After the Laughter: Ideology and Collective Memory in the Television Sitcom

by

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Abstract

This thesis is a response to the relative inattention given to the television situation comedy in media and cultural studies. It addresses the significance of the sitcom form in terms of its propensity for the articulation of ideological struggle at the level of signification. Situation comedies are studied at three significant points in recent history, and are examined as vehicles for the simultaneous expression and containment of oppositional voices.

Three of the most successful female comedies ever produced -- I Love Lucy, The Mary Tyler Moore Show, and Murphy Brown, are studied through the application of a method proposed by John Thompson. Applying Thompson's method to the issue at hand leads to: i) an historical reconstruction of the eras under study, ii) an examination of the corresponding narrative structure of each comedy being investigated, and iii) a re-articulation of both in terms of relevant communications theory. Following this method, the thesis highlights a number of key characteristics about the sitcoms and their relationship with their audiences. Not the least of these is the historical specificity of resistance and containment around the ideology of gender. The thesis concludes with a summary analysis of the sitcom as an aspect of popular memory and ideology in North America.

"A system of thought...is founded on a series of acts of partition whose ambiguity, here as elsewhere, is to open up the terrain of their possible transgression at the very moment when they mark off a limit. To discover the complete horizon of a society's symbolic values, it is also necessary to map out its transgressions[.]"

M. Detienne, cited in Stallybrass and White, p. 20.

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Introduction

Since television's inception over fifty years ago, comedy, in its myriad forms, has been a staple of television broadcasting. The presence of comedy has been so pervasive that it becomes difficult if not impossible to imagine the existence of the medium without the comic form. When one reflects on television's history from its' "golden age" to the present, the names, George Burns, Bob Hope, and Jerry Lewis, are likely to be as familiar as the more contemporary names of George Carlin, Bob Newhart, and Jerry Seinfeld. This ubiquity speaks to the consistent appetite of television's audiences in North America for comedy. Also, the versatility of the comedy format from the point of view of production repeatedly renders it a fruitful vehicle for the assembly of large audiences. This cornucopic abundance accords comedy on television its own place in the study of television history. It is a powerful attractor of popular attention, and an influential, and significant presence in modern media culture.

But, despite the popularity of television comedy, surprisingly little attention has been paid to this area in media and cultural studies. Although there are some notable studies of television comedy[1], the area has not received as much emphasis as other areas of television production such as music video, drama, news programming, and advertising. This thesis is a response to the comparative inattention given to comedy in general, and situation

[1](see Mattelart & Dorfman, 1971; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Marc, 1989; Kellner,1990; Douglas, 1994)

comedy in particular, in contemporary media and cultural studies. My goal is twofold: i) to provide a review of varying perspectives on the nature and role of comedy in western culture, with specific reference to the relationship between power, comedy, and ideology, and ii) to use this review as a foundation on which to build a discussion of situation comedy on television. Using a focussed discussion of a select group of T.V. sitcoms, I want to explore how the sitcom embodies and dramatizes the feelings, hopes, and fears of it's era. By examining sitcoms this way and studying them in the context of their historical underpinnings, I hope to draw a number of more general conclusions about the connections between media, culture, and ideology.

In theoretical terms, situation comedy is well-suited to an exploration of ideology and ideological struggles. The inherently political dimension of most comedy -- those situations where one demonstrates a form of power over "others" by laughing at them, or where the treatment of those others causes an audience to laugh -- are 'moments' where some of the most pertinent clues can be found to an understanding of the relative position of various groups in society and the dominant social logic of the time. When these moments are studied historically and comparatively they reveal meaningful qualitative differences from which one can draw conclusions about the changing nature of dominant discourses, and possible sources of opposition to them.

With this in mind I want to delimit my analysis of the sitcom and ideology by focussing on the shift in dominant and

oppositional discourses, as articulated in three well-known shows, from three different time periods. I focus on commercially successful shows because commercial success is a useful measure of a shows popularity and import. I have also chosen shows where a woman plays the star role, because one of the key areas I want to explore lies in the area of gender relations. It is upon these women stars that the success of the show depends. Because this is an historical study that compares and contrasts media discourses from different eras, I have chosen to focus on three shows that were important and influential in three key periods in the history of post-war television: The early to mid-1950s, the early-1970s, and the late-1980s to early nineties.

More specifically, I shall examine "I Love Lucy," "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" and "Murphy Brown." Lucille Ball is arguably the definitive starting point to an investigation of this type. Commonly referred to as the 'first lady of comedy' in North America, any comparative study of discourses about women in television comedy should arguably begin with her. The show's continued success in re-runs and video rentals more than qualify it as an important reference point in television history. In the 1970's, Mary Tyler Moore became no less significant than Lucille Ball. Her show from that era is so well placed between the era of 'I Love Lucy' and the present, that it becomes an indispensable site for analysis. The third choice is, once again, almost automatic. Any contemporary study of culture, comedy, gender, and ideology cannot ignore "Murphy Brown," especially in relation to the precedent set by the

other two shows. Though there are other comedies today centered on women that are as popular as this one, "Roseanne" for. instance, the similarities in theme and premise between Moore's and Bergen's shows makes their direct comparison irresistible.

In order to set the stage for an analysis of these three sitcoms I begin in chapter one with a brief overview of previous writing on the social meanings of humor: from assessments of classical Greek thought, through modern philosophy and the humor work of theorists like Bergson and Freud, to the more contemporary perspectives of the twentieth century. This chapter provides background for assessing how North American television's appropriation of the comic form differs from that which has come before it, rendering it historically significant. Chapter two shifts focus to a discussion of theory, as it applies television, ideology and culture. This chapter also examines the workings of television as an influential cultural space in modern societies, and develops theoretical arguments discussed in chapter one, introducing the concept of hegemony as a necessary augmentation to any attempt at connecting comedy to culture, television, and ideology. In this chapter I develop an argument for the utility of the concept of hegemony for analyzing changes in forms of representation in situation comedy. Chapter three begins with a discussion of methods for conducting a contextual analysis of cultural media products, and establishes the specific ways such a method can be applied. After doing so, the first of the three case studies is conducted. Chapter four then goes on to apply this method to the two remaining

television comedies mentioned earlier. In the final chapter I draw conclusions based on the information presented.

Chapter One

Theoretical Perspectives on the Social Meanings of Comedy

Raymond Williams once wrote that the "making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions" and that change in society is the result of "active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land"[2]. Culture then, for Williams, means "a whole way of life - the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning - the special processes of discovery and creative effort."[3] A communication perspective consequently "rises to become a crucial element in an analysis of culture; in fact, it represents a basic condition of being and, therefore, assumes an important role in the study of society."[4] Beliefs, values, attitudes, encoded in a variety of symbolic forms -- the comic form for instance -- circulate and are attended to daily in the media, and are thus fundamental aspects of modern society and culture.

The comic form, though, is unique. The experience of comedy takes a diversity of cultural guises, but it is also a fundamentally human experience that appears to transcend history, technology, and culture. Discourse about the comic, from many

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[2]Raymond Williams, in Hanno Hardt, **Critical Communication Studies: Communication, History & Theory in America,** (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 182.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid., p. 183.

different perspectives, has maintained an identifiable presence since the classical origins of western thought. From the time of Plato and Aristotle, commentators on the human condition in western societies have noted the social and cultural importance of humour. In light of this observation, and before any consideration of humour from the perspective of media and cultural studies theory, it is useful to consider some classical arguments about the social and cultural importance of humour, especially as an expression of social power.

Classical Perspectives on Humour

There is a relatively continuous progression of ideas in western writing on humor that demonstrate a certain consistency. From the theories of antiquity, through 19th century philosophy and psychoanalysis, to the audience-based theories of the twentieth century, one is immediately struck with how political questions are inherently connected to questions about comedy.

The most notable classical statements can be found in Plato and Aristotle. Both wrote about humor as a way of disparaging people or groups, and sought to define the conditions under which such disparagement is enjoyable for an audience, as well as those conditions in which it is not. Plato, in **Philebus**, suggests that the expression of conceit, vanity, and wealth, among friends, constitutes the "ludicrous" and should be met with laughter. By contrast, the satisfaction and rejoicing that results from watching enemies suffer misfortune is morally proper and natural, but therefore not humorous. In addition, Plato felt that the expression of conceit or

ignorance by friends who *are* powerful was detestable. But he mentions how the risk of incurring a spiteful reprisal from this powerful other should be considered when one is tempted to laugh at the mighty.[5]

Aristotle, in **Poetics**, was less concerned with the moral propriety of laughter. He was more concerned with the sources of laughter, and was of the opinion that in spite of the social circumstances, weakness and ugliness were the things that constituted the ludicrous. Aristotle added a qualification though. He argued that grief and mirth reactions were often compatible, but if the misfortune that came to individuals was too severe, as in the case of illness or death, then the ludicrous would cease to exist, and true humor could not result.[6]

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes came up with what is popularly known as the "superiority theory of humor." In both **Human Nature** and **Leviathan**, Hobbes writes that the inadequacies and imperfections of others are what is of importance when discussing the sources of laughter. Hobbes writes that laughter is like a "grimace" and that when people perceive something in others that is undesirable, they find it humorous when "by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves."[7] So for

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[5]Plato, **Philebus**, cited in Zillman, D., & Cantor, J.R.; A disposition theory of humor and mirth. In: A.J. Chapman & H.C. Foot (eds.), **Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications**, Wiley, London, 1976.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid.

Hobbes, the act of laughing amounts to an exercise in self-aggrandizement. Henri Bergson in **Le Rire**,[8] continued this tendency to define humor in terms of its potentially political qualities. He wrote that laughter is always corrective, and that in laughter we always find an unbridled intent to humiliate our acquaintances in that process of correction. In addition, Bergson argued that laughter itself was always the laughter of a group, whether that group was real or implied.

No historical consideration of humor can wholly ignore the influence of Sigmund Freud. Building on the work of many of the writers noted above, Freud elaborates the political dimensions of comedy by defining certain jokes as "tendentious." Tendentious jokes are those that "have a purpose [and] run the risk of meeting with people who do not want to listen to them." A non-tendentious, or innocent joke, is "an end in itself and serves no particular aim."[9] Tendentious jokes are of more interest here, although Freud felt that innocent jokes were more informative due to their relatively spontaneous nature. Still, Freud admits that tendentious jokes should not be ignored, and points out that innocent jokes rarely ever achieve the "sudden burst of laughter that make the tendentious ones so irresistible."[10] To Freud, this means that tendentious jokes

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[8]Henri Bergson, **Laughter: An essay on the meaning of the comic,** (Macmillan, New York, 1900).

[9]Sigmund Freud, **Jokes and their relation to the unconscious,** (Penguin, New York, 1976), p.138.

[10]Ibid., p. 139.

have at their disposal sources of pleasure that innocent ones are not able to tap.

Building on some of Freud's ideas, Sigmund Tarachow, in a 1949 paper,[11] brings the attention of psychoanalysis to the role of the comedian as an aggressive entity. What separates this writing from earlier writing on wit and the comic is that Tarachow makes explicit reference to particular comedians and their routines as a way of demonstrating 'hostile tendentious wit', and even more importantly, is keenly aware of the audience in this scenario[12].

Tarachow suggests an additional way of thinking about the people and forces involved in the comic process. The critical factor in this is the *management and direction of aggression.* He argues that there are two pairs of constant elements in a comic situation, i) the comedian and the audience, and ii) the aggressor and victim. This is not to imply four people, but the minimum number is two as comic/aggressor roles and audience/target roles may be played by one person respectively. With this understanding in mind Tarachow postulates four elementary comedic types: i) the masochistic comedian; ii) the story-teller; iii) the practical joker; and iv) the sadistic comedian.

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[11] Tarachow, S. (1949). Remarks on the comic process and beauty. Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 18, 215-226.

[12] The state of development of media industries, or lack of them for that matter, can be said to reside in the echoes of each perspective outlined here.

The masochistic comedian acts the part of victim, and either the audience or a real/imagined other is cast in the role of aggressor. On this point Tarachow cites the example of Abbott and Costello. Costello is "always in trouble, and is being punished, scolded and outwitted by Abbott, who plays a cruel and oppressive role. Yet it is always Costello who provides the punch line for the release of the tensions of the audience."[13] Tarachow goes on to note that the story-teller requires the greatest skill, for he is a monologist and must conjure images of both the aggressors and victims. Bob Hope is cited as an example of this type. By contrast, the practical joker is a pure aggressor. He attacks victims, then both he *and* the audience laugh. The sadistic comedian attacks the audience as a whole, or certain members of it. Tarachow makes an interesting statement with regard to this type of comedian, by suggesting that sadistic comedy is "successful only among groups who feel so much hostility toward each other that they are not content with fantasies of someone else being attacked...but enjoy seeing their companions victimized."[14]

Media, Humour, and Cultural Criticism

This provides an appropriate point to turn attention away from these classical general theories, in order to examine questions and ideas pertaining to humour found in media studies. Tarachow's paper from the 1940's demonstrates a critical

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[13] S. Tarachow, **op. cit.**, pp.215-216.

[14] Ibid., p. 216.

appreciation of the significance of previous theories of humour, as they apply to televised comic images, and provides a useful point of departure.

Five years prior to the publication of Tarachow's work, Adorno and Horkheimer published their **Dialectic of Enlightenment**,[15] outlining their position about the relationship of the audience to what they call the "culture industries." In their chapter, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,' they argue that in the wake of twentieth century technological and social change "culture now impresses the same stamp on everything. Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part."[16] Their totalizing exhuberance can be forgiven in light of what they were beginning to identify as immensely influential capitalist media of communication. Before the end of the page, they highlight "the absolute power of capitalism" in subordinating individuals in society, and go on to elaborate their position.

While their utter disdain for all things popular is to be noted, it is the way they define the blind acceptance on the part of the audience of all that the cultural/media industries produce that characterizes their perspective. They write that the

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[15]Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno, **Dialectic of Enlightenment,** (Herder & Herder, New York, 1969).

[16]Ibid., p. 120.

> man with leisure has to accept what the culture manufacturers offer him: Kant's formalism still expected a contribution from the individual, who was taught to relate the *varied* experiences of the senses to fundamental concepts; *but history robs the individual of his function.*[17]

In other words, since individuals have very little 'choice' in what is provided as entertainment, they must accept what is available. Adorno and Horkheimer point out here, that the absence of 'varied experiences' is an historical development and constitutes a fundamental break with what Emmanuel Kant had considered to be the role of the individual subject. The 'repeatability' of goods production -- due to mass industrialization -- comes to be 'reflected' in cultural entertainment products as well. According to Horkheimer and Adorno then, this had a *homogenizing effect* on both the production of messages, and the reception by audiences. Put another way, mass produced products and images resulted in mass produced individuals and audiences, with no objection from either. For Horkheimer and Adorno, even "gags, effects, and jokes are calculated like the setting in which they are placed. They are the responsibility of special experts and their narrow focus makes it easy for them to be apportioned in the office."[18] Translated, this suggests that 'debased popular forms,' like a comic performance, are as contrived and mechanical as the system that produced them.

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[17]Ibid., p. 124; (emphasis mine).

[18]Ibid., p. 125.

Another influential early perspective on humour in the study of contemporary media and culture is Dorfman and Mattelart's **How to Read Donald Duck.**[19] They illustrate the ways imperialist and capitalist ideals can be written into something as simple as a Disney comic. The unbridled acquisition of material wealth by Scrooge McDuck is represented as 'naturally' as the inherent stupidity of the natives that Disney so often depicts. This is, of course, rife with whispers of capitalism. Dorfman and Mattelart note how in one story which includes native peoples, these "poor simpleton[s]" gladly turn over their valuable jewels and gold for a box of soap that allows them to thrill themselves with "magic bubbles."[20] Considering the ring of historical truth to a passage like this, its presence is disturbing for the authors when contextualized against Central American experience. According to Dorfman and Mattelart, 'spheres of influence' such as this have a detrimental effect on the consumers of these transplanted cultural products. Dorfman and Mattelart point out how in these comics, "[c]ivilization is presented as something incomprehensible, to be administered by foreigners."[21] The ramifications of the consumption and enjoyment of these messages in a foreign country, then, are very significant. Here, the authors' draw attention to the *effect* of these messages on a particular audience, in this case consumption by an audience from

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[19]Ariel Dorfman, & Armand Mattelart, **How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic.** (International General, New York), 1971.

[20]Ibid., p. 51.

[21]Ibid.

the 'third world' in whose country the United States has some sort of interest.

Agency, Audiences, and Laughter

One criticism that has been levelled at perspectives such as Adorno/Horkheimer and Dorfman/Mattelart, is that they lack an adequate theory of the audience. The essence of such criticism is that audiences are not as 'passive' as the perspectives of the authors above seem to suggest, and that when the critical capacities of the audience are considered, the 'meaning' of a given media message is not as clear-cut as they would seem to suggest it is. More recently, media studies scholars have emphasized how audiences actively construct their own meanings. In doing so, they account for the informed experiences of the audience at large, and avoid the conundrum of assumptions to the contrary. As an example, the 'meaning' of a musical artist like Madonna can be variously understood as a re-statement of conventional, sexualized representation of women in popular music, or as a powerful re-interpretation of those same dynamics where the woman involved is conceptualized as more a 'master' than a 'servant'.

John Fiske can be pointed to as an example of an author who is especially responsive to the 'meaning-making' capacities of individuals and audiences. In **Understanding Popular Culture**[22] he focuses on this very question: where should one position the

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[22]John Fiske, **Understanding Popular Culture**, (Routledge, New York, N.Y., 1989).

audience in relation to social power? Fiske argues that until recently, the study of popular culture has taken two main paths. The first he describes is the "less productive...which has celebrated popular culture without situating it in a model of power." Here, popular culture is seen simply as a form of "ritual management of social differences" that exists through the exercise of democratic choice and opposition, resulting in social harmony. The second he describes is one which is well situated within a model of power, but where the forces of control and domination are so strong as to limit or even prevent the development of any truly 'popular culture' at the level of meaning. This is the position developed by theorists such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Dorfman, and Mattelart.

A more recent third position, one to which Fiske intends his book as a contribution, suggests that popular culture is indeed a site of struggle over *meaning*. Though he acknowledges the place of ideological dominance in the system as a whole, he "attempts to understand the everyday resistances and evasions that make that ideology work so hard and insistently to maintain itself and its values." Fiske offers a more optimistic view of popular culture, one that may interpreted as progressive but not disruptive. In 'the people' he finds evidence for both "the possibility of social change and of the motivation to drive it."[23]

Fiske's perspective on media messages moves us closer to understanding the complex and contradictory elements of audience

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[23]Ibid., pp. 20-21.

relationships to media messages and social power. "Popular culture in industrial societies" writes Fiske, "is contradictory to the core."[24] Despite the attempts of industry to create profit in its' own best interests, expensive failures such as t.v. shows, movies, and automobiles such as the 'Edsel', illustrate Fiske's main contention about the role of the audience in "meaning generation." Popular culture, on this account, cannot then be reduced to the process of industrialized production and consumption. Instead, it is "the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures in a social system,"[25] of which production and consumption are only a part. Fiske goes on to note how the process of "negotiating the problems of everyday life" within complex, modern societies, produces "nomadic subjectivities," capable of forming (or breaking) "social allegiances" within a structure of power. Fiske envisions this as a fluid process, and notes how 'the people' are capable holding contradictory positions "alternately or simultaneously" without much trouble. But these subjectivities, Fiske continues, "are elusive, difficult to generalize and difficult to study, because they are made from within, they are made by the people in specific contexts at specific times. They are context- and time-based, not structually produced."[26] These things must be considered when any media products are studied systematically.

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[24]Ibid., p. 23.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid., p. 24.

In **Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970**, Bonnie Dow offers support for Fiske's argument. In opposition to perspectives that suggest a television text is an "'empty vessel' that can be all things to all people [in terms of meaning],"[27] Dow claims that Fiske's view is more representative of the claims for an "open text." Dow draws attention to Fiske's description of a television text as a:

> structured polysemy, [...] a potential of unequal meanings, some of which are preferred over, or proffered more strongly than, others, and which can only be *activated by socially situated viewers in a process of negotiation between the text and their social situation.*[28]

The dominant ideology at work in a given television text can usually be discerned, but Fiske believes there is no guarantee an individual or audience will necessarily receive this text in the intended fashion. Dow asserts that this position is necessarily and easily demonstrated through reference to any feminist reading of a patriarchal text. Still, Dow writes that one is struck by the continued 'high visibility' of the dominant ideology in Fiske's approach. According to Dow "every possibility he offers is a *reaction to the preferred meaning*. In short, resistance or opposition assumes that the viewer 'gets' the preferred meaning[.]"[29] This observation will be central in the analysis of sitcoms to follow.

