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# The Norman conquest: the style and legacy of All in the Family

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*Boston University*

BOSTON UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF COMMUNICATION

Thesis

**THE NORMAN CONQUEST:  
THE STYLE AND LEGACY OF *ALL IN THE FAMILY***

by

**BAILEY FRANCES LIZOTTE**

B.A., Emerson College, 2013

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to Jean Lizotte, Nicholas Clark, and Alvin Delpino.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I'm exceedingly thankful for the guidance and patience of my thesis advisor, Dr. Deborah Jaramillo, whose investment and dedication to this project allowed me to explore a topic close to my heart. I am also grateful for the guidance of my second reader, Michael Loman, whose professional experience and insight proved invaluable to my work.

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**THE NORMAN CONQUEST:  
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BAILEY FRANCES LIZOTTE**

ABSTRACT

The 1970s brought a change to the face of the television sitcom, particularly with the works of Norman Lear, as comedy began to shift its focus away from portrayals of the ideal nuclear family to more complicated interactions with the outside world. This thesis focuses on *All in the Family* and the various ways that the series broke ground in its methods of social discourse. The series' unique representation of working-class domestic life and its various distancing techniques provided a new challenge for sitcom audiences. With other Lear series and the likes of *M\*A\*S\*H* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, the 1970s television comedy landscape provided platform for socially conscious discourse. However, this period of progressive entertainment declined toward the end of the decade, as series like *Happy Days* and *Laverne and Shirley* sought to look backward rather than forward. From the 1980s to the 2000s, with a few exceptions, the focus of the sitcom reverted back to the preservation of idealized domestic and workplace families with the likes of *Family Ties* and *Friends*. However, the 2010s bring the promise of new social relevancy in television with series like *Black-ish*, which negotiate 1970s relevancy with 2010 narrative and aesthetic style, and streaming, non-network programs like *Orange is the New Black* and *Transparent* that experiment with genre in new ways.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABC .....	American Broadcasting Company
BBC .....	British Broadcasting Corporation
CBS .....	Columbia Broadcasting System
FCC .....	Federal Communications Commission
GIF .....	Graphics Interchange Format
HBO .....	Home Box Office
NAB .....	National Association of Broadcasters
NBC .....	National Broadcasting Company
RCA .....	Radio Corporation of America
TGIF .....	Thank God It's Friday

## INTRODUCTION

The 1970s was a period of significant social change in the United States, with the civil rights and women's liberation movements, an increasing lack of trust in the government caused by the Watergate Scandal and the Vietnam War, and the decade's stagflation resulting in crippling economic conditions throughout the country. All of these important shifts were highlighted by another significant change in the 1970s: the television landscape. According to Erik Barnouw (1990) "The 'top ten' series of 1973–1974 included not a single holdover from the 1968–69 list of leaders. The replacements were almost all new offerings."<sup>1</sup> The 1970s marked the introduction of the "socially relevant sitcom," which took a hard look at the issues of the present day, encouraging discussion both within the texts and among audience members after the credits rolled. While previously a means of reproducing the traditional ideals of the nuclear family, sitcoms began to grapple with the present rather than emulate the past.

My thesis will focus on the work of Norman Lear, one of the most prominent producers of this period of relevancy. With hit series such as *All in the Family* (1971–1979), *Sanford and Son* (1972–1977), *Maude* (1972–1978), *Good Times* (1974–1979), and *The Jeffersons* (1975–1985), Lear's impact on the sitcom came not only through the previously taboo content in his series, but also in his defiance of the traditional conventions of the television sitcom genre. My particular focus will be on Lear's first successful sitcom, *All in the Family*. Airing

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<sup>1</sup> Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*. (Cary, GB: Oxford University Press, USA, 1990) 430.

from 1971–1979, the series serves as a time capsule of the decade, with references to the economy, politics, and various social movements that were previously discussed in the American home but never on the American television. However, I will not merely explore the breadth of issues that the series introduced to American television, as many have already done so. Rather, I will be focusing on the televisual storytelling techniques through which such messages were delivered to the American people. I argue that the impact of Lear's work came not only from the subjects his series addressed, but also in his resistance of the narrative and stylistic standards of the traditional domestic sitcom. As my thesis will explore, there are several moments in *All in the Family* wherein the series stops obeying the standard setup-punch line format of the sitcom and focuses on the serious, real-world implications of the subjects the series addresses. This complexity is achieved through the writing, direction, and tone of the series, which bring controversial and topical subjects to the forefront while also aiming to leave the audience reflecting on the issues that have been discussed, and questioning why they had been laughing in the first place. Furthermore, I will be examining Lear's legacy on television with more contemporary examples of socially relevant television, questioning the degree to which these series present similar challenges to the audience.

### **Literature Review**

Though this thesis will focus on close readings of various socially relevant series, it is important to acknowledge how such social relevancy came to

television. Eileen R. Meehan (1986) used the 1970s shift to relevancy on CBS to illustrate the various approaches that can be taken to understand decisions made in the television industry. She first utilizes the instrumentalist approach, which "focuses on relationships between individual persons, their social networks, their employing organizations, and the elites who control those organizations" wherein "individuals make decisions and set policies within a competitive business environment."<sup>2 3</sup> From this perspective, the networks' shift to relevancy stemmed from an ongoing competition between CBS and RCA for ratings and the ensuing financial struggles that were a result of the "talent raid" in 1948.<sup>4</sup>

Meehan then observes the shift from an institutional approach, which "focuses on relationships between organizational entities, both corporate and governmental, whose interactions construct a business environment. [...] Thus, institutionalists analyze the invention, innovation, and commercialization of technologies, services, and products [...]."<sup>5</sup> From this perspective, Meehan describes the rivalry between RCA and CBS to define and control television technology in the 1940s. With RCA winning the battle, CBS abandoned its interests in technology and made networking its priority, resulting in a subsequent battle between NBC and CBS for key demographics and the resulting experimentation in competitive television programming.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Eileen R. Meehan, "Critical Theorizing on Broadcasting History," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 30, no. 4 (1986): 393.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 397.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 396.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 399–400.

Finally, Meehan examines the relevancy period on CBS from a structuralist approach, in which the ideological, political, and economic domains that create social structure result in "a series of microcosms in which organizations are embedded. [...] Within and across these three structures, organizations pursue their perceived self-interests, which may contradict or coincide with the larger interests of the system [...]."<sup>7</sup> From this perspective, the shift in the 1970s was a result of the redefinition of the "commodity audience" with changes in the ratings system, advertising, and broadcasting from the pre-television days.<sup>8</sup>

Meehan's analysis reveals that the true motivations behind major decisions like those on CBS in 1970s are far more complicated than can be explained in a simple narrative. The tale that is so-often told about CBS executives merely wanting to reach a younger demographic with edgier programming gets more complex when factoring in the entire context of the history of broadcasting. This is something to keep in mind throughout this thesis. While I will be analyzing the impact of the text itself, there were many factors that were responsible for *All in the Family's* presence on the air that go beyond the text.

Much of my thesis is supported by Todd Gitlin's 1979 article "Prime Time Ideology," which suggests that "Many of the formal conventions of American

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 401.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 406.

television entertainment are supports of a larger hegemonic structure."<sup>9</sup> He further suggests the sitcoms of Norman Lear "have disrupted stereotypical conventions of static character and imposed solution."<sup>10</sup> Gitlin examines Lear's dimensional characters, growth of story world, shifts in formula, and solutions (or lackthereof) of problems posed. Gitlin states that these trends in *All in the Family* work against the typical capitalist ideology which associated consumerism with the ideal lifestyle.<sup>11</sup> Like Gitlin, I will be observing *All in the Family's* defiance of standards in television, but rather than focusing on the series' relationship to capitalism I will examine the impact that such deviations from the norm had on the way its social messages were delivered.

The majority of my analysis involves genre study: how the sitcom has evolved, as well as when and how the conventions of the sitcom are defied in Lear's work. Therefore, it is first imperative to understand the sitcom and its conventions as they are traditionally understood. In his book, *The Sitcom* (2009), Brett Mills positions the sitcom against other genres of television. Responding to the difficulty of defining such genres, as well as the tendency for the sitcom to be involved in genre hybridity, Mills suggests that "the sitcom can most usefully be defined as *a form of programming which foregrounds its comic intent*,"<sup>12</sup> therefore, Mills suggests that the defining characteristic of the sitcom is that comedy is the

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<sup>9</sup> Todd Gitlin, "Prime Time Ideology: The Hegemonic Process in Television Entertainment," *Social Problems* 26, no. 3 (1979): 251–66.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>12</sup> Brett Mills, *The Sitcom* (Edinburgh, GB: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 42.

driving force of the series. He argues,

...other aspects of sitcom which are commonly noted in definitions of it - its length, its domestic setting, its character types, its shooting style - can therefore be understood as conventions through which that comic impetus is expressed and demonstrated rather than tropes which define and characterize the genre.<sup>13</sup>

My argument takes a negotiated position of Mills' argument. When examining *All in the Family* in comparison to earlier sitcoms, I will argue that such "conventions" were understood to be essential to the sitcom genre, and *All in the Family's* significance was largely due to its deviation from these understood conventions. As I look to more recent sitcoms (and other forms of comedy), I examine new conventions of the sitcom that have been popularized. While I am in agreement with Mills that the hybridity of newer sitcoms makes it impossible to formulate a clear definition of "sitcom," I contend that there continue to be understandings of what a sitcom should be and say.

This argument is supported by Jason Mittell's (2004) idea of genre as an ever-evolving set of "cultural categories." Mittell finds that attempting to uncover an overarching definition of a particular genre is an impossible and inaccurate approach in television study, and that genre should instead be considered in relation to the cultural context of its audience in a particular time and place. As Mittell argues, "Genre definitions are no more natural than the texts that they

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 49.

seem to categorize. Genres are cultural products, constituted by media practices and subject to ongoing change and redefinition.”<sup>14</sup> My third chapter serves as the most direct illustration of this idea, as I examine how the passage of time has reshaped audience understandings and expectations of sitcoms, with the most significant forms of television comedy actively working against these assumptions.

### **Norman Lear and Relevancy**

With its origins in radio, early domestic sitcoms on television portrayed the ideal American nuclear family. Story worlds were suburban utopias where minor inconveniences and dissatisfactions were easily resolved by the end of the half-hour. In the 1960s, the new trend of the “rural sitcom” played with class in new ways; for example, *The Beverly Hillbillies* (CBS, 1962–1971) was about an impoverished backwoods family who suddenly strikes it rich and moves to California. *Green Acres* (CBS, 1965–1971) turned this premise on its head, with a wealthy couple from New York choosing to live a simpler life on a farm. Both series explored class through this “role play,” but neither associated class with struggle. As mentioned previously, there were several reasons for CBS’s decision to purge itself of such comedies and focus on attracting younger, more educated audiences with programs like *All in the Family*. However, despite all of the catalysts for change, the networks were slow to embrace their role in the television revolution.

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<sup>14</sup> Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.



*All in the Family* was an American remake of the British sitcom, *Til Death Us Do Part* (1965–1975),<sup>15</sup> and was initially developed for ABC. After two pilots the network suddenly got cold feet about putting the show on the air.<sup>16</sup> The reason that *All in the Family* in was picked up by CBS was simple: a lack of quality comedy available for selection by the network. Programming executive Michael Dann remarked in an interview that “if we had had three or four more good comedies that year, *All in the Family* would not have been taken.”<sup>17</sup> The third pilot of the series (produced for CBS) became the first episode broadcast. Despite CBS’s decision to air the program, the network took several precautions in anticipation of harsh audience reaction. First, the program was buried in the 9:30 timeslot of the Tuesday night lineup, following a long block of rural comedies (*The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Green Acres*, and *Hee Haw*) and preceding the newsmagazine series *60 Minutes*. Second, stations were armed with extra phone operators to respond to outraged audience members. Finally, a disclaimer was run before the first six episodes which stated, “Warning: The program you are about to see is *All in the Family*. It seeks to throw a humorous spotlight on our frailties, prejudices, and concerns. By making them a source of laughter, we hope to show – in a mature fashion – just how absurd they are.”<sup>18</sup> As cast member Rob Reiner commented, “There was a big disclaimer that

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<sup>15</sup> Produced by Johnny Speight.

<sup>16</sup> Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty* (Cary, GB: Oxford University Press, USA, 1990), 434.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Dann, interview by Don West, *Archive of American Television*, October 26, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Sean Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), 11.

basically said, 'Don't watch this show.'"<sup>19</sup> All of these steps indicate that CBS was initially far less willing to be the socially relevant network than it would soon become.

As it turned out, there was not much of a reaction to the first episode of *All in the Family*. This may have been because not many people saw it; the first episode came in third in its time slot for the evening. Consequently, the phone operators reported receiving significantly fewer calls than they were expecting, with the majority of the remarks positive.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the first season, *All in the Family* saw a steady rise in viewership, and CBS eventually moved it to the opening of the Saturday night primetime lineup. With the likes of *M\*A\*S\*H*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and *The Carol Burnett Show*,<sup>21</sup> Saturday night (typically a notoriously dead night for television) became a must-see night for CBS. These were the days of a synchronous, mass audience, and *All in the Family* was one of the most-watched and discussed series of the decade. For five consecutive years, *All in the Family* was rated the number one series by Nielsen.

While this thesis will discuss *All in the Family*'s post-Lear legacy, it is important to recognize the series' direct legacy through its many spinoffs.

Though not a spinoff, the series continued with *Archie Bunker's Place* (1979–1983). Lear was not involved with the production of *Archie Bunker's Place*.

Rather, star Carroll O'Connor was largely in charge of production, and the series

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> "All in the Family," *Archive of American Television*, <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/shows/all-in-the-family>.

<sup>21</sup> These series were respectively produced by Larry Gelbart, James L. Brooks and Allan Burns, and Bob Banner.

never reached the high ratings that the original series had. Spinoffs of *All in the Family* included the series *Maude*, *The Jeffersons*, *Gloria* (1982–1983), and *704 Hauser* (1994) were direct spinoffs of *All in the Family*. In addition, *Good Times* was a spinoff of *Maude*, and series like *Sanford and Son* (a remake of another British series, *Steptoe and Son*, that aired on NBC), *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* (1976–1977), and *One Day at a Time* (1974–1984) were notable series of the period that were produced by Lear. Throughout the 1970s, Lear had as many as five series on any given season's programming lineup, and is thus an important subject of study in relation to television history. Lear's overwhelming domination was enabled by financial interest and syndications rules (fin/syn) that were passed by the FCC in 1971. The rules limited the network's amount of programming that was produced in-house, allowing independent production companies like Lear's Tandem Productions to retain full ownership of their programs.<sup>22</sup>

It is also worth mentioning some of the other progressive programming that was on the air in the 1970s outside of Lear's oeuvre. On CBS, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* explored the life of a woman who by choice was both single and had a career. *M\*A\*S\*H* was a single-camera series that, while set during the Korean War, provided commentary on the ongoing Vietnam War. On NBC, *Chico and the Man* (1974–1978) addressed issues of racial prejudice.<sup>23</sup> These examples all illustrate the sitcom's shift toward social consciousness in the 1970s.

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<sup>22</sup> Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2014), 258.

<sup>23</sup> Produced by James Komack.

## Chapter Overview

Chapter one will discuss how *All in the Family* strove to work against the trope of the ideal nuclear sitcom family in terms of visual and aural style. Costume, lighting, set design, camera movement, sound and blocking will all be analyzed in comparison to earlier sitcoms as well as the series' contemporaries. A thorough analysis of these stylistic decisions will illustrate the series' deviation from the standards of the day, as well as the new challenges that it presented its viewers with techniques such as alienation.

Chapter two will focus on the writing of the series, including character development, narrative structure, and tonal shifts, all of which significantly deviated from what was typical of the domestic sitcom at the time. The melding of the real world with the story world, the occasional lack of closure in an episode, experiments with seriality, and sudden emotional turns will be examined as a means of delivering socially relevant messages.

The third chapter will look at the legacy of the relevancy period, examining changes in style, writing, and issues addressed in television comedy from the 1980s onward. With a focus on issues of class and race, I will look not only at modern network sitcoms but also at those on cable and streaming services, while also examining sketch comedies that similarly push boundaries and defy conventions. The goal of each of these chapters is to illustrate the potential for comedy on television to be a more complex method of storytelling than originally intended.

