980s by a female writer, Carla Lane, who scored a number of hits with shows such as *Butterflies* and *Bread*. However, this period proved to be something of a heyday for British sitcoms and, with some notable exceptions, the 1990s saw audiences decline and the number of new sitcoms drop rapidly from the schedules.

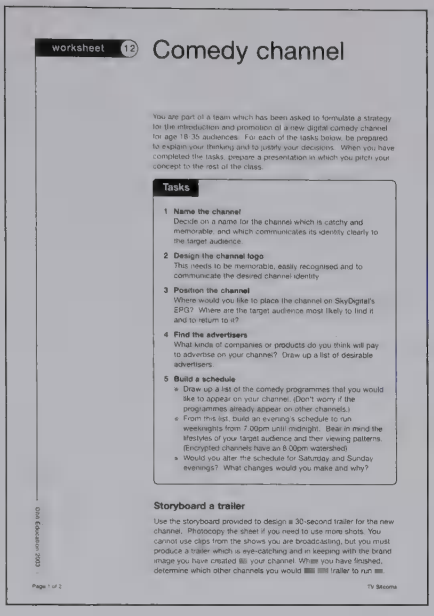
This has in part been attributed to Channel 4's policy of importing quality US sitcoms such as *Cheers* and its spin-off *Frasier*. These shows found immediate popularity with younger audiences who seemed to have grown tired of the middle-class parochialism of much of the mainstream channels' comedy. At the same time, Channel 4 were at the vanguard in introducing new writers and performers into British TV (*The Comic Strip Presents …*, *Saturday Night Live*, *Who Dares Wins*), as well as producing their own sitcoms such as *Desmond's*, set in a Peckham barber's shop with a largely African-Caribbean cast.

The linking of comedy to youth audiences continued during the 1990s, during which both BBC2 and Channel 4 were able to gain significant footholds in the audience share during prime-time. This was largely due to their adoption of more aggressive US-style scheduling techniques, bundling similar types of programmes together at key times of the week and offering audiences stranded schedules so that specific genres of shows could always be found at particular times. The emergence of comedy zones on both channels (9.00–11.00pm Monday and Friday nights most commonly) has allowed them to develop further programming in this genre with the knowledge that there is a specific audience to which it can be promoted. Shows such as *The Royle Family*, *Father Ted* and *Spaced* have all emerged to both critical and popular success.

In contrast, both BBC1 and ITV have struggled to find new sitcoms that can rival the large and loyal audiences of their past successes. This is in part due to the domination of prime-time scheduling by soap opera and docusoap, leaving few productive slots for new shows. Others have argued that the UK tradition of relying upon single or paired writers needs to be eschewed in favour of the industrial practices of US sitcom production. There, production companies employ an in-house team of writers to produce a continuous stream of scripts, tailored to the successful formulas and target audiences established by a show. Team or table writing is now beginning to emerge in this country and has found some success in the recent BBC hits, *My Family* and *My Hero*.

As multi-channel, digital television platforms grow in popularity in the UK, we are likely to see the role of sitcom change further. The repeatability and longevity of sitcom have already made the genre a key ingredient in the success of channels such as UK Gold and UK Play, both of whom promote themselves as an opportunity for audiences to watch their favourite shows over and over again. The Paramount Comedy Channel specialises in US imports, but also screens a number of UK sitcoms and has begun to involve itself as co-producer on a number of UK-based shows.

The online resources include a number of simulation exercises which encourage students to understand the role of sitcom as part of a narrowcast, multi-channel environment. **Worksheet 12** asks students to come up with ideas for the scheduling and marketing of a new comedy channel targeting 18- to 35-year-olds.



worksheet 12

Comedy channel

You are part of a team which has been asked to formulate a strategy for the introduction and promotion of a new digital comedy channel for age 18-35 audiences. For each of the tasks below, be prepared to explain your thinking and to justify your decisions. When you have completed the tasks, prepare a presentation in which you pitch your concept to the rest of the class.

Tasks

1 **Name the channel**
Decide on a name for the channel which is catchy and memorable, and which communicates its identity clearly to the target audience.

2 **Design the channel logo**
This needs to be memorable, easily recognised and to communicate the desired channel identity.

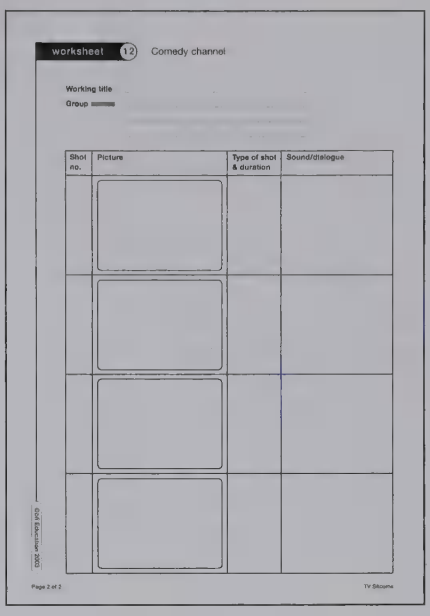
3 **Position the channel**
Where would you like to place the channel on SkyDigital's EPG? Where are the target audience most likely to find it and to return to it?

4 **Find the advertisers**
What kinds of companies or products do you think will pay to advertise on your channel? Draw up a list of desirable advertisers.

5 **Build a schedule**
- Draw up a list of the comedy programmes that you would like to appear on your channel. (Don't worry if the programmes already appear on other channels.)
- From this list, build an evening's schedule to run weeknights from 7.00pm until midnight. Bear in mind the lifestyles of your target audience and their viewing patterns. (Encrypted channels have an 8.00pm watershed.)
- Would you alter the schedule for Saturday and Sunday evenings? What changes would you make and why?

Storyboard a trailer

Use the storyboard provided to design a 30-second trailer for the new channel. Photocopy the sheet if you need to use more shots. You cannot use clips from the shows you are broadcasting, but you must produce a trailer which is eye-catching and in keeping with the brand image you have created for your channel. When you have finished, determine which other channels you would like your trailer to run on.



worksheet 12 Comedy channel

Working title

Group

Shot no.	Picture	Type of shot & duration	Sound/dialogue

Types of sitcom

It may be useful to give your students some basic categories in order to break down the field of sitcoms into more manageable pieces. This should not be merely a descriptive exercise. There is little point listing sitcoms and placing them into relevant categories if this is an end in itself. Rather, students should be trying to group related texts in order to see how the similarities manifest themselves and the importance this has for the meanings and the values of the programmes.

• The family and workplace sitcoms

Hartley divides sitcom into two major types: the family sitcom and the workplace sitcom (John Hartley, 2001, p66). The family or domestic sitcom is concerned with the internal relationships of the family unit. Most often, in order to generate tension, conflict and comedy, the family presented is not of the traditional, nuclear variety; where the family unit is intact, the quirkiness or eccentricity of one of the major family members becomes the source of humour.

Examples of fractured family sitcoms might include: *Absolutely Fabulous* and *Grace under Fire*, *Cybill* (single mothers); *The Upper Hand* and *My Two Dads,* (single fathers); *The Brady Bunch* and *Sister, Sister* (remarriages, mixed families) or even dysfunctional metaphorical families such as *Men Behaving Badly*, *Cheers* and *Father Ted*. On the other hand, life is scarcely more 'normal' in *Roseanne*, where the eponymous maternal figure dominates with vitriol and

sarcasm or in *Malcolm in the Middle*, in which the eccentricity of each family member is brought into focus by having a child genius in their midst.

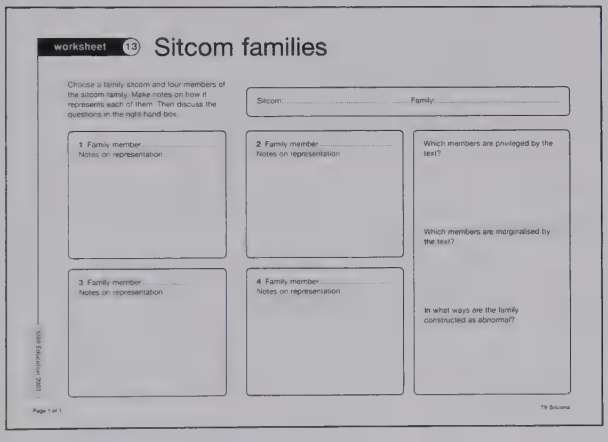
The recent BBC series *All about Me* attempted to create comedy from a family unit which was far from 'ordinary' but contained no comic stereotypes. The mixed race partnership of the parents (Jasper Carrot and Meera Syal) and their children was rarely commented upon, let alone employed as a source of humour. Even more unusually, the episodes' narratives often pivoted around their son Raj, a cerebral palsy sufferer, although his illness in itself was rarely used as a narrative device and he was never represented according to the common stereotypes of the disabled 'victim'.

Hartley indicates that one of the pleasures of these sitcoms is the consistent linking of the bizarre and the abnormal to everyday notions of family life – what he terms 'the not quiteness' of domesticity (John Hartley 2001, p66) By providing a set of representations which seems to be slightly at odds with the dominant ideas of how a family should be, family sitcoms have the potential to yield political readings and to offer some challenge to the status quo. In the US, in particular, a number of sitcoms have been singled out for criticism by Republican politicians because of their portrayal of the family. Then Vice President, Dan Quayle took *Murphy Brown* to task because its portrayal of a strong, resourceful single mother figure, played by Candice Bergen, did not help the promotion of family values. George Bush famously stated that he wanted American families to be like *The Waltons* rather than *The Simpsons*, although that series had the final laugh by introducing the Bushes as the Simpsons' new neighbours in one episode where they were terrorised by the family.

The workplace sitcom, according to Hartley, 'seemed generically driven to be about sexual chemistry rather than occupational specificity'. A constant focus upon the relationships within the workplace, often revealed through flirtation, sexual tension or other relationship situations, tends to drive this kind of sitcom, so that the nature of the workplace and the labour undertaken becomes almost irrelevant. Thomas Schatz notes a major increase in the amount of workplace programmes on US television in all genres during the 1970s, a trend which is attributed to the merging of boundaries between home and work, as a declining economy and spiralling inflation forced many families to rely upon two working partners. Schatz also argues that the workplace show, such as *Taxi* and *M*A*S*H*, was used to target a more affluent demographic than domestic programming. This would have been particularly popular with advertisers, who often focus their marketing on middle-class or professional groups with relatively large amounts of disposable income (Thomas Schatz). In the UK, *Are You Being Served?* was one of the first examples of a pure workplace sitcom and its success led to many similar shows during the 1970s and 1980s (*The Rag Trade*, *On the Buses*, *Hi-De-Hi!*).

Looking at more recent examples of sitcom, it is clear that there is a large degree of crossover emerging between these two types, with family sitcoms offering elements of the workplace and the ensuing emphasis on sexual, as well as domestic relationships. The BBC comedy *My Family* splits its action between the main character's home and his dental practice; similarly programmes such as *Frasier* seek to lay equal emphasis on home and work as spheres of comedy. Workplace comedies such as *Drop the Dead Donkey* and *Dinnerladies* have also evolved so that the comedy arises from the predictable relationships between familiar characters, as a kind of quasi-family set-up.

Hartley's categories provide a useful way of beginning to break down sitcom into meaningful sub-genres. Students should be encouraged to sort their own viewing of sitcom into these categories and to begin to account for the kinds of pleasure which domestic, workplace or hybrid sitcom might offer. The discussion can be taken further by focusing on Hartley's notion of the 'not-quiteness' of the sitcom family and by asking students to find evidence of the ways in which our assumptions about what constitutes 'normal' families are subverted by the sitcoms we watch. **Worksheet 13** has been designed for this exercise.



worksheet 13 Sitcom families

Choose a family sitcom and four members of the sitcom family. Make notes on how it represents each of them. Then discuss the questions in the right-hand box.

Sitcom: ..... Family: .....

1 Family member .....
Notes on representation

2 Family member .....
Notes on representation

Which members are privileged by the text?

Which members are marginalised by the text?

3 Family member .....
Notes on representation

4 Family member .....
Notes on representation

In what ways are the family constructed as *abnormal*?