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[27]Barkin and Gurevitch, 1987; p. 18, cited in Bonnie J. Dow, **op. cit.**, p. 12.

[28]John Fiske, 1987a, p.65, cited in Bonnie J. Dow, **op. cit.**, p12; (emphasis mine).

[29]Ibid., (emphasis hers).

Kellner,[30] as another example, also writes that "audiences may resist the dominant meanings and messages, create their own readings and appropriations of mass-produced culture." Kellner positions audiences as free to "invent their own meanings, identities, and forms of life." He points out that in contrast to older dominant ideology perspectives (such as Adorno & Horkheimer, or Dorfman & Mattelart), theories which give the audience *too* much power "are also one-sided, limited, and should give way to more comprehensive and multidimensional critical perspectives which theorize the contradictory effects of media culture."[31]

Fiske's work, and that of other contemporary 'active audience' theorists, illuminate an omission in what has been presented to this point. It is precisely the 'transgressive' elements of the laughing audience that must be introduced and discussed in the interest of establishing a balanced consideration of the relationship between social power and laughter. All of the theories of the social dimensions of humour presented to this point have been uniform in their attention to the corrective or aggressive capacities of laughter, or the incorporation of humour into dominant ideologies. Though laughter may well to some extent have an ideological function, laughter *by the dominated* is as important to any thorough consideration of humor and society as laughter by the *dominators*. Recalling Plato's caution regarding the 'spiteful reprisals' that should

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[30] Douglas Kellner, **Media Culture**, (Routledge, New York, N.Y., 1995).

[31] Ibid., p. 3.

be considered when one is tempted to laugh at the mighty, it seems necessary to consider this type of expression in more detail, as well as the social sanctioning of what I will call "carnival laughter." It is Bakhtin's **Rabelais and His World**[32] which is the most-cited work on the significance of the carnivalesque to the long-term maintenance of societies and institutional power. The notion of carnival will provide a theoretical model upon which we extend this discussion of critical resistance, at the level of audiences, in tandem with the broader concept of ideology. These ideas will then be connected to my investigation of situation comedy.

Carnival, Comedy and Ideology

Holquist's prologue to **Rabelais and His World** outlines the relationship, in Bakhtin's eyes, between carnival and the strictures of religion and government. According to Holquist, "carnival" is the "most productive concept in [his] book" and "is not only an impediment to revolutionary change, it is revolution itself."[33] "Carnival laughter 'builds its own world in opposition to the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state (p. 88).'"[34] This opposition though is apparently licenced only because of the acknowledgement on the part of the church-state nexus that there is a "superior power...that preexists

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[32]Mikhail M. Bakhtin, **Rabelais and His World**, (Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, Indiana, 1984).

[33]Ibid., p. xviii.

[34]Ibid., p. xxi.

priests and kings."[35] The existence of carnival, then, is maintained, but it simultaneously works to legitimate existing power relations as it informs and perpetuates the opposition of those that power constrains. The irreverent power of carnival laughter lies in its creative, regenerative aspect. It can be contrasted with the laughter of the satirist whose "laughter is negative and places [him] above the object of his mockery[.]"[36] In festive laughter, the people do not exclude themselves as targets, instead, they understand themselves as part of the world and everything in it as comic. "For the medieval parodist everything without exception was comic. Laughter was as universal as seriousness; it was directed at the whole world, at history, at all societies, *at ideology*."[37]

To establish a connection between this perspective and the individual, a rather lengthy quotation from Bakhtin is useful:

> Laughter is essentially not an external, but an interior form of truth; it cannot be transformed into seriousness without destroying and distorting the very contents of the truth it unveils. Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power.[38]

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[35] Ibid., p. xviii.

[36] Ibid., p. 12.

[37] Ibid., p. 84, (emphasis mine).

[38] Ibid., p. 94.

Here Bakhtin very clearly expresses his ideas about agency, and the role of laughter in terms of individuals[39]. Still, in Bakhtin, the broad social connections between carnival, ideology, and laughter, are central. In spite of the fact that Bakhtin stands sharply at odds with the 'top-down' political perspectives on laughter noted earlier, he nonetheless accommodates these perspectives in his analysis. As evidenced in the above quote, the people's 'fear' of authority is liberated through laughter at the system -- a system which legitimates both the authority *and* the laughter.

Bakhtin's perspective on carnival laughter introduces a tension of sorts between 'high' official culture, and 'lower', more popular expressions of what Bakhtin would term folk culture. Building on Bakhtin, Stallybrass and White in **The Politics and Poetics of Transgression**[40] elaborate this relationship over history. A consideration of some of the key ideas in Stallybrass and White's book is most useful in helping to delineate the historical presence of the high-low dichotomy, and moves us towards a contemporary analysis of the content and structure of comedy.

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[39]Both Holquist, and Stallybrass and White however, do suggest that Bakhtin's enthusiasm 'idealizes' the role of the individual. This is to be acknowledged here, but the debate on this point that Stallybrass and White allude to will be left undeveloped.

[40]Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, **The Politics and Poetics of Transgression**, (Methuen & Co., London, 1986).

Stallybrass and White argue "that cultural categories of high and low, social and aesthetic,[...] are never entirely separable."[41] They go on to define four separate but related spheres in which these categories exist. These are "psychic forms, the human body, geographical space and the social order - [and are] a fundamental basis to mechanisms of ordering and sense-making in European cultures."[42] It is the last of these four spheres - the social order - that is most relevant to the analysis at hand. By concentrating on the high/low distinction as it applies to the social order, we are in a position to discuss dominant institutions and discourses; and symbolic resistances (or outright challenges for that matter) to those institutions and discourses. Stallybrass and White remind us that "the higher discourses are normally associated with the most powerful socio-economic groups existing at the centre of cultural power, it is they which generally gain the authority to designate what is to be taken as high and low in the society." They go on to note that this:

> is what Raymond Williams calls the 'inherent dominantive mode' and it has the prestige and the access to power which enables it to create the dominant definitions of superior and inferior. Of course the 'low' (defined as such by the high precisely to confirm itself as 'high') may well see things differently and attempt to impose a counter-view through an inverted hierarchy.[43]

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[41] Ibid., p. 2.

[42] Ibid., p. 3.

[43] Ibid., p.4.

Stallybrass and White define their use of the terms 'high' and 'low' as the discourses of "literature, philosophy, statecraft, the languages of the Church and the University" versus the "low discourses of the peasantry, the urban poor, subcultures, marginals, [etc.]..."[44]

Bakhtin's conception of carnival is not limited to European history. Stallybrass and White state that there is "now a large and increasing body of writing which sees carnival not simply as a ritual feature of European culture but as a *mode of understanding*, a positivity, a cultural analytic."[45] Certainly, as a mode of understanding, it is by no means a universally applicable standpoint for analysis. Still, it does open up a valuable space for the simultaneous discussion of containment and resistance as they apply to laughter. Barbara Babcock's expansion on this theme, what she calls "symbolic inversion," extends the notion of carnival to include "*any act of expressive behaviour* which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes..."[46]

Babcock's use of the phrase 'commonly held cultural codes' raises the relationship of carnival to ideology. It seems clear that Babcock's use of the phase is in fact synonymous with the general concept of ideology. It provides us then, with an opportunity

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[44]Ibid.

[45]Stallybrass & White, **op. cit.**, p. 6, (emphasis theirs).

[46]Barbara Babcock, **The Reversible World**, 1978, p. 14; cited in Stallybrass and White, Ibid., p. 17 (emphasis mine).

to *expressly* incorporate the concept of ideology with the notion of carnival,[47] and in so doing, attempt to re-define carnival in a manner conducive to a theoretical study of the sitcom form. As this investigation will show in later chapters, the ideological overtones in a situation comedy are rather easy to demonstrate, as are the 'subversive undercurrents'. It is through attention to the ways ideology and resistance operate within the sitcom form that makes discussion of them compatible with carnival. The extent to which the 'high' discourse of patriarchal ideology informs and tempers expressions of 'lower' feminist ideologies, can be shown to exist uniformly across each situation comedy to be studied here this way. This will be seen to stand as an example of what Williams called the 'inherent dominative mode.' The ideological nature of symbolic authority within the sitcom form is seen to be *implicitly structural* in terms of the narrative 'situation.' The challenges to this authority within each sitcom, on the other hand, are *as implicit* to the generation of its' 'comedy.'

The 'End' of Comedy?

In his book, **The End of Comedy: The Sitcom and the Comedic Tradition**,[48] David Grote explores the traditional themes and patterns that have defined popular comedies from the

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[47]It is clear through review of the cited reading that the notion of 'carnival' is already inherently ideological, but in the interest of clarity a particular interpretation of ideology will be applied in these pages.

[48]David Grote, **The End of Comedy: The Sitcom and the Comedic Tradition**, Archon Books, (Hamden, Connecticut; 1983).

era of Elizabethan English Literature up through to the present. He studies extensively the role and politics of the traditional comic hero, and traces a number of the consistent features over time and history to demonstrate the way societies themselves employed or repressed the expression of the populace in the form of comedy. In summing up his review of this richly complex material, it is the promise of *change* that Grote suggests is most typical of the role of the traditional comic hero. Though he acknowledges that there are few if any instances where comedy has 'changed the world,' "each comedy is a repetition of the mythical promise of change,'"[49] a statement for which he provides exhaustive evidence. So within the traditional comedy for Grote, "this comic plot and its heroes speak most persistently of change, of the possibility of personal change as well as social change."[50] "Comedy" he writes "did not have to work this way, but it did."

> That it did so not just in a few places or a few eras but throughout Western culture for more than two thousand years indicates that these particular characteristics in these particular variations of a basic story express some very deep and important needs of the audience, an audience that participates as a group, in public, as a sample of society.[51]

Grote argues that it was the joy of watching comic heroes *overcome* the adversities in the achievement of change that defined the

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[49] Ibid., p. 49.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid., p. 48-49.

essence of the comic experience for audiences. But, in spite of this standard feature of traditional comedy where "film and stage together, for more than two thousand years, have shared this dedication through the plot and heroes of the comedy[,]" Grote goes on to argue that American television, and the eventual central presence of the sitcom, "has suddenly and completely rejected it."[52]

Traditional Comedy and the Conventional Sitcom

According to Grote the notion of change is anathema to the conventional sitcom. In numerous passages, he notes how "the basic situation of a successful series must be eternal," and that if we are to understand "the revolutionary form of the situation comedy, we must examine the form as it uses both kinds of situation," those of the individual episode, and of the series as a whole.[53] Considering the sitcom this way, it becomes "obvious" that it is "like no other form of literature and shares almost nothing with what we have always known as comedy."[54]

Unlike previous comedies, the sitcom spends no time explaining the relations between the characters, or their situations. It is assumed that this is understood. Though the stories themselves are unconnected, episode to episode, there is nonetheless an appeal to understand the fundamental premise of the series in order for

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[52] Ibid., p. 56.

[53] Ibid., p. 61.

[54] Ibid.

these stories to make sense. The only inclusion is the challenge to the established situation, and the consequences that are averted as this challenge is resolved. The feature that is most significant about the sitcom, though, is the absence of change that results from this. None of the 'lessons learned' in any one episode will translate to anything that will in any way threaten the situation as it existed at the beginning of the episode. The 'hero' of a sitcom, then, being one concerned more with keeping things the way they've been, is sharply at odds with the traditional hero, who *brings about* beneficial change. The hero of the sitcom is "a whiner more than a doer, a complainer but not a changer."[55]

Grote's discussion has some interesting ramifications for the discussion of the sitcom in terms of 'ideology, power, and the social analysis of comedy.' It is reasonable to assume, that if the sitcom truly is a 'new comic form,' as evidence suggests it is, it must in some way represent a new significance to both the society of which it is a part, and the institutional apparatus that oversaw its creation and circulation in its many different incarnations. This sort of a change "does not happen because of a single success. *I Love Lucy*, or *All in the Family* did not cause this form to appear, no matter how important they may have been in providing the models that so many others chose to imitate," nor does it suggest that the sitcom's presence is the result of a "secret conspiracy hatched in the boardrooms of the corporate networks[.]" Instead, the sitcom

[55]Ibid., p. 97.

happened because some "peculiar circumstances made it possible and because the audience liked it, asked for more, and supported more when it appeared." All of this is to say that the sitcom is "not inherent to the medium itself," because, though the medium of television is world-wide, "the rest of the world does not have it [...] it is still a peculiarly American phenomenon[.]"[56]

Having said this, I want to conclude this chapter with a final comment about the sitcom as an ideological form, and its relationships to the Bakhtinian conception of carnival. The underlying dynamic of all situation comedy is that *some* situation is temporarily threatened by *some* sort of event. The resolution of that 'threat', dictated necessarily by the narrative structure of the sitcom itself, leads to an inevitable solution and a return to the stasis that existed previously. The nature of that solution tends, almost always, to reproduce a certain set of ideas and power relationships. The transgressive appeal of that threat though, to a laughing audience, is then seen to be inseparable from its resolution. And so, defining the sitcom in these terms, it has become arguably analogous to notions of carnival. The sitcoms' consistently central position within the hegemonic apparatus that the cultural institution of television unquestionably is, enhances this conceptualization, and leads naturally to the study of sitcoms in relation to questions of power. In subsequent chapters I shall attempt to emphasize the centrality of the political in situation comedy, by adopting a perspective on media

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[56]Ibid.

theory that addresses the operational imperatives of media/cultural institutions, at the same time as it documents historical contradictions in the audience. The existence of communication technologies, and the place of comedies within them, can only amplify the significance of these representational power dynamics. As Raymond Williams points out, "it is through the communication systems that the reality of ourselves, the reality of our society, forms and is interpreted."[57]

[57] Raymond Williams, cited in Hanno Hardt, **op. cit.** p. 183.

Chapter Two

Ideology, Culture, and Hegemony: Definitions, Theories and Debates

In order to study the ideological dimensions of situation comedies, it is necessary to have a working definition of the concepts of "culture" and "ideology." There are many competing definitions of these concepts, but I have found the definitions offered by John Thompson in **Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication**[58] to be particularly useful.

First, the concept of culture: Thompson's definition is essentially similar to the one proposed by Williams that was noted earlier. While allowing for the fact that the concept of culture itself also has a long and complex history, Thompson draws on the work of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Culture, for Geertz, can generally be referred to as "the symbolic character of social life, [and] to the patterns of meaning embodied in the symbolic forms exchanged in social interaction."[59] Thompson qualifies this definition by extending it to include an aspect that is "not always evident in the writings of Geertz - that symbolic forms are embedded in structured social contexts involving relations of power, forms of conflict, inequalities

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[58] John B. Thompson, **Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication,** (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

[59] Ibid., p. 12.

in terms of the distribution of resources, and so on"[60]. Thompson then refers to this as the "structural conception" of culture, and writes that "[cultural] phenomena, on this account, may be seen as *symbolic forms in structured contexts;* and cultural analysis may be regarded as the study of the meaningful constitution and social contextualization of symbolic forms"[61] [62].

This view of culture is particularly relevant given what Thompson calls the 'mediazation of culture'. Thompson begins his development of this idea by tracing the roots of modern media back to the fifteenth century:

> when the techniques associated with Gutenberg's printing press were taken up by a variety of institutions in the major trading centers of Europe and exploited for the purposes of producing multiple copies of manuscripts and texts. This was the beginning of a series of developments which, from the sixteenth century to the present day, was to transform radically the ways in which symbolic forms were produced, transmitted and received by individuals in the course of their every day lives[63].

It is the historical process through which this happened that Thompson refers to as the mediazation of modern culture. According

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[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Thompson is careful, however, to distinguish this structural conception of culture, by writing that it "should not be confused with 'structuralist'. The latter term is generally used to refer to a variety of methods, ideas and doctrines associated with French thinkers such as Levi-Strauss, Barthes, Greimas, Althusser and-in some phases of his work at least-Foucault" (Ibid., pp. 163-164).

[63] Ibid., pp. 163-164.

to Thompson, one of the significant features of modern societies is that they are characterized by the existence of mass media.

Thompson goes on to argue that the study of ideology in modern societies should focus on "the ways in which meaning serves to establish and sustain relations of domination"[64]. By relations of domination, he means the general study of power. Due to the "mediazation" of culture, power in modern societies is closely associated with the production of meaning through the process of signification. By focussing attention on symbolic power Thompson's definition leads us towards questions about politics, identity, and social hierarchies. Once attention has been focussed this way other questions inevitably arise about the ways, and in what forms, ideology comes to be represented symbolically.

Television comedies are immensely popular symbolic forms and thereby provide an important site for the study of ideology in contemporary life. In the previous chapter, some of the underlying political dimensions of comedy were discussed, but I now want to shift the focus to the broad problem of ideology and to the specific site of television comedy, and, even more specifically, the television sitcom. Thompson's specific focus on relations of domination in discussions of ideology, renders it immediately appropriate to considerations of representational power in *any* comic form, and especially televised situation comedies. In later chapters I examine the institutional/cultural place of television in tandem with

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[64]Ibid., p. 56.

an analysis of situation comedy and ideology, with the comedies themselves discussed in relation to the conditions of their creation and reception. But for now, and in order to be able to more fully frame my discussion of ideology in television sitcoms, a more detailed discussion of Thompson's modes of operation for studying ideology is useful.

Ideology: Modes and Methods

Thompson describes five modes through which ideology operates: legitimation, dissimulation, unification, fragmentation, and reification. He is careful not to propose these as the only five possible modes of operation of ideology. He also points out that these five do not necessarily act independently of each other, and may in fact overlap in some cases.

Legitimation is a mode whereby relations of domination are established and reinforced by being presented *as though* they are legitimate, with this legitimacy being based on either rational, traditional, or charismatic grounds. Rational grounds appeal "to the legality of enacted rules"[65], traditional grounds to the sanctity of tradition, and charismatic grounds are established by appealing to the exceptional qualities of a particular individual who exercises authority of some sort. The near uniformity with which families exist as a staple of the sitcom form, an observation made by many authors, is an example of a tacit claim of legitimation. Sitcoms very

[65] Ibid., p. 61.

often draw their legitimacy from their anchorage in the "natural" two-parent heterosexual family, and, in turn, tacitly reinforce this naturalized image. Conduct within or against the rules of a traditional family by the charismatic individuals who comprise it, not only demonstrates this parallel, it *defines* the premises of most situation comedy.

With the above observation in mind, Thompson's discussion of three strategies of symbolic expression associated with this first mode of ideological production usefully augments the argument. Thompson refers to these ideological "strategies" as rationalization, universalization, and narrativization. Using the example noted above, the *rationale* behind the seemingly *universal* role expectations within a family, comprises the backdrop against which the *telling of the story* makes 'comic sense'. Put another way, *without* the "natural" assumption that men as husbands and fathers benefit the members of families through the benevolent exercise of authority, stories that involve challenges to this authority would not hold any meaning. Critical attention quickly illuminates the idea that logical, rational claims, the nature of them, and the way they are assembled as stories, are all culturally relative -- an observation that will become increasingly central to the questions being pursued here.

The next ideological mode discussed by Thompson that has relevance for the study of the t.v. situation comedy is his third mode, *unification*. Relations of domination are established and sustained by "constructing, at the symbolic level, a form of unity which embraces individuals in a collective identity, irrespective of

the differences and divisions that may separate them"[66]. One of the more obvious assumptions of this thesis, is that there is a necessary relationship between the assembly of large television audiences and the resonant images that comprise television content. The nature of that relationship will be considered at length in later pages, but the political orientation of a symbolic representation, and its consistent re-iteration over the course of a long-running television series, is surely a 'construction at the symbolic level.' It is this type of construction in a sitcom that engenders 'a form of unity' in the audience. It is precisely the divisions and differences between the members of an audience that must be temporarily suspended, in order for the premise of a given show, and the comedy generated by it, to have sustained, collective appeal. This is not intended to camouflage the potential for oppositional or negotiated readings noted earlier by Fiske, but instead to flag the essential (ideological) dynamics of those premises as they exist symbolically, while addressing in the process the inherent suspension of disbelief employed in the reception of most forms of entertainment programming.