## CHAPTER 1: THE STYLISTIC REVOLT

### Introduction

While Norman Lear is credited with bringing social relevancy to television comedy, few take the time to examine the ways in which these messages were delivered within his series. Several television scholars have discussed Lear's work in relation to the strength and viability of the messages in these series. During *All in the Family's* run John D. Leckenby (1976), Timothy P. Meyer (1976), and Norman L. Friedman (1978) examined various audience responses to Norman Lear's work.<sup>24</sup> More recently, scholars like Fred McKissack (1999), Christine Acham (2004), and Aniko Bodroghkozy (2015) have critiqued the authenticity of African-American representation in Lear's series to varied conclusions.<sup>25</sup> In light of more recent controversial comedy series like *South Park*, Jonathan Gray (2009) has considered the limitations of *All in the Family* as a satire.<sup>26</sup> While the areas of audience reception and readings of produced texts have been the priority of many scholars of Lear's work, few examine the stylistic choices in Lear's series as not only carriers of meaning, but as rejections of sitcom standards that brought complexity to the topical subjects it addressed. In

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<sup>24</sup> John D. Leckenby, "Incidental Social Learning and Viewer Race: All in the Family and Sanford and Son," *Journal of Broadcasting* 20, no. 4 (1976): 481–94; Timothy P. Meyer, "Impact of All in the Family on Children," *Journal of Broadcasting* 20, no. 1 (1976): 23–33; Norman L. Friedman, "Responses of Blacks and Other Minorities to Television Shows of the 1970s about Their Groups," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 7, no. 1 (1978): 85–102.

<sup>25</sup> Fred McKissack, "Television's Black Humor," *The Progressive* 63, no. 4 (1999): 39–40; Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2004); Aniko Bodroghkozy, "Equal Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement," *European Journal of Communication* 30, no. 1 (2015): 112–13.

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*. (New York: NYU, 2009).

this chapter I will focus on the stylistic decisions implemented on *All in the Family*, specifically the ways in which the overtly theatrical presentation and unique use of camera and sound create emotional realism in an alienating and artificial space. Through these techniques, *All in the Family* critiques the traditional sitcom while also providing an alternative mode of presentation.

This chapter analyzes *All in the Family* through its artistic choices and the way that these choices not only created meaning but also showcased the new potential of the sitcom. Before examining the style of the series in depth it is necessary to explain the value of such an analysis. Herbert Zettl (1978) argues:

...television has quite erroneously been considered more a distribution device for ready-made messages than a genuine “art form” in the traditional sense. Hence, program content, rather than the medium itself, and the effect of program content have been the target of more or less close scrutiny rather than the whole process of television or even its basic aesthetic factors.<sup>27</sup>

The analysis of *All in the Family* that follows will negotiate Zettl’s desire for television to be studied as art with the understanding of television as a platform for messages and discourse.

It should also be acknowledged that aesthetic analysis has been a controversial strategy in television scholarship. Sarah Cardwell (2013) recounts frequent negative associations with aesthetic study: it wants to separate itself

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<sup>27</sup> Herbert Zettl, “The Rare Case of Television Aesthetics,” *Journal of the University Film Association* 30, no. 2 (1978): 3.

from other forms of media study; it finds value in its subject and ignores the presence of that value in outside works; it is a form of elitist nostalgia that merely endeavors to return to the good old days.<sup>28</sup> Cardwell attributes this attitude to the historical domination of cultural studies in television scholarship. Such approaches to television focus on “sociological, ideological and broader cultural matters, but...neglect stylistic analysis and reject aesthetic evaluation.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, the aesthetic approach is viewed as in direct opposition to the dominant mode of television study. This analysis of *All in the Family* seeks to provide evidence to the contrary. Rather than detaching from the cultural studies perspective of the series, these chapters will examine how the style of the series presented the messages that are acknowledged in cultural studies. They will also recognize the style of series outside of those created by Lear in the 1970s and instances where commonalities can be found. In this way, relevant sitcoms before, during, and after the 1970s are included in the discussion of the ways genre creates meaning and shifts through time.

## **Visual Analysis**

### *Mise-en-scène*

When considering the visual style of *All in the Family*, it is important to consider the program’s industrial context. While CBS was eager to cater to a new, younger, urban, educated audience, there was no certainty that *All in the*

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<sup>28</sup> Sarah Cardwell, “Television Aesthetics: Stylistic Analysis and Beyond,” in *Television Aesthetics and Style*, ed. Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 23.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

*Family* would be the network's saving grace. The look of the series played directly against the visual standards of the sitcom. However, this shift in visual style is not merely declarative. The style of the series challenged the audience's viewing experience in new ways. The obvious artifice of the set indirectly critiques the artificiality of the sitcom genre itself. The theatrical presentation of the set aids in this message of falseness while also enabling moments of emotional realism.

The theatrical presentation of *All in the Family's* set is combined with its function as a domestic space. A major defining factor of the domestic sitcom is the domestic sphere itself. The set functions as a familiar space that influences audience expectation, but it also connects the fictional home to the audience's personal domiciles. Classic sitcoms of the 1950s and the 1960s such as *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951–1957) and *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (CBS, 1961–1966) feature spacious, pristine, well-decorated homes that reflect the ideal middle-class nuclear family (those whom advertisers were eager to court).<sup>30</sup> *All in the Family's* set, in contrast, denies the audience such visual pleasures that continued to be present on its contemporaries such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

It is first worth comparing the set of *All in the Family* to that of *The Honeymooners* (CBS, 1955–1956), a working class sitcom of the 1950s. The

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<sup>30</sup> These series were respectively produced by Jess Oppenheimer and Carl Reiner (father to *All in the Family* cast member Rob Reiner).



Kramden's home has a cramped quality while at the same time appearing bare. The action is mostly confined to the small kitchen area, whose furniture further constricts the movement of the characters. A window in the background reveals the view: a building with a fire escape, indicating the urban residence of the couple. The set reveals the financial strain of the Kramdens, while also restricting the blocking and physical expression of the characters. Often, the actors are shot from behind chairs and other furniture. Though class is similarly specified through *All in the Family's* set, it is more spacious than that of both *The Honeymooners* and its predecessor *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC1, 1965–1975), whose cramped and cluttered setting is more akin to *Sanford and Son*.

This comparison of cramped and spacious living conditions reflects the class associations of the two New York boroughs represented in the series. *The Honeymooners* takes place in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, the most populous of New York's boroughs. The Bushwick area is known to be populated by both the working and middle-class and saw increasing ethnic diversity beginning in the 1950s, shifting from an almost entirely white population in 1950 to a drop to 89% white residents in 1960.<sup>31</sup> *All in the Family's* setting is Astoria in Queens, the largest and most ethnically diverse borough, known now as a mostly middle-class neighborhood, but in the 1970s is described as "the essence of a

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<sup>31</sup> John A. Dereszewski, "Demographic Change in Bushwick in the 1950–60's," *Internet Archive*, August 24, 2007, [https://web.archive.org/web/20070824040003/http://www.upfromflames.com/uff\\_path/uff\\_path\\_demographic\\_changes.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20070824040003/http://www.upfromflames.com/uff_path/uff_path_demographic_changes.html).

working-class neighborhood.”<sup>32</sup> While not technically a suburb, *All in the Family*’s setting certainly has a suburban feel in comparison to *The Honeymooners*’ highly urban two-room apartment.

The split is clearly illustrated in the opening credit sequence of *All in the Family*, which begins with Archie and Edith singing at the piano. As the couple continues to sing, there is a transition to shots of the city. The initial aerial shot of skyscrapers gives a first impression of an urban feeling similar to that of *The Honeymooners*, but the image soon cuts to another aerial shot of rows of houses and trees. The camera pans along the rows, highlighting the similarities in shape and height of each house. Shots that simulate driving in a car give a closer view of these houses, further emphasizing the lack of variety in the visual presentation of the neighborhood (with the only real difference among the buildings being their color). The camera stops at the Bunker’s house and zooms in to the front door as the image fades back to Archie and Edith concluding their song. The significance of these visuals is twofold. First, there is a mismatch between the traditional neighborhood and the characters. The couple’s heavy New York accents (in addition to Edith’s shrill singing voice) indicate the typical sitcom neighborhood is inhabited by atypical characters. Second, the neighborhood shots reflect the attitude of Archie and many of his neighbors that the neighborhood must be preserved. For example, when the Jeffersons (a black family) move into the neighborhood, a petition circulates throughout the

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<sup>32</sup> Nancy Beth Jackson, “Living in Astoria.” *Astoria*, October 19, 2003, <http://www.astoria.org/astoria-living.html>.

neighborhood in an attempt to prevent them. Such concerns of sameness throughout the community are illustrated through the similar architecture

While the economic differences between the Bunkers and the Kramdens may be slight, there is a stark split between the cramped urban Brooklyn locale and the suburban atmosphere of Astoria that is presented in the opening sequence. In this way, the setting of *All in the Family* is providing a variation of the middle-class suburban setting that was so prevalent in previous sitcoms. Indeed, Archie and Edith are singing “Those Were the Days,” a song of longing for the good old days as the cookie-cutter houses are presented to the audience one by one. This sequence sets up Archie’s conflict throughout the series: the ambition to reclaim the days of *I Love Lucy* and middle-class ideals in a time of social, political, and economic change that prevents this nostalgic desire from ever coming to fruition. What is most complex about this conflict is that, as one who grew up during the Great Depression (with both Archie and Edith often commenting on how poor they have always been), Archie is longing for a past that he has never known, but still accepts as the normal way of life.

In *All in the Family*, the set’s space and construction allow blocking to be utilized to its full impact. Jeremy G. Butler (2012) discusses the factors that influence a series’ blocking, stating that “Since the sets are typically fairly shallow in most TV studio productions, the actors usually move side-to-side, rather than up-and-back. [...] Consequently, actors’ movements tend to be at angles to the

cameras as they move laterally – side-to-side in this shallow space.”<sup>33</sup> The majority of *All in the Family*'s blocking functions in this way, with characters often moving along the x-axis of the set. As the set is significantly longer than it is deep, it is less common to see blocking along the y-axis. This type of blocking is encouraged in areas like the kitchen, as there are counters along the x-axis and y-axis to encourage deeper blocking. Often, a character will call another from the living room into the kitchen for a private conversation; the close proximity to the audience facilitated by the kitchen set-up combined with comparatively smaller space highlights dramatic intensity. In the living room, Archie's chair serves as a center that emphasizes instances of deep blocking. The movement from behind the chair to in front of the chair is often a signifier of a heightened argument. For example, in the episode “Judging Books by Covers,” Archie moves to the television to pick up a newspaper as he voices uncouth assumptions about the sexuality of Mike's friend. Gloria and Mike move from behind the chair to meet Archie further downstage to confront him. Objects on the set also provide opportunities for movement along the y-axis. In the living room, the telephone is placed upstage, and rarely-seen but often-referenced objects such as the television and piano are implied to be downstage beyond the proscenium. These objects not only encourage movement along the y-axis in the living room, but objects like the television and telephone are often catalysts for narrative propulsion, bringing the outside world into the domestic sphere.

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<sup>33</sup> Jeremy Butler, *Television: Critical Methods and Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 249.

The extended length of the Bunker home enables the development of tone and narrative in a theatrical manner. With no wall separating the two spaces, the Bunker's dining area is essentially part of the living room, with the kitchen nearby that is easily accessible through a swinging door. This setup allows scenes to develop at an unusually quick pace, as the elongated x-axis encourages continuous movement. For a socially conscious sitcom this set design is particularly important as it allows the characters' conversations (and arguments) to proceed more organically. A conversation can be taking place in the living room, continue as the cast effortlessly moves to the dinner table, and still continue as Archie returns to his chair and Edith (the most mobile character in the family) scurries throughout the set performing household tasks. This development connects to the narrative uniqueness of the series, as it allows a virtually uninterrupted narrative with each act (and occasionally the entire episode) occurring in "real time."

Despite the fact that there is more space and slightly more decoration in the Bunker home than the Kramden's, the set of *All in the Family* is no more pleasurable to the eye than that of Ralph and Alice's apartment. This is due in large part to the lighting and color palate of the set. The lighting consists of obviously artificial light which gives the image a yellow tint. The lighting provides little shadow, giving the image even less depth than that of the black-and-white sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s. Zettl writes that light "can influence our outer orientation, to help us see an object in a particular way, relative to its

surroundings and its location in time. It can also influence our inner orientation. Proper lighting [...] can make us feel happy or sad, comfortable or anxiety-ridden.”<sup>34</sup> *All in the Family*’s high-key lighting denies the audience any emotional influence. The maintenance of the same lighting, no matter the time of day or emotional circumstance, creates an uncomfortable juxtaposition when unexpected tonal shifts occur. For example, “Edith’s 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday” is a two-part episode in which Edith is nearly raped by an intruder in the Bunker home. The rapist enters the episode after ten minutes of purely comic interactions among the characters. There are no lighting changes that signify a shift in tone. Instead, the maintenance of the series’ typical visual style puts the responsibility of the shift on the writing and acting, making the event something that is experienced in the moment rather than aesthetically prefigured.

Because the working class had not been represented on television since the days of black and white television, *All in the Family* brought a new visual style to this type of domestic sitcom through its use of color. The color palate of the walls and furniture consists of unsightly yellows and browns. The centerpiece of the set is Archie’s brown armchair. It is interesting to consider such stark differences in the visual style among shows that were part of the same powerhouse Saturday night comedy block for four consecutive years. Indeed, it would appear that the programming schedule had a tendency to divide the Saturday night lineup based on style. For example, in the 1973–1974 season,

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<sup>34</sup> Herbert Zettl, “The Rare Case of Television Aesthetics,” *Journal of the University Film Association* 30, no. 2 (1978): 4.

the lineup started with *All in the Family* and *M\*A\*S\*H* in the first hour. These two series had significant visual differences themselves, with *M\*A\*S\*H* being a single-camera comedy filmed both in and outdoors. The second hour of the lineup was dedicated to sitcoms that were more aesthetically pleasing, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *The Bob Newhart Show*. While Mary Richards does not live in the black-and-white suburbia in which the Petries resided, Mary's trendy, well-decorated apartment provides similar visual pleasures to the middle-class domestic sets of the 1950s, heightened by the addition of color.

In addition to the set, the clothing of the characters similarly denies the audience visual pleasure while also calling attention to its function as a costume piece in a performance. According to Jeremy G. Butler (2012), "Costume is one of the first aspects of a character that we notice and upon which we build expectations. It is a significant part of the program's narrative system."<sup>35</sup> The fact that in the first few seasons Archie and Mike rarely deviate from their respective white button-down and blue denim shirts is an oddity of consistency. While there are many consistencies within the genre of the sitcom, the overt lack of variety of Archie and Mike's clothing aids to their presentation as characters. Furthermore, the consistency of Archie and Mike's costume draws attention, as did the set, to the fact that they are just that – costumes.

Much like the set, the colors of many of the costume pieces are often drab and blend in with the set. Both Archie's brown and green CPO coat and Mike's

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<sup>35</sup> Jeremy Butler, *Television: Critical Methods and Applications*. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 240.

green army jacket (a signifier of the counter culture) are dark-toned. Edith's wardrobe often matches the set in color, with yellow-green, brown, and orange representing a large portion of her color palate, furthering her attachment to the home as a housewife. Gloria's style changes throughout the series run. Her character's wardrobe (and physical attractiveness in comparison to the rest of the cast) allow the audience the occasional visual satisfaction from a series in color, but her appearance also serves the narrative purpose of allowing Archie to comment on modern styles, as he does in the pilot of the series when he comments on her mini-skirt: "Every time you sit down in one of them things, the mystery's over." Archie's comment on Gloria's appearance and Mike's approval of the same clothing showcase the Mike and Gloria's sexual relationship through his commentary on her attractiveness.

Through setting, blocking, color, lighting, and costuming of the series, *All in the Family* establishes its difference from previous sitcoms and assists in the theatrical presentation of the series. Such techniques aim to call attention to the artifice of the sitcom genre as it previously existed while simultaneously representing an image of a family that was closer to the real-world.

#### *Camerawork*

*All in the Family's* camerawork deviates significantly from that of the typical sitcom. In addition to Norman Lear's input, John Rich, the first director of the series, is largely responsible for the unique use of camerawork. Later directors such as Bob LaHendro, H. Wesley Kenney, and Paul Bogart continued



and expanded the visual style established by Rich. The framing and movement of the camera on *All in the Family* work to defy the sitcom standard of distance from the performers. In traditional sitcoms, the actors have a degree of personal space between themselves and the camera. These series apply the traditional framing techniques of medium-shots, two-shots, and close-ups and remain within those visual boundaries.

It is worth examining how other sitcoms have used framing in both comedic and dramatic moments in comparison to *All in the Family*. For example, in the classic "Vitameatavegamin" scene of *I Love Lucy*, Lucy is framed in a medium close-up as she struggles to recite her lines. Similarly, in the iconic chocolate dipping scene, as Lucy and the other factory worker attack each other with chocolate, the tightest shot of Lucy is a brief medium close-up. In contrast, in the episode of *All in the Family*, "Everybody Tells the Truth," the camera zooms in on Archie's face during a comedic tirade, eventually landing on an extreme close-up of his mouth as he prattles on at lightning speed. Later, the same technique is used when Mike and Gloria take their turns to yell at Archie. It is clear from these contrasting examples that even in the most outlandish comedic moments of the traditional sitcom, the camera maintains a respectful distance.