The actcom, the domcom and the dramedy

Richard Taflinger offers a more detailed taxonomy of the sitcom, dividing US sitcoms into three distinct categories; the actcom, domcom and dramedy. The most common type of sitcom, according to Taflinger, is the action comedy or actcom. In the actcom, we recognise the characters as 'normal', but regard their actions as incongruous or abnormal according to dominant views. Taflinger uses the example of Lucy turning her apartment into the Cuban countryside, complete with chickens in one episode of *I Love Lucy*. This kind of show has a number of further characteristics:

- Narratives are action-orientated, based on personal motivations.
- Characters are not complex, but predictable in action and thought. The main characters are central to the plot; supporting characters often serve only as the recipients of humour.
- The settings are subsidiary to the action, with little sense of 'personality' or individuality.

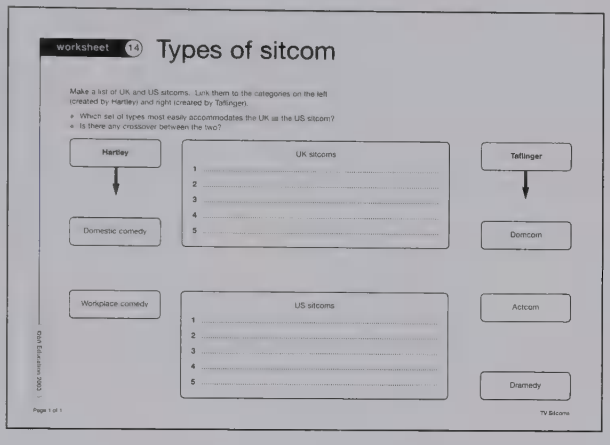
In the domestic comedy or domcom, characters' actions are often motivated by a moral or emotional dilemma, which needs a solution and which is normally resolved through the counsel of a trusted and respected elder. Domcoms are invariably set in family environments and the narrative issues involved are frequently focused on the children; it is then the role of the parent to guide and advise the character's actions towards a satisfactory and responsible conclusion. A good example of this kind of sitcom would be *The Cosby Show*. Taflinger summarises the qualities of domcoms as follows:

- Plots are character-orientated and based on domestic motivations.
- Characters are complex, with multiple and conflicting emotions. The main characters are emotionally stable and look to instil moral values in those that they are responsible for. Supporting characters often include children, whose problems or conflicts drive the narrative and need to be resolved by the main characters.
- The settings serve as a background to the action, but are often personalised to reflect the characters who inhabit them. Invariably, the setting is a home, most often middle-class.

Finally, the most infrequent kind of sitcom is the dramatic comedy or dramedy. A basic definition is that these are comedies dealing with social issues and problems in which character and action are subordinated to the debates that are set up within the show. In this way, the beliefs and values of the characters are brought into sharp relief and frequently tested by the complications which the narrative throws at them. Taflinger holds up programmes such as *M*A*S*H* as archetypes of the dramedy:

- Plots are thought-orientated and examine the effects on characters when they are confronted by social issues or by problems with which they are not equipped to deal.
- Characters are generally complex, with multiple and conflicting emotions and a sense of self-reliant dependence upon one another.
- The writers try to communicate themes and ideas through the comedy and characters are often led to some kind of new understanding by the narrative events.
- The settings often establish both character and ambience for the programme.

Taflinger's categories seem to be more applicable to US sitcoms than UK equivalents. Nevertheless, it might be worth trying to impose his categories upon some British examples to see how useful they are as sub-genres. This exercise could be developed further by asking students to think about the differences between UK and US products, as well as the audiences who consume them. Are Hartley's categories a more useful way of thinking about sitcom? What elements, if any, might be appropriated from Taflinger's work for studying UK sitcom? **Worksheet 14** can be used for this kind of exercise.



worksheet 14

Types of sitcom

Make a list of UK and US sitcoms. Link them to the categories on the left (created by Hartley) and right (created by Taflinger).

- Which set of types most easily accommodates the UK as the US sitcom?
- Is there any crossover between the two?

Hartley

Domestic comedy

Workplace comedy

UK sitcoms

1
2
3
4
5

US sitcoms

1
2
3
4
5

Taflinger

Domcom

Actcom

Dramedy

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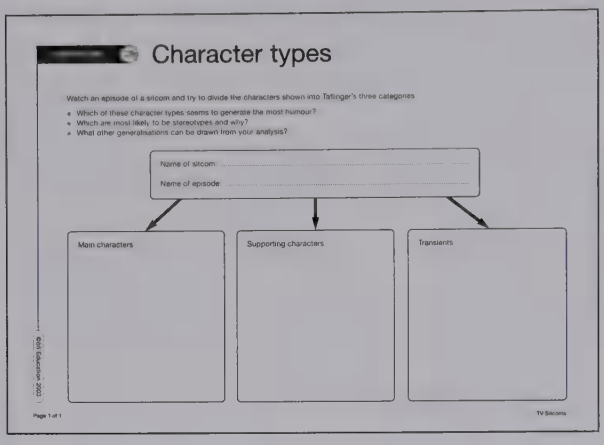
TV Sitcoms

Character roles

Taflinger also offers a useful discussion of the use of character roles within sitcom. He divides these roles into three major types:

- **Main characters** carry the bulk of the narrative and are designed as the primary source of the humour. Traditionally, sitcoms depended upon only one or two main characters, although there are examples where shows have used more (*Friends* has six main characters).
- **Supporting characters** are regular cast members who support the main characters, sometimes acting as the foil for humour, sometimes providing humour in their own right.
- **Transients** are non-regular characters, whose presence is necessary in particular episodes, but not for the success of the series as a whole. This includes special guest stars, walk-on characters, or characters who make repeated but sporadic appearances in a series.

Worksheet 15 provides an opportunity for students to consider the use of different character types in sitcom and how they are related to the creation of humour through stereotyping.



Character types

Watch an episode of a sitcom and try to divide the characters shown into Taflinger's three categories

- Which of these character types seems to generate the most humour?
- Which are most likely to be stereotypes and why?
- What other generalisations can be drawn from your analysis?

Name of sitcom: .....

Name of episode: .....

Main characters

Supporting characters

Transients

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TV Sitcoms

Taflinger's sitcom categories function in a different way to those of Hartley since he is not basing his taxonomy purely on the form or content of the shows. Thus *I Love Lucy* and *The Cosby Show*, while apparently sharing many similar elements in terms of subject matter, form and style, are viewed as different creatures because of their ideological agenda. The introduction of this agenda into the debate raises many interesting questions about the meanings and functions of sitcom as part of popular culture and, in later sections, we will look at how sitcoms may be analysed ideologically.

However, Taflinger's approach also creates a number of problems in what he sets out as an objective analysis of the genre. By introducing criteria such as 'normality' into the process of categorising sitcom, Taflinger begins to impose his own readings and values onto a series of texts which might be read in very different ways by different kinds of audiences. Throughout, there is also an implicit set of value judgements being made, privileging his third category, dramedy, as 'quality' television and marginalising the actcom as a superficial and unintelligent type. While there may be some justification in regarding *M*A*S*H* as a better programme than *Mork and Mindy*, this kind of judgement risks dismissing the vast majority of sitcoms as worthless and prevents further serious attention to why they should be so popular in the first place.

Analysing a sitcom

The process of analysis is one of the fundamental elements of any Media Studies or related course. Historical perspectives, institutional contexts and wider debates about the role of media forms within our society can be taught through lecture and research tasks, but are ultimately worthless without being tethered by our students' specific experience of the texts they are studying. The fact that these texts are often popular cultural products, already experienced to some degree by the students is both a boon and a bane. On the one hand, we rarely have to struggle to elicit some sort of discussion, evaluation or judgement on texts that already form the basis of a great deal of their peer interaction (this is a luxury appreciated a great deal, I think, by those of us who teach or have taught English Literature). On the other hand, we have to work hard to ensure that the terms of the debate are appropriately formal, analytical and objective, which is not always the case with texts as familiar as TV programmes.

The analysis of sitcom, then, helps both to frame the understanding already held by the students in an appropriate sphere of reference, as well as to discover unconsidered elements and ideas within the text or texts. There are a number of analytical approaches that can be adopted, some of which are discussed below. In all cases, the usefulness of the approach is severely limited when it is merely a descriptive process. The naming of parts is an important step in the students' development and they should be encouraged to build up a glossary of terms, which they can apply to indicate their recognition of key elements. However, it is equally important that students are able to account for and explain these elements and the ways in which they contribute to the creation of meaning within a text.

• Using critical theory

One glance at the bibliography of this or any other media teaching publication will indicate the huge amount of material that is available for those interested in the areas covered. The majority of this material is generated through higher education media research or co-opted from related branches of academia in order to facilitate media analysis, and much of it is very difficult for the average post-16 student to take on board. A key issue for teachers is to determine how much of this material we wish to pass on to our students and in what kind of format it is most appropriate.

In all cases, I would suggest that the most important question to ask is 'How will this help my students to understand ...?'. At AS and A level, there may be a great temptation to swamp the course with as much critical material as possible in the hope that some of it is effectively appropriated by the students

(and perhaps because it helps to convince cynical colleagues of the 'seriousness' of the subject). However, I suspect that this approach often leads students to employ different theorists as totems, listing names and theories they feel might be relevant to particular questions, rather than using the ideas illustratively to build analysis and arguments. (As a result of years of exam marking I have identified a condition peculiar to Media students, Lévi-Strauss Syndrome. LSS at its most extreme involves invoking the structural anthropologist's name in every paragraph of an exam answer because the studied text seems to contain a number of themes which are paired or oppositional.)

The use of critical theory needs to be built into topics so that it functions as a learning skill. You need to choose ideas you refer to judiciously, so that they are manageable and useful for students. While students should certainly be encouraged to research ideas further and to read key academic texts for themselves, often this approach is too intimidating in the first instance. Teachers should be looking to introduce critical theory clearly and with discrimination, prioritising the aspects which are most important for the way you have chosen to teach the topic. If the theory does not add to the students' understanding or aid their learning, it is probably better to leave it out altogether. Good insight and good argument will always earn more marks from examiners than learning the ideas of academics by rote.

• Textual analysis

Textual analysis tends to work most effectively for students when they are given short sequences to study and when given clear instructions as to why they are carrying out the analysis. Try to give a clear context for the task that you set – 'We are looking at the ways male characters are constructed' or 'We are trying to compare this with the sequence from *Only Fools and Horses*', for example. It is worth running over some of the most useful areas for an analysis of a programme's form and style and seeing how these might be applied to sitcoms.

• Some key terms

• Camerawork

It is assumed that you will have begun your course with some basic textual analysis exercises, so students should be familiar with a range of terms identifying shot sizes, shot angles, shot types, camera movements and so on.

The majority of TV sitcoms, given their studio-bound nature, relatively small budgets and short shooting times will not demonstrate a particularly distinctive visual style. A live mix is often put together from a four- or five-camera studio shoot, with exterior footage, significant close-ups and reaction shots edited in

post-production. The reliance upon conventional framing, using a preponderance of mid-shot and medium close-ups, combined with the common techniques of continuity editing, creates a 'transparent' style, which allows the audience to understand the action, without drawing attention to the process of construction. (The notion of 'realism' to which these elements are closely related is discussed further in Case Study 3.)

Students should be able to explain how the protagonists of sitcom are positioned in relation to the audience through the use of camera. A comparison of a sequence from *The Cosby Show* with one from *The Royle Family* should provide an interesting discussion of how the two fathers, Cliff and Jim, are being constructed. Students might think, for example, about:

- the use of low angle shots of Jim to emphasise his size or sloth;
- the use of mid-shots and close-ups of Cliff to facilitate his 'mugging' and other forms of visual comedy;
- the positioning of the two fathers in relation to other characters, particularly their wives, to suggest their relationships.

In addition, it might be possible to look at the ways in which the camera is used to generate comedy from particular actions and reactions. The famed sequence from *Only Fools and Horses* in which Del, trying to impress two young ladies with his sophisticated lifestyle, falls through an opening in the bar was recently voted one of the top three comedy sequences of all time by British TV viewers for the Channel 4 programme *The 100 Greatest Comedy Moments* (Channel 4, 2001). The humour in the sequence arises partly from a classic piece of slapstick and from the social context of this embarrassing action. However, it is intensified by the way the sequence is framed, in medium long shot so that we see the fall but only hear the moment he hits the ground. In addition, keeping Trigger in a two shot with the action allows the moment to seem even funnier as he doesn't notice his friend's misfortune.

Many recent sitcoms, such as *Spaced* or *Malcolm in the Middle*, adopt a more filmic style, eschewing the studio for location shoots with a noticeable aesthetic. Try looking at a sequence from one of these shows and drawing comparisons with more conventional sitcoms.

