

British Situation Comedy and “The Culture of the New Capitalism”

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Abstract

This study examines British television situation comedy over the last fifteen years and analyses the genre as part of a discourse about the nature of modernity. In this period globalisation, technology and the rapid reassessment of formerly established social structures have created new modes of everyday existence that represent significant changes to people's lives. The thesis argues that contemporary sitcoms address these shifts in social understanding and anxieties about contemporary British life. A wide range of texts are discussed, four in particular detail; *Peep Show*, *Love Soup*, *Saxondale* and *Home Time*; which explicitly try to form a dialogue with their audience about living in modernity.

The thesis largely takes a methodological approach from Television Studies, referencing scholars from the discipline, in particular John Ellis's concepts of "working through" and employing a significant amount of textual analysis. Chapter two looks at the context of television in this changing world and chapter three analyses how sitcom as a genre has redefined its forms. Chapter four identifies the importance of 'tone' in comedy and analyses how modernity demands new modes of address for comedy to meet the expectations of its audience. The study demonstrates how texts balance new approaches with continuities drawn from the existing sitcom tradition.

In order to interrogate the nature of social change and its effects, chapter one engages with the work of a number of social theorists. In particular it analyses the recent writings of Richard Sennett and Zygmunt Bauman, who identify contemporary life as "the culture of the new capitalism" and "liquid modernity" respectively. They consider how such change might affect how individuals feel about themselves and their place in society. Throughout, the thesis demonstrates how this work might be applied to the study of sitcom and combines social theory with a detailed analysis of this television form in transformation, arguing that sitcom remains a resonant site for audiences to participate in a productive discourse about how we live today.

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My parents and family have been a huge support to me over the years and first introduced me to sitcoms. Most of all I would like to thank my wife, Helen Hanson, whose support and encouragement has been invaluable.

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines television situation comedy (sitcom) in the United Kingdom over the last fifteen years and argues that its texts can be understood as part of a discourse about the nature of modernity. I will argue that the modernity encountered by the television audience in this period and depicted in the characters, situations, jokes and forms of sitcoms in Britain marks a definite shift from the patterns of life understood for the previous three or four decades.

Debates around the meaning and nature of modernity have formed a large body of critical work, going back two centuries. This critical history is outlined in studies written around twenty to thirty years ago by Fredric Jameson, David Harvey and Marshall Berman, who also all put forward their own varying analyses of what modernity was becoming at that particular juncture in time. In one sense modernity is a state of now; of the dynamics of the moment with its tensions between past, present and future; yet each phase of modernity has its own distinct character and is experienced differently, depending on the social, historical, geographic and technological circumstances. If the 'modern' as we understand it began some centuries ago, it has undergone a number of transformations that represent new ideas in the way life is organised. Harvey, Berman and Jameson engage with ideas about 'postmodernity', then a popular concept in theorising culture. However, if as Jameson suggests, "postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete" (ix), then it proved premature as an argument, for change has become even more relentless in recent years, indicating that the process is, in fact, far from over. Now lives

are constantly changing and responses to this are ever more complex, as Harvey suggests: “modernity ...is characterised by a never-ending process of internal ruptures and fragmentations within itself” (12), all of which form part of its discourse.

This current period of modernity goes under many different names. Most of these try to give some sense of its fluidity or flexibility or its place within the history of capitalism and modernisation. Thus Jameson defines it as “late capitalism” (xviii, with “postmodernity” as a synonym), while Harvey prefers “flexible accumulation” (147). Richard Sennett sometimes refers to it as “flexible capitalism” (*The Corrosion of Character* 9) but more often adopts the more widely applicable term “the culture of the new capitalism” (*The Culture of the New Capitalism*). Zygmunt Bauman pronounces the era of one of “liquid modernity” (*Liquid Modernity*) before applying the “liquid” idea to specific aspects of present-day living. As the work of Sennett and Bauman is at the centre of this study, I will use “culture of the new capitalism” and “liquid modernity” as terms to define contemporary modernity.

The post-war society, based on identifiable structures and codes, both in social organisation and in the inherent sense of self, has been largely broken down through considerable shifts in both the economy and culture. Change has occurred through globalisation, technology and the rapid reassessment of previously accepted notions like class, the nature of work, personal relationships or indeed mass entertainment. Some of these changes may be progressive or necessary while others may be encouraged by ideology or profit imperatives but

they have all served to create a climate of uncertainty that informs 'our' modernity.

'Modernity' is defined here as the attitudes and structures informing contemporary life – the condition of modern living in Britain – both for society as a whole and for the individuals within that society. As Jameson has written, "modernity would then...describe the way 'modern' people feel about themselves" (310) and my contention is that these feelings are aired within sitcom. In using the terms 'our' and 'we' in this study I'm referring to modes of living shared by people without much power over the last fifteen years within Western democracies in general and Britain in particular; people who form the bulk of the television audience. Sennett suggests that "what's peculiar about uncertainty today is that it exists without any looming historical disaster; instead it is woven into the everyday practices of a vigorous capitalism" (*Respect* 31). Uncertainty then pervades modernity; Berman suggests that "to be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction" (13) and that "to be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and our world – and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are" (15).

We did not become part of "the culture of the new capitalism" overnight. The external forces that have helped to transform society and the shifts in attitudes that have resulted from these changes have been gestating for a long time as markets have been deregulated, sexual mores and familial ties have become less rigidly defined, new technologies have transformed how people

communicate with other and how they make transactions with institutions, old community structures have diminished and consumption and individualism have grown in response to all these developments. Ultimately this has led to a new landscape of living, where people think and feel differently about themselves and their place in society and where there is an acknowledgement of perpetual motion, of continuous change.

Harvey argues that “if the only thing certain about modernity is uncertainty, then we should, surely, pay considerable attention to the social forces that produce such a condition” (118). Culture is inextricably linked with the society in which it exists, which informs both cultural texts and how they are seen and understood. The contingent, even frightening, nature of modernity has become an intense everyday reality and popular forms such as sitcom have had to adapt to reflect their audiences’ experiences. Television remains a part of most people’s lives but is no longer the unchallenged mass medium of the pre-internet era. Inevitably this has affected the consumption and understanding of sitcom, a genre forged by interaction with large audiences. This in turn has altered the production, distribution and function of sitcoms.

This thesis will analyse the construction of modernity in sitcoms and how programmes have negotiated with their audiences to reflect this world, using what Raymond Williams called its “lived culture” (*Long Revolution* 66) to create humour. The first chapter within the study will cover critical debates on the nature of social change and how it might affect the self. In subsequent chapters I will examine the shifts in production and consumption, both within television as a

whole and sitcom in particular and will consider how this affects texts. I will also take a close look at tone and mode of address within some sitcoms and suggest that this is one of the key areas of change within the genre, a change that has been necessary to resonate within the realities of contemporary life and accurately reflect its sensibility. This chapter on tone will also reflect on some conceptions of comedy and its role. While there will be a detailed discussion of comic structures and codes later, in this introduction it is worth simply asserting the idea that comedy has long had a place within the popular imagination as a social critic; as Gerald Mast argues, “comedy is truly the foe of progress and the social order” (340).

Sitcom, traditionally the most popular comedic form on television, is rooted in the rhythms of everyday life with character types and situations that are familiar to its viewers and is in a particularly strong position to comment on how it feels to live within modernity. I will argue that sitcom has value and that some of its texts are aesthetically and thematically rewarding as cultural products but most of all I claim that they also have the ability to conduct a sophisticated discourse with their audience about their lives. They enable a dialogue to take place about how people might feel that has the potential to challenge viewers and make them think about or perhaps even question their experience. This function is understood by their audience. A sitcom’s characters and situations and of course the humour that they contain are designed to resonate with the people that watch it – if they don’t then the programme fails.

Britain has had a long tradition of successful sitcoms that reached very large audiences from the late 1950s to the early 1990s. This tradition formed a dialogue with viewers about how they lived: about conformity; social change; divisions and social structures; in which as Williams pointed out, “perfectly obvious social tensions, of a contemporary kind, were being played through with some emphasis” (*On Television* 85). Programmes such as *Steptoe and Son*, *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* and *The Good Life* contributed to public discourse about the contemporary moment and about the fundamental architecture of society. They did this within easily recognised and understood codes and generic conventions and it was this perceived rigidity of form, coupled with their mainstream popularity that often saw sitcom critically dismissed or ignored. As audiences and television as a medium changed and previously vast viewing figures began to slump, so the future of sitcom started to be questioned both inside and outside broadcasting. The resonance with the audience was no longer assured.

Particularly in the period around the millennium, critics and executives started to pronounce sitcom as a phenomenon of the past. D.J. Taylor suggested that; “essentially, comedy has gone the same way as pop music and half a dozen ‘popular’ art forms... at the same time, the past 30 years has brought a sizeable shift in the things that people find funny”. For Taylor, social change and a fragmented culture formed from myriad individual, rather than shared, interests precludes a cohesive comic response, different people will inevitably laugh at different things, just as people were already listening to their own choice of

music, meaning that there “is no longer a comic mainstream”. The broadcasting industry began to lose faith in sitcom as a cornerstone of its output; experienced entertainment producer Paul Jackson believed in 1999 that “the public are saying we’re bored with the traditional sitcom” (qtd in Rampton). Others were more positive, another executive, John Willis, thought that

“I doubt however if sitcom is dead, it is more likely just to be taking a quick nap. Sitcoms need to be nurtured and loved. It takes multiple episodes for characters to grow on the viewer. These days that takes more patience than most channels can offer”.

Willis’s comments, made in 1998, have proved prescient, both in his assertion that sitcom could survive but also in his concern that the industry could lack the patience to allow a relationship between text and mass audience to develop. My contention is that the genre has forged a fresh relationship with its audience that is informed by their experience of modernity at the turn of the twenty first century. In doing so, it has had to rethink its address to its viewers. To survive and make the transition to a new media culture, sitcom has had to be transformed as the audience has fragmented and discovered alternative modes of viewing. Its architecture had proved insufficiently robust so its forms have had to be reinvented in order to speak effectively to audiences. This was necessary to reflect a modernity that is intrinsically different from the expectations and experiences that the audience had in the era preceding the mid 1990s. The “comic mainstream”, as Taylor puts it, is less strong than it used to be but there are still powerful, resonant comic voices which viewers can relate to their own lives.

I will be analysing sitcoms made for British television over the last fifteen years in detail, examining what they say to their audience and crucially how they say it through their characters, structures, writing and aesthetics. I will refer to a large number of British programmes in making my case. I believe this is important in reflecting the full flavour of sitcom's responses to modernity so that we can see recurring trends, themes and the development and deployment of formal changes. It is also necessary to demonstrate that there are still divergent responses to modernity across sitcom; each text has its own distinctive approach, set of influences and agenda. No existing study of British TV sitcom has surveyed such a large range of texts and closely related them to these issues. In examining contemporary sitcom it is also impossible and certainly undesirable, to ignore classic shows from the past. These programmes set down a template for what sitcoms could be and continue to exert an influence on the shows that succeeded them. The most effective recent sitcoms exploit the dynamic within the text between the old and the new, between innovations that assure the audience of its relevance and continuities that they can recognise from the best shows of the past.

Within this wide frame of reference I will pay particular attention to four sitcoms: *Peep Show*, *Love Soup*, *Saxondale* and *Home Time*. *Peep Show* is probably the most successful of these shows and the only one still running, with eight series broadcast on Channel 4 since 2003 – the most recent shown at the end of 2012. Written by Sam Bain and Jesse Armstrong and starring comedians David Mitchell and Robert Webb, it tells the unfolding saga of two mismatched

flatmates; uptight credit controller Mark Corrigan (Mitchell) and self-proclaimed musician Jez Usborne (Webb).

Love Soup ran for two series on BBC1; the first in 2005 saw two parallel narratives between American comedy writer Gil (Michael Landes) and perfume counter manager Alice (Tamsin Greig), two people who are unknown to each other but who the audience see are perfectly matched through the way they view the vagaries of modern life. A second series in 2008 just featured Greig (Landes was unavailable and in the series we hear that Gil has suddenly died just before he was due to meet Alice on a blind date through a lonely hearts advert). *Love Soup* was written by David Renwick, author of *One Foot in the Grave*, one of the last truly successful mass audience sitcoms but is the most generically complex of the four. Some might argue that it is a comedy-drama but I believe that it remains rooted in sitcom tropes, notably that laughter is its principal aim.

Saxondale is a vehicle for comedian Steve Coogan, creator of Alan Partridge and other comic character creations. *Saxondale*, written by Coogan with Neil McCormick, was built around the central figure of Tommy Saxondale (Coogan), a former rock roadie turned pest controller in suburban Stevenage and ran for two series on BBC2 in 2006 and 2007.

The final central text, *Home Time*, is the least well known and successful of the shows, broadcast for just one series on BBC2 in the autumn of 2009. It was co-written by Neil Edmond and its star, Emma Fryer. Fryer plays Gaynor Jacks who, just returned to Coventry after an abrupt teenage departure in 1997,

discovers that going back home twelve years later is not the answer to her problems.

My four key examples have been chosen because they explicitly engage with the problems of living in modernity and especially the dislocation between the self and society, which is a recurrent theme in discourse about contemporary life. Other shows also do so to some extent but these texts are particularly focused on establishing a dialogue with their audience on how modernity makes people feel about themselves and their place in the world; their humour derives from how these conflicts are displayed. They also employ particular devices to dramatise the conversation between text and audience, beyond simply the action unfolding on screen, so that points can be made about contemporary life. In *Peep Show*, this is a whole aesthetic landscape that provides access to the protagonists' innermost thoughts and feelings through point of view camerawork and the use of voice-over to offer a counterpoint to dialogue and action. *Love Soup* uses voice-over to a significant extent too but it also offers a commentary on the action by dramatising both scripts and sketches authored by characters in the story and bizarre events that are retold in flashback to others within the fiction. *Saxondale* and *Home Time* use rather more prosaic strategies but they still perform the function of allowing the audience to hear a reflective and reflexive voice. In *Saxondale*, this comes through the opening sequence in each episode in which Tommy is forced to attend an anger management group. While he rebels against the group, often disrupting their proceedings, his interventions still illuminate the tensions inherent in his life as he is asked to consider his

feelings and actions. Similarly the device of hearing Gaynor's diary entries in *Home Time*, both now and as a teenager in the week she left home, gives us a way of comparing her past to her present and an understanding of the dislocation in her world that is distinct from the things that she feels she has to say for acceptance among her friends and family. It also tellingly points up the contrast between the hopes and optimism of 1997 and the disappointments of life in 2009.

While social change does not conform to easy historical periodisation, 1997 represents a seminal moment within the period examined by this thesis. This year marks a clear point in recent British history with the election of Tony Blair's first 'New Labour' government. Gaynor's teenage diary entry for the 2nd May 1997 is heard in voice-over in *Home Time*'s first episode, announcing that "if I could have voted today I'd have opted for red because things are changing and no one even knows. In three days time I turn 18 and I'm voting with my feet". The beginning of the Blair years is now seen as something of a chimera, a moment of hope that was never quite fulfilled. On one level, real change did not come; the hopes on the left for a more progressive path away from neo-liberalism were largely dashed but from another perspective the march of globalisation, the rise of the Internet and other mass communication forms and the transition in social structures towards imperatives of 'choice' and 'flexibility' have proved to be profound changes that accelerated from around this time in the late 1990s. These changes are interconnected and in many cases were reliant on each other to take effect. In turn they have caused a myriad of micro-revolutions in all aspects of everyday living, from shopping to work practices to home

entertainment and so indeed, to sitcom. Thus 1997 is also a key moment within the development of British television comedy; *I'm Alan Partridge*, which could be thought of as the beginning of a different type of sitcom in its themes and address to the audience, was first broadcast for example. From then on, situation comedy became a form that began to take a different direction from the structures that had sustained the genre for the previous fifty years.

The devices they use and the arguments my four main textual examples make about living in contemporary Britain create a coherent picture and critique of modernity. As part of a wider range of contemporary texts, they also demonstrate how sitcom has adapted its form to meet the expectations of its audience, an acknowledgement that this audience watches and understands television within the dictates of a transformed media environment. Television is now one of many competing information and entertainment media and the conventions of production and consumption and the role of the audience have become much more flexible, a development which I will explore fully in a later chapter. However television, which, as John Ellis argues, "is distinct in its everydayness and its sense of co-presence with its audience" (*Seeing Things* 176), remains a strong vehicle for communication about how we live now, debating the uncertainty and anxiety that people experience in modernity. There is no reason why sitcom, a situation with recurring characters played for predominantly comic effect, cannot still work as a forum within television to explore and understand this world.

Mick Eaton wrote in the late 1970s that “there has been virtually nothing written about the television situation comedy as a specially televisual form” and “that in academic work on television the situation comedy has been all but ignored” (61). Despite its long-standing ubiquity and popularity, sitcom has still often been criticised, or more often, ignored in the academy, partly perhaps because of this ubiquity and popularity, which gave some commentators the idea that it must therefore be worthless. Roger Kimball in 2008 went as far as denouncing sitcom as one of the “ephemeral and intellectually vacuous products of pop culture ... [that] are enlisted as fit subjects for the college curriculum”, in a tirade against such study, showing the pressures on those that want to address the form and stress its importance.

In Britain in particular, Eaton’s complaint still largely stands. The paucity of work could also be because, as Jim Cook explains in the BFI dossier *Television Sitcom*, the first really significant lengthy critique in the UK, “to attempt to write seriously about comedy can give rise to two linked objections: ‘analysis’ is unnecessary – comedy, like any other popular form, works self-evidently and naturally; people who write seriously about comedy can’t have any sense of humour – if you have to explain a joke you explain it away.” (1) It has also, as some other writers in this dossier demonstrate (Curtis, Swanson, Oakley), been characterised as conservative in content and rigid in form.

Cook goes on to argue however ‘...the questions of sitcom are not simple or obvious’ (3) and I also believe both that comedy is complex and that unlocking that complexity can enhance rather than reduce the joke. After the publication of

the BFI dossier in 1982, little work followed on sitcom in the UK, other than some sections in Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik's book *Popular Film and Television Comedy* in 1990 and occasional interventions by dossier contributor Andy Medhurst, one of the very few scholars to take comedy seriously as a subject in the UK. Medhurst's work is often concerned with comedy in a more general sense, particularly in its application to debates about national character (*National Joke*) but this has included some particularly astute commentary on particular shows and episodes from sitcoms (*National Joke* 117-123 for instance). Over twenty years after the BFI dossier first appeared Brett Mills produced his study *Television Sitcom* and has subsequently followed this up with *The Sitcom* and a number of other articles and papers on the topic. I will draw on his work and analysis, especially on formal change in the genre. Other than Mills's important contribution however recent works have been limited; Barry Langford has written a useful chapter in *Popular Television Drama Critical Perspectives* and noted that "sitcom remains notably underdiscussed" (15), although there have been valuable studies on particular shows (Ben Walters' *The Office* for example).

In the United States, despite the complaints of Kimball, the situation has been a little better. Sitcom has been harder to ignore in critical writing because of its continued popularity and its traditional centrality to the television experience and its history. There have been notable studies by critics such as Lawrence E. Mintz, David Marc and Janet Staiger and collections edited by Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder and Joanne Morreale. Staiger writes that "one of the most powerful sites for both discourse creation and discourse circulation is the

American television situation comedy. In the medium of television, the sitcom has proven to be the most popular genre” (2). While many of the same factors have affected television in the United States as in Britain and audiences for sitcoms have declined, Joanne Morreale argues that “it appears that the cycle is shifting once more and the sitcom will remain one of television’s most durable forms” (250). Writers such as Marc and Antonio Savorelli have analysed new trends in American sitcom programming and there have been studies of individual significant texts such as *Seinfeld*, *Sex and the City* and the US version of *The Office* by Mirzoeff, Lavery and Dunne (ed.), Hirsch and Hirsch, Jermyn and Griffin. While there are differences in the nature and reception of sitcom on either side of the Atlantic, I will argue that the British tradition and its recent experience, is just as rich and resonant as that of America. This makes the lack of critical work on British programming all the more regrettable.

While the breadth, and depth, of work on British sitcom is absent, there is considerably more general writing within Television Studies from both Britain and America that can and will be constructively used here. Significant contributions on transformations in the medium have been made by Karen Lury, Jeremy G Butler, John T Caldwell and others. John Ellis’s work on the changing relationship of television to its audience is particularly important and will play a key role in the formulation of my arguments. In particular I find his notion that television is a mode of “working through” for the audience in coming to terms with their lives very persuasive and this informs my reading of the texts. Ellis argues that

Television imbues the present moment with meanings. It offers multiple stories and frameworks of explanation which enable understanding and, in the very multiplicity of those frameworks, it enables its viewers to work through the major public and private concerns of their society. Television has a key role in the social process of working through because it exists alongside us, holding our hands (*Seeing Things* 74).

It seems to me that sitcom is an exemplar of this process. Its affinity with everyday living and ordinary existence can imbue the moment with meanings and offers the opportunity to be a vicarious mirror in which we can see our own lives, “holding our hands” as it provides both the comfort of familiarity and a challenge to our own assumptions about society and ourselves.

Despite all these valuable interventions, little critical writing in Britain, other than Mills’ work, has really addressed at length the formal and aesthetic changes that sitcom has undergone and the meanings that this might create for the shows’ audiences. There has been some work on American models by scholars such as Butler (175-217) but there are many particularities about the programmes and the situation in the UK. Similarly while there is a large and ever-growing body of work that considers the future of television within the digital age (Caughie, Nelson, Lury *Interpreting*), little of that has looked at the particular pressures and conditions that sitcom faces as part of this process in the unique landscape of British broadcasting. Other than one essay in *Screen* by Mills in 2008 on *Peep Show* there has also been no academic work on my four key texts. I hope to extend the terms of the debate so that form and content in the new sitcom can be considered in relation to each other.

While the thesis is primarily looking at the subject from a Television Studies standpoint, I feel something else is also required to really interrogate the research question of reactions and responses to social change. I need to establish what this change really is and consider ideas about what the effects on society and the individual might be. To do this I will be examining some arguments developing in the social sciences over the last couple of decades that seek to characterise and analyse this changing experience of people in a fast-evolving world where traditional structures have been diminished or abandoned by globalisation and where a much more fluid sense of social ties to class, family or country has taken its place. A number of leading social theorists try to identify the questions facing individuals negotiating their way through this society. I believe that their analyses can be productively applied to the study of recent sitcoms and that these programmes can help articulate some of the debates introduced by these theorists in their arguments.

The work of a number of theorists is useful here and will be discussed in this study, including Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Harvey, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, and others. However two of the social critics, Richard Sennett and to a lesser extent Zygmunt Bauman, will feature most prominently as their work is particularly incisive and pertinent on these issues. Their ideas can illuminate an understanding of the attitudes implied and critiqued in the texts, although this does not mean that their analysis of the actuality of modernity will go unquestioned – there are criticisms that can be made about their positions.

So why am I stressing the importance of Sennett's work and making his writing the primary critical voice in my study? It might, after all, seem a strange choice. Sennett does not write about comedy or even television. However I believe his work is particularly appropriate to my study because he is concerned with how people feel about themselves and their place in the world in Western societies where the socio-economic context has been transformed and where old expectations and securities have disappeared. By using his social theories we can situate these cultural texts firmly in their social context. It is Sennett who I believe articulates the contemporary conflict between the self and society most clearly and thus best enables understanding of the world that these comedy shows portray.

Sennett was born in 1943 and brought up largely in Chicago. He has written about his poor but bohemian and political background extensively recently, especially in and around his book *Respect: The Formation of Character in a World of Inequality* (2003), although he claims to "dislike personal confession ... I've tried to use my own experience, rather, as a starting point for exploring a larger social problem" (*Respect* xiv).

He made his name as a sociologist in the US from the 1960s to the early 1990s at institutions including Yale, undertaking extensive fieldwork with social groups to gauge the nature of American society and its codes. These studies include *The Fall of Public Man* (1964) and *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (with Jonathan Cobb 1970). Much of this work concerned hierarchies and class identity in the context of a post-war settlement that saw mature, planned

capitalist economies with clear and ordered gradations of authority. For those lower down the pyramid of power, there was a clear sense of class consciousness and self-belief, derived particularly through union membership and the benefits gained from collective struggle. Sennett's fieldwork took in groups from all parts of the social spectrum and aimed to find out how they saw their place in this system.

In the mid 1990s, Sennett moved to England to take up a post at the London School of Economics. While he still writes a lot about America, a British dimension started to enter his work. His transnational move coincided with both the advent of the Blair government in Britain and a shared understanding that the structures of society were changing through technology, globalisation, deregulation and moral shifts. He has used his outsider status to comment on British politics and society becoming something of a public intellectual, as far as such a status exists in the UK. Some of his comments are on the particularities of Britain; while often cited and occasionally consulted by the New Labour government he criticised some of its ethos and obsessions with targets, for instance the excessive bureaucracy that academics faced in the UK ("Suffering Professionals") but his work is usually about how people are affected by change across the developed world.

My principal interest is in Sennett's later work, since his move to the UK, which seeks to make sense of the social transformation of the last decade or so. This work has a clear relationship to his earlier studies. Having detailed how previous social structures operated and dictated the understanding of the self, his

mission is now to show how these structures have unravelled and how they have created a culture of uncertainty and ambiguity, where we experience “a shift in the larger culture’s value system, one in which stability as such increasingly lacks moral prestige” (*Culture* 75). He has frequently revisited his earlier fieldwork and case studies to collect evidence of this transformation. There are four major works by Sennett that directly tackle these issues: *The Corrosion of Character* (1998), *Respect: The Formation of Character in a World of Inequality* (2003), *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (published in 2006 but based on a series of lectures at the University of Yale in 2004) and *Together The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (2012). This most recent volume is the second in a trio of books “about the skills people need to sustain everyday life” (ix) but whereas the first in the trilogy, *The Craftsman*, concentrated on the principles of craft and technique, *Together* is about how people deal with each other and the world around them, a world that now is changing rapidly; the nature of these changes and their effects, is at heart of all these four books. In addition, there are a number of chapters and articles in periodicals and newspapers that flesh out his position and apply his arguments into new areas.

Zygmunt Bauman, like Sennett, is not British but is based in the UK and he engages with the British experience. He is originally from Poland and moved to Britain many years ago to be a Professor at the University of Leeds. Like Sennett he is nominally ‘left-wing’, although critical of many of the structures of thinking on the left over the last fifty years (he shares a disdain for identity politics with Sennett). His output remains prolific, increasingly based around his analysis

of a world founded on what he terms “liquid modernity”, a thesis laid out in his book of this title published in 2000. Since then he expanded his notion of what “liquid modernity” might be and how it operates throughout life, applying the concept to relationships (“liquid love”), culture and everyday living through ever more books on the subject. He sees modernity as a site where individuals become fragile and flawed, lacking supportive structures for morality because of this “liquid” environment in which people live, where nothing is fixed, predictable or secure. Thus individuals are adrift within society: “to practice the art of life... amounts in our liquid modern world to being in a state of permanent transformation, to perpetually self-redefine through becoming (or at least trying to become) someone other than one has been thus far” (*Art of Life* 73).

In these circumstances “uncertainty is the natural habitat of human life” (*Art of Life* 20) and, in Bauman’s view, society becomes more fractured and selfish. Bauman pays a little more attention than Sennett to popular culture (*Culture in Liquid Modern World, Liquid Life* 62), although not to any great depth (or indeed understanding) but his analysis of the way modernity works is also relevant to the reading of contemporary sitcom texts.

Sennett’s message, supported by Bauman and aspects of other theorists’ work, is that the new modernity does not deliver what it promises – that its ‘freedoms’ and ‘choices’ are largely imaginary and worthless. In addition, the best aspects of the old system, the structures that, for all their undoubted restrictions, could allow a sense of collective struggle or of clarity in forming a “life-narrative”

(*Corrosion* 16) have been taken away from individuals, creating a disjuncture between them and the society they inhabit.

Popular sitcoms reflect these anxieties so they too become part of a social discourse and a way of seeing ourselves. Sennett's central argument, which is that "the culture of the new capitalism" is a reductive, fallacious culture that robs us of respect and "authorship" (*Corrosion* 16) in our daily lives, can be applied productively, if not unproblematically, to these programmes. While their creators may well not have read his work, the anxieties that he identifies are ones that inflect contemporary experience. Television comedy is one of the cultural arenas in which shared concerns can be played out in public – where there can be a "working through". It takes its place within everyday experience and the liberation of laughter allows sitcom to take its analysis to a popular audience (if not as popular as before, as I will discuss). In doing so it adds to social discourse so that aspects of Sennett and others' ideas become part of a wider, rolling sense of disquiet and questioning about the position in which 'we' find ourselves. Certainly 'we' as viewers can see that the protagonists, narratives, situations and tone of these programmes support Sennett's assertion that "these changes have not set people free" (*Culture* 13).

There has been no coherent previous attempt to link the picture of modernity dramatised in recent sitcoms with theoretical writing about how everyday experience and the relationship between self and society, may have changed. The only use of this critical work to discuss sitcoms, as far as I am aware, is the application of some of Sennett's writing about the modern

workplace to *The Office*, both in Ben Walters' monograph on the series in 2005 and in a newspaper article by Jenny Turner. While helpful, these discussions only look at the most explicit readings of his ideas to texts: the move to 'flexible', if "illegible" (Sennett, *Corrosion* 10) work environments and the depiction of that workplace in *The Office*. However, the analysis of modernity in the work of Sennett, Bauman and others is much more widely applicable to sitcom's depiction of contemporary life. Many recent sitcoms have forged a dialogue with audiences about all aspects of their lives, from work to leisure, from friendships to relationships, from security to freedom and the application of social theory allows a better understanding of this conversation.

Here I hope to show that while sitcom is no longer a mass entertainment, able to gain viewing figures of ten-twenty million, it still has a significant social role in engaging audiences and in commenting on the pressures, iniquities and of course the absurdities, of modernity. The best sitcom texts can still offer a valuable discourse that is a dynamic dialogue about what modernity means; the mode of address allows a space for the audience to reflect and respond to what is happening to them. They offer a humorous analogy of everyday existences not unlike our own and ask questions that anticipate what competing interpretations might be – do you feel like this sometimes? Is this better or worse than before? What is the right thing to do in this situation? Can you see how this aspect of modern life might be funny or ridiculous? This social role is part of the function of the sitcom; it can even be seen as an ethical imperative that if unfulfilled marks

out the show as an artistic failure because, whatever the ratings, it has to resonate and make that connection with the lives of its audience.

SOCIETY AND MODERNITY

Introduction

If we have evidence and a clear discourse to help us understand contemporary society we can make sense of the landscape in which sitcoms appear and the kinds of conflicts and anxieties that they are dramatising and satirising. Sitcoms can be particularly rich when read as a commentary on social mores and they have proved a very popular form of cultural discourse in Britain over the last fifty years; indeed Brett Mills has argued that “sitcom becomes not only representative of a culture’s identity and ideology... it becomes one of the ways in which that culture defines and understands itself (*Television Sitcom* 9).

Sitcom in Britain has long assumed this social role, reflecting debates and changes within society and imagining its conflicts for comic effect. The “consolation” of laughter with which the form rewards viewer investment has allowed sitcoms to become accepted by their audience as interpretations of society because, as John Ellis argues, “consolatory entertainment goes over, renews and embellishes accepted truths about human nature...it serves to generalise the particular feelings and experiences of individuals as being part of a larger experience” (*TV FAQ* 13).

Ellis’s notion of “consolation” develops the concept of television as a process of “working through” in society that he first introduced in *Seeing Things* earlier in the decade. “Working through” and “consolation” provide productive models for how sitcoms and society can bind text to context, engaging in a

dynamic dialogue about this “larger experience”, which offers a consoling function for the anxieties of individuals struggling with its consequences.

In the 1960s and 1970s, programmes such as *Till Death Us Do Part*, *Steptoe and Son*, and *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* do this very explicitly and articulately with characters talking through the issues that were the subject of political conflict at the time: class; gender; race; party politics; embourgeoisement or economic decline for example. Using a format in which the audience gets to intimately know recurring characters in situations that usually approximate to something like the familiarity of contemporary daily life, with problems encountered by many, enables this and reflects the uncertainties and fears of the moment.

However, society thirty or forty years ago, while conflicted, was easier to characterise. There was a sense of belonging to a society or class or community; the tropes of identity in mainstream life were very clear and rigidly defined, which also made it easier to oppose or question them. But what about Britain now? How can comedies begin to embody and critique the way that people feel about themselves and the society they live in? The society that sitcoms now portray has changed dramatically and can no longer be based on these structures and certainties. Instead programmes are trying to explore and to satirise new anxieties and conflicts. In this study I analyse how the humour of contemporary sitcoms exploits the tensions of being an individual in a changed society. It is through this humour that connections with the audience are made about their own fears and confusion.

Social Theory and Modernity

Much recent analysis within the social sciences has attempted to characterise and explain how shifts have occurred in how people might feel about their lives and how those lives fit into a wider social narrative. Social criticism should be of great interest to television scholars in illuminating the very radical changes in how the medium has come to be produced and consumed over the last decade or two. After all, the social and economic changes that these theorists describe and define have created a landscape in which television has transformed from a small number of networks offering a mixed schedule viewed as broadcast by a mass audience to a plethora of channels often serving niche audiences who time-shift their viewing of TV texts as part of a range of entertainment and information choices. Such change has fundamentally altered the outlook of those viewers too, altering the textures of everyday life and the certainties of place within social structures that played a significant part in how people watched television and what they watched on screen. In comedy, this has meant a move away from programmes aimed at uniting large audiences at the heart of the primetime schedule. It has also meant a shift in tone and content, with new comic targets and approaches to suit an audience with a very different sensibility.

The work of Richard Sennett, Zygmunt Bauman and others helps to open up debates on how Western society has moved from one place to another and together these theorists present a cohesive picture on the conflicts within modern society, even if their analysis and explanations may differ. From the late 1940s

there was a post-war settlement built on the older industrial models of communities with a strong economic base (often in manufacturing or public service) and a coherent network of social interaction where people knew and co-operated with those around them. It was a world constructed around the national and the local, in which individuals had a clear function within their society and within the family and community unit. In a less sympathetic reading, it could be argued that this world was reductive and restricted, a conformist society lacking enterprise, where lives could be stifled with predictability. Although Sennett argues that the dissipation of this world has caused great problems, he concedes that “it was claustrophobic in outlook; its terms of self-organisation were rigid” (*Corrosion* 117). This period of post-war settlement could be said to have lasted up to the 1990s, although the break-up of the settlement began (at least in Britain and the United States) from at least the early 1980s and the ideology and some of the measures that brought about its downfall occurred much earlier (Jameson xx).

The position in which individuals in Western societies now find themselves living is in many respects a much less obviously regulated, more atomised, world dominated by globalised capital and money markets rather than national governments. The change is extensive and real: Anthony Giddens argues that “I do think our era is in some ways profoundly different from the past – a mixture of new opportunities and deep threats and difficulties” (“In Conversation” 4).

The “culture of the new capitalism” disseminates a hegemonic discourse promoting ‘freedom’ and ‘choice’ but this creates a less secure environment;

communities are more fluid, personal relationships more transient and work is no longer 'for life', as workers are encouraged to move from job to job and not to forge alliances with colleagues through trade unions. This demands a very different mindset from the securities of the past, when there appeared to be a clear role (albeit often subordinate or even oppressed) within the economic and social system for everybody, articulated through the microeconomic practices of Henry Ford or the state planning ideas of John Maynard Keynes. David Harvey suggests that "postwar Fordism has to be seen, therefore, less as a mere system of mass production and more as a total way of life" (135). That way of life has now largely disappeared. The individual is imagined as a much more autonomous unit with weakened social and economic bonds outside the self. Bauman suggests that now "ours is... an individualized, privatized version of modernity, with the burden of pattern-weaving and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual's shoulders" (7-8). Cultural texts can raise questions with their audiences about how this burden manifests itself, helping to articulate fears and desires and making sense of what change might mean and "working through" potential responses to these shifts.

Social theorists can illuminate change through their ideas and arguments, which can be supported by the use of statistical data to provide evidence of the effects of the move from industrial society to this new globalised, atomised reality and argue what it might mean for how individuals regard themselves and their place in the world. Through detailing and analysing some of the social theorists' interpretation of the nature and consequences of this transformation and the new

shape of Western, post-industrial societies, I aim here to lay out the kind of concerns that are dramatised in recent comedy programmes and understood by their audience.

Debate on the increasing fractures between self and society has been taking place for at least twenty years and covers a range of disciplines. The main proponents of ideas in the field have included the philosopher Anthony Giddens, the economist Richard Layard, the sociologists Robert D. Putnam, Ulrich Beck, Sennett and Bauman and, in one of the most recent and most influential contributions, the epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, whose years of study of public health informed their book on social inequality, *The Spirit Level*, in 2009. The studies are interconnected in that they build upon each other's work; Putnam's work in 2000's *Bowling Alone* on social organisation in American communities clearly informs Layard's *Happiness: Study of a New Science* and *The Spirit Level* for example but ideas are developed and calibrated to reflect a situation that seems constantly in flux. In the early 1980s, Marshall Berman bemoaned the fact that "wholeness goes against the grain of contemporary thought" (88) – not any more, social theory's responses to modernity now do presume a totality to the way the world works. It is also noticeable that, rather than being confined to the academy, this work has been important in public and political discourse, widely discussed in newspapers and cited by politicians. Giddens' book *The Third Way* for instance is often seen as a founding document for New Labour and 'the third way' concept was frequently used as a clarion call by Tony Blair himself. *The Spirit Level* achieved its aim of

influencing public policy in its analysis but also provoked a furious backlash from the free market right, questioning its application of data (Snowdon). The authors tried to answer these critics (“Authors respond”), showing that these arguments are ongoing and develop in response to interventions and critiques. The work of these critics has influenced popular discourse because they reflect anxieties that are felt by many people. Arguments about the way we live now have become prevalent in debates: in newspapers; popular studies, such as those by Oliver James or Alain de Botton; analysis by commentators like Francis Wheen or Paul Mason and in television news programmes; not to mention Internet forums and blogs, which were spawned in the era of contemporary modernity but often display great fears and antipathy towards it.

In many of the studies, some possible solutions to political and economic confusion are suggested but they are not my primary interest – rather it is the analysis of the problem that appeals here. The theorists I am utilising offer diverse political positions and there is quite some distance from the Blairism of Giddens to the more entrenched leftism of Sennett and Judt for example but they are largely ‘progressive’ and on the liberal/left spectrum in their views. Their view of modernity may be critical but is removed from the Conservative critique of contemporary living offered by the right-wing press in Britain or by intellectuals such as Roger Scruton. While differing in the extent of their optimism (Beck, Giddens) or pessimism (Bauman, Sennett), all the theorists are concerned with how the world works now compared to twenty or thirty years ago and with how people might feel about this comparison. Particularly valuable for the study of

contemporary sitcom form and tone are their thoughts about how living in a society that is less codified and more apparently fluid affects the sense of self and the role of the self in society. It is these dilemmas that shape the text and context of the comedy programmes I am studying. Many of the theorists diagnose a doubt and fear behind many of our actions; at the beginning of *The Spirit Level*, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett summarise their view of contemporary life as follows:

It is a remarkable paradox that, at the pinnacle of human material and technical achievement, we find ourselves anxiety-ridden, prone to depression, worried about how others see us, unsure of our friendships, driven to consume and with little or no community life. Lacking the relaxed social contact and emotional satisfaction we all need, we seek comfort in over-eating, excessive shopping, psychoactive medicines and illegal drugs (3).

