FORMULA

The short book that follows constitutes either a long essay or a series of very short fragments concerning the American sitcom, as it was instantiated between, roughly, World War II and the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2019. Those dates are not accidental. The sitcom developed to suit the consumer interests of the expanding audience of baby boomers and their parents, in the era during which television ownership became a common aspect of American domestic life: in 1950, 9 percent of American households owned a television; by 1978, it was 98 percent. In 2011, the percentage fell to 96.7 percent.[1] That dip reflected an increasing reliance on personal computers to consume media, although the Nielsen company, which specializes in collating consumer information on television, now includes broadband-enabled "smart TVs" among the devices that it counts as televisions for the sake of its data gathering—which means that the proportion of viewers who watch new shows when they are first broadcast is likely much lower. While some sitcoms are still made, and even watched, it nonetheless makes sense to refer to the genre in the past tense for structural reasons: First, because the displacement of television services onto online platforms like Netflix, which usually release multiple episodes of a show at once, has dispensed with the conventional serialization devices that structured many of the sitcom's signal formal properties. Second, because many of those formal properties had been dispensed with even before the migration into digital media, and while it is possible to imagine a sitcom (indeed, there are many) without a laugh track, a soundstage, or a strong form of episodic narrative

closure, the loss of all three (to the cringe, the "single camera" green screen set, and the seasonal arc, respectively) has created, over the past few decades, a set of post-sitcom genres with sitcom elements: the dramedy (*Ally McBeal*, *Sex and the City*), the comedy mystery (*Search Party*, *Only Murders in the Building*), the comedy procedural (*House, M.D.*; *Murderville*), and plenty more. Nonetheless, allowing the sitcom slightly more than three score years and ten, between the broadcast of the first episode of *Mary Kay and Johnny* on the DuMont Television Network on November 18, 1947, and the final episodes of *BoJack Horseman* bundled out by Netflix on January 31, 2020 (just before the lockdowns began in the United States), the genre effectuated a complex, subtle, and arguably unrivaled-in-scale change in American attitudes and therefore in the attitudes of those around the world whose lives were touched by American empire and the American culture industry, concerning love, sex, family, plot, work, race, and identity.

Justifiably notorious for its formulae, the sitcom is better defined from the middle out than deductively; this book as a whole constitutes a definition of the term. But I take the three salient variables to be (1) a laugh track—that is, either recordings of a live studio audience, a "canned" recording, or (almost ubiquitously) a combination of the two; (2) a soundstage set that remains consistent over time, whether Mary Tyler Moore's Minneapolis pied-à-terre or Monica Gellar's massive West Village pad; and (3) a strong form of episodic modularity that produces comic closure at the scale of the episode rather than the yearlong season or the whole series. And again, while it is possible to imagine a sitcom that has *only* a laugh track but neither of the others (like the British show *I'm Alan Partridge*), *only* a soundstage but neither of the others (though I've failed to think of a show that fits this description but isn't a soap opera), or a strong form of episodic closure but neither of the others (like *Family Guy*), a show with *none* of them would not be a sitcom.

Of these three elements, this book is most directly concerned with the third. My book title, *Closures*, is designed to highlight the paradoxical quality of a comedy—that is, a narrative of social harmonization through the world-founding creation of a family—which must repeat its peculiar *form* of comic closure again and

again, week after week, for as long as the ruse can be sustained. So, despite its reputation as a normative model of heterosexual social reproduction, the sitcom in fact presents the heterosexual family neither as the inevitable point of departure for comic plot nor indeed its point of arrival. Whereas in a Shakespearean comedy like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, say, the aftermath of a wedding could no more be depicted than could life after death, the sitcom dwells in the present continuous, where family is always on the verge of disintegrating and always in the process of being repaired or reconstituted. Procedural television shows, from medical dramas to whodunnits, depend on strong forms of closure at the scale of the episode too, but unlike sitcoms they are structured around *cases*: new characters and settings introduced in each episode to host the main cast and who leave only minimal traces, if any, behind after the diagnosis has been determined, culprit identified, or verdict returned. Sitcoms require narrative closure and ideally the establishment of whatever dynamic homeostasis prevailed at the episode's start, but without a case of any kind to solve, they must design social settings—whether of family, friends, or the workplace—capable of sustaining not a singular closure but closures, plural.