Editing

Although it is difficult, and in some ways counterproductive, to talk about editing separately from the use of camera it is worth asking students to think about the two systems discretely. There is a discernible tendency for AS and even A level students to write confidently about the ways in which cameras are moved, framed and angled in a particular sequence, but to show little awareness of how and why different shots are juxtaposed with one another.

Again, studio-based sitcoms will tend to favour simple cuts and maintaining the rules of continuity editing. Nevertheless, students should be able to show some appreciation of the ways in which editing is used:

- to control time;
- to distribute narrative information;
- to privilege or marginalise various characters;
- to create comedy from the actions or dialogue on screen.

Make sure that your students feel confident recognising and analysing different types of transition:

- **Cut** – used to suggest some sort of relationship between juxtaposed shots;
- **Dissolve** – often used to suggest a strong relationship between juxtaposed shots, particularly events separated by space or time;
- **Wipe** – often used to suggest a transition from one sequence or section to another.

Build up your students' confidence in analysing editing by looking at brief sequences (30 seconds to one minute), with some variety of techniques and intentions in the editing. From a teaching perspective, a good VCR with still frame and jog/shuttle facilities or a DVD player will make the task of demonstrating these techniques in action much more convenient. Turn down the sound in order to focus upon the creation of visual meaning. As well as identifying the number of shots and the length of the shots, identify the number of camera set-ups in the scene (this gives an idea of how much material the editor had to work with). Then replay the sequence, covering the image, to see how sound editing contributes to the process.

- ***Mise en scène***

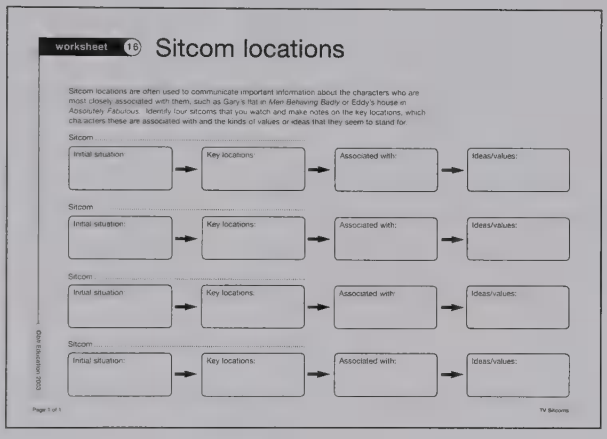
Although the term technically refers to the use of camera, as well as to other elements of the frame, it is often more convenient to separate these two ideas so that students can focus on the *content* of shots as well as their formal qualities. In practice, these things will inevitably be discussed with reference to one another. Students should think about visual elements such as

- sets and locations
- costume and make-up
- props
- lighting
- use of colour

It is very easy for students to be dismissive of elements such as sets in television sitcoms, since they appear to be cheap and artificial in comparison

to film locations or environments. Nevertheless, it is worth thinking about the way in which sets are used to communicate ideas and meanings about the characters who inhabit them. Trying different approaches to this kind of task might yield better quality insight from your students. Commutation tests are always an interesting method of concentrating on specific elements. These involve isolating a significant element of the *mise en scène* and trying to imagine the result of replacing it with an equivalent. What would be the effect if Frasier and Marty Crane were living in Monica and Chandler's apartment rather than their Seattle penthouse? Comparisons are also productive. For example, you might ask students to discuss how notions of gender are built into the major sets and locations of *Men Behaving Badly* and *Absolutely Fabulous*.

Worksheet 16 can be used with students to consider the way in which sets and locations help to provide audiences with information about sitcom characters and values.



worksheet 16

Sitcom locations

Sitcom locations are often used to communicate important information about the characters who are most closely associated with them, such as Gary's flat in *Men Behaving Badly* or Eddy's house in *Absolutely Fabulous*. Identify four sitcoms that you watch and make notes on the key locations, which characters these are associated with and the kinds of values or ideas that they seem to stand for.

Sitcom .....

Initial situation:	→	Key locations:	→	Associated with:	→	Ideas/values:

Sitcom .....

Initial situation:	→	Key locations:	→	Associated with:	→	Ideas/values:

Sitcom .....

Initial situation:	→	Key locations:	→	Associated with:	→	Ideas/values:

Sitcom .....

Initial situation:	→	Key locations:	→	Associated with:	→	Ideas/values:

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TV Sitcoms

Lighting is another element which students find difficult to articulate in analysis. Traditionally, TV sitcoms have employed the high key lighting system which characterised much studio based TV of the last 40 years. However, as lighting technology has improved and more comedy is shot on film rather than video, the range and subtlety of lighting techniques have increased, allowing the lighting to play a much more significant role in the creation of atmosphere. This is certainly the case in a show such as *The Royle Family* where a documentary mode of address is created through the adoption of 'natural' lighting techniques, among other elements. It might also be worth looking at how hybrid sitcoms often adopt the style of other genres, but use lighting to soften these generic elements in order to maintain a light-hearted tone. Thus the iconography of World War I trenches is clearly present in *Blackadder Goes Forth*, but high key lighting is used to ensure that we are not frightened or alienated by the surroundings. (The final sequence of the series in which the characters are sent

'over the top' into a hail of machine-gun fire, interestingly, uses low key lighting to create a threatening battlefield; these actions are not played for comedy.)

Sound

The majority of mainstream sitcoms adhere to television's dominant practices by using 'natural' sound mixes in which important dialogue, normally that of the main characters, is foregrounded against a backdrop of appropriate ambient noise. It is obviously important that dialogue is kept clear and uninterrupted, particularly in those sitcoms which rely upon verbal comedy. You may wish students to consider other aspects of sitcom sound, such as the presence (or absence) of a laughter track. While older sitcoms often employed pre-recorded laughter tracks (sometimes known as 'canned laughter') at strategic moments, the majority of recent sitcoms that use laughter tracks are filmed in front of studio audiences. Nevertheless, there is still a large degree of manipulation involved in order to ensure that the quality of laughter is sufficient in terms of volume and length. During the warm-up session prior to recording, the gallery will identify those areas of the audience where boom microphones can be placed most effectively for recording. Additionally, studio laughter tracks can be swapped between takes or enhanced to provide a suitable reaction to a gag.

Studio laughter serves a number of functions within sitcom. It works to guide the reactions of the home audience and to provide a community response. Laughter comes much more easily when comedy is experienced as a group, rather than as an individual. It also serves various technical purposes, such as masking cuts and edits, preserving the 'transparency' of the construction.

Intertextuality

As part of any textual analysis, students should be aware of the ways in which sitcoms make reference to other sitcoms, programmes or media texts in order to create humour. Often, intertextuality works to create a sense of shared cultural experience among the audience, who gain pleasure from the recognition of the references and their adaptation or subversion. In an episode of *The Young Ones*, the main characters are asked to represent Scumbag College on an episode of *University Challenge*, where they are up against a bunch of upper class stereotypes from Oxbridge. The show adopts the familiar *mise en scène* of *University Challenge* where the two team benches are vision-mixed vertically so that both are present on screen simultaneously. In *The Young Ones*, this arrangement is literalised, allowing Vyvian to stamp through the floor and to kick one of the opposition comedically in the head, while Neil accidentally urinates on the unfortunate fellow below him. Sitcoms such as *Father Ted* and *Spaced* push the use of intertextuality further, often structuring whole narratives around other media texts, particularly films.

Narrative analysis

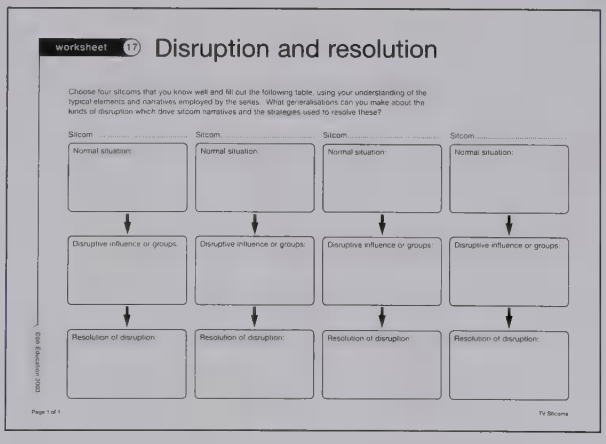
There are a number of different models or theories which are commonly employed by teachers when attempting to build students' understanding that narrative is not an arbitrary sequence of events, but a set of predetermined structures that we use, as a culture, in order to make sense of an apparently chaotic and disordered universe. Many of these models have their basis in literary criticism. This is not a problem as the majority of fictional narratives in the mass media are derived from literary antecedents.

The application of one set of ideas rather than another is probably determined more by a teacher's familiarity and experience with those ideas than any innate superiority in a particular theorist's work. The most important point to make about any kind of narrative analysis is that students should always be encouraged to see beyond the structures that they can identify in order to explain why these structures are significant.

If we take the example of Tzvetan Todorov's widely used model of narrative, we can examine how this might increase understanding of the workings of sitcom. Todorov establishes five major phases in the development of a narrative:

- a state of normality or equilibrium;
- a disruption of the equilibrium by some kind of force;
- a recognition of this disruption and a period of disequilibrium;
- the application of a further force in order to resolve the disequilibrium;
- a return to equilibrium, though often different from the initial state.

The application of this structure to a whole range of sitcom episodes should immediately be obvious and students should have little difficulty in providing examples from the programmes they have seen. **Worksheet 17** can be used to encourage this way of thinking about sitcom structures. However, it is worth focusing on a number of points that arise from this exercise. Firstly, what constitutes 'normality' or equilibrium in the sitcom studied? What kind of forces are introduced in order to disrupt this equilibrium and what might these tell us about the values of the programme?



worksheet 17

Disruption and resolution

Choose four sitcoms that you know well and fill out the following table, using your understanding of the typical elements and narratives employed by the series. What generalisations can you make about the kinds of disruption which drive sitcom narratives and the strategies used to resolve these?

Sitcom:	Sitcom:	Sitcom:	Sitcom:
Normal situation:	Normal situation:	Normal situation:	Normal situation:
Disruptive influence or groups:	Disruptive influence or groups:	Disruptive influence or groups:	Disruptive influence or groups:
Resolution of disruption:	Resolution of disruption:	Resolution of disruption:	Resolution of disruption:

One area of Todorov's model which might raise difficulties is the final phase. Most sitcoms reach a point of closure in each episode, but a striking feature of this closure is the degree to which it maintains the status quo we were presented with at the beginning of the episode; Mick Bowes refers to this as 'circular narrative closure' because 'it returns the characters to the positions they occupied at the start, thus allowing next week's programme to start afresh' (Mick Bowes, 1990, p129). Thus, Del Boy and Rodney's business ventures are always a failure; Alan Partridge never gets his TV show back again and Victor Meldrew never finds satisfaction with his lifestyle or neighbours. This circularity is illustrated and reinforced by what Phillip Drummond (1976) calls 'synchronising motifs', the repetitive use of particular actions, situations and catchphrases in order to provide the audience with predictable and reassuring moments of comedy.

This is not to say that the basic situation of a particular sitcom never changes – families can grow up together (as in *The Cosby Show*), characters can get married and have children (*Only Fools and Horses*) and cast members can change altogether (*Spin City*). Having said this, none of the changes which occur alter the situations to such a degree that the essential elements and characterisations disappear.

The circularity of sitcom narrative has roots in its institutional context, where the repeatability of such programmes is highly prized, but it also has an effect on the kinds of readings and meanings that are available to audiences. It is no coincidence that the themes of many (particularly British) sitcoms centre around social entrapment and frustration. Del Boy wants to be upwardly mobile, but cannot escape the obligations of his family or his poorly thought out money making schemes; Compo wishes to settle down with Nora Batty but is thwarted by his own childishness, as well as that of his 'gang'; Richie and Eddie want to find both money and women in *Bottom*, but have even less success than their counterparts. This comedy of frustration has been noted by Mick Eaton:

> 'The necessity for the continuity of character and situation from week to week allows for the possibility of comedy being generated by the fact that the characters are stuck with each other ... It is as if the formal necessities of the series provide the existential circle from which the characters cannot escape.' (Mick Eaton, 1981)

Although many critics have pointed to the simplistic and repetitive structure of sitcom as an index of its essential conservatism, others have noted the potential, through its emphasis on frustration and entrapment, to offer some sort of challenge to a dominant value system which privileges success and personal development. Let us look at some of the ways in which sitcom might be open to ideological analysis.