The final mode of ideological expression with direct significance to this study is that of *reification*. Thompson sees this as a way that domination can be sustained by representing a "transitory, historical state of affairs as if it were permanent, natural,

[66]John B. Thompson **op. cit.**, p. 64.

outside of time"[67]. The creation and reception of some comic messages are predicated on certain cultural assumptions. Some of these assumptions have origins that predate shows, modern institutions, and even modern societies themselves. It is in the re-articulation of these socio-political themes in forms like the sitcom, that renders them conducive to discussions of ideological domination via reification. The relationship between a Man and His wife, or Men and Women generally, is one of these seemingly "naturalized" universal differences. As a result, the study of symbolic representations of 'man' and 'woman' on television is meaningful on a number of different levels. In order to understand this properly though, there is one point that must be made clear. It is not the single incidences of a media representation that renders it ideological via reification. Rather, it is the uniformity with which these representations occur throughout media of communication that tends to foster the feelings that they are just representations of what occurs naturally.

From Ideology to Hegemony?

Reification, universalization, and legitimation are all concepts that have an anchorage in Marxian studies of ideology. One of the criticisms levelled at classical Marxian theories of ideology is that they are too economically reductive and are excessively totalizing and pessimistic. There is, the argument runs, insufficient recognition of the often compromised, negotiated, and contested

[67] Ibid., p. 65.

nature of ideology. Critics who have made such arguments have suggested that the concept of hegemony is a more useful analytic tool than the older Marxian concept of 'dominant ideology'.[68]

The name Antonio Gramsci is synonymous with the concept of hegemony. Born to lower middle-class parents in an impoverished part of Italy, the island of Sardinia, he was later to win a scholarship to the University of Turin. His experiences of both a backward peasant society, and that of an industrial city, were to eventually prove significant in the development of his political thought. Perry Anderson[69] begins a relatively recent review of the work of Gramsci by making the following statement: "Today, no Marxist thinker after the classical epoch is so universally respected in the West as Antonio Gramsci. Nor is any term so freely or diversely invoked...as that of hegemony, to which he gave currency."[70] Neither the praise for Gramsci nor the qualification regarding the ensuing use of the concept is overstated. His cryptic writing style in the notebooks, necessitated by the ever present spectre of censorship, have rendered his work and ideas open to a multitude of interpretations. As Anderson puts it succinctly, the "price of so ecumenical an admiration is necessarily ambiguity:

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[68]Richard S. Gruneau, **pers. com.**, May 1997.

[69]Perry Anderson, The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci, **New Left Review**, #100, Nov. '76 - Jan. '77.

[70]Ibid., p. 5.

multiple and incompatible interpretations of the themes in the Prison Notebooks."[71]

Though hegemony can be understood as the means by which a popular ideology is produced, it is by no means the same thing as an "Ideology." In **Ideology: An Introduction**,[72] Terry Eagleton distinguishes ideology from hegemony at a number of points. According to Eagleton "hegemony is a broader category than ideology: it includes ideology, but is not reducible to it."[73]

> Hegemony, then, is not just some successful ideology, but may be discriminated into its various ideological, cultural, political and economic aspects. Ideology refers specifically to the way power-struggles are fought out *at the level of signification*; and though such signification is involved in all hegemonic processes, it is not in all cases the *dominant* level by which rule is sustained.[74]

Hegemony then, is a system of internal control, or:

> ...an order in which a common social-moral language is spoken, in which one concept of reality is dominant, informing with its spirit all modes of thought and behavior. It follows that hegemony is the predominance obtained by *consent* rather than force of one class or group over other classes.[75]

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[71] Ibid.

[72] Terry Eagleton, **Ideology: An Introduction,** (Verso: New York, 1991), p. 113.

[73] Ibid., p. 112.

[74] Ibid., p. 113.

[75] Joseph V. Femia, **Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process,** (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 24.

Gramsci distinguishes between two elements of society that act together to produce cultural hegemony, civil society and political society. In his book **Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process**[76] Joseph Femia defines and clarifies Gramsci's distinction between political society and civil society. Political society is made up of those institutions which secure consent through domination or coercion, such as the government, the legal system, or the police and law enforcement agencies. Civil society is comprised of all that falls outside of that realm, into what can be considered 'private.' This entails the education system, religious affiliations, corporate organizations, and other similar social institutions such as media institutions, not incidentally. Hegemony is exercised *primarily* within this domain of civil society, and,

> ...is attained through the myriad of ways in which the institutions of civil society operate to shape, directly or indirectly, the cognitive and affective structures whereby men perceive and evaluate problematic social reality.[77]

The civil society then, is the locus for the production and reproduction of a 'dominant ideology.' It should be noted, however, that the distinction between political and civil society

> ...is essentially analytical, a convenient device designed to aid understanding; in reality Gramsci recognized an interpenetration between the two spheres. For example: 'the

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[76]Joseph V. Femia, **Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process,** (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

[77]Ibid.

State, when it wants to initiate an unpopular action or policy, creates in advance a suitable, or appropriate, public opinion; that is, it organizes and centralizes certain elements of civil society.'[78]

Hegemony and the Production of Ideology

Femia and Anderson both concern themselves with an explanation of the concept of hegemony that largely adheres to the project of orthodox Marxism. Much of their discussion is geared towards the clarification of Gramsci's ideas, in concert with the imperatives of class struggle and revolutionary practice. By contrast, the work of Todd Gitlin is much less concerned with maintaining any necessary reverence for a classical Marxian perspective. Gitlin seems willing to abandon the old Marxist formulae in the interest of a more contemporary application of the concept itself. Gitlin suggests that it is not necessary to accept "all of Gramsci's analytic baggage to see the penetrating importance of the notion of hegemony--uniting persuasion from above with consent from below--for comprehending the endurance of advanced capitalist society."[79] He then continues to suggest that "one need not accept a strictly Marxist premise that the 'material base' of 'forces of production' in *any* sense (even "ultimately") precedes culture."[80] However, Gitlin retains Gramsci's central idea that those who are in charge of the dominant institutions of society are concerned with the maintenance of their superiority,

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[78]Ibid., p. 27

[79]Todd Gitlin, **op. cit.**, p. 10.

[80]Ibid.

often through their priviledged position in the struggle for signification.

> [Messages]...must emanate outward from message-producers and then into the audience's minds, there to be interpreted....[and since] the media aim at least to influence, condition, and reproduce the activity of audiences by reaching into the symbolic organization of thought, the student of mass media *must pay attention to the symbolic content of media messages* [.][81]

Gitlin's perspective on hegemony and media content promises to move away from the *potentially* confining debates of classical Marxism, towards the point where media representation can be looked at as *the* 'site of hegemonic struggle.' Gitlin does not ignore the reality of the capitalist system that produced the media institutions in the first place, nor does he forget about the very real types of counter-hegemonic struggle that have occurred in recent history. Still, it is the *representations* of these events themselves, and the *ways* that they are presented, "framed," and circulated *as symbols* in culture, that is the essence Gitlin's contribution.

These media representations exist as electronic relics of hegemonic struggle, symbolically encoded with the politics and values of their time. Though the perspectives and interests of authors such as Anderson and Femia, who concern themselves with clarifying the project of socialism, are by no means irrelevant to the study of communication in contemporary societies, it is authors such as Gitlin, Kellner, Thompson, and Williams, who have opened up a

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[81]Ibid., p. 14, (emphasis mine).

newer critical theoretical perspective on the politics of media content. They are helping to make possible the *incorporation* of the best ideas and concepts that the Marxist perspective has to offer for a study of media, of which hegemony is certainly one, without the economistic and Leninist trappings that have limited Marxist analysis in the past.[82] Equally important, recent critics such as Gitlin and Thompson emphasize the importance of media in the critique of modern social life. Today, the media simultaneously represent and shape the collective consciousness of modern western culture as a whole. Symbolic representations in all forms of media play a significant role in shaping the attitudes and ideas we have, and, more importantly, in what we remember about where we've been, and what we see of the world around us.

Television and the Hegemony of Meaning

The point is that in contemporary western societies, media play a key role in constituting the social formation. Notably, media representations are actively involved in the construction of a 'popular common sense'. It is in this regard that Eagleton specifically mentions privately owned television stations as "hegemonic apparatuses."[83] Similarly, in **The Whole World is Watching:**

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[82] Richard S. Gruneau; **pers. com.**, May, 1997.

[83] Terry Eagleton, **op. cit.**, pp. 113-114.

Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left,[84] Gitlin defines hegemony as "the name given to the ruling class's domination through ideology, through the shaping of popular consent."[85] He also cites Raymond Williams as a theorist who has transcended the base-superstructure model of classical Marxism to propose a definition of hegemony that articulates not only the dominant ideology, but a whole range of other practices, desires and values that also work to define reality for the majority of society.

Gitlin develops his theory of hegemony with specific reference to the modern media. Capitalist imperatives (ie: the production of surplus value) do not *preclude* representations of socialist ideas in mainstream media content, for example, but they do preclude any full endorsement of socialism as the most reasonable solution for the betterment of society. The version of hegemony theory that Gitlin employs is therefore "an active one: hegemony operating through a complex web of social activities and institutional procedures. Hegemony is done by the dominant and collaborated in by the dominated."[86]

According to Gitlin, hegemonic ideology "enters into everything people do and think is 'natural' - making a living, loving,

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[84] Todd Gitlin, **The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left**, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980).

[85] Ibid., p. 9.

[86] Ibid., p. 10.

playing, believing, knowing, even rebelling."[87] But at the same time people only partially accept hegemonic ideology and actively dispute and challenge it in different ways and to different extents. The 'substance' of hegemonic ideology shifts as major institutions shift, and with shifting alliances that form among groups in society. In a passage that is, not incidentally, reminiscent of definitions of carnival noted earlier, hegemonic ideology "enfolds contradictory values: liberty versus equality, democracy versus hierarchy, public rights versus property rights, rational claims to truth versus the arrogations and mystifications of power."[88]

Institutional Infrastructure and the Circulation of Ideology

In order to help clarify how this works in practice it is useful to add in a few ideas from John Thompson. Building on the work of Gitlin and others who have written on the cultural significance of media, Thompson constructs a valuable framework for understanding what he calls "cultural transmission" from a technical/institutional perspective. Thompson's focus lies across the range of the creation, reception, and circulation of cultural symbols in a modern society. He defines three characteristics of cultural transmission: i) the technical medium of transmission, ii) the institutional apparatus of transmission, and iii) the space-time distanciation involved in transmission. These three aspects are considered separately below.

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[87]Ibid.

[88]Ibid., p. 11.

The technical medium of communication

The technical medium of communication influences the messages being communicated in three main ways according to Thompson. The first of these is *fixation.* This is defined as the degree to which a given communication can be said to be captured or recorded as such. This varies from one medium of communication to another. For example, a face-to-face conversation between two people would have little to no fixation, except with respect to the memories of the individuals involved. A communication engraved in stone tablets on the other hand, would have a very high degree of fixation. This understanding leads one to conclude, as Thompson does, that different media have different potentialities as information storage mechanisms. He then goes on to state that the storage capacity of technical media makes the content conducive to being used "as a resource for the exercise of power, since they may confer restricted access to information that can be used by individuals for the pursuit of particular interests or aims"[89].

The second consideration given the technical medium of communication is the extent to which the content can be reproduced. In alluding again to the printing press Thompson points out how, for the first time in history, written messages were reproducible on an unprecedented scale. Similar developments in audio and visual reproduction had impacts as well. It is the reproducibility of symbolic forms that renders them amenable to commercial

[89]Ibid., p. 165-166.

exploitation by various institutions of mass communication, through their commodification.

The third aspect of the technical medium to be considered is "the nature and extent of *participation*"[90]. Different media have different requirements for the apprehension of their content by an individual or individuals. For example, reading a piece of writing usually occurs according to the whims of a single individual, who is free to peruse the material in any direction and at any speed deemed suitable, whereas a television broadcast does not afford that same luxury. Also, the television broadcast is generally considered to be a social event, either with others immediately present, or with anonymous others watching the same thing elsewhere.

<u>The institutional apparatus of transmission</u>

Thompson defines the institutional apparatus of transmission as "a determinate set of institutional arrangements within which the technical medium is deployed and the individuals involved in encoding and decoding symbolic forms are embedded"[91]. This situation creates circumstances where relations of power are again prevalent, as the individuals occupying certain institutional positions are charged with a unique authority to exert varying degrees of control over the processes of cultural transmission.

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[90]Ibid., p. 166.

[91]Ibid., p. 167.

Thompson offers an example from the publishing industry: the decision to publish a literary text lies largely with the publishing house, but is in turn reliant on a successful mechanisms of distribution such as schools and bookstores. Thompson calls these channels of selective diffusion, or, "the set of institutional arrangements through which symbolic forms are circulated, in differing ways and to differing extents, in the social world."[92]

Kellner echoes this institutional perspective on power when he writes that "the desire of powerful corporations to control key technologies and markets"[93] is rooted in both the development of commercial broadcasting specifically, as well as the legitimation of the system as a whole. Kellner also cites Williams to elaborate this point. According to Williams, any consideration of "technological response to a need is less a question about the need itself than about its place in an existing social formation. A need which corresponds with the priorities of the real decision-making groups will, obviously, more quickly attract the investment of resources..."[94]. As we shall see later, there are some interesting questions raised when the representation of women on comedic commercial television is studied in tandem with Kellner's research into who the 'movers and shakers' of commercial television actually are.

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[92]John B. Thompson, **op. cit.**, p. 168.

[93]Douglas Kellner, **op. cit.**, p. 29.

[94]Ibid.

The space-time distanciation involved in transmission

Here, Thompson is referring to the necessary detachment from both time and space that the transmission process involves. This detachment, of course, occurs in varying degrees. A face-to-face conversation occurs within a "context of co-presence"[95], and therefore involves no space or time distanciation. The development of recording and broadcasting technologies renders anything that is recordable and broadcastable as almost infinitely amenable to space-time distanciation. This situation itself allows us to speak of what Thompson calls the "extension of availability"[96]. Thompson then proceeds with an historical overview of the development of communication technologies from clay tablets, through paper and printing, to cable and satellites. A detailed discussion of the historical development is not necessary here. It is of more importance to focus on the capacity of the modern media to *record*, *circulate*, and *preserve* meaningful symbolic forms, which has been outlined here by the attention to Thompson's three characteristics of cultural transmission.

Television, Symbolic Content, and Political Economy

Having established the ideological significance of media symbols, and the hegemonic apparati which are involved in their creation and circulation, a more focussed discussion of the monitary

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[95]Ibid., p. 169.

[96]Ibid.

mediation between social experience and media representation is necessary. In such a discussion it is necessary to recognize that "ideological hegemony is not reducible to the economic interests of elites."[97] Nonetheless, any consideration or study of media content must necessarily consider the economic realities upon which media production is based. Even a cursory understanding of the relationship between television, advertising, and the capitalist system that supports it all is fundamental to an understanding of how content in media may or may not affect revenues derived through broadcast.

It is commonly understood in media studies that the primary role of a television show is to provide an audience to advertisers. Advertisers pay money for the exposure of the products they are advertising. It is the 'responsibility' of the show to have an appeal that is as wide (or, in some cases, as focussed on a particular market segment) as possible, so that the largest number of 'preferred' viewers/consumers can be reached. Viewers, ideally at least, attend to both the show and the ads that support it. If it can be assumed that the ads have been attended to by this mass audience of viewers, and that the ads have been successful, then increased sales are the expected result. It is necessary again to add a caveat here though, as Gitlin again reminds us that "there is no such thing as a strictly economic 'explanation' for production choice, since

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[97]Todd Gitlin, **op. cit.**, p. 512.

the success of a show -- despite market research -- is not foreordained."[98]

Still, the content of the shows themselves remains important because, in spite of Gitlin's caution, if the content is not attractive to a significantly large audience then it will not attract the necessary advertising revenue to support it and the show will leave the air. George Gerbner points out that on U.S. network t.v. "an audience of about 20 million viewers is necessary for a program's survival."[99] Gitlin also acknowledges that the "networks try to finance and choose programs that will likely attract the largest conceivable audiences of spenders" and that "this imperative requires that the broadcasting elites have in mind some notion of the popular tastes from moment to moment."[100] The representations that make up that content, then, can therefore be linked directly to the economic impetus that determines if, and for how long, that content will remain in the cultural spotlight.

It is tempting at this point to suggest that the individuals making decisions about content in mass-media settings are somehow 'in charge' of disseminating a particular perspective on society, but such a suggestion would be rather naive. A more useful, and I believe accurate, way of envisioning production choices is to view them as being more or less 'self-selecting.' The familiar adage that

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[98] Ibid., p. 514.

[99] George Gerbner, **op. cit.**, p. 372.

[100] Todd Gitlin, **op. cit.**, p. 516.

refers to "giving the people what they want" is made manifest through producer's attention to market research and the natural 'evolution' of historically-specific popular attitudes that themselves become addressed and targeted for marketing purposes. For this reason, and in the context of what has been said about market research, the financial considerations of modern broadcasting, and the hegemonic shifts in culture that have occurred over time, it would be incorrect to assume any conspiratorial 'agenda' in the selection and production of television programming.

At the same time, self-selection leaves in its wake a veritable treasure trove of rich symbolism that is both culturally and temporally significant. This is not to suggest that the roles of the individuals in the positions of executive power in media institutions should be ignored, but only to add a rather important qualification to investigations of this type. The individuals in the position to make economic decisions of this sort are in fact, inadvertently or otherwise, *involved* in the process of disseminating sets of values and ideals that play a role in establishing and re-establishing a dominant ideology. Kellner describes this relationship well. Despite television's obvious imperatives towards profit maximixation and capital accumulation "it must also maintain a certain amount of ideological legitimacy for the system as a whole and support at least a certain level of apparent democracy."[101] According to Kellner,

[101]Douglas Kellner, **op. cit.**, p. 96.

television acts as a crisis manager, a mediator of social conflict, and a manager of consciousness.

Hegemony and Television Genre

Having underlined the ideological significance of media symbols, the institutional circulation of them, the economic processes related to maintaining that circulation, and the connection of all of the above to questions of ideology and hegemony, one more aspect needs to be considered as it relates to a study of the t.v. sitcom: the issue of "formal" program properties. Gitlin has noted how many of the formal properties of television shows themselves act to reproduce cultural hegemony. Among the most notable of these are *format and formula*, which Gitlin says acts to reproduce cultural hegemony through the repetition of regular weekly time slots, consistent characters who do not develop, and standard program lengths. "In these ways, the usual programs are performances that rehearse social fixity: they express and cement the obduracy of a social world impervious to substantial change."[102] *Genre* is interesting for Gitlin when studied in retrospect[103] and, when possible, traced over a period of time.[104] "In other words, changes in cultural ideals and in audience sensibilities must be harmonized to

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[102]Todd Gitlin, in Horace Newcombe, **Television: The Critical View (4th ed.)**, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 512.

[103]Ibid., p. 516.

[104]Ibid., p. 517.

make for shifts in genre or formula."[105] *Slant* is the technique through which social issues or problems are either ignored or domesticated, as is seen in the fifties style of shows like "Father Knows Best" where broad 'social problems' do not seem to exist, and "All in the Family" where issues like racism become domesticated.[106] *Solution* is a part of almost every show on television, and for Gitlin, simply reinforces the notion that no matter how complicated the problems presented might be, that they will be solved regularly and reliably by a few people.[107] All of these are examples of Kellner's more general statement that "both the form and content of television programming are ideological, that television is saturated with *ideological bias*."[108] Gitlin concludes that

> it is no small measure because of the economic drives themselves that *the hegemonic system itself amplifies legitimated forms of opposition.* In liberal capitalism, hegemonic ideology develops by domesticating opposition, absorbing it into forms of compatible consciousness with the core ideological structure. Consent is managed by absorption as well as by exclusion. The hegemonic ideology changes in order to remain hegemonic; that is the peculiar nature of the dominant ideology of liberal capitalism."[109]

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[105]Ibid.

[106]Ibid., p. 524.

[107]Ibid., pp. 524-525.

[108]Douglas Kellner, **op.cit.**, p. 114, (emphasis his).

[109]Todd Gitlin, **op.cit.**, p. 528, (emphasis his).

As we shall see, this also happens to be a strikingly accurate description of a hegemonic perspective on television situation comedy.

Situation Comedy as Hegemonic Ideology

Popular situation comedies are a good place to look for evidence of hegemonic expression in society. Though a wealth of literature could be cited at this point to delineate the political potential of even an interpersonal humorous interaction[110], the purpose of this investigation is to interrogate political relationships at the level of signification in situation comedy, and how these change concurrent with the demands of western capitalist hegemony. If the long-term success of a television program can be taken as an indication of the 'qualified acceptance' of the material by the audience at that particular historical moment, then changes in the character of particular representations, when studied chronologically and comparatively, might offer useful clues to hegemonic change within that society.