Turning to a dramatic moment of one of *All in the Family's* contemporaries, the last scene of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* series finale features a heartfelt farewell speech delivered by Mary to her coworkers. The

shot is a medium close-up that remains static as she weeps and tells them “Thank you for being my family.” Though an emotional moment in the series, the audience is kept at a polite distance. By comparison, in the *All in the Family* episode “Edith’s Crisis of Faith: Part 1,” Edith learns in the hospital that her transvestite friend has been beaten to death in the street. A 20-second period of silence follows this revelation. Within these seconds are two shots: (1) A close-up of Edith’s face with her reaction to the news, and (2) a two-shot in which Archie and Edith look at each other without words as the camera zooms back in to the close-up of Edith’s face as it fades into the next scene. The use of close-ups that are so tight that the entire head of the subject cannot fit onto the frame is a common practice on *All in the Family*, both in comedic and dramatic moments.

David Baker (1985) writes of *All in the Family*’s camerawork that “It is significant how the two components of space – camera and performance – worked together to reinforce the communicative ability of their respective narrative structures.”<sup>36</sup> One of the most notable transgressions of the domestic sitcom that became an aesthetic norm in *All in the Family* was its particular use of the camera. Barker notes the way close-ups of Archie

“were often used for comedic or dramatic effect. This was especially true for reaction shots...Much of Archie’s patriarchal stance, and the humor derived from making fun of such a stance, was a result not so much of

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<sup>36</sup> David Barker, “Television Production Techniques as Communication,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2, no. 3 (1985): 238.

what Archie said as the way he reacted to the words and actions of others.”<sup>37</sup>

The mobility of the camera during these close-ups was what set the series apart. It was a regular technique in the series for the camera to gradually zoom to close-ups. The tightness of faces in the frame (at times verging on extreme close-ups) creates a claustrophobic feeling of hyper-intimacy.

The pace at which the camera zooms in is set apart from the common slow and smooth zoom-ins more typical of sitcoms. Rather, the camera zooms in fast and wobbles enough to noticeably encroach on the space of the characters. When in a comedic moment, this allows the audience to fully study a character’s reaction through their facial expressions. In dramatic moments these close-ups perform an arguably more significant function, as they not only take away the viewer’s agency to look away from the face of the subject, but also use the pace of the zoom to implicate the audience in this invasion of personal space.

Lear (2014) provides an anecdote in his autobiography that illustrates the new visual risks he was taking. In one of his many arguments with lead actor Carroll O’Connor, O’Connor walked out of the table reading for the episode “The Elevator Story,” in which Archie is trapped in an elevator with a group of people that includes a pregnant woman who suddenly goes into labor. O’Connor was convinced that an episode shot in an elevator would be too cramped for the camera. Despite Lear explaining his intention that the birth of the baby “would

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

take place on Archie's face," O'Connor initially refused to have any part of the episode and only relented after being absent for most of the shooting week.<sup>38</sup>

Lear describes the aftermath:

... when the episode was taped the following Tuesday we got a phenomenal reaction. The audience cheered. Some cried. Everyone agreed it was our best work to date and simply had to win an Emmy. It did...and Carroll O'Connor's Archie was stunning, the scene even better than I imagined. The camera in tight, we see that face reacting to the sounds of the birth taking place below... Archie's expressions mirroring everything going on – and then, cutting through the commotion, from the center of all life, comes that first cry and Archie melts....<sup>39</sup>

This story illustrates the intent with which the camera was utilized during the filming of the series, with considerations being made as early as the writing of the script. Such attention to the visual aspects of the series in the writing speaks to the camera's relationship to narrative and tone.

In addition, the camera occasionally foregoes the typical shot-reverse shot technique of sitcoms in favor of panning from one character to another. This is often done to comedic effect and in moments of silence, as the hilarity stems from the understanding that the characters have been holding their expressions for at least the duration of the camera movement. Additionally, panning keeps the view in suspense as they must wait for the character to come into frame to

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<sup>38</sup> Norman Lear, *Even This I Get to Experience* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 248–249.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

know what their reaction will be. The intent with which the camera moves sets it apart from other sitcoms of the 1970s and prior. While the camera panning to follow action or zooming in to a two-shot or a moderate close-up was common, the camera in *All in the Family* takes agency, encroaching on the personal space of the characters and emphasizing emotions and relationships not necessarily written on the page.

Turning momentarily to *Maude*, Horace Newcomb (1977) describes a sequence in the episode “Maude Bares Her Soul” which contains a somber moment that is furthered with the use of the camera:

The camera moved in for a tight close-up of her face. She posed at an angle, her head lifted slightly out of the supine position by the tilted headrest of the couch. As she continued her narrative of parental conflict and adolescent rebellion, her face, rich with emotion shifted, then trembled, then dissolved as she wept. She strained toward the camera, toward us. An audience of millions hovered over her, listened, laughed, and shuddered by turns, becoming for practical purposes the human side of the silent and anonymous psychiatrist...We analyzed Maude Findlay, and in doing so, we analyzed “Maude.”<sup>40</sup>

The camerawork in this episode is particularly essential because the entire story takes place in one location (the therapists office), with Maude essentially performing a monologue for the entirety of the episode. There are two extended

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<sup>40</sup> Horace Newcomb, “The Television Artistry of Norman Lear,” *Prospects* 2 (1977): 109.

shots in this episode; both lasting over three minutes as the camera gradually zooms into Maude's face and rests in the close-up. The long takes create a sense of theatricality while also denying the audience any relief from the tension by cutting away.

What is most essential to the success of the Lear style of framing is the consistency of technique as tones shift between comedic and dramatic. The use of the close-up both as a comedic and dramatic tool brings a sense of cohesion to the series. Rather than separating the comedic from the dramatic, the visual language of Lear's series emphasizes its insistence upon emotional complexity in the sitcom.

### **Aural Aesthetics**

#### *Diegetic and Nondiegetic Sound*

*All in the Family's* use of sound is another factor that sets itself apart from the traditional sitcom. Zettl discusses the importance of examining television sounds, stating:

As a "people medium" television lives off dialogue very much like the theatre. Although the visual closeup provides many important clues and subtext meanings, the major information is generally revealed through some form of speech. [...] Music and sound effects generally support or intensify the visual image. Sound effects and music are often an essential

facilitator for psychological closure (of the inductively presented images) first, and an intensifier second.<sup>41</sup>

Frequently, sitcoms will use non-diegetic music to introduce a scene or bridge two scenes together. This is the case in the majority of sitcoms, including *I Love Lucy*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Beverley Hillbillies*, and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. However, with the exception of one moment in one of the first episodes in the series, *All in the Family* contains no non-diegetic music. Even the theme song, "Those Were the Days," could be read as diegetic as it is performed by Archie and Edith at a piano. The refusal to provide the audience with emotional cues through the music is similar to the effects of the consistently high-key lighting.

*All in the Family* uses few sound effects, but those used are present frequently. The main effects that the series utilizes on a regular basis are the telephone ring, the doorbell, and the toilet flush. The first two sounds go hand-in-hand; they connect the Bunker household to the outside world. They are two important facilitators of the topicality of the series. They are also sounds that encourage characters to move throughout the set, crossing the x-axis to open the door and moving upstage along the y-axis to answer the phone. The use of sound as a force of movement and a situational catalyst lends to the theatrical presentation of the series.

The toilet flush is an iconic and groundbreaking sound effect on the series,

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<sup>41</sup> Herbert Zettl, "The Rare Case of Television Aesthetics," *Journal of the University Film Association* 30, no. 2 (1978): 5.

as it was the first heard on broadcast television. As opposed to the telephone and doorbell, the flush does not require the actors to move. The presence of the off-screen flushing character (usually Archie) is indicated by the sound, while the camera is fixed on the reaction of the character hearing the flush. Much as the unappealing color palate does, the sound effect of the flush serves as a criticism of the distanced and refined traditional domestic sitcoms. This inclusion of crude humor influenced future working-class sitcoms like *Married...With Children* (FOX, 1987–1997).<sup>42</sup>

### *Laughter*

John Ellis (1992) writes that on broadcast television “the image and sound both tend to create a sense of immediacy.”<sup>43</sup> One of the most significant aural elements that lends to the immediacy of *All in the Family*, and indeed the majority of sitcoms, is the laughter of the audience. Lear’s sitcoms would state proudly during the ending credits that the show was “recorded on tape before a live audience.” While the laugh track is still utilized in many multicam sitcoms, there has been a growing distaste in audience response to this production tactic. Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore conducted a study in 2011 that gauged audience responses to sitcoms with and without laugh tracks. Her results indicated that audiences were more receptive to comedies that did not contain a laugh track, but also that audiences were more likely to accept laughter from a live studio

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<sup>42</sup> Produced by Michael G. Moyer and Ron Leavitt.

<sup>43</sup> John Ellis, “Broadcast TV as Sound and Image” in *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 144.



audience because of its authenticity in comparison to canned laughter.<sup>44</sup> The study was conducted on British and Norwegian audiences, and British participants were more likely to associate the laugh track with American sitcoms, despite the fact that many British sitcoms also utilize the laugh track.<sup>45</sup>

The laughter of the studio audience serves several functions on *All in the Family*. First, the theatrical nature of the production lends itself to the laughter of a live audience. Second, because of the taboo nature of *All in the Family*'s humor, the laughter of a group of people gives the television audience permission to laugh as well, as opposed to manipulating the audience to laugh at a joke. In addition, the laughter of the audience facilitates the tableau moments of the series, in which an actor holds a position or expression during an extended moment of laughter or applause. For example, in the episode "Sammy's Visit" Archie enthusiastically welcomes Sammy Davis Jr. into his home for a visit, all the while making oblivious racist comments in the form of praise. When Davis is about to leave, he surprises Archie with a long kiss on the cheek. Davis holds the kiss as the audience loudly laughs and applauds. As he and the rest of the characters begin to laugh and move around the set, Archie remains in place and maintains the same shocked expression as the audience laughter continues. These moments serve as a theatrical agreement between actor and audience; the laughter and applause at the reaction to Archie signals Carroll O'Connor to

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<sup>44</sup> Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore, "Laughing Together?: TV Comedy Audiences and the Laugh Track," *The Velvet Light Trap* no. 68, (2011): 29.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

maintain his expression. Such moments could not be sustained without the participation of the live audience. They not only provide a theatrical experience for the audience, but they make the audience part of the television production process in a way that cannot be realized until taping.

While audience laughter is useful in maintaining moments of comedy, its absence can also be crucial to maintaining drama. Just as the audience acts as both a member of the production team and an off-screen character with their contribution of laughter, the lack of laughter from a live studio audience similarly emphasizes tone, while also denying the television audience the fulfillment of the expectations of a comedy. In the aforementioned *Maude* episode, there is a period of approximately seven minutes wherein the audience laughs only once, and as Newcomb explains, “while the laughter is there, it is a nervous laughter that tenses us rather than distracts.”<sup>46</sup> However, as the audience is constantly recorded, extended periods of audience silence (interrupted by the occasional cough from an audience member) serve as the reminder that they are present in this moment, making the choice not to laugh. As opposed to the way in which studio laughter encourages comedic moments such as the tableau, the audience’s silence neither provides a cue for the actors, nor gives permission for the television audience to ease the tension with laughter. Rather, the silence heightens the tension, forcing the television audience to react to the issue itself, rather than to the issue within the context of a joke. The fact that television drama

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<sup>46</sup> Horace Newcomb, “The Television Artistry of Norman Lear,” *Prospects* 2 (1977): 122–123.

so rarely has an audience that will react makes the dramatic silences in a comedy all the more striking.

### **Conclusion**

*All in the Family* uses its own style not only to criticize the sitcom genre's artificiality but also to provide a more complex alternative. Through its theatrical proscenium set, the alienating effects of the color palate and lighting, new use of the camera and selective use of sound, the series critiques the artificiality of sitcoms of the past that presented a story world that rejected reality. The bare bones, spacious mise-en-scene both denies the audience the pleasures of the domestic sitcoms of the past and provides the dramatic potential of a stage play. The framing and movement of the camera deliberately defy the aesthetic conventions of the traditional sitcom by denying the audience the visual pleasures of dynamic lighting, as well as the aural pleasures of non-diegetic tone-setting music. The theatrical nature of the performance space and the liveness of the audience provide another acknowledgement of artificiality, while at the same time providing authenticity in its elements of real-time performance and reaction. These elements go hand-in-hand with the new ways that narrative and dialogue are utilized on the series, which will be explored in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 2: OUTSIDE-IN

Edith: Oh my, I just saw the saddest thing on TV.

Gloria: What was it, Ma, a new comedy show?

- "Mike's Friend" (5.14)

### Introduction

Norman Lear's comedies have been praised for the wit and topicality of the writing. As Jack Gould (1971) of the *New York Times* wrote, "Except for 'All in the Family' it is difficult to recall another TV attempt to bring the disease of bigotry and prejudicial epithets out into the open with the aim, one hopes, of applying the test of corrective recollection and humor."<sup>47</sup> In terms of industry praise alone, *All in the Family* received ten Primetime Emmy Award nominations for writing throughout its nine-year run and in 2013 was ranked as the fourth best-written show of all time by the Writer's Guild of America.<sup>48 49</sup> The series presented a complexity of character, narrative, and tone that was new to the sitcom landscape. Through these techniques, *All in the Family* challenged both the status quo of the sitcom genre and sitcom audiences themselves, forcing them to look critically at America and the family.

Before proceeding to an analysis of the writing on the series, it is important to acknowledge Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch's idea of the cultural forum. Newcomb and Hirsch (1983) define television as "the expressive

<sup>47</sup> Norman Lear, *Even This I Get to Experience* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 244.

<sup>48</sup> "Nominees/Winners," *Television Academy*, <http://www.emmys.com/awards/nominees-winners>.

<sup>49</sup> "101 Best Written TV Series List," *Writers Guild of America, West*.  
<http://www.wga.org/content/default.aspx?id=4925>.

medium that, through its storytelling functions, unites and examines a culture.”<sup>50</sup>

This idea is suitably applicable to *All in the Family*, both through its examination of American culture in its storytelling techniques and its critique of real-world issues. Furthermore, Newcomb and Hirsch emphasize the way in which an individual producer’s style affects the meanings that are created, thereby bringing different perspectives to the cultural forum. They assert that “while shows like *M\*A\*S\*H*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and *All in the Family* may all treat similar issues, those issues will have different meanings because of the variations in character, tone, history, style, and so on, despite a general ‘liberal’ tone.”<sup>51</sup> This chapter aims to examine the meanings behind such variations on *All in the Family*, and the beneficial discourse that was brought to the cultural forum as a result.

In addition to exploring *All in the Family*’s role in the cultural forum, it is necessary to examine its function within the role of the sitcom. Larry Mintz (1985) describes the sitcom as,

[...] a half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters within the same premise. That is, each week we encounter the same people in essentially the same setting. The episodes are finite; what happens in a given episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled, solved at the end of the half hour. [...] The most important feature of

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<sup>50</sup> Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, “Television as a Cultural Forum,” in *Television: The Critical View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 561.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 567.

sitcom structure is the cyclical nature of the normalcy of the premise undergoing stress or threat of change and becoming restored. [...] This faculty for the “happy ending” is, of course, one of the staples of comedy, according to most comic theory.<sup>52</sup>

As this chapter will illustrate, *All in the Family* actively pushed against this definition through its experimentation with unresolved narrative, seriality, and emotional complexity.

Jason Mittell (2015) argues that an audience’s comprehension of a series relies upon its understanding of the series’ extrinsic norms, which include the television format (time slots, commercial breaks, etc.) and the elements of the series’ genre.<sup>53</sup> Mittell also writes of series’ establishment of their own intrinsic norms that are unique to the series and that teach viewers what to expect in future viewing. I argue that *All in the Family* establishes techniques such as silence and verbal chaos as intrinsic to the series, and this allows sudden tonal shifts to be simultaneously shocking and organic in the story world. Further, I contend that the intrinsic norms of *All in the Family* supersede the extrinsic norms of the sitcom by defying audience expectations in narrative and tone.

This chapter will focus on the ways that the writing on *All in the Family* reshaped the sitcom. Aside from the obvious shock and topicality that were contained in the pages of the scripts, Lear and his writers used other methods to

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<sup>52</sup> Larry Mintz, “Situation Comedy,” in *TV Genres: A Handbook and Reference Guide*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 107– 29.

<sup>53</sup> Jason Mittell, “Comprehension,” in *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 168.

take the familiar genre of the sitcom and tinker with it to create a more complex experience for the viewer. This effect was accomplished through a combination of elements: the premise of a controversial and topical series explored through the perspective of the working class; multidimensional and complex characters; experimentation of narrative structure within and across episodes; and the infusion of both comedy and drama that created a challenging emotional experience for the audience.