It is this world that contemporary sitcoms depict.

How Have Our Lives Changed?

If social transformation is being debated then the methodologies of social theory need to offer some kind of evidence of how and to what extent this is taking place. The pace and nature of change can vary and reactions to it may be different. There have been significant economic movements towards globalised markets and the direct effect on employment and prosperity for many people can be measured. There are some statistics that highlight this clearly: 24% of Britons were manual workers in 2006 compared to 70% in 1951 for example or the change from 80% of those 1950s manual workers living in rented accommodation to 64% of manual workers being homeowners in the late 1980s

(Storry and Childs 190-91). There is also plenty of data to show that economic advance has not been equal and that economic and social inequality is increasing. Wilkinson and Pickett's study is based around these facts and they show data that illustrates that the UK has a particularly stark income gap between richest and poorest, with the richest 20% of the population over 6.5 times wealthier than the poorest 20% (17).

Changes in attitude may seem harder to measure. Politicians are always laying claim to 'what people are saying and thinking' but they have no real way of knowing what large numbers of individuals feel about different issues other than through very broad-based opinion polls. There are also dangers in generalising about the views of the people when they may just be signs of an incipient trend developing. In his popular study, *Welcome to Everytown*, philosopher Julian Baggini tries to understand the mindset of the average contemporary Briton. He does this by living for a few months in a suburb of Rotherham in Yorkshire, which is the postcode conforming to the most representative cross section of different social groups in the UK. He argues that

social commentators often make the mistake of looking at trends and then over-extrapolating from them. It is true that we are becoming more middle-class and individualistic but the direction we are heading in should not be confused with where we are now (8).

This is a useful warning and of course change is a gradual process of ebb and flow; new ways of thinking are gradually introduced and have a stronger purchase at some places and moments more than others. However there are some studies and surveys that can give us a measure of how thinking and assumptions are altering.

The survey *British Social Attitudes* has been run by the National Centre for Social Research since 1983 and publishes detailed studies on particular issues, underpinned by extensive fieldwork with focus groups. Internationally, the European and World Values Surveys monitor notions such as levels of trust in fellow citizens or perceptions of kindness in others that can provide important clues to the modern mindset. There are some much more specific long-term studies that can also prove useful; for instance the Rowntree Foundation's long-term project compares those born in 1958 to those born in 1970. The British Household Panel Survey has monitored the same sample group since 1991 and the 'Whitehall 1 and 2' studies monitor British civil servants and have provided evidence to studies on hierarchy by showing that health and lifespan are strongly affected by one's position in the chain of command (Wilkinson and Pickett 75). Evidential work like this provides a framework in which to discuss popular perceptions about how things might have changed. To give a couple of examples from *British Social Attitudes*: the perception that there has been a universal breakdown in social trust is challenged by survey data but this data does show that young, urban males' trust in others has significantly declined (Clery and Stockdale 209). Another study shows that attitudes can shift over time and between generations – 84% of parents over 65 agree that marriage is the best kind of relationship in contrast to only 38% of 18-34 year olds (Dench 107).

Many of the social theorists on contemporary living base their ideas around this statistical evidence. Wilkinson and Pickett ground their conclusions in data from already published national and international sources, as does Richard

Layard. Robert Putnam's study on changes in America makes much use of the US Government's General Social Survey, which differentiates between different states and employs data from a range of organisations in order to track a decline in public community involvement over some decades. Others, notably Sennett himself, are involved in extensive fieldwork with social groups (in the USA Sennett looked at groups as diverse as immigrant bakers, Boston upper-class families and IBM programmers), which are used as a basis to make some assertions about how people might feel about their lives (*Corrosion* 68, 119).

Sitcom and Social Change

Texts like comedy programmes can also provide evidence, albeit unscientific, of how attitudes can change. The contrasts between Britain in earlier decades and now can be demonstrated in the differences between the sitcoms of the age. This ranges from obvious political or social factors like the presence of racist jokes or indeed party political debate in the earlier shows or swearing and more overt sexual references in the later ones. Yet it goes further than that. Social change can be seen in the assumptions that are communicated between text and audience about what might be found usual or unusual. To take an example: in the 1980s there was a very popular (and very fine) suburban sitcom, *Ever Decreasing Circles*. The premise of the show, which was a subtly scabrous satire on suburban mores of the time, was that its central protagonist, Martin Brice (Richard Briers), was a busybody who was involved in the organisation of countless local groups and clubs. Just twenty-five years later

such a situation would not feel credible, as Robert D. Putnam details in his work on the decline of social capital' in *Bowling Alone*, suburban communities just do not work like that anymore (210) and in Martin's close commuters would be much more likely to return from work late and relax with their family or computer rather than spend all their time socialising with their neighbours. What may have been just a comic exaggeration of a recognised social situation at the time is no longer believable. By the same token, character types can change. One of the missing stock characters from recent sitcoms is the pseudo-intellectual, a figure that was previously familiar in sitcoms in both the USA and Britain: Diane Chambers (Shelley Long) in *Cheers* for example and, on occasion, Harold Steptoe (Harry H. Corbett) in *Steptoe and Son*. This absence is not because intellectual ambitions are now so normal that they are no longer comic but because they no longer seem intelligible to audiences. The intellectual aspirations of Diane, even though they are played for laughs, no longer resonate as a goal – wanting money or fame would seem more realistic. That does not mean that no one wants to educate themselves anymore but it does imply that the popular discourse no longer recognises this desire in the same way as previously.

Equally the situations that Mark and Jez in *Peep Show* find themselves in would have seemed too atypical to work as a convincing comic scenario two decades earlier; the show relies on a cultural zeitgeist of computer games, casual sex, self-help regimes and drug-taking that is more universal, at least for its target demographic, than before. Humour often comes from the transgression from expected or appropriate behaviours so the joke with

characters like David Brent (Ricky Gervais) in *The Office* is his inability to correctly read the parameters of discourse about race or the boundaries between work and personal modes of behaviour. These accepted norms change over time and rely on different audience expectations to those of sitcoms of twenty or thirty years earlier.

As I will discuss in subsequent chapters in this study, text cannot be divorced from context and there are a whole host of factors to bear in mind that help to shape the content of television programmes – from institutional production politics to the power of particular individuals in the process and the distribution patterns and the consumption practices that dictate audience response. That said, the text is working to produce a reaction from its viewers through what its characters do and say and sitcoms communicate with them through this shared language of social assumptions.

The Self and Society

The group of theorists I have identified, despite working in a similar endeavour, come to some different conclusions and emphasise different aspects of contemporary experience. Some, like Putnam and to an extent Giddens, are primarily concerned with social organisation and how such structures can be reconstituted in the new order. Layard and especially Wilkinson and Pickett stress the inequality of the new society based on markets and capital. Sennett, Bauman and Beck are especially concerned with the motivations and beliefs of

people and how their sense of morality and obligation might be affected by modernity.

Of particular interest is how these theorists define the modern individual. I will look at Sennett's analysis in detail but Beck, Giddens and Bauman also have interesting ideas on how individuals approach the task of living in the modern world. Giddens contends that "the creativity of modern life comes not just from the driving force of the markets but also from the changes that ordinary people everywhere are making in their lives" ("In Conversation" 27). He takes a broadly optimistic view of modernity as a driver for new freedoms, while acknowledging the problems that can arise from a globalised world and its potential inequalities. Giddens sees technological change as one of the most important agents of change ("In Conversation" 5) but takes a more positive view of this than Layard (78-9) or Putnam (216-17), both of whom see the rapid advance of technology, especially television itself as I will discuss in the following chapter, as a crucial factor in the dislocation of individuals from society. Giddens has many critics in his embrace of some of the elements of global capital (Wheen 226-7), not to mention some of his dealings with world leaders (from Blair to Gaddafi) but his ideas on modernity have proved very influential.

Ulrich Beck has written about how modernity can be defined through the concept of "living your own life in a runaway world", the title of his article in Giddens and Hutton's edited collection *On the Edge*. He contends that

it would only be a slight exaggeration to say that the daily struggle for a life of your own has become the collective experience of the Western world. It expresses the remnant of our communal feeling ("Living" 164).

For Beck “the ethic of self-fulfilment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society” (“Living” 165). In the article he identifies fifteen different ways in which, he argues, “living one’s own life” has shaped a new society (165 -73). He suggests that this new way of living necessitates a reinvention of the self; a more isolated self than before but someone who is able to take control of themselves through processes of reflexivity, declining tradition and depoliticisation. He acknowledges that this means much of this individualism is institutionalised and that many “lives of one’s own” can end up being broadly similar (166). The idea of “living your life” has proved resonant and so have the clichés of the ambition. In episode 8:4 (‘Chairman Mark’) of *Peep Show*, Mark mordantly tells his girlfriend Dobbie (Isy Suttie) that “living your life isn’t all swimming with dolphins and climbing Machu Picchu”. However, Beck’s reaction to this new world remains broadly positive; he sees potential for liberation, altruism and co-operation in this new individualisation, away from the emphasis on the majority’s wishes that defined the collective society (173).

One of Beck’s points is that the centrality of the self is a very recent human development (“Living” 170). For centuries the self was expected to be subordinated to the whole or the mass. The gradual drip of ideas from early twentieth-century psychoanalytic theory into popular attitudes has had an increasing influence on society in creating a heightened awareness of both the needs and frailties of the self. In the comedies of the 1970s this is sometimes referred to but in a very self-conscious and rhetorical way; in a 1972 episode of *Steptoe and Son*, ‘Loathe Story’, Harold’s attempt to murder his father leads to

an encounter with a sex-obsessed psychiatrist and a host of Freudian gags. Characters identify themselves in terms of the collective group rather than as isolated individuals; they are defined by social status. By the 2000s, self-reflection has become an unremarkable and implicit mode of thought for comic characters – after all research by *British Social Attitudes* showed that 68% agreed that “it is important to me to talk about my feelings” with 66% agreeing that people nowadays spend more time talking about their feelings than in the past” (Anderson, Brownlie and Given 157). Mark in *Peep Show* is constantly worrying about the actions of his own unconscious, although in ‘Holiday’ when he has to see a counsellor with fiancée Sophie (Olivia Colman) he proudly boasts that “none of it is even my fault – it’s all my so-called subconscious” and while Tommy Saxondale may mock his weekly anger management therapy group, he dedicates his life to the construction of a self in opposition to those around him. Other theorists see this obsession with the self and the eschewing of collective identities as problematic and something that damages individuals, disorientating them from the society around them. Indeed Richard Sennett argues that “modern identity is flooded with identity–talk... [which] isn’t much use for making sense of personal life today in the global economy because an ever-shifting external market reality disturbs fixed pictures of self”. (“Street and office” 175).

The torments and feelings of failure that haunt Mark or Alice in *Love Soup* are felt to be their own fault; certainly the characters around them consider their feelings of failure or the actuality of their failure, to be a personal flaw, separated from the struggles of others. Even Beck, despite his belief in the potential of a

new individualism, notes that “social crises appear as individual and are no longer or are only very indirectly perceived in their social dimension” (“Living”167). He thinks this actually creates “a new immediacy” (167) between individuals and society, whereas others see it as a fundamental dislocation.

Bauman insists that

[p]rivatization (of modernization) means compulsive *self*-critique born of perpetual self-disaffection; being an individual *de jure* means having no one to blame for one’s own misery, seeking the causes of one’s own defeats nowhere except in one’s own indolence and sloth, and looking for no remedies other than trying harder and harder still.....living daily with the risk of self-reprobation and self-contempt is not an easy matter (*Liquid Modernity* 38).

He and Sennett critique this shift towards seeing problems as solely of the self rather than created by systems. Whereas characters like Harold Steptoe and Terry Collier (James Bolam) in *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* saw their ills as at least partly dictated through class and Ria Parkinson’s (Wendy Craig) ennui in *Butterflies* was shared through the social position of women (Hallam), now the finger of blame is pointed at the individual. For in the new world, the “liquid modernity” defined by Bauman or “the culture of the new capitalism” as Sennett terms it, there are no longer supposed be such strictures. However in both Bauman’s and Sennett’s analyses the changes in society are more cosmetic than real, part of a discourse that makes reality harder to confront than previously and offers no way forward by collective action to confront the sources of power.

Richard Sennett and “the Culture of the New Capitalism”

Sennett's body of work offers a coherent and illuminating account of how people in the West inhabit this confusing new world. Within it, Sennett expounds a number of interconnecting themes to describe how people's lives have changed. This can be outlined in a few key recurring phrases he uses, often in the titles of his books. "The Culture of the New Capitalism" describes the way new economic exigencies drive a whole approach to living through their claims to flexibility and meritocracy, claims that Sennett dismisses as essentially spurious. The idea of "character" and its "corrosion" through this changing culture is also central to his critique. Character is defined as "the personal traits which we value in ourselves and for which we seek to be valued by others" (*Corrosion* 10). Crucial to this is the concept of "respect"; indeed Sennett's book *Respect* is subtitled *The Formation of Character in an Age of Inequality*. Implicit here is that, within "the culture of the new capitalism", "respect" becomes something that becomes harder to give and harder to feel for the self. Sennett suggests that socio-economic changes make it harder to construct the self meaningfully at all; they threaten the development of a "life-narrative" (*Corrosion* 133) that can bring the individual some kind of fulfilment and understanding of their function in society. He lays out the central dilemmas as follows:

How can a human being develop a narrative of identity and life history in a society composed of episodes and fragments? Short term capitalism threatens to corrode character, particularly those qualities of character which binds human beings to one another and furnishes each with a sustainable sense of self (*Corrosion* 26).

In this environment it becomes much more difficult to be "the author of one's life" (*Corrosion* 16), another of Sennett's key themes. The importance of this idea in

the new society is stressed in an article by Jenny Turner, who ties Sennett's thinking on self-authorship to a range of cultural texts, including *The Office*, commenting "there's something so brittle and anxious, I always think, about "success" as a concept. It's a word for filling in CVs with, not sustaining life".

In his recent work Sennett tries to sketch out what "the culture of new capitalism" really means for people's daily lives. He particularly concentrates on work but argues that the sense of self created in the new work environment affects every aspect of culture. It is useful to go into rather more detail about the nature of this new capitalism, as Sennett interprets it and consider how that might be reflected through television sitcom.

The capitalism of the decades after the Second World War was regulated and managed in the mode Harvey describes as "Fordist-Keynesian" (124). It often involved large workplaces with many hundreds or even thousands of people working together to produce goods from ships to chocolate bars. Within those work spaces there was a clear hierarchical pyramid of command with a board and a chief executive on the top and a number of layers below them reaching down to operatives on the shop floor. Each worker within this pyramid had a clear understanding of the tasks for which they were responsible and a set of recurring duties they understood that they were expected to perform. The process of production was broken down into a number of actions and shared out so that particular people performed the same function within this process. Authority was deduced by rank within the pyramid but rank also necessitated responsibility and accountability for the decisions that were made. Lives of

people in the lower rungs of the pyramid were dictated, therefore, by routine, by the repetition of small tasks that contributed to a greater whole. This pattern was expected to last – it was quite possible to take a job at sixteen and expect to still be there up to your mid-sixties.

As Sennett describes it, this brought about a particular relationship with time and one that can be interpreted in contrasting ways. Time in the pyramidal structure could hang heavy; the repetition and predictability of that life were a great source of frustration and lack of fulfilment to many people and its bureaucracies could lead to a closed system. Sennett does acknowledge that “routine can demean” (*Corrosion* 43), although there are times when one feels that this point could be made more forcefully and more often to balance his otherwise astute reading of the inequities of the new capitalism. However, rather than defending the doctrines of Fordism which, as Bauman argues, is the most complete example of the mechanised function of individuals in society within the old, “heavy capitalism” (57) or trying to claim that routine and bureaucracy are entirely forces for good, what Sennett seeks to do is to show that the notion that this has been replaced by flexibility and choice in working lives is a fallacy.

Time in the old system could be made to have a meaning for individuals; he believes “rationalised time enabled people to think about their lives as narratives – not so much of what will happen as of how things should happen” (*Culture* 23). Within a rationalised timeframe people could be sure of their function in the world, of who they were. A “life-narrative” (*Corrosion* 133) could be established by an understanding of “what should happen” to you in most

circumstances as a result of that role, a role you have perfected and matched to yourself over time. It was a life lived for the long term in which “delayed gratification makes possible self-discipline; you steel yourself to work, unhappily or not, because you are focused on that future reward” (*Culture* 77).

This didn't just apply to work. The implication is also that “you”, the object of Sennett's analysis, saved for an incremental increase in recognition through improved wages and status but also a better lifestyle through everyday comforts and items earned. Similarly you invested emotionally in family and friends because the future would be spent with them and engaged with your neighbourhood because you knew you would always be there. Collective action made sense in the same way; solidarity is easier when you live and work with the same people over time and successes are achieved through actions, creating its own history of progress. Equally the consequences and sanctions against individuals thought to be undermining the collective carried much more weight. There could be an expectation of rewards that would come in time, such as security, promotion and status within the community.

Under the new capitalism however there can be no such expectations for, as Sennett describes, work has become “an experience which drifts in time, from place to place, from job to job” (*Corrosion* 26). In this environment time ceases to be an advantage to the individual and becomes a problem, for “the conditions of time in the new capitalism have created a conflict between character and experience, the experience of disjointed time threatening the ability of people to form their characters into sustained narratives” (*Corrosion* 31).

Whereas status both at work and within communities could be earned by the accumulation of time, of knowledge and experience, such time can now be regarded as a hindrance, an indicator of an inability to adapt to change or to be sufficiently malleable, for as Marshall Berman argues “in order for people, whatever their class, to survive in modern society, their personalities must take on the fluid and open form of this society” (95). To stay, to seek security or to work at a skill over time is suddenly no longer the way to earn respect, according to Sennett, who suggests that “the modern culture of risk is peculiar in that failure to move is taken as a failure, stability seeming almost a living death... The destination therefore matters less than the act of departure...to stay put is to be left out” (*Corrosion* 87).

The new capitalism celebrates rather than fears the possibility of risk. In the years since Sennett published his analysis we have seen the consequences of this trend on the economy and subsequently the lives of individuals through the financial crash of 2007-08. The lack of a sustainable life narrative through risk and the change in the meaning of time and experience has, according to Sennett, influenced our ways of thinking. He suggests that “the capacity to let go of one’s past, the confidence to accept fragmentation: these are two traits of character...truly at home in the new capitalism” (*Corrosion* 63). Thus people who choose not to let go of the past and accept fragmentation or who are unable to do so, are unlikely to prosper in this culture.

In contemporary sitcoms these ‘character failings’ are used for comic effect. Tommy Saxondale is unable to reconcile his past self as a roadie for the

world's top rock bands to his present day suburban routine as a pest controller in Stevenage. He is constantly confused by the spectre of the past so that he eventually tires of Dixy (Mark Williams), an old road crew colleague who wants to go drinking every night (episode 1:3 'Wasps') but is even more appalled in 2:1 by an encounter with another former fellow roadie, Malcolm Jessop (Simon Greenall). Jessop has become a corporate bigwig and is embarrassed by Saxondale's obsession with the 1970s, claiming to be "still kicking ass – just in a way that fulfils my customers' needs in a constantly changing business environment". Steve Coogan has said that Saxondale "wants to define himself in a way other than how he is living in life and that's his tragedy really" ("Interview" Saxondale DVD extra). Certainly other characters regard Tommy's inability to let go of his previous life as laughable; the constant needling and mockery of Tommy by council contact Vicky (Morwenna Banks) is a recurring feature. However, his embrace of the past is surely an attempt to retain a sustainable sense of self in the face of an unrecognisable new culture where he senses that his values, hewn in the counter-culture of the 1970s, no longer have worth. Tommy is nominally fulfilling his dream by working for himself and being 'free' of authority but in reality finds that he is utterly dependent on the patronage of others, such as Vicky, to make a living. Equally the confidence to accept fragmentation is not felt by characters in other shows, hence the loneliness felt by Alice in *Love Soup* and the inability to forge intimacy of Mark in *Peep Show*.

The abolition of the hierarchy and the apparent move away from bureaucracy in many industries and institutions presents itself as a new form of freedom. Sennett begs to differ, however, arguing that

in fact, the new order substitutes new controls rather than simply abolishing the rules of the past - but these new controls are also hard to understand. The new capitalism is an often illegible regime of power (*Corrosion* 9-10).

If rules are difficult to understand then control of one's own life becomes harder because it is unclear what the effect and consequence of our actions are going to be. There is also the fear that these nebulous rules can suddenly change. What we know and what we have learnt becomes less important in a culture of continual reinvention and flexibility. Sennett suggests that "the passage of years seems to hollow us out. Our experience seems a shameful citation" (*Corrosion* 97). Both Alice and Tommy Saxondale find their erudite knowledge a source of confusion or even suspicion in their peers; Tommy is made to feel uncomfortable as an intelligent working man by both his clients and contacts and Alice's awareness of a world beyond the perfume counter is seen as a problem. Witness the reaction to her objections to the use of Martin Luther King's words for advertising cosmetics in 'The Reflecting Pool' (1:4), analysed later in my chapter on tone, or her observations in 'There Must Be Some Kind of Way Out of Here' (1:1) that the name of her estate agent, Rush and Butcher, reminded her of Stalin's death camps. When she says "I bet everyone says that", she receives the chilly, mystified retort, "not really".

On a more direct level Mark in *Peep Show* finds his professional world at JLB Credit an unknowable labyrinth of ever-shifting agendas and targets. Even

Jez, the great evangelist of the flexible society and its supposed freedoms discovers the limitations of the modern workplace in 7:2 ('Man Jam'). He starts working for odious website owner Ben (Danny Babington), whose maxim of "the work never starts", Jez soon realises, in fact means, "the work never stops. He's got me by the blackberries – turning it off is a sackable offence. If I go to a funeral I can switch it to vibrate". In this 'casual', 'creative' environment workers are entirely subject to the whims of their unaccountable masters and the nebulous business model. Thus Jez finds out the truth of the illegible British work culture he had fondly imagined in the following terms in 4:4 'Handyman': "we don't make steam engines out of pig-iron in this country anymore – we hang out, we fuck around on the playstation, we have some Ben and Jerry's, that's how everyone makes their money now yeah?".

Anxiety and Dread

In *The Culture of the New Capitalism* Sennett characterises the shifts in working life, and thus our wider experience, as follows:

one way to contrast this situation to the pyramidal firms I studied 30 years ago lies in the emotional difference between anxiety and dread. Anxiety attaches to what might happen; dread attaches to what one knows will happen. Anxiety arises in ill-defined conditions, dread where pain or ill-fortune is well-defined. Failure in the old pyramid was grounded in dread; failure in the new institution is shaped by anxiety (*Culture* 53).

In many ways this is the defining statement for this study. Here Sennett offers an analysis of the forces in modern life that offers a very direct and plausible explanation of why comedies in the last decade differ from those made thirty or so years ago, when he was studying his pyramidal baking and computing

businesses. The sitcoms of Britain in the 1970s were based on an understanding of dread – a shared dialogue with their audience about an ordered society where an individual’s role within their world was rigidly defined and understood by themselves and the world around them. The jokes and also the pathos came from this knowledge of predictability and inflexibility: whether it is by the precise gradations within the class system satirised by *The Good Life* or *George and Mildred*; the understanding that Harold Steptoe could never leave his junkyard prison guarded by his father; or Ria Parkinson’s confines as a housewife in *Butterflies*. Change occurred within very fixed parameters, such as Bob Ferris’s (Rodney Bewes) aspirant conformity in the Elm Lodge Housing Estate in *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* Now that burden of dread has been lifted but anxiety has taken its place. The uncertainty of what might happen weighs heavy on characters in contemporary sitcom, through the “ill-defined conditions” of their everyday lives. The rise of anxiety has become a pervasive way of experiencing life. Studies by Jean Twenge in the USA have shown that by the late 1980s the average American child was more anxious than child psychiatric patients in the 1950s, for instance (Wilkinson and Pickett 34).

The Office sketched out the “anxious” and “ill-defined” workplace very comprehensively with the shifting allegiances, unclear expectations and unaccountable command structure and Ben Walters has outlined how Sennett’s writing can illuminate the portrait of work in the show (137-8, 149 -50). However, the “ill-defined conditions” of modern culture permeate all aspects of day to day experience with an insidious attitude of unease that seeps into all aspects of life.

Shows like *Peep Show*, *Love Soup*, *Saxondale* and *Home Time* investigate further layers of anxiety in the relationship between the self and society. Mark in *Peep Show* is an exemplar of the anxious individual – terrified in his middle management role in a loan company but also frightened of the expectations of love, friendship and even casual acquaintance. The voice-over device in the series allows us to access all his fears about this but most of all the anxiety about his own inadequacy, for instance when he tells us in 'Holiday' (4:5) that "the only good thing is my life is so boring that it might go on forever". The discourse of the modern world, through the media or the attitudes that people have adopted, seems to encourage Mark to question every action in case it could be perceived as inappropriate or ridiculous. It is established that Mark is old-fashioned; he likes the comfort of order, rules and restraint but finds that they are no longer available to him.

Anxiety controls women's lives just as much, as Alice in *Love Soup* discovers as she tries to retain her sense of self in the face of unexpected events when every encounter becomes unpredictable and every assumption is subverted. The show's writer, David Renwick, is particularly interested in the iniquities of modernity (*In Conversation* DVD extra) and the culture and consequences of a world ruled by anxiety. Alice is made to feel an outsider for not conforming to what a woman is supposed to be but finds that it is hard to know what is expected of her, even if she wanted to conform. Her unknown perfect other half, comedy writer Gil, is told by his neighbour Irene (Trudie Styler)

in 'The Reflecting Pool' (1:3) that "all you ever do is question yourself". Anxieties multiply and propel the action into a spiral of misunderstandings.

Sitcom and Social Change

Anxiety promotes a constant struggle for survival so that characters expend all their energies in negotiating one crisis before they fall into the next. Sennett's diagnosis of this principal malady of modern life illuminates the texture of everyday struggles in the last decade. The familiarity of daily routines in the post-war settlement slips away and the structure given by community and codes that were mutually understood becomes something much more fluid and uncertain. With no jobs for life, with personal relationships harder to negotiate and with a lack of continuity of experience, the dialogue between comedy programmes and their audience has had to change to fit a new reality. Sitcoms have to talk to their viewers about what they know and the feelings they experience. The move from dread to anxiety has become very apparent in the texts and the shift in tone and address has been matched with the formal changes in TV comedy that I will outline in subsequent chapters, changes that suit this new fluid reality.

This was commented on some time before Sennett outlined his more general theory of "emotional difference" in 2004 (*Culture* 53). In 1997, in an article in *The Guardian*, journalist Jonathan Freedland made a very perceptive comparison between *I'm Alan Partridge*, the first series of which had just aired and the comic serial *The Fall and the Rise of Reginald Perrin* from two decades

earlier. He suggests that in Partridge “they have come close to capturing the spirit of the times... for Alan Partridge could be to the 1990s what Reginald Perrin was to the 1970s – a surreal representation of ourselves”. He outlines the differences between Partridge’s world and that of Perrin (Leonard Rossiter), the nine to five middle-management dessert firm executive, “the ultimate corporate man”. In the earlier series Perrin is driven mad by the stultifying predictability of his life: the same walk through the same poet-monickered streets to get to the same train to see the same colleagues day after day after day before returning to an unchanging domestic scene. As Freedland states, “his problem is ennui, his dream escape from the rat race” but for all his adventures in faking his own death, reappearing as another man, and opening his own chain of shops and therapy centres, his dream is never fulfilled; each episode ends with his primal scream of despair as he realises that the world has really stayed just the same. Partridge’s dilemma is very different. Freedland details how, instead of a dull job for life, Partridge is forced to furiously hustle for a six month contract, how instead of living in the family home he is divorced and resident in a single room in a Travel Tavern, and how he is “constantly unsettled by sexual ambiguity”. Freedland also points out that “Perrin’s world was a softer place, where people did things together”, although the older series also offers something of a critique of Sennett’s paeans to the past over the iniquities of the present. Perrin rails against a world where freedom is continually constrained and where narrow expectations, rigid hierarchies without merit and mind-numbing routines dictate existence. Yet he still has a context, a wife and family, a social order to react

against whereas Partridge is completely self-directed, afloat alone and anxious that at any time he may not be noticed or matter anymore. Surely part of the reason for Alan's obsessive detailing of brand names and consumer durables is that being judged by the things that you own is a measure that he understands and that seems to offer some sort of tangible recognition. As Freedland points out in conclusion, "future students anxious to know about the rise of the flexible market, the shift from manufacturing to service industry and the breakdown of family and collective life in Britain could do a lot worse than to sit down and watch Alan Partridge".

Thus, right at the beginning of the new style of sitcom appearing on television screens, it is acknowledged as a way of understanding the changes taking place in Britain. Comic characters become a vehicle to communicate with the audience and their responses to the new environment resonate with the problems and frustrations encountered by people trying to understand their own place in the world. Thus, David Brent, many of the sketch characters in programmes like *Little Britain*, Uncle Bryn (Rob Brydon) in *Gavin and Stacey* and Karen, the perpetually curious little girl (Ramona Marquez) in *Outnumbered* perform the same function for viewers in explicating modernity through enacting incomprehension of how it really operates. Mark and Jez, Alice or indeed Steve Coogan's later alter ego Tommy Saxondale, do the same thing in a manner that is both more complex and more self-conscious.

Failure and the Self

Sennett's analysis of anxiety and dread stresses the different emotional implications of failure. Failure is the great subject of British sitcom and the factor that distinguishes it most from many of the texts that form its American counterpart. This was established early on with Tony Hancock's comic persona of the deluded loser and the domestic capitulation of Harold Steptoe. In *The Corrosion of Character* Sennett argues that "failure is the great modern taboo... coming to terms with failure, giving it a shape and a place in one's history, may haunt us internally but seldom is discussed with others...left untreated is the raw sentence 'I am not good enough'"(118).

However sitcom has had an important place in allowing this conversation to take place. There is an argument that in a culture increasingly transfixed by dreams of success through TV talent shows and consumerism, failure may be becoming more of a taboo in Britain but if so this is a new development. Cultural texts from Thomas Hardy to Philip Larkin and Graham Greene to Morrissey have seen failure as a central theme in British life in the twentieth century, a life where aspirations were constrained by rigid class structures and emotional reticence, both within society and the self.

Sitcoms have performed an important role in putting these fears in the public domain. They allow audiences to address the likelihood that, at least on some levels, most individuals are likely to feel failure and to work towards some kind of acceptance of their own frailties. Comic characters encourage self-criticism, a realisation that the viewer may have to admit that they have traits akin to a Basil Fawlty or an Alan Partridge but they also allow empathy for human

weakness, an understanding of the frustration and pain that lie behind the behaviour of other people, frequently deriving from their feelings of inadequacy. In his book *The Comic Mind*, the American critic Gerald Mast noted that “comedy is built around [an].... implacable inevitability; men are fools” (339). This trait of foolishness, of misunderstanding what is really going on, of miscommunication with those around one, of misjudging the appropriate way to behave in a given situation, is what gives comedy its narrative drive and the code by which the audience understand the jokes. The character of the fool opens up the theme of failure and in Britain this has been exploited to its fullest potential. In most American sitcoms, even allowing for such obvious loser characters like Cliff Claven (John Ratzenberger) in *Cheers*, this trend is offset by the basic assumptions of optimism that underpin American society, with its doctrines of possibility and redemption so that often even the most sour or hapless characters can be embraced by the “hugging and learning” grace note that brings an episode to the close. Only *Seinfeld* of mainstream sitcoms really goes against this grain.

In British shows by contrast characters don't hug and usually don't learn. The failure of someone like Rigsby (Leonard Rossiter) in *Rising Damp*, or Mark and Jez in *Peep Show* is pretty absolute. The deep-seated knowledge of their failure haunts them and forms the landscape in which their actions take place. After another romantic humiliation in the 'Jeremy's Manager' episode (5:5) of *Peep Show*, Mark remarks to himself, “Ah the familiar gut-punch of pain and confusion is back – hello old friend”. Mark situates himself within a culture of

failure and frustration that feels comfortable to him; in 'Seasonal Beatings' (7:5) he tells himself "fortunately we're English so no one's going to ask any questions – thank you centuries of emotional repression". Yet the changing society of the last decade or so complicates and at the same time intensifies this pervading sense of failure. A more globalised, aspirational, consumerist culture is less sensitive to the common deep-seated acceptance of the realities of failure than the Britain of the past. Some of those learnt co-ordinates are no longer understood. If Britain is more likely to mirror the American dream of success then the stakes of failure actually become higher because there is no longer that shared acceptance of its reality; it can no longer be admitted or be the subject of much sympathy. If we have no contented, secure sense of self in the face of external pressures then, as Sennett states, we will suffer an omnipresent feeling of failure, "failure to make one's life cohere, failure to realise something precious in oneself, failure to live rather than exist" (*Corrosion* 119) but we will lack the consolation of sharing that feeling with others.

Thus even if Sennett is probably right to suggest there is a developing taboo about failure in 21st century Britain, comedy is one place where it can still be dramatised and accepted. The pay-off of laughter allows that interaction with the audience to take place and the codes of foolishness and failure are still strong enough to be comprehended. Characters can vicariously embody the pain of the audience. The new sitcom may have changed in many ways from its traditional ancestor but not in the centrality of failure as a subject, nor in the foolishness of its characters. Indeed the use of frankly dislikeable protagonists in

many instances (*Nighty Night*, *Pulling*, *The League of Gentlemen*) has grown as the form has gravitated towards niche and knowing audiences.

If sitcom is in fact a place that goes against Sennett's notion that failure is "seldom discussed with others", one of his other statements on the subject is more applicable. Later in *The Corrosion of Character* he argues that

anyone who has deeply tasted failure will recognise the impulse: given the destruction of hope and desire, the preservation of one's own active voice is the only way to make failure bearable. Simply declaring one's will to endure will not suffice (134).

Sennett is right to say that failure can be made bearable by the retention of the active voice. This enables the individual to feel that they are not completely ruled over by authority or defined by the compromises that are made to get through daily life. It also holds true for the experience of watching contemporary sitcoms. Their conception of failure, their portrayal of an increasingly cold and atomised world, could just be depressing without the alignment in our viewing with characters through their "active voice". However flawed they may be we need to feel some affinity with the feelings of these protagonists for the comic process of recognition to bring its rewards. The principal reason for the choice of *Peep Show*, *Love Soup*, *Saxondale* and *Home Time* as my central texts is that their use of an "active voice" is so explicit. By employing various formal devices, they allow a way into the characters' thoughts that show the dislocation between the self and society that modernity delivers.

Negotiation and "Working Through"

The commentary on the action by characters in these programmes illustrates the process of negotiation of the complexities of modern life that they, like their audience, have to undertake. The idea of 'negotiation' is articulated in Film Studies by Francisco Casetti and his concept is also applicable to the relationship between sitcom and its audience. While the spectator position in television is distinct from that in film in a number of ways (notably the cinema as a destination as opposed to television's domestic role for instance), there are clear connections in the dynamic between text, context, and viewer. Casetti argues that

negotiation effects a rearticulation of positions at stake, and at the same time reaches for a compromise. The different stances of modernity are brought together, redefined and rematched... in the end they find positions that are entirely practicable – and in some way practiced (181).

Casetti's ideas on "negotiation" complement Ellis's more specifically televisual argument that television is constantly "working through" problems with its audience. In this process the "active voice" becomes a form of argument or a protest at the iniquities that modernity brings and can allow some characters a measure of justification and dignity to offset their failures to understand, to communicate or to conform. The "active voice" illuminates Sennett's key claim - that "the flexible society" makes it harder to build up a "life-narrative" (*Corrosion* 133) and particularly makes it very difficult to be "the author of one's life" (*Corrosion* 16).

Through the interior voice devices these shows employ we can see that struggle for authorship raging. Tommy Saxondale determines to be the "author

of his own life” by opposing himself to the circumstances in which he lives and operates everyday. Alice in *Love Soup* does something similar in a quieter way, distancing herself from the world around her, which she identifies as increasingly insane, asking herself questions such as “God, what are we like as a species?; it’s a wonder how we survive” (2:11 ‘Human Error’). Through the process that Casetti describes as the “rearticulation of positions” (181) we become aligned with Alice and identify this insanity too, her perspective allowing us to see what we might accept as normal in modernity as immoral, poignant or simply ridiculous. In contrast Gaynor, the central protagonist in *Home Time* feels she has lost authorship and is trying to regain it. After a twelve year absence she returns to her home town of Coventry to rediscover her identity. It is surely no coincidence that Gaynor left in 1997 – now fixed in cultural mythology as a time of hope – and returns in 2009 when that hope has faded. The identity that she has constructed has apparently not worked and she has returned to a pivotal moment in her life in order to have another go. The friends she left behind offer a corrective to this however. They have never moved on but “the culture of the new capitalism” has taken away the authorship they may have forged from knowable, solid social structures and left them floundering. The certainties of old have been left behind and can’t be recreated and restoring links with her old friends proves difficult for Gaynor as, despite her reticence about her time away, she seems divided from them by experience. As Sennett explains, “In all... practices of daily life ‘meritocracy’ stands for a threat to solidarity, felt by both potential winners and losers. Social mobility carries social costs” (*Respect* 98).

Sennett also talks about how modernity's drive for individual achievement has had a detrimental effect on how the self functions. He contends that

in the search to consummate the project of finding a natural aristocracy, the mental life of human beings has assumed a surface and narrowed form. Social reference, sensate reasoning, and emotional understanding have been excluded from that search, just as have belief and truth (*Culture* 120).

One of the main sources of laughter in these shows is the characters' inability to escape this "surface and narrowed form" of thinking. *Peep Show's* critique of modernity supports this view very strongly. Mark and Jez's existence is characterised by a narrowed mental life – a life embraced by Jez and one that seems unavoidable for Mark, bowed down with his own moral cowardice. Mark still has social references and claims to have the reasoning but they no longer seem to have any currency with the people with whom he is surrounded. Neither Mark nor Jez have any emotional understanding though and it is this that the show's complex aesthetic, based on interior voice-over and point of view camera shots, allows us to see. This device allows us into the mindset of the characters and would appear to act as a 'true' version of the two flatmates thoughts, feelings and motivations. Yet as Brett Mills has suggested, "Mark is incapable of communicating with those close to him partly because he cannot make sense of the rules of social acceptability, but mainly because he does not actually know what he really thinks or feels" ("Paranoia" 57). Rather Mark tells himself things like "you probably did the right thing there. Don't listen to your heart – that's what no one tells you but it's probably the grown-up truth" (5:3 'Jeremy Broke') as he passes up yet another opportunity. This is the central joke within *Peep Show*. It is

this ignorance, this void that is being satirised by the device as much as the more obvious gap between thought and deed.