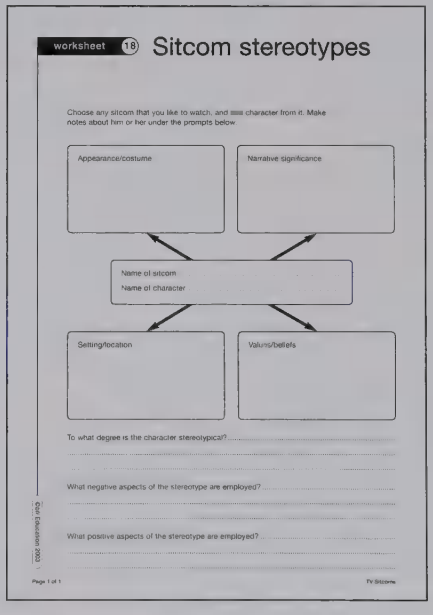
Ideological analysis

In *Teaching TV Sitcom*, the authors note that there are a number of broad areas of social conflict, which are almost always articulated within sitcom narratives:

> '... chiefly class and gender, although sometimes power relations within class and gender may be used. Racial and national difference may also be marked. Within and across these, there will be a set or several sets of character relations which often draw upon stereotypical oppositions.' (Bazalgette *et al*, 1984, p5)

The commonplace use of stereotype within sitcom is a necessity of its abbreviated narrative structure and the need to create comedy from characters who are often transient or marginal. However, it is perhaps too simplistic to accuse sitcom of the blanket perpetuation of limiting and harmful representations, particularly in the case of non-dominant groupings. You might ask your students to identify a number of key social groups who often feature in the sitcoms that they watch and to discuss the kinds of qualities with which they are associated. Are these qualities always the same, irrespective of the sitcom or its audience? How many of these qualities would be seen as negative in the light of assumptions about 'normal' behaviour? (**Worksheet 18** has been set up to help with this kind of exercise.) Bowes makes the point that not all stereotypes in sitcom are 'bad' stereotypes:

> '... what is important is to examine the place of the stereotype in the structure of the programme – is the stereotype the target of the humour or the producer of it? Are we laughing at the stereotyped group or with it? In this sense there is a considerable difference between the crude racist stereotype of Asian characters in *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*, who we are invited to laugh at, and the gay stereotypes of *Agony* who often function as a means of making the prejudices of 'straight' people seem odd and laughable.' (Bowes, 1990, p135)



worksheet 18

Sitcom stereotypes

Choose any sitcom that you like to watch, and one character from it. Make notes about him or her under the prompts below.

Appearance/costume

Narrative significance

Name of sitcom

Name of character

Setting/location

Values/beliefs

To what degree is the character stereotypical?

What negative aspects of the stereotype are employed?

What positive aspects of the stereotype are employed?

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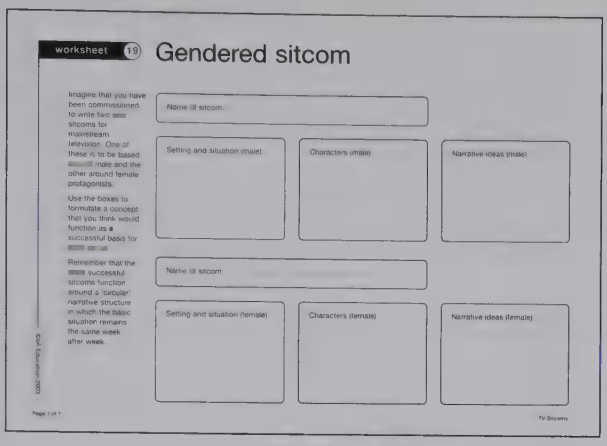
TV Sitcoms

Whether or not it is possible to identify how this difference is constructed textually seems more debatable. Rather we should be aware of the fact that comedy will tend to exacerbate the numbers of readings available from particular texts by creating an ambiguous relationship between the sitcom, its characters and the audience. The ambiguous readings of the character of Alf Garnett in *Till Death Us Do Part* are often cited as an example of this process in action, but almost every sitcom thrives on the tensions that are created between our identification with and laughter at the protagonists.

Sitcom as a genre has been very responsive to social change and has been quick to pick up on areas of social unease as the basis for comedy. This demonstrates that it has a significant role to play in the audience's understanding of social and cultural values. Whether this role is a reactionary or a radical one is up for debate. Humour provides an opening within ideological structures to challenge, disrupt or ridicule dominant views to some extent. In a mass medium, which is dominated by white, middle class, male producers, writers and performers, the ideological issues raised in sitcom remain key. The case studies which follow attempt to engage with some of these ideological issues by focusing on specific sitcoms and their attitudes towards family and gender. **Worksheet 19** can be used with students to begin thinking about the issues of gender raised by sitcoms and **Worksheet 20** focuses on analysing the role of the family. Case study 3 focuses, in particular, on the role of realism within sitcom and some of the recent developments in its form and style. **Worksheet 21** has been put together to encourage students to think about the issues of realism raised in various forms of sitcom.



worksheet 19

Gendered sitcom

Imagine that you have been commissioned to write two sitcoms for mainstream television. One of these is to be based around a male and the other around female protagonists.

Use the boxes to formulate a concept that you think would function as a successful basis for

Remember that the successful sitcoms function around a 'circular' narrative structure in which the basic situation remains the same week after week.

Name of sitcom:

Setting and situation (male)

Characters (male)

Narrative ideas (male)

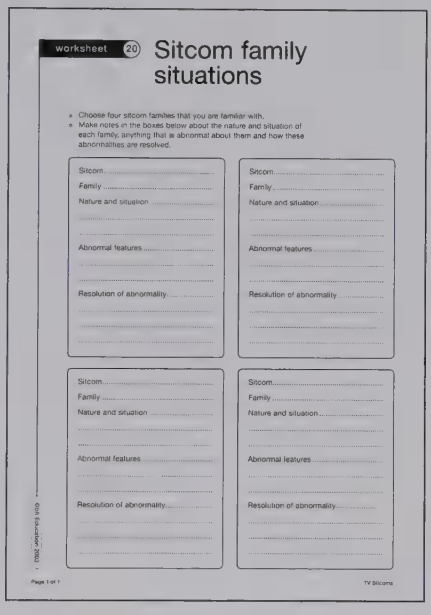
Name of sitcom:

Setting and situation (female)

Characters (female)

Narrative ideas (female)

TV Sitcoms



worksheet 20

Sitcom family situations

- Choose four sitcom families that you are familiar with.
- Make notes in the boxes below about the nature and situation of each family, anything that is abnormal about them and how these abnormalities are resolved.

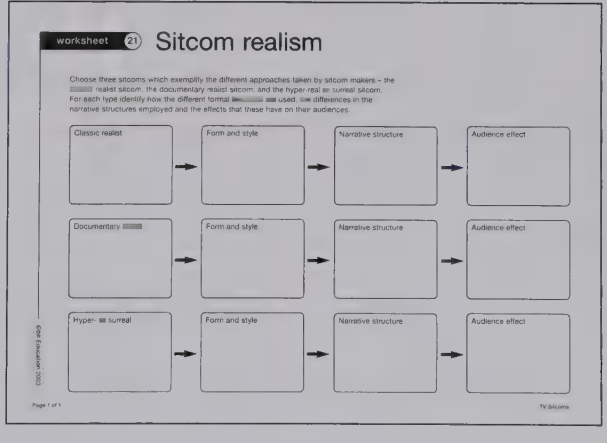
Sitcom
Family
Nature and situation
Abnormal features
Resolution of abnormality

Sitcom
Family
Nature and situation
Abnormal features
Resolution of abnormality

Sitcom
Family
Nature and situation
Abnormal features
Resolution of abnormality

Sitcom
Family
Nature and situation
Abnormal features
Resolution of abnormality

TV Sitcoms



worksheet 21

Sitcom realism

Choose three sitcoms which exemplify the different approaches taken by sitcom makers – the realist sitcom, the documentary realist sitcom, and the hyper-real or surreal sitcom. For each type identify how the different format is used, the differences in the narrative structures employed and the effects that these have on their audiences.

Classic realist	Form and style	Narrative structure	Audience effect
Documentary	Form and style	Narrative structure	Audience effect
Hyper- or surreal	Form and style	Narrative structure	Audience effect

TV Sitcoms

3

Case studies

Each of these case studies looks at sitcom from a different perspective, although you will find that there is some crossover between the areas covered. I have tried to take an approach similar to that I would take in class, by introducing a topic briefly, but generally, before proceeding to textual examples as the basis for an in-depth discussion. In each case, I have tried to maintain a clear line of argument throughout, even though this has sometimes meant oversimplifying or ignoring contrary ideas.

You should feel free to use as much or as little of the material here as is appropriate for your students. Clearly, no AS or A level candidate would be expected to write about sitcom in the kind of depth or detail contained in the case studies. However, the kinds of arguments which are used to structure these ideas, should provide a way for you and your students to tackle the various exam topics based around sitcom. Each of the case studies has a number of worksheets relating to the subject matter in the online resources.

CASE STUDY 1: Sitcom families

Texts: *Malcolm in the Middle*, *Friends*, *Frasier*

Given the domestic nature of the medium of television, it is perhaps unsurprising that many sitcoms use the concept of the family as a narrative and thematic cornerstone. The basic premise of many UK and US sitcoms involves a family or a group of individuals who function as a family. Domestic settings and locations are common; where the home isn't used as the main environment, there is often a surrogate such as a café or a bar. In this sense, comparisons with soap opera can be instructive, since both genres depend upon the audiences' own experiences and attitudes towards family to generate an emotional response.

(Although Hartley correctly points out that soap is often as concerned with inter-family or neighbourly relationships, as with intra-family structures.) (Hartley, 2001, p66)

Also in common with soap, sitcom's representations of family often throw up some interesting paradoxes. We earlier identified the circular narrative structure and the importance of entrapment as structuring principles of sitcom form (see p49). There are many examples of sitcoms which use the family as an obstacle to the protagonist's development, implying the restrictive and limiting nature of the family unit. Harold Steptoe's attempts to find independence and to climb the social ladder are constantly thwarted by the demands and machinations of his father in *Steptoe and Son*. Similarly Del Boy's failure to achieve wealth or status in *Only Fools and Horses* is attributable as much to his commitments to Rodney and Uncle Albert, as to his own incompetence as a businessman.

On the other hand, while presenting the family in this way, sitcoms simultaneously celebrate the kinds of liberal values which 'good' families share – love, loyalty, understanding and emotional interdependence. At the point of narrative closure, the protagonist's frustration at his or her inability to escape from their situation will frequently be subordinated to the recognition that their family represents the kind of positive social qualities which they will not find elsewhere. Conventional and prime-time sitcoms tend to play this moment sincerely, offering an emotional payoff to the audiences and confirming dominant views of the family as the fundamental unit of society. Del Boy calls Rodney 'a plonker', but hugs him to demonstrate his paternal feelings. The Royles put their domestic differences behind them as they settle down for the next programme on TV or head off for a pint at The Three Feathers. Often, the moment is ritualised, with the characters undertaking a regular task or situation, such as Roseanne's family gathering around the kitchen table to confirm their togetherness.

Occasionally, this moment of closure will be played as parody, slyly acknowledging the unlikelihood of reconciliation and understanding in the light of the destructive events which have preceded it. This strategy is common in programmes such as *The Simpsons*, where improbable, last-minute narrative developments allow the family to come back together as a unit and to confirm their feelings for one another despite the extreme nature of the situations and conflicts in which they have found themselves.

The changing nature of sitcom's subjects over the years often reflects real changes occurring in our cultures. Hence, we can perceive a pattern in the nuclear family sitcoms which dominated the 1950s and 1960s, being replaced by various unconventional or dysfunctional family arrangements in the 1970s, the introduction of African-Caribbean families in the 1980s and the use of gay characters and families in the 1990s. This is not to suggest that sitcom is

particularly progressive in championing alternative families. Irrespective of the surface differences in the sitcom narratives and characters, the kinds of values that they privilege are remarkably homogeneous. Despite a 30-year difference in their origins, both *I Love Lucy* and *The Cosby Show* present us with a reasonably conventional family set-up, dominated by an eccentric protagonist. At the close of each episode, however, it is not the eccentricity or individuality of Lucy and Cliff that are celebrated. Rather it is the ability of their families to remain strong and loyal, despite the idiosyncrasies of their behaviour. In this light, we should see this representation of family as part of a predictably conservative strategy for television, whereby social difference and the unease it causes can be handled and defused through the employment of humour.