I have already noted how comic representations can be interpreted as meaningful symbolic cultural forms and as such can

[110]see Arieti, S. (1950); Barreca, R., (1991); Bergson, H., (1901); Bergler, E., (1937); Brody, M.W. , (1950); Diserens, C.M., (1926); Dooley, L., (1934); Dorfman, A. & Mattelart, A., (1971); Fine, G.A., (1983); Fine, G.A., (1976); Fiske, J., (1987); Freud, S., (1905); Freud, S., (1927); Gane, M.,(1991); Goldstein, J.H., (1976); Grotjahn, M. (1951); Husband, C., (1977); La Fave, L. & Mannell, R., (1976); Kelling, G.W. (1971); Kris, E. (1940); Lee, J.C. & Griffith, R.M. (1960); Levine, J. & Redlich, J. (1955); O'Connell, W.E. (1964b); Poland, W.S. (1990); Sachs, L.T. (1973); Sands, S. (1984); Tarachow, S. (1949); Zillman, D., & Cantor, J.R. (1976).

be analyzed in terms of their ideological significance. Thompson offers an interesting observation on this point:

> In the mundane stories and jokes which fill so much of our everyday lives we are continuously engaged in a process of recounting the way that the world appears and in reinforcing, through laughter which profits at another's expense, the apparent order of things. By telling stories and receiving (listening to, reading, watching) the stories told by others, we may be drawn into a symbolic process which may serve, in some circumstances, to create and sustain relations of domination[111]

It is in these "some circumstances" that a meaningful investigation can be undertaken with respect to the ideological components of popular comedy, as well as the hegemonic process through which we come to understand, as a culture, that certain representations "just aren't funny anymore." Women, political minorities, racial minorities, and more recently, sexual minorities, have all been at different times and to different extents, part of a popular "symbolic process which may serve, in some circumstances, to create and sustain relations of domination."[112] As an example, Gitlin notes that the "black sitcoms probably reflect the rise of a black middle class with the purchasing power to bring forth advertisers, while also appealing *as comedies* - for conflicting reasons, perhaps - to important parts of the white audience."[113]

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[111]John B. Thompson, **op. cit.,** p. 62.

[112]Ibid.

[113]Ibid., p. 517, (emphasis his).

An historical period's comic treatment of some social group or issue, when necessarily considered in retrospect, will very often *not* concur with contemporary portrayals. An example of such a case is found in the starkly unapologetic vilification of Russians in a cartoon like 'Rocky and Bullwinkle'. It betrays its Cold War origins today with a minimum of investigative scrutiny. The fact that these sorts of portrayals are largely if not entirely absent from television content today, is of course in perfect concert with the shifts in popular awareness that occurred with respect to the Soviet Union in the 1980s. That television itself

> takes different positions in different historical juntures is indeed confirmed by the changes in the portrayal of the Soviet Union in the 1980s. For decades, television served cold war ideology by presenting negative images of the Soviet Union and repeating declarations that communist societies were totalitarian and resistant to any democratic reform whatsoever.[114]

Any ideological operation of the media then, is largely invisible because of its consonance[115] with lived reality at the time of production. It is only the passage of time that strips away the

[114]Douglas Kellner, **op. cit.**, p.104

[115]'Consonance' as I am using the term, is quite obviously an adaptation of Tony Schwartz's *Resonance Theory*, where media messages are said to 'resonate' with the experiences of the attending audience. Consonance is slightly different. It refers to the state at which two strings are vibrating and producing two sounds with exactly the same pitch. In this state they are indistinguishable from one another and appear to be *one* sound. Given time or some sort of intervention, it can be made apparent that there had actually been two sounds. The production of a cultural form like a comic portrayal in a given historical period can be conceptualized the same way. The cultural 'product' remains the same, but the productive/receptive environment necessarily changes, 'dating' the product in the process.

'veneer of realism'[116] in a given portrayal and reveals it for what it is, essentially a 'hegemonic' cultural construction.

The question of history becomes a key element that differentiates "hegemonic" from "instrumentalist" critical perspectives (i.e., "dominant ideology" perspectives) on media and culture.[117] Kellner makes this point nicely when he notes that instrumentalist models provide "an ahistorical picture of capitalist domination in which the society is completely controlled by the logic of capital," whereas a hegemony model "portrays capitalist strategies as a *response* to crisis tendencies, social struggles, and the fundamental antagonisms of a social order governed by class divisions and the often-contradictory imperatives of capitalism and democracy."[118] In the chapters that follow I try to identify and contextualize these 'consonances' as seen in comic representations of women which are shrouded in the ideology of their era, and demonstrate how certain aspects may have been effectively invisible at the time of their initial reception.

Comparative appraisals of comic, symbolic representations involving an identifiable group from 'different productive eras', will in many cases yield an obviously different 'slant'. As George Gerbner writes, "TV is the new (and only) culture

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[116]Fiske's contention that 'realism and ideology are inseparable' is a useful adjunct to this idea.

[117]Richard S. Gruneau; **pers. com.**, May, 1997.

[118]Douglas Kellner, **op. cit.**, p. 73 (emphasis mine).

of those who expose themselves to information only when it comes as 'entertainment.' Entertainment is the most broadly effective educational fare in any culture."[119] The observation that comedy has always been a key presence in this educational fare, legitmates it as a valid genre for critical historical analysis. Any differences discernable in this 'entertainment fare' in different historical periods is likely to be attributable, at least to some extent, to changes in the nature of hegemony.

The inherently political dimension to most if not all situation comedy, then, more than qualifies it as an especially useful genre for investigating hegemonic change. Historically, as has been demonstrated, authors from many theoretical predispositions have been unanimous in their contention that whatever can be theorized about humour and laughter, the power of the 'laugher' over the 'laughee' is without rebuttal. Television does nothing to change that fundamental truth, and can only act to *amplify* comedic power. Kellner speaks to this when he writes that:

> it was as if the audiences could face the turmoil wrought by the 1960s only in the medium of comedy, as if laughter provided both the best sheild against and the easiest access to the upheavals of the day. Indeed, television pursued the time-honored tradition of using comedy and satire to deal with society's most difficult and divisive problems.[120]

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[119]George Gerbner, **op. cit.**, p. 368.

[120]Douglas Kellner, **op. cit.**, p.54.

This would seem to suggest very strongly that if societal 'problems' are to be dealt with at all in television it is in its' comedies that the most potentially disruptive of them will find their forum. This should not be taken to suggest, however, that comedy performs this function uniformly or necessarily, but merely to demonstrate an accommodating predilection.

> New comedy programs that dealt with the conflicts of the 1960s, especially Norman Lear's "All in the Family," did become highly popular and brought into the United States' living rooms the sort of debates that had indeed been taking place in the real world of struggle and conflict. These fierce, generational conflicts dramatically contradicted TV's world of harmonious resolutions of trivial or unreal problems.[121]

In the face of this, television *has*

> responded to pressures from the environmental, women's, gay, black, Chicano, and other new social movements, especially in the early 1970s. Network entertainment divisions were pressured to portray more positive images of blacks, women, Hispanics, gays and other minorities, and to hire members of some of these groups for the news and entertainment divisions as well.[122]

Kellner then mentions the significance of Norman Lear to this particular era, as well as the distinctively liberal position he sometimes took.

The establishment of the Women's Television Network in Canada, Women's Studies departments, support groups of all types,

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[121]Ibid.

[122]Montgomery, in Douglas Kellner, **op. cit.**, p. 102.

shelters, and crisis lines are all manifestations of changes in the hegemonic settlement around questions of gender and are arguably connected to (among other things) the changing representations of women in popular media, including situation comedies. Older comic representations of the relations between men and women become especially interesting as indicators of gender dynamics in social life in earlier times. The 'disappearance' of these earlier gender dynamics in sitcoms becomes 'invisible evidence' changes in hegemony.

But it is the precise nature of these ideological changes that is of greatest interest. Kellner's comments noted above draw attention to the political resistance associated with counter-hegemonic voices and initiatives. The examination of resistance, however, must be balanced by attention to the differing ways that the existing institutional arrangement of society at any given time mitigates and harmonizes these voices into a 'mutually satisfying business arrangement.' Mapping the changing dimensions of resistance and containment in popular humorous representations allows us to concretely gauge shifts in the 'popular common sense' that are played out in the media. Kellner argues that, indeed:

> as serious conflicts *have* occurred from the 1960's to the present over U.S. intervention and the role of the military, women's rights and abortion, sexuality, the environment, civil liberties, and other issues, these conflicts have naturally been played out in the media, which have the role of mediating between dominant social groups *in the interests of social integration and stablization*. In this environment it is television that frames the

controversies, presents various positions, and sometimes privileges one position or another.[123]

I am proposing that popular television comedy is one of the predominant sites where evidence of the sort of mediation mentioned above can be found. This does not mean that comedy *necessarily* reinforces in individual audience members the attitudes or predispositions it portrays, though there is some empirical support for this idea.[124] Rather, I am suggesting that the rise and fall of different themes, images, and discourses in comedy is a constitutive feature the changing social context.

With this in mind, I want to investigate a number of essential questions: How significant is the 'fall from favour' of given types of comic portrayals involving women when studied against the rise of the women's movement; how are portrayals of women in sitcoms related to hegemonic change; and are the largely predictable changes in representation more closely linked with true emancipation, or mere containment in the guise of the former?

Gender, Institutions, and Hegemonic Masculinity

I want to address one last theoretical issue in this chapter, before moving on to a series of case studies of

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[123]Douglas Kellner, **op.cit.**, p. 79, (emphasis mine).

[124]see Neil Vidmar & Milton Rokeach, Archie Bunker's Bigotry: A Study in Selective Perception and Exposure. **Journal of Communication**, Winter 1974, pp. 123-137. The authors demonstrate that, on the basis of attitudinal pretesting in the form of questionnaires, subjects who held similar views to those of Bunker tended to feel as though he validated their own personal views, and as a result actively sought to remain regular viewers.

representations of women in situation comedies. How can one incorporate a theory of gender into the issues of institutional and hegemonic power in modern television broadcasting that I have been discussing in this chapter? In his book **Gender and Power**,[125] Robert Connell provides some useful guidelines by drawing attention to the ways that gender dynamics manifest themselves in different cultures, and in different historical periods.

One of the ideas that Connell develops is what he calls the "institutionalization of gender." He begins his discussion by looking at a number of institutions fundamental to modern societies. These are; the family, the State, the street, and the gender order. Though he considers all of the above in detail, a brief overview will suffice.

The family is widely considered to be one of the most fundamental social institutions. "Conservative ideology," notes Connell, "speaks of the family as the 'foundation of society'..." Immediately however, Connell takes issue with this position and suggests that the family, far from being "the basis of society, [is actually] one of its most complex products."[126] Connell draws attention to the way that sociological research on the family power-structure demonstrates this complexity. Research on the family lies at the crossroads between traditional role expectations, decision making power, the ties of both to culture and other institutions such

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[125]Robert W. Connell, **Gender and Power**, (Stanford University Press, Stanford, Ca; 1987).

[126]Ibid., p. 121.

as the church, and finally, to the development of capitalism. Connell is able to show how all these connections play a role in defining gender in terms of the family and society.

Connell envisions 'The State' as sitting "at the other pole from the family.." He goes on to say that "almost no-one has seen it as an institutionalization of gender. Even in feminist thought the state is only just coming into focus as a theoretical question."[127] He then runs through a number of examples to demonstrate how this is so: from "State elites being the preserve of men"; through the exclusion of women from various positions in the military; to the intervention of the State in sexual matters; and the American New Right that has "attempted to role back feminism through control of courts and legislatures."[128] All of these lead Connell to conclude how it "can hardly be denied that the State is deeply implicated in the social relations of gender."[129]

Connell also looks briefly at "the street" as one of the sites where the everyday realities of gender politics are given voice and put into practice. This can take the form of pushing strollers, shopping, prostitution, cat-calls, and rape. As this is 'less important' to my analysis of comedies, we can turn now to Connell's last category; the gender order. He begins with attention to the "conventional division of labour in working-class families in Western

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[127]Ibid., pp. 125-126.

[128]Ibid., p. 126.

[129]Ibid.

cities," which assign "most childcare and housework to the wife-and-mother..." Connell then connects this to the labour market of the capitalist state, one that provides low-status, low-pay, part-time jobs that "curiously enough" are filled by married women. This is said to 'dovetail' nicely, because the social expectations of women's domestic roles (reinforced by many other institutions), and the commitment necessary to fulfill them; only leaves time for this sort of 'second income' employment. According to Connell, this situation is "anything but accidental," and he writes that this pattern "has developed particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, and in the context of the recession represents a practical accommodation between the institutions involved."[130]

Connell's purpose in attending to the inter-related character of these social institutions, is to build a foundation for his discussion of 'hegemonic masculinity'. It is this idea that is most useful for the present investigation. It refers (like hegemony) more broadly, to "a social ascendency achieved in the play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life and cultural processes." He continues that is is not ascendency achieved at the point of a gun, or threat of unemployment [necessarily], but one that is "embedded in religious doctrine and practice, *mass media content*, wage structures, the design of housing, welfare/taxation policies and so forth..."[131] The

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[130]Ibid., pp. 134-135.

[131]Ibid., p. 184; (emphasis mine).

pervasive male dominance across all of these spheres cannot help but play itself out 'on the street', thereby broadly connecting the operation of institutions to experience and the existence of social theory.

When envisioned this way, it becomes clear that the ideological inclinations of the television sitcom are usefully viewed in light of the imperatives of patriarchal capitalism, as a response to any threats to its dominance. As a means of enhancing a practical understanding of *why* a cultural institution like television should operate this way, Douglas Kellner provides some pertinent clues, if not an outright explanation. In a section of **Television and the Crisis of Democracy**[132] entitled *"Television in the Corporate Power Structure,"* Kellner documents the interconnected nature of corporate America to the 'big three' television broadcasters. An in-depth analysis is not possible given the limitations of my study, but attention to some of his observations and information is useful to clarify and document the commercial interests protected by the means suggested above.

"Studies of the political economy of television" Kellner begins, "have demonstrated the degree to which the TV industry is embedded in the structure of [hegemonically masculine] corporate capitalism." Initially the owners of broadcasting networks were individual entrepreneurs who ran them as businesses in a competitive communications market. But early on, the process of

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[132]Douglas Kellner, **op. cit.**, pp. 80-90.

mergers began, and by the 1960s the networks were being run by people whose "specialties were corporate management and the maximization of profits." The communications industry was marked by increasing concentration in the 1970s and 1980s, and Kellner cites Ben Bagdikian's (1987) claim that the corporate control of information and entertainment has resulted in what he calls "a new Private Industry of Information and Culture."

Television networks are a part of this corporate structure and have numerous ties to other major entertainment industries and major corporate and financial powers such as

> the space and satellite industry, health care and management concerns, housing, crime and surveillance, education, and manufacturing. In addition, the networks are tied to banks and major financial institutions, and interlocking ownership and shared boards of directors link them with other major corporations as well.[133]

The merger between General Electric (one of the nation's biggest defence contractors) and N.B.C./R.C.A., makes N.B.C.'s ties to even the defence industry as "particularly close." Kellner includes a table that illustrates some of these extensive corporate ties, but at this point it is more singularly useful to point out that of the forty-seven board of directors names that are listed, *only four* are women.

> Media ownership is a men's club and it is unlikely that these men from the dominant classes would encourage counter-hegemonic perspectives on either class or gender issues unless they felt

[133] Ibid., pp. 80-82

> unthreatened by them. As a commercial medium, television must appeal to popular sentiments, even when those sentiments may include counter-hegemonic sensibilities. But it is a condition of hegemony that these sensibilities tend to be emptied of much of their radical content in media representations.[134]

Contemporary cultural theory would lead us to suggest that these same dynamics will be evident in the television sitcom.

[134]Richard S. Gruneau, **pers. com.**, July 1997.

Chapter Three

Operationalization of Thompson's Method: Hegemony and Ideology in 'I Love Lucy'

John Thompson proposes a useful method for the systematic study of symbolic forms, his 'depth-hermeneutic approach'. It is comprised of three phases of analysis. The first of these is socio-historical analysis, the aim of which is "to reconstruct the social and historical conditions of the production, circulation and reception of symbolic forms."[135] There are four aspects of social contexts that are defined as important to this reconstruction. The first is "spatio-temporal settings." This refers to the reconstruction of locales "in which symbolic forms are produced and received. Symbolic forms are produced (uttered, enacted, inscribed) and received (seen, listened to, read) by individuals situated in specific locales, acting and reacting at particular times and in particular places[.]"[136] For each of the time periods to be studied in this thesis, it is necessary to conduct this spatio-temporal reconstruction in order to establish a general understanding and appreciation of the attitudinal climate of the era. Such reconstructions could, of course, become quite lengthy, so it will be necessary to narrow the scope somewhat by limiting exploration to a number of key indicators, to be spelled out below. This act of delimitation will simplify the

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[135]Ibid., p. 282.

[136]Ibid.

process of contrast and comparison between the different time periods.

Phase One: Socio-historical Reconstruction

One constant throughout the forty years of history covered by this investigation is, of course, western, capitalist and masculine hegemony. Following Kellner and a host of others, television, within this context, is the institutional cultural space where "within well defined limits[...]the major conflicts of U.S. society over the last several decades have nonetheless been played out..."[137]. Kellner goes on to argue that "[t]elevision is best conceptualized[...], as the terrain of an ever-shifting and evolving hegemony in which consensus is forged around competing ruling-class political positions, values, and views of the world."[138] While it would be convenient to restrict inquiry to a description of television content alone, it is necessary to understand television content in its relationships to much broader questions about politics and society.

When one considers the social-historical context within which symbolic forms are received and appropriated, Thompson's proposed method for the study of cultural artifacts is compatible with Kellner's institutional perspective on television. Thompson notes how symbolic forms (such as comic representations, among many others) are situated within certain *fields of interaction*, or

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[137]Douglas Kellner, **Television and the Crisis of Democracy,** (Oxford: Westview Press, 1990), p.14.

[138]Ibid, p.16.

'positions and trajectories', "which together determine some of the relations between individuals and some of the opportunities available to them."[139] These unwritten 'social schemata' are implicit forms of practical knowledge "gradually inculcated and continuously reproduced in the mundane activities of everyday life."[140] One might remember here the pleasures of a shared joke with a trusted friend, and the 'sanitization' that can often occur when joking in public.

Whereas Kellner looks at the media's power at the institutional-political level, Thompson draws our attention to the way that symbolic forms reproduce power in more localized environments. By taking a point of departure from both of these positions we can hope to construct a general, comprehensive look at the social and political significance of comedic television representations, and the 'mundane activities of everyday life.'

Consider an example. Shifting between the kind of macro and micro perspectives suggested by Kellner and Thompson might allow us to cross-reference information regarding employment levels for women outside the home, or disparity in wage earnings between men and women, and percentages of women in executive positions (and/or the development of Women's Studies programs in universities), with comedic representation and the emergence of women's equality as a large-scale social movement.

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[139]Ibid.

[140]Ibid.

As mentioned above, in order to meaningfully reconstruct and compare the attitudinal/ideological climates of the historical periods under study, the bases for *comparison* for each period must be readily available. Here, it is useful to look at three principle categories. The first of these is *statistical information*. Secondary data concerned with levels of gender inequality in areas such as income and employment in each of the relevant time periods of the sitcoms I have chosen to analyze will be drawn on in order to establish a very general overview of the relative social standing of women at the time surrounding each show. In **Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media**[141] Susan Douglas makes numerous references to such statistics. Contextualized within a personal narrative of her reactions to and thoughts about a variety of media messages and themes, her work provides a valuable source of information for my investigation. Her time frame of inquiry from the Fifties to the present also conveniently positions her book as a useful background map for my analysis of the **I Love Lucy** show, which ran from 1951 - 1957.[142]

The second category of comparison is focussed on the ways that large circulation magazines and news broadcasts helped to frame and contain the emergence of the Women's Movement. For example, Susan Douglas notes how major periodicals such as Time

[141]Susan J. Douglas, **Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media**, (Times Books: New York, N.Y., 1995).

[142]David Grote, **The End of Comedy: The Sit-Com and the Comedic Tradition**, (Archon Books: Hamden, Connecticut, 1983), p. 179.

and Newsweek, played an important role as mediators and commentators on the emerging women's movement in the 1960's and its manifestations in U.S. popular culture.