It is useful at this point to look in detail at an episode from the show to see how Sennett's ideas and those of some of his contemporaries who have been working in the same critical area can be applied to see how the anxieties that they identify might be worked through in the text. Before looking closely at a textual example, however, there are some questions that should be acknowledged about intentionality and reception. Without intensive fieldwork it is not possible to judge precise audience reactions and readings of a text and even then any results are likely to be only partial – a text can often be read in a multitude of ways. There are however “preferred readings” as Stuart Hall posited many years ago (134), readings directed by the text and I would argue that these readings are made very explicit in these programmes. We can source some evidence for intent in interviews and other extra-textual materials, although authorial intent (and here there are a range of potential authors, notwithstanding the traditional primacy of the writer in television comedy) does not limit the potential readings available or always control audience reactions. Comedy has been particularly prone to oppositional readings where the target of the humour has embraced the joke and seen the comic portrayal in a completely different way to that intended by the creators. Johnny Speight's East End bigot Alf Garnett (Warren Mitchell) in *Till Death Us Do Part* is the most famous example, when the satire on reactionary prejudice was enjoyed by some for the racist jibes of its central character but other instances might include Harry Enfield's 1980s

equivalent persona 'Loadsamoney' or Jennifer Saunders' fashion victim Edina in *Absolutely Fabulous*, both of which were lauded by those they originally intended to disparage.

Contemporary sitcoms set up a clear dialogue between text and audience. In the case of my four central shows, this is emphasised by the reflexive devices I have previously outlined. That does not mean that other readings are not possible or do not take place but I would argue that there are clear preferred meanings being transmitted. Furthermore humour in the shows operates on these connections – if they are not being made the jokes are not going to work. If we can see what the joke is intended to be we can examine the assumptions and analysis of the situations that lie behind its construction.

Case Study: *Peep Show* – 'Mark's Women'.

The episode I would like to look at in detail here is entitled 'Mark's Women', the final episode in series five of *Peep Show*, transmitted in 2008. *Peep Show's* point of view devices make clear its use of modernity as a subject of satire but it occupies an interestingly ambiguous relationship with its audience. With a core audience of young men, demographically similar to its two main protagonists, flatmates Mark and Jez, it is full of explicit sex and drug references and a thorough detailing of the popular culture (such as music, computer games and pornography) often surrounding, youngish, quite well educated, middle-class single men. Yet its take on this world offers a savage critique and bleak indictment of this kind of modernity.

Much of the humour in *Peep Show* comes through the disparity between the approaches of its two mismatched protagonists. Mark's desire to conform to majority expectations and his inability to do so is thwarted by a combination of accident, the unfairness of the system and personal weakness. This is placed in contrast to Jez's keenness to appear to live for pleasure and the moment. Their antagonism about how life should be lived is played out for comic effect; in 'Sistering' (3:4), Mark complains that "nothing means anything to you does it? Friendship, loyalty – they're just fusty old words like sixpence and codpiece to you aren't they?" In the same episode Jez tells Mark "why should I take responsibility for my actions? I just do the actions, it's not like I spend hours and hours thinking about it. What kind of life would that be?" Neither of their approaches to the modern world works and both end up unhappy and desperate.

In 'Mark's Women', Mark is getting divorced from his wife and colleague Sophie, whom he abandoned just after they were married at the end of series four. He is pursuing another colleague, Dobbie, who seems much better suited to his personality and shares his interests. Mark returns to his flat at the start of the episode, in voice-over sharing with us his jubilation at just being promoted at work, credit company JLB. "Finally all the back-biting and plotting and arse-kissing and credit stealing and hard work has paid off!" he tells us, pointing up the realities of working life. He returns to discover a drunk Sophie with their annulment papers and a rather sheepish and forlorn Jeremy but fails to make a connection between them.

Jez is in a rare state of introspection. He asks Mark “I was just thinking why do I even do half the stupid shit I do? Maybe I’m a knobhead. Maybe I’m not in the 1% of people who think that they are going to be successful musicians and are totally right but in the 99% of talentless, misguided dickheads”. The next day, busking with his heavily drugged and amoral friend Super Hans (Matt King), they are drawn to the ‘New Wellness Centre’ which promises personality tests. After they go in initially to “freak out the freaks” in this barely disguised Church of Scientology, Jez breaks down.

The personality test sequence is something of a tour de force, using the show’s aesthetic to set up a debate with the audience about the individual in modern life in a way that seeks to be both funny and sad. Despite the obvious con of the cult’s personality test, it proves a trigger for (albeit temporary) self-realisation in Jez. There is a twist of the inner voice technique whereby Jez’s real voice and his sub-conscious swap over during the test. Initially we hear the inner voice announce that this is going to be funny. The first question asks him whether he makes efforts to make people he’s not fond of laugh or smile and Jez sullenly answers “no” with his voice-over jauntily saying “actually it’s more of a yes!” When asked whether he tries to fit in to social situations he vacillates between yes and no while the voice inside asks “what was my plan again?” However, when asked whether he is where he wants to be in his life, he says “not particularly”, while the inner voice screams “fuck you!” What he thinks he ought to say and what he really feels have reversed position. Quizzed on his family background he reveals that his father left home when he was ten years old

(the first time this has been referred to in the series) and prodded about what the ten year old Jeremy would have said to his Dad if he'd had the courage he begins to cry, saying "I don't know – don't go". Jeremy then breaks down exclaiming "I thought I knew what I was doing with my life but I haven't got a fucking clue!" Inside his head, the voice keeps repeating "this is funny".

The sudden disintegration of Jez's carefully constructed but largely unthinking persona in this episode illuminates Sennett's concept of "respect". Sennett argues that modernity makes self-respect extremely difficult by robbing us of the framework in which the exchange of respectful actions between people that create a strong social bond are made to matter. In an article in 2005, he argues that "people need to feel that they matter to others; they want honour....more, they want to look in a mirror without self-loathing ("What our Grannies Taught Us"). When forced to question himself Jez can find no honour or self-respect in how he lives his life – he doesn't matter to anyone; they really do think he's a "knobhead" and deep down he knows it. Equally no one really matters to him. His relationships are all transient and he balks at any effort. His long-standing friendship with Mark is based on history and convenience; they spend most of the time resenting and envying one another. His first act in his new 'saved' life with the New Wellness folk is to ring Mark and apologise because "I take and take and I never give anything back... I need you to know that I'm selfish and irresponsible and I need to take ownership of that fact". Jez immediately adopts the language of self-help – ultimately even repentance is portrayed as a selfish act in modernity.

Such is the context in which Jez exists that his moment of self-knowledge cannot lead to a considered reevaluation of his life and real change. Instead his response is to join the ludicrous cult who asked him the questions, shelling out money he doesn't have to take courses in how aliens left tablets of truth on earth. When he asks a sceptical Mark to explain the problems of the world and is told "there are myriad historical and economic reasons" he triumphantly retorts "exactly – you haven't got a clue". His search for easy, erroneous answers illustrates the kind of shifting flux of modernity that Sennett and Bauman describe, where "public space is where public confession of private secrets and intimacies is made" (Bauman *Liquid Modernity* 40). When even Jez begins to doubt the alien theory, the newly fundamentalist Super Hans angrily tells him that "you've been having thoughts all your life and look where it has got you". To those used to believing nothing and rolling the wave of fluid modernity, the only apparent alternative is the absolute, the utterly rigid law – however ridiculous it may be. Sennett says that in contemporary circumstances "the psyche dwells in a state of endless becoming – a selfhood which is never finished. There can be under these conditions no coherent life-narrative, no clarifying moment of change illuminating the whole" (*Corrosion* 133).

Jez is really "a pliant self, a collage of fragments" (*Corrosion* 133) and his attempt to give himself a coherent life-narrative must be doomed to failure, for there is nothing in his world to support it. Sophie tells him that their tryst at the beginning of the episode could have led to her pregnancy. On telling Mark, the previously supposed (and indeed actual) father, Jez realises that what he has

been feeling is guilt, an emotion that is a stranger to him and that this explains his attraction to the cult. As Mark and Super Hans fight over his future, both agree that he is obviously a “dickhead”. As their fight ends with the breaking of Mark’s new high-definition TV, Jez’s subconscious incants “oh God he’s broken a TV. I might be a father. He’s broken a TV!” returning us to the superficial Jez of old, a “pliant self” with no perspective, no code and no coherence.

Through the series, Jez lives for the now, for the immediate need and acts as an embodiment of Bauman’s contemptuous vision of modern individuals as ruled by “the seductive lightness of being” (*Art of Life* 118). This episode is a rare instant of him questioning his life of plentiful drugs, bad dance music and unsatisfactory sex with whoever moves into current view. This notion of a life lived entirely in the moment and revolving around the exercise of freedom and transitory pleasure is much critiqued and examined in the show. *Peep Show* is constantly asking the question posed by Bauman, “is liberation a blessing, or a curse? A curse disguised as a blessing, or a blessing feared as a curse?” (*Liquid Modernity* 18).

Mark’s trajectory in the series and in this episode is a corollary to Jez’s path. Here we have someone entirely unliberated, weighed down by guilt and convention. His restraint is measured against Jez’s liberation and found equally wanting. His narrative in the episode begins with his promotion at JLB, a classic example of Sennett’s new flexible workplace where “stability as such increasingly lacks moral prestige” (*Culture* 75). Mark’s promotion quickly proves much less of a triumph than he imagined. He is given the task of making colleagues redundant

so that his overbearing, maniacal boss Alan Johnson (Paterson Joseph) and the real powers at the company can avoid accountability for their decisions. At a redundancy bash Johnson tells Mark, “show me a good loser and I’ll show you a loser”, displaying his contempt for his workforce. Nothing is dependable or secure at JLB and kudos is earned under Johnson’s regime by conflict between workers rather than co-operation, as seen in Mark’s perennial battles over both work and Sophie with his ever sneering rival Jeff (Neil Fitzmaurice). This is highlighted in this episode by Johnson’s command to Mark to sack Sophie for her poor performance, despite knowing the problems and anguish this would cause him. Mark’s work life illustrates Sennett’s model of “the culture of the new capitalism” as a site of never-ending anxiety. There is a constant danger of disposal, of worth being recognised one day and rubbished the next; an absence of trust or solidarity or shared responsibility. At the beginning of the sixth series, JLB goes out of business on the whim of its globalised masters. Mark forms an action group of employees but sells them out for a payoff cheque, his bosses rightly understanding that his principles really go no further than self-interest (6:2 ‘The Test’). *Peep Show* allows us to comprehend Sennett’s assertions about the truth of “the culture of new capitalism” and see that “a shortened framework of institutional time lies at the heart of social degradation; the cutting edge has capitalised on superficial human relations” (*Culture* 181). As the title ‘Mark’s Women’ suggests, this is borne out in this episode by Mark’s personal life.

Mark’s primary difference from Jez, beyond their interests and lifestyles, is in his reflexivity. Whereas here Jez suffers from his lack of self-knowledge, Mark

is burdened with a surfeit of it. His inner voice asks himself “why do I feel guilty? I feel guilty about everything from pollution caused by Chinese industrialisation to not wearing some boxers as much as others”. His “pliant self” is directed by internally targeted disgust and self-consciousness. When Dobbie invites him for “cheap lager, expensive crisps and self-loathing” he finds it a very attractive offer. This does not mean that Mark has nothing to feel guilty about. On the contrary, as David Mitchell, who plays the character, suggests, he is just as bad as Jez and Super Hans; “people assume he is moral because he’s always worried about things but in fact he’s just a moral coward” (Marshall 6). His self-knowledge, as Mitchell implies, does not impede his moral cowardice in any way. After the redundancy party he ends up in bed with a drunken Sophie. A condom accident leads to pregnancy – a pregnancy ensured by Sophie who on learning of the mishap immediately adopts a position designed to encourage conception.

Mark and Sophie are interesting as a sitcom couple. Both central characters are portraits dipped in satirical venom, although it could be argued that Mark is allowed more sympathy because of our access to his inner voice, however horrendous that might be. On the surface, they appear pleasant enough but we come to understand the selfishness of their motivations, such as Sophie’s attachment to motherhood as a lifestyle option and Mark’s determination to avoid making any decision or taking responsibility for any action. Mark attempts to sack Sophie as ordered, without even thinking of standing up to Johnson. His failure to do so is entirely down to his embarrassment at Sophie’s tearful reaction; promising “24/7” care to stop her crying, as his inner voice tells himself (and us),

“just got to say the right words - can think about what they mean later”. Mark and Jez’s comic polarity between the urge for order and the urge for chaos converges on their inability to decide truly on any course of action. As Bauman observes, “the state of unfinishedness, incompleteness and underdetermination is full of risk and anxiety; but the opposite brings no unadulterated pleasure either, since it forecloses what freedom needs to stay open” (*Liquid Modernity* 62). This is the modern dilemma that most contemporary sitcoms satirise and which resonates with their audience; ‘choice’ makes you unable to choose any course of action because of what might be lost. Mark endlessly vacillates over commitment and liberty, the one becoming most attractive as it begins to move out of view. He feels he has to reject Dobbie because “I’m having a baby with a woman who probably secretly hates me – I wouldn’t want to mess up that sweet deal”. Equally Mark’s reaction when told that that Jez might be the father is relief rather than real anger.

Peep Show’s caustic satire on contemporary mores is used to communicate a rage at the moral emptiness of its characters’ lives. It uses its protagonists and situations to demonstrate the anxiety in Mark’s life caused by the fluidity of his environment. He shares with us his recognition that Sophie “probably secretly hates me” and his immediate concern on hearing about the baby is that “it will grow up and write a bitter memoir about how distant I was”. It is important to note that for all their revealed sadness, occasional badness and pathos, Mark, Jez and Sophie are also portrayed as no worse than anybody else. Like their audience they are unable to find satisfaction in a world where freedom

and choice only lead to anxiety. In 'Das Boot' (6:6), Jez tells Mark he is worried that he is evil. Mark reassures him that "no, the absolute worst thing anyone could say about you is that you were a moral blank, whose lazy cynicism and sneering, ironic take on the world encapsulates everything wrong with a generation. But you, my friend, are not evil".

Peep Show emphasises the analysis that Sennett makes in the conclusion to *The Corrosion of Character*:

This is the problem of character in modern capitalism. There is a history, but no shared narrative of difficulty, and so no shared fate. Under these conditions, character corrodes; the question "who needs me" has no immediate answer (147).

The series is a comedy of corrosion, of characters searching, and very much failing, to find a 'character' in modernity. Mark in particular often situates himself within a deeply pessimistic worldview, regaling Jez with statements such as "these are the endtimes" ('Nether Zone' 7:3). Jez in return, while entirely pursuing his own pleasures, does so in the belief that he exists in a similarly selfish, even brutal world. When Mark is mugged he tells him "you've got to toughen up, this is the 21st century; it's what's going to happen" ('Mugging' 3:1).

Social critics like Sennett have identified and described the extent and the nature of the problem at the heart of modern lives: a dislocation of the self from society. In the "culture of the new capitalism" we search in vain for the equipment to understand our role in our own world. Questions are forever unanswered about whether we can trust other people or are able to feel secure or whether we actually like ourselves or not. Contemporary sitcoms in Britain have been able to

dramatise these problems back to their audience, at the same time performing the traditional comic paradox of both “consoling” them through their humour and their resonance and questioning the way they live. Despite the “consolation” of laughter, contemporary British sitcoms have also sought to make viewers uneasy, to create a discomfort around the actions of the characters in the programmes. This seems appropriate, for this mirrors the unease and discomfort the audience encounter in everyday modernity. However we also need to consider how the complexities of the changes defined by Sennett and Bauman have affected television as a medium in order to fully understand and analyse how recent television sitcoms have engaged with modernity and this is what I set out to do in the next chapter.

TELEVISION: REVOLUTION AND EVOLUTION

Introduction

The everyday experience of “liquid modernity” has changed the way in which people use, watch and understand television. Likewise this “culture of the new capitalism” has had a dramatic effect upon the television industry, creating an environment that influences the production and distribution context of programmes. In modern lives, the media has become increasingly intertwined with all aspects of our experience, not just at home in the primetime period of 7 - 11pm in the evening between dinner and bedtime. Boundaries and compartments within lives have become increasingly hard to maintain. Work impinges on leisure hours and now takes place in domestic as well as corporate or institutional spaces while media such as television can be consumed while travelling, at a work station or in public places, rather than solely its previous domain of the family living room. Media moulds modernity but also reflects how it is experienced – consumption practices have a central role in dictating both content and form.

Despite television’s ubiquity, this explains the shift from a medium for a mass audience to a personalised media, what Lisa Parks calls “flexible microcasting” or “the programme of the self” (134). In its rapid expansion in the decade or so after the Second World War, television was forged around the idea of a universal, shared experience with huge proportions of the population watching the same show at the same time and creating a shared popular culture that both reflected the reality of everyday living and shaped perceptions of it. The

extent to which television is 'mass media' has been disputed. Those from the Frankfurt School, such as Theodor Adorno, who largely dismiss any worth in the medium or any ability to transcend its systems (168), see it as a structure which makes individuals part of a passive, amorphous mass through its "socio-psychological implications and mechanisms" (158). Raymond Williams on the other hand suggests that the idea of its role as a tool for "the masses... obscured the fact that the means chosen was the offer of individual sets, a method much better described by the earlier word 'broadcasting'" (*Technology and Cultural Form* 24). If the mass or broadcasting experience is no longer predominant then television's own structures and codes, many of which were centred on that form of popular address, have had to change.

It is important to recognise that television's re-negotiation of its relationship to its viewers, away from a mass group (however positively or negatively that was conceptualised) to Parks' "programme of the self" where individual or niche demographic tastes are apparently served, has revolutionised the medium. Yet equally one must acknowledge that much remains the same; lots of people still watch the same kind of programmes and still like to relax in front of a TV set and talk about their favourite shows with people they know (and increasingly, through social media, with people they don't know). There remain important continuities that have helped audiences to orientate around change – it is an evolutionary process as much as a revolutionary one.

The media is clearly a key agent in social change as it is understood in everyday life, yet Richard Sennett and to all intents and purposes Zygmunt

Bauman (there are some perfunctory references to *Big Brother* and a couple of films in *The Art of Life* 89, 107) have been surprisingly mute on the subject. This is all the more strange as the transformation of both industrial practices and modes of viewing offer rich ground for their theories and interpretations of the effect of change on individuals and their relationship to the rest of society. This is a serious omission in their analysis, perhaps reflecting some of the old snobberies that afflicted their generation about the importance of television as an active element within ordinary lives. Yet, despite their lack of direct discussion of television past, present and future, much of the debate about TV and its future closely follows the arguments of theorists like Sennett and Bauman about the nature of modernity. After all, they see a society, a culture, an economy that has become more fluid, less clear and navigable and more atomised and based on short-term priorities and gains. This “liquid modernity” must have an effect on both the television industry and its audience, with the emphasis on mobility and multitasking, the driver of constant re-invention and the porous line between work and leisure influencing the content of television and how it is watched. Texts are built around what audiences are assumed to want but cumulatively texts themselves also end up creating new modes of viewing.

Theorising TV: From Mass Entertainment to “Flexible Microcasting”

Sennett’s analysis of the “culture of the new capitalism” is also strongly applicable to the changing business of producing and distributing television programmes. British television’s move from a duopoly to a trio of terrestrial

broadcasters and then to a multichannel digital environment, driven by a free market ethos and shareholder interest and informed by ratings and deregulation, has had a significant impact on how creativity is managed and realised. Sitcom, it can be argued, has suffered more than other television genres from this shift – the new imperatives of instant recognition and success and viewer convenience have found the form wanting. Sitcom’s role has changed within television both for the industry that produces texts and for the audiences that consume them.

In this chapter I want to explore how television’s place in society has been redefined; as a medium of consumption, as an industry and as an agent of discourse. I also want to consider sitcom’s place and role within this wider landscape of television evolution and revolution and think about the effect of the medium’s change upon the genre’s ability to obtain and engage audiences. The balance of competing attractions between television and new media continues to evolve and I will conclude this chapter by asking what audiences still get from TV and what television texts, in particular sitcoms, can still uniquely offer. In the next chapter, there will be an extended examination of the development of the sitcom form. Sitcom was an integral part of television as a mass experience, relying on its shared engagement with very large audiences for its potency. How has it responded to Parks’s world of “flexible microcasting” (133)?

Television has been the leading form of mass communication over the last sixty years. For about thirty five years within that (roughly between 1960 and 1995 in the UK), it was a mature, dominant, industry with established, clearly defined structures and relations with its audience, forming the centre of cultural

consumption for most of the population. Ratings for the most popular comedy shows could top twenty million, over a third of the population (BFI figures show for instance that *To the Manor Born*, *Bread*, *Just Good Friends* and *Only Fools and Horses* achieved these figures in the 1980s). The popular and critical perception is that this era has now passed. Over the last 15-20 years, the structures of the industrial model of broadcasting in Britain (and elsewhere) have been dramatically redrawn and other media and entertainment vehicles compete for audiences' attentions. While TV shows can still be popular, the assumptions are that it is no longer the same type of communal experience with 'appointments to view' that it once was and that texts are no longer likely to speak across demographic divides to diverse social groups. John Caughie has talked about "mourning television" and its "loss of a 'seriousness' in which television actually matters, of a 'popularity' which is not simply obedient to the market" (411). Critics like Caughie now see television as just a conduit for 'content', facilitating a menu of material that viewers might want to see when it might suit them. This trend has been identified for some years; in 2000 Robert D. Putnam in his critique of an ever more socially disparate America *Bowling Alone*, said that "news and entertainment have been increasingly individualised. No longer must we co-ordinate our tastes and timings with others" (217).

Where social theorists have been found wanting in analysing television's function in contemporary everyday living, Television Studies scholars have at least endeavoured to interpret the changes in the medium and the effects on those watching. Many of them have formed powerful counter arguments to the

notion that television is somehow part of the past, as Caughie implies, rather than an important feature of our present and future and argue that it retains its power and influence; as Jeffrey Sconce proclaims “despite this continuing contempt for the medium by the priests of both high tech and high theory, there continues the nagging suspicion that television remains the pre-eminent information and narrative technology of the world” (“What If?” 94).

Such theorists have built on writing since the 1970s and 1980s by Raymond Williams, John Hartley, Christine Geraghty, Charlotte Brunsdon, John Fiske, Stuart Hall and others to attempt to define what television means to its audience in this time of change and how the broadcasting industry has devised forms to meet the needs of viewers existing within a fluid and sometimes inchoate culture. American television scholars Michelle Hilmes and Lynn Spigel have looked at the medium’s past to situate the changes in a continuum of transformation within television to maintain its hold on viewers; as Spigel argues, “understanding what is new about the medium thus demands an understanding of both its present and its past” (“Introduction” 1). Also in the United States, John T. Caldwell (*Televisuality*) and latterly Jeremy G. Butler have identified the links between aesthetics and an industrial practice driven by economic pressures. Caldwell has coined the term “televisuality” to describe a form of television from the 1980s onwards that privileges complexity in its construction and aesthetic to exploit the unique intimacy of the relationship between television texts and their audience because as Butler argues, “distinctive style is a significant weapon used by television practitioners to combat the distraction factor of the modern

mediascape” (14). In Britain, Robin Nelson argues in *State of Play* that “a distinctive era of television practice has emerged in the 1996-2006 decade under consideration” (7), while Karen Lury has looked in much more detail at aesthetic shifts on screen in *Interpreting Television* (2005), analysing contemporary television in general and specific genres and programmes in particular, in Butler’s “modern mediascape”.

John Ellis and the Survival of Television

One of the most sustained attempts to define and redefine television as a medium over the last three decades can be found in the work of John Ellis and it is Ellis’s writing that I will draw on most from Television Studies in my analysis of contemporary sitcom and its relations with its audience. Ellis’s work only discusses sitcom specifically on a few occasions (eg *Seeing Things* 118-120) but his general writing on television, on its construction, on its industrial context and particularly on its offer to its audience, is valuable and applicable in describing sitcom’s continuing appeal. This is all the more so as he returns to the topic as the medium transforms, from *Visible Fictions* in 1982 to *Seeing Things* in 2002 and *TV FAQ* in 2008 and in other papers, essays and blog posts.

In *Seeing Things* John Ellis characterises television’s transition as a medium as a move from scarcity to availability to plenty (2). This trajectory has evidently affected television’s relationship to the audience but the manner in which the medium has been affected and by how much is not always easy to determine. Here I want to consider the contradictions and continuities in the

contemporary television environment as well as the changes. Together the balance of new and old shapes “liquid modernity” in television as a transitional rather than a transformational state. Jeremy G. Butler suggests that “today old media are flailing about, keening about their precipitously declining revenues while new media make grand claims about the digital revolution but cannot seem to make that revolution profitable” (138). Old media might be in decline but have proved much more tenacious than had been expected a decade or two earlier when deregulation escalated and technological advances became apparent. Mark Lawson has remarked that “(an) example of the perils of futurology is that the television conferences I attended at the turn of the millennium all declared with unstoppable confidence that the idea of TV as a shared, communal experience was doomed, as technology permitted viewers to choose what and when they watched” (“TV Matters”). In fact as figures show audiences still engage with broadcasting to a very great extent and the number of broadcast hours viewed has hardly altered. Instead, as Henry Jenkins has pointed out, what has happened is that “old media are not being displaced. Rather their functions and status are shifted by the introductions of new technologies” (14).

John Ellis does not consider that ‘plenty’ or a disruption of the ‘flow’ (a term and concept he took and developed from Raymond Williams’s work: *Visible Fictions* 117-119; *Technology and Cultural Form* 86-93) necessitates the end of television content or broadcast television. Instead he argues that “what may be dying is not TV but our ability to generalise about it” and that “people still watch broadcast TV (more than ever in a recession). More generally, the schedules of

broadcast TV still define the cultural and market currency of TV material” (“End of TV?”). As he suggests “it’s more complicated” (“End of TV?”) than the idea that TV is somehow at an end; the medium and indeed sitcom as a form within it still have a vital function in the lives of many people. As Helen Wood and Lisa Taylor have stated, “it is possible to capture the changes sweeping through television’s organisation at the same time as to hold on to some of what remains central to television as a particular cultural form” (149).

The Modern Broadcasting Business

From 1955 to 1982, Broadcasting in Britain was a duopoly; one publicly funded (BBC) and one commercial broadcaster (ITV) competed for audiences but they were also to a large extent mutually supportive, creating a mature, secure industry. In this environment, creative talents were restricted in their choices in a marketplace but were conversely able to experiment and develop their craft while engaging with large audiences at the same time. “Scarcity” (Ellis, *Seeing Things* 39) was dictated in television by technological factors of signal and spectrum but ended up influencing the shape of the industry and the expectations and experiences of the audience just as contemporary television has been informed by digital technology. The coming of Channel 4 in 1982 heralded the end of the duopoly but terrestrial broadcasting proved very resilient for at least two decades afterwards and still is to some extent. Channel 4’s most significant intervention in terms of industry and audience (beyond the important influence of its texts and approach to content) was that it was established as a

publisher, not making shows itself but commissioning others to do so. This created a parallel industry of enterprises working with, but distinct from, the main broadcasters.

Ellis terms this era as one of “availability”. When he coined the term a decade ago he saw “availability”, “where a choice of pre-scheduled services existed at every moment of the day and night”, as dominant, with ‘plenty’ still a “commercial dream” (*Seeing Things* 61). Now “availability” and “plenty” co-exist as models of viewing. “Plenty” has come into existence through a number of changes, enabled by government, which have dissipated the power of the old model of broadcasting without quite erasing its structures from the audience’s experience. These interventions through deregulation were influenced by free market ideology that sought to couple technological opportunity and advance to flexible late capitalism, aiming to maximise short term profits for shareholders. This could happen either through advertising revenue or through building a subscription base, as Rupert Murdoch did by developing Sky (later B Sky B) as a satellite broadcaster (Crisell 33). These trends were facilitated by two major pieces of legislation: the 1990 and 2003 Broadcasting Acts. The 1990 Act, introduced in Margaret Thatcher’s last year of power, set up a system of franchise auctions and a new regulator (the Independent Television Commission or ITC) and a 25% quota of independent production commissions that both ITV and the BBC had to meet. The 2003 Act, under New Labour, deregulated further, allowing a much greater conglomeration of ownership across different media including the consolidation of different commercial stations and reflecting the

move to “plenty” and convergence by creating a single regulator, OFCOM, for both telecommunications and broadcasting. OFCOM has been more interested in ensuring a free market in the sector than in policing the quality of programmes or service levels to audience members (Crisell 38).

This industrial context shows that broadcasting has become part of the “culture of the new capitalism” that Sennett describes; a culture “attuned to singular events, one-off transactions, interventions” rather than, Sennett believes, building “sustained relationships” (*Culture* 178). As well as offering a useful analysis of the pressures facing the contemporary television audience in their attempts to gain a sense of “character”, Sennett’s conceptions of companies and workers find fertile ground in the history of British television in the 1990s and 2000s and not just within the commercial industry.

The BBC’s central role in British public discourse has ensured its survival but as it is perceived as a foe of the free market by competitors and conservative politicians (Murdoch) there have been numerous attempts to ensure that it is exposed to business rationalisation. This was particularly the case after the appointment of John Birt as deputy director-general in 1992. Birt introduced an internal market to the corporation and established the primacy of the ‘mission to inform’ rather than prioritising entertainment, including the systems of sitcom development established by previous leaders. Former Head of Light Entertainment Bill Cotton denounced as “a colossal mistake” the plan he perceived “to abandon the BBC’s role as the backbone of the entertainment industry in Britain” (qtd in Horrie and Marsh 281). In these older regimes, sitcom

writers and producers would be able to try and develop a relationship with an audience over two or three series. Time to grow audiences became reduced, with programmes being measured through rating figures, channel share and critical comment in a much more immediate way and staff analysed for their efficiency and commercial outputs (Barnett and Curry 99-104). The culture that 'Birtism' heralded is one characterised by Andrew Crisell as a "loyalty to trade rather than organisation", of "professionalism" and "managerism" (44). This reflects Sennett's (and indeed Bauman's) ideas about trends in the modern workplace. Sennett suggests that in this kind of environment "people are meant to treat work as an episodic activity, a series of tasks as one jumps from place to place" (*Respect* 189). Television executives began to move between public service broadcasting, commercial channels and independent production companies according to the highest bidder, rather than being identified as a BBC figure or even a 'company man' at one of the ITV franchises. At the BBC, many key figures departed as they discovered that past experience had a diminished currency (Horrie and Marsh 128) or publicly lambasted Birtism (Potter). This demonstrates that, as Sennett argues, the notion of the 'life-narrative' through work (*Culture* 23) is no longer on offer; instead "the modern institutional realm... puts a particular emphasis on breaking the bonds of unconscious, ingrained habits even if these have served perfectly well in the past" (*Respect* 236).

The weakening of pyramidal, bureaucratic monopolies in broadcasting undoubtedly had some benefits too, as power ebbed away from the structures and personalities that could limit creative expression. Sennett and Bauman too

often underplay such benefits in their critique of modernity. However as Sennett says “my argument is that these changes have not set people free” (*Culture* 13) and television talent did not, in many cases, find that they were set free by Birtism or deregulation legislation. Bureaucracy was not cast aside, rather it took on new forms, such as Birt’s ‘Producer’s Choice’ procedures. Indeed the persistence of the bureaucracies at the BBC (many set in place in the Birt era) continues to cause problems for the corporation as seen in the Savile scandals of 2012 (Hewlett). Rather programme-making became “in the sense that its creative aspects were becoming significantly constrained by the need to survive in the marketplace – a business” (Crisell 44). The dictates of the market, the need to obtain instant results in channel share or ratings, mirrors the demise of the concept of delayed gratification within modern living. I will look later at how the repudiation of delayed gratification might inform audiences response to programmes but there is also an institutional effect.

Sennett remarks that “the prestige of work requires a certain kind of institution to be credible; it has to be stable enough to deliver the future rewards; its managers have to remain in place as witnesses to your performance” (*Culture* 77). Certainly it could be claimed that in the BBC of the 1960s and 1970s under executives like Hugh Greene, David Attenborough, Irene Shubik, Bill Cotton or Jimmy Gilbert, this could be possible: a sense of continuity, of developing good work and of improving one’s art and craft are evident in the history of the corporation (Briggs). That became harder after Birt’s changes and the belief was established that the market was the best arbiter of what was made and what was

watched. Stability was no longer seen as viable or desirable and constant change was perceived as a necessity. Sitcoms could no longer develop an audience from series to series. They had to find viewers very quickly and if they failed to do so they were unlikely to be re-commissioned.

Technology and the TV Audience

Technological change has been entwined with this industrial transformation; the rapid development of new modes of delivery ran concurrently with new business practices. As Michelle Hilmes argues “at every step of the process of technological innovation, cultural pressures and demands shape both the technology itself and the uses to which it is put” (4). The adoption of digital technology has certainly had a transformative effect on the television industry. In Britain, this was hastened by another Broadcasting Act in 1996, which laid the basis for a move away from the analogue signal to a digital spectrum with multiple channel and platform choices (Crisell 35). In 2012, the final analogue transmission took place and all viewers are now accessing some kind of digital reception of TV content. This has meant that for the last decade or so the main broadcasters have been positioning themselves to compete for viewers in the new digital landscape. An early strategy that was pursued by all the major British broadcasters was to set up multiple channels within a platform to ensure that the brand of BBC, ITV, Channel 4, or indeed Sky, reached the maximum numbers of potential viewers. The ability to access a large, ever expanding number of channels is dictating how television operates as a business. The received

wisdom has been that, as Nelson describes, there has been “a further industry conception of audience, away from the idea of a ‘mass’ audience to one composed of microcultures conceived of and defined in terms of niche markets” (17), so that channels would no longer try and provide something for everyone. To that end, the new channel brands set up by established broadcasters were aimed at defined, rather than general, audiences, either by being made up of the same kind of programming (Film Four or the news channels, for instance) or targeting specific demographic groups. Thus ITV 2 is for the young, ITV 3 for the old and ITV 4 for men. In comedy, this demographic definition has proved to be one of the most transformative developments in the new decade. As the mainstream ‘broad’-casting channels of BBC1, ITV1 and even to a large extent BBC2 and Channel 4 are drawn into competition for share and ratings, broadcasting comedy with its need for long-term audience commitment and engagement and its tendency to misfire has become a gamble, albeit a gamble that can sometimes reap rewards. The solution sought by TV companies has been to place comedy series, including sitcoms, on niche channels to try and build critical and audience support away from the front line of competitive market pressures. However these niche channels have become identified with a particular demographic, the young, especially young males. Thus much recent comedy has appeared on BBC3 or E4, both channels aimed primarily at the 18-24 age groups. There have been some exceptions to this general rule, with some titles still debuting on BBC2 (including *Saxondale* and *Home Time*), Channel 4 (such as *Peep Show*), even occasionally BBC1, as with *Love Soup* and some

more cerebral sitcoms like *The Thick of It* or *Getting On* appearing first on BBC4. However, many recent hits have been aired first on these digital channels – *Gavin and Stacey* on BBC3 and *The Inbetweeners* on E4 are obvious examples – and the need to fit with the channels’ demographic inevitably influences the text. Programmes must meet the presumptions of the channel’s audience about the shows they expect to find when they tune it to that channel. The multichannel system leaves less room for viewers to be surprised or challenged by what they encounter on screen because the parameters of what can be transmitted are necessarily narrower than for a broadcasting system where all tastes are served, including sometimes those that are not one’s own.

The second consequence for the industry of television’s digital revolution is in how the content produced for television is seen. Digital transmission means programmes no longer require television sets; instead hardware is becoming increasingly multi-purpose, allowing shows to be accessed on computers and on mobile phones as well as on television equipment. Clare Bratten wrote in 2003 that “as television slowly goes digital its full convergence with the computer-based Internet remains only a matter of time” (19). Ten years later that time has still not entirely arrived, although companies like Google and Apple are identifying television as the next locus for their data (Garside) and broadcasters are also working on drawing their internet and transmission applications ever closer together. Convergence of technology and content has the potential to change how we think about television and indeed make us consider whether it will survive at all. ‘Convergence’ is one of those zeitgeist terms that can be

interpreted in many ways. Technology has enabled audiences to access content on different platforms but convergence also depends on the actions of the audience. Henry Jenkins argues that “convergence does not occur through media appliances, however sophisticated they may become. Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others” (3). In this sense, convergence can be seen as both active and collective, although there remain limitations due to copyright and corporate interests and Jenkins perhaps is rather utopian in seeing the process as driven by social interaction rather than individual convenience. However, rightly in my view, he characterises media convergence as “a process, not an endpoint” (16), which is ever evolving according to the needs of both consumers and producers.

The move away from analogue transmission transforms the idea of both time and space within the medium. There are now no technical imperatives to view texts at the same time as they are broadcast or for television content to be restricted to the nation states in which they are based. In the latter case, attempts to control access to texts, whether through regulation, registration or copyright controls have had very limited success. In Britain there has been a greater integration of American product within television content as a result. After the peaks of ratings in the 1980s for *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, American shows have been generally very marginal to the mainstream schedule, hardly ever airing on BBC1 or ITV1. Channel 4 had showcased a number of popular US sitcoms (notably *Cheers*, *Frasier* and *Friends*) but otherwise hit shows like *Seinfeld* were

relegated to late night slots on BBC2. Now American shows are sought out on home formats, digital channels or in legal or predominantly illegal downloads and as more people have seen them, particularly opinion formers, so they have started to influence television industry culture in Britain. As a result high-end dramas like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire* and *Mad Men* and sitcoms from *The Simpsons* to *Modern Family*, made in a very different industrial context to that in the UK, are used as comparators and exemplars to which British product is often critically found wanting (Billen, Norman). Television, previously ruled by national boundaries, has proved as vulnerable to globalisation in its consumption as other industries, for globalisation is a fact of “liquid modernity”. Sennett describes the term as “one way to name the forces which exhausted the old order” (*Respect* 180) and this does create a very different reception environment to even a decade ago for comedy creators. In Britain this offers opportunities as well as problems for both creative talent and for audiences, as Armando Iannucci detailed in his BAFTA speech; *Peep Show* can have fans in Cincinnati, as well as Croydon, without compromising (at least not yet) its cultural specificity.

Time and the TV Viewer: Convergence and the Schedule

The changes in how television exists within time are particularly significant. The rise of the VCR in the 1980s allowed the public to record and keep programmes on tape but the uptake of personal or digital video recorders (PVRs or DVRs) in the 2000s made the process of timeshifting much simpler for many people, marking what William Uricchio calls “the transition from

programming centred to viewer-activated notions of flow” (171). This development coincided with broadcasters’ own development of on-demand services that could be accessed from a computer (and in some cases also via the television set and through mobile phones). The BBC led the way in Britain through their i-player service, which has had an enthusiastic take up from the public. Other broadcasters have followed suit, although the models are slightly different; without the BBC’s public service obligations ITV have contemplated charging (Andrews), while Channel 4 have coupled their own on-demand service with uploading large amount of archive content onto YouTube, which is free to audiences but can enable additional advertising revenue. DVD, while commonly cited as a physical format threatened by digital delivery (Sweney), still retains an importance in the consumption of television texts and has been an important source over the last decade or so of both revenue and finding audiences. The limitations of tape proved a problem for television texts on VHS; acquiring a long-running series entailed a vast space commitment in the home, while the relative compactness of the DVD format allows whole seasons to be easily purchased, stored and consumed. Watching the box set, often several episodes at a time, was the way in which most viewers saw shows such as *The Wire* (only broadcast in the UK initially on a minority digital channel, FX, and then some years after production on late night BBC2); with multi-episode series such as this, DVD viewing away from the schedule proved more convenient for many. DVD also proved important for sitcoms, allowing them to develop and extend their audience. *Peep Show*’s low broadcast ratings were compensated by very high

DVD sales – up to 400,000 units - to both established fans and new viewers attracted by word of mouth (Sexton).