### **Premise**

#### *Ripped from the Headlines*

The narrative and aesthetic techniques employed in Norman Lear's sitcoms directly responded to and critiqued what had been lacking in previous television comedies. Lear is often praised for the scope of topical issues he addressed in *All in the Family*. While the series is best known for bringing racial discourse to America's living rooms, it also tackled other controversial topics of the day such as religion, feminism, and gun control. While the conversations in the Bunker household persistently mention these and other important social issues, the family also faces them directly. Indeed, throughout the series the Bunkers are forced to interact with the tumultuous outside world that involves hate crimes, sexual assault, protest, and other social issues.

These instances, coupled with the frequent references to real-life events and popular culture, made the Bunkers a family that exists in the real world, as opposed to the fabricated worlds of previous sitcoms. For example, the second

episode of the series, "Writing the President" (airing on January 19 1971) mentions two political statements by well-known celebrities: *Sing Out, Sweet Land*, John Wayne's love letter to America, and *The Slow Guillotine*, a television special about pollution starring Jack Lemmon. In this way, *All in the Family* reached another level of relevancy. The specific references to the real world gave the series an air of authenticity. While other series create their own fictional world complete with fictional television shows, brands, and politicians, *All in the Family* bombards the audience with familiar references to current affairs and pop culture.

At the same time, the interior world of *All in the Family* provided its own pathways for controversial exploration. For example, Archie's misogynistic treatment of Edith and his bigoted treatment of Mike (often referring to him as a "Pollock") and his black neighbor Lionel (despite his best intentions) fuel arguments over such subject matters. The inclusion of Lionel as a series regular for a unique perspective of racism and bigoted logic, as Lionel often patronizes Archie and his backwards viewpoints. For example, in the episode "The Hot Watch" Archie believes that he's been given a stolen watch that needs to be repaired. When he asks Lionel for his advice, assuming he has friends that frequently rob businesses, Lionel replies, "No, my friends don't fool with small stuff. They're more into air conditioners, TV sets, stereos. [...] but if you want to put in a order for the next riot..." Later, Lionel makes a joke about recent police corruption, and the following exchange results:



Archie: Now, that ain't exactly fair. We all know there's a couple of cops on the take. You don't want to go blaming the whole police department for a couple of rotten apples.

Lionel: Oh! So-- So what you're saying is, don't condemn a whole group of people for the actions of a few?

Archie: That's right, Lionel. You gotta remember that.

Lionel: Oh, I will. I will, Mr. Bunker. Uh, uh, let me see now. "Don't condemn a whole group of people for the actions of just a few" (repeats as he exits the house).

Such conversations between Archie and Lionel are frequent, with Lionel using Archie's own logic to make him the unwitting butt of the joke. In this way, Lionel acts as a surrogate audience member, taking pleasure in such buffoonish bigotry. In a more significant way, these exchanges critique the nonsensical nature of bigoted logic.

As *All in the Family* frequently commented on the real world, so too did the real world comment on the fictional world of *All in the Family*. After the airing of the fifth episode, "Judging Books by Covers," which featured the first openly gay television character, the series was discussed in the White House Tapes by President Nixon and his staff. Though his staff found "Writing the President," in which Archie writes a letter to President Nixon, favorable (despite Nixon being mocked throughout the episode), Nixon expressed disdain for the series, saying

it “glorified homosexuality.”<sup>54</sup> The conversation on the tapes develops into a more general conversation about Nixon’s views on homosexuality outside of the show. This is illustrative of the cultural forum *All in the Family* created, and how the fictional world and real world were constantly commenting on each other. The episodes further encouraged discussion because arguments were never settled in the Bunker household. Mike and Archie never see eye-to-eye, and often episodes close on one of their screaming matches. For example, the episode “Everybody Tells the Truth,” ends with a complicated argument in which both Mike and Archie are criticizing each other for their misinterpretations of an incident with a black man, in which the man confronted Archie for referring to him as “boy.” The argument is continuous and becomes unintelligible as Edith, Gloria, and the restaurant waiter attempt to settle the argument to no avail. The fact that the series leaves such political, cultural, social, and moral questions unanswered encourages further audience conversation when the credits roll.

It is important to note the perpetual struggle that Lear underwent with the network in his pursuit to bring relevancy to television. Though CBS was taking a risk with the series, the network was not willing to push the limits as far as Lear desired. For example, Lear provides the following as a sample of the network notes from the aforementioned “Judging Books by Covers”:

We ask that the homosexual terminology be kept to an absolute minimum, and in particular the word “fag” not be used at all. “Queer” should be used

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<sup>54</sup> John Ehrlichman & Bob Haldeman, “Richard Nixon Tapes,” 1971.

most sparingly, and less offensive terms like “pansy,” “sissy,” or even “fairy” should be used instead. And again, a term like “regular fella” would be preferred to “straight.”<sup>55</sup>

While the network aims to avoid offending audience members with the using the word “fag,” their suggestions for “milder” insults indicate an acceptable level of verbal abuse that can be doled out to homosexuals. Norman Lear was criticized for similar reasons by Laura Z. Hobson in the *New York Times* in September of 1971, who argued that *All in the Family* “deodorized” racism with its lack of commitment to the harsh terms that true racists use such as “the n word.”<sup>56</sup> This reaction illustrates the fine line that had to be walked in the production of *All in the Family*, with Standards and Practices and offended viewers wanting a milder presentation and viewers like Hobson demanding a harsher more authentic depiction of bigotry.

The issues Lear faced concerning the relevancy of his material are also illustrated in the implementation of the Family Viewing Hour in 1975 by the FCC, in which the first hour of prime time on the networks was dedicated to family-friendly programming.<sup>57</sup> *All in the Family*, having led the powerhouse Saturday night lineup up to that point, was forced into a later timeslot. Lear, along with several other independent producers and guilds filed a suit against the FCC, the NAB, and the networks, claiming that the Family Viewing Hour infringed upon

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<sup>55</sup> Norman Lear, *Even This I Get to Experience* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 233–234.

<sup>56</sup> Sean Campbell, *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), 22

<sup>57</sup> Elana Levine, *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 98.

their First Amendment rights. Lear and his co-plaintiffs won the suit, and in 1976 the Family Viewing Hour was revoked.<sup>58</sup>

During the period of the Family Viewing Hour, *Sanford and Son*, another of Lear's series (run by Lear's partner, Bud Yorkin) that aired on NBC, remained in its 8:00 timeslot, suggesting that the relevancy of *All in the Family*, which regularly commented on the real world, was more threatening than *Sanford and Son*, which, while a notable working-class black sitcom, was more of a traditional domestic sitcom in both narrative and tone. *Sanford and Son* differed from *All in the Family* in that, while addressing the life of a working-class father and son, the series was light-hearted and formulaic compared to *All in the Family*. Every episode involved obligatory recurring gags and catchphrases, there was significantly less reference to current events, and the episodes all ended with a satisfactory resolution.

Despite the narrative and tonal differences between *All in the Family* and *Sanford and Son*, it is clear that Lear had an interest in exploring similar family dynamics in the majority of his series. While not the first to do so, Lear began his own trend within his sitcoms of adult children living with their parents (Mike and Gloria in *All in the Family*, Lamont in *Sanford and Son*, Carol in *Maude*, and Lionel on *The Jeffersons*). Previously, the majority of sitcoms featured childless couples or families with young children. Lear complicated the family dynamic by trapping two generations of adults in the same house. In *All in the Family* the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 99–100.

strangeness of the situation is heightened by the fact that Archie and Edith's daughter, Gloria, is a married woman. She and her husband Mike live in her parents' household while Mike is in college. The peculiarity of this situation is illustrated in "Gloria Discovers Women's Lib," wherein Gloria leaves the house after an argument with Mike and stays with a friend. Archie asks Mike, "Suppose Gloria stays away for two, maybe three months. What do you figure to do? I mean, this is a unique family group we got here. Two parents and a son-in-law." Between Archie's frequent jabs at Mike about his living situation, the series utilized this unique family group to explore the intergenerational dynamics between the two generations, including their attitudes on sex, politics, and race. *Maude* uses the two generations of adults to comment on liberalism. Carol, as a younger woman is depicted as the more "genuine" liberal, and often points out the hypocrisy in Maude's positions and beliefs.

The frequent presence of the young, liberal adult on Lear's series was also beneficial to the networks as it provided a means of representation for their target demographic. As Eileen Meehan (1986) argues, there are several reasons for the shift of emphasis from older viewers to young, college-educated viewers, including long rivalries between CBS and RCA/NBC over talent and technology, and shifts in ratings gathering methodology.<sup>59</sup> All of these factors resulted in a fierce competition among the networks to attract this new demographic, and

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<sup>59</sup> Eileen R. Meehan, "Critical Theorizing on Broadcasting History," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 30, no. 4 (1986): 393–406.

these series catered to such audiences by pitting the stance of the youth against that of the previous generation.

*All in the Family* changed the domestic comedy and its potential as a facilitator of discussion through its recognition of the outside world, embrace of controversial subjects, and focus on inter-generational conflict. As Norman Lear's other series such as *Maude* explored variations of these elements, the socially relevant domestic sitcom became not only a critique of the American family, but also a guide to the discourse of serious social and political issues.

#### *The Return of the Working Class*

*All in the Family* was the first working-class sitcom to air on television in over a decade. According to Richard Butsch (1992), though *The Honeymooners* was a notable working-class sitcom in the 1950s, the only working-class representation in the 1960s was *The Flintstones*.<sup>60</sup> This lack of representation of a working-class family through an entire decade is particularly striking considering the large working-class audience at the time. As Butsch and Lynda M. Glennon (1983) observed, from 1942 to 1978 "Working-class occupations constituted 65.0 percent of the occupations of actual heads of household. Yet only 8.4 percent of the 189 series depicted families with heads of household employed in such occupations."<sup>61</sup> As a domestic sitcom in which the family's economic status reflected the majority of the watching audience, *All in the Family*

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<sup>60</sup> Richard Butsch, "Class and Gender in Four Decades of Television Situation Comedy: Plus ça Change...", *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 9, no. 4 (1992): 392.

<sup>61</sup> Richard Butsch and Lynda M. Glennon, "Social Class: Frequency Trends in Domestic Situation Comedy, 1946–1978," *Journal of Broadcasting* 27, no. 1 (1983): 80.

was relevant not just to society but specifically to its own audience.

The 1970s were the ideal time for such a show to air. From 1970–1979 (encompassing the entirety of the series run) the United States suffered crippling economic conditions, with inflation more than triple what it had been since the beginning of the century.<sup>62</sup> Initially Archie is the sole provider of the four-person family. He works full-time on a loading dock and occasionally moonlights as a cab driver on the weekends. The struggle for money is a constant presence on the series, with frequent references to the family's inability to afford luxuries. Later in the series, Gloria gets a job, though it is implied that her money is kept in a savings account rather than contributed to the household budget. Throughout the series Archie is denied a Christmas bonus that puts financial strain on the holidays, he loses a promotion despite his getting a high school diploma to be qualified, and he fears the loss of his job over a shipping error on his part. At the beginning of season five, Archie's union goes on strike, leaving him without a paycheck for several weeks. During this time Edith gets a job with the Jeffersons, and Mike gets a part-time job. In these three episodes, the tables have turned, and everyone in the household but Archie is working.

These episodes in which Archie is out of work, denied promotion, or concerned about losing his job, speak to issues of masculinity in the 1970s. I argue that the economic instability and unemployment rate during the decade led to a shift in the definition of masculinity. Amanda Lotz (2014) labels Archie "a

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<sup>62</sup> Michael Bryan, "The Great Inflation," *Federal Reserve History*, November 22, 2013, <http://www.federalreservehistory.org/Period/Essay/13>.

classic depiction of patriarchal masculinity, while his son-in-law [...] contrastingly embodied many of the emerging characteristics of the new man,” who challenges the old norms of masculinity.<sup>63</sup> Archie, as a patriarchal figure, defines his manliness by his ability to work and provide for his family, while for the majority of the series Mike rejects this understanding of masculinity by choosing to continue his education while he is financially supported by his father-in-law and wife (though in later seasons he does secure a job and Gloria becomes a stay-at-home mother). Archie’s masculinity is threatened not only by the recurring fear that he will lose his job, but also by the realization that his family, including two women, can take his place as providers. His respect for the self-made man and his disdain for those with inherited wealth illustrate his values, and his frequent jibes at Mike’s lack of employment indicate his distance from the new masculinity that was emerging in the 1970s.

*All in the Family* reintroduced the working class to the sitcom after a decade off middle-class dominance. Traditional sitcoms of the day avoided portraying life as it was for the majority of the country in favor of perpetuating the middle-class, consumerist lifestyle as the norm. In response, *All in the Family* provided a complex illustration of the working-class household that both reflected the economic condition of the country and spoke to old and new ideas of masculinity during a period of social change.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.



## Character

The uniqueness of the characters (particularly Archie and Edith) are essential to the conveyance of tone on *All in the Family*, largely due to the decisions of the actors. Carroll O'Connor communicates much of this outlandishness through his performance, with his loud delivery and often contorted facial expressions. Edith's character is similarly over-the-top, particularly with her high-pitched voice. In her dutifulness and subservience (with a few moments of temporary liberation) she is a version of the typical 1950s housewife, and she is desexualized in such a way that she remains far from the 1950s ideal. Deviations from Archie and Edith's typical mode of behavior are signifiers of textual importance. Edith's innocence and kind-heartedness makes her defeated reaction to the murder of her transvestite friend all the more powerful. Archie's usual self-serving attitude makes the disappearance of that attitude noteworthy.

At this point it is important to acknowledge the actors' contributions to the series; I choose to mention this here because Norman Lear credits many of Archie's mannerisms and malapropisms to Carroll O'Connor.<sup>64</sup> O'Connor's animated vocal delivery and contorted facial expressions separate Archie from his counterpoint on *Til Death Us Do Part*, Alf Garnett, who largely shouted his lines in the same tone with a straight face. While the central character in *Till Death Us Do Part* possessed an air of sardonic pessimism, Archie's physicality

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<sup>64</sup> Norman Lear, *Even This I Get to Experience* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 251.

and excitability add dimension to his character. For example, in the episode “Sammy’s Visit,” when Archie is on the phone convincing Sammy Davis Jr. to come to his home, he shouts his line, “You wanna do that, huh?” and yet his facial expression indicates his excitement over the prospect. O’Connor’s decision to portray Archie’s glee in much the same manner as his anger illustrates that this form of behavior is central to Archie’s responses to the world. The same performative techniques that would be considered aggressive and cruel in anger become endearing in another situation.

Basing the character of Archie on his own father, Lear sought to make the racism, sexism, and homophobia that he was exposed to throughout his life into something laughable, inane, and associated with people of low intellect. At the same time, Lear does not “other” Archie because of his bigotry, but instead uses Archie to present a complicated view of racism and its potency. For example, in the episode “Two’s a Crowd” Archie and Mike are accidentally locked in the storeroom of Archie’s recently-purchased bar. The two drink together and are huddled under a blanket to keep warm. They begin to have a drunken conversation in which Mike questions why Archie has racist labels for everyone. Archie explains that he called people what his father used to call them and did not know any other way of talking about them. When Mike asks Archie if he ever thought that the things his father said were wrong, Archie responds with a lengthy monologue about his understanding of fathers:

Don't tell me my father was wrong. Let me tell you something, a father who made you is wrong? A father, the breadwinner of the house there? The man who goes out and busts his butt to keep a roof over your head and clothes on your back, you call your father wrong? [...] Let me tell you something, you're supposed to love your father 'cause your father loves you. How can any man who loves you tell you anything that's wrong?

This monologue, tearfully delivered by O'Connor, reveals Archie's emotional connection to his patriarchal values as well as the source of his prejudiced view of the world. Archie's speech reveals a naiveté reminiscent of Edith's; despite his skepticism of everyone he encounters, Archie unconditionally trusted his father (in spite of the abuse that he reveals to have suffered at his hands). In this moment, the series draws connections between racism and patriarchal masculinity, arguing that issues such as prejudice are furthered by dominant patriarchal ideologies.

While criticizing and profoundly exploring racism, *All in the Family* also critiqued liberal attitudes as something more complicated than “the right way to think”. Though Mike is typically portrayed as the voice of reason (having been based on Lear), there are times in which his own logic is flawed or regressive; Lear has described the character as “full of passion absent the facts.”<sup>65</sup> For example, in “Edith Writes a Song” two black men break into the Bunker home with the intent to rob the place. When the Bunkers discover the men, Mike

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<sup>65</sup> Norman Lear, *Even This I Get to Experience* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 253.

attempts to talk rationally with the men, apologizing for Archie's typical faux pas.

The following exchange occurs:

Mike: You see, he doesn't understand. He associates the crime and the stealing with the fact that you guys are black and not with the underlying social causes.