The third angle of comparison that is useful to consider in any brief background reconstruction of differing historical periods, is the impact of other contemporaneous television shows. Following a useful lesson from Kellner's **Media Culture**,[143] attention to these other shows allows one to explore levels of consistency between televisual representations, thereby guarding against potential criticism that the scope of inquiry is overly narrow. Doing this also opens up discussion to include representations in case studies of television shows that *do not necessarily* echo the dominant political imperatives of the time. Recognition of such differences allows one to consider cultural contradictions within the eras themselves.[144]

Phase Two: Thematic Analysis

The second phase of analysis, drawing on Thompson's depth-hermeneutical approach, is *formal or discursive analysis*. This can take the form of semiotic and/or conversation analysis, syntactic or argumentative analysis, or study of the narrative structure.[145] For the purposes of the investigation at hand semiotic/conversation

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[143]Douglas Kellner, **Media Culture**, (Routledge, New York, N.Y., 1995).

[144]It is this omission, not incidentally, that hinders Kellner's most recent writing.

[145]Thompson develops these types of analysis in detail in pp. 285-289, however the space need not be taken here to elaborate them, as it is only Thompson's *general* method that is pertinent to this paper.

analysis may not be the most effective approach, due in large part to the limitations of focussing on dialogue from a predominantly visual symbolic form. With the exception of specific instances where dialogue and semiotic incidence are used as supporting references to a thematic description, I shall largely put aside this sort of analysis.

The study of narrative structure however, is much more appropriate to this investigation. At the outset of his recent book, Thompson describes what he calls his 'grand narrative'; a term he employs to represent the *essence* of an on-going and complicated discourse on ideology. In much the same way, though on a smaller scale, the narrative inflections of representation for the three shows under study here will comprise the material upon which my analysis and conclusions will be based. I believe that this more general, theme-based approach to television content provides fodder for Thompson's next and final phase of analysis.

Phase Three: Interpretive Contextualization

The third and final phase of Thompson's approach is called *interpretation/re-interpretation* and is concerned with a synthesis of the information gleaned from the preceding forms of analysis, towards the "creative construction of possible meaning."[146] It is at this point where the sum total of all information presented in relation to the symbolic forms under consideration is synthesized. In the remainder of this thesis I attempt to examine and compare the

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[146]Ibid., p. 289.

three t.v. sitcoms under review in this way. The interpretation of the episodes will be conducted from the point of view of establishing the political dynamic of appropriate scenes within the episodes. Evidence from dialogue as well as visual cues like facial expression, stance, body posture etc. will be employed as well.

My "re-interpretation" of the shows will contextualize information about the era of production that has been gleaned from secondary sources. Themes that become clearly evident about how power is represented on the shows will be tied to available information about broader relations of power in order to demonstrate what relationships may exist between them. Evidence of hegemony and counter-hegemonic struggle will be examined though comparisons between and among other programs. All of this leads us to consider, following Thompson's reformulation of the concept of ideology, the ways in which media can be said to be mobilizing meaning in the service of dominant interests.

Beginning the Case Studies: The 'I Love Lucy' Show

It seems appropriate to begin my case studies with 'I Love Lucy' because Lucille Ball would certainly have to be considered one of the most memorable comediennes on television to date. The continued presence of the "I Love Lucy" show in re-runs a full forty-plus years after it first aired, is a strong testament to her impact and appeal. But before considering the show itself, it is first necessary to re-create a sense of the era in which the television show

was to air, and in doing so, provide a backdrop against which certain themes in the show were to resonate.

The Social and Cultural Context Prior to 'I Love Lucy'

In **Where the Girls Are**, Susan Douglas provides an historical account of the status of women earlier this century with a personal narrative based on experience. She draws attention to the importance of understanding "the ideological rollercoaster ride that [her generations] mothers took" and goes on to describe "how their tensions and struggles in relation to the mass media eventually became [their] own"[147] Mothers of 'baby-boom' children, such as Douglas', experienced the Depression, World War II, and the post war era, each of which came with its' own distinct message about proper female behavior. In the U.S. in the 1930's, the message was very clear that a woman was not to 'steal' a job from a man, and twenty-six states still had laws prohibiting employment for married women. For single, white women, realistic options were in the more conventional areas of teaching, nursing, and positions associated with the beauty industry. After World War II began, thereby ending the Depression and shipping millions of men into the service, these same women were targeted with 'Rosie the Rivieter'-type campaigns in order to fill the jobs vacated by men; a move that Douglas describes as "the most concerted propaganda campaign up to that time aimed specifically at women."[148] Key institutional/cultural apparati such as

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[147]Susan J. Douglas, **op. cit.**, p. 45.

[148]Ibid.

radio programmers, film-makers, ad agencies, and women's magazines, all worked together under the direction of the Office of War Information to make the donning of overalls and the operation of industrial tools more glamorous. Samples of the rhetoric of the period indicate clearly that women were to be "on an equal footing with men" and continued to say that "with industrial advances, there's *practically no limit* to the types of jobs women can do."[149] The campaign worked, compelling, or at least easing the transition for, over 6 million women to join the work force, with 2 million of these in heavy industry.

As the war eventually came to an end, a vast majority of the women had got used to working outside of the home, liked it, and wanted to stay there. Polls at the time indicated that 80 percent of these women wanted to remain in the work force after the war. After Japan surrendered, however, more than 4 million women were fired from their jobs by 1946. An equally aggressive campaign was then employed to get women back into the homes. Douglas writes how the fear associated with the availability of jobs for returning soldiers, coupled with the insurgent 'red-scare' that developed during this period, proved to be effective tactics for returning women to their 'traditional American' positions. 'The scare' was predicated on the notion that in order to distinguish a true American from the Communist other, it was necessary to maintain the role of motherhood without the inclusion of state institutions such as

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[149]Ibid., p. 46, (emphasis mine). The transparent irony of limitation/liberation 'imagery' in such a statement will be left undeveloped, but should be noted.

daycare, which was referred to by some at the time as a "Communist plot."[150]

The ideological assault, however, did not stop there. The book publishing industry published such titles as the 1947 **Modern Woman: The Lost Sex** which contained passages referring to feminists as "neurotically disturbed" and hampered by "penis envy." Feminism itself, was seen as nothing more than "a deep illness," combatted most effectively by the full embracing of a "feminine way of life," taken to mean procreative endeavors and the shunning of higher education. Women who did not follow this new prescription for social propriety, were doomed to raise children who became "'delinquents', 'criminals', and 'confirmed alcoholics.'" That one of the authors of **The Modern Woman** was herself a career woman, did not seem to affect the reception of the material, as the book itself became a best-seller.

A number of films from this same period re-affirm this theme, and are worth mentioning. A 1945 picture called *Mildred Pierce*, starring Joan Crawford, tells the story of a hard-working female restauranteur who, through her efforts, is able to provide materially for her daughter. But, due to the lack of time and motherly love, the daughter becomes a murderer. Crawford was awarded an Oscar for her performance, an indication of her talent, but certainly also of the film's popularity and wide circulation. Other films such as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), *They Lived*

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[150]Ibid., pp. 46-47.

by Night (1949), and *Gun Crazy/Deadly Is the Female* (1949), all revolved around the theme of women whose drive for money, sex, power, and success were responsible for the demise of the male characters.[151]

"I Love Lucy" and Prefeminist Resonances

There is, of course, much more that could be written about the social and cultural context of this pre-Lucy era. Still, the major point about women's 'postwar' return to domesticity has been made and I want to move now to consider a couple of episodes from the series. These episodes will demonstrate some interesting consistencies with the broader social context which will further illuminate how the series, in terms of overall narrative structure, can be said to reproduce the prevailing ideology of the period while also acknowledging women's desires and frustrations.

First, a few introductory comments about the television show are in order. It is characteristic of the premises of the "I Love Lucy" show, that much of the comic potential springs from Lucy's repeated attempts to have herself included by her husband in his exciting, glamorous life as a television star. A number of episodes are expressly concerned with this struggle. It is through the innovative ways and extents to which Lucy tries to become 'more than a housewife,' that the show provides some of its most memorable moments. Extending this idea, it becomes clear that in

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[151] Ibid., pp. 47-48.

large part, much if not all of Lucille Ball's early reputation as a comedienne is based on this type of representation. Considering her enduring appeal then, her repeated failures in these attempts were necessarily and consistently endearing to women in television's emerging mass audiences in the 1950's. Lucy's repeatedly thwarted attempts to achieve some sort of respite from her otherwise mundane reality had a significant resonance for female audience members on a number of different levels.

First, for the women comprising the 80 percent who wished to remain employed after the end of the war, Lucy's repeated schemes, as well as her inevitable frustration with her own failures (however comic), were arguably received by the shows' audiences with more than just a simple glint of recognition. On this point, David Marc recalls that Lucy's schemes are both "ridiculous and futile. She is funny, but incompetence is the source of her humor." As the episodes end, he continues, "she is, in quick order, reminded of her rightful place, forgiven by her exasperated but loving husband, and sent back to little Ricky and the roast."[152] At one stroke the post-war family, and women's roles in it, are naturalized, while recognition is given to women's aspirations for more.

It is likely in the few intervening years between the end of the war, and the 1949 stirrings of the 'I Love Lucy' shows' development, that the attitudinal climate engendered by millions of

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[152]David Marc, **Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture**, (Unwin Hyman; Boston, Mass., 1989), p. 93.

firings, the subsequent campaign of ideological retooling, the expansion of post-war suburban households, as well as the contributions from cinema and publishing, were all factors that were conducive to the show's popularity. This also may reference the conservative hegemony that Kellner outlines. Women could take pleasure in identifying with Lucy's desires for recognition and equality, but in a show that consistently reproduced the emerging post-war ideal of domesticity.

A second fundamental element that must be discussed is the role of Lucy's husband within the context of the show. Ricky is without question the center of authority in the Ricardo household. The relationship they share, in terms of familial power dynamics, is one of established, gendered convention. Ricky makes the decisions, earns and controls the money, has his meals prepared, and regularly disciplines his unruly wife, to the extent of administering an over the knee spanking in one episode. David Marc notes how, along with other sitcom husbands like Ralph Kramden, Rob Petrie, and Darren Stevens, the Ricardo character treats his wife as "little more than a contractual housekeeper who is to be safely locked away at home."[153] I draw attention to this in order to demonstrate how well this narrative premise fits with the prevailing conservative notions of the late 1940's. Still, much of the appeal of 'I Love Lucy' lay in Lucy's continuing unwillingness to 'stay in her place.' For that reason it is important to recognize the contradictory components of the show as

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[153]Ibid., p. 135.

well. With this in mind, I now want to consider two specific episodes of 'I Love Lucy' in more detail.

"Lucy Does a T.V. Commercial"
(Originally aired May 5th, 1952)

Telling evidence of Marc's and other's contentions regarding the requisite domesticity characteristic of the sitcom series are immediately evident in the opening shot. Lucy is seen sewing a hole in Ricky's sock, and in an equally fitting display of comic incompetence, accidently sews her pincushion into the sock while fixing the "huge hole" at the top end of it. Before long the phone rings and it becomes evident to Lucy that Ricky needs an actress to do a commercial for the t.v. program that he is producing. Obviously, Lucy is immediately interested and is instructed immediately by Ricky that she is not going to be considered for the part. Ricky leaves as Ed, the neighbor, comes down offering to do some work while his wife is away. An oblique reiteration of a prevailing stereotype is made, as he comments that "loafing isn't any fun unless she's nagging at me to get some work done." A shared laugh results.

Upon informing him of her dilemma, Ed echoes the authority of Lucy's absent husband and implores her to "relax and forget about the whole thing." Capitulating under the weight of her pleas, Ed helps her anyway. When Ricky returns, he finds Lucy acting from the inside of their hollowed out T.V.. Visibly unimpressed, and in an attempt to mess her up, Ricky plugs in the T.V. and "bar-b-ques" Lucy in the process. While comic liberty is not

to be confused with any abusive undertones in this instance, the violent character of the penance exacted here is noteworthy. The limits of Lucy's endearing incompetence, however, have not yet been fully addressed in this scene. It quickly becomes clear that Lucy has inadvertently disassembled all of the electronic components of the set, rather than simply sliding them out intact from the cabinet. This is worth mention only because it is Lucy alone who is chastised for this action, and not her male accomplice, Ed, who both supplied the tools, and was the architect of the plan in the first place.

Ricky comes out the next day informing Lucy that he has to be at the t.v. station in half an hour, which is followed by a question if his breakfast is ready. Lucy plays aloof and uninterested. "I don't care if you don't want to talk to me or not, but will you please get up and fix me my breakfast? I need my strength. What do you want me to do? Starve to death?" Her reply is a very sardonic; "Would you... please?"

Lucy intercepts a phone call after Ricky has left, and inserts herself into the position of the actress. The comic premise revolves around the fact that the vitamin product she ends up plugging is horrible tasting, and contains 23% alcohol. When Ricky finds out, he scolds her in front of the commercial director, and tries to send her home, but this is met with protestation by the commercial director because of time constraints. Ricky is still adamant, but is forced to concede. Before he leaves, he listens to a run through of the lines, which Lucy performs flawlessly.

In the process of rehearsals, Lucy begins to get extremely drunk, mixing up the lines and the tongue-twisting product name. Later, Lucy, having gone missing from the dressing room where she was to sleep off her intoxication, stumbles out of the back during the live airing of the show, and proceeds to stare lovingly at Ricky, who is singing. She make attempts to kiss him and, when the camera is pointed out to her, proceeds to greet her neighbors over the air. The episode ends with Ricky carrying Lucy off the stage behind the curtains.

In light of what has already been written, further elaboration on the social significance of Ricky's role expectations of his wife would hardly be surprising, and as such, is unnecessary. The parallels are obvious. What is worthy of discussion, however, are some of the elements that could be said to fly in the face of this conventional interpretation. Douglas contends that it "is common to think of the post-war backlash [against women] as beginning with a vengeance in 1946 and reigning in a monolithic and uncontested form until the late 1960s. But this was not the case."[154]

'Nascent Feminism' in the Shadow of the Feminine Mystique

Douglas acknowledges that in the late 1940's and early 1950's, the hegemonic battlefield that movies, television, and advertising were already becoming, were arguably characterized by a virulent antifeminism. It was an antifeminism that "was so

[154] Susan J. Douglas, **op. cit.**, p. 49.

vehement, even vicious, at times, that the feminism of the period has been too frequently eclipsed. But it was there."[155] She points to a number of different films, books (one a best-seller), and magazine articles to support this idea. She also mentions the relatively new presence of television in the home as well, and writes about the role that a number of female comedians had in communicating a sense of the eras' fledgling feminist discourse. These women characters

> often defied the compliant, womb-centered, housewife stereotype. The most famous, of course, was Lucy, but there were others, including Alice Kramden of *The Honeymooners*, Imogene Coca of *Your Show of Shows*, Gracie Allen of *The Burns and Allen Show*, Mama and Katrin in *Mama*, and Molly Goldberg of *The Goldbergs*.[156]

Douglas goes on to assess the contributions of a number of these women. What comprises the essence of their collective contribution were the ways in which they simply refused to be restricted to the home, almost never backed down from a verbal altercation, were loud and not afraid to yell, and seemed to delight in the transgression of female boundaries. "Some of them, like Lucille Ball and Imogene Coca, were physically mutinous, brilliantly using their faces and bodies in slapstick enactments of the battle of the sexes," while Gracie Allen was "the master of linguistic slapstick, using puns, malapropisms, and a willful misunderstanding of language to turn

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[155]Ibid..

[156]Ibid., p. 50.

male logic on its head."[157] It must be noted here though that Douglas, quite correctly, calls attention to the way that the narrative of these shows tended, in a carnivalesque turn, to contain this transgressive behavior, leaving them in Douglas' words "happily tamed at the end of each episode."[158] For her though, it was the chance to see, even if for only a while, and through hegemonic representation, women who were not content with the traditional duties and responsibilities associated with womanhood, that qualifies them as relatively 'emancipatory' in theme.

Even the evolution and eventual presence of the "I Love Lucy" show itself is worth some discussion at this point. It is highly ironic that Lucy and her struggles to be included in her husbands' glamorous life comprised so much of the shows comic content. This is because when the show was proposed initially by CBS to Lucille Ball, it was Ball who petitioned the station to have her husband included as a character. Desi Arnaz, of audibly Cuban ancestry, did not fit with the traditional American family that they sought to portray. CBS did not heed her request, and Lucy declined the offer. Lucy funded the production of a pilot that never aired, and was soon able to convince the studio that Arnaz was best choice for her television husband, eventually achieving televisual immortality for both of them as a result.

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[157]Ibid.

[158]Ibid., p.51.

This underlines the extent to which, even in the late 1940's, a woman was able to command a level of respect and clout, and bring about a change by taking complete charge of the production of the initial pilot. Granted that woman was Lucille Ball, who was well-known, and therefore hardly stands as a typical case. The relevant point is though, that it was not the same Lucille Ball we know today as a *result* of the series of television shows. She was as yet unproven on serial television, and whatever success or reputation she had enjoyed prior to that time, was nothing compared to the legacy that was to follow. Still, the temptation to make too much out of an atypical case, should be resisted. One only need consider the relative frequency and success of t.v. shows produced by men of the period. However, the irony of the situation is a useful reminder against jumping to conclusions about direct similarities between comic representation and lived reality. As we will continue to see over the course of this investigation, 'ruptures' of this sort between successful comic narrative and lived reality are telling instances of the conservative tendency of television.

"Lucy's Italian Movie"

(Originally aired April 16th, 1956)

Given the perspective outlined above, a second episode can be considered relatively briefly. The Ricardos and their neighbours are on a vacation together in Italy. The episode begins as Ethel is admonished by her husband for complaining about the narrow seats on the train they are travelling on, by being told that the seats are plenty roomy, but she is "roomier." Lucy notices that

there is a "masher" out in the hallway of the train outside their cabin, who is constantly 'glaring' at Lucy. As she eventually convinces Ricky to investigate, it becomes clear that he is an Italian film director who thinks that Lucy would be perfect for a new film he is doing. This, of course, is news which thrills Lucy. The director then proceeds to give Ricky his card saying, "if your charming wife would be interested in auditioning, call me please, but do it soon, you see, we start production in a few days." Lucy begins getting in the mood for her Italian movie, by tousling her hair, and pulling at her own dress to expose a cleavage covered, conservatively, by a sweater. She leaves the train car with the words "Arrivaderci, mi amore, arrivaderci," which is accompanied by the action of grabbing Ricky's face and pushing his head back as she turns to go. Ricky's expression conveys his surprised disapproval.

Later, the couples have arrived at the hotel they are staying at. While looking at the pictures in an Italian popular magazine, a discussion between Ed and Ricky about "earthy" Italian actresses ensues. Both Ricky and Ed become very vocal in their approval of what they see. Both Lucy and Ethel receive this in stride and even smile along. Lucy, in a moment of foreshadowing, eventually expresses the desire to "soak up some of the local color" in preparation for what she is still insisting will be her 'debut role.' She intends to accomplish this by going to an 'old-fashioned' wine factory. In what is immediately recognizable as a classic episode, Ricky, finger pointed at her in a scolding fashion, makes her promise she will engage in "no funny business." It is a promise she quickly

rationalizes her way out of after he leaves. Ethel threatens to tell Ricky what Lucy is up to, and is instructed by Lucy that she "can tell him anything you want, tell him the truth." Ethel, relieved, indicates that she will do just that, and is met with "don't you dare!"

Ethel comes back later looking for Lucy, who should have been back by this time, but instead encounters Ricky. Realizing that Lucy is not there, Ethel promptly tries to leave, but is sternly questioned by Ricky. Upon finding out what he suspects, he begins to swear in Spanish. Ricky is upset however, because he has actually asked the director over to help Lucy get in the movie, and now she is not there. When she returns, however, she is covered with purple coloring from a 'grape fight' with a native Italian woman in the vineyard. As a result of this, the director informs her that the color will not come out in time, and as a result Lucy is unable to take part in the film. Turning instead to Ethel, he offers her the role of 'American Woman,' and the word "Censored" appears on the screen over Lucy's snarlingly belligerent facial expression.

Once again, the dominance of men is very prevalent. When the director, for instance, decides he wants Lucy in his movie, he gives his card to Ricky. The almost paternal fashion that both women are spoken to again in this episode, seen very clearly in the instances of finger pointing, re-iterates this same dynamic. Lucy is, unsurprisingly, once again engaged in another scheme to achieve some fame and fortune of her own, and is willing to go to unnecessarily extreme lengths to make it happen. True to form, as a result of her own endeavors, she ends up sabotaging herself. The

self-sabotage is even more unfortunate in this case however, in light of Ricky's support for his wife's endeavor. It is support though, which remains curiously unstated until it is too late. Still, this episode does contain clear representations of transgressive behavior. Aside from the rather obvious act of leaving in spite of being told not too, Lucy's playful 'exposure' and tousling of hair, capped off with a surprisingly vigorous push to Ricky's face, is both a social and physical challenge to his authority in that scene.

