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Sit Down for Sitcoms

Hanna-Maria Vester · Thursday, September 9th, 2021

Sitcoms aren't usually discussed critically. Why take them seriously? Here's why: they're not only fun (and enjoyment must always be taken seriously), they delineate a specific relationship to the complexities of life as we live it. On the political potential of the sitcom.

By Hanna-Maria Vester

Many have called the first two decades of the 21st century the »golden age of television«. Whether in front of the telly or a laptop - masses glued to their screens witnessed a flourishing entertainment landscape populated with high-quality dramas. Often, they take a gleeful look at criminal men - and more and more criminal women (*Killing Eve*, *Dead To Me*). What *Breaking Bad* was in the naughties has morphed into *Ozark* in the 2010s. It's edgy, it's raw, it's dark. Most importantly: it's frankly not what my mind's equipped for after a day's work...

The situational comedy, conversely, serves as light entertainment and centres on the everyday life of (mostly law-abiding) ›normal‹ US-American people. Sitcoms are formulaic. There certainly are surprises, but the end of an episode usually presents some type of resolution and return to the

Series

Be it food or pop culture - the term »Guilty Pleasure« means everything that we're ashamed of liking. But why do we even think that some pleasures are guilty? In our series »UngUILTY Pleasures« we want to unpack and question the term. For that, Litlog authors write about which entertainment genres and trash programs they utterly enjoy - and demand: pleasure without guilt! You can find more articles [here](#).

status-quo. Moreover, the characters and warmly-lit sets are all relatively static; over time, they become familiar and comforting. No wonder that the televisual sitcom is still one of the most popular genres, especially in a time of pandemic and climate horror. Respite is more than necessary.

Sitcoms do not focus on high-stakes, life-or-death storylines. Much like *Feel Good TV*, they illuminate the meaning of human existence in and through the ordinary. A venerable movie and quality TV connoisseur may wrinkle their nose at this perceived simplicity. Same goes for (most of) academia. As if the water we swim in is not interesting enough for closer investigation. No, I shan't feel guilty about this love of mine. No chance.

Instead, I continue to be fascinated by how sitcoms explore the intricacies of everyday life. There is so much to explore, but I want to highlight one particular aspect: how the sitcom tackles political topics. Even though sitcoms function brilliantly as means of escapism, they embody a certain realism to ensure relatability. Sitcom-lovers like me will even have noticed a definite turn towards the ›real‹ and the political in the past 20 years. Let's look at how this works and simultaneously ask: what are the limits of this emphasis?

Sitcom Realism

For years, *Friends* has been criticised for its outdated set of values in terms of race, gender, body image. Equally, its class and economic relations are often highlighted as deeply privileged if not unrealistic. All together now: »How can they all afford to live in such fancy apartments in New York?!« Yes, yes, we know! What the success of such a show, and its most prominent naughties rip-off, *How I Met Your Mother*, shows: to many, such details really do not matter. It's more important to have a group of people be together, deal with the fun (and occasionally the less fun) aspects of life, to observe how they bumble around in the big city. Problematising the actual economic relations of struggling city-dwellers in their mid-twenties, that's not too important. Relatability and entertainment are.

And yet, *Friends* was surprisingly progressive, showing the first lesbian wedding in a sitcom. Sure, the homophobic jokes never ceased. And yet, like Joanne Morreale argues in *Critiquing the Sitcom. A Reader*, sitcoms »provide ideal sites for critical examination of [such] tensions and contradictions« (xii). She points out: »While their status as commercial product suggests that they will ultimately support the status quo, they may also allow for a multiplicity of discourses« (xii).

Friends walked (well - crawled) so that others could run, like two of my favourite shows that lean into the progressive potential of the genre: *Superstore* - a workplace sitcom - and *One Day At A Time* - a remake of a 1970s family sitcom. Shows like these are simply delightful; and they actually shift the focus on people's pressing, even existential concerns.

With the show *The Office* (2001-2003), the workplace sitcom was born. But it was only with the hugely successful US-remake of the same name (2005-2013) that the concept became its own replicable formula. Series like *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013-2021) were soon to follow, focusing on a government department and a police precinct respectively. In contrast to *The Office*, these shows began to focus less on embarrassment and more on the concept of the ›found family‹ in a workplace environment. In a neoliberal fashion, these sitcoms made sure to tell us that work can be a place of friends, fun and personal fulfilment - a tendency that is

both reproduced and subverted in *Superstore*.

One Day at a Time, Where Art Thou

In 2017, Netflix revamped the 1970s show *One Day at a Time*, giving it a modern coat of paint. In many ways, this sitcom is conventional. It centres on one family and their relationships which is accompanied by gasps and laughter of the live audience. Yet, the original concept, which focused on a white family, is turned on its head. The Alvarezes are a family of immigrants, with the grandma having left Cuba over forty years ago with her husband. She lives in Los Angeles with her daughter Penelope and her grandchildren Alex and Elena. The family is fun and cute, with legendary Academy Award winning Rita Moreno as grandma Lydia stealing the show almost every episode.

✘ A sitcom tackling important issues: *One Day at a Time*.