Robber 1: Oh, then you must be a liberal. Well, man, we done found us a genuine liberal and an honest-to-God bigot. Now you can't beat that.

Mike: Come on, guys. Hold it. You're putting me on now. All I meant was that He doesn't understand what living in the ghetto can do to a man.

Robber 2: And you do?

Mike: Well, I'm studying it in my sociology class.

This interaction illustrates a moment in which Mike is made the buffoon as much as Archie. To these men, the term "liberal" is not associated with positive progressive attitudes, but rather the delusion that sympathy equates to true understanding or progress. Mike's whiteness, education, and privilege in comparison to the robbers are all elements of the white liberalism that takes strong positions on issues from which they are personally removed. From the robbers' perspective, Mike's liberal view of their situation is just as backward and damaging as Archie's racist assumptions. This interaction presupposes the overall attitude of the series' spinoff, *Maude*, which provides a harsh critique of liberal hypocrisy through its titular character. For example, in "The Double Standard," despite her desire to have an open-minded outlook on premarital sex,

Maude is unable to overcome the belief system instilled upon her and struggles in allowing Carol's boyfriend to stay in her room overnight.

Similarly, Mike's ideology is occasionally shown to be flawed in his attitudes toward women. In "Gloria Discovers Women's Lib," Mike explains to Gloria,

I believe in total equality between men and women. But that equality can only come about when the female partner is willing to confess her total inferiority...You, the woman come to me, the man and you admit that you're weaker, you're more needful, and you're inferior...the minute you admit to me that you're inferior, my maleness is satisfied, I can immediately elevate you to a level of complete equality.

Similarly, Mike reveals later in the series that he does not want to go to a woman doctor. His attitudes in the subject of women's rights and feminism resemble that of Archie's and reveal Mike's own liberal hypocrisy. The Bunkers do not live in a black and white world with left-wing heroes and right-wing villains; just as Lear complicates the idea of racism, so too does he complicate liberalism. This complex reading of liberalism serves to implicate the series' intended audience of young urban democrats. Complexity in characters like Mike and Maude encourage the audience to consider their own flaws and hypocrisies.

Through highly expressive but complex characters, *All in the Family* enabled a comparison between liberal and conservative points of view. While the liberal character of the series is written to be more logical and educated than

the conservative bigot at the center of the show, *All in the Family* also takes steps to critique liberalism through the contrast of education and experience. *Maude* takes this critique further, with the titular character often revealed to be a pontificating hypocrite who claims to be a radical liberal, but whose progressive views are revealed to be compromised by certain conservative understandings. Lear's series bring complexity to the cultural forum, presenting multiple views that are all flawed to varying degrees.

### **Narrative Structure**

Ironically, the series that is the most concerned with the outside world rarely leaves the Bunker domicile. As opposed to a series such as *I Love Lucy* that may have two related storylines occurring at once, or *The Dick Van Dyke Show* juggling multiple locations in one episode, *All in the Family* remains in the home with all of the characters engaging in the same narrative. Few episodes stray from the Bunker household, and therefore the scenes are permitted to be lengthy and continuous. If an episode features a different setting, that particular scene is typically sandwiched between two scenes in the Bunker home. There is no temporary escape to a B-plot to lessen the tension of a scene; the audience is forced to remain fixed on the subject at hand as the characters are. Lear explains that "The episodes were written and produced as plays, with people talking and behaving in real time, like a piece of theater. We rarely stopped for a time lapse."<sup>66</sup> The decision to keep episodes as temporally and spatially

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<sup>66</sup> Norman Lear, *Even This I Get to Experience* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 247.

contained as possible allowed the characters to develop debates and respond to arguments in an organic manner. For example, the episode “Gloria Discovers Women’s Lib” consists of two acts and a short tag before the end credits. Within the first ten minutes of the first act, each of the four main characters’ positions on feminism is addressed and the main conflict between Gloria and Mike begins. The act ends with Gloria leaving the house, infuriated by Mike’s theories of female inferiority. In the second act, Gloria returns and has a conversation with Edith in which Edith suggests that there is more to her life as a housewife than Gloria sees from her perspective. Gloria then has a conversation with Mike which devolves into a screaming match as the act ends. In the tag at the end of the episode, Mike and Gloria walk down the stairs, smiling and claiming they have settled their argument, with the implication that they have used sex as their solution. The episode dedicated its entirety to one issue and provided four points of view on the subject, but in the end provided no real resolution of the problem. As such, the episode is a literal example of the cultural forum, providing a model of discussion for the audience and encouraging them to continue the conversation after the episode has concluded.

The resistance of resolution is a common tactic in *All in the Family*, both structurally and within the stories. The fact that neither Archie nor Mike is able to convince the other to accept the opposing point of view frustrates the expectation of easy answers. While typically Archie is written to be wrong-minded, the fact that he has a counterargument to volley back to Mike’s assertions establishes the

show's insistence that there are no easy solutions to the problem of intolerance, and that the best thing that can be done is to continue the conversation. When episodes conclude without a "satisfying" ending, such as Gloria's decision not to report her sexual assault in "Gloria the Victim," the show is similarly positing the fact that many of these subjects do not have easy answers that can be presented in a half-hour television sitcom. As Todd Gitlin (1979) observes, "On the networks, *All in the Family* has been unusual in sometimes ending obliquely, softly or ironically, refusing to pretend to solve a social problem that cannot, in fact, be solved by the actions of the Bunkers alone."<sup>67</sup> These endings encourage the audience to contemplate how these unresolved fictional conflicts are similarly unresolved in the real world. Also, unlike previous sitcoms whose domestic issues are neatly resolved within the family, the issues that the Bunkers face are systemic and impossible to solve within the domestic sphere.

In addition to these unique narrative elements within the episodes, *All in the Family* also experimented with multiple-episode story arcs. The first appearance of a two-part episode occurs in the ninth and tenth episodes of season three, "Flashback: Mike and Gloria's Wedding." Other Lear series had similar two-part storylines, such as "Maude's Dilemma" (in which Maude is considering abortion) and "Walter's Problem" (which deals with Walter's alcoholism). However, the most interesting use of multi-episode narrative arcs occurs in seasons five and seven of *All in the Family*. The opening four episodes

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<sup>67</sup> Todd Gitlin, "Prime Time Ideology: The Hegemonic Process in Television Entertainment," *Social Problems* 26, no. 3 (1979): 262.



of season five are entitled “The Bunkers and Inflation,” wherein Archie’s union goes on strike. The episodes examine the financial hardships of the Bunkers as Archie is out of work, while the rest of the Bunker family (including Edith and Mike) bring extra money into the house by getting jobs. Even more complexly, season seven opens with three consecutive multi-episode stories: the three-part “Archie’s Brief Encounter,” the two-part “The Unemployment Story,” and the two-part “Archie’s Operation.” The latter two sets of story arcs overlap, with the “Archie’s Operation” storyline commencing at the end of “The Unemployment Story.” In this way, *All in the Family* resisted the half-hour time constraint, while also experimenting with a form of serial narrative. Multi-part episodes that dealt with economic hardship like “The Unemployment Story” and “The Bunkers and Inflation” benefitted from the seriality of the storytelling because such issues could only properly be commented upon over an extended period of time. Unlike traditional sitcoms that presented self-contained stories that did not require week-to-week viewership, *All in the Family* used the multi-episode story arc to reward their faithful audience and present a more complex viewing experience.

The experimentation with narrative within and among episodes of *All in the Family* brings both a challenge and a reward to the sitcom audience. As Mintz described, the sitcom was understood to be a self-contained half hour episode with a simple resolution that led to a happy ending. Thus, *All in the Family* challenged the expectations of the sitcom with its lengthy scenes, lack of closure, and multi-part episodes. For the loyal fans of the series, the continuation of

episodes from week to week rewarded their continued viewership of the series by promising more of the story the next week. With these narrative experiments, *All in the Family* both subverted expectations and created new ones.

## **Tone**

### *Distanciation*

While *All in the Family* is labeled “relevant” because of the topical nature of the program, I argue that the label should also refer to the show’s tone. Though certainly a comedy series with plenty of laughs, *All in the Family* by no means lacked gravitas. Tragedy, which had never before befallen sitcom families prior (at least while they were onscreen) was a frequent visitor to the Bunker household. From Gloria and Edith’s near-rapes to Gloria’s miscarriage to Edith’s transvestite friend being beaten to death in the street, the Bunkers faced moments that were personal to the characters and too serious to be truly comedic. These episodes, featuring tragic narratives infused with jokes, often ended in an alienating way, utilizing Brechtian distanciation. According to Jeremy G. Butler (2004),

Brecht argues that conventional dramatic theater narcotizes the spectator. [...] Brecht contends instead that we should be confronted, alienated. His is a Marxist perspective that believes that the theater should be used to point out social ills and prompt spectators to take action about them.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Jeremy G. Butler, *Television: Critical Methods and Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 78.

Just as Brecht used distancing to address social ills, so too did *All in the Family* employ tactics of alienation to address real-world concerns. Often, this alienation was achieved by denying the audience the closure of a final laugh. To Lear, such emotional complexity was an essential element of meaningful comedy; “laughter lacks depth if it isn’t involved with other emotions. An audience is entertained when it’s involved to the point of laughter *or* tears – ideally, both.”<sup>69</sup> The Emmy nominations for writing that the show garnered are indicative of the show’s success in conveying these tones. In 1978, the series was nominated for Outstanding Writing for three episodes: “Edith’s 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday,” wherein Edith is almost raped and then must decide whether or not to report it; “Edith’s Crisis of Faith,” wherein Edith loses her faith after her transvestite friend is beaten to death; and “Cousin Liz,” which won the Emmy, and involved Edith discovering after her cousin’s death that she was a lesbian.<sup>70</sup> It is interesting to note that all three of these episodes center on Edith; her naiveté often served as a catalyst for both comedic and dramatic moments throughout the series.

The series did not limit interesting tonal shifts to the most controversial subjects on the series; indeed, many shocking turns from the comedic to the dramatic occur in the least likely of storylines. For example, in the season six episode “Archie Finds a Friend,” Archie befriends a Jewish man, mainly in an attempt to “get rich quick” by investing in his invention. The episode takes a turn

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<sup>69</sup> Norman Lear, *Even This I Get to Experience*. (New York: Penguin, 2014), 266.

<sup>70</sup> “Nominees/Winners,” *Television Academy*, <http://www.emmys.com/awards/nominees-winners/1978>.

when the man suddenly becomes ill and dies on the Bunkers' couch while Archie is sitting with him. The final three minutes of the episode feature a quiet moment between Archie and Edith on the front porch as they reflect on the situation. The pacing of the scene is slow, with several silences employed throughout the sequence. There are no jokes; Archie begins by deflecting attention to the porch itself and how it should be repaired, and Edith encourages a discussion about the dead man. The audience remains silent until the final applause.

The tonal shifts did not necessarily affect the narrative in such a grand way. In season two's "The Insurance Is Cancelled" Archie is faced with having his insurance cancelled while also having to decide which employee he must fire. Edith's nephew, the bumbling insurance salesman, gives an elaborate explanation to Archie as to why the cancellation has occurred. Archie, not wanting to admit that race played a part in his decision, attempts (unsuccessfully) to use the same terminology to explain to Emmanuel, his Puerto Rican employee, that he has been fired:

Archie: ...you gotta believe me, see. I'd like to do something for you, but I can't. Listen. I'm only a little man, see? I'm only a little man, see? These decisions are made by-by the big men. Upstairs. You know what I mean? It's the system, Emmanuel. See, it's the way the system operates.

Emmanuel: System?... Well, where do I go to talk to this system?

Archie: Well, Emmanuel, you can't talk to the system. I mean, it ain't a person. It's a— it's — (*Archie drops the act, and speaks with sincerity*) I

don't know what it is. See? All I know is that I'd like to help you, but– but I can't, Emmanuel, and I'm really very sorry.

This is a small, somber moment in one of the less hot-button episodes of the series, and yet its inclusion makes such tonal shifts a convention of the series. The more extreme examples of such tonal shifts are not gimmicks, but rather a heightened presentation of the world that always exists in *All in the Family*.

The most striking tonal shifts in the series are those that occur at the end of an episode. One of the most notable examples of this technique occurs in the episode “Archie Is Branded.” In the episode, Paul, a member of a Jewish vigilante group comes to the Bunkers’ home after a swastika has been painted on their door. After debating with Mike about the justification of vigilante violence, the man leaves. A few moments later, an explosion is heard, and the family rushes to the door and open it. The camera switches to a view of the family looking outside the door. The camera slowly moves to a close-up of Archie’s face as he says, “Holy gee. That’s Paul. They blew him up in his car.” The episode fades out in silence and ends at this moment, without the usual tag at the end and without the music accompanying the ending credits. This episode is one of the most extreme examples of *All in the Family*’s occasional denial of closure for the audience. While traditionally sitcoms tend to ease the tension of the most trivial situations with a laugh, this socially relevant series does not merely settle for addressing controversial topics. Alienating techniques such as this remind the audience that while they are viewing a sitcom, the “real-world”

issues of the series are our own, and they cannot be fixed with a punch line. In this way, the series both implicates its audience and calls it to action. Through *All in the Family's* tonal variations and Brechtian distancing techniques, the series frequently reminds the audience both of the artificiality of a television series and the reality of the issues presented.

### *Presentation Binaries*

Just as *All in the Family* utilized tonal shifts regularly as a convention, so too did the series normalize the techniques by which such tones were conveyed. Dialogue and silence are both utilized to convey both comedic and serious moments, making the shift of tones, while shocking, in keeping with the norms of the series.

*All in the Family* is inherently a verbal show, with its emphasis upon inter-generational arguments. The series utilizes language for comedic effect in several ways. The frequent overlapping and interrupting dialogue among characters creates an absurd verbal chaos. Edith's role as a long-form storyteller involves lengthy prattling monologues (occasionally accompanied by the silent physical comedy of Archie miming a suicide as a forced audience member). Indeed, one of Archie's main character traits is his abuse of the English language. Similarly, dialogue and monologue are used to convey more dramatic moments. For example, in the season seven episode "The Draft Dodger," Archie's usually witty and sardonic observations of the world are replaced with a screamed monologue in anger as he learns that Mike's dinner guest moved to

Canada to avoid the draft. His entire speech contains one joke, but the rest of his tirade conveys a genuine anger that rarely is presented from the character. Similarly, both Archie in “Two’s a Crowd” and Maude in “Maude Bares Her Soul” (*Maude*) have lengthy monologues in which they reveal to another person their complicated relationships with their respective fathers.

Silence, too, heightens both comedy and drama. For example, the episode “Oh, My Aching Back” features a dinner scene in which no one speaks for one minute and forty-two seconds. Rather, the characters use physicality for humorous effect and to comment on character. The sequence begins with everyone chaotically grabbing dishes of food to add to their plates at the same time. The choreographed way in which they move continuously and yet never reach for the same item as another character implies that such chaos is commonplace at a Bunker dinner. Archie then proceeds to add generous amounts of ketchup to his meal, and spitefully adds more at the disapproving glare of Edith. Mike and Gloria eat a carrot stick *Lady and the Tramp* style as Archie looks on, disgusted. Edith then salts her food, pausing to pour some salt in her hand and throw it over her shoulder as Archie watches judgmentally. Mike begins humming and Archie glares, irritated. Mike catches Archie’s eye and quickly finishes humming his tune. In this two-minute sequence, characters and their relationships with each other are illustrated without the use of dialogue. These scenes normalize the use of silence as a comedic element, and highlights physicality as an essential element of the Bunkers’ mode of expression. Just as

silent comedy is utilized as means of self-expression, so too are the silent dramatic moments in the series. The silence that accompanies the alienating moments, such as the silent exchange between Archie and Edith after the news of Beverly's murder in "Edith's Crisis of Faith," remains in keeping with the character writing throughout the series.

Just as the polarized characters of Archie and Mike allowed a complex look at conservatism and liberalism, the presentational polarizations allow social issues to be presented with emotional complexity. The use of both silence and sound in comedic and tragic moments in the series creates a dramatic cohesion. While unexpected, the tragic moments of silence or shouting are accepted because these tactics are regularly utilized throughout the series.

## **CONCLUSION**

*All in the Family's* various methods of resisting the traditional forms of sitcom writing challenged both the sitcom itself and its audience. By representing a working-class family engaging in real-world issues, Norman Lear made visible to a class of people who made up the majority of the viewing audience, but had been excluded from the sitcom landscape throughout previous decades. The theatrical characters, contained narrative structure, and tonal shifts brought an experience to the television sitcom that simultaneously rewarded, challenged, and implicated its viewers. Lear's experimentation with narrative seriality and emotional complexity in the sitcom revolutionized the genre (at least temporarily).