But viewed in relation to the world outside of television, some apparent inconsistencies arise and must be addressed. Recalling what Freidan had called the 'Feminine Mystique', (meaning the ideology that held women responsible for the home, children, and 'condemned' those who dared to aspire to more) Douglas tells how this antifeminist ideology came into its own between the years of 1952-1955. This era, in part characterized by the types of messages discussed earlier, fits very well with the conservative undertones of the "I Love Lucy" show and many others. But Douglas goes on to point out how

> despite all the propaganda casting working women as neurotic freaks, they got jobs. By 1955 there were more women with jobs than at any point in the nation's previous history. At the very time the feminine mystique imagery was most ironclad, women began flocking to the job market.[159]

So it is clear that a rupture exists between the overall narrative of the "I Love Lucy" show and an increasing number of the women

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[159]Ibid., p. 55.

assumed to comprise a segment of the audience. This occurs, interestingly, very close to the point that the previous episode was originally aired. It becomes imperative at this point then to look for similar evidence in the next landmark television comedy about a woman, "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."

Chapter Four

From Mary Tyler Moore to Murphy Brown

The publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 was a turning point in American womens' vision of themselves and their collective experience. It was a best-seller for the months April through July,[160] the number one best-selling paperback a year later, and as such was a constitutive element in the events that were to more directly precede the appearance of 'The Mary Tyler Moore Show'. Sections of the book were published in other women's magazines, extending its influence, and inspiring similar investigations that continued to draw attention to issues surrounding the status of women. One of these is an *Atlantic Monthly* piece by Paul Foley that appeared in March, 1964.[161] It included a number of telling statistics that help to convey a sense of the era itself with respect to women's equality in the U.S.. Only two Senators, eleven of 435 members of the House of Representatives, and three of 422 federal judges, were women. As had been the case almost twenty years earlier, women were still generally confined to low-status, low paying jobs, and were still not being encouraged to

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[160] Ibid., p. 125.

[161] Ibid.

pursue advanced education[162]. Statistics such as these led Foley to conclude that true equality for women was still a long way off.[163]

1963 was also the year that the Equal Pay Act was pushed through Congress by the Kennedy administration, capping a Presidential Commission on the Status of Women initiative that had begun two years earlier. The same administration also tabled a report that year titled 'American Women' that included recommendations for the establishment of child-care services, equal opportunities for employment and education, and the pursuit of public office. It is also significant that *The New York Times* covered the release of this report on the front page of its' October 12th, 1963 issue.[164] Though these and a number of other events have significance, the events of the *late* sixties and early seventies have a more immediate temporal proximity to the 1970 beginnings of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and it is to these events that more detailed attention can be given.

The Social and Cultural Context Prior to Mary Tyler Moore

The 1968 Miss America pageant was to become a notable historical moment in the Women's Movement of the 1960's, and is an ideal place to begin. Organized by a former actress from the

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162In 1970 for instance, the same year MTM was to air for the first time, there were even fewer women with Ph.D's than in 1940 (Douglas, 1995; p. 172).

163**Ibid.**

164**Ibid.**, p. 124.

television show *Mama*, Robin Morgan who played Katrin,[165] several busloads of women went about making a mockery of the proceedings; chanting slogans, carrying signs, and disposing of symbols of their collective oppression such as steno-pads, high heels, *Playboy* magazines, and, of course, bras. Douglas reports that by the standards of the day, such behavior was "completely shocking."[166] The protest involved the crowning of a live sheep as 'Miss America' and circulated photos of a nude woman marked to resemble the diagrams in butcher shops detailing different cuts of meat. What makes this rally so significant according to Douglas, is that it was only the *first* major demonstration for woman's liberation. Not surprisingly, the media of the day dismissed the demonstrators as "'bra-less bubbleheads', 'ridiculous exhibitionists', and 'man-haters.'" This however, was not to dissuade women from participation, as they began to flock to women's organizations, increasing their membership four-hundred-fold by 1974.

Not all demonstrations of solidarity were this playful, however. That same year saw the formation of over-the-top organizations like the Society for Cutting Up Men. The premise of this organization, led by Valerie Solenas, was that it was men who were a biological accident, responsible for the world being a "shitpile," and deserved nothing more than death, unless they were to save themselves by joining the male auxiliary of the organization.

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[165] George Lipsitz writes on p. 78 of **Time Passages**, that Robin Morgan played 'Dagmar'. It of course makes little difference who is right, and is merely an observation.

[166] Ibid., p. 139.

Though this particular group could be interpreted as being highly tongue-in-cheek -- and most certainly on some level was -- later that year Solenas shot and nearly killed Andy Warhol.[167]

Returning to more typical examples of women's protests though, 1968 was a generally tumultuous year. The year was characterized by the 'birth' of "thousands of rebellious, defiant, politically infuriated young women who talked back, got arrested, and went to jail."[168] The media coverage of events associated with such social upheaval was predictably dismissive. Though many examples of this could be cited, it is more useful to discuss some of the media 'frames' noted earlier by Gitlin, that were used to contain the movement. These frames, or some variation, were used repeatedly in the coverage of stories associated with women's demonstrations.

For example, in printed coverage, the use of quotation marks around particular phrases about, or charges of, systemic sexism, acted to delegitimate the information by employing the typographical equivalent of a smirk. Less obvious techniques involved the willful inclusion of irrelevant information that obscured the real messages with conservative fear-mongering. Journalistic balance became a euphemism for the juxtaposition of 'more rational' voices with those deemed less so, and the preponderance of reportage on "extreme" as opposed to more moderate positions,

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[167]Ibid., p. 143.

[168]Ibid., p. 152.

existed as an additional corrective. Blatant denigration of the women involved in the movement often took the form of 'aesthetic criticism.' By suggesting that "those feminists" were typically "ugly man-haters," the motivations of the women involved in the women's movement were immediately reduced to simple jealousy. An example of this, for a story on the Miss America demonstration, is a news story on television that focussed on placards reading, "There's Only One Thing Wrong with Miss America - She's Beautiful" and the less imaginative "Jealously Will Get You Nowhere."[169]

In a similar vein, photographic techniques of containment are perhaps best exemplified by a specific example. The August 31st, 1970 edition of TIME magazine offered an unflattering, almost Picasso-esque rendering of Kate Millett on the cover. The picture portrayed her from the waist up, thus capitalizing on the opportunity to display her lack of stylistic flair and the masculine undertones of a collared button shirt. It also provided ample opportunity to represent her long, stringy hair, and her facial expression, as one of haggard stridency. To call her unpopular visually and politically in the mainstream media is to cultivate understatement.

Her counterpoint in these spheres, however, was Gloria Steinem. Routinely categorized as beautiful, *Newsweek* carried Steinem's picture on the cover of its August 16th, 1971 edition. It was a facial shot only, with just the top of one shoulder visible so as

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[169]Naomi Wolf, **The Beauty Myth**, (Random House, Toronto, Ont.; 1991), p. 68. It should also be noted here that Wolf dates the demonstration as having occurred during the 1969 Miss America pageant.

not to distract the eye of the viewer. She, in contrast to Millett, is smiling pleasantly, almost coyishly. The fact that they are different magazines is irrelevant, because both magazines share the same imperative; which is to appeal to a wide audience through a resonant image on the cover. Though this is a specific example, it speaks volumes about general hegemonic representational practice in a commercial society predicated on the visual.[170] One final point, is that the inclusion of textual borders on these images confirm the preceding statement. The banner over Millett's head reads in (not incidently) bold, black lettering; 'The Politics of Sex'. Below her, also in black, is the epitaphic 'Kate Millett of Women's Lib'.[171] Steinem's cover on the other hand, flies a banner which beatifies her as 'The New Woman' in a perhaps coincidentally softer font, which is balanced by her name (only) below; in white letters, and even slightly italicized. It appears Newsweek saw no need to sully her reputation with references to women's liberation.

Television coverage amounted to a literal synthesis of the strategies of 'framing' outlined above. Television representations were augmented however, by both the scope, and the intertextual capacities of the medium. Douglas cites numerous examples of still

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[170]Naomi Wolf's discussion of the 'Professional Beauty Quotient' in **The Beauty Myth** is a worthwhile development on this idea.

[171]Four months later, the same magazine attacked her reputation, and publicly rebuked their support of her cause. It is interesting to note in this circumstance, that the initial magazine article under the cover of which the image just described appeared, had praised her book '*Sexual Politics*' as "remarkable." After Millett revealed herself to be bi-sexual at a public meeting, the December, 1970 edition ran "a vicious column that claimed she had discredited herself and the movement and quoted a number of critics who excoriated *Sexual Politics*." (see Bonnie Dow, **Prime Time Feminism**, p.56).

memorable news anchors who through tone of voice, facial expression, chuckles, and inter-personal banter, together enhance the biases that inevitably exist anyway in visual/textual juxtapositions, lead-in/trail-out stories and commentary, and the wealth of tone-setting cultural symbols[172] that can be employed as illustrations.

Taken as a whole, many of the fundamental representational strategies associated with the media's treatment of the early Women's Movement and other social upheavals, demonstrate very clearly a hegemonic response to threats to the status quo. It is into this media and cultural environment that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was to emerge. And. it is also against this cultural backdrop that analysis and commentary about the show must be considered.

The Mary Tyler Moore Show (1970-1977)

Bonnie Dow begins her discussion of Mary Tyler Moore by saying that if "television scholars had established a canon of 'great works' akin to that which exists [...] in literature, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* would surely be included in it."[173] This glowing praise notwithstanding, MTM is certainly important for i) the relative political representation that characterized the narrative premises of

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[172]A good example of this is Walter Cronkite in front of a picture of Freud, as he begins a lead commentary for an upcoming story on the Women's Movement. His tone is one of amused, paternalistic sagacity. Douglas' chapter eight contains numerous descriptions of accounts like these, as does Naomi Wolf's **The Beauty Myth**.

[173]Bonnie J. Dow, **Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970**, (University of Pennsylvania Press; Philadelphia, Pa., 1996), p. 24.

the show itself, and ii) the larger social context within which the show was received. Though Dow points out that MTM was not the first working woman sitcom, it was the first to expressly concern itself with profeminist consciousness raising, where work was unconnected to the pursuit of marriage, or anything other than simple life satisfaction.

"Mary Tyler Moore" and Feminist Resonances

The timing of the appearance of MTM is hardly coincidental. Given the glimpse provided earlier of the years preceeding the development of the show, and acknowledging that this represents only a very small fraction of what could be written about the events of that time, it would be a wonder that a show like this *did not* develop. Recalling Gitlin et. al and the theoretical sketch of the relationship between television content and the institutional mitigation of hegemonic change, the presence of this type of show is hardly surprising. Indeed, Dow notes how the development of MTM had a distinctly economic rationale. CBS wanted a show that would appeal to a youthful audience, in part as a reaction *against* the existing audiences for shows from their then current line-up like *Petticoat Junction*, and *Green Acres*.[174] Audiences for these shows had less disposible income, and were older and more rural demographically. The single women market was one of CBS's new targets, and it was to this audience that MTM was directed.

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[174]Ibid., p. 32.

Market imperatives also played a notable role in shaping the structure of the show. For example, the deference to residual conservatism (the fear of offending sponsors) in the productive machinery, underwrote a decision by network executives to scrap the initial plan to have Mary play a divorced woman.[175] This also displayed however, on the part of the executives, an appreciation for the intertextual sophistication of television audiences. Seeing as how Moore's previous role of note was the perfect wife Laura Petrie, this decision by the executives at that time is interesting and significant, and as Dow recommends, must be taken into account in any interpretation of MTM.[176] Aside from the obvious nervousness about the topic of divorce, the thought that Mary could have divorced Dick Van Dyke played on the minds of those involved. That said, I want to turn now to a sample episode of MTM.

Mary Dates a Younger Man

The premise of this episode is rather simple. The show begins as Mary announces to her friend Rhoda that she has just had a wonderful time with a date, and describes their shared activity of making 'snowangels.... like in "Love Story."' The sweetness of the activity is not appreciated by Rhoda as she asks "you did that...in public?" Thus, the tone is set early for the reception that Mary can expect from her circle of friends. Mary expresses the concern that

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[175]This occured in spite of the fact that the divorce rate had been on the increase since 1963, and by 1975 had doubled (Dow, 1996; p. 79).

[176]Ibid., pp.28-29.

though they had alot of fun, Steven did not ask for her phone number.

Mary arrives at work and is very cheerful and happy. She is promptly rebuffed by the t.v. station's head writer, Murray, who has had a horrible weekend. As they talk, Ted, the comic news anchor, walks in and swaggers up to Mary. Standing beside her as she sits at her desk, he puts an arm on her shoulder and pulls her in towards him, inquiring if her weekend "was as great as mine." The hint that his was "sin-sational" goes all but unnoted, and Mary attempts to busy herself at her empty desk. The telephone rings and it is Mary's date asking if she can take the day off to see him, a request denied immediately by Lou. She makes plans with him for that evening instead.

The next scene shows Mary preparing dinner for her date, Rhoda enters, and comes eventually to state that she is surprised Mary is seeing him because he doesn't seem like her type. It is at this point that the age issue is discussed, and Mary defends the difference, though she is unsure of how old he is. Steven arrives, and Rhoda's pressure to find out his age works on Mary, and the eight-year difference between them becomes clear. While shopping later for clothes that Rhoda insists are too young for Mary, she declines to inform Rhoda how old he is and claims to have forgotten.

Later, after Steven shows up unexpectedly early to her work to pick her up for a party, it is Lou's turn. Lou immediately appears agitated; agitation that becomes more evident after the brief

kiss Steven gives Mary as he leaves. Lou begins by telling her that she is ruining her life and "driving a stake through the hearts" of all the people that love her. Mary tells both Lou and Ted that this none of their business, but is visibly upset and unsure what to do. Lou agrees and leaves. Attending the party as planned, it becomes obvious to Mary that her friends were right, and she confronts Steven as she leaves. At work the next day, Ted asks them on a double date, and when she confides that they are no longer seeing each other, Lou smugly reminds her that he "knew it wouldn't work."

As a counterpoint to *I Love Lucy* the themes in this episode, as well as the series as a whole, very obviously stand in stark contrast. Lucy's dreams of autonomy are what Mary takes for 'Mr. grant'-ed.[177] She is gainfully employed outside of the home, free (in theory) to date who she wants, and represented increasingly powerfully as the series progresses. In all of these senses, Mary stands as a televisual symbol of the progress of women. According to Bonnie Dow, MTM "can be viewed as disrupting hegemonic practices of female representation on television in at least two ways." The first of these is the way MTM departs from the "goodwife" type of representation that pervaded television from its' beginnings. The second, is the way MTM "expanded the limited parameters of the single adult woman comedy, which, although existent since the

[177]Though succumbing to the lure of pun here, it is an economical and telling way of describing both the narrative premise of the show itself, and in a metaphorical sense, the prevailing/institutionally-mediated ideology of the period. It is obvious in retrospect, but nonetheless widely noted that Mary is the only cast member to call him 'Mr. Grant'.

beginning of television, was hardly a dominant form in the way that the domestic sitcom was."[178] Dow goes on to argue that the essential significance of the show is its' "inaugeration of a tradition of feminist representation built around the single woman with something to prove."[179] The show also played a role in making individualism and equal-opportunity feminism major themes in popular cultural representations of feminism "across media and genres,"[180]

What is most striking about MTM in theoretical terms are the ways and extent to which a balance of sorts is struck between resistance and containment. This balance can be said to occur in two, directly parallel senses. First, in an *intratextual* sense between Mary and the other predominantly male characters on the show, especially Mr. Grant; and second, the *intertextual* balance between the "demands of feminists and the resistance of anti-feminists"[181] that characterized the discourse about, and reception of the show by society as a whole. Drawing on recent writing as an illustration of this, Bonnie Dow states that

> *Mary Tyler Moore* offered a very qualified feminist vision that blended discourses of the 'new woman' - working and living on her own outside of the confines of past domestic sitcoms - with traditional messages about the need for women to continue

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[178]Bonnie J. Dow, **op. cit.**, p. 34.

[179]Ibid., p. 45.

[180]Ibid.

[181]Susan J. Douglas, **op. cit.**, p. 194.

fulfilling traditional female roles as caretakers and nurturers in the cobbled together 'family' of the workplace.[182]

The inclusion of the idea of 'family' alluded to by Dow also becomes important here. Most academic commentators on MTM make repeated reference to the 'pseudo-family' that existed in the show. Lou is the patriarch, with Murray and Ted as Mary's siblings. "The paternal role that Lou Grant plays in relation to Mary Richards and her submission to his authority on both personal and private matters demonstrate the perseverance of patriarchal relationship patterns"[183] in the show. This is very evident already in the previous description of a randomly selected episode. Lou assumes without question that he is entitled to criticize Mary's choice of romantic partners. This is not to suggest he is the only one, Rhoda does so to an extent that even exceeds Lou's contribution. A significant difference though is immediately clear. Mary engages and debates her female friend in a way that she does not appear to be capable of doing with Lou. Though she does tell him at one point that it is none of his business, her visible discomfort while doing so is obvious when viewing the episode. It should be noted that the non-dominant imbecile Ted's crotch-level embrace of Mary in the same episode elicits a similar, though more understandable level of discomfort.

But Mary's role within the show is much more complex than this. "Within her family of co-workers, Mary functions in the

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[182]Bonnie J. Dow, **op. cit.**, p. 25.

[183]Ibid., p. 41.

recognizable roles of idealized mother, wife, *and daughter* - roles familiar from decades of reinforcement in popular culture generally and sitcom specifically."[184] Dow contends that the mother/wife roles with regard to Lou are less explicit, but are readily seen in an episode viewed as background: Mary takes it upon herself to plan and hold a surprise birthday party for him when she finds out he would otherwise be alone, a solitude he'd prefer. Dow also alludes to an episode at one point where each of the male characters fantasizes about being married to Mary. These and many other instances from the 168 episodes that were made must certainly temper any sustainable, feminist interpretation. "At work, Mary is still an isolated woman, a token."[185] The emphasis on this type of interpretation over others is indeed borne out by evidence from the world outside of television. Attention to this evidence will simultaneously demonstrate the aforementioned parallel between the relations *on* the show, and those of society *with* the show.

Building on the pun-inspired metaphor above, the discussion of Mary's relationship to Lou is representative of the show's relationship to 1970's hegemony. Susan Douglas writes that the show itself elicited in part a number of popular articles on the topic of representation of women in comedy. In titles larded with the pop-speak of the period, echos of Lear's "All in the Family" ring through articles like "Women Are Dingbats," "Women Get the Short

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[184]Ibid., p. 42, (emphasis mine).

[185]Ibid., p. 45.

End of the Shtick," and "Same Time, Same Station, Same Sexism[.]" Written by Leonard Gross of T.V. Guide, these articles all made the observation that "despite the superficial appearance of change on TV with shows like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and *Police Woman*, the medium was as sexist as, possibly even more sexist, than in the days of *"Our Miss Brooks, Oh, Susanna,* and *I Love Lucy."* [186] Douglas goes on to write that because MTM was the only television sitcom in 1970 with a single woman in the title role, it became a "lightning rod for feminist criticisms and aspirations."[187] These hinged on questions of how assertive the 'new woman' could or should be. At the same time, most of the commentary about the show misread it, according to Douglas, because it focussed too closely on either one of two perspectives and then made "pronouncements about its cultural significance."[188]

Douglas writes that MTM was neither progressive, nor retrograde; culturally or politically. Rather, it was, necessarily, both at once. In Douglas' words, MTM was a "masterful balancing act, the show spoke powerfully to women[,] yet domesticated feminism at the same time."[189] This type of reading of the show is of course invaluable to the thesis here, and demonstrates that once again, a strong argument can be made for the sitcom as opening a small

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[186] Susan J. Douglas, **op. cit.** p. 200.

[187] Ibid., p. 204.

[188] Ibid.

[189] Ibid.

window on the carnivalesque in media culture. The dominant patriarchal values are seen to pervade the premises of the show itself, and yet are balanced by the necessary challenges to its authority expected within the sitcom form. "Laughter," writes Bakhtin, "does not permit seriousness to atrophy [but instead] restores this ambivalent wholeness. Such is the function of laughter in the historical development of culture[.]"[190] And while Bakhtin would not have been aware of the sitcom while writing these words, the underlying 'function' of carnival laughter is seen to be consistent with that of the sitcom: manifestly comic emancipation that only makes sense as such when framed by the latent conservatism of the form itself. "Of course," writes John Fiske, "the traces of the carnivalesque remaining in today's popular culture are unlikely to have any direct politically transformative effects." Indeed, Fiske argues, the spheres of politics and entertainment "never interact so directly."