The models of comic subjectivity and character that emerge from this metadiegetic necessity are original and distinct to the sitcom: with the passing of the sitcom, so passes the age of Morticia Addams, Mork, Sally Solomon, Dwight Schrute, and all the many other sitcom characters upon whom the imposition of heterosexual relations generated powerfully contrarian practices of anti-familial eccentricity. The practice of sex and gender under the aegis of the *situation* has produced characters like these not merely appealing to transsexuals (by common but sadly uncitable observance, trans people seem to watch a lot of sitcoms) but structurally transsexual in their very position, constantly foreclosed in their asymptotic but nonetheless extravagant attempts to wrangle being from becoming.

Three quick notes about method: First, I want to be clear that the readings in the sitcom that follow are *literary* readings, which is to say that they seek to animate the interpretive questions raised by this most flimsy, and in some ways most abject, of genres. I focus on individual episodes of long-running shows and therefore call on small visual or textual details to yield evidence about the nature of

the genre as a whole. Since the formulaic quality of the sitcom is something of a given, both for this study and in general, often what might seem like a detail about a given show might be treated as a trope common to the genre. For example, in a certain episode of *Sister, Sister*, Tia and Tamera Mowry are sent home with eggs that they are to protect as though they were babies. Of course the "egg sitting" trope is not uncommon in US sex education classes, and it is also remarkably common in sitcoms and associated media set in high schools: the website TV Tropes collects forty-one instances of "egg sitting" in live-action television yet doesn't include the episode of *Sister, Sister*.[2] Parts, but not all, of whatever one could say about the egg in *Sister, Sister* could also be said about Niles taking care of a bag of flour in *Frasier*, Chris being given a brown egg by a racist teacher in *Everybody Hates Chris*, Kelso fraudulently obtaining a second egg in *That '70s Show*, and so on. For these reasons, my argument progresses according to its own internal logic rather than according to the chronological history of the genre, to which I make occasional reference but rarely accord any particular explanatory power. If indeed the sitcom is an especially formulaic genre, then it is thereby also an especially *anachronistic* genre, in which an individual joke ("we finish each other's . . ." // "sandwiches?") could belong to its historical moment but could just as easily be a remnant of a past moment ("[the Chinese] just call it food") or even a prefiguration of a moment still to come.

Yet the converse is equally true: even the most hackneyed of tropes may be subtly undone in the instantiation, and it may be that the very application of a cliché itself entails its dialectical reversal. My goal here is to encourage the perversities of the sitcom to endure into the critical scene; I seek neither to elevate individual works out of the generic morass ("generic" being no discredit to a work of art), nor to account for the genre as if it were a singular twitch of capital—a culture industry to be loved and loathed on the basis of its hegemonic grip on the world. The sitcom is interesting because of its unfinishedness—and perhaps because of the unfinishedness it exposes in the general project of heterosexual social reproduction. I have no interest in evaluating any of the objects I discuss here, on either aesthetic or political grounds; genre studies like this are justified if they can account for the cultural problematics that a

given genre formulates and sustains. Few genres, and certainly not the sitcom, determine the political content with which they are instantiated in a given instance: over the course of this book, I engage sitcoms whose political commitments range from crypto fascist, through mildly conservative, to liberally feminist, to radically emancipatory, and so on. I've also found it useful while teaching the sitcom to be clear—though surely nobody who has read this far can be under any illusions on this point!—that I can't supply any advice to the prospective television showrunner. I have no practical experience working in this particular sector of the culture industry, and I am not interested in acquiring any.

Second, this book *is* committed, albeit in a rather half-articulated and gun-shy way, to the program of family abolition articulated by Charles Fourier and those feminist and abolitionist writers who have written on the topic since: from Alexandra Kollontai and Shulamith Firestone to Lola Olufemi and Sophie Lewis. An extended essay on the formal properties of the sitcom is not the place to rehearse the case for family abolition (rather than reform, or antihomophobic "love makes a family" activism, etc.), but suffice it to say that when I describe "the family" as it is depicted in the sitcom, I am describing a set of social relations that are reproduced against the interests of every individual bound by them—including those of the patriarch, though his least of all—and which are felt as suffering and compulsion whenever they are felt at all. I suspect it goes without saying that these coercions are mitigated not one iota when, as in *Modern Family* or *The New Normal*, the parents in question are homosexual men.