## CHAPTER 3: THOSE WERE THE DAYS...WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

### Introduction

Nearly forty years after *All in the Family* shocked President Nixon with the introduction of a homosexual character, *Modern Family* (ABC) presented a gay couple as two of the principle characters of the series. Following in the footsteps of such series as *Sanford and Son*, *The Jeffersons*, and *Good Times*, *Black-ish* (also currently airing on ABC) examines issues of racial identity within an upper middle-class African-American family. Thirty-seven years after the transvestite Beverly LaSalle was beaten to death in *All in the Family*, Amazon released *Transparent*, a series centered on a transgender woman and her family's experience with the transition.

After a period of relatively mild sitcoms that embraced heteronormative ideologies from the 1980s to the 2000s, the past decade's broadcast networks, cable channels, and streaming services have taken steps (some limited and some more radical) to increase the representation of diversity on television. The year 2014 alone saw the premiere of such series as *Black-ish* (ABC), *Transparent* (Amazon), *Jane the Virgin* (the CW), and *Cristela* (ABC). However, the stylistic decisions implemented on such series must be critiqued. As the previous two chapters have shown, *All in the Family's* particular narrative and stylistic choices not only presented social issues, but also provided an in-depth exploration of such issues and encouraged participation in the cultural forum. The following chapter will examine the legacy of 1970s social relevancy,

exploring representations of class and race on modern comedies in relation to their presentations in the 1970s.

When looking at the shifts in the subject matter and style of socially relevant comedies throughout the years, it is necessary to set up a framework from both a genre studies and a cultural studies perspective. Both Jane Feuer (1992) and Jason Mittell (2004) question whether genre theory is an appropriate method of analysis of television, given the complications of multiple texts, the influence of schedule flow, and technological innovation.<sup>71</sup> <sup>72</sup> Mittell argued that genre is created by audience and industry, rather than by elements within the text itself. Therefore, the formal analysis of texts that is so common in genre studies does not teach us what is important about genre.<sup>73</sup> Mittell claims that genre's meaning is created through discourse surrounding the texts. Genre is ever-evolving, and audience reactions to programs change depending on their cultural and temporal contexts. Therefore, he believes that it is necessary to examine specific cultures' reactions to texts at specific points in time rather than the texts themselves.<sup>74</sup> As with the previous chapters, this chapter will be a negotiation between the formal analysis of traditional genre study and Mittell's emphasis on cultural reaction to texts. Using this method, I will examine the evolution of the socially relevant sitcom.

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<sup>71</sup> Jane Feuer, "Genre Study and Television," in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, ed. Robert C. Allen (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 1992), 139–159.

<sup>72</sup> Jason Mittell, "Television Genres as Cultural Categories," in *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 1–28.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

Jane Feuer takes focuses on television comedy as she examines the aesthetic, ritual, and ideological approaches of genre theory to sitcoms. Feuer notes commonalities in the series she has examined, including the half-hour format, a "problem of the week" that is resolved by the end of the episode.<sup>75</sup> Feuer also acknowledges how comedy itself has changed as a genre. She notes Grote's observation that television comedy is nearly the opposite of what it was at the time of Greek "new comedy" rather than challenging authority and functioning as a progressive force of social change, the sitcom merely perpetuates the dominant ideology, ensuring that the status quo remains in place.<sup>76</sup> Feuer's argument will be particularly applicable to my examinations of various "socially relevant sitcoms" and the degree to which they attempt to change television and the world.

While genres are beneficial to the creation and understanding of television, they can also be a hindrance to creativity and audience readings. Genre expectations allow audiences to estimate their interest in a television program before viewing. In this way, the audience plays an integral role in the development of the entertainment industry. Audience understandings of genre guide creators' artistic decisions, and a clear line can be drawn through production, distribution, and reception that is connected with these genre conventions. In a television comedy, advertisers, networks, and audiences have

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<sup>75</sup> Jane Feuer, "Genre Study and Television," in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, ed. Robert C. Allen (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 1992), 139–159.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

a clear idea of what elements should or should not be present, and creators are confined within conventions of the genre; expectations not being met risk a disappointed audience, low ratings, and cancellation. For audiences, there is a comfort and pleasure associated with the recognition of familiar genre elements, and the positive response from the critical community and general audiences encourages creators to continue make more of the same. Thus, the pleasures associated with the successful series *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004) are recognized and promoted in series like *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS, 2005–2014) and *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007–present). This is especially true on network television, with cable series having more freedom in terms of format and content.

In the 1980s, Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch (1983) introduced their idea of television as a “cultural forum” in which audiences were encouraged to participate in discourse about social issues.<sup>77</sup> However, as television evolved and more viewing options became available, Newcomb adjusted his claims (2005), stating that television's role has changed from cultural forum to wholesale supplier;<sup>78</sup> nonetheless, the medium continues to raise new questions for audiences even if these audiences are fragmented and create their own viewing experiences. This chapter will examine the effect of the shift from “cultural forum” to “wholesale supplier” and whether or not modern television shows are able to address social issues in a way that fosters discussion beyond the text.

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<sup>77</sup> Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, “Television as a Cultural Forum,” in *Television: The Critical View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 561–73.

<sup>78</sup> Horace Newcomb, “Studying Television: Same Questions, Different Contexts,” *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 1 (2005): 107–111.

### The Shift

In *Television: Critical Methods and Applications* (2004) Jeremy G. Butler discusses the various ways that style is utilized in television and the motivations behind such decisions. Many of his observations can be applied to the shifts in the television comedy landscape since the turn of the century. The notable trend of single-camera sitcoms that exclude a live studio audience or laugh track from a series' sound are of particular interest here. Butler reminds us that, apart from artistic reasons, the decision to choose one mode of presentation over the other is largely economic, with both modes having their own benefits.<sup>79</sup> While the traditional multiple-camera series of the twentieth century decreases the necessity for multiple takes and allows episodes to be shot in sequence, the now-popular single-camera technique for comedies allows certain locations to be shot at one time and gives the director more specific control over the shots.<sup>80</sup>

Another important consideration is that of product differentiation and standards of quality.<sup>81</sup> While there are still network sitcoms that utilize the classic multiple-camera style (such as *Mom* and *The Big Bang Theory* on CBS), there is an increasing association between "quality" sitcoms and the single camera. The theatrical presentation of the multiple-camera sitcom and the accompanying sounds of laughter can seem antiquated, cheap, and manipulative. While network sitcoms are split between single and multiple camera modes of

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<sup>79</sup> Jeremy G. Butler, *Television: Critical Methods and Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 213.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

presentation, cable and streaming series are virtually all produced in the single-camera mode.<sup>82</sup> The industry recognizes this shift in attitude toward multiple-camera sitcoms, as is evidenced by the fact that there has not been more than one multiple-camera Emmy nominee per year for Outstanding Comedy Series since 2005, and there have been no multiple-camera nominees at all since 2011.

Butler also discusses the growing trend in the sitcom of addressing the audience. While many twentieth-century sitcoms avoided breaking the fourth wall, programs like *Malcolm in the Middle*, *It's Garry Shandling's Show*, *How I Met Your Mother* and *The Wonder Years* spoke directly to audience in character.<sup>83</sup> More recently, the documentary-confessional style of has come into popularity on shows such as *The Office* and *Modern Family*. Butler labels this as an ambiguous address.<sup>84</sup> Series like *Black-ish* and *Louie* often bookend the episode narratives with general commentary, the former in an editorial-style montage and the latter with a short standup comedy routine. These various audience addresses aim, in one form or another, to break down the barrier between audience and text.

Sitcoms have also employed more elaborate editing, narrative structure, and pacing in comparison to the 1970s. As discussed in Chapter 2, *All in the Family* often followed a play-like structure, with a large portion of the episodes taking place in the Bunker home in "real time." This structure allowed for deep

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<sup>82</sup> Notable exceptions include the animated series *Life with Louie* (HBO, 1994–1998) and the multi-camera sitcom *It's Garry Shandling's Show* (Showtime, 1986–1990)

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

discussion of the issues the show chose to handle. As time has passed and the television landscape has embraced different styles and modes of storytelling, the amount of location and time jumping in sitcoms has significantly increased. Consequently, sitcoms have altered the ways in which they address their audiences, with the earlier socially relevant sitcoms of the 1970s aiming for a theatrical presentation and more recent efforts utilizing more specifically televisual techniques like voiceover and flashback editing. John Caldwell (1995) describes “televisuality” in terms of “excessive style and visual exhibitionism,” which functions to hail audiences and keep them from changing the channel.<sup>85</sup> The stylistic decisions of many modern sitcoms, including the shaking of the handheld camera, fast-paced editing, and graphics are examples of such televisuality that problematically prioritizes audience retention over developed reflection of important social issues.

The use of music is another notable shift from its function in the 1970s. While *All in the Family* and *Maude* rarely utilized extra-diegetic music, modern sitcoms have a variety of uses for music. Many continue to use the classic transitional music that re-introduces the program from a commercial break or bridges one scene to another. A more recent use of music in television comedy has been to underscore the mood of a particular scene. Conversely, many “mockumentary” series like *The Office*, *Modern Family*, and *Parks and Recreation* reject the use of music to underscore the action, both to emulate the

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<sup>85</sup> John Thornton Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 352.

documentary style and to increase the awkwardness of a situation.<sup>86</sup> This shift in the use of sound in the sitcom indicates a shift in the “outer form” of the television sitcom, while also indicating a change in the function of comedy and the creation of humor.

The pacing of the writing, editing, and performance of many modern sitcoms influences the potential for tonal variation on these series. As previously discussed, *All in the Family's* particular mode of writing allowed the development of various tones that made a more complex viewing experience for the audience. The typical modern sitcom has more rapid-fire dialogue and more elaborate editing. For example, series like *How I Met Your Mother* and *Arrested Development* intercut scene with flashbacks for comedic effect, and mockumentary series like *The Office* and *Modern Family* cut to interview segments to comment on the narrative. The shakiness of the handheld camera that is often used in the single-camera sitcom indicates restlessness that differs from the focus of the comedies of Norman Lear. At the same time, the hand-held camera provides a sense of authenticity in its refusal to comply to the static, neatly composed shots of the traditional sitcom. This camerawork is akin to the *mise-en-scene* of *All in the Family* in its intention. However, while 1970s relevancy series were willing to experiment with shocking and unresolved issues, modern sitcoms nearly always revert to the pre-relevancy tendency to end on a

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<sup>86</sup> Jeremy G. Butler, *Television: Critical Methods and Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 330.



happy, humorous note, giving in to the standard of comfort that audiences have become used to in the genre of the television comedy.

## **Diversity in Relevancy**

### *Working-Class Representations*

The popularity of the working-class sitcom began to wane in the latter half of the 1970s, as CBS's domination of socially relevant comedy gave way to ABC's family-friendly series such as *Happy Days*, *Laverne and Shirley*, two sitcoms set in the pre-civil rights era of the 1950s. As the 1980s began, nostalgic, escapist sitcoms declined as the middle-class nuclear family was resurrected. The family-friendly trend continued throughout the 1980s with abundant series featuring affluent families such as *The Cosby Show*, *Full House*, and *Family Ties*. However, in the late 1980s working-class representation on television reappeared with two long-running domestic sitcoms: *Married...With Children* (FOX, 1987–1997) and *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988–1997). Just as *All in the Family* had resisted the classy, polished look of the sitcoms that preceded it, these two series provided an alternative to the “perfect family” sitcoms of the 1980s and 1990s.

*Married...With Children* immediately parodies the classical sitcom formula in its opening title sequence. The sequence opens with a location shot of a fountain in Chicago and aerial shots of the city as Frank Sinatra's “Love and

Marriage” plays on the soundtrack. The text “Married” appears glistening in blue, and then animated green sludge drips down to cover it. “With Children” appears as a yellow package stamp with an accompanying metallic thud sound effect. As the song continues, an establishing shot of the Bundy house fades in – a modestly-sized mud-colored house with paint chipping over the garage. The shot fades to the interior of the house, and echoes of *All in the Family* are immediately apparent. The set, while more cluttered than the Bunker home, is similarly on a soundstage that is artificially lit. However, rather than employing *All in the Family*’s consistent high-key lighting, the *Married...With Children* set has a glass door in the background that allows the night lighting to provide shadows, giving the set a dreary essence. The couch that is placed in the center of the set facing the audience is a familiar and unflattering orange, and the brick wall and off-white wall paper of the background contribute to the visual displeasure of the mise-en-scene.

The introduction to the characters in the opening credits sequence immediately sets the series apart from its contemporaries. While many 1980s sitcoms participated in the trend of introducing characters with a smile and an acknowledgement of the camera, *Married...With Children* presents the actors interacting in character. Al Bundy, the head of the family, sits staring ahead as he wordlessly hands out his money to his children, wife, and the family dog without acknowledging any of them. While it could be assumed that Al is watching television and his preoccupation is keeping him from acknowledging the

family, his attention extending beyond the proscenium of the stage and the lack of diegetic sound give the impression of a defeated man staring into space in depression. At the end of this skit, the stamp sound interrupts the Sinatra music, as green slime drips over the credits of the executive producers.

The tone of the series matches its sardonic introduction. While the typical domestic sitcom of the 1980s featured a family who was able to solve their minor inconveniences within half an hour through their love and support of one another, *Married...With Children* introduced characters that were abrasively cruel to one another. *The Honeymooners* introduced the screaming argument to the sitcom, and *All in the Family* developed its potential with the development of meaningful arguments. *Married...With Children* changed the tone of the dysfunctional family, bringing sardonic disdain to the sitcom at a time when it seemed that family togetherness could solve any and all problems.

An example of the show's resistance against the format of TGIF (ABC's Friday night lineup of family-friendly programming with series such as *Full House* and *Family Matters*) is the episode "We'll Follow the Sun." The episode opens with Peg and Al hurling quick insults at each other as if there were in a vulgar screwball comedy. Peg's taste is coded as low-brow throughout the episode as she obsesses over the Fall Preview edition of *TV Guide*, enthusiastically reading the outlandish premises for fictional new series such as "*Nun of This*, about a nun who's had enough." Al decides that on Labor Day the family will go on a vacation to see America, which Al describes as "where people pretend they want

to go when they can't afford to go someplace good." The family spends the rest of the episode in a static traffic jam feet from their house, during which time the entire family engages in a brawl with a family in a neighboring car. The episode concludes with Al standing on his car, professing his hatred of Labor Day and family as onlookers honk their horns in approval. This episode illustrates the shared burden of the working class in emulating the vacations that the ideal sitcom family frequently takes. This episode prefigures a similar episode of *Malcolm in the Middle* that features the family stuck in a traffic jam on their vacation.

*Married...With Children* also engages in humor that would be considered too crude for the middle-class family comedy. For example, in "We'll Follow the Sun" Peggy passes by a bouncing car in the traffic jam (which presumably contains people engaged in sexual activity). Peg leans against the car and says "Boy, that takes me back!" The rough insults that the family members direct at each other and the vulgar humor in the writing departed radically from what was being presented in the likes of *Growing Pains*. Through this deviation in sitcom writing, *Married...With Children* contested the dominant ideology of the family sitcom at the time.

*Roseanne* similarly presents a working-class family as something more complexly handled than its contemporaries. Based on the standup comedy of Roseanne Barr, the series became popular for its irreverent humor and mordant picture of family life. The series features two parents who struggle financially,

with Dan (John Goodman) as a contractor who does not have a steady job and Roseanne (Barr) as the main breadwinner who has various menial jobs throughout the series that are often underpaid and demanding. The series depicts the obstacles faced by parents who are simultaneously working and struggling to raise their children, absent the conveniences and leisure time that the more affluent television families like the Huxtables have. In addition to being two of the only working class representations in the domestic sitcom of the 1980s, both this series and *Married...With Children* presented protagonists who defied the sitcom standards of beauty, with Al Bundy's unkempt hair and clothes and receding hairline, Peg Bundy's big hair and tacky clothing, and Roseanne and Dan's larger bodies. As these series and *All in the Family* illustrated, the working-class sitcom provides a space for variation of body-types and fashions that traditional sitcoms avoid.

*Roseanne* also followed in the footsteps of 1970s relevancy sitcoms like *All in the Family* by addressing controversial issues and presenting variations of tone. Issues such as women's rights, homosexuality, and domestic abuse were addressed regularly on the series. While not addressing specific cultural references as *All in the Family* and *Maude* did, the issues the characters were forced to face in the domestic sphere were serious, socially relevant concerns that were not being addressed elsewhere in the sitcom landscape.