Convergence, with its ability for audiences to see programmes at a time of their choosing, represents a shift away from critical notions of the relationship between the television industry and its audience; the ‘flow’ conceived by Raymond Williams as “the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form” (*Technology and Cultural Form* 86) had been developed by John Ellis (*Visible Fictions*), who argued that texts are consumed within the context of other textual material (programmes but also adverts and interstitials), broadcast as a schedule. The schedule of programmes, broadcast and promoted at specific times encourages the organisation of the TV business around channels. The schedule allows the broadcaster to exercise control over what, how and when the audience watches but it also builds a coherent narrative that can be easily understood by viewers. Ellis considers that “the schedule defines the everyday specificity of television” (*Seeing Things* 131). Life can be organised around favourite shows and the schedule can reflect perceived patterns in everyday living when certain kinds of programmes are perceived as appropriate for particular times (Sunday night ‘warmedy’ drama or Saturday night variety for example).

The ability of audiences to access programmes when they choose appears to imperil these deep industry structures: Michelle Hilmes suggests DVRs “bring into question the whole basic *raison d’être* of the concept of network, if programmes are essentially part of an online library” (18). Yet, while

its model is certainly changing, the idea of a schedule is proving surprisingly resilient. DVRs and on-demand viewing are still based on the schedule and are usually viewed in the few days around broadcast (Ellis, "End of TV?"). TV broadcasts still offer the route by which texts can become known and seen, as Toby Miller points out:

TV still dominates as a mode of production, distribution, and reception of the very genres that it helped create. Time-shifting and platform choice are versions of what has long been the dominant norm - watching material produced and brought by television networks.

John Ellis argues that this is even more the case in the British context and that the catch-up market in particular is still inextricably linked to the schedule (and is still very largely distributed by the broadcasters themselves rather than third parties such as Netflix in the US). He suggests that viewers are becoming "schedule shufflers, still organising their viewing in relation to the concept of currency, which is the effect of TV scheduling" ("End of TV?"). This links to Ellis's earlier argument in *TV FAQ* that "curiously it is the niche channels that seem most under threat in the emerging new order of TV....most wide channels could easily transform into a download or on-demand model or storage on PVR" (174). Audiences in "liquid modernity" above all are short of time and schedules remain a useful tool for them to use. Without the broadcast of TV content and its organisation into some form of schedule, however flexible, then the danger for the industry is that texts become impossible for viewers to find in the morass of digital content; broadcasting and scheduling offer both an easy route and guide for the viewer and a promotional platform for distributors and producers. Andrew Crisell actually goes as far as to argue that within the industry the schedule has

actually assumed more, not less, importance. Crisell sees producers who are bound by the requirements of schedule slots to extend or curtail their work beyond its natural length and believes that the dictates of the schedule's content will become ever more restrictive as the tendency of "plenty" will not be to offer more but more of the same "because the demand will be for material of an ever narrower range" (45). The questions over the future of the schedule are complex but the reports of its demise have proved premature. It does, as Crisell points out, retain much of its power within the structures of the industry and something of its control over audience's viewing. That control is looser than previously however. The schedule has a currency for a few days or weeks in which people choose to view at their convenience or rather as Ellis notes ("End of TV?") choose to view some kinds of programmes, notably dramas and other fictions (including to some extent sitcoms). News, sports and talent shows still rely on being seen as broadcast but it has been noticeable that in trailers the BBC emphasises the on-demand availability of shows like *The Killing* or indeed sitcoms like *Rev.*, which have developed a word of mouth following, rather than their transmission times. There have been reports too that viewers of ITV's upscale period drama *Downton Abbey* are watching on-demand or recording on DVR to enable them to skip the commercial breaks (Armstrong, "Downton"). To Uricchio this activity represents a "transformation of the viewer-television interface" (178), a shift in scheduling power with audiences choosing to view on their terms, against the market interests of the broadcaster.

Case Study: The Changing Schedule

It is not just the power and reach of the schedule that is in a state of transformation. The content of the schedule has already substantially altered its character to reflect changes in industry and audience. Some genres have revived and prospered (variety and talent shows for example), some have risen to become dominant ('reality' based factual entertainment) and others have declined, either pretty much completely (single drama) or moved from the centre to the margins of the schedule. Sitcom is in the latter category. Up to the 1990s, along with soap operas, it was the programming with the most reliably high audiences, a lynch-pin for prime-time viewing but it is now pushed to the edges of 'the flow'. To show the extent of this change, I will compare two weeks' programming from nineteen years apart by analysing *Radio Times*' listings from a week in October 1992 (3-9 October) and comparing them with another October week from 2011 (22-28 October). Selecting October for this comparative analysis allows us to see the extent of the change clearly. It is a traditionally strong month for television as darker evenings bring bigger audiences and new shows are being promoted and scheduled. By looking at the numbers of sitcoms being transmitted in prime time (7-11pm) and the channels on which they were broadcast we can see how the genre has been repositioned within the industry. In 1992, there were four terrestrial channels and an embryonic satellite market, centred largely on Hollywood movies and sports. In 2011, there is a myriad of digital channels, including those related to the three broadcasters who dominated the 1992 schedule. We now have BBC3, BBC4, ITV2, ITV3, ITV4, E4, and

More4, as well as another terrestrial broadcaster Channel 5 and its own two digital offshoots 5* and 5USA.

By comparing the two listings from 1992 and 2011 the changing fortunes of sitcom in the schedule can be clearly seen. In 1992 no fewer than eight new episodes of British sitcom series were premiered through the week; by 2011 there were just three UK sitcoms being broadcast for the first time, despite many more channels being available. The impact of the change doesn't end there: the three first broadcast episodes in 2011 are all shown at 10pm, towards the end of primetime and are all on minority channels; BBC2 showed *Rab. C. Nesbitt* (ironically a show that originally dates from twenty years earlier and has been revived) and Channel 4 transmitted *Fresh Meat* (I consider *Fresh Meat* a sitcom, although each episode is just under an hour and it has dramatic as well as comic moments) and *Pete Versus Life*. The two Channel 4 shows are aimed specifically at a younger demographic that fits into the Channel's brand identity.

In contrast, all but two of the eight 1992 new broadcasts air before the 9pm watershed with only one (the risqué Julian Clary vehicle *Terry and Julian*) starting at 10 or later. In 1992 five shows premiere on primetime BBC1 with one shown on ITV (*Men Behaving Badly* which transferred to BBC1 for its following seasons). Therefore 75% of new sitcoms are on the two most popular channels, although there is evidence here of ITV's retreat from the genre, which might be seen as a portent of pressures to come as sitcom came be seen as too much of a risk to advertisers for the investment needed. ITV had never been as successful as the BBC in producing sitcoms but they still were an integral part of

their schedules until the 1990s. The BBC1 shows included stalwarts that ran for many seasons such as *Keeping Up Appearances*, *Birds of a Feather*, *Waiting for God* and *2 point 4 Children*, in contrast to the absence of BBC1 sitcoms altogether in this week in 2011. Primetime BBC1 sitcoms do still occur (*Life of Riley*, *In With the Flynns*) but this comparative exercise reveals that they are no longer part of the regular pattern of broadcasting over the week. The primetime pre-watershed slots are now often dominated by docusoap and popular factual shows that are much cheaper to make. Other significant points of comparison emerge too: not only were eight new sitcom episodes screened in 1992 but eight more UK shows are transmitted as primetime repeats and a further three American sitcoms and one Australian series are aired. In 2011 there was still a *Dad's Army* rerun but repeats and non-UK sitcoms have been largely relegated to the new digital channels. It might seem surprising that there were no new broadcasts of sitcoms on digital channels if, as I have claimed, sitcom as a genre has found a new home on BBC3 or E4. There were plenty shown on these channels this week but they were reruns of hits established in the preceding years and months on the stations, including episodes of *Gavin and Stacey* and *The Inbetweeners* or, especially on E4, a number of the American shows that Channel 4 has long nurtured here, including *My Name is Earl* and *How I Met Your Mother*. Sitcoms may have found a home on BBC3 and E4 but the volume of new shows was much smaller than the number of sitcoms placed on primetime two decades earlier.

Comedy's Place in Contemporary Television

If we look closely at the 2011 schedule however we can see that there is still plenty of comedy, just not in the sitcom form. What has happened over the last decade or so is that some of the functions of sitcom within the schedule - its ability to create laughter and enjoyment and to create archetypal and resonant characters for the zeitgeist - have been taken on by other sorts of programming and producers have looked to cheaper formats to achieve those kinds of connections with viewers. Some of this is through other comic television forms: sketch shows and particularly over the last decade, panel shows. These programmes typically feature a group of stand-up comedians, with one of them acting as chairman, performing routines within a game show format or commenting on topical issues in a very loose quiz framework. In the 1992 schedule sample there was only one example of such a programme, the little-remembered *A Word in Your Ear*, but in 2011 there were seven, many repeats of earlier episodes, despite their supposed topicality. The immediacy of these programmes, allied to their cheap production requirements other than performance fees, has proved very tempting for broadcasters.

Away from recognised comic forms, comic structures also play an important part in reality or other popular factual programmes. The docusoaps of the late 1990s delighted in unearthing 'characters' such as Maureen in *Driving School* and Ray in *The Clampers*; *Big Brother* and other competitive reality shows that followed built up comic potential through their participants and the situation, marking some out as 'comic' characters, for good or ill. Similar patterns

are emerging in the current vogue for scripted reality shows like *The Only Way is Essex*, in which producers respond to viewer discourse about the shows to re/create comic storylines. Other factual programmes, such as the motoring series *Top Gear*, have emphasised humour as an attraction to viewers, allowing them to extend their audience beyond those interested in cars. Comedy then has moved outside sitcom to play a part within a range of programming, elements of which encourage audiences to laugh. There have always been some examples of this (the comic aspects played out in *Coronation Street* for instance) but there has been a marked increase in the extent of the erosion of generic boundaries.

The industry has not only been instrumental in changing the audience's experience. The relationship between producer and consumer in the medium is a dynamic one and the audience has also had a notable effect on the shape of the industry. Partly this again derives from technological advance. Television used to be an industry that required extremely expensive equipment and studios as well as years of technical training or experience gained over many years working up through the ranks within a broadcaster before creative control could be exercised. With the advent of less expensive infrastructure and modes of production (cheap lightweight cameras and mobile technology) and distribution (the internet) have come limitless opportunities for interaction and comment, either in blogs, online forums or social media. The ability of the public to be producer, distributor and arbiter of content might have a democratic appeal but it also offers some fundamental challenges to television. The difficulty in

maintaining a revenue model to pay for expensive professionals and the Internet's ability to make faster, multiple interventions has meant that television's position as market leader in communicating information about the world has been diminished. Television news bulletins now often rely on footage the public has provided through mobile phones and uploaded on to YouTube. This has proved quicker and serves the speed of response and consumption required in "the culture of the new capitalism".

User-generated content can also encompass fictional forms but crucially rarely long-form ones. YouTube's limits on length, though now less restrictive, have encouraged the creation of short sketches or comically reworked footage rather than recurring texts that develop a long-term relationship with an online audience. The Internet as arbiter has also had an effect on comedy programming. Comedy and sitcom in particular, tends to be vulnerable to strong, negative, critical reactions. Perhaps because comedy encourages such a personal response, the failure of texts to produce that desired reaction can elicit anger and vitriol, a vitriolic response that the subject is inclined to share. Sitcom writer Simon Nye has said that "sometimes when you write a sitcom you are made to feel that you are plying an evil trade" (Nye interview) and the problems sitcoms have sometimes encountered with newspaper critics are amplified in the new era of participatory social media and communication. In comedy this can be through general forums in newspapers, personal Twitter and Facebook posts, or through dedicated comedy sites and forums, such as www.chortle.co.uk or <http://www.comedy.co.uk/forums/> . Here the user group is defined by their

interest in comedy and that defined market is ever more important for shows as they become marginal, niche products rather than reaching for the large numbers that can be a bulwark against criticism. If such tastemaker groups reject a text, if they proclaim it a failure, then the creators are under pressure within the industry, as they can be perceived to lack a base of support in the marketplace.

If, as with *Peep Show*, audiences are small but committed, there can be a case for retaining that support and kudos – without it, a programme’s life will remain limited. Within this environment the audience for comedy can seem unpredictable, even febrile at times, in its reactions: TV critic Grace Dent sums it up when in her review of *Grandma’s House* she suggested that

[w]e’re in a curious state with British comedy right now, where we clutch our faces in horror as another broad-humoured *Life of Riley* or *My Family* reaches our screens, with their neon-signposted light-lolz and risible incidents involving aqua-aerobics. But then when someone fights the good fight and makes something more complex – *Friday Night Dinner*, *Rev.*, *The Morgana Show* – we attack it with spears.....The safest bet for TV commissioners in current times, hoping to set Twitter alight with belly-laughs is to green-light something serious, fully aware of its unintentional humour.

In this environment, sitcom can create anxiety within the industry. As Emily Bell has noted, “sustaining a long enough run at a fantastically high cost for something which might – if you are lucky – rate as highly as a repeat of *Changing Rooms* holds no appeal for commissioners”. With so many risks attached, sitcom has also proved vulnerable to what Stuart Maconie has called the “culture of second-guessing and simpering. It’s been elevated to a science that has television by the throat”. He’s referring to attempts to create content around supposed demographic requirements or to the use of focus groups to evaluate

the likely impact of programmes, practices that have created a great deal of ire amongst creative comedy talent (underlined by Iannucci in his BAFTA lecture).

David Renwick vented his fury at this culture in *Love Soup*. The episode 'Green Widow' (2:7) shows Alice, as an outsider, visiting a focus group watching Gil's posthumous show 'Love Soup' (seen by us as *Love Soup* viewers in dramatised inserts in the first series). Invited by Gil's agent Lloyd (Owen Brenman), Alice is on the other side of a one-way mirror while a selection of the public spit bile about the production, accusing it of being, "a mess", "a completely rubbish story – what was all that about?" and pronouncing "if that was supposed to be a comedy, God help us". Lloyd sarcastically tells Alice "there you go – obviously we should applaud the democratisation of our industry. Audience interactivity clearly has much to teach us". A shocked Alice asks "who are these people?" as Lloyd tells her that they particularly hated the *Love Soup* title, claiming that it sounded like a cookery programme. When Alice wonders if they noticed the 'love' part of the title he retorts that "it looks like they only pick one word and if it's not the right one they're off to another channel to watch celebrities stick their head up an elephant's arse". The series airs Renwick's frustrations about the state of comedy and interference in the creative process; as he admits "there are a lot of fairly personal digs about what television has become and it's inexorable – there's nothing you can do about it and it's the times we are living in" (Interview with Lambert). These interventions increase markedly in the second series, which takes a sharp inward turn, presumably reflecting some of his experience of making *Love Soup*.

Television and Everyday Living

As my analysis of television within the era of “the culture of the new capitalism” demonstrates, the broadcast industry is more global, more atomised, more subject to market forces than it was previously. Technology has altered the way it is accessed by its audience and as Uricchio suggests has shifted the balance between the producer and consumer (171). Yet the industry has not changed completely; its structures and its schedules, despite considerable pressure, have proved more durable than many expected. Sitcom’s place in this new landscape has proved problematic for the genre. The changes in organisation and viewing have lost it its central place within the television landscape and instead it has had to forge a new kind of existence that is more marginal but still influential and occasionally powerful.

In the early 1990s, Roger Silverstone predicted that “the unchallenged age of broadcasting may be over. In which case, audiences will increasingly become, more literally consumers, buying and owning software and hardware and paying for telecommunicated services” (174). Silverstone’s projection proved to be premature, as the industrial and audience structures lasted for many years to come. Only now is this change coming to pass and even then the extent and scope is arguable. His notion of the audience as consumer is interesting and requires consideration however. This enhanced role as consumers is not necessarily a development that in Sennett’s terms “sets us free” (*Culture* 13). Rather than all tastes being served the result can be that the power of the audience is dictated by a market interpretation of the desires of the majority or

that the louder voices within public discourse drown out its complexity as a body of viewers or conversely that the 'audience' loses completely its coherence as a concept, fragmenting into millions of individual preferences with little connection to each other. Just because there are more potential commercial interventions and options for viewers within the broadcasting industry does not mean that the audience assumes more control or is empowered. Bauman argues that "consumption is an utterly, irredeemably, 'individual' pastime, a string of sensations which can be experienced – lived through – only subjectively" (*Liquid Modernity* 97). By this token the 'audience' as it was traditionally constructed by television was something more than a set of individual consumers.

Television's changes have not just occurred because of deregulation, convergence, or new technology. They are happening because the audience has changed; the lives that the viewers that watch television lead have been transformed and as such television, a medium that is entwined with the rhythms of domestic, day to day, existence, is inevitably affected. Television is built around the perceived requirements of the audience in this everyday context – if those requirements are thought to have changed then so must television.

Talking about the audience is not always easy since one cannot confidently claim knowledge of what are, in effect, the thoughts, assumptions and experiences of millions of people. However it is necessary to try and address what 'the audience' means. Television exists because of the audience and this informs and inflects all its texts. Michelle Hilmes has written that "often overlooked in writing the history of television is the role of the audience, the

'great unknown' without whom all is meaningless, but whose presence and predictions can only be guessed at by anxious broadcasters" (122) and S. Elizabeth Bird states that "the 'audience' is everywhere and nowhere" (3). Yet it is, after all, possible to analyse the audience to some degree; behaviour can be studied, data collected, ratings calculated; viewer's responses can provide some useful understanding and so can consideration of trends within the industry as a response to what they perceive as public demand.

The television audience also has to be seen in the context of wider social upheaval. Sennett and Bauman see a society that has moved away from a collective to an individual sensibility, in which people are increasingly isolated from each other and from familiar and coherent understandings of their place within the world. Sennett perceives a society where notions of 'choice' and 'freedom' are championed by people in power but argues that "the flexibility they celebrate does not give, it cannot give, any guidance for the conduct of an ordinary life" (*Corrosion* 147). Indeed Bauman suggests that now "individualisation is a fate not a choice" (*Art of Life* 34). This is significant because television was built around "the conduct of an ordinary life"; it was designed to be a shared entertainment that fitted into lives that were broadly similar in their structure. The schedule, after all, was constructed around the notion of most people arriving from work or going to bed or watching with or without their children at particular times of day. The structure of time in modernity is now much less predictable.

The concept of 'everyday life' has always been important in television, both for those working in the industry and for those studying the medium because of its domestic reach and its particular intimacy in the lives of its audience. Executives, as Hilmes intimates, try to anticipate the responses of the viewer within their everyday environment, calculating how particular shows and formats will be appreciated by the audience watching at home. Central to this have been ideas about how the dynamics within the family unit would work in relation to the text and how this could be translated into commercial activity that would benefit advertisers. In early forms of the study of television, the concept of the 'everyday' created both a value and a problem in the intellectual response to the medium. Television was seen as important as a site of 'affect' (Adorno 165-6), a place where society and the individual's actions within it could be studied; this approach is seen in work such as Charlotte Brunsdon and David Morley's *Nationwide* study in the 1970s. However television's very everyday-ness was also seen as evidence that it was inherently trivial, that its worth could only be an indicator of what was happening in the world through the behaviour of its audience rather than a set of texts that had meaning in themselves and might form a meaningful dialogue with that audience (Adorno 168). Television Studies as a discipline has long moved beyond these notions and engaged with the value of television as a medium, celebrating some of its works (Medhurst, Lury, Nelson, studies in the BFI classics series) and consequently the study of audiences has progressed from seeing them as merely passive receptacles and processors of dominant ideologies to active participants.

Despite the problems with these earlier critical constructs of the television audience, it is necessary to theorise this audience relationship and its place within the everyday, to think about what it might say about the medium and the society it inhabits. Empirical data on viewing trends and case studies of viewing habits can also provide evidence of how television and everyday life interact. The discourse formed through this relationship creates a television culture with its own customs, practices and history, what critic David Bianculli in his book *Teletiteracy* interprets as “engaging in a friendly dialogue with the viewer, speaking what it knows is a common language” (258).

Critical work can also show us how this relationship might be changing. Roger Silverstone’s work in the early 1990s offers a theoretical model of TV and everyday life just as imminent change through deregulation and digital technology is beginning to become apparent. Silverstone sees TV as “embedded in the multiple discourses of everyday life” (ix) because “our experience of television is of a piece with our experience of the world: we do not expect it to be, nor can we imagine it to be significantly otherwise” (3). Silverstone sees this experience as both psychological and social and an integral part of the individual’s position within society. Like Sennett and Bauman’s view of the dynamics at work in modernity, Silverstone believes that “everyday life becomes then the site for, and the product of, the working out of significance” (164) but he argues that within this television is central to “the mediation of anxiety and reassurance” (54). Unlike some earlier theorists, however, Silverstone notes that the audience are part of this discourse. He sees a complex

picture where television's place in everyday life is a nexus of individual, social, psychological, cultural, economic, political and technological factors and tensions. He stresses that this is a "conversation" (130) and to this extent I think his work complements the analysis of John Ellis and his concepts of "working through" (*Seeing Things*) and "consolation" (*TV FAQ*). Silverstone is clear that the way TV is viewed is important as well as what is viewed; he calls this a "double articulation" because "the consumption of both, the technology and its content, define the significance of television as an object of consumption" (123). Thus if the technological relationship changes so does the nature of the dynamic between television and the 'everyday'. It may be "part of the grain of everyday life" (22) but the pattern of the grain changes and in 1994 Silverstone anticipates that it might do so in the future. He concludes that "the position of the audience, and our capacity to make sense of that position in a changing world, still depends on its location within the public and private structures of everyday life" (176). The question, nearly twenty years later then, is what that location might be now.

Statistical data can help us in tracking the extent of change. While the channel share of terrestrial stations in the UK has inevitably dropped in a multichannel environment, the total number of hours of TV that the audience watches has stayed relatively stable (in 2011 this was 26.74 hours per week (*Broadcast 29/07/2011*) and "there is certainly no progressive downward trend" (Gunter xii). The availability of many more channels don't seem to have affected how much television people view, nor do the attractions of other media. How they watch it may be different though. Convergence with computers and mobile

technology disrupts some of the old theoretical assumptions about television's place within the home and the critical constructs about the 'hearth' and TV's role within the family (Silverstone 29). However if audiences are seeing shows on the way to work through on-demand services on their mobile phone, TV is still ingrained in their everyday lives, even if the effect of 'broad-casting' is altered. The process of transformation in television creates subtler shifts in emphasis and understanding of the medium than is often acknowledged. Silverstone's consumer certainly holds more sway – the power of consumption has come to be more balanced with the powers of production and distribution – but it is a negotiated arrangement between television and its audience that retains much of the existing functions of television's place in everyday life because those functions suit both parties. Other elements change their characteristics as everyday life changes; as the boundaries of work and leisure blur, for instance, so television can be accessed through computers in the workplace as well as in a domestic setting or can be accessed at different times of the week according to the audience's availability.

Karen Lury characterises the importance of television's relationship with day to day existence by stating that "there is no escape from the everyday; or rather, in sleeping, dreaming, working; in sex and in watching television, each everyday is occupied by a series of escapes and returns" ("Corner" 372). The power of that position is not necessarily affected by the changes in the viewing landscape. Wood and Taylor make a very convincing case for stressing the continuities in television's role in everyday life in an article entitled "Feeling

Sentimental about Television Audiences”. They argue that analysis should look beyond technological determinants to what television can still mean in everyday experience, asking “does rearranging television more centrally around one’s personal lifestyle mean that television is *less* central or *more* central to our ways of life?” (146, italics in original). Only detailed empirical work can really answer this and Wood in particular has been at the forefront of studying audiences’ behaviour as multichannel, digital viewers (Skeggs and Wood) but the implication she and Taylor reach is that “television as a durable domestic object is woven into the sociocommunicative framework of everyday lives” (147). TV is still an integral part of both our private and public discourse and new modes of consumption do not necessarily change that fact.

Television and the Internet

One key element in social change over the last fifteen years has been the emergence and influence of the Internet. The Internet swiftly moved from being a professional tool to a public one, driving patterns of behaviour. It is easy to see the extent of this impact in some aspects of everyday life; the ability to buy items and services on line has transformed retail business and consequently the closure of shops is having a transformative effect on town centres. The ability to communicate and find information from a variety of locations, including domestic spaces, using the Internet has had an effect on working patterns and has lessened the need for some kinds of face to face interactions. The rise of social media, which has expanded at an astonishing speed since Facebook was

founded in 2004, is similarly causing real shifts in business practices and individual's modes of social engagement. In 2010, 12.5% of the UK population was using Facebook everyday and this has undoubtedly risen since, particularly since Twitter joined Facebook as a mass participation medium (Gunter 63). If we look at all Internet services, according to a 'Changing Media' report by the Office of National Statistics, penetration in the UK in 2009 was 76%. This figure is pushed downwards by a much lower rate of use by the over 65s (24%). For those who are 16-24 the rate is 90% and 67% of all the population go online everyday so the Internet in its many forms is very much now part of the weft and weave of everyday life in the UK (Gunter 4-6).

An obvious conclusion to these figures might be that the Internet has somehow replaced television's old role at the centre of everyday living. However this does not seem to be the case; the impact of the Internet on television has been rather more ambiguous. Gunter points out that "the relationship between TV viewing and the Internet is not straightforward. There are individuals who use both media frequently, while there are others for whom use of the Internet for certain purposes might displace some of their TV viewing" (23). There are variables within television here; the Internet, with its immediacy and ability to easily carry a range of voices and perspectives, has challenged television's primacy as a source of information with the reach of TV news down from 74% in the late 1990s to 55% just five years later (Gunter 11). However entertainment has been affected much less; material might be viewed on the Internet but content that a large number of people want to enjoy and share is still to a great

extent generated by television and distributed by its companies. The shared experience is still very evident in the success of talent shows like *The X-Factor* that depend upon a common moment of anticipation and response. Sitcoms can retain some of this power in the shared appreciation of gags, characters and situations, even though they are less reliant on liveness or discovering the result; indeed already knowing what the result will be has long been one of the pleasures of sitcom. The desire to share is still apparent in audiences. Henry Jenkins acknowledges that “broadcasting provides the common culture and the web offers more localised channels for responding to that culture” (222).

One of the reasons that TV has retained much of its audience in the face of this online challenge is that television companies have been adept at using the web and increasingly social media as a complement to viewing. Jeremy G. Butler suggests that “the future of media convergence, like the future of the moving image itself, depends upon media companies’ ability to compete with the real-time screen’s user agency, navigable space, temporal simultaneity and virtual sense of shared space” (167). Thus far TV companies have done this, integrating online interactive elements with broadcast texts and allowing engagement from viewers to be mediated, while at the same time delivering a flexibility in viewing possibilities that, as discussed, utilises rather than replaces the schedule. The practice of ‘bundling’, producing further content around the programme, through websites or through ‘red-button’ services, has been successful for the BBC and other broadcasters.

What the Internet has meant, however, is new modes of viewing, new habits that have the potential to influence the texts that television creates. The audience is now familiar with the very different viewing pleasures and narratives that the Internet provides. The Internet is a medium built on small, discrete elements rather than television's long, continuing forms. Online viewing is designed to provide quick answers and results that bring closure to the questions posed. We are accustomed to use the Internet to find pieces of information and opinion rather than a sustained, balanced assessment and to experience instant pleasures over delayed gratification. John Ellis argues that "the web will, therefore, create different forms... the web is driven by searching and finding; TV is driven by provision from trusted sources; television is a centralised content-creating industry, and the web behaves in a very different way" (*TV FAQ* 223).

The web has relied on the content that TV creates to stimulate its own audience demand. Comedy has been a major part of this process but in this translation across media, the way the work is viewed and understood can change. For example, Alan Partridge has been reinvented on the web but in a series of pastiche sketches (*Mid Morning Matters with Alan Partridge*), sponsored by Foster's lager, rather than the longer, more complex forms of his broadcast sitcom incarnation but even this has ended up being broadcast on Sky Atlantic (Plunkett, "Alan Partridge Switches"). The broadcast industry has learnt to use the Internet as a site for content for comedy, repackaging sitcoms to present scenes and characters away from their contexts to try and attract new audiences. This can prove problematic because sitcom works on the careful calibration of

elements across a series and within each episode that an audience works to understand and identify. The Internet's emphasis on limited viewing time and small bites of content alters that relationship. For instance, the famous dance scene in the second series of *The Office* (2:5) became a viral sensation online. Although the three-four minute clip remains funny through the ridiculousness of David Brent's actions and the sense of mounting hysteria, it loses some power, poignancy and comedy when cut off from the context of the knowledge of the characters and their situation built up over hours of viewing.

The Internet cannot replace everything that television can offer, unless it acts as just another screening device. The power and reach of the Internet can benefit some sitcom texts but can also create its own pressure points for television shows. The possibilities that the web provides for interaction and an instant, shared feedback means that sitcom's weakness – a tendency that audiences have for violent opprobrium if it is felt that the promise of laughter has not been delivered – can be amplified. Within the culture of the Internet age, negative opinions can be made to carry more weight than previously, aided by anonymity, instantaneousness and peer to peer platforms.

Television and the Atomised Society

The individualisation that seems inherent in the use of the Internet and its ubiquity in both work and domestic life (unlike television's solely leisure context) underlines Sennett's and Bauman's critique of modernity and its social fragmentation. While it appears to connect people together, the infinite choice of

material on the Internet paradoxically allows individuals to endlessly reinforce their pre-existing opinions. Tony Judt, who broadly shares Sennett's and Bauman's analysis, remarks that "if everyone selects gobbets of knowledge and information that interest them, but avoids exposure to anything else we do indeed form global communities of elective affinity – while losing touch with the affinities of our neighbours", contrasting this with "the television reports they took in over dinner" (120). This suggests that for all the talk of virtual communities created through the Internet, television can offer a more genuine kind of social affinity. However there are social critics who consider that the atomisation of society is a process in which TV has played a large and guilty part. Putnam's influential study *Bowling Alone* and economist Richard Layard's equally prominent *Happiness Lessons from a New Science* are unequivocal in claiming that television has had a detrimental role in social fragmentation. They see television as a primarily insular medium, taking people away from their fellows and instead encouraging unrealistic aspirations and misguided readings of the world around them. Layard quotes the well known case of the introduction of television to the remote Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, with a resultant rise in crime and disharmony, to argue that it "reinforces the commonsense view that TV is a major independent force in our lives, and not simply a reflection of what we already are" (78); he claims that television concentrates on extremes so that it desensitises viewers to sex, violence, wealth and beauty, causing discontent (86). Putnam's response is rather more measured and based on empirical data but also cites television as a major point of atomisation. He seems to be more kindly disposed to the Internet

because of its potential to create positive virtual communities, perhaps a more hopeful possibility in 2000 than it might seem today. However he sees television, especially the multichannel televisual landscape already established by then in the USA, as socially corrosive; “television viewing has steadily become a more habitual, less intentional part of our lives”, he argues (224). Putnam’s reasoning, based on his primary argument that the civic society that formed the basis of much American life (far more so than in Britain) was gradually falling apart, is that time in the home watching television naturally precluded participation in community events. That might be so but Putnam is also forced into tight rhetorical corners in his concerns about television’s influence. He acknowledges that “TV at its civic best can be... a powerful force for bridging social differences...” (243) but also believes that “it provides a kind of pseudopersonal connection to others” and that “by making us aware of every social and personal problem imaginable, television also makes us less likely to do anything about it” (242). This rather smacks of having things all ways. One of the themes in his book (which broadly shares Sennett’s and Bauman’s politics and critiques of modernity) is that there are two kinds of connections between people; bonding and bridging, of which bridging, which links individuals and groups who otherwise have differences, is the most valuable (22). As Judt points out and even Putnam acknowledges, television has the capability to aid this bridging process; equally if we are made aware of social problems, why does ‘television’ make us less likely to act? There’s an undercurrent of snobbery here; a belief that if people

(particularly working-class people) weren't exposed to the world outside their experience they would somehow be more virtuous – or at least malleable.

Such criticism of television tends to presuppose that the audience is passive, that watching television replaces activity, rather than truly engaging individuals or that it can embody no critical function; Linda Hutcheon dismisses it completely as “pure commodified complicity, without the critique needed to define the postmodern paradox” (10). As one would imagine, television scholars have defended the medium against such charges and have pointed out the complexities of the audience's position. Caldwell counters that “the television viewer in practice has never been passive – or even typically theorised as passive by the industry. Broadcasters from the start did not see the viewer as a couch potato, but as an active buyer and discriminating consumer” (*Televisuality* 250). Silverstone dismisses the common opposition between conceptions of active and passive viewers; of course audiences may be active, he suggests but what does that really mean? For him “the key issue is not so much whether an audience is active, but whether that activity is significant” (153). This may depend on the nature of the engagement, both from the viewer and within the text. Andrew Crisell contends that “it is misleading to see powerful texts and powerful audiences as an oppositional, see-saw relationship; they often collaborate, and there is also a sense in which even ‘inert’ and uncritical viewers are powerful” (140). As Ellis and Bianculli, in his robust defence of television (23, 123), argue, television builds a dynamic reciprocal relationship with its viewership, which takes the form of a conversation or, in Francesco Casetti's term, a “negotiation”.

Bianculli claims that “a lot of the fear and loathing directed at television is done so out of a time-honoured, reflexive overreaction to the dominant medium of the moment” (23). Sitcom, for a long time held such a position, attracting criticism as one of the most popular modes within this dominant medium. Now that television’s place as the leading popular culture medium is more questionable, even if it is proving more resilient than many expected, television in general and sitcom in particular, occupy a different critical and public space, so rethinking is needed about its agency on the audience.

“Televisuality” and “Teleliteracy”

A new mode of conceptualising the relationship between television and its audience has come out of this move away from the medium’s absolute dominance within everyday life to a place where it competes for the audience’s attention. Caldwell’s work has proved influential in theorising this shift; he proposed the concept of “televisuality”, which incorporates notions about ‘quality’ television that began to be expressed in the 1980s. Around the same time David Bianculli developed the idea of “teleliteracy”, which he argued “is a concept that ... means using and treating TV properly – taking advantage of the best it has to offer” (158). He advocates an active critical appreciation by the public (as a newspaper critic he offers a direct address to the audience) based on the merits of the television text as an art form. Bianculli explicitly calls for ‘quality’ but has a broad conception of what that might be within different genres. Caldwell’s ‘televisuality’ is less ostensibly value-laden but privileges texts which employ

aesthetics or formal devices that encourage an active audience engagement. He suggests the adoption of this approach was in part to keep U.S network television relevant to viewers amidst competition from cable and home videos in the 1980s. Such shows “were a function of the audience” because “many viewers expected and watched programmes that made additional aesthetic and conceptual demands not evident in earlier programming” and required a “certain minimal level of educational, financial and cultural capital” (5). In the American context such strategies flowered in the late 1980s, retreated somewhat in the early to mid 1990s and then were displaced from networks to subscription cable channels like HBO and AMC and shows like *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men*. In the UK the situation was rather different since the greater emphasis on public service broadcasting meant there was always a conception of ‘quality’ in both documentary and fiction. Thus it could be argued that the idea of an aesthetic transformation in the medium and its links to ideas of ‘quality television’ came rather later in the UK, precisely because television had always carried more cultural kudos in the first place. However this was predominantly based on content over form, notwithstanding exceptional experimental works such as Dennis Potter’s *The Singing Detective*. If television is one available art form rather than ‘just’ a mass medium then it can develop its own conceptions of distinction and can be a site of “cultural capital”. Ideas about “cultural capital” were developed by Pierre Bourdieu as a way of measuring the influence exerted by taste and education, partly to uphold class privilege (80-83). For many years television watching as a whole was seen as evidence of lack of “cultural capital”

but now TV has its own highbrow texts favoured by educated viewers. They may lack mass appeal but this can have its own attraction within the business if they attract tastemakers and educated, affluent audiences that can lend both cultural credibility and advertising or subscription revenue.

Bianculli sees such “cultural capital” linked to shifts in technology that “allowed many of us to be not just viewers but collectors” (251), able to watch some kinds of programmes away from the flow. The ability to replay, rewind and display has certainly aided this process. This kind of “teleliteracy” and “televisuality” has particularly applied to fiction, especially long-running, complex fictional narratives. Texts like *Mad Men* offer levels of richness and complexity to support this kind of viewing and also signify desirable “cultural capital”, hence the critical concentration in recent television studies on such texts, which suit the tastes of educated scholars rather than appealing to a broad constituency of viewers (McCabe and Akass; Nelson). In the UK this has led to a privileging of American shows, precisely because they are seen to possess an inherent merit, more patinas of sophistication, than equally worthy British programming (Billen).

John Ellis sees this as “connoisseurship”, with the audience for fiction “beginning to divide into connoisseurs, regular viewers, occasional viewers and those who don’t bother much with any of it” (*TV FAQ* 149). Indeed I would suggest that the middle ground of occasional and regular viewers is being squeezed out of the equation. “Televisual” programmes require attention and effort – watching them delivers pleasure to those commit but is also designed to exclude those who don’t; creator of *The Wire*, David Simon, after all famously

declared “fuck the casual viewer!” (*The Culture Show*). The ability to drop in to fictional shows becomes increasingly difficult, marking a significant change in television because series (as opposed to serials) always signalled this as an attraction. Audiences, once they had seen a few episodes and familiarised themselves with character and situation could catch others now and again or in different orders in reruns and still be able to follow and enjoy them.

Connoisseurship also elevates viewing beyond the “flow” through DVD box sets, on-demand services and downloads. The audience chooses to watch this particular text; they are not just watching television. In a recent piece Toby Miller quotes the creator of US show *Heroes*, Tim Kring, who went as far as to denounce those who saw his show as broadcast on the network as “saps and dipshits who can’t figure out how to watch it in a superior way”.

Connoisseurship offers a new way to see television texts; there is a demand for close viewing based on the programme’s quality of form and content but also an appeal to the audience’s “cultural capital”, offering apparent superiority to the broadcast audience. This is illustrated by the marketing of the Sky Atlantic channel, which aims to capture upscale audiences for advertising by purchasing HBO and AMC dramas that such viewers may have already enjoyed on other channels. The ‘carrot’ is a channel full of such programmes, a ‘quality’ narrow-cast station, the ‘stick’ is that viewers have to subscribe if they want to see these programmes on television at all – if they don’t, they have to wait for a commercial release on DVD or download.

The demise of the casual viewer is significant for sitcoms. Many traditional shows were watched by regular or occasional viewers but as the initial effort of knowing the show's set-up or recognising the generic codes from seeing many similar texts becomes more demanding for the audience so the relationship between the sitcom and the viewer within the television landscape has shifted. Popular shows such as those featured in the *Radio Times* of 1992, *Keeping Up Appearances* for instance, had a particular address through its central character (suburban arriviste snob Hyacinth Bouquet, played by Patricia Routledge) and its style of humour that gave it a place in public discourse, whether one was a regular or infrequent viewer. Now sitcoms call on a much smaller number of viewers but require a greater level of commitment; the tone is more challenging, the narrative more complex and in many cases this appeal to a greater level of "cultural capital" is in evidence. Geoffrey Phillips in the late 1990s suggested that "in the main sitcoms have ebbed away down the decades, simply because of the increasing sophistication of the viewing audiences". Sitcoms have had to adjust to this supposed "sophistication" and to greater viewing expectations but like dramas, they can and often strive to be, the objects of connoisseurship, both through the complexity of their comedy and their formal codes, while retaining a role in a wider television culture.