The examination and, ultimately, confirmation of the importance of family is perhaps more pronounced in US sitcoms than in the UK equivalents. The centrality of family has been a recurrent theme in the political dogma of Republican and Democratic parties over the past 50 years, with both clearly influenced by the lobbying of various religious organisations. The notion of family is very strongly connected with many of the diverse discourses that make up the dominant ideological paradigms of US society, the so-called American Dream. Unsurprisingly then, many of the most successful US sitcoms have chosen a family or family-like group as protagonists and used them to reaffirm popular constructions of what family life should be.

• *Malcolm in the Middle*

This US sitcom displays many of the classic features of the family sitcom. The programme is based around the lives of an ordinary lower middle-class family living in the suburbs of a nameless US city, and several techniques are used to generate comedy from this situation. The show's perspective is that of Malcolm, middle son and child genius. The trope of viewing the family from the child's perspective is a common ploy in making the structures of family life seem strange and humorous. It was often used in prime-time American sitcoms such as *Happy Days*, *Family Ties* and *The Wonder Years* and it is a convention which has transferred very comfortably to teenage TV sitcoms such as *Boy Meets World* and *Sister Sister*. In the case of *Malcolm*, his genius adds another level of estrangement, since he seems to understand a great deal more about the ways in which his family works than his parents do.

In addition, the show adopts a quirky and surreal style, which is far removed from the gritty approach of analogous sitcoms such as *Roseanne* or *Grace Under Fire*. Exaggerated vignettes help to indicate the embarrassing or frustrating aspects of family life: in an early episode, Malcolm comes down to breakfast to find his mother, Lois, shaving his father Hal's back as he stands naked, reading the newspaper. Fantasy sequences take us inside the mind of

younger brother Dewey, while he becomes best friends with a housefly or is threatened by a sinister garden gnome. By freeing the text from the demands of realism, the show is able to create the kinds of inversions of our expectations from which comedy arises.

The episode, *Therapy* (Season 2, Episode 8), begins with an apparently familiar sitcom event. Hal returns from work, while Lois is preparing dinner for the family. He has brought éclairs, though there were only three left at the bakery and Hal says he 'had to cut in front of an old lady to get those'. Lois responds that they should let the boys have the cakes, but when they hear a sound which indicates that their sons are about to come in for dinner, both devour the éclairs as quickly as possible. The humour of the sequence arises from the parents behaving in the same way as their children would.

However, despite Malcolm's genius and narrative centrality, this is not an inverted family structure where the children exhibit the kinds of values we would expect from their parents. In this sitcom, all the characters are infantilised. The family acts as a peer group rather than a hierarchy and power is maintained only as a fragile understanding of the labels which society has given them: mum, dad, sons. Having said this, Lois is clearly placed in charge of the family unit, though her role is maintained through fear rather than more normal maternal imperatives. She openly acknowledges this fact as she attempts to clean out a long neglected cupboard full of the family's detritus:

> 'Human underpants – I must not be threatening you people enough!'

The main narrative of this episode involves Malcolm's attempts to extricate himself from his class's medieval pageant by faking a breakdown and signing himself up for a series of sessions with the school therapist, Miss Gilbert. The concept of therapy is treated with predictable contempt by the programme, as Malcolm easily manipulates Miss Gilbert into believing his problems. A montage sequence shows him studying late into the night from a range of books to ensure that his symptoms are convincing the therapist. His classmate congratulates him on undergoing therapy:

Lloyd Well done, Malcolm. Admitting you need help is the hardest step.

Malcolm No. Keeping up with all the latest cognitive and behavioural therapies is the hardest step, Lloyd.

When older brother, Reese cottons onto the plan, he also begins to seek therapy (though his research involves renting *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Se7en* and *The Nutty Professor* on VHS) and Miss Gilbert, concerned that two members of the same family should need help, arrives at the family home to talk to Lois. The closure of the narrative effects a reconciliation between Lois

and the boys, as Malcolm admits the pressure that he feels being a genius and Lois reveals that she only wants the best for him. As they both sob uncontrollably on the sofa, Miss Gilbert remains stranded at the edge of the frame in this scene, since it is not therapy that has brought them to this point but the realisation of the obligations of family, a realisation which is felt or implied in every episode.

Despite the unconventionality of this family on the surface, the values which are seen as part of normal family life rest at the heart of their relationship, surfacing when the unit threatens to fracture or disband. This kind of reassuring, conservative view of family keeps the show firmly within the tradition of domestic sitcom established in the early days of TV. Nevertheless, the coda ensures that the abnormalities of this group of characters are sufficiently restored to guarantee the situation for the next episode. In this case, Lois and Hal discover that the cupboard they have cleaned out is, in fact, a bathroom. As they begin to put some of the boxes back, Hal whispers conspiratorially that 'the kids never need to know about this place.'

Often the humour of this kind of sitcom derives from a setting or situation which is in some way alien or abnormal, implying a view of 'normality' that can be shared by the audience. However, any definition of what is normal is likely to be generated by dominant groups – in other words, what is normal to white, middle-class, middle-aged programme-makers and audiences. This is not to say that all sitcoms are based around dominant groups, but rather when other representations do appear, they tend to be 'explained' through dominant viewpoints.

• *Friends*

This series is based around the lives of six twenty-something New Yorkers, who share their apartments and leisure time with each other. The core characters form a symbolic family and the key themes of the show are lifted from a middle-class ideal of family life – loyalty, emotional dependency and, of course, friendship. When outsiders are introduced, they are generally done so as a threat to the unity of this group and rarely achieve any sort of status within the show. One of the regular subsidiary characters, Carol, is Ross's ex-wife and the mother of his son. The marriage ended when she began a gay affair with Susan, with whom she now lives as a family.

In the opening episodes of *Friends*, humour was generated from the usually painful situation of a marriage break-up through the 'abnormal' nature of Carol's affair. Her homosexuality clearly contrasted with the 'natural' heterosexuality of the main characters, although the jokes tended to be directed at Ross's inability to maintain his relationship, rather than her behaviour. Ultimately, Carol and her lover are accepted and retained in the world of *Friends* because they function

as a normal family, *despite* their homosexuality. In this way, the potentially disruptive effect of a gay character in a mainstream sitcom is naturalised by the fact that Carol retains a middle-class view of familial relationships.

We, the external audience, are asked to share these viewpoints by becoming part of the community set up by the show. This process is aided by the presence of a laughter track, which both encourages a sense of the show's 'liveness' and spontaneity but, more importantly, acts as our guide in determining reaction. Through the use of audience laughter, we are invited to share the joke and the perspective from which the joke is told. In *Friends*, this is pushed further by including the audience's reaction to romantic and emotional scenes. (When Ross and Rachel kiss for the first time, the audience cheers and sighs happily.)

- ***Frasier***

In this sitcom there is a more sustained examination of family stereotypes, illustrating further how humour derives from our assumptions about normal familial behaviour. The Crane household exists as a kind of dysfunctional family unit. Martin Crane is the father, his natural authority signified by his former profession as a police officer. His power and influence however have been curtailed by a gunshot wound, which has left him vulnerable and dependent upon the care of others. Martin's physical therapist, Daphne, lives with him, superficially fulfilling the role of the mother by acting as housekeeper and cook. However, she is also constructed as child-like, through a naïve belief in her own psychic powers and by her British, northern, working-class origins which are seen as unsophisticated and primitive compared to the American, West Coast middle-class lifestyle which she has taken up. Frasier exists as son, necessarily loyal to his father and Daphne; as mother-figure, responsible for the family's emotional well-being (he is a radio psychiatrist); and as father-figure, keeper and provider of the household. Two other characters make up the central roles. Niles, Frasier's brother and also a psychiatrist, and Roz, Frasier's radio producer.

Much of the comedy comes from the tensions between the various roles which the characters have to occupy. In addition, the humour derives from the inversion of typical assumptions about gender. Both Frasier and Niles are *feminised* males. Their love of fine clothes, *haute cuisine* and the classical arts are matched by their dislike of classic male pursuits – football games, drinking in bars and eating in steak houses. The deviance of their characterisation is emphasised by the contrast drawn to Martin Crane, who functions as a stereotype of masculinity and to Roz, who is a 'masculinised' female, independent, successful and sexually assertive, preying on the single men around her.

The partnership between Frasier and Niles is coded as a kind of marriage. They dress in similar fashion, they share professions and lifestyles and find it difficult to

maintain relationships with their partners. In fact, several episodes revolve around the jealousy felt by one brother at the professional or romantic success of the other. However, the fraternal link is used to ensure that this kind of deviant relationship remains safely humorous and does not become too extreme or uncomfortable for the audience. The structure could not work if Niles were a best friend instead of a member of the family. (Buddy comedies, such as *Men Behaving Badly* or *Seinfeld* strive to avoid the kind of emotional closeness demonstrated in *Frasier*. In these series, male friendships are based around clearly heterosexual activities such as attending sports matches, going to pubs and bars or discussing women. Emotional bonds are rarely suggested or explored.)

Despite the obvious differences between the content and the approach of these sitcoms, there is a remarkable similarity in the values of the texts and homogeneity in the representations of family which are offered. Loyalty, stability and honesty are all privileged qualities within these family groupings. Although characters may stray from the groups and these qualities, the point of closure inevitably reconciles the family and ensures that they have learnt the value of conformity. Most importantly the family or family group represents a community within which the audience can find a strong sense of identification; they are 'us', set against the possible 'them' who would disrupt this unity. They represent 'normal' life and are placed in strong opposition to the individuals who threaten to undermine the stability of the sitcom world.

In this way, sitcom is able to create a shared sense of normality, which is a politically loaded notion. Groups and value systems which exist outside our cultural hegemony can be held at bay through this process, either by their consistent demonisation as disruptive forces (Will's former working class friends leading him astray in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air),* by being sanitised and assimilated into the mainstream (as in the above example of *Friends'* treatment of its gay characters) or by being ignored altogether (for instance, the lack of disabled characters in sitcoms).

CASE STUDY 2: Sitcom and gender

In this case study, we examine how the conservative tendencies of the sitcom format manifest themselves through the representations of gender which it offers to its audiences. We will also consider the potential of sitcom to undermine our assumptions and values and to challenge the dominant views of our culture.

Texts: *Men Behaving Badly*, (Series 5, Episode 2, 'The Good Pub Guide')
Absolutely Fabulous (Series 4, Episode 3, 'Small Opening')

Earlier, we looked at Taflinger's descriptions of the kind of character types to be found in the sitcom universe (see p37). With this kind of formulaic approach, it is hardly surprising that sitcom should be so heavily reliant upon stereotypes to fill its environments. The images of men and women with which we are presented in sitcom have to be easy to recognise and relate to. They do, however, raise some key questions about the way in which we are positioned in relation to these types in order to generate laughter.

We suggested previously that the humour of sitcom often arises from the undermining of a shared set of ideas about what constitutes 'normal'. Unsurprisingly, then, gender becomes an obvious arena in which humour can be generated from the contrast between expectations of the audience and the behaviour or attitudes of the characters. For example, male sitcom protagonists are often marked by some clear deviation from the dominant views of the qualities which make up masculinity. Basil Fawlty in *Fawlty Towers*, for example, demonstrates masculine drive and ambition, but is constantly thwarted in his attempts to establish control of his hotel, his staff, his guests and his wife by his overemphasis on the superficialities of class distinctions and social niceties. Similarly, Del Boy in *Only Fools and Horses* suffers because he lacks the professional skills to realise his business plans and because he is handicapped by the brother and grandfather (or uncle in later series) whom he has to look after. In both cases, their comedy flaws derive from a misplaced feminine trait – in Fawlty's case, the desire for conformity and for acceptance into a class community and in Del Boy's case, the need to protect and nurture his family.

On the other hand, there are plenty of examples of sitcoms whose humour derives from the exaggeration, rather than the undermining, of existing stereotypes. In this case, we are being asked to examine our own ideological positions in relation to the programmes, acknowledging and finding humour in the extremes of the protagonists' representations. Classic examples of this kind of approach may be found in *Till Death Us Do Part* or *Rising Damp*. Alf Garnett and Rigsby embody a range of social prejudices, particularly linked to gender and race.