*Roseanne* also experimented with tonal shifts throughout the series. For example, the episode "Lies My Father Told Me" addresses mental illness,

infidelity, and alcoholism simultaneously. The episode opens with Roseanne revealing to the children that Dan's mother was admitted to a mental hospital. Throughout the episode Dan drinks and blames his father for driving his mother insane by being unfaithful in their marriage. Dan arrives intoxicated at his father's house, where he tells his father's new wife and their teenage son to leave before he ruins them. In his drunken anger, he breaks several objects in the house before Roseanne comes to bring him home. The next day, Dan's sister reveals that his father was never unfaithful, but that his mother had been suffering from mental illness since Dan was a child, and in order to keep it hidden from him, Dan's father claimed to have been the cause of her breakdown. Dan weeps in Roseanne's arms and later makes peace with his father. Like "Maude Bares Her Soul," there are very few laughs heard throughout the episode. The series takes a serious and close look at mental illness as something that can not necessarily be attributed to one's environment. At the same time, it subtly provides a critique of gender roles within the family. Dan's mother's illness is hidden from him because (according to Roseanne) "For a kid it's easier to have a bastard for a father than a crazy person for a mother." Dan's family attempted to preserve the ideal mother, while sacrificing his relationship with his father. In this and similar episodes, *Roseanne* commented on the understandings of family that are perpetuated by society, while presenting an alternative, more complex family in the Conners.

Another long-running working-class sitcom was *Malcolm in the Middle*,

which aired on FOX from 2000–2006. A significant departure from its 1980s predecessors, *Malcolm in the Middle* was a single-camera sitcom that did not employ the use of a laugh track. The series' protagonist was the pre-teen genius Malcolm, whose life was followed up to his graduation from high school. The choice to center the series on the life of a child simultaneously acknowledged the financial pressures placed on the parents while also giving insight into the emotional experience of a child in a working-class family. Malcolm often faces embarrassment due to his family's financial circumstance. For example, in "Lois vs. Evil" (1.9), Lois is fired from her job, and the family struggles to make ends meet. Malcolm accidentally lets it slip to his school crush that his family is poor, and she organizes a food drive to support the family, which humiliates Malcolm. In other episodes, Malcolm is often excluded from experiences that are common to his peers (many of whom are from upper-class families). These moments in the series provide a previously-unseen dimension to the working-class sitcom.

The series finale of *Malcolm in the Middle* provides the audience with a strong message about the working-class experience. Malcolm's parents forbid him to take a high-paying position right out of high school and push him to attend Harvard (with no financial assistance), expecting him to eventually become the President of the United States. Here, Lois explains her reasoning for this decision to Malcolm:

What [matters] is you'll be the only person in that position who will ever give a crap about people like us. We've been getting the short end of the

stick for thousands of years...You know what it's like to be poor, and you know what it's like to work hard. Now you're going to learn what it's like to sweep floors and bust your ass and accomplish twice as much as all the kids around you. And it won't mean anything because they will still look down on you.

Interestingly, during Malcolm's graduation ceremony, the announcer's microphone experiences feedback, preventing the audience from ever learning the family's last name. The decision to keep the family name unknown both made the working-class experience a more universal one, and further emphasizes Lois' argument that no one "gives a crap" about the working-class. Lois' speech plainly states the mission statement of the series from its beginning. *Malcolm in the Middle* refused to accept the "American Dream" myth as truth. With two hard-working parents and a genius for a son, the family was never given the opportunity to climb the social ladder.

Since the end of *Malcolm in the Middle* it has been more difficult to find working-class representation in the sitcom. With an increased emphasis on people's relationship to technology and pop culture, the television landscape tends to represent groups of people who have the means to interact with these on a regular basis.

### *Ethnic Representation*

The sitcoms of Norman Lear such as *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times* were milestones in the representations of African Americans on television,



depicting the issues that working-class black families faced. Currently, there are some sitcoms on network television that explore diversity such as *Fresh Off the Boat* (ABC), *The Mindy Project* (FOX), and *Jane the Virgin* (The CW). On Netflix, Aziz Ansari's *Master of None* features an Indian-American man and his group of ethnically and sexually diverse friends who deal with issues of identity and adulthood. While these series all address issues of race to varying degrees, comedy series that regularly reference specific cultural events to make arguments about race are few and far between.

Of the comedy series currently airing that address race, *Black-ish* (ABC) directly connects to the socially relevant sitcoms of the 1970s, both in terms of content and style, while at the same time negotiating these elements with more modern forms of television comedy. In fact, series creator Kenya Barris directly stated the influence of 1970s relevancy comedy in his work:

I consider myself a disciple of Norman Lear...And one of the things he did was topic-driven humor. In our second year, I want people to know we're not just a family show. We're a family show that deals with topics with your kids. And that's driven by exposing your kids to the world, and giving your explanation.<sup>87</sup>

Here, Barris reveals the intent to combine the narrative styles of the likes of *All in the Family* and *Malcolm in the Middle*. While children were a rare presence on the majority of Lear's series, *Black-ish* aimed to take the socially conscious form

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<sup>87</sup> Debra Birnbaum, "Black-ish' Premiere Tackles N-Word Controversy Head-On," *Variety* 320, no. 10 (2015): 16.

of discourse from the 1970s and apply it to the traditional nuclear family – with parents, children, and grandparents all involved and vocal.

Visually, *Black-ish* could not be further from a Norman Lear sitcom. It is a single-camera series with no laugh track. The set provides visual pleasure of color, light, and detailed decoration. The soundtrack provides extradiagetic music to bridge one scene to the next. Scene are typically short and locations often vary. Despite these stylistic differences, however, the manner in which the series handles controversial subjects reflects the socially relevant sitcoms of the 1970s.

The issue of class is an important consideration when examining the series. Herman Gray (1989) suggests in his discussion of black representation on television that

The idealized representations of the family presented in [*The Cosby Show*] maintain the hope and possibility of a stable and rewarding family life. At the same time, this idealization displaces (but does not eliminate) possibilities for critical examination of the social roots of crisis in the American family.<sup>88</sup>

*Black-ish* is a variation of *The Cosby Show*, presenting the affluent African-American family as not idealized, but rather in a state of questioned identity. Rather than avoiding racial discourse as *The Cosby Show* did, *Black-ish* questions the association between wealth and assimilation. *Black-ish* is also

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<sup>88</sup> Herman Gray, "Television, Black Americans, and the American Dream," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 6, no. 1 (1989), 385.

issue oriented like *All in the Family*. Rather than always splitting attention among different storylines, *Black-ish* occasionally focuses on an in-depth discussion of the subject at hand in which all characters have a voice. The family at the center of the series is inter-generational, with the protagonist, his wife, his parents, and his children all having varying degrees of opinion on the subject at hand.

The generational divide between Dre and his parents can be compared to that between Lamont and Fred on *Sanford and Son*. In both series, father and son have different visions of what “blackness” means. In the pilot episode of the series, for example, Dre attempts to give his son an African rite of passage ceremony on his birthday, afraid that the family is losing its heritage and becoming “too white.” Dre’s father responds to Dre’s ceremony incredulously: “This ain’t our culture. We’re black, not African. Africans don’t even like us.” This echoes a similar exchange between Lamont and Fred in *Sanford and Son* in the episode “Lamont Goes African” (2,17), in which Lamont reinvents himself by adopting African clothes and lifestyle. Fred’s response is similar to Dre’s father’s as Lamont begins redecorating the house with African artifacts:

Lamont: A man's home is supposed to reflect his culture.

Fred: Well, if you want to reflect *my* culture, put up a picture of Billy Eckstine and Joe Louis.

Similarly, when Lamont refers to Sanford as a “slave name,” Fred begins to recount the generations who have had the name Sanford. He refers to his family “roots” being in Missouri. The references to an African-American singer

and an African-American boxer as Fred's "culture" indicate that his understanding of "blackness" differs significantly from Lamont's. In both *Sanford and Son* and *Black-ish*, while the older generations embrace the cultural significance of African-Americans in the United States, the younger generations dismiss these elements of black culture as their true identity. These "identity crisis" episodes are just one example of how both series use generational difference to explore multiple understandings of race.

Another similarity between *Black-ish* and *Sanford and Son* is the role of white characters as the fools who are socially awkward around their black peers and illustrate a cultural divide between the two races. In *Sanford and Son*, this "white fool" was usually a policeman, who would alternate between overly verbose explanations in police jargon and malapropisms of black slang. This police officer had a black partner who would both correct his mistakes and translate his long-winded dialogue to Fred and Lamont. In *Black-ish*, the white characters have a similar misunderstanding of appropriateness in black culture. For example, in the episode "The Word" (2.1) several black characters must explain to peers and coworkers who is allowed to use "the n-word." This particular use of white characters allows for the necessary explanation of black culture to the mass audience.

*Black-ish* embraces the progressive aspects of *Sanford and Son* while rejecting those that have been considered problematic. Donald Bogle (2001) wrote that *Sanford and Son* "frequently acknowledged racism, even when it didn't

challenge it.”<sup>89</sup> Deviating from *All in the Family*’s tendency to have extended arguments about race, “*Sanford and Son* never paused long enough to deliver stinging covert comments about racism and its effects. [...] Had they expressed real anger about that, the series would have gone in a different and provocative direction.”<sup>90</sup> *Black-ish* embody the potential that was seen in *Sanford and Son*. With episodes like “The N Word” and “Hope” that showcase frustration over persistent racism in America, the series reveals what *Sanford and Son* could have accomplished had it looked beyond its own junkyard.

Important to the cultural significance of *Black-ish* is the manner in which controversial issues are presented. Each episode of *Black-ish* begins with a voiceover monologue performed by Dre that serves to set up the theme of the episode. Rather than making this set-up specific to the story world, these introductions discuss issues as they generally are presented and constructed in the world. For example, the opening monologue of “The Word” begins with a very general introduction of the peculiarities of the English language, and then segues into a discussion of “the n word” before cutting to the first scene within the story world. Rather than the typical narrative introduction from series like *Everybody Hates Chris* or *How I Met Your Mother*, *Black-ish* avoids discussion of fictional characters and events in favor of embracing the world that includes the viewing audience.

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<sup>89</sup> Donald Bogle, *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (London: Macmillan, 2015), 191.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

Furthermore, just as *All in the Family* included references to the outside world in order to more directly connect with the audience, *Black-ish* includes several references to real-life figures and current events. While the series does make such references in the dialogue between the characters, notable references also appear in the opening monologues. *Black-ish* takes this socially conscious comedy a step further by occasionally presenting these references visually and aurally through pictures and video clips. For example, the opening monologue from "The Word" utilizes clips of a George W. Bush speech in which he struggles to produce a coherent sentence and the infamous Scripps National Spelling Bee contestant who hear "numbnut" instead of "numnah." The inclusion of non-fiction footage in the sitcom places these characters in the real world as *All in the Family* did.

The characters in the series also bring an interesting dimension to the series through their physical and behavioral characteristics. In particular, the addition of mixed-race characters into the family heightens the complexity of the series. For example, Dre's wife Rainbow is a woman of mixed race. She is portrayed by Tracee Ellis Ross, the daughter of black singer Diana Ross and a white father. Rainbow's ethnicity frequently marginalizes her in family arguments. For example, in "Hope" (2.16), Dre is adamant about fostering a discussion of police brutality against African Americans with his children. In fact, a humorous flashback reveals that he was an avid supporter of Malcolm X, indicating that his passion about subjects of race can verge on excessive. While

Dre wants the family to confront the issue directly, Rainbow prefers to shield her children from the violent realities of the world, hoping that if the children see the world in the positive light, the future will be brighter. This difference of opinion between husband and wife is reminiscent of the differences between black-centered television series of the past. *Sanford and Son* and *The Cosby Show* took two vastly different approaches to dealing with race on television. While *Sanford and Son* depicted the financial and social struggles of African Americans in the 1970s, *The Cosby Show* provided an example of a successful, affluent, and happy black family in the 1980s. These two series were both praised and condemned for their respective visions of blackness. The fact that both points of view are present in one series in *Black-ish* allows for these criticisms to continue be developed at the same time.

Of all of the episodes of *Black-ish* that have aired, "Hope" most closely emulates *All in the Family* in both structure and tone. The episode takes place entirely in the family living room, keeping the conversation on the subject at hand and allowing all eight members of the family to contribute in their own way. This reflects the narrative structure of *All in the Family*, with the majority of the narrative taking place in the home and close to "real time" in order to develop arguments and tone. In addition, while the news coverage the family is watching is of a fictionalized event, similar real-life events such as the shooting of Trayvon Martin and the death of Freddie Gray are referenced, bringing the real world into the drama of the episode. Like the Bunkers, the Johnsons live in the world that

the audience also experiences. The episode was critically acclaimed; James Poniewozik of *The New York Times* wrote, “In a single half-hour, it connected Ta-Nehisi Coates with James Baldwin; offered a primer on Freddie Gray and Sandra Bland; contrasted Andre’s Gen-X-Malcolm-X black nationalism with the generation before and after him...It was broadly relevant and brilliantly specific.”<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, the comparisons to Lear’s work were noted. As critic Matt Soller Seitz wrote in his review,

The episode also took the American sitcom full-circle, way back to the 1970s, when Norman Lear productions like *All in the Family*, *Good Times*, *Maude*, and *The Jeffersons* brought the day’s politics into prime time, laid conflicting points of view out in lively, often blunt dialogue, and transformed the sitcom from a lighthearted conversation piece into an extension of an ongoing national conversation that always had at least two sides, often many more than that, all in conflict, never entirely resolved.<sup>92</sup>

This recognition of Lear’s legacy in the modern sitcom illustrates its continued potential to push boundaries of both subject matter and tone as was done in the 1970s.

In “Hope,” the topicality of the series combines with a stark tonal shift that separates itself from the typical light sarcasm of the series. Making his case for exposing their children to the realities of violence against African Americans, Dre

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<sup>91</sup> James Poniewozik, “With Police Brutality Episode, ‘black-ish’ Shows How Sitcoms Can Still Matter,” *The New York Times*, (2016): C2.

<sup>92</sup> Matt Zoller Seitz, “In Its Own Sweet Way, ABC’s black-ish Is a Landmark Show,” *Vulture* (2016).



delivers the following monologue with sincerity:

Remember when [Obama] got elected, and we felt... the whole country was really ready to turn the corner? And you remember that amazing feeling we had during the inauguration?... And we were so proud. And we saw him get out of the limo and walk alongside it and wave to that crowd. Tell me you weren't terrified when you saw that. Tell me you weren't worried that someone was gonna snatch that hope away from us like they always do. That is the real world, Bow. And our children need to know that that's the world that they live in.

Dre speaks over footage of Obama waving to the crowd on Election Day. The combination of image and sound provides a unique commentary on a well-known event, marking a familiar image (often read as a positive image) with feelings of fear and sadness. While post-1970s comedies have generally avoided specific associations of reality and complexity of tone, this episode of *Black-ish* proves the power of infusing drama into comedy and confronting real-world issues.

In addition, the children of the family present different degrees of assimilation and blackness. The oldest daughter, Zoey, is fifteen years old and presented as a typical teenager. While not as outspoken about current issues as other members of the family, it is revealed that she does have an understanding of the world around her and a degree of care, as she reveals in "Hope" when she yells at her brother, Junior, for wanting to participate in a protest march for fear of his safety. Junior, conversely, is a more willing participant in social issues, such

as environmental awareness and the aforementioned protests. He is also the most stereotypically "white" character on the series, with his light skin, blue eyes, social awkwardness and lack of accent in his speech that the rest of his family possesses to varying degrees. The youngest children, twins Jack and Diane, represent the typical twin personality divide, with Diane's maturity and intellect sharply contrasting Jack's boyishness and naiveté. The degree to which these characters' personalities are divided from each other allows different perspective to be voiced on the series. The variety of "blackness" the series presents is contrasted to the relative similarity of personalities in the Huxtable family. The varying personalities on *Black-ish* facilitate diverse conversation from multiple perspectives.

### **Relevancy on the Fringes: Animation and Sketch Comedy**

Since the early '90s, the raunchiest comedy was interestingly present in animated comedies for adults. Series such as *Family Guy*, *The Simpsons*, and *South Park* were known not only for possessing a form of crudeness unseen in live-action television, but also for timely topical references. While traditional sitcoms were shying away from specific people and events, these animated series provided biting critiques of current issues and public figures. There are many potential answers to the question as to why animated series are able to address subjects that live-action series cannot. For example, animation's relation to the classic satirical comic strip gives such series historical permission to have more relevant points of discussion. In addition, the use of caricatures as

main characters allows radical points of view to come from a source that appears too bizarre to exist in reality. Indeed, both Peter Griffin (*Family Guy*) and Cartman (*South Park*) have obvious roots in the character of Archie Bunker. Furthermore, Norman Lear himself has served as a consultant on certain episodes of *South Park*, bringing his comedic sensibility to a new venue. However, despite Lear's support and involvement in such series, these topical animated series have not presented the issues in the narratively and tonally complex way that allowed for deep discussion and encouragement of active participation in the cultural forum.