Butler suggests that "televisuality might not exist in a 'pure' form but its implementation within the sitcom illustrates how it can have an impact on genre evolution and shifts in television style" (217). *Peep Show* offers a good example of this in the British context; the show makes a very clear "televisual" appeal

through its aesthetic but also through its deployment of cultural capital in reading its images and points of view, in its popular (and indeed high) culture references and in the tone and address of its comedy. For instance in the episode 'Jeremy at JLB' (6:1), Super Hans breaks up a quarrel between Mark and Jez by shouting "Oi! Drabble! Byatt!" While somewhat incongruous in terms of character and context this is a funny line but only for those who are aware that literary sisters Margaret Drabble and A.S Byatt have a long-standing animus. It is likely to pass over some heads but give extra pleasure to those that can respond to the reference. *Peep Show* asks for, and in its case largely gets, an active engaged audience response.

For the reasons outlined in this chapter sitcom's place within television has moved to the margins. As late as the early 1990s it was at the heart of the primetime schedule in Britain but, as deregulation, multichannel and digital viewing and new modes of watching television have developed, it has become a specialist kind of programming, often screened on niche channels and aimed at an identified market of comedy fans. This audience is engaged but can be demanding or critical if a text is seen to fall short of their standards or is not what they expected. Shows also have to find an audience in a more diverse and complex media landscape and somehow grab their attention. For the rest of this chapter I will consider sitcom's problems within contemporary television and analyse how they reflect upon the wider issues about the dislocation of individuals in society that inform this study. By looking closely at examples we

can also see how sitcoms can either fail or succeed within the terms of today's television.

Sitcom and the Contemporary TV Landscape

The transitions in television have changed its relationship to time and space. Programmes are no longer viewed solely in a fixed domestic space, nor do they have to be seen at the time of broadcast. In contemplating the rise of the DVR, Karen Lury writes that "in refusing to participate in the actual, shared 'now', the viewer is refusing to participate in a shared present with those on-screen and the television audience in general" (*Interpreting* 111). The shared 'now', however, has transmuted into a personal 'now', the demand for instantaneous responses and pleasures. The Internet can offer anything at anytime in a way far beyond television but television has tried to keep step with the new audience expectations of 'now' through on-demand, time-shifting and the new modes of viewing previously discussed. What this has created is a culture of instant gratification, replacing long-established social structures that encouraged the belief in a fulfilment that might be long-distant. Sennett and Bauman are very interested in these changing parameters of time and space; Bauman sees in modernity "the new irrelevance of space, masquerading as the annihilation of time" (*Liquid Modernity* 117), with the implication that the new ways of living signal a loss of meaning rather than a gain in convenience or opportunity. He also claims that

no longer is the delay of gratification a sign of moral virtue. It is a hardship pure and simple, a problematic burden signalling imperfections in social arrangements, personal inadequacy or both (*Liquid Modernity* 159).

Sennett also warns of the perils of the new conceptions of time; he argues that, in stripping time of its meaning, “the culture of the new capitalism” also denudes us from the gains of experience, of building the ‘life-narrative’ he sees as central to character (*Corrosion* 26) and that “the new paradigm makes nonsense of delayed gratification as a principle of self-discipline” (*Culture* 78).

Sitcom relied a lot on delayed gratification and the old social structures of time, now weakened by “liquid modernity”. Its texts require time to understand the characters and situation, time to find the keys to the codes that unlock the possibility of laughter. Once this is established viewers could drop-in as casual or regular viewers; circular narrative structures are designed to make that possible but it did require an initial period of orientation before audiences could access the jokes. In an age of instant expectations the pressure on time for the audience is actually greater; work time and leisure time are no longer clearly differentiated and there is infinite competition for their attention. John Ellis argues that:

We no longer have ‘spare time’, we no longer have to ‘kill time’ and feel very uneasy at ‘wasting time’. Time famine breeds impatience and the desire that choices should be immediately available (*Seeing Things* 170-171).

“Time famine” means sitcom texts now need to establish an immediate connection with an audience because they can no longer reasonably expect them to watch the first few episodes to familiarise themselves with the show and begin to find it funny. There are ways of doing this: promoting shows on the basis

of their performers or writers and their relationship to previous successes; grouping them together on niche channels like BBC3 so that they can be identified and discovered by an audience and their appeal can develop and expand; or targeting a particular demographic address, such as young people. This process of 'interpellation' (theorised by Barthes and Althusser), of attracting audience attention, as Butler discusses, is now much more necessary and complex (14). Paradoxically, however, once this process has taken place and viewers have committed to a show, texts demand more active engagement from their audience; in particular the narrative structures are more complex and demand more effort to follow. Given the time commitments of the modern audience this means they may choose to watch fewer programmes or see them in intensive sessions at their convenience rather than grow with them week by week as the schedules dictate. This process engendered a particular kind of dynamic between text and audience and is becoming another casualty of televisual change.

Sitcoms can still reach an audience, harder though it may be now. Viewers are more selective and this selection process is aided through a critical consensus of opinion formers, peers and now virtual communities. In choosing to watch a show on the basis of reviews or recommendations from friends on Facebook and Twitter or the views of online forums, audiences are participating in a collective act. This might seem to counter some of the arguments that Sennett and Bauman (and indeed Silverstone and Butler) make about atomisation and support Jenkins' idea that convergence is created by active

interventions by the public working together but it is a very different kind of collective experience from television's original concepts and structures, which were based on social reach and united the audience at one moment in time, sharing the same pleasures. Sitcom was at the centre of the television schedule precisely because it provided this so effectively but, as Brett Mills states, "in a broadcasting industry in which the number of channels continues to increase, the sitcom's once universal appeal may continue to splinter into ever more individualised examples" (*Television Sitcom* 49).

Success now comes from building constituencies of viewers through these new forms of consensus. In the case of shows like *Gavin and Stacey* and *The Inbetweeners*, screenings on niche channels earned good reviews and enthusiastic followers. Extensive repeats and web promotion built up that following to a critical mass, although in rather different ways. *Gavin and Stacey* crossed-over from the youth demographic of BBC3 through its older supporting cast and its warm tone and found a home on BBC1. Its success burned brightly but for a very short time – the third series premiered on BBC1 but the situation had become creatively exhausted. However the legacy of the programme is still evident in reruns, DVD sales and further shows by its writers and performers (Ruth Jones created *Stella* for instance). *The Inbetweeners* was repeated on Channel 4, where it did pick up a wider viewership but it stayed on E4 as its premiere channel and concentrated on maximising its demographic of 16-24 year old males. This proved astonishingly successful, growing from committed comedy fans by word of mouth and social media to such a large numbers that its

catchphrases and textual codes were a lingua franca for young men in 2010-11, marking a point of inclusion. Its feature film spin-off became one of the biggest British comedy box office hits. James Kirkham, whose company devised the social media for the series, explained that

we identified a wicked fanbase already in existence, run by a vociferous community. We intentionally co-created the new series platform with them, so we could leverage the fans and pump it through in the right voice and right tone. The smartest shows and the best programmes will start to look at what social media can physically influence, in terms of testing new storylines and incubating new talent (qtd in Bashford).

Shows can also appeal to the audience through previous successes. Sometimes this attraction is sub-generic, based on a style of comedy often populated by the same performers that might share a tone or a style. Contemporary British comedy relies heavily on the intersections between talents such as Steve Coogan, Julia Davis, Chris Morris, Mark Gatiss, Julian Barrett and Armando Iannucci, for example and there is an expectation that an audience is already there to be accessed for their new shows. The success of this strategy can vary, depending on the material.

Channel 4's student set sitcom *Fresh Meat*, launched in autumn 2011, featured a largely unfamiliar cast with new characters and situations. It was also formally complex with longer episodes and a mixture of comic and dramatic storylines. However it did have a proven writing team in charge of the show in Jesse Armstrong and Sam Bain who are the writers of *Peep Show*. The student setting appeals to a very clear and accessible demographic - one that is traditionally responsive to comedy. The programme still had to deliver but largely

succeeded in resonating with this audience and engaging enough other support through critics to be recommissioned.

In contrast, the same period in Autumn 2011 saw the transmission of Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant's *Life's too Short*. The acclaim for *The Office* and *Extras* has made them British television's most famous sitcom writers and expectations were high. However, despite heavy promotion, the series fared very badly; audiences fell away quickly after the first episode and critical comments, both in the press and online, were predominantly negative (Epstein, Mumford). Part of the problem was that elements of the show felt *too* familiar to the audience, re-treading previous themes and ideas that felt fresher and more adeptly handled in the writers' previous work. Here an audience was identified, addressed but still lost, through the inadequacies of the text.

The Holy Grail within the sitcom industry remains achieving success with a broad audience but, for the reasons I've outlined, the chances of doing so are considerably less than twenty years ago. However it is not impossible; a show can at least be re-commissioned, resonate with an enthusiastic audience and garner positive critical opinion. *Rev.* has been a critical success over two series on BBC2 because an audience has responded well to its blend of traditional and modern comedy tropes. Its ecclesiastical setting is a familiar sitcom 'closed' world and its script and performances contain enough warmth and accessible archetypes and situations to appeal beyond the comedy niche, yet retain enough grit and edginess not to alienate that core comedy audience. Ratings are modest but steady and DVD sales are strong. The use of *Peep Show* writers Armstrong

and Bain as script editors for the second series conferred a kind of approval from the comedy community for this more mainstream offering, while the mix of performers illustrated a broader appeal: star Tom Hollander has made his name as a straight actor in film and television, his on-screen wife Olivia Colman is best known as Sophie in *Peep Show*, while supporting cast members Simon McBurney, Miles Jupp and Steve Evets, have made their name in theatre, stand-up comedy and panel shows and social-realist cinema respectively. The show also developed its own public discourse; on the one hand it offered a narrative of enjoyment and engagement, on the other it benefited from the largely positive response from the Church of England about the realism of the show and its comedy (Arnold; Dowell, “Rev.”).

Case Study: *Home Time*

Rev. offers an example of how a good show can gain some sort of traction in the new televisual landscape and reach an appreciative audience. That is not always the case, however and some good sitcoms fail to get to viewers. I will examine why this might be more closely by considering the fate of one of my central texts, *Home Time*. Of course, calling the series ‘good’ is a subjective value judgment that I’m making; I enjoyed it and so did some other commentators who, like me, thought it was well-written with engaging characters, performances and funny lines and that it had something interesting to say about modern British life (Nicholson; Thompson, “Kings”). Others may not have liked it but most people just did not see it at all. Ratings started low and failed to grow,

dropping from 600,000 viewers to below 500,000 (Plunkett, “TV Ratings”) and when I enthused to my peers about the series, almost all of them had never heard of it.

Home Time actually received a largely positive critical response. Rebecca Nicholson in *The Guardian* was positively evangelical, writing about the show every week in ‘The Guide’, calling it “as smart and original as it is as sad and funny” and saying that “it deserves to be a big hit”. Sources as diverse as the *Heat* and *Financial Times* were enthusiastic. Ben Thompson in the latter claimed that it “attained the same balance of tenderness and acuity that has characterised so many of the greatest British sitcoms from *Porridge* to *The Office*” and argued that it was “for my money, the most promising new British sitcom since the far-off advent of *Peep Show*” (“Kings”). The series was also nominated for best sitcom at the South Bank Awards and for an international Rose D’Or award. The online response was more mixed. There were some negative comments, occasionally vituperatively so, on comedy forums such as <http://www.comedy.co.uk/forums/Hometime>. The online criticism may have affected the willingness of the committed comedy community to welcome the show. Some respondents also seemed to link it to the controversial demise of Sharon Horgan’s series *Pulling* by the BBC a few months earlier. *Pulling* had some superficial similarities as it was centred on a group of female friends and some posters appeared to think that *Home Time* had replaced a show they had grown to enjoy.

There may be other reasons why *Home Time* did not achieve the success it might have done. Opening the show directly on BBC2 probably seemed a positive step for its creators but it proved problematic. *Heat* magazine in its preview for the first episode said “A new comedy series from new writers, starring people we’ve never heard of, coming straight to BBC2? Amazing” (Hilton). However opening on BBC2 brings ratings pressure and audience demands for instant gratification. *Home Time* relied on subtle humour and getting to know the interplay between complex characters. Perhaps the BBC felt that the series wasn’t raucous enough for the expectations of the BBC3 audience and that the relative youth of the characters precluded BBC4 screenings but it might have been able to grow an audience more easily away from the terrestrial spotlight. Having decided to launch the series on BBC2, the corporation, which had commissioned the show from established comedy producers Baby Cow (owned by Steve Coogan), seemed to lack the courage of their convictions. The show was moved at short notice from a summer to an autumn transmission (Armstrong, “No Laughing Matter”). When it was broadcast, *Home Time* wasn’t trailed at all so regular BBC viewers would be unaware that it was being shown other than through the listings; a trailer might have given some sense of the show’s tone and address to help the audience and emphasised its slow-burn appeal in the manner of *The Office*. The final two episodes were rescheduled from Monday to Thursday, further disrupting the small audience that had committed to the show at that point.

Contemporary comedy shows also thrive on an afterlife after broadcast. The traditional pattern is a DVD release shortly after the final episode and repeat runs at least on the digital stations. This did not happen with *Home Time*. Baby Cow may have been preoccupied with the final series of *Gavin and Stacey*, which was produced around the same time but no DVD appeared in that immediate post-broadcast period, which was particularly strange as it was just before Christmas. In correspondence, Baby Cow informed me that the series was available on download only through iTunes, which might have been an attempt to try new distribution methods in the current market (Henderson). Finally the series was released on DVD in autumn 2011, two years after broadcast, with the likelihood of fairly limited sales. The show has not yet been repeated on any UK channel.

The story of *Home Time* demonstrates some of the problems and frustrations for sitcom creators in contemporary television – critically well-received work can still be overlooked and fail to reach the audiences it deserves. Twenty years earlier its BBC2 slot would have meant that it would have been given time to find that audience but in the current landscape it meant it was exposed but under-supported. Rebecca Nicholson ruefully pleaded “despite the lack of fanfare and slight viewing figures, let’s hope the BBC appreciate what they’ve got on their hands and give it another chance to take off”. This didn’t happen, however. *Home Time* demonstrates the difficulties facing sitcom in the new television landscape but the programme and the response it provoked in the

small number of people, such as Nicholson, Thompson and I, also shows the pleasure sitcoms can still provide for their viewers.

What Can Television Still Offer?

In this age of “liquid modernity”, with its array of available, instant options and rapid technological advance, what can television in general and sitcom in particular, still offer an audience? Is television now just a stubborn vestige of history, a habit that is proving hard to break but will inevitably slide away when the population gets used to converged content on handheld devices, probably hosted by social networks rather than broadcasters? Some people are insistent that this is the case; for example Dan Sabbagh has claimed that the live-as-broadcast success of *The X-Factor* was an exception that proved the rule and that “traditional media are in decline, and anybody not paying attention to that is in denial”. While media consumption patterns are undoubtedly shifting and perhaps elements of what Sabbagh describes as “traditional media” are declining, it is also striking that there are many continuities in the television experience. As Lawson infers, (‘TV Matters’) the television model has proved much more enduring than was imagined twenty years ago when the new technological possibilities became apparent. The reason for this is that people seem to like television as a medium; audiences want to watch it just as much as they always did because it often gives them what they want. The figures for the number of hours viewed per week remain stable and there was a small increase in hours of live television viewed per day in 2010 (Barb/ thinkbox qtd in Gunter);

Gunter's study reveals that 77% of respondents did not believe that social network use affected their TV viewing (21). All this data is evidence that contradicts Sabbagh's arguments. As Miller points out, some of the new media landscape is intrinsically connected to the old models: "versions of what has long been the dominant norm - watching material produced and bought by television networks" and Caldwell argues that the basis on which we understand new media largely comes from our existing experience of television:

[t]elevision brought to the table of technological 'revolution' a set of principles that proved to ground the Internet as well. Television is electronic, ubiquitous, round the clock, and ostensibly (like the net) free ('convergence television' 70).

The audience appreciates the new convenience, which helps to fit in with changes in their own patterns of day to day living but they still feel that the old models offer something that remains relevant; many millions of people do come home to their living rooms and watch live broadcasts or as Ellis reports ("End of TV?") catch-up with that week's schedule to retain its currency. One problem here is that 'early adopters' like Sabbagh overstate the impact of change. Some urban professionals might feel that traditional media is no longer so applicable to their lives but that is not likely to be a typical experience for other demographic groups.

Television also has some unique properties that have not yet been replicated by other media. Television's dynamic and complex dialogue with its audience is still ongoing, as Wood and Taylor recognise, arguing that "the old screen medium of television, we argue, whether multiple and diffuse in new

arrangements of time and space, or diversified in content and form, is as durably and consistently located in the fabric of everyday life as it ever was” (144). It’s true that new media is now also part of everyday living but it acts to perform functions of that life; crucially television talks to us about our lives, engaging its audience in a social discourse. New media have not yet found convincing extended, fictional structures whereas television can still offer the vicarious pleasures of showing audiences the lives of people who can be recognised as something like themselves, in forms that replicate the rhythms of the ‘everyday’.

Television can also help us put our world into context; Ellis argues that “the feeling of uncertainty that haunts the world is one that I think that television addresses in an important and distinctive way” (*Seeing Things* 3) and Silverstone suggests that “modernity and post-modernity are expressed in the content of television and its active hybridisation of public-private culture” (174). The landscape of modernity that Sennett and Bauman address is one that needs interpretation and dramatisation so that the audience can reflect on its position within the world. The intimacy of television, its ability to be part of everyday life and yet set itself apart from it to comment and reflect on existence, still renders it powerful, for as Jostein Gripsrud puts it, “broadcast media relate to fundamental, elementary social and psychological needs (or wishes or desires) that are not likely to go away in the foreseeable future” (213). This fulfilment of a need transcends technological change; Armando Iannucci, in a BAFTA lecture in 2012, argued that

whatever device that rectangle is on may keep changing, away from the home and onto the tablet, but it’s still these same four sides enclosing

what you've made. It's an intimate connection between you and them.....TV is personal.

As Iannucci, a sitcom practitioner, implies, sitcom is a particularly strong example of what television can still offer its audience, even if it no longer is its most popular genre. Firstly it offers a unique relationship to character over time. Time in television is changing in terms of *how* we view but not necessarily in *what* we view. In TV fictions like sitcoms we can come to know characters over a long period, a period that can mirror our own experiences and progress. In films and plays we receive only an impression of a character over two hours; in a sitcom like *Peep Show* there has been twenty four hours the audience could have spent with the protagonists in a broadcast period of eight years. In that time we have seen them age – there have been failed marriages and the birth of children and the loss of jobs – and aged ourselves and we have watched the series as our own lives have evolved. As Lury writes, “the perception of time by the audience is understood as experience... felt in relation to the duration of viewing in terms of minutes, weeks and years” (*Interpreting* 95). Sitcom in particular emphasises the ordinary over the dramatic; it aims to mimic the shape of the experiences of its audience and dramatise how it might make them feel. In the case of *Peep Show* no over-arching narrative is forming Mark and Jez; the focus is the frustration they feel in every minute of their existence because that is where the humour of the show lies.

Secondly sitcom has a capacity for social comment and an ability to engage its audience in a discourse about the way they are living. Again television

forms can make a unique offer; films and plays arrive often late to a debate as fully formed statements, while new media is all too reactive, often producing an instant storm of cacophonous opinion. This can be interesting as a symptom of society but rarely offers an analysis of it. Television can develop an ongoing and sophisticated conversation about the world with its viewers. Ellis argues that “television has also mediated the increasing complexity of modern life to modern citizens... it’s a pervasive and everyday medium, it has been central in mediating it to the widest possible number of people” (*TV FAQ* 4). Sitcom in Britain has traditionally revelled in this task; the deal of laughter allows the text to elicit ambivalent responses from its audience, who are prepared to be challenged because they feel liberated by the comic take on their own experience. In the 1970s sitcoms looked at the dread of routine work and hierarchies or the uncertainties felt over issues like race, youth or class. In “liquid modernity”, shows like *Peep Show*, *Home Time*, *Saxondale* and *Love Soup* address the anxiety of their audience and Ellis’s “feeling of uncertainty that haunts the world” (*Seeing Things* 3) by creating a commentary through character on how the relationship between the individual and their society is being transformed. The anxiety is communicated through the form, the content and the tone and is reliant on the particular intimacy of television and the special engagement that sitcom can provide.

Thirdly sitcom utilises the experience of television itself to produce this intimacy, perpetuating its impact. Mick Eaton suggests that “television viewing is inscribed into the situation comedy format, interpellating us into the world of

ideas and information and holding us there by a celebration of our subject position in TV shows” (89). Subsequent shows such as *The Royle Family* do this very explicitly but most sitcoms reflect this process. Karen Lury describes the affect of television on us as “akin to an awareness of self, a visceral friction between memories and speculations that have personal, social and historical dimensions” (“Corner” 376) and sitcom can emphasise affect through its direct address.

A programme such as *Peep Show* might represent the future of television in obvious ways in its aesthetic, its multi-platform success, its virtual communities and its targeted demographic but this all comes from its authority as a television programme. It represents the strengths that have sustained and in many respects continue to sustain, television in the popular imagination and experience. Shows like this engage with our experience, they insinuate themselves into the audience’s understanding of their world. However, to survive in the landscape of “liquid modernity” sitcoms have had to undergo fundamental reappraisals of their form, as I will go on to describe in the next chapter.

THE CHANGING SHAPE OF SITCOM

Introduction

Within this world of shifting television codes and structures, sitcom has undergone its own transformation. My central contention in this study is that British sitcoms since the late 1990s have evolved a new relationship to their audience in order to discuss anxieties created by social change in this period. Responding to new realities in the audience's experience has necessitated changes within the genre and its form. In this chapter, I will establish the nature and extent of these changes and discuss why they have taken place at this time, considering the impact on both the programmes themselves and how they are viewed by their audience.

A number of questions about sitcoms arise that need to be addressed in this chapter. For instance, how have sitcoms changed exactly? In contemporary shows, what remains the same or similar and what is now radically different from their forebears in the commonly imagined 'golden age' (Dunkley 2000) of sitcom in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s? How might generic and formal shifts act, somehow, as a comment on social anxieties?

I will address these questions by looking at the accepted parameters of the sitcom form up to the mid 1990s and examining some subsequent British programmes that helped to create new templates for the genre. I will then examine in detail the changes that have taken place in form and in audience response, through analysis of a number of texts and their contexts, particularly through the key programmes examined in this thesis. The following chapter will

consider how tone has been established in sitcoms over the last fifteen years, how this is different from what has gone before and what that might mean for the way sitcom is understood.

It will become clear that since the mid 1990s there have been some significant developments and shifts in emphasis within what had previously been a very popular and easily defined type of television programming. However there are many continuities and links to the past too which need to be acknowledged – the sitcom has been re-imagined but not totally reinvented. It can also be debated whether the shape of sitcoms has changed to reflect society or whether industrial transformation in the broadcasting business has been the prime determinant. Both have a part to play and it is hard to untangle the different forces at work here. As society has become directed and organised around Richard Sennett's "culture of the new capitalism" and Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity" so writers and comics want to engage with their audience about how this affects the way they live but they are themselves also influenced by those forces in the institutions, companies and markets that produce and distribute their work. Certainly the changes in how the sitcom is seen and how it sees itself, coincide with the major upheavals in the structure of television in the UK through deregulation, competition and technological advancement as outlined in the previous chapter.

As I have demonstrated, a wealth of critical writing on the transformations in television over the last couple of decades by scholars like Caldwell, Butler, Silverstone, Lury and Ellis has theorised the links between producers and

consumers and technology and everyday life. Much of this writing makes common ground with some of the assumptions about modernity by social theorists such as Sennett and Bauman, at least in what the audience demands and expects of television. However there is no equivalent discourse specifically on sitcom; what demands does modernity make on comedy, particularly on situation comedy with its traditional focus on provoking laughter based on everyday experience?

Any television comedy show's principal intent is humour – that is how we identify sitcom and distinguish it from drama - so much evidence of the nature of the new formal landscape will be in the workings of comedy within the text itself. In the aesthetics, situations, characters, performances and jokes that make up a sitcom, we can find how the programmes are anticipating responses based both on the audience's knowledge about the world they live in but also their appreciation of the changing nature of sitcoms. Every audience member brings to the text their experience of living in the contemporary everyday with its absurdities and potential for mockery, as well as the experience of watching other TV comedy programmes. Viewing comedy shows and being familiar with how they work creates a path of understanding to how the humour might operate. As new norms and forms develop, over time this can alter the nature of a genre.

What Was Sitcom?

Sitcom is a genre largely unique to broadcasting. Although Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik identify precursors in elements of music hall or comic strips

(228), sitcom does not exist in a meaningful way in film, literature or art. Radio and television are the sole vehicles of sitcom (although it is possible that the Internet could become a home for versions of it in the future) because they are able to convey both its sense of space and particularly of time. Sitcom relies on appearing in people's homes on more than one occasion, on repetition of situation and on familiarity of character. Neale and Krutnik suggest that it "inscribed a domestic conception of the TV audience" (232) and Lynn Spigel argues that "it helped naturalise a strange new technology because it conveyed stories about everyday situations that took place in a familiar setting" (*Make Room* 136). Sitcom has traditionally thrived on broad-casting, on being experienced by large groups of people simultaneously, while at the same time being consumed within a domestic environment as part of their everyday experience. That everyday experience can be argued as sitcom's defining feature; its content is more concerned with the ordinary, the interior, the rhythm of mundanity, than with the epic. As such, its structures have often seemed open-ended and without the need for the arcs of dramatic progression with a defined outcome required by film and theatre.

Sitcom developed in parallel between Britain and the United States; in both countries the beginnings of the genre were in radio, then later television variants on established radio forms developed when the new medium saturated mass culture in the 1950s. However televisual forms subsequently diverged into rather different but equally successful models. While sitcoms have been produced and been popular in other countries, it has been British or American

programmes that have been the most critically acclaimed, culturally influential and successful in sales worldwide, despite the truism that comedy has difficulty crossing borders (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 60).

Sitcom on radio and initially on television, was based around comedians performing riffs on personas established with the public through variety and music hall before new stars were eventually born through broadcasting. Radio stations had noted that audiences responded to recurring characters based around comic stars like Jack Benny or Tommy Handley and that placing them in some kind of identifiable situation allowed comic possibilities and familiarity in communicating with the audience. The rapid spread of television ownership first in the United States and then in the mid-late 1950s in Britain, as post-war affluence enabled large numbers of working-class households to buy sets, saw many of these radio comic favourites transposed to TV (Spigel, *Make Room* 137).

In Britain the most important early sitcom broadcast on TV followed this pattern of transfer from radio. *Hancock's Half-Hour* had been a great hit on BBC radio from 1954 and two years later made the transition to television. Starring Tony Hancock and written by Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, the show initially transposed its supporting cast of performers (including Kenneth Williams and Sid James) to the screen. The situation was fluid; while there was the continuity of Hancock's life with his friends based around humdrum suburban life in East Cheam, circumstances could be changed to suit the joke and the storyline. This continued to some degree as the series shed its supporting cast and swapped

East Cheam for Earl's Court in 1961 and became just *Hancock* – for instance in the episode 'The Bowmans', Tony is suddenly transformed from bedsit drifter to popular radio soap star. While the background might change there was a continuity of character and tone however. Tony Hancock played the character of 'Tony Hancock' (in a move that was something of a precedent for Larry David in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon in *The Trip*) as a deluded, vainglorious loser, redeemed only by his endurance in the face of adversity. The success of the character and its apparent resonance with British sensibilities set a particular course for the content of sitcoms in the UK. The battle with everyday life by a character, pair or group of characters who evade success through their own failings but who occasionally retain some vestige of audience sympathy, has permeated British sitcoms ever since through *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?*, *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*, *Fawlty Towers*, *Only Fools and Horses*, and *One Foot in the Grave* to *The Office* and *Peep Show*.

Industrial models for sitcom in Britain were also established through *Hancock*. After the 1961 series Tony Hancock dismissed Galton and Simpson and transferred his allegiance to ITV, the country's commercial television network but as Mark Lewisohn notes, "viewers of this series would have swiftly realised that something was going badly wrong with the brilliant and much adored comedian's career" (294). It can be argued that the failure of this move established two points of principles in British sitcom: firstly the primacy of the writer and secondly the dominance of the BBC as the producer of sitcoms in the

UK. ITV had successes (and in *Benidorm* has recently had its first sitcom hit in over two decades) but the BBC garnered the reputation as the home of quality comedy. Channel 4 began to challenge this dominance over the past fifteen years. Its thirtieth anniversary celebrations in 2012 made much of its comic successes, screening a programme of its top thirty comedy programmes and it is true that *Father Ted*, *Peep Show*, *The IT Crowd*, *Black Books* and *The Inbetweeners* (the top five as voted by viewers) have all had a significant impact on the genre. Since 2011 Sky has become an important player within the comedy world after recruiting former BBC commissioner Lucy Lumsdon and making deals with independent companies like Baby Cow – thus far producing a slate of new shows like *The Café*, *Trollied*, and *Stella* (Armstrong, “No Laughing Matter”). As Sky is a subscription channel it may be that sitcoms will be able to develop audiences away from ratings pressures, as with models such as HBO in the United States but it remains too early to say whether this activity and investment will be maintained or whether it might just prove to be a method of applying commercial pressure to the BBC and Channel 4 by diminishing their claim to original and innovative programming. However at the moment the BBC still remains the broadcaster most associated with sitcom and the particular practices and culture of the corporation have helped to create a distinctively British model for the genre.

Galton and Simpson’s massive subsequent success with *Steptoe and Son* meant that sitcoms in Britain were creatively driven by a single author or pair of authors, who would write all the episodes. Inevitably this meant a limit to what

was possible to produce at any one time, so series would often comprise only six episodes. The writers worked within a system where, at least at the BBC, there would be a development and protection for projects to give them time to establish a relationship with their audience.

In the much more market dominated American network system, a far bigger business which relied on a critical mass of content, there was a need to produce much longer runs of series. This was particularly the case once a lucrative syndication system developed, requiring over a hundred episodes that could be sold and shown for years to come. One writer could not be expected to deliver this volume of material so a team writing system developed, sacrificing elements of authorial voice for a competing team of contributors who would hone and polish every joke and pitch ideas into the framework of character, situation and audience engagement.

For all their differences the visual demands of the new medium and the need to engage the new viewing public saw the television sitcom on both sides of the Atlantic develop similar sets of formal conventions and recognisable codes. To make sense to the audience, situations needed to be clearly defined and tended to concentrate on recurring spaces of the home or the workplace. Both home and work suited the form as they offered continuity and a realistic setting, corresponding to the audience's experience of their own lives, where the same group of characters could be expected to recur from week to week – described by Mick Eaton as “the timeless now of television situations” (70). They also deliver a sense of confinement – it is hard for people to escape their family or

their work – that has played an important role in the themes and tone of the sitcom.

Very quickly through its early models (*I Love Lucy*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *The Phil Silvers Show* in the US and *Hancock*, *Steptoe and Son* and *The Rag Trade* in the UK), sitcom came to be a genre which was easy for its audience to identify through signals and tropes that were clearly marked across texts as well as within them. There were aesthetic norms that marked out the programme to viewers as a sitcom as opposed to a drama or a documentary. Key among these was the audible presence of the studio audience whose laughter acted as a signal to those at home that particular points in the show were found funny by others. The laughter of the audience also signalled that although the viewer might be alone at home they were part of a collective experience. Spigel argues that “by connecting viewers to a new electronic neighbourhood, the genre encouraged audiences to perceive spatial and social relationships in new ways” (*Make Room* 136). This also serves to reinforce the importance of television to its audience – Barry Curtis talks of “sitcom’s function as a celebration of television” (4). The presence of the audience influenced other areas of production and aesthetics too. As characters were acted out largely live in front of a public audience there were theatrical aspects to the actor’s performance; sitcom acting was often ‘bigger’ than that in drama or film, as the cast tried to engage those in the room as well as at home to gain laughs. The bulk of sitcom time was shot in the studio, standing in for the hub of the action at home or office or factory. Like most TV production up to the 1990s, sitcoms adopted a three-camera set-up

markedly different from the single cameras favoured in the film industry so that actions could be captured live or quickly for broadcast. The studio environment also necessitated particularly bright high-key lighting that could pick up the whole set and thus opportunities for humour across the *mise-en-scène*.

Sitcom also developed its own narrative structures that presented a different kind of seriality to other forms of television fiction. Neale and Krutnik believe that “what the sitcom pivots around is the ‘refamiliarizing’ of the recurring situation, protecting it and redefining it in the face of various disruptions and transgressions... the sitcom’s process of narrative transformation relies much more emphatically, then, upon circularity” (234-5). As they go on to describe, *Steptoe and Son* is a perfect instance of this circularity. In each episode there is some threat or disruption to the status quo, usually an attempt by Harold to leave his father and the junkyard. Inevitably Harold is thwarted, the threat is conquered and the status quo is restored. This pattern is then re-imagined in the following episode in what Neale and Krutnik characterise as a “trammelled play between continuity and forgetting” (235) in the dynamic between text and audience.

Within this model there is a requirement for some things – the relationships between characters, the situation in which they find themselves and which the audience have come to recognise – to remain broadly the same because changes would render the show as it is understood no longer sustainable. This circularity, this perceived inability to open the diegesis up for change, has often been seen as the source of an inherent conservatism in sitcom; Gillian Swanson says for instance that “change is not possible in

conventional sitcom at a structural level as the situation must remain the same for the series to continue in its recognisable form” (33). Yet it is important to understand that although circularity is an important element within sitcom, its narrative structure is often much more complex than might be apparent. In the period up to the 1990s there was progression in many programmes and even where circularity seems at its purist – as with *Steptoe* – the cumulative effect can be something other than conservative or merely mechanical. The circularity of Harold Steptoe’s torment at the hands of his father and his frustration at his own lack of talent, generates a kind of tragic power over time and also seems realistic. As Bruce Crowther and Mike Pinfold suggest “we all knew, as did Harold, that all he had to do was walk out the door and freedom would be his; but Harold also knew, as we did, that he never could”(64).

These are the central elements in how the sitcom came to be recognised and classified in its first forty years. Within the broadcasting industry sitcom quickly became valued as one of the most popular and durable forms of programming. It began to occupy particular key points in the schedule and conformed to a pattern of returning series in which each episode ran for twenty five-thirty minutes with many of the tropes outlined above standardised for ease of production. As it proved its worth with high ratings, sitcom came to occupy a place at the centre of prime-time, usually between 8pm and 10pm. In the United States sitcoms were often seen as the most lucrative properties, appealing across a very broad audience and attractive to advertisers; the final episode of *M*A*S*H* in 1983 remains the highest rated programme in network history (Butler

82). In Britain only soap opera challenged the sitcom for prime-time dominance and resonance with the audience (Mills, *Television Sitcom* 5). Characters, catchphrases and situations became a familiar part of the cultural landscape; to describe someone as a 'Captain Mainwaring' (the pompous Home Guard Commander in *Dad's Army*) or a 'Del Boy' (the wheeler-dealer from *Only Fools and Horses*) would be understood as a particular type embodying specific traits. Lifestyles not lived by the majority were comprehended through sitcom – self-sufficiency in *The Good Life*, say – and shows like *Till Death Us Do Part*, *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin* and *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* grapple with the zeitgeist as it was being debated by their audience (Williams, *On Television* 85).

This place at the very centre of the television experience was strongly established for both viewers and the industry by the 1990s, cemented by many of the previously mentioned programmes from the 1960s and 1970s, which proved very durable with viewers as repeat screenings kept them in the public eye and their artistry and appeal was acknowledged by critics. However there were a number of perceived problems with the genre that were commonly circulated in criticism. One such criticism was the conservatism that had been detected in the narrative structures, and also in both the 'sit' and 'com' of the form. Many critics in the 1982 BFI dossier on *Television Sitcom* for instance (Curtis, Swanson, Lovell, and Oakley) saw its programmes as hegemonic representations of life that dissuaded viewers from believing that society could be changed or that stereotypes could be questioned, although the analyses of Cook or Medhurst and

Tuck allow for more positive potential. While having some useful things to say about the limits of representation at the time, some of this criticism ignored the complexity of comic codes and the discourse with the public that comic reworkings of the everyday could bring to the audience.

By the beginning of the 1990s the situations that most sitcoms relied upon also came to be seen as conservative or at least dated. Family life was now much more disparate than it was in the 1950s; work was no longer dominated by large employers where lots of people would work together on the shop-floor with clear hierarchies that could be easily comprehended for comic purposes (as for instance in department store comedy *Are You Being Served?*). Sitcoms themselves became stereotyped, for example a long-running and rather old-fashioned and undemanding show, *Terry and June*, was used as a signifier of all that was deemed wrong with the genre: middle-aged, suburban, lower-middle class, full of forced scenarios about the boss unexpectedly coming to dinner and misunderstandings about soft furnishings. As Lewisohn points out its “very blandness singled the series out for some vituperative condemnation from those who prefer their comedy to be more cutting” (299). While some criticisms of the state of sitcom were fair, this broad-brush approach to its problems ignored the variety of approaches the form could allow. Like any genre the rules of the sitcom could be a liberating and disciplined framework to produce subtle insights and variations on the theme and its large audiences allowed cultural critique to circulate to a wide range of people. *Ever Decreasing Circles*, a popular series in the 1980s, might be seen initially as belonging to the *Terry and June* model but

closer viewing showed a subtle dissection and critique of suburban mores, played out using all the established sitcom conventions (Medhurst, "Gnome Zone" 268-9). This was all the more powerful because it was designed to appeal to viewers who might adhere to these mores and so might be inspired to challenge themselves, "working through" their doubts and frustrations.

Most importantly comedy itself had changed dramatically in Britain since the late 1970s with the rise of what became known as 'alternative comedy'. This began as a political response to the racism and sexism within much conventional comedy at the time. This was particularly acute on the club and stand-up circuit but also existed in the ethnic and sexual stereotypes of *Love thy Neighbour*, *Mind Your Language* and other sitcoms of the preceding decade. The 'alternative' comedy movement coincided with the foundation of Channel 4 and raised the possibility of a more radical comic voice but its impact on sitcom proved more fitful than on sketch shows or televised stand-up comedy. Certainly *The Young Ones* had an impact; in one episode there was famously an extended rant about the supposed 'safety' and 'smugness' of *The Good Life*, a judgement that, like *The Young Ones* itself, has not really stood the test of time. *The Young Ones* was looser in its construction than usual, with rock bands suddenly performing in mid-episode but it also had a studio audience and gargantuan performance styles. Its aesthetics look like a sitcom and it works with the familiar confinement of recurring characters in a confined situation. Other shows, like *Blackadder*, used some of the personnel of the alternative comedy movement but also retained much of the conventional sitcom model including the studio audience.

While 'alternative' comedy raised interesting cultural and political questions about the content that sitcom had traditionally relied upon, traditional sitcoms still achieved huge audiences and 'alternative' models offered few new ideas in place of them. Very quickly that generation of 'alternative' comics was embraced by the light entertainment establishment. Performers once deemed 'alternative' such as Stephen Fry, Emma Thompson, Robbie Coltrane, Ben Elton and Dawn French are indeed that establishment now.

In the early 1990s another comic generation emerged, one that eventually would lead some radical changes in British sitcom. To begin with, the leading figures in this new movement seemed uninterested in sitcom, preferring to work in sketch shows and ironic re-workings of variety. Ben Thompson writes extensively on the talents that subsumed the 'alternative' comedy of a decade earlier in his book *Sunshine on Putty*. Thompson unearths a diary he kept in his role as a comedy journalist, chronicling the sitcoms broadcast in one week in February 1990, which included the first edition of *One Foot in the Grave*, later to become a huge hit for David Renwick, the writer of *Love Soup*. He argues, on the evidence of his diary, that

this grainy snapshot of life before reality TV can also – with the aid of hindsight's high powered microscope – be seen to reveal a small-screen comedy world in a fascinating state of flux.