In Neale and Krutnik's terms, they are 'monstrous' figures, disturbing accepted social orders and running 'counter to accepted middle-class decorum' (Neale and Krutnik, 1990, p261). In both cases, the unacceptable nature of their views is tempered by the characters' placement in a clearly dysfunctional or abnormal 'family' set-up, and by the cyclical nature of sitcom narratives in which they are unable to develop and change or make any progress through life. As such, it is made safe to laugh at the characters and their prejudices, recognising our own normality as an audience. The risk inherent in this approach is that the audience begins to identify *with*, rather than *against* the protagonists, a risk exacerbated by Garnett and Rigsby's narrative centrality, as well as the casting of well-known faces in those roles. Johnny Speight, the writer of *Till Death Us Do Part*, has lamented in a number of articles that some

members of the audience have taken to their hearts a character that he clearly intended as a caricature.

The ambiguity of audience's reaction to this kind of sitcom, coupled with the complex ways in which humour and comedy filter the ideological processes of the text, create the potential for multiple readings. This has allowed some debate as to the progressive potential of certain sitcoms and their ability to challenge or question established representations, particularly in the field of gender. Debates on the political importance of sitcom have tended to argue that the excessive nature of the representations offered and the subversive power of laughter and comedy allow dominant views to be opened up to examination, so that their basis in so-called 'common sense' can be shown to be no more than a construction. Opponents of this view suggest that that the formulaic nature of sitcom form and narrative work against this process, shutting down the potential for undermining dominant views almost as soon as it arises. We will look at two UK sitcoms whose success has been built on exaggerated versions of gender stereotypes.

• *Men Behaving Badly*

Tony and Gary, the protagonists of *Men Behaving Badly*, may not be as 'monstrous' as some of their sitcom predecessors, but they are clearly in the tradition of Rigsby and Garnett in their fixed views on gender and their determination not to be shaken from these belief systems. The success of the series during the 1990s was linked to several cultural manifestations which seemed to suggest a renegotiation of the concept of masculinity. The rise of *Loaded* and other men's lifestyle magazines, the emergence of Chris Evans and the zoo format on national radio (in which the single DJ is replaced by a group of presenters who talk among themselves, as well as addressing the listeners), the rapid growth in the commercialisation of football and its acceptance as a respectable middle-class pursuit were all banded together under the ideological umbrella of 'laddism'.

The 'situation' of this particular comedy is structured around three sets of relationships – Tony and Gary, who share a flat in a London suburb; Gary and his girlfriend, Dorothy; and Tony's unrequited infatuation with Debs, who lives in the flat above – and played out over three main locations – Gary's flat, Debs' flat and the local pub, The Crown. (A fourth location, Gary's office, is often used to introduce sub-narratives and the subsidiary characters of George and Anthea, but is rarely visited by the other main characters.)

Although there is some sense of narrative development across the various series, with Gary asking Dorothy to move into his flat, proposing and then getting married to her, individual episodes tend to feature fairly basic or rudimentary plots. In the context of the lack of narrative complexity in *Men Behaving Badly*, interest and humour is generated from the characters and

values of the show. The terrain of this sitcom is that of gender. Gary and Tony are constructed according to widely understood stereotypes of masculinity, although these tend towards negative qualities: immaturity, selfishness, lack of emotional awareness and boorishness. In contrast, the paired female representations focus on more positive, though equally stereotypical ideas. Dorothy and Debs are both sympathetic, understanding and maternal, eternally patient and forgiving of Gary and Tony's behaviour.

In addition to the construction of the characters, *Men Behaving Badly* looks to link ideologies of gender to its entire diegesis. Locations, behaviour, emotions are all coded in terms of gender and humour is generated through the incompatibility of the masculine and feminine systems in evidence. Episode 2 from Series 5, 'The Good Pub Guide', opens with a scene of Gary and Dorothy in bed. In case we are in any doubt about the stereotypes on offer, their difference is implied immediately through their choice of reading matter; Gary flicks through The Sun, (finding a story on the invention of adjustable prosthetic breasts by Brazilian plastic surgeons, he comments 'I'd say you can't go far wrong with hugely inflated') while Dorothy studies The Independent. The bedroom is obviously Gary's and tells us plenty about his version of masculinity. The *mise en scène* is reminiscent of the unfussy décor of male teenagers, with pinups and posters of British beers stuck above the bed. In a gesture that is equally territorial and inconsiderate, Gary loudly breaks wind several times because '... it's what blokes do'. The pair's ensuing argument draws out the battle-lines of gender to which the programme will rigidly adhere:

Dorothy You're always rummaging around in your underpants. You're always staring at women's breasts. You sit on the tube with your legs wide open as if you're exhibiting some new species of giant plum. You think that road rage is a brilliant idea. You go to football matches so you can shout out 'You're a wanker' to that little umpire bloke ...You think women are constantly fascinated by ironing. You're always going 'Wah-hah-hey'.

Gary Well, what about you women? You think the most important thing in the universe is chocolate. You put on a skirt the size of four teabags and then you complain 'cos blokes look at you. You're always saying things like 'Look at those lovely curtains' ... You're always complaining that we can't find your clitorises, but you know as much about our tackle as you know about wiring a plug. You blame us when you have a period, you blame us when you don't ...

At the end of the episode, Dorothy attempts to teach Gary a lesson by assuming his behaviour in The Crown. When she meets him for a drink, she unsubtly adjusts her breasts, sexually harasses the landlord ('Nice todger. Bet you can't

get many of those in a biscuit tin'), and belches and farts ostentatiously. This show of masculine characteristics from a woman is too much for the male characters to handle. She is immediately barred from the 'male' environment of the pub, although she achieves a small degree of success: Gary is barred along with her. However, as he drinks with Tony in the customary coda on the sofa, it is clear that the situation is not permanent. He has not changed his attitudes or his behaviour and he will return to The Crown in the next episode. The restoration of the sitcom equilibrium ensures that the gender tensions remain in place to continue to create humour in the rest of the series.

Any attempt by male characters to adopt feminine characteristics is equally doomed. One regular source of humour is Tony's attempts to win Debs over by reconstructing himself as a 'new man'. In 'The Good Pub Guide', this involves Tony faking an interest in astrology to impress his neighbour. Astrology is coded as a feminine pursuit, through its association with Debs and through its emphasis on the importance of emotional and relationship issues. Dorothy points out that Debs has turned to astrology as an emotional 'crutch' because she has recently lost her job. However, Tony is happy to exploit the situation precisely because Debs is 'vulnerable at the moment'. Through Tony, the programme is able to ridicule the pretensions of astrology as a source of guidance through life. Debs asks whether he would like a coffee; Tony replies 'No, I brought some lager. It's alright though, I checked the coordinates and Saturn is in conjunction with Pisces, so it's okay to get pissed.' Moreover, the sitcom is able to indicate once again how easily 'feminine' modes of thought and behaviour are exploited by 'masculine' pragmatism. Tony has made up his natal chart to impress Debs:

> 'I was born under a wandering star, with the sun shining in my face. This suggests I was destined to have congress with a Sagittarian lady.'

Tony is asked to leave, but we know that he will return in the next episode in order to try once more to win Debs over.

Many sitcom protagonists are driven by the frustration of being trapped within a particular set of unchanging circumstances, familial or organisational. Gary and Tony, on the other hand, seem to be frustrated because of change, as they desperately cling to a lifestyle and a set of values which they enjoy but which appear to be slipping away from them. Individual episodes often introduce a threat to their stability – mostly the result of Dorothy or Debs' demands – and then allow the threat to be neutralised by the male characters' intransigence or lack of understanding.

In 'The Good Pub Guide', Dorothy's attempts to change Gary's attitudes are mirrored by the refurbishment of The Crown. Both elements represent an unwelcome challenge to Gary's lifestyle. Of course, the close of the episode

assures us that these challenges have been unsuccessful. The Crown looks exactly the same as it has always done, as new landlord Ken based the refurbishment around a photo he believed to be from the 1920s; in fact it is a faded snap of Gary and Tony in the pub, with Scotch eggs on their heads. In addition, Dorothy and Debs are nowhere to be seen in the final sequence as Gary and Tony share a couple of cans of Stella together and celebrate the pleasures of living for the moment.

• Women in sitcoms

In the USA, there has been a long-standing tradition of sitcoms based around female protagonists. *I Love Lucy* was one of the first examples of the genre in the 1950s. In the 1970s, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Rhoda* were hugely successful and in the 1980s, *Roseanne* became a worldwide success. More recent examples such as *Ellen*, *Grace under Fire* and *Suddenly Susan* confirm the potential for using female characters as the basis for comedy.

Predictably, most of the above have achieved success by inverting or subverting the accepted representations of their female stars and by providing a situation for them in which traditional models of femininity are shown to be inadequate. As before, by drawing attention to the subversion, the shows seek to demonstrate that we share a common understanding of what the normal would be. Many of these sitcoms are based around the family, although often this is not of the nuclear variety. The independence and self-sufficiency of the protagonists is often suggested by their lack of a steady partner, even though the lack is generally shown as a source of comic disappointment.

Despite not having a man, these women tend to play the role of mother to the disparate group of individuals with which they surround themselves. As such, the values of the nuclear family can be confirmed, even while the disappearance of such families in the real world is being acknowledged. One exception to this is *Roseanne*. In this series, Roseanne Barr plays the matriarch to a working class Baltimore family and the comedy is generated through her inversion of the audience's expectations of what the mother figure should be. Roseanne is abrasive, foul-mouthed and frequently dismissive of her husband and children. Nevertheless, the stability of family life and the centrality of her role in this is affirmed by the close of each episode, which brings the family together in the knowledge that they will live more effectively together than apart.

• *Absolutely Fabulous*

In the UK, there have been relatively few sitcoms which have focused predominantly on female characters. An exception is *Absolutely Fabulous* which is structured around an inverted family formation, in which the mother,

Edina, is constructed as childlike, irresponsible and spoilt, whilst her daughter, Saffron, has to take a maternal role in looking after her. Edina's lifestyle is encouraged and sanctioned by her best friend, Patsy. Both Edina and Patsy are approaching middle-age, but are seen as independent and assertive figures, who ignore the conventions of female behaviour by adopting a masculine approach to life: hedonism, heavy drinking and sexual promiscuity.

This type of behaviour by female characters seems to place *Absolutely Fabulous* into a sub-genre of the family sitcom identified by Rowe (1995) – that of the 'unruly woman' comedy. In this type of programming, the narrative centres on 'grotesque female figures whose excesses break social boundaries' (Rowe, 1995). Although Rowe identifies the unruly woman by a physical presence which is both excessive and loose (she specifically focuses on Roseanne as the archetypal unruly woman), excess may also be represented through the behaviour, uniform and attitudes of the female characters. In this way, Feuer is able to develop the definition of the unruly woman as any character 'exceeding the norms of femininity at the time the character was popular' (Feuer, 2001). The icon of the unruly woman has been interpreted by some academics as providing a space in which female transgression can be witnessed and celebrated, even while she seems to be part of larger social forces, which should contain her, such as marriage and family.

Absolutely Fabulous clearly generates comedy from the excesses of its protagonists, and particularly by implying their distance from the values which they should display as woman or mother. Episode 3 from Series 4, *Small Opening*, opens with a tracking shot across an opulent living room set, characterised by its extravagant furniture and *objets d'art*. Eddie and Patsy are in the living room, attempting to tidy up. However, this is not a scene of domesticity, since the mess in question is a huge pile of various narcotics. Empty bottles of Bollinger champagne also litter the set, adding a final touch to the hedonistic atmosphere. As with many sitcoms, this particular space is strongly associated with the protagonists, signifying the conspicuous affluence, adherence to fashion and the uninhibited lifestyle that Eddie and Patsy have chosen to lead.

However, Eddie's house is not entirely her own. The kitchen, for instance, is clearly demarcated as Saffy's space. Tucked away below the rest of the house, Saffy and her grandmother are most often shown around the kitchen table, which is probably the most traditional piece of furniture in the house. Eddie and Patsy only venture into this room when necessity demands, and both are shown to be uneasy here. In most episodes, it is a place for confusion and conflict. In *Small Opening*, Eddie (stoned and paranoid) attacks her mobile phone on the kitchen table, mistaking its ring tone for the drone of a giant bee. Later, she verbally assaults her former husbands as they gather in the kitchen, prior to the opening night of Saffy's autobiographical play:

> 'I can tell you a few things about him. Being married to him was like being married to an antique shop – full of crap and always closed. Old wood, aren't you?'