The term *heterosexual* is used here to describe not an orientation but an exertion of power. Indeed, I am generally skeptical of "sexual orientation" as a model of erotic object choice, for reasons long established in queer studies: perhaps it could be true, for some fraction of people, that erotic objects tend to (1) belong to the same group, (2) be primarily defined by sex (rather than hair color, personality, etc.), and (3) remain consistent over time. But even if such a group exists, and we have ample reason to be skeptical of the notion, it wouldn't necessarily follow that it possessed what we usually call a "sexual orientation," unless we could *also* establish that these erotic object choices were predictable in advance rather than

collated inductively after the fact. Sigmund Freud's theory of sexuality as reaction formation strikes me as more persuasive: that more important to a person than their erotic object choices is their erotic *aversions*, and that "sexual orientation" designates simply what is left of polymorphous perversity after shame, disgust, and fear have done their work. Heterosexuality, however, unquestionably exists as an organ of power. Psychically, it functions to repudiate or disavow any possibility of identity with an erotic object: a man, penetrating a woman, is experiencing heterosexuality in so far as the act of penetration affirms for him his essential difference from the body he is penetrating. Politically, it works to instill the family as the basic unit of socialization, to move women into unwaged reproductive work, and to self-replicate through the reaction formations already mentioned—shame, fear, and disgust. The lesbian feminist Sheila Jeffreys, who is of course well known for her critiques of queer politics, kink, and porn and for her disdain of trans women in particular, nonetheless developed a useful analysis of heterosexuality as "the sexuality of male supremacy which eroticizes inequality."[3] While I acknowledge the debt of this work to lesbian feminists like Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Adrienne Rich, and Monique Wittig, I don't use the phrase "compulsory heterosexuality" because I consider it pleonastic: heterosexuality simply names the compulsory sexual disconnection that patriarchy requires in order to organize the social field in the interests of men and of capital. I consider this work a feminist work of scholarship, dedicated to the illumination and extirpation of patriarchal social forms; I am, certainly, committed to the trans feminism articulated by Emma Heaney and Jules Gill-Peterson, among others, and this work has been shaped by reading the work of social reproduction theorists and Marxist feminists like Amy De'Ath and Kay Gabriel. It is not, however, a theoretical intervention in itself, much less a political one, but a formal assessment of a genre.

Third, to refer to "the sitcom" as though it named an archive that a person could claim to have mastered is to invite trouble. I have lost track of the number of times that a colleague or friend, upon hearing I've been writing a book about sitcoms, asks me what I make of *some particular show they love*, which I've never heard of, and which, were I to try to watch it with anything like the rigor required to do

the job properly, would insert another three months, at least, into my research schedule. So, hands up: I haven't watched every American sitcom, and I don't believe anyone could (or, frankly, should). I haven't even watched every *episode* of every show I mention here, though I've watched all the episodes of the shows I discuss in any detail. This book, like the sitcom itself, aims for something between coverage and exemplarity: a lot of items are covered quickly in passing, and a fairly high degree of exposure to the genre is assumed, but only a smaller number of shows are treated in depth. A different book, with different claims, could be written focused only on the shows I've declined to talk about in detail: *M*A*S*H*, *Seinfeld*, *The Golden Girls*, *Parks and Recreation*, and so on. I've tended to pass over shows whose reception has already been, more or less, on the money: I have little to add to Sianne Ngai's exquisite rendering of *I Love Lucy*, for example, but want to give *The Brady Bunch* its long-overdue desert.[4] I've tried to think about the question of exemplarity as I would if I were writing a book about Victorian novels: no reader would expect me to have read them *all*, yet somewhere between the main five Charles Dickens novels and *Middlemarch* and the twenty-five thousand or so entries in what Margaret Cohen and Franco Moretti have called "the great unread," there's a threshold for credibility. Negotiating that threshold has engendered a peculiar critical device, which I didn't anticipate deploying when I began work on this project. When there isn't a particular reason to do otherwise, which in about half the cases here there is, I have defaulted to writing about *pilot episodes*. This plan carried the risk of skewing my analysis to emphasize properties particular to pilot episodes, especially the more-than-usually-schematic framing of both *the situation* and its incompleteness to which pilot episodes, naturally enough, are prone. I hope I've offset that risk in the study itself. But this device has two justifications: it has helped me clarify ways in which a given show's *situation* is, indeed, often the fundamental subject of my analysis; and I hope that it will help readers for whom a given show is new catch up at least to this book, if not to the show itself, by watching a single episode rather than (so to speak) opening an unread book at a chapter somewhere in the middle, or else reading from the start.

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