The exhaustion of the classic British sitcom form is made all the more apparent by the grisly spectacle of seventies behemoths trading on past glories. And the advent of *One Foot in the Grave* – arguably the last in the *Dad's Army/Fawlty Towers/Only Fools and Horses* family line of generation-crossing mass-audience sitcoms – only further reinforces this sense of transience and impending extinction (15).

There are some truths here but as Thompson admits hindsight is a great help. The beginnings of satellite broadcasting and the prospect of multichannel television were becoming clear but there was little sense then of what this might mean. The Communications Act later in the year was, in retrospect, a key point of change in broadcasting, yet in 1990 the vast majority of the population was still just watching four channels and was seeing them as transmitted, with the video recorder as an aid to catching up if you missed an episode on an occasional night out. The programmes Thompson describes in February 1990 were also very popular and, rather going against his own argument, he has to admit that at least half of them were pretty good, not too bad for a form where the failure rate was notoriously high (16). While it is possible to make a claim that *One Foot in the Grave* was the last of the great mass audience sitcoms, it could also be argued that it was a continuation of this 'family line' and that this impending extinction was not apparent at all. Indeed as I will demonstrate some other shows from the last two decades have managed huge popularity at times.

One Foot in the Grave, with its choleric suburban hero Victor Meldrew and his rants at the miseries and insanities of modernity, was after all one of a triumvirate of very successful sitcoms in the early 1990s that seemed to speak to the times. Simon Nye's *Men Behaving Badly* became rather unfairly tainted with the revival of 'lad culture' as a backlash to the culture of alternative comedy. In fact much of the show was a witty and well observed satire on the mores of modern men in the shape of Gary Strang (Martin Clunes) and his dimwitted housemate Tony (Neil Morrissey). The 'alternative' comedy generation also

belatedly established their sitcom success with *Absolutely Fabulous*, written and starring Jennifer Saunders, which mocked the pretensions of fashionable London at the time. All three of these early 1990s hits however kept to traditional sitcom conventions, including the use of studio audiences.

By the mid 1990s other programmes were becoming popular but in slightly different ways. *Father Ted*, a sitcom about a trio of Irish priests by Graham Linehan and Arthur Matthews, became a hit but a hit on minority channel, Channel 4. Linehan and Matthews made no secret of their 'golden age' British sitcom influences (Linehan interview) and the show's character dynamics, studio audience and narrative structure were certainly in line with earlier models. However *Father Ted* heightened the situations and characters of sitcom to new levels of absurdity; the 'wise-fool' character of Ted himself (Dermot Morgan) is the counterweight to the swearing, drooling Father Jack (Frank Kelly) and the idiot savant Father Dougal (Ardal O'Hanlon). Starting from a realistic and recognisable basis, each incident retained its own logic while spiralling into ever more chaotic and extreme consequences. The show showed the benefits of a cult hit; its absurdity might alienate a truly broad audience but it built a band of committed followers who unequivocally 'got it' and would repeat catchphrases and buy DVDs.

New Models

This, then, was the sitcom landscape around the mid 1990s – a few mainstream successes, albeit with rather less of a grip on the primetime

schedule than previously but with some trends beginning to establish a different kind of relationship between the audience and the text, as Britain began its gradual movement towards a deregulated, multichannel media of Ellis's "plenty" (*Seeing Things* 162). As rules were established ensuring that increasing percentages of programmes were made by independent producers rather than in-house at broadcasters, production companies specialising in comedy began to gain strength in the 1990s. Tiger Aspect, Hat Trick and Talkback were initially the most powerful, joined over the past decade by Vera Productions, Baby Cow and Objective Productions. Many of these companies have been associated with established comedy performers and writers (such as Rowan Atkinson, Jimmy Mulville, Mel Smith and Griff Rhys Jones, Rory Bremner and Steve Coogan). Over the past 15 years they have become an alternative comic power base to the BBC's in-house production team, which had traditionally developed comic ideas and made them in their own studios with their own crews. Now the BBC, which, along with Channel 4 and now Sky, is legally obliged to open up a percentage of production to outside companies, commissions a large percentage of its output from these independents, which have become of equal importance in developing comedy series and new talent.

The first of the key shows that it can be argued changed the nature of British sitcom was a product of this new independent production environment. In 1997 the first series of *I'm Alan Partridge* was broadcast on BBC2 but was produced by Talkback. The show took its titular character from two comic, but not sitcom programmes earlier in the 1990s. *The Day Today* was a highly influential

sketch show shown in 1994. Derived from Radio 4 comedy *On the Hour*, it featured many important talents as writers and performers including Armando Iannucci and most famously Chris Morris, the agent provocateur of contemporary British satire. As a mock TV magazine show, it also included a self-obsessed and slightly hysterical sports reporter called Alan Partridge. Partridge was played by Steve Coogan, a successful Mancunian impressionist who had begun to develop a stand-up and acting career. In 1995 Partridge gained his own series, a chat show parody called *Knowing Me, Knowing You with Alan Partridge*. This was written by Iannucci, Coogan and Peter Baynham – all *Day Today* alumni – and was almost but not quite a sitcom. There was a recurrent setting and the ever-present Partridge but unlike the superficially similar US show of the same period, *The Larry Sanders Show*, there was no dramatisation of the world away from the fictive show itself. Alan presented his chat show in an increasingly desperate manner with different fictional guests being humiliated on his sofa each week, until on a disastrous Christmas show Alan punches the fictional controller of BBC2 in the face with a turkey on screen. Although it is extremely funny, the presentation of *Knowing Me, Knowing You* feels closer to an extended sketch parodying light entertainment, rather than the dynamics of character and situation found within sitcom.

I'm Alan Partridge, from the same writing team is, however, unequivocally a sitcom. It follows on from the end of its predecessor and sees Alan fired from national television and trying to revive his career in local radio back in provincial Norfolk. As well as his professional downfall, his wife has left him for her fitness

instructor and he is forced to live in a Travel Tavern motel. The series follows his new life, both in the radio studio and at the motel, with regular characters surrounding him in each location.

Ben Walters argues that *I'm Alan Partridge* has a 'documentary aesthetic' (103). Also defining the series as the beginnings of a new approach in British sitcom, he characterises *Partridge* as a

fly on the wall sitcom ... [which] downplays quick-fire one-liners, fixed studio sets and self-contained farce plotting, the series was built on nuanced character observation, hand-held camerawork, significant portions of location shooting, and looser stories which reflected Partridge's aimless existence yet also had a degree of continuity across the series. Much of this was closer to docusoap than conventional sitcom (102).

While I admire Walters' work and agree that *Partridge* is a significant point in the development of a new style of British sitcom, I think here he overplays the scale of the change from established generic codes. Many of the principal differences between *Partridge* and previous shows are tonal rather than aesthetic. Most significantly the show retains a laugh track from a studio audience, complete with rapturous applause at points for Coogan's comic schtick. There is some hand-held camerawork but also many traditional sitcom set-ups with medium shots to gauge reactions to Partridge's inappropriate outbursts and his own misunderstandings of social situations. Again, there are some location shots but not many more than, say, *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin* and there is the recurring set of the Travel Tavern lobby. The "nuanced characterisation" seems particularly hard to support as the show features an acting style that is frequently broad in the extreme, not just by Coogan but also by Felicity Montagu as his

personal assistant Lynne and Simon Greenall as indecipherable Geordie hotel employee Michael.

The show's links to a new comic generation in part mask these many continuities with generic norms. Indeed when the second series was rather belatedly made in 2002, there were a number of complaints about its intrusive studio laughter from some who had completely forgotten that the 1997 series had featured a laugh track (Plunkett, "Lose the Laughs"). This illustrates the dramatic change in audience's expectations of many sitcoms in the intervening five years. Where *I'm Alan Partridge* plays an important part in this process is in its picture of a new social structure. Alan is depicted as utterly alone, save for his downtrodden personal assistant, Lynne, in a relationship that is almost abusive. He has no family, no home, no career trajectory and his aspirations have been tried and failed. As Jonathan Freedland has detailed, Alan's world has no structure or security – it is ruled by anxiety's ascendancy over dread (Sennett, *Culture* 53).

The first series of *Partridge*, broadcast in the year of raised hopes as New Labour came to power in 1997, suggests a world where, as Richard Sennett, Zygmunt Bauman and others argue, the individual has become dislocated from society and where codes of personal morality, solidarity and self-belief are rendered meaningless. In the second episode, 'Alan Attraction', Alan is apparently forced to make everyone at his production company redundant. In fact rather than downgrade his car he chooses not to retain a skeleton staff. Instead of explaining the position to them face to face he pretends that the company is

safe and then sacks each staff member for ludicrous supposed infractions before locking himself in his office and telling them the truth via intercom. Even then he neglects to tell his receptionist, Jill (Julia Deakin), so that he can attempt to seduce her. Alan's rudeness and insensitivity does not derive from his insecurity but co-exists with it; his fear at every situation is that he will not be seen as powerful or important. Subsequently he is haunted by recurrent daydreams that he is a lap-dancer, replete with golfing sweater, having to perform for those with power over his future. In social encounters Alan feels powerless because he cannot be sure of meaning and purpose in a world that is increasingly ambiguous. Much of the show's humour comes from his pedantic wish for precision and clarity in any conversation, hence his unease at Jill's penchant for innuendo and his need to stress that his understanding was she did not intend to charge for their coupling. While I think Walters stresses the "documentary aesthetic" too much, he is correct to identify a documentary tone in the way that the audience follows Alan's progress, a distance from the subject that became more fully developed in later series.

I'm Alan Partridge was a cult BBC2 success rather than a huge mainstream hit. It retained many traditional tropes but is important in establishing a new sitcom landscape of modern living, a comedy of loneliness away from the conventional solace of the family or the group of friends or workmates. In contrast *The Royle Family* retained that spirit of warmth and inclusion but altered the aesthetic codes of sitcom and helped to create a new set of generic expectations. The show was written by Caroline Aherne and Craig Cash from the

same Manchester comedy scene as Coogan. Aherne was already known to TV audiences through the sketch show *The Fast Show* and in the guise of pensioner Mrs Merton, a comic persona that had seen her interview celebrities in character. *The Royle Family* eschewed a laugh track and the show is almost entirely shot around one set, the Royle's living room, as they watch television themselves and talk through the minutiae of their daily lives. It relies on an intimacy between viewer and audience that is different from the unity of audience members that the studio audience attempts to create. Rather *The Royle Family* works more as a mirror, reflecting back the domestic lives of those watching or allowing a privileged fly on the wall position into the family's life. Here the laughter of others would be an intrusion. Without the studio audience the traditional 'proscenium arch' mise-en-scène and shooting style of earlier family sitcoms would be too broad and inappropriate. Instead Aherne, Cash and the production team adopted a more filmic shooting style from a single camera in the centre of the action that captures the group dynamic; often static, the camera occasionally follows the conversation as a kind of surrogate viewer (Lury, *Interpreting* 161). All these aesthetic decisions come from their aim for comedy in its most naturalistic form, described by Aherne as "things happen in sitcoms... real life is just people sitting around and sometimes saying funny things" (qtd in Thompson 273). Thus the show aims to recreate the natural humour of the family dynamic, particularly through the jokes of Jim, the Royle's patriarch (Ricky Tomlinson). The acting is downplayed to match the visual style; there is an emphasis on small gestures and repeated phrases as the characters perform to each other instead of an

audience. The series also was significant for its approach to narrative, eschewing the disruption/ resolution model for either the weft and weave of real time family interactions or the kind of life events common to many – Denise and Dave’s (Aherne and Cash) wedding, the birth of their son, and the death of Nana (Liz Smith).

Karen Lury in a discussion of the aesthetic of the series argues that

[*The Royle Family*] revisits certain conventional aspects of the television sitcom... but it does so in a way that intensifies a sense of place. The viewer’s relationship with the Royles and their home is intimate and almost overwhelming as a sensual experience... the movement of the camera through the set and the way in which the programme is edited is lingering, immediate, and full of detail (*Interpreting* 161).

Lury is suggesting that the show is experimental in its aesthetic not so much by eschewing the traditions of sitcom with which its audience are familiar but by immersing viewers into those tropes so intensely that viewers experience them more fully.

The success of *The Royle Family*’s first BBC2 series in 1998 saw a transfer to BBC1 that proved lucrative and it became the most popular sitcom of its era. Proving that a sitcom could be popular without the prompts of the studio audience or the aesthetic constructions that had formed the genre for so long created a new freedom for the form. Sitcoms could have more flexible codes without sacrificing their ability to speak to a mass audience. The show still retains a regular Christmas day special some years after its run as a series came to an end (albeit with significantly diminishing artistic returns), showing that it remains resonant as a television spectacle.

It was *The Office* that most clearly seemed to offer a new way forward for sitcom and its relationship with its audience. As Ben Walters says, it became “the BBC’s most talked about sitcom in years” (1); although its ratings never matched *The Royle Family*, its influence was more profound and certainly more global, with a highly successful US version shown on network TV by NBC. *The Office* clearly did employ a documentary aesthetic, the premise being that an unseen BBC documentary crew is following the day to day existence of Wernham Hogg, a paper merchants firm in Slough. There is handheld camerawork following the characters, who are able to directly address the camera (and thus the audience) in the ‘talking head’ convention of documentary. There is no studio audience nor any other device that would sacrifice the sense of naturalism that writers Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant were so desperate to instil. “I think the realer you are, the more you connect on an emotional level” Gervais has said (qtd in Walters 23). The series aims to create comedy from the textures of everyday life without using the conventional artifices that television comedy has used to mediate the relationship with the audience – so no laugh track, no high key lighting, no three camera set up, less emphasis on cyclical plotting within an episode and more on stories that slowly build up over the life of the series, including narratives that are not comic, such as the threat of the office closing and most notably Tim (Martin Freeman) and Dawn’s (Lucy Davis) romance. Most importantly this worked. The show’s quality was recognised by critics quickly, despite its low-key promotion in the schedules and viewers eventually came to the programme and responded to it. The comic power comes both from the

accumulation of realistic and thus resonant detail and the comic characterisations, particularly deluded manager and would be 'chilled-out entertainer' David Brent.

The show's new set of conventions forged a different kind of relationship with the audience. Walters argues that "*The Office* goes to great lengths to reduce the distance between action and audience: much of it is achieved through its plausible realism, but it is Brent's persistent approval-seeking attention to the lens that really turns the screw by locating us within the dynamic we're observing" (2-3). There are undoubtedly new elements in televisual comic language here and the programme had a significant role in making older conventions seem stale and ineffective. Gervais and Merchant have publicly eschewed British sitcom influences in favour of American heroes such as Woody Allen and Larry David ("Making *The Office* Work") but they are there none the less. Brent has clear links to Hancock and other classic British fool figures and the naturalistic approach for dialogue is reminiscent of Clement and La Frenais's writing in *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* and *Porridge*.

The Office created a new landscape for sitcom in Britain. Due to the success and the credibility of the show (and of *The Royle Family*) audiences became used to new forms of sitcom. Laugh tracks began to grate, highly lit three camera set ups looked too unrealistic and big comic performances seemed too theatrical – at least in many cases. There have been a number of sitcoms that have proved to be successful with audiences since the final broadcasts of *The Office* in 2003. Success is measured differently in the new media world

however; rather than audiences of over ten million it is a place in the national discourse that proves worth, coupled with steady, above average, ratings, YouTube clips, social media links and DVD sales.

One such example, which offers a typical route to success in this landscape, is *Gavin and Stacey* (BBC/ Baby Cow 2007-9). The series originally aired on digital channel BBC3, now the primary site of most comic fiction on the BBC and became a word of mouth hit, earning a swift repeat on BBC2 before eventually moving to BBC1, with three successful series in all and a final Christmas special. The show used many of the tropes of new sitcom. There was no studio audience and there was single-camera filmic camerawork with an emphasis on location shooting (including an awful lot of driving shots to denote the long-distance relationship theme). Most of all there was a continuing narrative across the series, involving both Gavin (Mathew Horne) and Stacey's (Joanna Page) romance and marriage but also Ness (Ruth Jones) and Smithy's (James Corden) slower progress towards an attachment. It was this narrative drive – essentially non-comic - that seemed to be a crucial factor in the success of the show; episodes ended on cliff-hanging moments that created speculation and excitement. While the laugh track had originally sought to unite the audience by reinforcing the comedy within the text now that function can be performed by a more interactive sharing between viewers to create a discourse around the programme. In his 2009 book *The Sitcom*, Brett Mills talks about contemporary sitcoms' accrual of the features of both documentary and drama and suggests that *Gavin and Stacey* has “an aesthetic drawn from drama....meaning that in

many ways it appears visually similar to soap opera rather than sitcom, [and] draws on narrative arcs commonly associated with drama” (31). Its pleasures are also in part derived from soap opera and popular drama traditions too; the expectation of what might happen between characters and the anticipation of narrative developments is as central to the viewing experience as the jokes and comic figures in the text.

These programmes have demonstrated and popularised new ways in which the sitcom can be watched, can sound, can look, can be performed and can tell stories. It is worth looking in detail at how some of these specific formal properties have been transformed in the genre and the extent of changes across the form in the last decade. I will also demonstrate how these formal changes enable a rethinking of comic content and also reflect social dislocation and shifts in attitude by those making the programmes and those watching them.

The Studio Audience

Probably the most emblematic change in the sitcom has been the shift away from employing a studio audience’s laughter as a part of the text. The sound of the studio audience was, after all, seen as a defining characteristic of the sitcom, a code that allowed for a text to be instantly recognised as belonging to the genre. Most sitcoms at least on a surface level present themselves as an approximation of a familiar reality to most of the audience. The laugh track denoted that this was a comedy not a drama. The sound of laughter from those watching the programme being performed ‘live’ in the studio gave clear and

comprehensible instructions that not only was this scene or line supposed to be funny but that other people – people likely to share a good deal in common with you – also found it funny. The laugh track seemed to be popular and it was a generic code, a short-hand, understood equally in Britain and America.

Part of the reason this 'live' laughter was recorded and used in the broadcast was that it gave the appearance to the viewer at home that they were part of something bigger than themselves: Spigel's "electronic neighbourhood" (*Make Room* 136). This is important because it gave a power to sitcom's expression of the world. Neale and Krutnik suggest that "both the sitcom and television in general are concerned with reaffirming cultural identity, with demarcating an 'inside', a community of interests and values, and localizing contrary or oppositional values as an 'outside' "(242), while Barry Curtis identifies "the studio audience who supply a sort of surrogate community of agreement" (9). While these critics, among others, deduce that this reaffirmation and sense of community may be essentially conservative, it nevertheless meant that sitcom with its mass audiences acquired a resonance in speaking about society and the individual's place within it. Curtis highlights the form's "ambiguous address" (9); the studio audience might appear to endorse the racist jibes in *Love thy Neighbour* but the laughter of others also encourages the melancholy class discussion of *The Likely Lads*, the gleeful destruction of convention in *The Young Ones* or the critique of everyday frustrations in *One Foot in the Grave*.

The studio audience was clearly an agent in a collective experience, an enactment of a virtual community that predates the digital age. The critical

commentators I have cited on changes in contemporary living are all broadly in agreement that the kind of collectivism that formed the basis of society through the bulk of the twentieth century is no more. Bauman says that “we are at the end of the era of mutual engagement” (*Liquid Modernity* 11); Putnam and Wilkinson and Pickett track a decline in ‘social capital’; Sennett suggests that “the social has been diminished” (*Culture* 82) and even those more positive about modernity argue that now “the social form of your own life is initially an empty space which an ever more differentiated society has opened up” (Beck “Living Your Own Life” 165). In this landscape one can argue that the decline of the once near universal use of the laugh track in television sitcom offers a symptom of this social shift. Is the collective, mediated response to comedy that the studio audience laughter represents no longer appropriate in this atomised world? There is some evidence of this, although the answer is more complex than might first be apparent. As detailed earlier the success of *The Royle Family* and then *The Office* showed that the audience at home could still respond to a comedy without the laughter prompts of those present at the recording. As Mills puts it,

the abandonment of some of the genre’s most obvious characteristics [such as the laugh track].....has rarely led to confusion over whether they’re sitcoms or not. This suggests there’s flexibility..... within audience’s reading techniques (*Television Sitcom* 25).

Once it was shown that the laugh track was not a prerequisite for success it allowed a greater flexibility of approach towards the material. Aherne and Cash and Gervais and Merchant were determined to be naturalistic, to create comedies that would derive from the textures of everyday life in all aspects,

including aesthetic ones. For them the laughter of others on the soundtrack would be intrusive, ruining the appearance of realism and interfering with the developing relationship between the individual watching at home and the characters on screen. Gervais and Merchant made their feelings on the matter very clear in the second series of *Extras*, their follow up to *The Office*. In the show, central character Andy Millman (Gervais) moves from extra to actor, starring in his self written sitcom 'When the Whistle Blows'. His dreams of integrity and realism are destroyed by BBC management's insistence on a mainstream approach with crowd-pleasing string of catchphrases encouraged by witless laughter from a baying studio audience. Although their picture of studio production already seemed somewhat anachronistic, it shows the leading comic talents of the day resolute in a belief that the call to collectivism implied by the studio audience was somehow both demeaning and cheating. From the success of the newer models a frequent critical response to many sitcoms on the traditional model is that the laugh track is a distraction that is both patronising to viewers and a mark of a lack of wit and integrity; as comedy executive Sophie Clark-Jervoise has pointed out "there's a real snobbishness about audience sitcom" (qtd in Mills, *The Sitcom* 63). What was once seen as part of the generic furniture, an essential part of what a sitcom must be, is now suspect and is thought to act as a hindrance rather than a help in the dynamic between audience and programme. As Karen Lury states, the predominant discourse is that "the sound of the crowd signals a lack of quality.... [some sitcoms] do not have laugh tracks, and consequently the humour is judged to be more subtle and

intellectual" (*Interpreting* 83). This kind of thinking can be seen, for instance, in journalist Sam Wollaston's review of *In With the Flynns*, a BBC1 family sitcom, when he complains "where do they find these people though? Not just to come along, but to laugh, when it's not funny? And why do they want laughter in there at all, when it immediately makes it feel like a tired old sitcom?" Wollaston's snobbery and didactic notions of what an audience might be allowed to find funny are further demonstrated when he opines, "nor is it anarchic, or surreal, or painful, or rude, or clever, which are other acceptable ways for modern comedy to be". This analysis is highly prescriptive about what comedy can be; *In with the Flynns* may not be brilliant but asserting that the mere inclusion of the studio audience is offensive implies he is keen to avoid association with others who might be watching. Hence a device that was designed to bring people together may now threaten to keep them apart.

This shift derives, in part, from wider changes in television beyond sitcom. Traditional generic models were designed for mass audiences and there was a need for them to bring together those watching so that their experience of watching the programme would seem to be a unified one. Even if inevitably those not conforming to the majority were marginalised, there was an attempt through the laughter of the studio audience to demonstrate that the individual watching was part of the whole, that society shared and agreed on more than they differed. While this may have been a fiction, it offered a powerful role for the sitcom and a set of accepted values for mass entertainment. Now the idea of broadcasting to the many, including the potentially undeserving or disinterested, is unattractive to

many creative talents. Ricky Gervais said of *The Office* that “I’d rather it was fifty people’s favourite show than ten million’s fifth favourite” (“Making *The Office* Work”) and Simon Pegg, star and co-writer of *Spaced* said of himself and collaborator Jessica Stevenson “To me and Jess appealing to a small group of people in a way that changes their lives is far more important to us than appealing to millions and millions of people and making them go hmmm (shrugs)” (interview in *Channel 4’s 30 Greatest Comedy Shows*). They want depth, not breadth, of appreciation.

However if the multichannel television culture assumes not one audience watching the same programme – or at least not beyond a few flagship ‘event’ programmes like *The X-Factor* or a royal wedding – but many disparate audiences immersed in their own texts, indulging in Parks’ “programming of the self” (135), then the idea of ‘mass appeal’ becomes redundant. TV shows now aim to appeal to a niche set of viewers or at best to become established with a niche audience and then break out into broader appeal; there is no longer a need to try and be acceptable to almost all those who might tune in. Curtis’s “surrogate community of agreement” (9) is no longer advantageous because in a more atomised, less coherent society, to be acceptable to everyone may make the text less appealing to the target niche demographic. So for instance it is more important to Channel 4 that *The Inbetweeners*, its sitcom about seventeen year old boys, has edgy sex and drug references that will attract its core young male viewers, than that such jokes might repel some of their parents. To dilute the content to ensure it is more inoffensive would compromise the need to engage

that primary constituency. *Peep Show* shares this approach, albeit in a rather more complex and satirical manner. It is prepared to forego higher ratings in favour of credibility with a core of committed aficionados (Plunkett, "Why Peep Show's Not Bigger"). The notion of unity that a laugh track tries to inspire is not in these circumstances necessary or indeed desirable. The fact that a number of successful comedies are now as likely to be viewed on DVD or online as when broadcast also weakens the need for the sound of a studio audience. Viewed in these contexts the laughter can seem dissonant and irrelevant. Television is watched in a different way than thirty years ago, by a viewer more likely to be alone rather than in a family and audience expectations have altered as new precedents like *The Office* have offered an alternative language of sitcom. Approached without its learnt codes and expectations, 'audience sitcom' can appear alien, false and oppressive to those not part of its tradition.

None of my core texts uses a laugh track. In *Peep Show* the complexities of the point of view shots and its interior monologues would be unbalanced by this additional element coming between Mark and Jez and the viewer. *Home Time* aims for a naturalism and sense of the everyday that would not be conducive to studio laughter. Hearing laughter, even to such great joke reveals as Gaynor's question to her Dad in episode two of "how long has Mum had an Irish accent?" (we learn this is entirely an affectation, one of a long line of borrowed identities) would break the delicate sense of intimacy drawn in the exchange. The same goes for *Love Soup*, which often relies on an interweaving of comedy and drama within single scenes. This would make for a sense of

nervousness in viewing the text if a studio laugh was followed by a moment of poignancy or even tragedy, as happens in the show, although it is worth noting that David Renwick often took a similar script approach to *One Foot in the Grave*, which did have a laugh track. Indeed *One Foot in the Grave* sometimes exploited the idea that the studio laughter could become frozen as something tragic or disturbing was revealed. Perhaps this might be a case of changing convention; in the five years between *One Foot* and *Love Soup* writers and producers may have become confident that studio laughter was now neither a corporate requirement nor an audience expectation. *Saxondale* is the most intriguing case; as discussed, Coogan's previous, in many ways rather structurally similar, series *I'm Alan Partridge* did have a laugh track. It may have been prevailing convention again or a quest for naturalism to avoid it here but it is possible to see *Saxondale*, with its broad central performance as an 'audience comedy'. The decision not to film with a laugh track does allow the text and the character more room for ambiguity and moments of tenderness however.

Viewers now negotiate their own comic response to the text – we are no longer assumed to find the same things funny - so is the studio audience a thing of the past, a once universal convention that has been comprehensively abandoned within ten years? The answer is no. For all the antagonism to the device and its rejection by several hit shows, it remains in use and in some texts it remains an effective, even vital, aspect of the comedy. Because of their long history of obtaining high ratings over long periods of time, to have a successful mainstream sitcom is still an aim of television executives. There remains a

feeling that a studio audience can help to unite a diverse audience at home, especially the family. One of the big hits of the last decade has been *My Family*, a very deliberate attempt by the BBC and independent producers D.L.Taffner to make a mass audience comedy, based on American rather than British models (US producer Fred Barron was hired to create the show for a writing team in the American tradition). *My Family* finally ended in 2012 but similar shows such as *Life of Riley* and *In With the Flynns* have taken its place. They aim to appeal to both parents and older children and retain high ratings, despite critical brickbats. The studio audience is part of the aesthetic of the programme. In *My Family* the laughter and cheers as characters enter the set demonstrate an ongoing relationship between those watching and the fictional Harper family on screen. Interestingly however, *Outnumbered*, the biggest new family sitcom of the last five years, dispensed with the studio audience as it sought a more naturalistic atmosphere partly through its improvised approach. Although it received much greater critical support and was also on BBC1, *Outnumbered* was shown after the watershed and achieved smaller ratings than *My Family* (Plunkett, "TV Ratings" 2007). It is a success but a success because those that did watch it formed a respectable enough number and signalled their commitment through DVD sales and word of mouth, a discourse that became part of the comment within broadsheet newspapers (Moorhead). That ability to be part of the zeitgeist, to trend on social media and to be actively appreciated by viewers is now central to being a sitcom success, replacing the audible community of the laugh track that was once part of the text.

Nevertheless the studio audience can also retain a role with particular kinds of sitcoms. Shows that rely primarily on the gag still need the validation of the laugh track to work; they need to employ the dynamics of the live show. A good example is *Not Going Out*, a sitcom featuring stand up comics Lee Mack and Tim Vine. Again, this show deliberately sets out to adopt an American style, complete with musical signatures to establishing shots of the London skyline, reminiscent of the New York tropes of *Friends* and *Seinfeld*. The emphasis is on the exchange of gags, especially Mack's quick-fire retorts and the laughter of the audience highlights his verbal dexterity, placing the primacy for the audience of the dialogue over the rather sketchy characters and plot.

Equally the studio audience laughter can retain a role if naturalism is not an important element in the show but absurdity or clowning are emphasised. From 2009 there was an unexpected defence of traditional sitcom styles with the success of *Miranda*, a vehicle for Miranda Hart's physical comedy and her brand of self-deprecating humour. The show relishes its old-fashioned aesthetic and artifice and the studio audience is an important part of this dynamic, building a dynamic between viewer and star, often amplified by her direct address and an atmosphere of escalating hysteria as one pratfall follows another. *Miranda* is being screened in early 2013 in a double bill on BBC1 with the equally raucous *Mrs. Brown's Boys*, which combines traditional crude humour with a studio audience that are seen at the beginning and end of each show, with the fourth wall being frequently broken down between those watching in the studio, the audience at home and the performers. The success of both shows demonstrates

that studio audience comedy is far from over in the popular imagination but the audience in both cases is positioned as a more explicit part of the text, seemingly justifying their participation by being drawn into the comic scene.

Another long-running hit that utilises the laugh track is *The I.T. Crowd*, written by *Father Ted* creator Graham Linehan. Linehan has said that “I’m not saying that all comedies should have a studio audience but I like it... it adds that bit of fairy dust to have the audience’s reactions” (*I.T. Crowd* Series 2 DVD extras), while commissioner Andrew Newman suggested that “for Channel 4 at the time to do something that was in a studio with an audience who you can hear laugh...was quite a bold move” (interview in *Channel 4’s 30 Greatest*), illustrating how quickly norms and expectations have changed. Linehan remains a credible figure in British comedy and *The I.T. Crowd* hasn’t suffered the same studio audience stigma as *My Family*, so why does the laugh track seem to work for this show? Again I would suggest that it is because naturalism is not the object of the comedy; the humour relies on a carefully structured absurdity. In such an environment the studio audience can be an active agent, adding to the sense of comic hysteria that fuels laughter at home.

A close look at a scene from the show illustrates how this works. Linehan is strongly influenced by the interweaving story structures of *Seinfeld* and *One Foot in the Grave* with their escalation of multiple absurdities (Linehan interview). In an episode from Series 2, ‘Smoke and Mirrors’, the two IT geeks, Roy (Chris O’Dowd) and Moss (Richard Ayoade), are in their office with their manager Jen (Katherine Parkinson). On hearing that Jen had a big meeting ruined by an ill-

fitting bra, the otherworldly Moss sets about inventing a new and perfect bra for her. The scene opens with the Roy, a character that is still foolish but is more sceptical and socially skilled than his friend, asking Moss whether he has been working on one of his inventions again. When told that he might have been, Roy mocks his previous effort – a ladder to help moths out of the bath. Roy’s speech logically picks apart the absurdity of this scheme, explaining how the ability to fly would render such a design useless on every level. As he deconstructs the flaws in such a ludicrous plan the audience laughter increases, culminating in Roy saying “I don’t like to be negative but all your inventions are absolutely worthless”. In retort Moss declaims, “prepare to put mustard on those words and put them on this slice of humble pie that comes direct from the oven of shame at gas mark egg on your face!” At this piece of exaggerated rhetoric from the normally bashful Moss the audience laughter is sustained and loud, ending with applause at the end of his speech. Jen then appears, assuring Moss that his bra design is indeed impressive. Moss then launches into a parody of sales talk, pointing up the social menaces of bad bras and the health issues now solved by his ‘living bra’ prototype. When Jen asks what he will call it he proclaims it the “abracada-bra”. There is again loud laughter as this punch-line ends the scene. The studio audience is necessary for such a scene to work effectively. There is no naturalism intended or desired here – plainly the humour is ‘silly’, an I.T worker is unlikely to suddenly design a new bra to help out his boss and no-one would even consider a ladder for moths. We don’t need to believe in the conversation as an authentic recreation of reality, the audience just has to find it

funny and that could happen in two ways. They have to find the use of words and the ideas amusing and they have to find the dynamic of the conversation plausible, within the logic of the show. For those watching, the actions of Moss are entirely consistent with what they know about the character. The sound of studio laughter encourages the viewer at home to ignore the palpable absurdity of the situation and join in the fun, laughing with and at the exaggerated and absurd protagonists of the show and enjoying the incongruity of the inventions. The cleverness and, simultaneously, the corniness of the final “abracada-bra” gag is an appropriate pay-off for the scene and the laughter emphasises that satisfaction.

The I.T Crowd shows that a studio audience can still have an important place within a sitcom but it has to be a certain type of show, one that relies on an exaggerated, even cartoonish, kind of humour that does not strive to convince viewers of an everyday reality.

The Comic Aesthetic

The wider aesthetics of the sitcom have also become reassessed over the last decade. In its era as a fixture at the centre of the prime-time schedule, sitcom had a strongly defined ‘look’, through camerawork, lighting and mise-en-scène. Shows were predominantly studio-based, with usually a couple of filmed exteriors; this was the usual aesthetic mode for dramas too but sitcom tended to be particularly set-bound. In the television of the 1960s to 1980s, video and film had different crews and separate union agreements and sitcom, as a genre in

which stories are often based around confined groups of people in homes or workplaces, mainly lived in the studio. This also suited the mode of production with the studio audience; a couple of filmed inserts shown to invited audience members might be acceptable but it helped if the bulk of the scenes were played out live in front of them.

Filming in the studio dictated many aspects of the studio aesthetics, while others were shaped by the comic aspirations of the shows. Studio shooting needs strong artificial lighting to properly illuminate the action. Sitcoms will often have a number of performers in a scene, with more than one of them attempting to do something funny. Lighting needs to be even stronger than usual so that the whole frame and quite small actions and reactions in it, are easily visible to the viewer. The effect of this 'high-key' lighting is, as Karen Lury says "not naturalistic; it does not simulate the kind of light that would actually be provided by natural light sources... instead the purpose may be more akin to certain kinds of window or shop display, where every object and detail is made visible and attractive to the viewer" (*Interpreting* 39).

The three-camera set up was a staple of other television genres, such as variety but as Brett Mills describes it suited the exigencies of the sitcom because it allowed reaction shots – one of the principal sources of the shows' humour because they help to define character – and aided the ensemble and collective nature of the text (*The Sitcom* 39-41). It also allowed single-take reaction shots to be filmed at the same time as the joke was told or the character-revealing faux pas was made, enhancing the comic impact. This was especially useful when

scenes were performed as live in front of the audience in the studio. The live performance also dictated the nature of sitcom sets, which needed to open up the fourth wall to the studio audience. To facilitate this sets needed to be quite simple in design and emphasise both performers and the comic props to be employed in the scene.

The changes in sitcom aesthetics are partly derived from technological and industrial developments, which have become ever more rapid over the past decade. Lighting has become more advanced and sensitive and cameras have become much more mobile and lightweight. This is in marked contrast to the three enormous mounted cameras formerly used, which needed operators with years of training and were ponderous to manoeuvre. The development of smaller cameras and reorganisation of technical staff means that sitcoms are no longer bound to the studio by practical and corporate necessity. Technology has also altered the image quality for the viewer; the video tape that formed the look of sitcom now seems artificial to modern eyes as viewers have become used to the more 'cinematic' feel of digital video in comedy shows. Location shooting frees up the possibility of creating different kinds of scenes that can be used in sitcoms and a new aesthetic palette is now at the disposal of producers.

Brett Mills has discussed the way that recent sitcoms have begun to borrow their look from other forms (*The Sitcom* 2009) whether that be from documentary or as he styles it 'comedy verité' (*The Office* of course but also the 'video diary' look of *Marion and Geoff*) or from drama (*The Royle Family* or *Gavin and Stacey*). Mills also describes how new technology also allows a much more

self-conscious use of the image and visual language than was usual in traditional sitcom (*The Sitcom* 132). Television has adopted a more cinematic aesthetic, pioneered by HBO and other long-form dramas and described by Nelson as “an enhanced visual means of story-telling in place of the dialogue-led television play, with its theatrical rather than filmic heritage” (11). In Britain this has also been deployed in sitcoms from *The Royle Family* to *The League of Gentlemen* so there has been a greater highlighting of ‘the image’ and visual devices like flashbacks, flash forwards, freeze frames and split screens are used for both narrative and comic effect. Jeremy G Butler suggests that,

in the television schema, style is aggressive, roughened and opaque, not smooth and transparent. It carries meaning. It makes jokes. It might call attention to itself. It can even make familiar things seem strange... (197)

The apogee of this heightened aesthetic of the image in the UK is probably *Green Wing*; here the running time needed to be an hour to accommodate all the sudden changes from fast to slow motion and other stylistic trickery. The use of such devices can sometimes make a programme less, rather than more, naturalistic. This runs counter to the contemporary trend but can emphasise the artifices of the text.

Peep Show is perhaps the most obvious example of the changing aesthetic as it seeks to situate the viewer in the heads of its chief protagonists. From the beginning of the series, it sets out to communicate this formally as well as in the script. We ‘see’ Mark or Jez’s point of view as if we inhabit their body through mobile camerawork that attempts to imitate the movement of their eyes. We often experience their differing viewpoints on the same event in this way. At

its most extreme the actors perform to camera rather than to each other, looking straight into the lens and thus straight at us, making us complicit in the process. Even with technological advances, this is an extraordinarily complex undertaking. David Mitchell (Mark) and Robert Webb (Jez) wear 'helmets' with cameras attached to capture their point of view and act to cameras imitating the point of view of those sharing the scene with them. In fact the technique came before the script, as producer Andrew O'Connor originally conceived the show (then *P.O.V*) as voice-overs above television clips. Following the transmission of an experimental reality documentary that used the head-camera idea (*Being Caprice* C4/RDF 2000) he decided that point-of view camerawork and a voice-over reflecting interior thoughts could work together to allow the viewer into their inner lives (qtd in Pennington). In the first series this was carried out to a level of what Mitchell and Webb have described as "masochistic purity" (interview in *Peep Show and Tell*), with the programme shooting most scenes twice from different angles so that almost every shot reflected the point of view intent. As well as being costly and complex, this purity did render the programme hard to watch for those used to a very different style of television fiction – a sense of disorientation reflected in the low viewing figures (Plunkett, "Why Peep show isn't bigger"; Dowell, "Channel 4"). In subsequent series the aesthetic has relaxed somewhat. It still forms the heart of the show but the point of view camerawork is used for significant moments rather than for every character in every scene.