Eddie's antipathy towards the kitchen, the domestic space most closely associated with traditional notions of femininity, is typical of the way in which the programme constructs the character in opposition to familiar ideas about women and their roles. The notion of motherhood is parodied in almost every episode of the show, as Eddie's neglect of Saffy is revealed in monstrous proportions. In this episode, a flashback sequence shows Eddie and Patsy taking a young Saffy to the park during the 1980s. Dressed in an exaggerated version of the New Romantic costume and played out to the soundtrack of *Prince Charming* by Adam and the Ants, Eddie and Patsy are fascinated by this unfamiliar environment. Ignoring Saffy, they take over the children's play area. However, their lack of experience is telling; Patsy is knocked out by a flying swing, despite being warned by Saffy that 'it comes back again'. After the flashback, Eddie confronts her daughter about the play that she has written, but her fears are not based, as we might expect, upon filial betrayal:

> 'Saffy darling. Will you answer Mummy one question? How fat is the woman playing me?'

Given that Eddie's relationships to her daughter and to her home are turned upon their heads for comedy, it is not surprising that *Absolutely Fabulous* also turns the role of men upside down within the narrative. Neither of the protagonists are shown to be dependent upon men or emotional relationships for their well-being. Unlike more conventional domestic comedies, there is no straight man used as a foil for the female characters' eccentricities, nor to sort out the situations in which they find themselves. In fact, the environment is often constructed as hostile to male presence. When ex-husband Marshall arrives, his entrance into the house is choreographed like a scene from a spaghetti western. His trepidation is shown to be well founded, as we cut to a low angle shot of Eddie and Patsy looking down from the landing, smoking cigarillos, accompanied by a soundtrack reminiscent of Ennio Morricone's work in Sergio Leone's Westerns.

In many ways, the most obvious source of conventional masculine values within the text is Patsy. Her excessive appetites for alcohol, drugs and sexual satisfaction suggest a similar outlook to the protagonists of *Men Behaving Badly* and her 'maleness' is further heightened by the jealous way she guards her relationship with Eddie. The programme is able to play on this idea of Patsy's masculinity in order to confuse the conventional representations of gender further. Eddie's mother often treats Patsy as 'the man of the house':

> 'Patsy, there you are dear. I need a strong pair of arms. I've got a wardrobe stuck on the stairs.'

Furthermore, Patsy's look (bouffant hair, exaggerated make-up, extravagant designer costumes), and the way she is lit, strongly suggest another archetype of mixed gender qualities – the drag queen. *Small Opening* acknowledges the significance of this construction as we watch the play within the text. In Saffy's production, Patsy is played by a man. Patsy doesn't realise this but is delighted with her doppelganger:

> 'Her tits are bigger than mine, Eddie, but otherwise she's fantastic.'

At the end of the episode the truth is revealed when the cast of the play are invited to lunch. Patsy is not, however, thrown by the revelation:

> 'Never mind. Cheers, mate.'

Patsy's (and the programme's) acceptance of her gender ambivalence is indicative of the text's refusal to 'punish' the characters for their unconventionality or to force them to return to more normal modes of behaviour at the close of each episode. Feuer indicates the radical potential of this kind of strategy in offering a critique of femininity:

> 'In this reading farce and ideological subversion count for a lot; the exaggerated excess of the characters makes them radical. The fan culture that formed around *AbFab* would seem to indicate that many viewers identified with the bad mothers and therefore against the proper but dull daughter.' (Feuer, 2001, p69)

The privileging of this kind of reading is even more pronounced in later series of the show, where Saffy increasingly becomes an unattractive, insular character, almost justifying her mother's treatment. However, it is worth considering to what degree the show's form contributes to the sanctioning of this value system. The heightened style, involving elements of farce and other obviously theatrical moments, distances us sufficiently from the text so that we can laugh at, rather than be shocked by, the excesses on show. Whether similar narratives would work in the more gritty, realist style of shows such as *Roseanne* is debatable. The next case study looks at the style of sitcom and the role of realism, in its various modes, in constructing our understanding of a text.

CASE STUDY 3: Sitcom realism

Texts: *Spaced*, *The Office*

As is the case with most fiction genres on television, the dominant style of sitcom is that of realism. It is important that this is understood not as a judgement on the 'realistic-ness' of the text, but rather as a description of the formal and stylistic qualities used to build up an authentic diegesis for the audience. Classic realism (sometimes termed dramatic realism to distinguish this combination of elements from those used to create documentary realism) is characterised by its 'transparent' qualities. Both camerawork and editing combine to form a text in which the process of construction is self-effacing; through convention and familiarity, the audience perceive the programme as natural and unmediated.

In fact, the construction of realism requires a high degree of skill to pull off effectively. Camerawork tends to be fluid and unobtrusive. Shots are composed using the rule of thirds and participants rarely acknowledge the presence of a crew. Montage is achieved through the conventions of continuity editing, employed to maintain the audience's understanding of temporal and spatial relationships. This is most obviously seen in the employment of the 180° rule, creating an imaginary axis of action which the camera operators cannot cross without undermining the illusion of reality. High key lighting and balanced sound mixing are used to support the creation of an authentic *mise en scène*.

The use of realism as the dominant form of television has been hotly debated by media academics since the 1970s. In a famous series of articles in *Screen* magazine (S.E.F.T, 1969 – present), Colin McCabe and Colin McArthur discussed the ideological potential of television realism, arguing that any radical intentions that the content of a programme might imply could be made 'safe' by the adoption of the conservative realist style. McCabe shows how important form is in the creation of a hierarchy of the text's competing discourses, ensuring that the kind of ideological tensions and contradictions which characterise our real lives do not disturb our understanding and pleasure of the television world. Realism, as a set of formal devices, acts as a kind of 'meta-discourse', organising the text's discourses and placing the spectator into a position of 'dominant specularity' from which the text makes most sense. Importantly, the positioning of the audience is not a natural or arbitrary process, but tends to reflect dominant views and perspectives in our culture. The form therefore means that our understanding of the text and its representations is always seen from this constructed perspective; however, the transparent nature of the form ensures that we are unaware of this positioning, seeing the text as a common sense or natural construction.

McCabe's discussion of TV realism and much of the work which built on his initial hypotheses has been centred around drama, whether in series or one-off formats. It might therefore seem inappropriate to bring these ideas to bear upon sitcom, a genre which is often considered an antithesis of realism. However, we have already looked at some of the ways in which the content of TV sitcom seems to intersect with our understanding of the real world; it must also be worth considering then the ways in which the style of sitcom frames and adapts this understanding for us.

One obvious formal example to take is sitcom closure. McCabe argued that the moment of closure in classic realist texts was a powerful ideological process, in which the various discourses produced are fused into an unambiguous hierarchy by the text's meta-discourse. It is the moment through which the text 'makes sense' and, as an audience, our understanding of all the events which have occurred prior to this are filtered through the moment of closure. The importance of closure is confirmed, as we have seen, by many mainstream sitcom narratives in which the outrageous behaviour or personality of the protagonists is subordinated to the needs of the family or group in which they find themselves. The constant return to this moment makes safe any potential transgression or disruption to the norms of society and reminds us of the primacy of the family or organisation as structuring features of our lives.

On the other hand, we have seen that some sitcoms offer a parodic or exaggerated closure for their audiences. These kinds of moments are often contrived to the point at which the audience recognises the formal necessity for closure, while acknowledging the artificiality of the process, given the events which preceded. It could be argued that the fragile nature of this kind of closure produces a similar effect to the deferred closure of a related TV genre, soap opera. Fiske (1994) has discussed how the lack of closure in soap allows audiences a much more open experience of the text in which alternative readings, some of which might be challenging or progressive, are possible. It is certainly the case that a number of sitcoms which work in this way – *The Young Ones*, *Absolutely Fabulous*, *The Simpsons* – have been held up as examples of transgressive sitcoms. However, as we saw in the last case study, the surrealism or absurdity of these programmes might well mitigate against audiences reading them politically, by suggesting that the diegeses are too far removed from the concerns of the real world. Neale, writing about the satirical power of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* comes to similar conclusions about the role of form in mediating the programme's values:

> '... the elements of illogicality and playfulness to be found in most comedy are in *Python* stretched to the limit ... So overriding are these features that they tend to qualify those aspects of the *Python* programmes that might otherwise be viewed as straightforwardly satirical.' (Neale, 2001, p64)

The relationship between form and content then becomes a key issue in our understanding of the ways in which sitcom might function for its audience. By looking at two examples of sitcoms which have adopted 'alternative' styles in order to create comedy for an audience, we can begin to suggest some of the ways in which this relationship manifests itself.

Spaced

Spaced contains many of the narrative elements which could be expected from sitcom. It centres around two twenty-something friends sharing a flat in North London, as they struggle to get to grips with 'adult' life and its incumbent issues of work, relationships and responsibility. Tim and Daisy are in turn surrounded by a number of further characters, who form an extended family for the show: Tim's best friend, Mike; Brian, an artist who lives below them and Marsha, the sexually voracious landlady.

Its formal qualities, however, mark out its difference to conventional sitcom. Firstly, it breaks out of the claustrophobic confines of set-based programmes by playing out its narratives in a number of different locations which change from episode to episode. Furthermore, it adopts a filmic style, which eschews the transparency of dramatic realism in favour of self-conscious techniques such as whip pans, travelling shots and dissolves, creative *mise-en-scène*, expressive sound and lighting, as well as inserts and flashbacks. The most noticeable aspect of the programme's construction is the rich web of intertextual reference which informs both narrative progression and stylistic choices, while calling upon a range of popular cultural knowledge from its audience.

In Episode 2 from Series 2, 'Mettle', Tim and Mike are preparing a mechanised fighting machine in order to enter the TV competition *Robot Wars*. The opening sequence resembles a scene from *Robocop*, with the robot's subjective viewpoint indicated through the green grid and data which is processed onscreen. While recognition of the reference will provoke some humour, the comedy comes from the bathetic revelation of their robot, which appears rather puny and impotent compared to its big screen counterpart. Despite Private Iron's shortcomings, it is seen as a threat to the robot supremacy of Tim and Mike's rivals Dexter and Cromwell. After Private Iron is sabotaged, it has to be rebuilt and revenge is sought in the illegal surroundings of Robot Club (the roboteer's equivalent of *Fight Club*):

> 'The first rule of Robot Club is you do not speak about Robot Club. The second rule of Robot Club is you **do not** speak about Robot Club ... No hang on a second. I've got that wrong. The second rule of Robot Club is no smoking.'

Meanwhile, Daisy is given a job in the kitchens of a Mexican restaurant, Neo-Nachos, whose workers and *mise en scène* are strongly reminiscent of the inmates and asylum in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. After she is forced to spend the day 'downstairs', where the mind-numbing activity of washing up becomes the equivalent of *Cuckoo*'s electrotherapy treatment, she leads the other workers in revolt against the manager, Tina/Nurse Ratched. Although they are reluctant at first, they follow the example of Chief, the silent, but huge Native American and break free from Tina's regime.

This extended and sustained use of intertextuality serves a number of functions in terms of generating pleasure through recognition and popular cultural 'expertise', as well as delineating a target audience for whom the references are meaningful. Moreover, by creating a diegesis which depends upon a multitude of other, often unrelated, popular cultural texts, it frees itself from the demands of both generic convention and realism, while adopting its own internally consistent and cohesive set of rules. The programme deals with familiar ideas (leisure juxtaposed with work, rivalry and hierarchy and so on) but filters these through a heightened reality, constructed piecemeal from our shared cultural experiences. Daisy tries to explain that she has been sacked from her previous three jobs, because of the opposing elements of her personality, while in insert we see two shots of her dressed as Sandy from *Grease* – the good, Sandra Dee-like Sandy and the bad girl she transforms into at the end of the film. (Her agency representative tells her: 'You've got to shape up. You've got to understand.')

Spaced offers little in the way of social critique or analysis. Throughout the series, work and responsibility are placed in opposition to leisure and creativity, with the latter forces clearly shown to be preferable. In this episode, a montage sequence intercuts Daisy's twelve-hour washing up marathon, with Tim and Mike's rebuilding of their damaged robot, contrasting the ingenuity and satisfaction experienced by the men with the mounting frustration felt by Daisy at her menial job. However, the characters' rejection of the pressure to conform is shown to be a personal choice, rather than a political one. The quirkiness of the characters and the intertextual framework of their actions protects them from the necessity of any moral or ethical interrogation. Rather we are invited to celebrate their lifestyle and to share in the cultural experiences out of which it is built.

With its patchwork of references, its collapsing of distinctions between texts and media and its emphasis on stylistic features, *Spaced* constructs itself as an archetypal post-modern product. It further demonstrates the way in which sitcom's fundamental structures lend themselves to continual reinflection and renewal. Another example of this process draws on a tradition which seems to stand at the opposite pole to *Spaced*'s hyper-real approach.