> But the carnivalesque may still act as a deep modelling of a pleasurable ideal of the people that is at once both utopian and counterhegemonic. It is demystifying, for it exposes both the arbitrariness and the fragility of the social order.[191]

Bonnie Dow also alludes to this type of relationship between the show and the audience of the period when she writes that "at its center [it] is a comforting vision of *adjustment* without *change*. By relocating a largely successful formula from the home to

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[190]Mikhail M. Bakhtin, **op. cit.**, p.

[191]John Fiske, **op. cit.**, p. 101.

the workplace, and redefining it in terms of a new type of character, the audiences "palpable fears about what women's liberation might mean" are contained and made less threatening. She then points out how, in the context of a media environment where radical feminists were repeatedly characterized as angry, aggressive and militant, that these qualities are "conspicuously absent (or when present, very short-lived) in Mary Richards."[192] The show then is able to succeed in much the same way that Mary does, through a 'negotiated' acquiescence to prevalent male power. Dow concludes that it is necessary to view the sitcom generally, and MTM specifically, as an "historically situated collection of rhetorical choices that attempted to combine the marketability of single womanhood with the timeliness of feminism." But in doing so, she continues, they largely managed to avoid the most controversial aspects of feminist rhetoric, or, "those requiring the most fundamental change in norms of thought and action."[193]

So at this point, as we begin to move ahead to a study of the 1990's era, two main themes have become evident. First and most obviously, there is the demonstrated tendency of the sitcom form to work very well as a site of contestation at the level of social meaning. Social meaning flows out of, and is constructed through, an accomodation on the part of media industries to historical unrest and resistance. A sitcoms' *presence* is in part the result of, and evidence

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[192]Bonnie J. Dow, **op. cit.** p. 45.

[193]Ibid.

for, the media's ability to suppress radical potential. The *success* of a sitcom on the other hand, may be interpreted as *identification by the target audience* with the struggles that precipitated this 'mediated suppression' in the firstplace.

There is also a second theme that is becoming clear. There is a distinct disjuncture between the politics of t.v.'s comedic representations, and many other types of hegemonic media symbols and social practices. Other hegemonic symbols and practices (such as the representation of women in news stories) have largely re-articulated dominant ideologies much more directly than sitcom narrative structure. It is attention to these other practices that will continue to be addressed, as we turn to the era of the late 1980s.

"Murphy Brown" and Postfeminist Resonances

MTM drew much of its power from its temporal proximity to women's liberation discourse, but it also drew meaning from its relationship to previous television representations of single women. It is with this observation in mind that we can begin to consider the significance of Murphy Brown with respect to the terms of the study here. The show's temporal distance *from* the women's movement, as well as the previous representations of women in t.v. took it into uncharted television terrain.

The Social and Cultural Context Prior to 'Murphy Brown'

As was the case with both of the other shows that have been discussed in these pages, *'Murphy Brown'* also comes into being

at an historical moment that renders its presence particulary interesting. Just as *'I Love Lucy'* arguably grew out of the end of World War II and the push to get women back into the home, and *'The Mary Tyler Moore Show'*, was similarly inspired by the emergence of, and debates about, the Women's Movement of the late sixties, the eighties have been characterized as a period of "backlash" against women, as well as the supposed gains of the movement itself.

"The year 1986," writes Dow, "was a key moment in the 'posting' of feminism[.]" That year saw the development of news specials like 'After the Revolution' with Peter Jennings on ABC, and books such as *'A Lesser Life: The Myth of Women's Liberation in America.'* In fact, Dow continues, the eighties in general "represent a depressing time for feminism. This view was given additional support by the persuasive arguments in Susan Faludi's successful book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991)."[194] Here Faludi makes a strong case for television's declining interest in and support of feminism, through references to *thirtysomething* and its "regressive politics," and the fact that unlike the 1970s, shows about single working women "almost vanished entirely (a point that helps explain the intense reaction to the appearance of *Murphy Brown* in 1988)."[195]

But the idea of an antifeminist "backlash" in the 1980s is not unproblematic. Though an extremely popular catch-phrase, and

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[194]Ibid., p. 86.

[195]Ibid.

a "handy way of understanding the 1980s retreat from many feminist goals," it tends to glance over some of the subtleties of the responses to feminism from that period. In this regard, Dow argues that the term 'backlash' implies a complete rejection of feminist ideals and an attempt to return women to subordinate roles. In Faludi's words "the last decade has seen a powerful counter-assault on women's right's, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women."[196] Still, the situation may not be so clear-cut. For example, according to Dow, some of the discourse that has been labelled "backlash" should be more accurately referred to as "postfeminist."

In defining this term, Dow points to Judith Stacey who defined postfeminism as "the simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticization of many of the central goals" of feminism. As examples of this, Dow cites how some of the outcomes of the women's movement -- such as the right of women to pursue employment and education -- have been thoroughly absorbed into popular consciousness. Still, she acknowledges that a backlash does exist: "the New Right alone provides ample evidence for that claim." At the same time, Dow's experience in the classroom has led her to believe that "shifting attitudes about feminism do not always represent a *rejection* of women's liberation as much as an *adjustment* to it."[197]

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[196]Susan Faludi, 1991, p. xviii; cited in Dow, ibid., p. 87.

[197]Ibid.

> What postfeminism represents, I think, is a hegemonic negotiation of second-wave ideals, in which the presumption of equality for women in the public sphere has been retained. This presumption, serving as the "essence" of feminism, requires the least ideological adjustment from men and from the culture at large (and, concomitantly, the most adjustment from women themselves). At the same time, the most radical aspects of feminism, those centered in sexual politics and a profound awareness of power differences between the sexes at all levels and in all arenas, have been discarded as irrelevant or threatening.[198]

Though there is no need to proceed with an extended overview of the development and inflections of the term "postfeminism," it is necessary to say a few more things about it to understand what Dow means when she refers to *Murphy Brown* as "postfeminism personified."[199] Towards that end, Dow writes that the "central question for postfeminism, then, would be, how can women integrate the two halves of their life (and the assumed radically different values and behaviors that govern them), family and work?"[200] Mediated postfeminism is "constructed in a way that limits its relevance for many women, while at the same time, declaring its relevance for every woman." Trying to establish whether or not postfeminism reflects the mood of women in the 1980s is not as

[198] Ibid., pp. 87-88.

[199] Ibid., p. 135.

[200] Ibid., p. 94.

useful for Dow, as is it to try and understand "the implications of postfeminist rhetoric circulating in cultural products in the 1980s."[201]

"In short," Dow writes, "postfeminist family television assumes that feminist goals have been achieved, for the most part, by women's access to the public sphere," and that families need not change to accommodate working wives and mothers. This is true throughout much fictional family programming, and "particulary sitcoms." This can be distinguished from non-fictional accounts, which tended to emphasize, more realistically, how "success in the workplace has led to problems in personal life." Dow then cites Press and Strathman's critique of this situation when they write that by "ignoring issues centrally important in structuring the real lives of working women, television glorifies and supports a status quo oppressive for women."[202] Though she agrees these authors make a good point regarding the lack of realism in postfeminist representation, Dow is more concerned with how these 'rhetorical tales' function as parables or morality plays about what are appropriate or inappropriate beliefs and behaviors.[203]

'Murphy Brown' and Postfeminist Resonances

The wealth of attention paid to the 1988 debut of *Murphy Brown* is due to a number of factors: first, it marked the TV

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[201] Ibid., p. 96.

[202] Press and Strathman, 1993, p. 14; cited in Dow, ibid., p. 99.

[203] Ibid., p. 100.

debut of a highly visible film actress; it was a success from a ratings standpoint at a time when pressure on new shows was fierce; and it was a re-working of a staple of the 1970s television, the single working woman type of portrayal as seen in MTM. Dow points out that numerous comparisons between MTM and Murphy Brown have made the latter observation hard to miss. But the differences between the shows far outweigh the similiarities, as critics were quick to point out.

> While *Mary Tyler Moore* was firmly within what Norman Lear called the 'emerging woman' genre, there is no doubt that Murphy Brown has made it. She is no struggling producer-cum-secretary in local news but, rather, a powerful network co-anchor of a prime-time news magazine.[204]

This point has been made over and over again in commentary about the show's appearance. In fact, when CBS ran a twentieth anniversary special on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in 1991, *Murphy Brown* was the lead-in show, and was advertised as 'An Evening with Murphy and Mary.' Dow goes on to note how virtually all of the comparisons of this sort were intended to demonstrate "how far women have come since *Mary Tyler Moore.* If Mary Richards was the feminist television icon of the 1970's, then Murphy Brown is the postfeminist icon for the 1990s."[205] In spite of this, Dow contends that the "substance or ideological content of [the show's] import is difficult to pin down." She continues that "there is a doubleness to

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[204]Ibid., p. 136.

[205]Ibid., p. 136-137.

the perceived meaning of the sitcom; it is discussed, at once, as an affirmation of women's progress and a reminder of the problems such progress has created."[206] It is precisely this doubleness however, that for the purposes here, renders it theoretically meaningful.

Dow spends much time describing how well the persona of Murphy fits with the predominantly 'male' attributes of what it takes to get ahead in a 'man's world. In contrast to her 'feminine foil' on the series, Corky, Murphy is abrasive, driven, and given to playing cruel practical jokes. Even her name is not traditionally feminine. Her style of dress is powerful, referring to her preference for blacks and browns as opposed to the pastels that Corky wears, her tendency to wear high collars and boxy suits with straight lined patterns, flats as opposed to heels, and subdued makeup and hair, all act to reinforce this reading. Taken together, they reflect Murphy's "goal of [and success in] gaining credibility in a male world."[207] Her recovery from alcoholism simultaneously enhances her 'masculinity' while signaling her inability to cope as a 'traditional woman'.

> All of these factors are, of course, fodder for comedy, contributing to the intriguing ambivalence of the sitcom's message. At the same time that Murphy is a "new" (read: liberated, autonomous, and powerful) woman on television much of the humor attached to her character is derived from the incongruity of these charcteristics in a woman. The prevailing tone in *Murphy Brown* is irony: Murphy is funny because she

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[206]Ibid., p. 139.

[207]Ibid., p. 140.

> consistently acts as we do not expect a woman to act. Rather than rejecting naturalized prefeminist conceptions of "good womanhood," the sitcom depends upon them to make sense. The troubling aspect of this dynamic is linked most often to the absurdity of Murphy, rather than to the absurdity of conventional expectations of womanhood[.][208]

It is very clear that central to the appreciation of the comedy in this show, is the idea that it is Murphy's own choices that have led to the 'predicament' she finds herself in. "Unmarried, childless, and without a satisfying romantic relationship, Murphy's character embodies what media constructions of postfeminism posit as the negative consequences of female independence."[209] This is an interesting development however, in light of the stance taken by the other two shows discussed earlier. In the previous shows, it is the emergent character of the 'feminist yearnings' which are constrained by the narrative structure of the sitcom itself. In *Murphy Brown* there is no attempt whatsoever to contain these types of expression, but instead an overt attempt is made to showcase them. This itself forms the basis for the comedy. Whereas before, in the other landmark comedies, it is the attempts at transgression which constitute the comic moments. In Murphy Brown, these 'transgressions' are a given, and it is the instances to the contrary that provide additional impetus for comedy. An inversion of sorts has seemingly developed.

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[208] Ibid., p. 142.

[209] Ibid., p. 144.

Still, Murphy Brown retains an anchorage in masculine hegemony. Whereas Lucy was seen to be 'happily tamed at the end of each episode,' and Mary was never entirely free from the patriarchal role expectations at her place of work, Murphy is consistently reminded of what the costs have been for her unquestionable, and clearly represented 'success.' The latent conservatism that has been suggested as an inherent feature of the sitcom, is still easily visible. And, the awareness of this from the point of view of the audience, is held in evidence every time they laugh; the ideological nature of the sitcom form is as implicitly involved in the generation of laughter in Murphy Brown as it was demonstrated to be across both of the other examples. With this in mind, attention can be turned to specific consideration of an episode of *Murphy Brown*, and a study of how these themes play themselves out on the show, as well as what this treatment can add to the understanding being developed here.

Murphy 'Learns to Play'

It is at this point we can consider an episode from 'Murphy Brown' in more detail. At the point in the series from which this episode has been taken, Murphy has already had the child that drew the ire of then Vice-President 'Danforth' Quayle. The episode begins as Murphy confides in Eldon, her ever-present house painter/pseudo-husband, that she is concerned that she doesn't know how to play with a baby (?) and has invited some local mothers over. Her intentions in this regard are to learn the songs and games that a typical baby would enjoy, because she doesn't

know any. The doorbell rings almost immediately,, and the first of the mothers arrives. It is obvious that Murphy is not looking forward to the ordeal, and sees it as more of a chore. The tone of Murphy's greetings of the other women are perfunctory at best. She makes only the slightest of efforts to be pleasant. As Eldon attends to the first woman, the doorbell rings again. Murphy answers the door, and without making eye contact intones impersonally "Hi they're in there." The woman responds pleasantly that she "sees *them* every week" and then "but I haven't seen you in..my gosh I can't remember the last time. When was it?" Murphy responds with near-pleasant surprise: "I'm sorry, do we know each other?" The woman responds that she is "Eileen your next door neighbor.." As Murphy guesses the wrong neighbor, the woman is helpful, and reminds Murphy that "you once drove over my trash cans..?" Murphy remembers this, of course, and immediately begins to 'lecture' the woman about the benefits of plastic cans, because they do "so much less damage to the car." After informing Murphy that they have been neighbors for eight years, and that she is not new to the area as Murphy suspects, the woman, tight-lipped, turns to go inside with the others.

After all the women have arrived, Eldon says his goodbyes, and Murphy follows him to the foyer, asking where he is going. She cannot believe that she is going to be left alone with all of these strange women, and expresses that she has nothing in common with them. Stoic, she returns to the room and proceeds to do her best. As she retrieves her son, and carries him into the group, the

friendly mother-to-mother banter ceases immediately, and the situation becomes more than slightly awkward.

Slowly, the banter resumes, this time with Murphy included. The mood however, seems slightly less spontaneous, and stiffens considerably as the relative 'progress' of each child's development is discussed. All of the children have clapped at this point, except for two of them. Murphy and one other woman are the unlucky parents. The women, playing a highstakes game of social poker, become surprisingly aggressive. Near taunts float in Murphy's direction as the 'developmental discrepancies' are sorted out. During the course of these proceedings, the mother of the other clap-difficient baby needs to change a diaper. Murphy instructs the women where to go. Before the woman returns however, the *real* game playing begins. Murphy excuses herself from starting the baby games, feigning manners, but the truth is she doesn't know any. A chorus of "The Wheels on the Bus" breaks out, with the mothers moving appropriate baby-limbs in a forced dance recital. This provides ample demonstration time for Murphy's Lucy-like incompetence.

When Murphy is told, with aggressive suspicion, that it is her turn to sing, she attempts to distract the ladies with news of the extensive catering she has provided. She claims to know the song, but just "doesn't want to see good food go to waste." Murphy is sternly taunted again by the same woman, the forgotten neighbour, to "sing it." The neighbour has called Murphy's bluff, but Murphy improvises her own words, and lyrically describes the bus 'driving

over the next door neighbor' as she mimics their previous collective puppetry. The other woman returns shortly with the news that now, while being changed, her baby had finally clapped. Murphy, while grumbling innuendo about the truth of the event, becomes the 'odd man out.'

After the commercial break, a week has passed, and as Murphy coaches Avery in clapping, the doorbell signals the start of the next 'group-play' session. As she welcomes them to her home, she inquires with a scripted Freudian-slip if they are ready for some "baby-tricks-er..I mean Games..?" The forgotten neighbor, who Murphy inquires about by name this time, is 'ill with a cold' and is not there. This proves unfortunate, because Murphy has her infant decked out in 'Armani for Kids.' After they all arrive and settle in, Murphy, this time with scripted irony, suggests they should "let the games begin!"

Insistent on demonstating her son's clapping ability, she begins prompting him to do her proud. This continues as Murphy's progeny sits, inactive. The scene changes in a way to indicate the passage of time, and still, though the prodding continues, there is no clapping. The guests shortly make haste, and as they assemble in departure at the doorway, they 'agree' to disband until 'after Easter.'

Eldon, on cue, enters as the women are leaving, and we sense immediately as the women leave that the act is about to be dropped in the presence of her virtual-husband. As Murphy describes the disbanding to Eldon, he calls the "kiss-off" over her

denials. The charade begins to crumble as the two move into the other room however, and Murphy confesses her competitiveness. She tells Eldon that he is right, she doesn't spend enough time with her son Avery, and that when she does spend time with him, she "[does] all the wrong things." Eldon instructs her, with a now familiar sage-like tone, that Murphy should deal with her son "on his own level, not on your own." "I don't know where to start," Murphy protests. "Yes you do, and I want you to try," he replys, with a tone of authority more paternal than one would expect from a housepainter. As she muddles through a rendition of "Itsy Bitsy Spider" in response to this advice, Eldon retorts that it is "hard for me to believe that you were meant to reproduce at all." She, remarkably, apologizes to him by stating that she "doesn't have the natural instincts for this that you do." Even if the episode had not been over at this point, there would be little else that could make a stronger statement in support of the perspective being constructed here.[210]

After all that has been said to this point, the episode described can be re-interpreted quite readily. The most obvious characteristic of Murphy in this example is how unneighbourly and aggressive she tends to be. Though conducting herself with a 'social smile,' viewers are not encouraged to feel sorry for Murphy in her

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[210]It is noteworthy, that the text of the song Murphy once again improvises to the tune of "The Wheels on the Bus," relates to the Watergate break-in. The day that this re-run episode was recorded for inclusion in this thesis, (June 19th, 1997; on CBS) CNN and other stations were running specials on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Watergate break-in. It is also a convenient coincidence that all of the sitcoms studied here appeared on CBS.

efforts to become a better mother, and so the treatment of her by the other women is *almost* cathartic. Murphy is undeniably an outsider, even though she is holding the meeting in her own home. Her desperate incredulity as Eldon leaves, shows that Murphy is well aware of her lack of social graces, and would prefer his presence.

The competition during 'playtime' that Murphy largely instigates, only re-iterates the same dynamic that had begun at the doorway. Murphy's motherly charade becomes as transparent to the women present as it is to the viewing audience, and the women do not let her off the hook. The old saying that there is 'strength in numbers' takes on another level of meaning when considered in relation to the theory presented earlier. Murphy is out numbered in this scene, but in a metaphorical sense, she is positioned by the narrative to be out numbered by many more.

The end of the episode highlights Murphy's chagrin at her own shortcomings. In addition, the fact that she turns to Eldon for childrearing advice is dripping with hegemonic significance. It is hardly even necessary to elaborate on the dialogue at this point. It will suffice to draw attention to a few general observations. Everything that Dow has written about the significance of 'Murphy Brown' to postfeminist rhetoric is clearly visible, and audible for that matter, in this (once again) randomly selected episode. Her deference to a man, on matters of child-rearing, and the playfully caustic criticism that she receives from him, borders on the absurd. This, however, should not overshadow the persistent 'dominance' throughout this episode, of the character that Candace Bergen plays.

In comparison to Lucy and Mary, Murphy is still, without any question, the most powerfully represented of the three. Even in this particular episode, where she is uncharacteristically passive by standards set by the series, Murphy still is a force to reckon with. It is however, as noted earlier, precisely this type of incongruity in a woman that provides the impetus for comedy. Her 'failures' in the role of motherhood, which she resigns herself to in this episode, ring with echoes of 'I told you so..' The narrative structure is thus seen once again to constrain an otherwise successful, powerful, and independent character. In addition, when attention is turned to the representational world outside of television, the gap between Murphy's professional postfeminist 'success' and everyday life is hard to miss.

Despite the "progress" of the women's movement over the past three decades, gender relations in the world today still leave much to be desired. Like past eras, social contradictions are everywhere, and exist in 'new and improved' forms. I disagree with John Fiske's optimism on this point. Even Madonna's supposedly powerful expression of femininity in recent years (a favorite example of Fiske's) can be seen as nothing more than a 'clever' ideological inversion. I might have a different perspective on Madonna if the extremes of her lucrative self-prostitution didn't play so well into the hands of the existing commercial hegemony. She's been little more than another cog in the beauty and entertainment industries' machinery since day one.