Peep Show's aesthetics are only possible through technological advances like lightweight cameras but what is most important is that the show uses its

distinctive aesthetic to make its meaning rather than for decorative effect. Most of the conflicts and contradictions of the characters come from the traditional concerns of British sitcom but the point of view style allows the viewer to experience them much more intensely; Brett Mills argues that many classic shows

deal with groups who the audience is intended to find funny because of their inability to understand one another. *Peep Show* may be the logical conclusion of this trend in British comedy, as the programme allows viewers to hear its characters' inner thoughts, finding comedy in the disparity between them and what the characters actually say (*Television Sitcom* 41).

By aligning us with Mark and Jez in the moment through what they see, hear, think and say, the aesthetic of the show implicates the audience in their schemes, dreams and inability to locate their moral compass. The effect of this is to bring home the shabby compromises of the everyday and, as Mills suggests, the disparity in all our lives between what we say and think. This device removes the temptation to just dismiss Mark and Jez as aberrant fools who are not like us. It also heightens the comedy because we become aware at all times of the discrepancy between thinking and saying, demonstrated both by the interior monologues and by the alignment of the camera, which also creates a comic power in the dislocation between what Mark or Jez can see and the appropriateness of their reaction to it.

The aesthetic palette available to sitcom has increased greatly in the last decade. There are two driving forces behind this. The first is the rapidity of technological advance, whether through the digital revolution or the momentum

of mobility and miniaturisation in equipment. This happy historical coincidence allows a new flexibility of approach in how people and the situations in which they find themselves can be a source of screen comedy. These options were simply not accessible to earlier sitcoms.

The second reason is the changes to the industry and the consumption of television in this period. The sitcoms of the seventies were made on a studio production line with its own conventions and economies of scale; it made sense to make things in roughly the same way, a way in which staff were schooled and highly efficient. The audiences themselves became thoroughly expert in reading this aesthetic when they watched programmes. Following the conventions of camerawork, lighting and mise-en-scène was not just practical; it created texts that were immediately intelligible and accessible. Now that this coherent production and institutional construction is no longer predominant, there are many different ways in which programmes can be made; equally in this diffuse environment of consumption there can be a number of diverse ways in which they can be watched. There can be alternative approaches to the old conventions of high-key lit, studio set, approaches that develop into traditions of their own. Indeed one could make an argument that the sitcom made with mobile camera, low lighting and naturalistic locations has become just as prone to cliché and convention as the model it has largely supplanted.

Performing Sitcom

Performance is another arena of considerable change for sitcoms of the last decade and a half, change that also reflects the impetus behind the moves away from the studio audience and the previous aesthetic norms. Performance and acting in television generally is an area that has been notably under-researched and discussed by scholars; a notable exception is Mills in *Television Sitcom* (and Wickham, *Understanding Television Texts*). This is a research gap because television fiction employs a very distinctive performance style to suit the intimacy of the medium. In series forms the time and space given to characterisation allows a complexity, intensity and slow revelation of character (for instance James Gandolfini as Tony Soprano in *The Sopranos* or John Thaw as *Inspector Morse*) that is not possible in film or theatre texts that are just two hours long and where narrative is the primary agent over character.

Sitcom, like soap operas and other long running dramas, gives an opportunity to develop a relationship between character and viewer over a considerable period of time. Sitcom also has its own performance styles that distinguish it from other dramatic forms. As Mills argues, “sitcom foregrounds performance more obviously than other genres... it is within performance that the possible radical potential of sitcom is most obvious” (*Television Sitcom* 68). Over time the audience can savour small nuances of performances, which can be anticipated and enjoyed as we identify them over time – the moment of contemptuous exasperated silence from Captain Mainwaring (Arthur Lowe) in *Dad’s Army* as he deals with another ludicrous idea from his men or the amused

smile of pretentious joy from Diane Chambers in *Cheers* as she surmises that one of her blue-collar workmates might be interested in art are examples.

Performance forms part of the comic pleasure of the text as the actor negotiates with the audience for the laugh. The studio audience had an obvious influence here when actors were playing their parts in a theatrical setting and directing their lines to a real physical presence. Performances were 'bigger' to emphasise the laugh lines and gain reactions from the people in front of them. Because of this, sitcom retained the link to the theatre experience, which as Nelson infers (11) was once prevalent across television, longer than most genres. For a long time drama often used very theatrical motifs but gradually moved into a more naturalistic mode, while variety, initially lifted straight from the music hall stages, eventually developed rather different studio conventions. Sitcom had the 'live' influences of both stand-up comedy and legitimate theatre. Exaggerated performances to generate laughs or deliver particular meanings have been important to the dynamics of the sitcom, especially in making them easily intelligible and accessible. Stereotypes are used in order to do this and have engendered much criticism but they allow easy routes of recognition for audiences. Medhurst and Tuck go as far as to say that "sitcom cannot function without stereotypes... immediacy is imperative" (43). The audience needs to form some kind of relationship with the characters, which can be aided initially by the immediacy and currency of stereotypes but ultimately they need to be inhabited by performers who can convince them that they are interesting and funny enough to deserve their sustained attention. This is a lot to ask from actors and to

combine the skills of convincing veracity, comic timing and detail, let alone the 'funny bones' legendarily demanded of the best comics, is a rare skill. It is unsurprising then that performers who prove themselves successful in sitcoms tend to get cast in further, similar, shows and specialise in comedy.

A key shift in the genre in Britain was *Steptoe and Son*, in which two actors, Harry H. Corbett (as Harold) and Wilfred Brambell (Albert), with strong theatre credentials were cast in the lead roles (Corbett came from Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop). *Steptoe* looks extremely theatrical to modern eyes; the show is very reliant on dialogue on what is, after all, pretty much a single set. Corbett in particular plays his part in a far from naturalistic mode, using the heightened language of Galton and Simpson's scripts to communicate Harold's pain to the audience and to create both laughter and sympathy through devices like monologues, flights of fancy and invective. Other 'golden age' performers like Ronnie Barker or Leonard Rossiter, make their characters dominate the programme by words and gestures that call attention to their impersonation of the part. What matters is less realism than impact, especially of course how much they make the audience laugh.

The laugh predominates over narrative and other forces that are so important in drama; it is the vagaries of character in their everyday situation that dictates action. In this way, as Mills suggests, "sitcom foregrounds performance" (*Television Sitcom* 68) more than other forms – it has to do so to be effective. Mills also draws a distinction between acting, which he defines as "everyday behaviour in the theatrical realm judged through veracity" and performance,

which is knowingly based on artifice (*Television Sitcom* 69). This seems to me to be a useful premise to begin to look at the specifics of performers' work in sitcoms because, as he notes, the "cast (need) to be able to fulfil both acting and performance, depending on particular moments in the script" (70) and "for comic performance to offer pleasure it must demonstrate the abilities of the person performing it far more obviously than non-comic forms do" (70). Characters need to be plausible if sitcoms are to be resonant and give the pleasure of recognition and so 'acting' delivers the verisimilitude of everyday experience that forms the bedrock of sitcom comedy.

However the rendition of reality is required for drama too; to make the text truly comic there needs to be an element of performance as well and this can manifest itself in two contrasting ways. The first is performance as comic excess, the exaggeration of character traits to the point of ridiculousness or the display of comic technique that as Mills says, "demonstrates the abilities of the person performing", rather in the way an audience might admire a great athlete. The second mode is rooted within the requirements of the text itself; we have noted that many sitcoms are based around a gap between aspiration and reality, thought and deed, right and wrong or correct and incorrect actions. Much of this humour derives from a performance by the character themselves: Father Ted desperately lying to cover up his latest mishap; Rigsby assuring his tenants in *Rising Damp* that "I was brilliant – if it hadn't been for the war, who knows"; Hancock trying to convince officialdom of his importance; or David Brent telling his staff that "you should have seen me in there" defending their jobs. In *Peep*

Show much of the comedy derives from our ability to be aware of this performance through its techniques, as when Mark pretends to be jolly while jilting Sophie in 'Wedding' (4:6). Complex characters can utilise different types of performativity for different situations: Tommy Saxondale is vulnerable and tender with his girlfriend Mags but strident and arrogant with authority figures and in his anger management groups and sullen and sarcastic with his encounters with yuppie neighbour Jonathan (Darren Boyd) and his false bonhomie.

All these roles emphasise performance at particular moments but the balance within a portrayal can vary. This reflects two alternative backgrounds for performers cast in sitcom and highlights some of the specific skills required. Comedians have, naturally enough, appeared in many sitcoms; indeed as we have seen the genre developed as a vehicle for established stage or film comedy stars to display their talents in a more sustained way. In the set of examples above, Hancock, Morgan, Coogan and Gervais were comedians (or in Gervais's case a comic performer on radio and TV) rather than actors when they were cast in their roles. They emphasise comedic excess in their characters, even if, as with Gervais in *The Office*, they are placed within a naturalistic backdrop. David Mitchell, who plays Mark, is a mix of comedian (not a stage stand-up but a ubiquitous presence as a comic voice on panel shows and as a social commentator) and actor. Leonard Rossiter as Rigsby, however, despite the enactment of excess that Rigsby demonstrates, was a celebrated actor, performing in an ensemble with other actors who specialised in comedy. Comic acting is a particular skill that runs counter to many other kinds of acting; as

Steve Coogan has said “being a good actor is about surrendering control. Being a good comic actor is about having a lot of control, controlling every moment” (qtd in Rees 15).

These two performance types, the comedian and the comic actor, are important distinctions and remain so within sitcom. Comedians can have the ability to act in a more restrained manner and comic actors can still perform excess but they bring something different to the audience experience of a particular programme.

However, as in other aspects of the sitcom, there have been significant shifts in the kinds of performances that take place within sitcoms. Without the studio audience there is no longer the need to project out to people in the room in the theatrical tradition. New mobile camerawork allows a greater intimacy of characterisation without worrying about visibility within the frame. A more naturalistic aesthetic within the text requires more naturalistic acting – otherwise the audience’s reading can be discordant if confronted with overpowering performances in an aesthetic that purports to represent reality. There are still big performances that can be successful in naturalistic comedy; Ruth Jones as Nessa in *Gavin and Stacey* is largely an amalgam of tall stories and curt put-downs but still seems credible in the context of the show. Such styles still really thrive in audience sitcoms, however. Richard Ayoade’s portrayal of Moss in *The I.T. Crowd* is hardly subtle and in the most obvious example Miranda Hart in *Miranda* uses a direct address to camera, both in words and by glances and grimaces at points at the narrative. Such a technique might seem similar to the

devices in my key texts that allow us to know the thoughts and feelings of the protagonists beyond their dialogue with others. In fact, a much more theatrical interaction is occurring, with Hart bringing in the studio audience to the action in the same way as a stand-up comedian might. The point of the show is the star persona, which is made as broad as television comedy can possibly be; the spectacle becomes Hart's face and body rather than a recreation of the comedy of manners of the everyday. The theatrical tradition is now usually much more diffuse but remains present in British TV sitcom, even in new comedies that eschew laugh tracks and high key lights and feature performances toned down from their predecessors. Simon Amstell's Jewish family comedy *Grandma's House* relies on predominantly single set exchanges of dialogue in which the delivery of lines by experienced comic character actors (Rebecca Front, Linda Bassett, Samantha Spiro and James Smith) contrasts with Amstell's own awkwardly self-conscious presence, playing himself. In the second series a number of jokes refer to the taunts of bloggers and commentators that Amstell is unable to act. This clever construction creates a show which feels more theatrical than *The Royle Family* for example.

Case Study: Steve Coogan and Tamsin Greig

The shifts in sitcom performance are then rather more ambiguous than some of the other technical changes we have seen. I would like to look at how this works in greater depth through looking at two of my central texts: Steve

Coogan's performance as Tommy Saxondale in *Saxondale* and Tamsin Greig's portrayal of Alice in *Love Soup*.

Coogan and Greig show two contrasting styles of comic performance but it is important to note that in other respects the aesthetics and themes of *Saxondale* and *Love Soup* share many similarities. Both choose not to use a laugh track and reject many traditional set-ups and tropes in their shooting styles. I also believe that both shows are intent on making a social comment about the state of the self and society in Britain today, as well as making people laugh. The characters of Tommy and Alice are both reflective about changes that take place around them and about the moral dilemmas that arise from the situations they find themselves in. They both try and take a principled stance against what they see as a failure in values. Indeed the core of the comedy is the gap between their expectations about how the world should work and the grubby reality of its actuality. However, despite this shared purpose and their common ground of new sitcom aesthetics, the texts feel very different. I would suggest that this arises in part because of the mechanics of their lead performance. Naturally the exigencies of character are very important here and both actors aim to create a performance to match what has been written but they also bring themselves to the text and audience expectations of the star shape the readings and meanings of each programme.

Steve Coogan is a comedy 'star'. He has created a number of successful comic characters and has developed a lucrative career in Hollywood films, with the occasional more challenging or reflective piece (such as his work with

director Michael Winterbottom in *24 Hour Party People*, *A Cock and Bull Story*, and another contemporary sitcom *The Trip* – in the latter two titles he appears as ‘Steve Coogan’, a version of himself). Many audience members would come to *Saxondale* because it is a Steve Coogan vehicle (Coogan also co-wrote the series with Neil McLennan) and, as with *I’m Alan Partridge*, the series is constructed around the character he plays. In the DVD extras he says that “we talked a lot about the character and then fleshed out his world” (interview in *Saxondale DVD Series 1* extra). The construction of Tommy as a character becomes a physical process; Coogan applies some ageing make-up to play someone about eight-ten years older than his real self, adopts a long, greying hairstyle and a beard (palpably false in the first series) and wears an appropriate outfit of denims and trainers. Instead of his own soft Mancunian tones, he gives Tommy a Nottingham accent. This is an interesting choice as Tommy lives in suburban Stevenage in the Home Counties so having a different voice shows that he does not fit into his surroundings. It is also an accent that is not often heard on national television. The persona of a fifty year old ex-rock roadie pest controller in suburbia also requires some thinking through of what Tommy’s tastes would be. Clearly a great deal of consideration has gone into this process because it aids the comedy of recognition. The audience can respond to the veracity of Tommy and recognise in him themselves or people they know. This covers everything from exactly which Genesis album he would like and which model of car he would drive to the choice of words at particular moments and his views on personal liberty and manners.

Much of the comedy in the show comes from Tommy's lips because, as Coogan says, "he is witty as well as being the butt of the jokes" but he is also "opinionated and rather verbose" (interview in *Saxondale DVD Series 1* extra). Thus the whole programme is based around Coogan's performance as Tommy, what he says, how much he says – Tommy's verbosity ebbs and flows according to the moment and how much in control of a situation he feels - and his attempts to 'win' conversations through a concluding punchline, best seen in the anger management scenes that precede the credits of every episode. To some extent then Coogan's embodiment of Tommy is very subtle, layered with nuances of language, intonation and cultural references. However in other regards the portrayal is very broad. To show this 'larger than life' man, Coogan uses a great array of facial gestures and physical movements. He is normally presented in medium shot to highlight this and Tommy appears all the 'bigger' by appearing alongside other much more reticent and underplayed performances; the contrast with Ruth Jones (acting very differently to her role as Nessa) as his girlfriend Mags is very marked, yet somehow this works within the dynamics of the show.

We can see this more closely by looking at points within the episode 'Cockroaches' (1:4). Here Tommy's daughter Stevie (Montserrat Lombard) visits him with her new boyfriend Matt (James Lance), a 'free climber' who works in corporate branding. This episode is rather reflective because it gives the opportunity for Tommy to demonstrate that he recognises his own faults and limitations. Matt is as verbose and boastful as Tommy is and also shares his ability to slightly misjudge encounters and make inappropriate remarks. When on

the initial meeting Tommy goes a step too far with some light sexual innuendo he pauses for a moment and his face freezes in embarrassment (Appendix figure 1). When Matt makes a yet more inappropriate remark a few seconds later, Tommy's smile sets again but in an expression of distaste rather than panic (Appendix figure 2). This is facilitated by Coogan's use of his teeth (or possibly false teeth) for the part, which are bared at moments of tension or insecurity. Conversely when he feels triumphant he delivers a bon mot with a smack of the lips. Later Tommy has an argument with Stevie over his stubbornness in holding out against the 'man', when she asks him "would it kill you to not have the last word?"

Finally after Tommy comes to an accommodation with Matt and realises that he shares some of his own faults (and that he had wrongly assumed that Matt's trips to the toilet were down to cocaine use, rather than irritable bowel syndrome) he makes peace by giving Matt a present of a statue of a leopard on a log, given to Tommy by guitarist Ritchie Blackmore. In giving the present, Tommy's face begins with his slightly superior, 'amused' face of control (Appendix figure 3) before he embarks on a speech, ostensibly an anecdote about Blackmore but clearly really about Tommy himself, saying "why don't I just shut my trap, stop being a sanctimonious prick, always slagging off other people and looking down on them". Here he goes in to full twitching mode, his face contorting and eyes bulging as his voice rises (Appendix figure 4); one of the flashes of inarticulate and humbling anger at the self that forms the heart of the character. Brett Mills argues that "there is an inherent deviancy in sitcom

performance, and this deviancy is both offered as pleasure and celebrated” (*Television Sitcom* 83). Tommy gives this kind of pleasure to the audience through the detail within Coogan’s portrayal of the role and the process of watching him as a comedian create laughs from the raft of facial tics, heightened words, sexual and social neuroses and rock tour war stories that make up the man. The performance is characterised by the ‘control’ that Coogan believes is the core of the comic actor.

Tamsin Greig is a very different kind of sitcom star, utilising a technique that offers contrasting pleasures to Coogan’s comic performativity. Greig has played serious acting roles (as Anne Frank’s mother in *The Diary of Anne Frank* for instance) but has become known primarily as a comic performer in a number of sitcoms – *Black Books*, *Green Wing*, *Love Soup* and most recently *Episodes* and *Friday Night Dinner* and in films, notably *Tamara Drewe* (d. Stephen Frears 2010). In comedy Greig has become known by playing a particular kind of part: intelligent, sensitive middle-class women who feel out of kilter with the iniquities of the world around them. The comedy comes from her sanity in the face of these unfolding absurdities and her characters’ mystification at the events that befall her. Although there are variants – Fran in *Black Books* is kookier, and Beverly in *Episodes* is rather more hard-edged – there is often continuity in type and audiences have responded to the alignment that they feel with the parts she plays. Casting Greig brings a particular tone (bittersweet yet whimsical) to a text and creates audience expectations from those that have enjoyed her previous appearances. Greig’s roles usually engender audience sympathies – possibly

why her less likeable character in *Episodes* makes the comedy feel somewhat uncomfortable. In the last two years Greig, still only in her mid forties, seems increasingly cast in older roles as mothers (*Anne Frank*, *Friday Night Dinner* and *White Heat*). As well as demonstrating the limited opportunities for female stars, this shift has also had the effect of moving her away from the position at the heart of the action she enjoyed in *Love Soup* or *Green Wing*. This seems a shame as her skills as actor/performer are particularly suited to the still centre of the text.

This skill is demonstrated in her performance as Alice in *Love Soup*, which aims to use viewers' instinctive warmth towards her as part of the construction of the series. In the first series she shares the show with a parallel character, American comedy writer Gil. They are clearly perfect for each other but never meet; instead Alice undergoes a succession of travails in her efforts to find both love and also inner peace in a life that seems full of bizarre events and cruelties. David Renwick explicitly uses the two leads as identification points of strong moral values around truth, honesty and compassion in a world around them that appears to offer none of those things. Greig carries a great deal of the weight of the programme; indeed in the second series without Michael Landes she is the absolute centre of attention and the audience are clearly directed to see the world and the supporting characters through her eyes. Yet, unlike Coogan, she doesn't give a proactively comedic performance, rather she is the centre of the thematic and dramatic elements of the show and *reacts* to comic ironies that befall her. She uses her own voice and doesn't change her usual appearance. In the scenes at the department store perfume counter where she works, funny

lines are delivered by her two work colleagues, Cleo (Sheridan Smith) and Millie (Montserrat Lombard); Alice just offers an occasional pithily ironic summary of the situation.

How this unusual comic performance works can be seen in the episode 'Lobotomy Bay' (2:8). Here Alice is now dating another comedy scriptwriter, Douglas (Mark Heap). They meet an ex-girlfriend of his, Kendra (Niky Wardley), an animator, for dinner. She and Douglas recall (and we see) his first broadcast sketch, which features a coupling that ends with the woman discovering that the man's genitals are in reality a pixellated area and Alice recounts (and we also see dramatised) a recent event when Douglas tried to complain to neighbours playing inappropriate rap records at a children's party and is thrown from a window into a bouncy castle.

As they leave Kendra tells Alice that Douglas is obviously in love with her and that must make her feel so good. However Alice is having doubts about Douglas and we later see her in bed with him, thinking through her fears in voice-over (Appendix figure 5). Greig's vocal delivery is always notably low-pitched and slow and her face is impassive as we hear her anxieties. After we hear her talk about her fear that he will ask her to move in with him we cut to the next morning when Douglas's answer-phone message intones "Hi, this is Douglas and Alice".

Kendra has invited them to a swanky TV industry party thrown by her husband, TV producer Elliott Anderson (Bill Bailey), who makes violent TV thrillers. They discover they have been invited so that Douglas can write witty 'zingers' for Elliott to pass-off as his own dinner-table witticisms because "you're

only as good as the expertise you can afford". At the dinner table Kendra suddenly unveils a new animation scene for her BBC3 comedy series 'Lobotomy Bay' (which she had described as being about "the general dysfunctionals of twenty-first century Britain" and forms another example of Renwick's jibes about contemporary television). In it, a cartoon Alice is attacked by a shaven-haired thug and when an animated Douglas tries to interject he is beaten up. When the cartoon couple go to bed 'Alice' discovers that 'Douglas' has no genitals. After this humiliation, Kendra just apologises for re-using Douglas's old joke, and seems unaware of any offence caused.

What is noticeable about the scene is that Greig says very little, makes no real jokes, yet retains the focus of attention. There are a lot of close-ups on her face as the action unfolds, capturing reactions in her eyes and a tightening of the mouth at moments of high embarrassment (Appendix figure 6). Furious and degraded, Alice is prevented by natural politeness and social constraints from complaining. This forms both the comic and sad aspects of the scene and fits in perfectly with the character as portrayed by Greig. She also retains the moral power though – intimating, if politely, to Kendra, that one can understand murder in the face of humiliation (Appendix figure 7). Afterwards she dejectedly tells Douglas that she hates the fact that "you're just expected to take all that stuff on the chin" (Appendix figure 8).

In her role as Alice, Greig carries this kind of pain on her face, impassive but allowing the audience to read her thoughts through their own reactions to what they have just seen. She pulls off a very difficult trick in her performance;

comedic (or sometimes troubling) extreme events swirl around the still centre of her character, a character that becomes a proxy for her audience. Both Alice and Tommy Saxondale function as figures that stimulate the audience to take a view on the changing world around them. In very different ways the performances of Greig and Coogan allow comedy to make comments on the individual and society.

Sitcom performance has undergone a process of evolution rather than transformation. The previously dominant theatrical model, reaching out from the text towards the studio audience, has changed to match the formal shifts around it but it remains one of a range of acting styles that sitcom uses. There is still a particular sitcom performative practice that makes its acting distinctive from both drama and stand-up comedy performance. This can be seen in the use of what almost constitutes a repertory company of actors working in sitcom within the last decade or so, whether in lead roles like Greig or Coogan, or as supporting cast. This is evident even just in performers mentioned in this section: Montserrat Lombard is in both *Saxondale* and *Love Soup*, Sheridan Smith is in *Love Soup*, *Gavin and Stacey* and *The Royle Family* and Ruth Jones acts in *Saxondale* and writes and stars in *Gavin and Stacey*.

Sitcom Narratives

Another area where sitcom's formal composition has been seen to change is in the narrative structures on which shows are built. There have been critical disagreements about the importance of narrative in comic texts. Steve Neale

suggested that comedy comes from “those excesses... which momentarily suspend the narrative” (22) – clearly the case for some of silent clowns, for instance and perhaps for sitcoms based around a central comic performance, such as *Saxondale* or *Miranda*. Jim Cook argues that “it is not such narratives in themselves but such narratives organised around comic intention that seem to specify comedy and this comic intention is evidenced by jokes and comic situations” (15). Against this notion that everything in sitcom is structured around the comic, Brett Mills believes that to “dismiss sitcom as a form in which narrative is of little importance misses not only one of its pleasures but also one of its most defining characteristics” (*Television Sitcom* 34). Shows like *Love Soup* and *Peep Show* are carefully plotted so that a number of narrative elements come together for comedic effect at the conclusion of each episode and Mills is right in saying that there is a great pleasure in watching the skill in this being achieved and in the anticipation of finding how the comedic connections are made.

While there might be critical disagreement on the value of narrative in sitcom, there is some consensus over how narrative traditionally worked in the genre. Sitcom, as Terry Lovell details (26), is held to follow literary critic Tzvetan Todorov’s model of an ‘equilibrium-disruption-re-equilibrium structure’ where the status quo is threatened but always restored at the end of each episode. This construction forms Eaton’s notion of sitcom as a “timeless now” (70). While this lack of change within the text was seen as one of the formal properties of the sitcom, it was always somewhat overstated even in the days of mass audience shows. Most programmes did allow some gradual shifts in circumstance for their

characters or situations (a change of lodger in *Rising Damp*, a baby and new couplings in *Only Fools and Horses*) while largely following the Todorov model.

An example of how the Todorov model works in a fairly pure form might be the episode of *Dad's Army* called 'A. Wilson Esq'. The long-standing situation in the show is that the home guard unit is run by lower middle-class bank manager Captain Mainwaring (Arthur Lowe) with upper-class, public school educated Sgt. Wilson (John Le Mesurier) serving beneath him. Here Wilson is promoted to be manager of the bank branch in the next town and is given officer command of their home guard platoon. The equilibrium of the show is shattered – Wilson is put in the position his class expects and for the first time we feel sorry for Mainwaring in the face of this effortless superiority. However, Wilson's bank is then bombed and he has to return to the status quo. Although this is a more extreme example than many, the disruption and then realignment, of the comic situation has been the staple of sitcom for many years. It is worth mentioning however that many shows have 'finished' their situation as the show concluded: the war ends in *Dad's Army*, the Brices move to another town in *Ever Decreasing Circles* and Victor Meldrew is killed in *One Foot in the Grave*.

The crucial advantage of the 'equilibrium-disruption –re-equilibrium' framework is that it ensures the sitcom's continued existence. The audience come to know the situation and the characters over time and gain the pleasures of variation within the episode but repetition in the fundamentals of the structure. This follows Neale's principles of genre (48) in which the familiar is balanced with the new. It is comforting for viewers to return to a situation and characters they

know and understand; this allows the comedy to gain depth and complexity without having to re-orientate oneself to a new set of circumstances. In industrial terms it also makes sense. If the situation is not brought to a quick conclusion through its narrative then the series can carry on for a long period if it proves popular with audiences. British comedy has never gone down the American syndication route, which requires longevity and indeed *Fawlty Towers* and *The Office* are examples of shows that chose, for artistic rather than commercial reasons, to stop at two series. Usually, though, longevity is still desired as it means that demand for more can be met and the profits, viewer loyalty, talent development and ancillary revenues and sales that come with a long-running series can be enjoyed. In mass prime-time broadcasting such successful programmes can become the cornerstones of a channel and a schedule and even in a more fragmented television audience they can help to promote and define a channel, as *Peep Show* does for Channel 4 for instance.

Even in the 1970s though there were programmes that did not follow the equilibrium-disruption-re-equilibrium model but built up a continuous narrative line through the programme (as Eaton acknowledges 69). *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin* completely relied on its seriality for its comic power in depicting Reggie's breakdown and his reinventions into new identities. *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* also uses its storyline as the basis of its comic structure. This is particularly so in its first series as Terry returns to Newcastle and has to come to terms with Bob's new aspirational lifestyle. Each episode builds on the last and has a clearly defined timeframe of the first few weeks of

Terry's return home (Medhurst, *National Joke* 122). Unlike the re-equilibrium of the end of the episode returning us to the state of play at its start, the events that end each instalment of *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* are still felt at the beginning of the next. Thelma accidentally getting in bed with Terry at the end of 'Home is the Hero' is still a keen source of embarrassment in 'Cold Feet' the following week. Series two is looser in places and there are a few self-contained episodes but still when Terry causes Bob to receive a black eye at the end of 'Some Day we'll Laugh about this' he sports it throughout the next show, 'In Harm's Way'.

Thus, although there is an assumed greater emphasis in contemporary sitcom towards continuous narrative, it had already established been in some very successful precedents. The 'Equilibrium-disruption-re-equilibrium' model is less dominant than it used to be but it is still commonplace either in whole or in part. Surviving audience sitcoms like *The I.T Crowd* or *Not Going Out* still thrive on producing comic variants that can be recreated anew on each occasion; the structure suits the pleasures that the audience receive from the show, which come from comic excess rather than plot development over the series. Within the episode, narrative development is important as it allows laughs to come from the increasingly outrageous situations in which characters find themselves but we are happy knowing that all will be resolved somehow and we will experience the same process all over again next time.

The old cyclical model does work well for much of the tonal and thematic ideas that British sitcom has traditionally explored. If, as I will examine more

closely in the next chapter, British sitcoms are imbued with failure, disappointment and pain and create humour from them, then a structure in which characters never learn and are unable to move on from their situation is an advantage because it reinforces these themes. The idea of the self-imposed prison of work or family (or of course the actual prison of *Porridge*) where no one feels able to leave has been the foundation for most of the classic comic texts in British sitcom's history.

By returning to the state of equilibrium at the end of each episode the text is signalling two important things. The first is that the characters and situation will stay the same; rather than getting caught up in debates about whether this may be radical or reactionary, the important factor to acknowledge is that it is resonant. Most people do not feel able to get out of the situation that they find themselves in, be it through their personal foibles, lack of money or family and cultural pressures. It is consoling, even sometimes liberating, to see your own reality represented humorously and vicariously through other people on screen and, as mentioned earlier, John Ellis has argued "consolation" is a very important aspect of television, providing "comfort and release from the stresses of mundane living" (*TV FAQ* 13). Secondly that comfort works in another way too – the development of the relationship between text and audience as they welcome a programme as part of their life. Re-equilibrium demonstrated that this relationship was going to carry on, that the pleasures it offered were not going to be taken away from them.

The move towards a continuous, more dramatic narrative, while partial and not as all pervading as assumed, does perhaps show a wider change in television culture. The re-equilibrium model does presume that the audience has a commitment to both the programme itself and the broadcasting experience; they want to tune in week after week and TV forms their core leisure activity. Now that television is organised around niche audiences in a more atomised society and there are competing media with ever increasing ways to access content, the intensity of the relationship between the viewer, the text and the process of watching it and experiencing it at the same time as other people is weakened. The relationship is now finite; the idea of years and years of an ongoing commitment no longer so realistic. In this environment a developing narrative telling a story in a funny way becomes a more attractive option. The movement towards a conclusion thus becomes one of the principal draws of *Gavin and Stacey* or of comic serials such as *Psychoville*.

Again *The Office* was very important in establishing a successful normative form, which it established in its central use of two narrative strands driving the series: the mutual attraction of Tim and Dawn; in the first series the threat of the office closing; and in the second Brent himself losing his job. However there is still much of the re-equilibrium model there too. Part of the power of the series is after all in its picture of routine, of the kind of prison that its predecessors depicted. Interestingly Gervais and Merchant do see the complexity here; they say that “we were trying to find a way of disguising the plots so that they didn’t undermine the realism, so that you wouldn’t see the

narrative mechanics at work” (qtd in Walters 15). *The Royle Family* too has many elements from the past. It is hard to think of a purer case of re-equilibrium than Jim Royle ruling the room from his armchair each week; the only change in many episodes is that the disruption element is so minor.

The central texts in my study reflect the more fluid state of narrative in contemporary sitcom. There are different kinds of storytelling taking place within and across the text but there is still an emphasis on characters that do not learn their lessons or expect to escape their own failings. *Home Time* is perhaps the show that invests most clearly in a continuous narrative. The situation is established at the beginning of the series by Gaynor’s return to Coventry after twelve years and, by withholding information about what she was doing or where she has been, the audience has an investment in the unfolding narrative. This is rewarded in part at the close of episode six by the sudden appearance of her husband (co-writer Neil Edmond) as she kisses her adolescent crush Paul (James Daffern), although the lack of a re-commission means that we will never find out more. Between these points we track Gaynor’s precarious relationship with her old friends. However, even here within this overall narrative umbrella, much of the narrative structure in the episode is quite loose, suiting the naturalistic approach of the series and is mainly concerned with Gaynor rediscovering her old neighbourhood and the idiosyncrasies of her nearest and dearest all over again – in fact the show is pretty much a female *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* in its structure.

Despite their adoption of other new tropes both *Peep Show* and *Saxondale* remain very much under the influence of the 'equilibrium-disruption-re-equilibrium' model. *Saxondale* is largely wedded to this structure; although he has his moments of self-realisation and redemption, Tommy remains an old rocker-cum-pest controller in conflict with modernity at the end of each episode having dispelled the disruptive influences of old roadie pals, authoritarian threats to his freedom or the demands of the anger management group. Only at the end, when it looks like Mags might finally leave him, is the threat of disruption severe but at the end the equilibrium is still restored. *Peep Show*, like *The Royle Family*, is marked by life events such as Mark's disastrous wedding or the birth of his son but it is vital for the comedy that nothing really changes and that Mark and Jez remain locked in their doomed embrace of opposites through apathy, fear and failure; in 'Big Mad Andy' (8:3) Jez tells us that "I hate living with him but obviously I never want to leave". A series of disruptions through love, lust or career are repelled. Series seven ended with the possibility of Mark moving in with new girlfriend Dobbie but there were a number of hints to the audience that the likelihood of Mark and Jez maturing apart was slight. Sure enough, in series eight the possibility of Dobbie moving in becomes endlessly delayed by exigencies of character that the audience find all too credible. Mark's flaws drive the narrative back to re-equilibrium every time; on this occasion his behaviour encourages Dobbie to take a job in New York. For all its embrace of new technology, the structures underpinning *Peep Show* are very traditional.

It is *Love Soup* which has the most complex narrative structure, as one might expect from David Renwick, whose command of interweaving structures (within the equilibrium model until its finale) in *One Foot in the Grave* was so strong. In the first series there is a parallel structure with two sets of stories, one centred on Alice and one on Gil, the screenwriter. There are occasional hints that their worlds might cross but they never meet. In 'War is Heck' (1:6) we see them oblivious to each other in different rows at the same theatre, the only two people not laughing at the play. Perhaps to accommodate these two equivalent narrative lines each episode was an hour long, changing the comic dynamics of the piece and consciously at times walking the line between comedy and drama. In the second series, the structure had to be rewritten late due to the sudden unavailability of Michael Landes as Gil. Now at thirty minutes each the series presented the adventures of Alice alone, as she learns about Gil, discovering his sudden death from a heart attack. Throughout there are the usual intertwining Renwick story points, all coming together at the end of each episode and invariably including antics involving Cleo and Millie. In addition there are some strands that cross over episodes such as Alice's weary romance with the hapless Douglas (clearly some dialogue intended originally for Gil, in his function as a comedy screenwriter, is passed onto Douglas, who is in the same business). Despite Gil's death there is a pay-off for the audience's investment in the parallel narrative in the show's conclusion. In the final episode 'Home' (2:12), Alice is given Gil's diary and understands their compatibility, asking "is that so dumb and

wet and wrong for any of us to find one small corner of this world where we'll never feel alone?"

Rather than making a complete shift from Todorov's equilibrium model and from the cyclical narrative to linear storytelling in the mode of drama, sitcom has gained a wider narrative range of options. Elements of the old narrative traditions linger on and form much of the comic force within each episode. It is important to recognise that sitcom relies on a balance between repetition and progression to engage the audience. Repetition was previously dominant but now progression also has a role in forming sitcom's relationship with its audience. In both cases character leads narrative in sitcom. Plotlines, whether they are within the episode or across the series, are driven by the consequences and plausibility of the characters' actions. Comedy comes from our understanding of these characters and our anticipation of how they might behave. The balance between repetition and progression has to be managed carefully because we need to maintain a stable relationship with the characters to find them funny.

The demands of modernity have changed the way that people watch comedy however and this has placed a greater emphasis on progression. As Sennett and Bauman would have it, the static or the familiar is no longer the basis of society. There have to be elements of change, of narrative momentum, even if nothing is changing inside the characters' heads. Contemporary sitcoms deal with our anxieties about lives full of inexorable waves of change; they offer a "working through" as Ellis describes it (*Seeing Things* 120), a space in which we

can think about this change through the operations of these characters in their situations and relate their anxieties to our own lives. Comedy allows a detachment from the feelings of uncertainty that helps us to lighten our load, while at the same time becoming more aware of our burden.

Conclusion

Sitcom plays a diminished role within the television schedules in the last few years but still has an important function for broadcasters. While most series are now likely to be of limited appeal, the successes that do come through and resonate with viewers can take on a cultural importance beyond their broadcast and demonstrate that television as a medium can build a unique relationship with its audience. Formal change has reinvigorated the sitcom and the genre has demonstrated that it is flexible enough to survive in a new viewing landscape by responding to the changing needs of audiences. Sitcom is thus now a genre that is less easy to define than previously; a text cannot just be easily identified by its laugh track, its lighting style, its theatrical acting or its circular narrative. A sitcom can just as easily be shot with a hand-held camera with downbeat, understated performances and tell an unfolding story across the series. However the shift is evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Sitcom exists in a state of transition between new and old, each new direction balanced by continuities with traditional models. Mills argues that

the more genres develop, the more they stay the same. While it's clear that a broader range of sitcom is available now than ever before, this is not to suggest that these have replaced the traditional format completely. Indeed... all these comedies of distinction maintain significant links with

narrative and aesthetic conventions developed in the early days of the genre, even if they go out their way to suggest they don't (*The Sitcom* 142).

Yet Mills has also expressed ambivalence over sitcom's new direction. He acknowledges that "sitcom has demonstrated that it can attain its comedic goals without employing those characteristics which not only most clearly define it, but which were also assumed to be essential for a programme's success" (*The Sitcom* 48 and pretty much the same text in *Television Sitcom* 25) but he also fears that "sitcom's once universal appeal may continue to splinter into ever more individualised examples" (*Television Sitcom* 49). While his observations over his two books are often contradictory on these points, it is possible to be both confident of the form's adaptability and be concerned at the diminution of its potential power and afraid that "contemporary series fail... to unite audiences" (*Television Sitcom* 49). It may be however that the forces of atomisation are unstoppable; certainly Sennett and Bauman would see them as a fundamental political-economic shift that affects everything, including how audiences respond to television. In these circumstances it can be argued that what is most important is that texts adopt forms that engage with the fears, frustrations and joys of contemporary life in the same way that popular mass audience sitcoms did in the past, forms that will develop with the expectations of the audience, even if the appeal is not as broad as before.