The Office

The Office appropriates the forms and conventions of the observational documentary, specifically its modern incarnation as 'docusoap', in order to create an updated version of the workplace sitcom. This particular show follows a disparate group of employees of a stationery company in Slough, led by manager David Brent, as they face the possibility of being downsized and relocated to Swindon.

This mixture of fictional and non-fictional modes is not as surprising as we might think. The docusoap, as its name suggests, has itself melded the use of reality footage to a structure that is inspired by soap opera. Most examples of docusoap use a geographical or workplace community as the basis for multiple narrative, character-based storytelling. However, docusoaps distance themselves from their fiction counterparts by the adoption of a documentary look, which audiences by convention associate with truth and authenticity. Elements of this look might include features such as:

- unsteady, handheld camera shots, rather than the steady fluent camerawork of fiction;
- cramped, asymmetrical framing, rather than balanced composition – the rule of thirds is often ignored;
- the camera often appears 'surprised' by the action, causing sudden movements such as whip pans;
- 'natural' lighting, using only those lighting sources available in the frame. This makes the shots look darker and less defined than the key lighting used in fiction;
- 'natural' or ambient sound, which encompasses all sound sources within a location. This can create obscure sound or inaudible dialogue in contrast to the controlled and balanced sound used in fiction.

In spite of the varied subject matter of TV's current crop of docusoaps, there is a large degree of uniformity in the kinds of ideas and values which they promote. Series such as *Airport*, *A Life of Grime* and *Vets in Practice* present an organisational environment as a community, focusing on individual narratives, but subordinating the importance of individual actions to the necessity of working towards group goals. These shows celebrate the value of work, particularly for its communalising functions. The conflicts which are necessary to create drama tend to be between worker and customer, an outsider to the organisation; disputes within the organisational structure are rarely shown and there is little attempt to cover the tensions that emerge from management hierarchies. From this perspective, similarities with sitcom, particularly workplace sitcom become obvious: the importance of the group, the need to resolve disruption and conflict within the group and the reassimilation of individuals at the point of closure, for example.

The Office's appropriation of docusoap's mode of address is not as straightforward as it might seem, however. In the first place, the use of elements of the documentary look is in itself subtly subverted in order to create humour for the audience. The members of the office, particularly David Brent, are all too aware of the presence of the camera and constantly acknowledge it with looks or asides. In Brent's case, these are often used for self-promotion, as he checks that the camera has picked up some positive phrase or action. Other members of staff stare at the camera as if hypnotised by it. Both of these features undermine the impression of unmediated reality which fly-on-the-wall filming attempts to create, while reminding us of the ways in which the presence of the camera changes the nature of the action occurring in front of it.

Further subversion of technique can be seen in those instances where unlikely or inappropriate events 'surprise' both the camera and the audience to comic effect. Brent's attempts to make one of his warehouse staff redundant get bogged down in a discussion about the differences between midgets and dwarves. Suddenly, the camera whip-pans across to David's assistant Gareth who wants to know: 'What's an elf, then?'. Gareth's presence, indicated to the audience here for the first time, and his inappropriate questions signal Brent's lack of tact and diplomacy, as well as the flippant approach which is taken to Bob losing his job.

The Office's adaptation of docusoap convention goes further than stylistic devices. In this generic appropriation, the values of docusoap are undermined as well. In most documentaries, narrative focus is placed upon individual members of a team to show how they work for the good of the organisation. In *The Office*, the narrative focus is on David Brent and indicates how easily individuals can exploit hierarchies for their own ends. Brent is an inept middle manager with delusions of adequacy. His ambivalent position within the organisation is characterised by his meaningless regurgitation of management jargon and his uncomfortable relationships with those below and above him in the company.

> 'I'll be loyal to the whole family ... There is emotion as good in business syndrome, sure, but notwithstanding the cruel to be kind scenario ...'

Brent's poor leadership of his team has created a workplace which is full of dysfunctional individuals. The constant focus on rivalry and tension within the environment ensures that there is little sense of group or unity to be protected. Consequently, narrative structure is often far less pronounced in individual episodes which tend to be structured instead around a series of related vignettes. Several narrative strands do stand out across the series however: Tim's growing disillusionment with the stationery industry, his unrequited passion for receptionist, Dawn and the uncertain future of the office within the company. In the final episode, Brent discovers that he has been promoted to

regional manager, but that in accepting the job he will condemn the office to closure. He needs little time to make his decision:

> 'Wernham-Hogg is one big pie and if they let me in charge of that one big pie, I'll be in charge of … the pie. The people are the fruit … Yeah, okay, I'll take the job.'

The Office can be difficult TV to watch. We cringe with embarrassment at the behaviour of Brent and at the recognition of those tensions and situations which permeate life in the workplace. Through its adaptation of documentary techniques, the programme has also provided some challenge to sitcom's conservative tendencies when it comes to work and organisations. Loyalty and emotional interdependence are not features of this workplace and there is little to keep the individual from straying beyond the bounds of the group. In fact, when individuals do put themselves first, like Brent, they are rewarded with promotion. Admittedly, the series ends with some degree of familiar closure. Brent loses out on his promotion, because he fails his medical, although he tells his workers that he passed on the job because of them. Tim, having been humiliated by Dawn's boyfriend, decides to make a career out of stationery and remains with the company. The office remains intact, the group has survived. However, this has much to do with institutional exigency, since no broadcaster wants to miss out on the possibility of a sequel to a successful series.

These two examples demonstrate the ways in which the format of sitcom continues to adapt itself to television's changing modes of representation thus guaranteeing the genre's continued success for some time to come. What is more, programmes such as *The Office* suggest that the changing form of sitcom will offer audiences new perspectives on familiar sitcom territory and continue to test the limits of TV's institutional conservatism.

Glossary

180° rule
An imaginary axis which governs where cameras can be placed in order to maintain continuity when filming a sequence.

Actcom
One of Taflinger's sitcom categories – a sitcom in which action-orientated narratives dominate.

Centred narrative
A single strand narrative based around one or two central characters.

Closure
The point at which narrative strands are resolved and equilibrium restored to a situation.

Continuity editing
Dominant editing system in fiction film and TV, in which temporal and spatial continuity is maintained for the comprehension of the audience.

Diegesis
The 'world' or environment created within a media text.

Discourse
An ideological value system, used to make sense of interaction between individuals or organisations.

Docusoap
A documentary format, heavily influenced by the narrative structure and values of soap opera.

Domcom
One of Taflinger's sitcom categories – a sitcom in which moral problem narratives dominate, usually within a family.

Domestic sitcom
Any sitcom whose narrative is based around a family or a surrogate family grouping.

Dominant (ideologies)
Those value or belief systems which support the interests of the most powerful groups within societies. Often seen as 'common sense' beliefs.

Dramedy
One of Taflinger's sitcom categories – a sitcom in which 'serious' issues and themes dominate over action.

Form
The structuring conventions of a media text, such as its generic, narrative or ideological framework.

Gallery
The area of the TV studio from which the directorial team control the action and the recording of a programme.

Genre
The categories into which we tend to divide the diversity of media output in order to spot similarities of form and content.

Hegemony
The process and the state through which dominant ideologies establish themselves as uncontested values.

High key lighting
Lighting scheme which provides a high level of set coverage, with large key lights flooding a scene.

Hybrid
A combination of different genres or styles.

Intertextuality
The process of creating meaning through reference to the audience's knowledge of other media texts

Low key lighting
An alternative to high key lighting in which a combination of light and shadow is used to create a scene.

Mise en scène
The combined effect of a series of visual elements within the frame of a visual text.

Montage
The effect of juxtaposing a number of different scenes or sequences through editing.

Narrative structure
The organisation of story elements into familiar patterns in order to make sense of a series of events.

Narrowcasting
The targeting of a small but specific audience for a product. The opposite to broadcasting.

Prime-time
In television terms, the period of the day in which the highest available audience is watching. On UK television, this is normally regarded as 7.00–10.00pm.

Public Service Broadcasting
The ideological basis of non-commercial broadcasting, often defined in terms of Reithian ideals – information, education and entertainment.

Representation
The processes through which aspects of the real world are reconstructed for media texts. Most commonly applied to the construction of particular individuals or social groups.

Rule of thirds
An informal rule which guides the composition of film and TV images so that they appear 'natural' rather than symmetrical or contrived.

Scheduling
The techniques employed by broadcasters to ensure that the largest available audience watches for the longest possible time.

Series
A TV format which consists of a number of self-contained episodes being broadcast on a regular basis.

Stereotype
An inflexible and simplified representation of individuals based on generalisations about a particular social group.

Stranding
A scheduling process in which the same kind of programme is broadcast in a particular broadcast slot on a regular basis.

Style
The combination of visual and other production elements which gives the text a distinct 'look' and mode of address.

Synchronising motifs
Repeated elements of sitcom style and content which are designed to generate laughter through familiarity and repetition.

Syndication
The licensing of US TV programmes to local networks for repeat showings.

Transparency
An ideal state in which the audience remain unaware of the processes of construction of the film or programme consumed.

Workplace sitcom
A sitcom based around groups of individuals brought together by their trade or profession, rather than by family ties.

This glossary is available on a student handout at www.bfi.org.uk/tfms

Videography

Series	First screened
Absolutely Fabulous	BBC, 1992
All About Me	BBC, 2002
Are You Being Served?	BBC, 1977
Barbara	Granada, 2000
Beast	BBC, 2001
Blackadder Goes Forth	BBC, 1989
Black Books	C4, 1999
Bottom	BBC, 1991
Boy Meets World	ABC, 1993
Brady Bunch, The	ABC, 1969
Cheers	NBC, 1982
Cosby Show, The	NBC, 1984
Cybill	CBS, 1995
Desmond's	C4, 1989
Dinnerladies	BBC, 1998
Drop the Dead Donkey	C4, 1990
Family Ties	NBC, 1982
Father Ted	C4, 1995
Fawlty Towers	BBC, 1975
Frasier	NBC, 1993

Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, The	NBC, 1990
Friends	NBC, 1994
Grace under Fire	ABC, 1993
Hancock's Half Hour	BBC, 1956
Happy Days	ABC, 1974
Hi-De-Hi!	BBC, 1980
I Love Lucy	CBS, 1951
Larry Sanders Show, The	HBO, 1992
M*A*S*H	CBS, 1972
Malcolm in the Middle	Fox, 2000
Mary Tyler Moore Show, The	CBS, 1970
Monty Python's Flying Circus	BBC, 1969
Mork and Mindy	ABC, 1978
Murphy Brown	CBS, 1988
My Family	BBC, 2000
My Hero	BBC, 2000
My Two Dads	NBC, 1987
Office, The	BBC, 2000
Only Fools and Horses	BBC, 1981
Only When I Laugh	YTV, 1979
On the Buses	LWT, 1970
People Like Us	BBC, 1999
Police Squad	ABC, 1982
Q	BBC, 1969
Rag Trade, The	LWT, 1977
Rising Damp	YTV, 1974
Roseanne	ABC, 1988
Royle Family, The	BBC, 1998
Sam's Game	ITV, 2001

Scrubs	NBC, 2001
Seinfeld	NBC, 1989
Simpsons, The	Fox, 1989
Sister, Sister	ABC, 1994
Soap	ABC, 1977
Spaced	C4, 1999
Spin City	ABC, 1996
Steptoe and Son	BBC, 1962
Suddenly Susan	NBC, 1996
Taxi	ABC/NBC, 1978
Thin Blue Line, The	BBC, 1995
Till Death Us Do Part	BBC, 1965
Upper Hand, The	Granada, 1990
Wonder Years, The	ABC, 1988
Young Ones, The	BBC, 1982

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• Some Useful Websites

http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/ - a huge resource of Media & Communications material run by Daniel Chandler at Aberystwyth University

http://www.bbc.co.uk – the BBC website

http://www.bfi.org.uk – the British Film Institute website

http://www.mediaguardian.co.uk – large archive of Media related articles from *The Guardian*

http://www.mediaknowitall.webprovider.com – a site for Media students, especially those following the WJEC specification

http://members.aol.com/dsimon9874/main.htm – Sitcom Monkey, a site on writing comedy by Simon Dunn

http://www.screenstudies.com – sections for students of Media and Film Studies

http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~taflinge/sitcom.html – Richard Taflinger's examination of US sitcom

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