Picture: Michael Yarish / Netflix

This show celebrates Latinx cultures in the US. At the same time, it does not only focus on the warm and fuzzy aspects of American life. The backdrop of the show is the family's sometimes precarious financial situation. It revolves around a single mother who is also a former nurse practitioner and served in Afghanistan. This grounds the sitcom in contemporary America. I was surprised when I found myself crying almost as much as I was laughing while watching *One Day at a Time*. The way it deals with PTSD, depression, addiction, undocumented immigration, racism as well as sexuality and

Series Info

One Day at a Time

USA 2017-2020

4 seasons, 46 episodes

Idea: Gloria Calderon Kellett, Mike Royce

Starring: Justina Machado, Rita Moreno, Todd Grinnell, and others

gender is both timely and sensitive. This show manages to tackle serious topics while remaining hilarious - a truly admirable tightrope act.

It's a typical American story which too often is overlooked for whiter shows. The fact that this family show depicts queer and immigrant characters unapologetically and with so much joy is refreshing and important. And yet, it was unceremoniously cancelled by Netflix in 2019 after four seasons. The workplace sitcom *Superstore* had more luck: even though it was often overlooked by critics, it lasted for six seasons. *Ugly Betty* star America Ferrera as Amy and Ben Feldman (who came to fame with the show *Mad Men*) as Jonah are the romantic centre of the series which focuses on supermarket employees in St. Louis, Missouri.

The Curious Case of Superstore

With its quirky, diverse cast, *Superstore* (2015-2021) comes closer than most sitcoms to depicting a realistic version of US-America. Aside from the main characters Amy and Jonah, there is Mateo: a Filipino immigrant, gay and gossipy – and, as it later turns out, undocumented. Cheyenne is a half-Japanese pregnant teenager who dyes her hair and can be described as, well, simple-minded. Dina, the assistant manager, is a dominant white woman who is sex-positive, vegan and equally obsessed with birds and rules. Garret is a Black man in a wheelchair whose sarcastic comments and lazy attitude define him. What is more, the background characters are recurring and most amusing – be they **customers** who keep interrupting important emotional scenes or other *Superstore* employees who get up to their own shenanigans in the aisles.

Mostly, this show is about store employees doing their best to make it through the day and have fun while they're at it. Yet, the series opens up important discourses about class and immigration. Mateo, for instance, is eventually captured by ICE. The protagonist, Amy Dubanowski, is a Latina woman who had to work to support her family since she was 19. She is noticeably fed up and often buds heads with optimistic middle-class man Jonah Simms. A large part of the show is about these central characters

Series Info

Superstore

USA 2015-2021

6 seasons, 113 episodes

Idea: Justin Spitzer

Starring: America Ferreira, Ben Feldman, Lauren Ash, and others

struggling to stand up to ›the man‹: »The series was always dedicated to tweaking the ways in which corporate America makes life hell for the people who work within it,« [writes Emily VanDerWerff](#). But therein lies the crux of the matter.

Like *One Day at a Time*, *Superstore* tries to tackle important societal issues in a complex manner. It is the character of Amy who embodies much of the political pull of the story. As an eventually single mother, she begins to finally move up in the company. The viewer who has rooted for her success is now faced with a conundrum – how can characters like Amy remain likeable when they become part of the ›system‹? *Can the system be changed from within?*

The series was eventually cancelled after 6 seasons. My theory why is threefold. First, like with *One Day at a Time*, I believe that the pandemic played an important role. Production had to pause, and when the show returned, it actually showed the supermarket employees wearing masks – which is not exactly helpful because it takes away from the performance. Reality 1, entertainment 0. Secondly, America Ferrera was written out of the show by her own request. This meant that the show lost its core protagonist. Again, this was presented to viewers in a realistic, even desirable fashion: Amy has to move in order to pursue her career and financial security. But, thirdly, this destroyed an emotional core: her relationship with Jonah is broken off, an aspect of

the series which pulled many regular viewers.

Too Real? Not Real Enough?

The show thus tried to stay true to its realistic set-up of a workplace sitcom embedded in a capitalist environment. And yet, this was only to its own detriment in the end. The overall storyline of the show, which is concerned with labour relations and fighting big corporations, has no real resolution. This is where the sitcom's swaying between comedy and politics failed in the other direction: as a long-time viewer, I was hoping for revolution. **But the showrunners themselves decidedly stated they did not want to end the show on a political note.** Instead, the return to comedy and happy family is palpable. As a fan, two hearts beat in my chest: the one which wants these characters to lead a happy life together, no matter the circumstances; and the one which wants to see corporations brought to justice. Only the first got what it desired. This is a sitcom, after all.

Superstore ultimately returns to the personal in favour of overarching societal problems, as the genre dictates. I felt that the potential of the show was that of a political drama series – and by pursuing political discourse the way it did, it opened up a can of worms. How can working-class Americans expect justice? They cannot, it seems. *Superstore* and *Parks and Recreation* share a certain neoliberal aftertaste: ultimately, the workplace remains idealised as a place of friendship and fun. But whereas shows like *Parks and Rec* focus on democracy and US-politics as frustrating, yet rewarding, *Superstore* reveals the reality of many US-Americans as bleak and unchanging. *Superstore* is a funny show, it is an important show, and the unresolved, the paradox, the »multiplicity of discourses« (Morreale xii) which vex me so are what actually make it an outstanding and worthy contribution to quality television.

Whatever the future of ›political‹ comedic writing holds, I'll surely be along for the ride. See, there is little to be embarrassed about when watching sitcoms. They contain more than one might think at first glance. And even when they don't: they are still my favourite unguilty pleasure.

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