On cable television, some of the most socially relevant discussions of race have taken place in sketch comedy. In the 1970s, the short-lived sketch series *The Richard Pryor Show* pushed the boundaries of race humor, with sketches including a press conference for the first black president and a parody of the court scene in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The series, airing on NBC, only lasted four episodes. Today, similar race comedy on sketch series has seen great success on Comedy Central. The series *Key & Peele* (Comedy Central, 2012–2015) was created by *MADtv* alumni Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, two biracial men who use the sketch comedy format to comment on stereotypes and discrimination in the United States. Anchored by these two personalities, all of the sketches feature both men in various costumes and makeup to perform several different characters. The majority of the sketches in the series in some way deal with the lives and identities of black men today. For example, more

than one sketch in the series addresses the affectation of “black voice” in certain situations and not others, illustrating the constant negotiation of identity that is required. Presupposing the discussion on *Black-ish*, *Key and Peele* has a sketch dedicated to teaching its audience who is and is not allowed to use the “n-word.” The series allows the exploration of multiple experiences and points of view all tied together by these two men. *Key and Peele* was the recipients of the Peabody Award. The following is the description of the Peabody Award for *Key and Peele* from 2013:

For sketch comics Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, both sons of black fathers and white mothers, biracialism is liberation, a cultural all-access pass, a skeleton key to any lock they care to try. The duo impersonates a wide world of black men, from nerds to thugs, sports icons to buppies. They tackle racially charged issues and ideas like no one else on television ... They break new ground even as they lay claim to all of comedy’s traditions. For its stars and their creative team’s inspired satirical riffs on our racially divided and racially conjoined culture, *Key & Peele* receives a Peabody Award.<sup>93</sup>

While suffering from the same lack of tonal complexity as animated satire, *Key & Peele* regularly discusses issues of race and racial identity that are similarly discussed in the likes of *Sanford and Son* and *Black-ish*.

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<sup>93</sup> “Key and Peele (Comedy Central),” *Peabody*, <http://peabodyawards.com/award-profile/key-peeel-comedy-central>.

## Conclusion

It is interesting to see who has taken on the mantle of social consciousness in television. Interestingly, while CBS was the leader of social relevancy in prime time in the 1970s, the risks the network is now willing to take are few and far between. Meanwhile, while ABC essentially spelled the doom of relevancy in the 1970s with the series of Garry Marshall and continued this push against social consciousness with the *TGIF* lineup in the 1980s and 1990s with series like *Full House*, *Family Matters*, and *Boy Meets World*, the network now appears to be taking steps to diversify in representation with the likes of *Black-ish*, *Modern Family*, and *Fresh Off the Boat*.

The sitcom has benefitted from the relaxation of broadcast standards of decency. Today drugs, alcohol, race, homosexuality, and a slew of other issues can be discussed on the air, but not without limitations. Not all of these topics can be discussed in the same place at the same time. An animated series on Comedy Central has different liberties than a live-action series on NBC. The majority of comedy series remain tonally and narratively in the pre-relevancy period, and most comedy series are reluctant to challenge genre conventions as *All in the Family* did in the 1970s.

Several of the previously cited theorists (among others) have acknowledged that genre is an ever-evolving idea. The older a genre becomes, the more complex and difficult works become to categorize. This is illustrated in the evolution of socially relevant comedy from the 1970s onward. With varieties

of presentation, topic, narrative, and style, comedy has the opportunity to reach different audiences through its various forms. Nevertheless, while many forms of comedy (such as the traditional domestic sitcom or the workplace sitcom) reappear to this day, the particular form of comedy that was presented in relevancy sitcoms of the 1970s such as *All in the Family* became all but extinct beginning in the 1980s. While the legacy of this time period is apparent, dedication to tonal complexity and controversy in the domestic sitcom has never reached the level of consistency that was present in the 1970s.

The questions we are left with are, “What has ‘comedy’ come to mean on television today?” and “Is socially relevant television still feasible?” Modern comedy has become more complex, with many series continuing to shy away from controversial topics, while the most radical forms of humor on television leave no room for emotional contemplation and deep discussion. While the networks are increasingly associated with “playing it safe,” the inclusion of *Black-ish*, with its controversial storylines, open discussion of race, and bleeped curse words, looks to be a step in the right direction (in this case, backwards). The episode “Hope” illustrated the continued viability of *All in the Family*’s form of humor on network television, and the genre-bending potential that streaming services provide offers another possibility for the resurgence of truly relevant comedy.

## CONCLUSION

*All in the Family* revolutionized the sitcom in many ways. It introduced the domestic sitcom to social and political issues that were previously unspoken on television. It brought emotional and character complexity to a television genre that was largely associated with frivolous escapism. The series addressed a multitude of problems in the country and society, and its refusal to provide a resolution within the story world made that the responsibility of the real-world audience. The series' influence has been observable from the days of its original broadcast to the present day. *All in the Family*, along with several other socially conscious sitcoms of the 1970s, bestowed a new responsibility upon television: to embrace comedy as a way of confronting the world outside the living room.

As explored in the third chapter, television comedy has evolved in terms of content and style, and while the legacy of 1970s relevancy is apparent in regard to representation on television, few series attempt to discuss current issues in the thorough and emotionally complex way that *All in the Family* did. Series like *South Park* address controversial issues on a regular basis, but favor shock humor and absurd, fast-paced narrative over the presentation of a deep multi-sided argument that addresses the true gravity of such issues. This avoidance of serious discussion in the majority of today's television comedies is reflected in the new aesthetics of comedy, including the handheld camera, fast-paced editing and dialogue delivery, and multiple short scenes as opposed to the "real time" efforts of Norman Lear's sitcoms. While there are stand-alone exceptions such

as the episode “Hope” in *Blackish*, the vast majority of television comedy, despite progressive premises and attempts at controversial storylines, insists on maintaining a singular tone throughout the series, denying audiences the challenge posed in the 1970s.

One probable cause of this shift in the presentation and reception of television comedy is the way in which content has thrived and circulated on the internet. People’s attraction to bite-sized entertainment like YouTube videos (which often utilize editing techniques like jump cuts that condense time) and GIFs on tumblr is reflected in the short, fast-paced scenes so popular on television comedies today. In turn, moments on these series are often transformed into GIFs and shared on the internet long after episodes have originally aired. The popularity of such GIFs on the internet serves as encouragement for creators to continue producing short, easily digestible jokes and moments in their series. Likewise, the commercial imperative tied to the creation of vignettes that can become viral sensations dominates in a television landscape rife with competition for smaller and smaller audiences.

The fragmented audience and the shift away from synchronous television consumption have also affected the role of television as a centerpiece for cultural debate. The prioritization of original series on cable television, streaming outlets, and other internet-based platforms has increased the total number of entertainment options and, consequently, has shifted audience dynamics. *All in the Family*, as one of four programming options during its time slot (and the



number one in its time slot for the majority of its run) was a series that incited national conversation. With all of the options available today, it is almost impossible for a program to reach as wide of an audience and encourage debate across the country in the same way. Furthermore, the ability of audiences to curate their own programming slates through streaming services and DVR eliminates the collective, simultaneous viewing experience.

All of these considerations lead to some major questions: Have the changes in television comedy and the television industry stifled the potential that was beginning to present itself in the 1970s? Has society become too “politically correct” to push boundaries and explore serious subjects? As mentioned in chapter three, in the past two years alone representation on broadcast and cable networks and streaming services has diversified with series like *Black-ish*. While *All in the Family* and *Maude* were able to present new controversial subjects in a manner that was both comedic and contemplative, this approach seems to be a difficult feat in the new television landscape. Is the solution to continue exposing audiences to such representations until creators and networks will be comfortable incorporating depth and complexity into their series? *Black-ish* indicates that this may be the solution.

Although the specific deployment and uses of viewing technologies appear to hinder the possibility of a national conversation about any issue raised by television comedy, technological changes present some potentially positive updates to the cultural forum. For example, the availability of series through

streaming services and DVDs allow people to engage with these texts long after series have ended. In addition, online events such as live tweeting (though criticized for competing with series for audience attention) allow debates to be extended beyond a person's immediate family and peers. Social media has enabled audience members to converse with each other without having met in person. Thus, while the amount of people participating in particular discussions at the same time has diminished since the 1970s, the conversations have become more expansive.

Future research should look to the new areas of experimentation in genre, narrative, and tone. As much of the programming offered by broadcast networks remains safely in the format of the traditional sitcom, it is worth looking beyond the sitcom format to other complex forms of socially relevant comedy. Examples of such experimentation have been evident on late-night television, cable networks, and streaming services.

While the majority of late-night talk shows follow a similar style and format, some interestingly complex and experimental comedy recently found itself on the fringes of late-night network television. From 2005–2014, Scottish comedian Craig Ferguson hosted *The Late Late Show* (CBS) and constantly played with the conventions of the late-night talk show. From improvising monologues to having a robot skeleton sidekick engineered to his tearing up question cards in front of his guests, Ferguson mocked the traditional late-night format that his contemporaries like Jay Leno employed. Often Ferguson would address the

hidden factors behind the standards of late-night, for example by disrupting the illusion that the episodes are actually recorded at night, or by swearing and bringing up racy topics to irritate the censor, and then having the camera cut to his reactions of displeasure. Most significantly, Ferguson often played with the narrative structure and tone of the show. For example, in one episode Ferguson removed the studio audience and dedicated the entire episode to a deep conversation with British comedian and activist Stephen Fry. Ferguson had a similar episode in 2009 dedicated to a conversation with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, for which the show earned a Peabody Award. As written on the Peabody Award website:

[...] the Scottish-born comedian perfected his offbeat take on the talk-show genre, proving that one of the silliest hours on television [...] could also be one of the smartest. Case in point: Ferguson's March 4 episode [...]. After spending his monologue on a detailed, incisive, often humorous recap of South African history, Ferguson turns the floor over to Tutu, letting the Nobel Peace Prize winner's words unfold as an oral history of his life, his country and his continent. [...] Between the many laugh lines (and the Archbishop subtly lands his fair share of these), the pair talk about suffering and forgiveness, and meditate on the nature of good and evil itself.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> "The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson: An Evening with Archbishop Desmond Tutu (CBS)," *Peabody*, <http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/the-late-late-show-with-craig-ferguson-an-evening-with-archbishop-desmond-t>.

Within his monologues, Ferguson's tone varied from absurdly humorous to emotionally taxing. For example, in response to Britney Spears' hair-shaving episode, Ferguson began by chastising other comedians for turning Spears' situation into a joke. The next twelve minutes of the monologue were dedicated to his own battle with alcoholism – a serious topic addressed sincerely with laughs thrown in here and there. Ferguson's show took structural and tonal risks similar to that of *All in the Family*, providing discussion of serious topics with a complexity of tone.

While Ferguson's work on *The Late Late Show* actively attempted to work against the conventions of late-night talk shows, it is important to note that this series aired at 12:30 A.M. This fact is crucial when considering when and why networks decide to take risks. *All in the Family* was initially a mid-season replacement; CBS added the series to the schedule because there were few options available and buried it in the Tuesday night lineup. The fact that the likes of Lear and Ferguson are allowed on the air at a time and place where they are likely to reach the least amount of people possible indicates that, no matter how much networks will later stand by a series, changing the status quo is never a priority. Further, while Craig Ferguson had artistic freedom in his 12:30 time slot, there are no sitcoms airing during those times. Therefore, the primetime sitcom is at a major disadvantage; its ability as a genre to develop into something more complex is hindered on broadcast networks. However, cable networks and streaming services provide new platforms for experimentation in both subject

matter and genre.

The half-hour sitcom on cable and streaming services is another area of potential relevancy. Though the majority of these series have departed from the domestic setting, they are more likely to address social concerns and experiment with form than series on the broadcast networks. Cable series like *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (HBO, 2000–2011), *Girls* (HBO, 2012–present), and *Broad City* (Comedy Central, 2014–present) have experimented with the tone of a sitcom in various ways. Series like *Veep* (HBO, 2012–present) and *Master of None* (Netflix, 2015–present) address relevant political and racial issues, respectively. This group of cable and streaming series illustrate that the sitcom remains a viable area for tonal complexity and social discourse.

Some of the most interesting experimentation with both relevancy and genre has occurred on streaming services like Netflix and Amazon. Both *Transparent* (Amazon, 2014–present), and *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013–present) address socially relevant topics in a poignant and tonally complex way. This complexity demands a reconsideration of how genre is defined within the television industry and understood by audiences. *Transparent* for example, is a dramedy that pushes generic boundaries and delves deeply into the experience of a transgender woman and her family. Though the forty-five minute length of the episodes is associated with drama, the series features several stylistic choices that are similar to the standard network comedies of today, such as the handheld camera, lack of laugh track, and location shooting. However,

the series take significant artistic liberties, freeing itself from the typical constraints of the sitcom. The writing of the series does not rely on the typical setup-punchline format of the sitcom, but aims for more subtle laughs, with downbeat humor and improvisation being important elements of the style. The premise of the series and the storylines themselves lean toward the dramatic side of the scale, with the genuine joy Maura (Jeffrey Tambor) finds in being a woman, and the difficulty she has revealing herself to her family as the central concern of the series. Nonetheless, the series is labeled within the industry as a comedy, having secured Emmys for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Comedy Series (Tambor), and Outstanding Directing in a Comedy Series at the 2015 Primetime Emmy Awards. The acknowledgement of *Transparent* as a comedy indicates a new acceptance of genre hybridity that appears to have come from artistic liberation in streaming. However, we must also question why the industry decides to label a series one way or another.

The success of tonally complex comedies like *Transparent* illustrates the new role that streaming services provide as an artistic liberator. With series such as *Transparent* and *Orange Is the New Black*, the line between comedy and drama becomes blurred. This is especially evident during the awards season, when *Orange Is the New Black* shifted from the comedy to the drama genre at the 2015 Emmy Awards. The freedom from network regulation and the lack of distinct brand identity of these emerging streaming services allow these series to handle socially relevant issues like gender, sexuality, and race in a new, more

direct way. The shifting label of *Orange Is the New Black* from “comedy” to “drama” and the assumption by the industry that a tonally complex series like *Transparent* is a “comedy” suggest that these new relevancy series may defy such simple understandings of genre.

It will be important to reexamine this area of new social relevancy and genre experimentation in five or ten years, when this new wave of progressively-premised series has further developed. While the most compelling and complex social consciousness appears to exist on streaming services, hope remains for the broadcast networks, as *Black-ish* has illustrated that modern sensibilities can be applied to controversial subjects. While not a direct copy of the Lear formula, the series does what we can only hope other sitcoms will attempt to do: utilize the power of comedy to address real-world concerns. While cable and streaming services have new and interesting offerings for a fragmented audience, it is important to remember that the bold beginnings of social relevancy took place on network television for a mass audience. Ultimately, it is up to the producers and distributors of content to determine if the sitcom remains a feasible platform for deep social discussion, and whether or not they are willing to take the risks that Norman Lear did in the 1970s.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

### Education

- **Master of Fine Arts in Film and Television Studies, Boston University, Boston, MA, Expected 2016**
  - GPA: 3.84
  - *Thesis Title:* The Norman Conquest: The Style and Legacy of *All in the Family*
  - *Thesis Adviser:* Deborah L. Jaramillo
  - *Relevant Coursework:* Hitchcock, Noir/Neonoir, American Independent Film, Scandinavian Cinema, Television Theory and Criticism, International Masterworks, Movie Stars and Stardom, Hollywood Romantic Comedy and Melodrama, American Masterworks, NBC: Anatomy of a Network, Horror and Gender, Hollywood Film Genres, Strange Art, Feminist Television Studies
  
- **Bachelor of Arts in Visual Media Arts, Emerson College, Boston, MA, 2013**
  - *Minor in Psychology*
  - GPA: 3.54
  - Graduated Cum Laude
  - *Relevant Coursework:* History of Media Arts I & II, Foundations in Visual Media Production, Asian/Pacific Rim Film & Literature, Media Criticism & Theory, Theatre into Film, Writing for Television, Studies in Digital Media & Culture, American Film Comedy, Media Ethics & Cultural Diversity, Understanding the Whedonesque

### Teaching Experience

- **Boston University, Boston, MA, September 2014 – present**  
*Teaching Assistant:* Understanding Television
  - Understanding Television is a large lecture course required of all TV-focused undergraduates in the Department Film and Television.
  - For three semesters I have led weekly discussion sections of 20 students per section, and my responsibilities have included grading papers and exams and assisting the professor during lectures.
  - My guest lecture, “A Brief History of *All in the Family*,” which I delivered in Fall 2015, introduced students to the development of *All in the Family* as a series, its broadcast history, and its impact on the television industry.

- **Boston University, Boston, MA, Spring 2015**  
*Graduate Assistant: International Masterworks*
  - International Masterworks is an upper-level seminar for both undergraduates and graduate students
  - During this semester I assisted the professor during lecture.

### **Awards and Honors**

- Dean's List
  - 4 semesters at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell
  - 4 semesters at Emerson College

### **Research Interests**

- Television Comedy
- 1970s Television
- Television Authorship
- Fandom and Reception Studies
- Children's/Family Film & Television
- Musical Film
- Dance in Film