The popularity of antifeminist talk-radio and television personalities such as 'Rush Limbaugh' and 'Howard Stern' are also significant to mention here for a number of different reasons. The case of Limbaugh is particularly notable for his concurrent television presence with 'Murphy Brown.' Provocatively antifeminist to the core, he refers to feminists as "femi-nazis," and rarely misses a chance to inflame these antagonisms publicly. Equally interesting, is the positive response he regularly generates to these diatribes from his audience. He speaks *for* them in a way similar to that of 'Archie Bunker'. The main difference, of course, is the absence of anything other than sarcastic irony while doing so.

On a broader, more societal level, examples of 'relations of domination' in gender relations continue to be plentiful and exceedingly stark in nature. The large-scale development and adoption of the internet, as the most glaring of these examples, has developed coincidentally with the airing of 'Murphy Brown', but has, in the act of reproducing the existing gender inequalities of the system as a whole, made the experience of pornography roughly akin to a stroll through a candy store. Granted, access to the internet presupposes the existence of certain means to do so, but the spectrum mysogynistic "entertainment" choices is as broad as it is disconcerting.

The JonBenet Ramsey murder non-mystery is another indicator of cultural pathologies at odds with the women's "progress" depicted in Murphy Brown. On one level, the widespread popular fascination with the circumstances of the murder draw attention

away from the extent to which 'consonant tastes' have been increasingly pandered to in television content, advertising, rock video, fashion, and movies, for years already. This highlights how far-reaching and well-oiled the machinery of the beauty industry is and has been; providing a training ground and showcase for those for whom 'occupational hazzards' consist in the loss of baby teeth.[211]

Even one of the most visible symbols of unruly 'female power' in the contemporary sitcom, Roseanne, has had cosmetic surgery on her nose,[212] and is publicly insecure about her weight. Many other comic television shows -- *Married, With Children* is a prime example -- routinely parade sexist models of desire in episodes and stand as another long-running example of how far society truly is from any political equality. These contradictions at the level of popular culture exist in stark contrast to a show like *Murphy Brown*, the existence of cable channels like WTN, and advertising capitalizing on recent marketing trends objectifying men, and yet, all are concurrent with the continuity of significant sexist tendencies in the culture.

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[211]In order to forestall any suggestion that I am being provocative here myself, this comment was inspired by a story I saw on television which discussed the availability of 'false teeth' for participants in child pageants, and, was itself part of a larger discussion on the very example cited here.

[212]Naomi Wolf's **The Beauty Myth** is well-known, among other similar books and articles, for documenting the staggering recent statistics related to cosmetic surgery. The previously unforeseen medical problems associated silicone breast implants, intermittently catch our attention, and speak to the magnitude of the reckless pursuit of the 'right look.'

Chapter Five

Conclusions

In this thesis, I have tried to demonstrate that the sitcom, as a cultural form, is conducive to a sustained theoretical examination on a number of different levels. Firstly, I have tried to show that in relation to questions around politics and gender identity, the sitcom enhances a 'tradition' of academic scholarship on humour. This is because the sitcom continues to draw attention to the political dynamics of representation in popular humour. What I have also tried to demonstrate, are some of the 'inflections' that the sitcom has brought to bear on this tradition. Through this attempt, I have tried to show how these inflections are unique, at least in relation to many, if not all previous comic forms.

Through the application of John Thompson's method, I have also tried to show that a number of the contradictions of different historical periods played themselves out through the sitcom form, at the level of popular culture, and at key moments of historical transition in American collective experience. I tried to demonstrate how, *in tandem* with widely disruptive hegemonic upheaval, the sitcom form came to mitigate these changes, and harmonize the frustrations of women with 'demands' of the state (dictated by the spontaneous unfolding of history). I have attempted to show how, at three key points in recent history, the essential elements of hegemonic struggle (as they relate to women) have been clearly represented. Beyond this, I have suggested that the

sustained success of the shows studied here, was indicative of their significance to the era of which they were initially a part. It is now useful to consider how the collective cultural memories of these shows, on balance and taken together, can be said to be significant to late-1990's hegemony.

Hegemony, Carnival, and the 'Persistence of Memory'

I want to conclude by developing the idea that at its best, the sitcom is a carnivalesque form in a postmodern media culture. The real power of sitcom lies in the sustained, collective cultural impact that has helped structure people's collective memories of the past. Sitcoms evoke a time and a set of experiences that some have lived, but others have not. This opens up the study of the sitcom then, in terms of their relative politics and their continued circulation in television today, for audiences with no temporal connection to the period being represented.

In his book, **Cultural Selection,** Gary Taylor tackles the question of 'why some achievements survive the test of time, while others do not.' "Endurance, significance, difference, rememberance--these are the constants of human culture."[213] They are also, interestingly, four aspects that are significant to the sitcoms studied here. The older two have endured, and all have a demonstrated significance to a particular era; as well as key differences between

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[213]Gary Taylor, **Cultural Selection: Why Some Achievements Survive the Test of Time--And Others Don't**, (Basic Books; New York, N.Y.), 1996, p. 2.

them. It is because of these first three aspects that they fulfill Taylor's last criterion.

Taylor goes on to write that what has been "done, thought, written, or spoken is not culture; culture is only that fraction that is remembered."[214] After developing a brief argument, that the passing of information to the living by those who are now dead constitutes a fundamental dynamic of culture, and, because "the dying of human carriers never ceases, the need to pass on memories to new carriers never ends, and so society never stops asking itself, "Whose memories will prevail?"[215] It seems that the perspective on situation comedy developed in these pages is conducive to asking this very same question. "If we approach culture from the perspective of memory," Taylor writes, "if we acknowledge the existence of any reality outside the mind itself, then we have to accept the existence of hierarchies of value."[216]

I have made an attempt here to demonstrate that the sitcom form is indeed a capable vehicle for the transmission of precisely these hierarchies; that they too, like many other forms, are repositories of cultural meaning. Humour, it has been noted, does this anyway. But what is unique about the humour in a sitcom, is our capacity to study it out of historical context, and compare it to similiar treatments at a different time. The key element in the

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[214]Ibid., p. 6.

[215]Ibid., p. 8.

[216]Ibid., p. 29.

sitcom form was said to be the symbiotic relationship between resistance and containment; a relationship that tends to be resolved on the side of containment. This similarity to older notions of carnival provides a critically useful theoretical language from which to study the sitcom. It is a language which helps us to understand sitcoms as politically inflected cultural memories, made manifest in pictures and punchlines.

Another keenly significant feature of carnival in older times, was said to be the long-term benefit to the overall maintenance of the order to which is was connected. Much was made of this idea early in the thesis. In essence, rulers and the church recognized the necessity of periodically letting 'the masses' revel in 'sanctioned debauchery', so that the orderly operation of those institutions was ultimately maintained. While the viewing of a sitcom can hardly be conceptualized as 'sanctioned debauchery', their treatments of political themes, and an audience's delight in their transgressive appeal; do seem to serve (and implode), Victorian *attempts* to "shift pleasures from the sites of mass activity [...] to the site of private and individualized activity."[217] The sitcom plays to mass audiences, which are safely separated by co-axial cable. And since I have suggested that the sitcom itself represents a form of politically inflected cultural memory, it is to a focussed consideration of this that we now turn.

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[217] Mercer (1983) p. 89; cited in John Fiske, **op. cit.**, p. 75.

George Lipsitz develops this idea in his book, **Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture**[218]. Lipsitz is interested in the way that a show like a sitcom can come to represent the memories of an era by those who did not experience it. Such an idea is important because when attention is narrowed by the exclusion of history, our 'information storage mechanisms' become limited to a set of industrially-produced images that structure our 'memories' of the past. When these images are tarnished by the "ideological patina"[219] so evident in the comedies discussed here, and are considered in relation to hegemonic masculinity, the pleasures they provide become a matter of hegemonic convenience. The political 'gains' of women, as represented through the comparative attention given here to some of television's landmark sitcoms, must seem so readily visible to 'newborn eyes'. In other words, the collective and ahistorical impression left by the continued circulation of these comedies in a modern media environment, arguably enhances the validity of 'the system' as a whole, but only when the shows themselves stand, singularly, as 'essential' records of times long since past.

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[218]George Lipsitz, **Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture**, (University of Minnesota Press; Minneapolis, MN.), 1990.

[219]Inspired by Grant McCracken's **Culture and Consumption**, his discussion of this idea is useful.

Carnival Pleasures and Collective Memory

Lipsitz argues that:

> sedimented historical currents within popular culture illumines the paradoxical relationship between history and commercialized leisure. *Time, history, and memory become qualitatively different concepts in a world where electronic mass communication is possible.* Instead of relating to the past through a shared sense of place or ancestry, consumers of electronic mass media can experience a common heritage with people they have never seen; they can acquire memories of a past to which they have no geographic or biological connection.[220]

It is the nature of these memories that deserves our attention. Much has been made of the differences between the representations of the women discussed here, and the broader experiences of women in social life at large. I tried to show that there is a lot evidence, which when considered in tandem with broader historical trends and tendencies, clearly indicates the conservative tendency of the sitcom form. Market considerations, it should be remembered, will often ensure that this is so.

It goes without saying in contemporary media discourse that representational practices in entertainment programming of all types, help to shape and influence our perceptions, as attending audience members, to changing social conditions. Ideologies can be, and are, an implicit part of many of these representations. The

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[220]George Lipsitz, **op. cit.**, p. 5, (emphasis mine).

analysis of the three comedies conducted here, if it has done nothing else, certainly demonstrates this with regard to the sitcom. The significance of this form to masculine and capitalist hegemony, however, is much more involved than this.

In each of the three cases studied here, a 'political crisis' of sorts is seen to exist in the few years immediately before the development of each series. After the end of World War Two, and the subsequent climate of uncertainty involving the role that women were to play in postwar U.S. society, *I Love Lucy*, became meaningful to the audiences of the time for the likely, if not probable resonance with the experience of women that the show most certainly catered to. *Mary Tyler Moore* followed the emergence of the widely 'disruptive' Women's Movement -- to the mainstream -- by a mere three years, and was expressly created to market to a 'new single woman on her own' audience segment. The size and intensity of women's voices ensured that the feminist aspirations could no longer be ignored on television. *Murphy Brown* also followed a period of uncertainty, but one that is seemingly less well defined, at least in comparison to the highly visible marches and demonstrations of the late sixties era described earlier. However, the noted rise of the 'New Right' and the 'backlash' described by Faludi, along with the largely conservative 'Reaganism' that characterized most of the eighties,[221] were all factors that contributed to the

[221] see Jane Feuer, **Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism**, Duke University Press: London, 1995. Feuer's entire book is devoted to an extended consideration of this topic

growing 'ambivalence' with regard to feminist aspirations. As Bonnie Dow has demonstrated however, it is precisely this ambivalence and apparent inactivity that characterizes the importance of the mid-eighties era, and as such, renders the appearance of *Murphy Brown* in 1988 as no less meaningful, historically, as the other two landmark comedies about women. All of these representations have been shown to be meaningful for both the role they had in 'transgressing' behavioural boundaries that had existed previously, while at the same time having those efforts constrained symbolically in ways which were, ideologically speaking, specific to the era of which they were a part.

The shows described in this thesis have demonstrated this duality in differing ways. For example, Lucy struggled for the duration of her first show to be included in her husband's life outside of the home. It was the very same home to which women of the period were increasingly finding themselves relegated. Much evidence was brought out in support of this idea, and it is clear that there were many other media forms that, in essence, reinforced the message that women, in spite of obvious and demonstrated abilities outside of the home, were in fact most sorely needed inside it. The appeals to this effect ranged from alarmist 'red-scare' propaganda to more subtle reiteration in forms like Lucy's landmark comedy. Still, women identified strongly with Lucy's countless schemes and efforts to secure equality and recognition.

With MTM, the same is true, except that the dimensions of masculine hegemony had changed subtly over the intervening

years. It was no longer advisable, in the wake of the large-scale consciousness raising that had occured as a direct result of the Women's Movement, to call for a 'return to the home.' To even suggest such a thing in that period could have only worked to strengthen, consolidate, and invigorate the very movement it was meant to hinder. Instead there was a qualified concession of sorts. A sitcom was designed to harness this new women's consciousness, and happened to appear in a manner that ensured it did not stray too far from a popularly acceptable level of dissention. The fact that MTM was more intermittently apologist in orientation, worked to harmonize the pro-feminist leanings of the show, with the decidedly antifeminist resistance that characterized the period more accurately. A woman could be shown to be working and living on her own, but not without a series of more conventional reminders about what she was supposed to be leaving behind. Aside from being technically alone and content with it, there seems to be little else that can be said to sustain extended arguments for a feminist 'victory' over more traditional patriarchal representations.

Murphy Brown can also be interpreted as a qualified concession to external debates and insecurities regarding the success, or its lack, of a 'bygone-era.' Without question, she is the most independent of the three women. She is single by choice, has made her career the most important thing in her life, and has a degree of success and political clout to back it up. These are things that Lucy could have never said or done, and that Mary simply wouldn't have. But there has been a price for such professional devotion. Much of

the comedy revolves around Murphy's inability to even fathom the domestic life that Lucy rallied against, and that Mary was poised to achieve should she have wanted it. It is no small part of the success of *Murphy Brown* that Corky, the younger, more attractive, but obviously less 'successful' of the two, routinely admonishes Murphy for the choices she has made in her life. Spiteful accusations of envy and jealousy constantly re-iterate a dominant theme: somewhere in Murphy's resignation to these attacks, rings an awareness of a lesson learned, but one that will rarely, if ever, be acknowledged.

The narrative structures of all of three comedies have demonstrated quite readily that, though the expression of counter-hegemonic values are given voice in this form, the comedy that they generate is necessarily dependent on the ideological limits imposed by the masculine and capitalist hegemony that is more typical of the cultural institution of television. The fact that counter-hegemonic voices are 'institutionally licenced' by their inclusion in a programming line-up -- when the appeal of the comedy is shown to be so potentially trangressive -- reiterates the complex nature of hegemony. In the absence of any nationally unifying carnival traditions in North American society, the sitcom, when explicitly concerned with political issues and struggles so evident in the three studied here, must certainly be *as involved* in maintaining the ideological dominance of (at the very least) the cultural institution of television, as the carnival proper was to that of the church and the goverance of kings.

Collective Memory and Masculine Hegemony

When these shows circulate and are attended to today by those with no direct connection to the era represented, the contradictory events of history that surrounded their initial broadcasts are invisible. The ideological essence of the period remains symbolically intact, but other important factors are completely absent. For example, the seemingly evolutionary changes in women's power evident in the comedies studied here as one moves from Lucy to Murphy, seem to suggest real evidence of societal change, and the 'success' of the women's movement. But, this is so only when considered comparatively *and ahistorically*. As attention to the historical periods has clearly indicated, along with the 'symbolic gains', are corresponding and consistent 'social losses.'

But the continued presence of the older shows, and the influence they no doubt have in structuring our recall of eras to which we may have no actual connection, need not be pointed to as evidence of any political agenda. Still, the shows reveal strikingly clear evidence of the ongoing masculine hegemony of capitalist television. It could be said then, that the appeal which sustained each of these shows so readily in their own times, ensured their subsequent success in syndication. The resonance that they had for the audiences of thier respective era was instrumental to the success that they enjoyed while initially aired. It is this same success which has ultimately 'led' to their subsequent syndication. Syndication is the 'goal' of many shows on television, and *every* sitcom. It also ensures that past successful shows will have a place to go, and

because of the absence of production costs, become even more profitable for the companies that originally produced them. So the reasons for the continued airing of shows like these are clearly economic, but they still have a direct and current social significance.

Lipsitz suggests that rather than "looking for innately emancipatory or hegemonic forms and meanings within popular culture, we would do better to study its 'transformations.'" It is precisely this sort of transformation that has been studied here through attention to the sitcom form. These transformations are, he continues, according to Hall

> the active work on existing traditions and activities, their active reworking so that they come out a different way: they appear to 'persist' - yet, from one period to another, they come to stand in a different relation to the ways working people live and the way they define their relations to each other, to 'the others' and to the conditions of life.[222]

This aptly describes the way that the sitcom form itself has "transformed." The sitcom, as a cultural form, is significant to the experience of popular culture, a culture that Lipsitz defines as existing in "no fixed forms: the historical circumstances of reception and appropriation determine [what belongs] to a sphere called popular culture."[223] Critical evaluations of television shows run the risk of missing an important "understanding [of] how television [including older sitcom] succeeds at intervening in the everyday life

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[222]George Lipsitz, **op. cit.**, p. 13.

[223]Ibid.

of the society it addresses." While not "discounting the shallow vulgarity of the medium, it is important to note that television also reflects an already ongoing unraveling of social relations in society[.]"[224]

I have argued in these pages through reference to a number of different authors how significant the medium of television is to maintaining the ideological legitmacy of society as a whole. The development and eventual popularity of the sitcom form within this institutional structure has been, indirectly or otherwise, a 'response to crisis tendencies' that have threatened dominant institutional arrangements. The sitcom is 'hegemonic' because its 'comic heroes' is express their opposition within the conservative imperatives of capitalism generally, and through television situation comedy specifically. In this way, the sitcom has been uniquely appropriate to the demands of western capitalism for mitigating 'crisis tendencies' in North American societies in at least two ways.

First of these is in the way that the representations simultaneously address and contain symbolic challenges to power for the audiences historically contemporaneous with the shows as they originally aired. This has been described at length already, but the second way is seen through the relative politics of these representations in popular culture today, representations that are 'received and appropriatied' in eras with which there are no direct historical connections. This tends to 'support the ideological

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[224]Ibid., p. 19.

legitimacy of the system as a whole' as memories become decontextualized. This speaks to what Lipsitz describes as the "function of memory within popular culture in general - memory as *managed misappropriation.*"[225] The viewing of an older sitcom in the present era does not afford the viewer a connection to its originating contradictions. The observation cited earlier with regard to MTM that 'the medium at that time was as sexist as, if not more sexist than, the time of *Oh Susanna, Our Miss Brooks,* and *I Love Lucy,*' supports this position, yet this kind of observation is all but entirely lost as sitcoms circulate and re-circulate in the cabled world of the present.

Some Concluding Thoughts

> Carnival traditions have provided another important frame of reference for American popular culture since World War II. Bourdieu speaks of popular forms that "satisfy the taste for and sense of revelry, the free speaking and hearty laughter which liberate by turning the social world head over heels, overturning conventions and proprieties."[226]

Our "television archives" according to Robert Deming, consist of "our memories of past programs and surrounding discourses" and predispose us "to assume various positions of identification and to accept a range of ideas, actions and behaviours" that frame our interpretation of programming.[227] It seems clear that television also

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[225]Ibid., p. 80; (emphasis shared).

[226]George Lipsitz, **op. cit.**, p. 15.

[227]Robert Deming (1992) p. 207; cited in Bonnie J. Dow, **op. cit.**, p. 33.

helps to frame much more; our understanding and historical recollection of the social world. While the 'spheres of politics and entertainment rarely, if ever, interact directly, the

> historical specificity of early network television programs led them onto dangerous ideological terrain. By examining them as part of our own history, we learn about both the world we have lost and the one we have yet to gain.[228]

In other words, when the sitcom is considered historically in this fashion, programs themselves ran the 'risk' of "sowing reasoning power in the minds of the masses," or, to put it in less elitist terms, risked 'spontaneous transparency'. John Fiske builds on this idea as he writes that

> Carnival may not always be disruptive, but the elements of disruption are always there, it may not always be progressive or liberating, but the potential for progressiveness and liberation is always present. Even in the carefully licenced, televisually modified versions there are traces of the enormous vitality and energy of popular forces that survive defiantly and intransigently.[229]

Sitcoms, as we have seen, are not disruptive, as much as 'disruption' forms the basis of their success. Nor have we seen them to be necessarily 'progressive,' or anything more than 'fleetingly liberating,' as much as these elements too, were omnipresent themes. The sitcom truly is a carefully licenced, and televisually modified version of the broader debates and issues that continue to

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[228]George Lipsitz, **op. cit.**, p. 75.

[229]John Fiske, **op. cit.**, pp. 101-102.

play themselves out at the level of history. In their success, and in the appreciation by audiences of their transgressive appeal, we do nonetheless see evidence of the tremendous vitality and energy of 'the people.' As attention to this historical, interpretive contextualization of the sitcom form has demonstrated, this energy continues to survive: if presently somewhat less defiant, and somewhat less obstinant.

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