TONE OF VOICE

Introduction

One of the ways in which sitcom in the last decade has been defined as different from its predecessors is through what we might call 'tone'; the manner in which it speaks to its audience. This tone can be identified as more challenging or 'darker' than previously (Mills, *Television Sitcom*; Walters; Thompson, *Sunshine*; Hunt). What does this really mean however? What is tone and how do we read the tone of a particular text? This chapter seeks to explore how tone can work in sitcom; it examines in detail whether there really has been a clear shift in address over the past decade or so and asks how this might reflect the dysfunction between the individual and society that theorists like Sennett and Bauman diagnose as a condition of modernity.

To understand the importance and meaning of tone in the sitcom it is productive to think of it in terms of what Raymond Williams described as "the structures of feeling... the actual living sense, the deep community that makes the communication possible" (*Long Revolution* 64-65) that are conveyed by the programmes. Within the communication between text and audience there are signals transmitted and received about the characters, situations and jokes and how we might read them. Each text has its own particular "structure of feeling" but this relies on the wider "structures of feeling" within the culture to be understood – inevitably these structures are contingent, shifting all the time and sitcoms mine this ambiguity.

Tone is a concept central to understanding comedy; it is, after all, through tone that we identify that a text is meant to be humorous. Tone is also the process by which we negotiate an ongoing relationship with a comic text such as sitcom; it is a mode of address which offers a guide to reading the comic aspects of narrative, character and jokes. Through tone we learn how to judge our response to particular characters at particular moments and how to approach the presentation of events. To take an example from a very popular mainstream sitcom, in *Only Fools and Horses* the central scenario is that 'Del Boy' Trotter (David Jason), who lives with his naïve, much younger brother Rodney (Nicholas Lyndhurst), makes money from dodgy dealings on his Peckham market stall. One potential reading of the situation could be that 'Del Boy' is a criminal, a man who lives by exploiting others, either financially, by selling them shoddy goods at inflated prices or emotionally, by manipulating his kindly brother. However it is the tone of the show that encourages us to read it differently. Del Boy is presented to the audience in such a way that they are likely to think of him as a witty, warm-hearted loveable rogue who is doing his best for his family in a tough world; this tone helps us to understand that Del Boy and his adventures should be read as essentially comic. Tone forms a discourse between text and audience, offering an interpretation of what is being shown that the audience are encouraged to follow.

Tone also becomes an authorial voice of sorts, suggesting that we laugh at y because we know x and thus z is likely to happen in these circumstances; it is a mode that we learn to comprehend through repeated watching of the sitcom.

Part of the reason that opening episodes of sitcoms, even of shows that later go on to be very successful, often attract such odium is that the tone of the show has to be understood before it can be truly appreciated. Sometimes it can take some time to gauge what our responses should be to the characters and situations. John Ellis sums up this problem for the genre as:

the very thing that makes a sitcom work also makes it difficult to establish a new format with TV audiences. The dynamics that drive a successful sitcom are not immediately apparent to a first-time viewer. It takes time to get to know the characters and the typical interactions between them (*TV FAQ* 91)

“The Comic Climate”: Theories of Comic Tone

Tone becomes especially problematic or challenging when it seems somehow ambiguous, inconsistent or inappropriate. If the audience does not appear to be receiving clear signals on how to react to the text then they may question whether what they are seeing is funny. There are two ways to characterise this disconnect between tone and audience: it can be seen as the comic failure of a text that misunderstands the relationship with the audience and proves unable to communicate a comic reading from its material or alternatively some sitcoms can deliberately disrupt the discourse to challenge the audience to think about a comic response so that finding it funny becomes a conscious and active choice in the reading of the text. *The League of Gentlemen* is an interesting example of a show that tries to pursue the latter path. While some of its myriad characters and story lines have a fairly obvious comic trajectory, others play with the audience’s reactions so that even its fans might find elements within it disturbing rather than funny.

However, despite its key role in defining the terms of the relationship between the text and the audience, tone has been very little discussed in relation to sitcom or indeed television as a whole. The idea of 'tone' and indeed the term itself seems best explored in some useful writing on the concept in Film Studies in the last few years. Jeffrey Sconce published an insightful piece in *Screen* in 2002 on the use of irony and nihilism in American independent cinema and the effects of this mode of address on the audience. The ironic address has been important in recent British sitcom too and there have also been suggestions of a nihilistic outlook on the world (Lawson, "Safe Comedy"). Douglas Pye also contributed a chapter in *Close Up 02* on 'Movies and Tone' that offers a model for how tone can influence our reading of a text; tone is "not simply about what is being signified in the dramatic material of the film but about the ways in which the film addresses the spectator and implicitly invites us to understand its attitude to its material and the stylistic register it employs" (7). He remarks on the lack of previous work on the topic in Screen Studies, finding its absence "at one level surprising, given the crucial role tone plays in enabling us to orientate ourselves to any film... [because] when these habitual processes are disturbed it can be an uncomfortable or disorientating experience... even movies that seem to establish their tone straightforwardly can hold all sorts of tonal surprises in store" (7).

As we are orientated by tone in film so, just as importantly, tone directs how we understand sitcom. Perhaps it might seem intangible or subjective to talk about the tone of a work yet tone is something that the audience learns to understand and negotiate as part of their viewing and appreciation of a

programme and viewers become keenly responsive to tonal shifts and fluctuations. Also particular tones are talked about frequently in relation to comic texts, even if the concept as a whole is neglected. Audiences understand that certain sitcoms are to be read as 'black comedy' (*Nighty Night, Psychoville*) in the same way that others are recognized as 'bittersweet' (*Butterflies, Roger and Val Have Just Got In*) or 'wry' (*The Trip, Agony*). Shows sharing these tones might be very different in most other ways (the last coupling for instance) but possess a common tonal direction, a way that the jokes and characters should be perceived. Such 'tones' are a set of signposts along our path through a text and cumulatively influence our understanding of what we might find funny.

In *The Trip*, for instance, Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon, playing themselves, travel around various top quality restaurants in the Northern countryside; throughout the journey Brydon repeatedly launches into impersonations of film stars such as Al Pacino and Michael Caine. Brydon often performs such impersonations as part of his comic act in other programmes, here though the tone of *The Trip* encourages us not to laugh at the impersonations themselves but rather at Brydon's insistence and persistence in performing them to cover his social awkwardness and especially at Coogan's exasperation at him doing so. This builds a comic dynamic into the relationship between the two men.

To fully understand the impact and application of tone in sitcom it is useful to look at some criticism around the theory of comedy. Jerry Palmer in his book *The Logic of the Absurd* argues that comic theories are based around two different debates around the reception of comedy; the extent to which comedy is

inherent or 'immanent' and what the comic unit of analysis should be. He suggests that most discourses about comedy are formed from a combination of positions from these two debates.

In the first instance the question is "whether the comic – regardless of the medium of its transmission – is an immanent property of a given event, utterance or text, or whether these latter's comic quality is something which is established in a process of negotiation with the audience" (20). The notion that there is a latent comic property that is there to be found is best personified in Palmer's analysis by Sigmund Freud's work on jokes. In the second debate, the issue is whether the comic analysis should focus on "the minimum unit of comedy, the individual joke or gag and its structure or upon larger scale units, comic character and comic narrative, for example" (20). Palmer considers that Freud's ideas combine comedy as immanent and the object for study as the minimum unit of analysis, while most literary and film criticism assumes the immanent but gravitates to larger scale units of analysis. In contrast "interactionist sociology and social psychology ... argues for the inherently negotiable nature of comedy, and is usually based upon minimum units of analysis, although in principle there is no reason why it should not be based on the analysis of units such as character" (20). What I am suggesting in my discussion of tone is a fourth position, one that Palmer only acknowledges here as a potential course, that comedy is often negotiable and that this can be based on larger units, such as character and narrative. I would also argue that literary and film (and particularly of course Television Studies) models of textual reading can fulfil this function,

although my analysis is also informed by sociological thinking in the belief that tone and its reading are rooted in the interaction between the individual and society.

Critical thinking should also acknowledge that these debates and positions are not absolute and that readings can contain some elements that may be immanent and others that are negotiated. Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik refine Palmer's discussion, arguing that "laughter can occur only in conjunction with certain kinds of utterance on certain kinds of occasion. Cues are provided by institutional contexts" (64). They point out that "funniness is... a property thus subject to negotiation and dispute" but also that "wherever and whenever the processes of negotiation, interpretation and laughter take place, they do so at points in an utterance which always share certain features" (65). Neale and Krutnik argue that negotiation plays a critical part in the comic process but involves responding to at least some immanent comic elements in many situations, characters or jokes, which have "features of humour located within them" (65). When we view sitcoms we are aware that the shows are supposed to be found funny, that the constructions we encounter are designed to elicit a humorous response but audiences negotiate with the text over whether that response will be forthcoming. Gerald Mast expresses this through his term "comic climate": "the notion that an artist builds signs into a work to let us know that he considers it a comedy and wishes us to take it as such" (9). As Palmer (232) and others point out, Mast's lists of cues, storylines and other signals to denote a comic text are not always convincing or exclusive to comedy but the

notion of “comic climate” is a useful one that resonates with the audience experience. We identify what a comedy feels and looks like and then choose to watch it in the hope that we will recognise those signals and experience the “comic climate” to make us laugh.

So tone in comedy in its most basic form is the dynamic between these “signs” in the text; the “comic climate”; and the audience’s response. It is also the process of negotiation that Palmer and Neale and Krutnik outline, the evaluation of the text by which the viewer will ascertain whether they judge it to be funny or not. In sitcoms particularly, I would argue, this has to go beyond Palmer (or Freud’s) minimum unit of comic analysis. Our negotiation with sitcoms is more complex than whether we find a particular joke funny; it is also contingent on our engagement with characters, the situation and the narrative. A sitcom can contain lots of good jokes (*Friends*, *Rising Damp*) but it becomes problematic if the gags are the dominant comic attribute to the detriment of character or situation. *Coupling* is a good example of this problem, being full of well constructed comic lines but with a series of unformed and rootless characters. This creates a deficiency of tone in the text; the process of interpretation is limited and inhibits the reading the audience can make.

Mast suggests that “an intellectual – emotional distance from the work... is the essential comic response” (15). Distance allows us to laugh by encouraging the audience to apply our judgement to the comic moment, separating us from the subject. In the most basic terms we laugh at someone slipping on a banana skin but understand their feelings of humiliation because at some point in our

everyday existence we could do exactly the same thing. The distance between viewer and text adds potency and sharpness to our readings of comedy and enables us to see resonance beyond the immediate situation. Richard Sennett talks about the superiority of empathy over sympathy:

the dialogic conversation... prospers through empathy, the sentiment of curiosity about who other people are in themselves. This is a cooler sentiment than sympathy's often instant identifications, yet empathy's rewards are not stone-cold (*Together* 23).

Comedy is more empathetic than sympathetic. This enables audiences to understand that the text can be read as light-hearted, even if in fact there is also serious or challenging content contained within it, while at the same time relating comic characters and situations from the diegesis to their own lives. We might feel very little sympathy towards Mark in *Peep Show* for instance but the show's comedy relies on a feeling of empathy with him from the audience as he attempts to deal with his dilemmas. Tone creates such a distance, through the "comic climate" and its negotiation but tone can also complicate such a reading if the signs become more complex or open to interpretation. What happens if emotional distance becomes harder to achieve or if that distance makes the audience question their comic reactions to what they see? British sitcoms over the past decade or so have played on such potential ambiguities of tone. I will consider how this can work and to what extent it represents something new, arguing that such a shift in emphasis is indicative of both the formal and social changes I outlined in previous chapters.

Changing Comic Signals

If tone is a process of “negotiating” (such as that outlined by Casetti 23) that works within Mast’s “comic climate”, then inevitably tone is altered if the comic signals change. In the previous chapter I outlined a number of formal shifts in sitcom and it is worth briefly reflecting on how they might affect the reading of tone by the audience. Casetti after all argues that film “negotiates in light of this giving of form and uses its own form for further negotiation” (23) and I believe that sitcom follows the same trajectory.

The most recognisable change has been the decline in the use of the studio audience in the recording and transmission of TV sitcoms. The laughter of the studio audience offers a very clear comic signal – lots of strangers are laughing at this, therefore it is supposed to be funny. Studio laughter punctuates the text and guides the audience through an appreciation of Hall’s “preferred reading” of tone (121). While viewers can choose not to join in when they hear the laugh track, it does mean making a conscious decision to read the text differently from their peers and to step away from the collective experience that such a device offers the audience. As Brett Mills suggests, “the removal of this collective experience –and collective justification – allows for the possibility that audiences might laugh at different things, which seriously undermines the hegemonic criticism of most sitcom” (*Television Sitcom* 63). The absence of the guidance and affirmation that the laugh track offers mean that audiences have to determine their responses themselves and these responses might be very varied.

Jeremy G. Butler provides an American perspective on this in his recent *Television Style*, suggesting that what he calls 'televisual' sitcoms (those that differentiate themselves from the old network model) compensate for the lack of a laugh track by which to interpellate viewers by hailing them instead with "a layering of signifiers and surfeit of signs that entreat and challenge the reader to decode them" (215). Butler raises an especially interesting point by arguing that "silence in televisual sitcoms, is ironically, a device for hailing viewers... a show with silences demands your attention – as does someone whispering softly in a crowded room" (215). In some cases silence is being employed to make some clearly signalled point – the silences in *The Office* over wide shots of the employees silently working emphasise the humdrum and powerless nature of working life – but they do open up a space that allows the possibility of other readings, of making different judgments. The audience is directed to fill the silence with their own thoughts but this creates an ambiguity of tone, a recognition that counter-readings are more likely without the laugh track. However we can't always be sure that a comic response is always intended. Sometimes silence is used in *The Office* to extend a joke – the stunned pause after a Brent comment perhaps - but famously the silence in episode 2:6 of *The Office* when Tim pulls off his microphone to declare his feelings to Dawn is not meant to be read as comic; we are asked to feel both suspense in seeing what happens and empathy with Tim's feelings. The 'comic climate' has become more problematic but also potentially more interesting.

The uncertainty engendered by the move away from the studio audience is further emphasised by the changes in aesthetics and performance. Mills's points about the new primacy of the image in comedy (*The Sitcom* 132) illustrate the extent of the move away from the brightly lit, theatrical styling that was once an easily recognisable generic trope. When almost every series adopted the same kind of shot structures, sets and acting techniques a consistency of tone developed; an easily recognisable set of signals that told the audience that they were viewing a popular situation comedy. As John.T.Caldwell (*Televisuality* 6) and Butler (197) argue, adopting 'televisual' aesthetics makes the tone more opaque because it is a look that is used beyond comedy, in drama or verité documentary for instance. If the audience is viewing a scene shot in this manner then they have to make a much less directed choice to identify the text as comic. The 'televisual' imperative is one of detachment and of a discourse between audience and text that encourages the viewer to choose his/her own path in discerning what they find amusing or engaging within a programme. No longer is the tone communicated directly through the codes of studio laughter and a fixed set of comfortable conventions in an explicit appeal to assure viewers of the show's intentions.

Tone is also conveyed through performance and the theatrical acting style of primetime, mass appeal sitcoms offered clarity of meaning through overtly comic voices and gestures. Some of this tradition still continues; for all the complexity of the series and its undercurrents of pathos and satire, Steve Coogan's exaggeration of physical and verbal tics in *Saxondale* reassures

viewers that they are still watching something anyone can recognise as a comedy. In *The Trip*, his much lower-key performance does not offer that reassurance so a different kind of comic reading is required. Similarly, in *Home Time*, Emma Fryer as Gaynor plays down the comic possibilities of her unusual and expressive face in favour of naturalism. Representing the passivity of Gaynor as a character in this way allows the audience to speculate about her and develop their own responses to her situation.

The growing stress on seriality in sitcom narratives also has an impact on tone. The circular narrative structure formerly dominant in sitcom allowed for tonal clarity. If audiences knew that an episode would inevitably return to the status quo then they could be secure in their reading of the narrative arc; the climax would be either a comic resolution or follow a pattern that viewers were familiar and comfortable with, even if, as in the case of Harold Steptoe's failure to ever leave the paternal home, it was tinged with tragedy. If there is some sort of linear story arc then the expectations of the audience become more complex. The tone can be altered by an unforeseen event and viewers can become less confident in how they might read the text. The famous 'over the top' ending of *Blackadder Goes Forth* is an early example of this in the UK; knowing this tragic outcome might lead viewers to watch repeats differently. The desire to know what happens in the developing storyline can also compete with the "comic climate" for the viewer's attention, complicating the reception of the text and the tone that this forms. The distancing impact of a changed aesthetic in many recent

sitcoms is reinforced by their use of different modes in which they tell their stories.

My four central texts are united in their use of devices that create detachment: new angles on the action that complicate the understanding of what the audience are seeing. *Peep Show* has its point of view shots and interior voices; *Love Soup* has multiple commentaries on the action, many based on the notion of authorship; *Home Time* has Gaynor's diary entries and *Saxondale* has Tommy's anger management sessions. All of these devices create an uncertainty of tone, an alternative reading of the action, even if many of them also add to the "comic climate" by showing up the disparity between the interior and social lives of the characters.

One of the most important contributory factors to the tonal shift has been the changes within the industry I previously outlined. If sitcoms are not being broadcast in primetime on BBC1 or ITV anymore, they are no longer expected to reach ten or twenty million people. When sitcom catered to a mass audience, it was important that programmes did not alienate large sections of potential viewers. This is not just about content (although this plays a significant part as will be discussed) but also about clarity and accessibility. The comic signals needed to be very clear to appeal to a broad-based audience and the tone of those shows was consistent and easily legible as a result. Without the requirement to please or be easily understood by everyone, opportunities have developed for a more challenging tone that can ask demanding questions of the audience or shifts between tones that make the comic climate harder but at its

best, richer to read. This shift brings its own challenges however. The negotiation of a comic relationship with the audience, the process described by Palmer (20), needs to be rethought in these circumstances. As Brett Mills suggests these changes “result in texts which must signal their comic intent in a different way or lay themselves open to the possibly not only of audiences failing to spot all the jokes but of failing to realise they’re watching a sitcom at all” (*Television Sitcom* 51). This tension is best understood by looking at aspects of tone that are explored in recent sitcoms and examining how tone operates within programmes.

Dark Comedy

It is almost a truism that much recent British sitcom is ‘dark’ in its tone. This tone is often seen as something that distinguishes new sitcom from its predecessors. In 2004, Mark Lawson suggested that “if television comedy were a stock market, the smart money at the moment would be flooding towards the dark and nasty, the surreal or grotesque: *Little Britain*, *Nighty Night*, *The Office*, the sort of stuff that begins on BBC2 or, these days, even further out on BBC3” (“Safe Comedy”). What do we mean by ‘dark comedy’ however? It sounds like an oxymoron; a concept that appears to be the antithesis of laughter. Yet comedy has often been about more than being ‘light’, more than something that ignores the cares of the world. Instead comedy has always striven to engage and conquer our fears and the world’s ills by making the audience confront them, to

liberating effect. Howard Jacobson concludes his book on the nature of comedy by arguing that:

[t]ragedy flatters us into believing we are grand, when put to the test; something more than flesh that falls away. Comedy answers to our suspicions that we are not grand at all, *only* flesh that falls away – but how much more remarkable *then* our exuberant persistence! (Jacobson's italics, 242).

As he implies, 'dark or 'black' comedy can be used to explore human weakness, cruelty, moral ambiguity, pessimism and cynicism – but also our endurance in the face of these trials. This has always been the case as is demonstrated by Jacobson in his studies of ancient traditions and customs from Navajo laughter rituals to the commedia dell'arte. Black comedy - jokes about death, disease and disaster and cruel observations about others – has long been a current in comedy, challenging social mores and conceptions of appropriate behaviour, whether in the playground or on stage or film. While many contemporary sitcoms have elements of black comedy in them, I would argue that 'dark comedy', as represented in sitcom, is different. It is more pervading, more clearly a view of the world than just a distasteful joke or taboo subject matter. Leon Hunt in his book on *The League of Gentlemen* argues that "it is perhaps best seen as a mixture of the 'black' and the 'sick', sometimes vaguely satirical but rarely attributable to an especially noble agenda... it is defined by its institutional and media context, by testing the boundaries of what is permissible on broadcast TV, particularly within a genre that is ostensibly a branch of 'light entertainment'" (25).

Hunt cites programmes like *The League*, *Nighty Night*, and Chris Morris's work, which very consciously test the boundaries of what is acceptable for

broadcast. I believe that 'dark' applies more widely than that however. It is a bleak worldview that goes beyond taboo-busting and shock tactics and offers challenges to the way audiences think about themselves and their place in the world. There are areas of debate about the extent to which this is new in British sitcom and I will engage with these notions later in this chapter – clearly there are a number of continuities – but it is possible to identify new aspects to the approach in recent sitcoms and these differences reflect the social shifts explored by Sennett, Bauman, Beck and other theorists. In doing so I will consider how sitcoms over the last decade might be considered 'dark'. There are three main areas in which I believe a dark tone is conveyed to the audience in these programmes: confrontation; content; and misanthropy and alienation.

Confrontation

Some recent sitcoms create a dark tone through confronting the audience and by directly challenging their preconceptions, their values and their sense of order, propriety and familiarity. One way to do this is aesthetically through the use of the image, editing or sound. The casual viewer can be disorientated and made uncomfortable by the text, which demands a conscious and active reading by viewers if they are to engage with its comic possibilities. By deliberately making it hard to access, the creative talent and the broadcaster might be claiming some sort of cultural capital (Bourdieu 39) or the 'televisuality' identified by Butler and Caldwell. In doing so programmes like, say, *Green Wing*, with its self-conscious style, are appealing to what Ellis has classed as 'connoisseur'

viewers where “their enjoyment is not so much of what will happen in a series, but how it happens” (*TV FAQ* 149); something audiences can proudly say they ‘get’, in contrast to the mass mainstream, having overcome the obstacles to familiarity put in their way.

Sometimes however this becomes more complicated and challenging. *Peep Show*’s aesthetic aims to unsettle its audience and constantly reminds them of their complicity with Mark and Jez through the point of view devices. An even starker example is *Nathan Barley*. *Nathan Barley* is a fascinating series in its comic approach because it seeks to confront its audience at every possible turn, which perhaps explains its relative lack of success. It was written by Chris Morris, together with cultural commentator Charlie Brooker and the show was based on an item on Brooker’s website *TV Go Home*. Morris is established as one of British comedy’s most combative talents through series such as *Jam* and *Brass Eye*, which pushed the very limits of how comedy could be presented on television. The show is set in the milieu of trendy Shoreditch dotcom companies and magazines, where the repellent titular figure of Nathan (Nicholas Burns) lords it over his self-regarding world, seemingly immune to any form of defeat or diversion from the pursuit of pleasure. The aesthetics of the show aped the Shoreditch world by being deliberately alienating and extreme; using frequent fast cutting and an ear-splitting sound design of computer generated sounds and dance music. This breaks up the pleasures of conventional sitcom viewing, marking it out as something that rejects those formal conventions and comforts. This might appear to make it appealing to the cutting edge younger demographic,

desired by Channel 4, who might be attracted by its rejection of traditional formulas. However the programme is also designed to be a repudiation of the values and tastes of that group. *Nathan Barley* is morally ferocious in its loathing of the Shoreditch culture and Nathan himself is given no redeeming features at all. The audience position is instead occupied by Dan Ashcroft (Julian Barrett) a jaded journalist, too weak to leave the scene but increasingly contemptuous of it. In episode two Ashcroft writes a piece called 'the rise of the idiots' bemoaning the vacuity of those around him. However the reaction of the 'idiots' is not to reflect on their failings or even to disagree with him; instead they acclaim Ashcroft as some kind of seer or truth-teller, all convinced the idiots are not them. At the climax Ashcroft ends up on a nightclub stage, forced to dress in a preacher's outfit but insisting that he is not a preacher, while a vast crowd bellows 'preacher man!' at his every word.

Nathan Barley is at war with its audience, attracting its trendsetting targets through their embrace of its cutting edge aesthetic and then forcing them to confront their own moral vacuum or taunting them for failing to recognise it. In episode five, even Nathan is terrified when he realises he had sex with an underage girl but ends up boasting about it when he realises he faces no opprobrium or sanction from his peers. Even the DVD package continues this abrasive relationship; it contains a booklet of 'artwork' from Nathan's website with the slogan "fucking with your head, yeah?" on the cover. In one sense this is aping the style of the site, in another it is making clear the nature of the series' negotiation with its audience.

Nathan Barley provokes confrontation through its aggressive tone combining style with content to a satirical effect. Conversely other sitcoms also produce discomfort and uncertainty in the viewer very differently through their blank, detached presentation; *Home Time* is a good example of this. The series as whole is filmed with a slow, unfolding pace using a detached single camera shooting long sequences of domestic interiors and Coventry streets. This creates a muted tone to the show; although there are frequent (very funny) jokes and characters with clear comic traits, they are not signalled explicitly as such to the audience; rather those watching have to identify the comedy almost counter to the elegiac, languorous mode of address.

'Blank Style', a naturalistic effect achieved through flat lighting, mobile camerawork and the other stylistic traits I have discussed, has become a common mode of sitcom presentation. It aims to increase the distance between viewer and text, to remove audiences from the comfort of a sympathetic connection to the characters to a more detached, empathetic response with space to consider our thoughts about what we are seeing. This space and distance can cause anxiety but it can create an opportunity for social discourse. Sennett suggests in his discussion of social co-operation that empathy is ultimately a more engaged and fruitful response, arguing that "the neutral, impersonal mask is one way to turn the actor outward, and so create a common space with the audience; complex co-operation needs to take that outward turn, to create a common space" (*Together* 246).

Blank style may be more challenging for the audience, taking away the security of sympathy but it may be the most appropriate mode to depict modernity and to combine style and content. Sconce, in his discussion of tone in recent American independent films argues that

[w]hether cultivated through strategies of disengagement or disjunction, 'blank' style in and of itself does not create 'tone'. When critics attack these films as ironic, cynical, fatalistic, or even nihilistic, they are responding to a tone produced by this style's application to larger narrational and thematic structures ('irony' 361).

Pye in his observations on tone points out that "like point of view, tone seems intuitively to belong to the 'how' of any discourse, the manner in which a story is told or an experience related, yet in analysis it rapidly becomes evident that the distinction between 'how' and 'what' is unsustainable" (29). The same ideas Sconce and Pye generate around films can be applied to the reception of British sitcoms. Two other series that use a 'blank' style applied to larger thematic structures are Jo Brand's show about geriatric nurses, *Getting On* and the political sitcom *The Thick of It*. Both might seem to offer comments on obvious satirical targets, respectively the National Health Service at its grassroots and the top levels of political power. Somehow the tone of the programmes goes further than this however. In *Getting On* the lunacy of management speak and conflicting organisational directives are certainly mocked but there is a deeper sense of the disconnection between the noble values enshrined by the NHS and the venal nature of the contemporary everyday life in which the nurses have to exist. In *The Thick of It* the machinations of government and opposition spin doctors are played out for satirical effect but the pervading

cynicism of both the programme and the characters within it adds up to a feeling of nihilism that, for better or worse, confronts the audience with their own complicity in the pantomime of power. The 'blankness' of and distance generated by these shows are necessary to communicate their view of their worlds.

Content

The most apparent shift in recent TV comedy – the content of the jokes and the subjects that the shows cover – illustrates the manner in which Pye's 'how' and 'what' of tone in sitcom combines (29). It is not just that contemporary sitcoms have more swearing, sex and drugs and breach old notions of 'bad taste' but that the 'blank' way in which this is presented leaves the audience to negotiate their own way through moral muddy waters. This move is inextricably linked to social change, a break up of agreed taboos and shared parameters of what is acceptable. That does not mean that these parameters are not keenly contested; comedy has been on the frontline of debates about taste and decency but there is considerably more licence in what sitcoms can say and how they can say it than twenty or thirty years ago. These social shifts have affected formerly rigid codes about what can be said on television, especially fictional situations that strive for some sort of authenticity. This has combined with the erratic move away from the mass viewing of the shared experience and the rise of niche audiences and multichannel viewing. The watershed, barring potentially offensive content from before nine pm, still survives but after this time there are few strictures in place, though occasional scandals still test the lines of acceptability.

Swearing is an interesting case in point. The use of swear words was traditionally one of the biggest causes of complaint on television before the 1990s – ‘clean-up TV’ campaigner Mary Whitehouse launched ferocious attacks on the repeated use of the epithet ‘bloody’ in *Till Death Us Do Part* (Sandbrook 460-61). This example shows the fluctuating state of public acceptability: the use of racial insults (however satirically used) in *Till Death Us Do Part* makes it hard to repeat it on television today, whereas the swearing that so bothered Whitehouse wouldn’t raise an eyebrow. The strictures of television sometimes had a direct impact on texts in terms of authenticity too. Prison-set *Porridge* remains one of the most respected and popular sitcoms of the 1970s but writers Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais were not allowed to recreate the realism of prison language so invented a new phrase of invective, ‘naffing’ or ‘naff off’ (*Omnibus*). This shifted the tone of the show by making this coded connection with the audience; viewers understood what the phrase represented and it made a gesture towards the grittiness that was understood to lie behind the comedy.

Now, however, swearing, to the strongest limits, is commonplace in all sitcoms after the watershed. The broadcast warning that it ‘contains strong language’ (or if the word ‘cunt’ is used, ‘very strong language’) is deemed to be sufficient notification for the audience. Partly, swearing exists in comedy as a badge of authenticity; if one wants to make comedy that arises from real life then in real life people swear. This follows social mores. While there are some situations in which swearing might still be taboo (as an insult to strangers or in

front of children perhaps) it is no longer the preserve of the barrack room or the factory as was the assumed wisdom forty years ago. For comedy to omit swear words in this landscape makes it appear evasive or escapist rather than existing in a recognisable reality. Certainly in the world of *Peep Show's* Jez, for instance, it would be hard to imagine a comedy that did not draw on his sustained use of 'fuck' in all situations. Partly swearing also has become an integral part of comedy because it is deemed to be funny. In *Peep Show*, Jez and Super Hans' constant swearing is part of their comic persona and part of that joke is on them; Jez's lack of imagination or wisdom is reflected in his belief that somehow swearing makes him radical or interesting. In a different way Mark's less frequent use of swearing is a mark of his frustration and lack of control in his life; his swear words are usually screamed in voiceover rather than real speech and are a comic rendition of his (and by implication our) fury at the nature of things. Swearing can also appear funny when it is inappropriate, creating the comedy of social embarrassment as the wrong word, at the wrong time, in the wrong place is used. *The League of Gentlemen* plays on this in a running gag involving casting the notoriously 'blue' comedian Roy 'Chubby' Brown (whose volcanic use of obscenity still renders him unbroadcastable even in today's climate) as the town mayor whose attempts at gravitas are always undermined by his compulsion to swear on every occasion (Hunt 50). Comic theorists like Jacobson (135-7) and Medhurst have championed the liberating force of Brown's use of obscenity, as others have concentrated on criticising his reactionary attitudes. Medhurst argues that he "finds ways of saying the unsayable through the

licensed space his commitment to obscenity has afforded him” (*National Joke* 189), suggesting that his interaction with his (live) audience is a game of dare. Swearing can have the function of lifting the lid off social decorum and opening up a space where text and audience are engaged in a mutually liberating dialogue about what people really think and feel. Recent hit *The Inbetweeners* does something similar within its group of teenage boys, each of them trying to up the ante through sexual boasting or insults aimed at the other group members. The audience pleasure comes from their gleeful destruction of the conventions of respectful discourse but crucially also the disparity between the priapian claims and apparent bravado of the main perpetrator Jay (James Buckley) and our knowledge of his absolute sexual failure and deep insecurity.

Although swearing can have this collective liberating pleasure, this can bring dangers to comedy. As Medhurst points out (*National Joke* 190-1) the fervid atmosphere of Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown’s shows can lead to the crowd roaring at attacks on anyone different from themselves. Swearing can also prove a route to steal easy laughs – rather in the way racial jokes were used in the weaker sitcoms of the 1970s. It can appeal to the lowest common denominator or in very real terms ‘lower the tone’ of the piece; the worst kind of BBC3 or Channel 4 late night sitcom (*Pete Vs Life* perhaps) can rely on the diminishing shock values of such words to try and ingratiate themselves with their target demographic rather than use swearing to enhance the comic possibilities of the text or to challenge, rather than reinforce, audience positions.

The use of sex in recent weaker shows can also create a tone that is both sneering and facile, rather like a more explicit version of the slightly sordid innuendo in unlamented populist hits of earlier times such as *On the Buses*. However many sitcoms have responded in perceptive and resonant, as well as funny, ways to a new sexual licence. The whole sexual landscape from which the comedy of recognition derives has changed so comedy is required to change with it. The statistics clearly show how dramatic the change has been and include a rise in the number of children born out of wedlock to over 40% in the UK in 2000, compared to 6% in 1960 and increases in the numbers of partners for both women and men as well in the divorce rate (Layard 78). The consequences of this shift are the subject of great debate amongst social theorists but it also has an effect on the comic operations of the text and the tone of the discourse with the audience. Sex in TV sitcom was, of course, governed by the same kind of moral restraint in terms of its depiction as swearing but it remained a staple of comic situations and character. The joke was frequently one of sexual frustration, of desires that were doomed never to be fulfilled. Sex was pursued but was usually foiled, couples would be interrupted in flagrante and passions were unrequited as (usually male) protagonists made fools of themselves trying to impress objects of lust that were largely out of their league. Alternatively, comedy was created through couples with mismatched libidos (most famously *George and Mildred*). The shared joke was that sex was something that most people wanted but knew they were unlikely to get. Social rules and long-standing mores, not to mention the fear of unwanted pregnancy, served as impediments to desire

that people understood only too well. The dawn of the sexual revolution in the late 1960s and particularly the early 1970s only served to emphasise this comic tone of complicity with the audience's awareness of the limits of desire and the pathos that came with the inevitability of failure in pursuit of sexual satisfaction. In *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* Bob and Terry are keenly aware of a new, 'free' sexuality that exists just out of reach. Terry dabbles in liaisons with local girls but finds it impossible to escape the prying censure of his community, the interruptions of his family or the interventions of their husbands (Wickham, *Likely Lads* 76). The new permissiveness confuses both Terry and especially Bob who, once married, finds himself torn between love for his wife and a usually thwarted compulsion to pursue other women so that "his sex drive is a force that seems to control him utterly, against his better judgment" (Wickham, *Likely Lads* 77). In the show the old moral strictures are still in force and the consequences of defying them, particularly for women, could be severe, yet individuals are more aware that their pleasure is being contained and temptation seems more available, even if permissiveness appears to be happening somewhere else.

In the intervening thirty or forty years those codes of restraint have weakened in the lives of many Britons and within the prevailing culture. Previously sitcoms derived humour from a repressive culture where sex was a subject of embarrassment that was approached, if at all, through innuendo, even with one's own partner (at least with the lights on). Comedy now has to comment on a much more open sexual culture where most desires can be served and where there are few external barriers to gratification. Importantly it is also a

culture in which the self has become the centre of debate and the personal has become political, what Bauman frequently denounces as “the miniature, diminutive realm of personal life-politics” (*Liquid Modernity* 52). In many new sitcoms the jokes about sex now come from the perceived inadequacies of the self and the inability to understand or negotiate one’s own desires, rather than the conflicts between what one wants and social restrictions on what one is allowed to have. Without the inevitability of marriage, the fear of pregnancy, the disapproval of family or community, comedy arises from a new sexual etiquette and the tone depends on the text’s dialogue with the audience about their own fears, desires and experiences. Dealing with sources of such anxiety demonstrates sitcom’s aptitude for television’s dialogical role of “working through” articulated by Ellis. Ellis argues television can fulfil this role because it is where “uncertainty can be entertained, and be entertaining” (*Seeing Things* 82). Sitcom’s relationship with its audience and its tonal range enables this “working through” to take place and to simultaneously challenge and entertain the audience.

The depiction of people’s sex lives and of long-term sexual relationships in contemporary sitcoms reflects new social norms. Popular hits like *Gavin and Stacey* or *Benidorm* have cheerfully promiscuous characters such as, respectively, Nessa (Ruth Jones) or the swinging couple Donald and Jacqueline (Kenny Ireland and Janine Duvitski) in the latter. Both these shows have regular gay characters that are not just the object of the joke, although jokes can still arise from the negotiation of difference by others. Subjects like masturbation,

pornography and fetishism are treated quite openly in sitcom; the comic potential for social embarrassment is still mined but taboos are disappearing and shame is now strictly relative. In 'Jeremy in Love' in *Peep Show* (6:4) Dobbie finds that Mark has accessed porn on a laptop she loaned him but shrugs off his embarrassment by saying that "it's shameful but so is the fashion industry". The ambitious Becky (Kerry Godliman) in the first episode of *Home Time* proudly tells Gaynor she has "had 270 sexual partners since '96 including webcam". It is understood that all sorts of sexual expression are possible and valid in the new sexual landscape with a few obvious exceptions. These unacceptable elements of sexuality are still explored by dark comedies in characters like the pederast 'Herr Lipp' (Steve Pemberton) in *The League of Gentlemen* or Alice's necrophiliac admirer Stefan (Patrick Monckenberg) in the 'Kiss of Death' episode of *Love Soup* (2:9).

While a number of programmes have contributed to the new frankness of tone in sexual matters in comedy, *Peep Show* has proved particularly important in showing and critiquing the sexual mores of new century Britain. Graham Linehan has said that "I don't think anyone in comedy had sex until *Peep Show* – it was always interrupted. Jeremy has sex but it's really soul destroying sex. I think it was a new area that hadn't really been explored before" (interview in *Peep Show and Tell*). Jeremy does have frequent sex with a number of women throughout the series; his soul is not usually conscious enough to think it is being destroyed but it's true that his sexual relationships don't usually work out well for him. On a number of occasions he is unable to deliver satisfaction (for instance

with self-assured music industry executive Callie (Niky Wardley) in 'Jeremy's Manager 5:5), although unlike Mark he isn't mortified with embarrassment at the fact. Jeremy as a comic character is based around his need for instant gratification at all times, as well as his inability to escape the moment; sex is another example used to illustrate the disparity between his belief in his own talent, whether musical or sexual and the reality of his ineptitude. Frequently his sexuality is opportunistic and overrides any loyalty to others, so he sleeps with Sophie, with Mark's sister Sarah (Eliza Bennett), at the end of series seven we see him being beaten up by Super Hans for making a pass at his new Japanese girlfriend and in series eight he decides to fall in love with Dobbie, Mark's girlfriend. Jez sees sex, like his music and his lack of job, as an essential part of his identity - the patina of cool that would make him worthwhile. Of course Jez's belief in his own liberation is mistaken and he is frequently brought down by romantic feelings that he is unable to fulfil. Unable to formulate feelings of love, his confusion leads to disastrous results. In 'Wedding' (2:6) he agrees to a passport marriage to his American girlfriend Nancy (Rachel Blanchard) and is initially, despite his protestations, unable to comprehend that it is purely an administrative manoeuvre. When the chance of happiness with Nancy might actually come to something later in the episode, he allows himself to be talked into infidelity, with predictably disastrous consequences, by his dreadful neighbour Toni (Elizabeth Marmur) who persuades him that adultery is part of everyday life today before demanding "my piece of pie". Jez's rare attack of "stupid honesty" sees him confess to Nancy and be swiftly jettisoned. His

relationship with Elena (Vera Filatova) in series six is interesting in that he gets a taste of his own sexual opportunism. The entirely self-directed Elena is even more motivated by instant gratification than Jez and is clearly using him as a diversion in her lesbian relationship with long-term lover Gail (Emily Bruni). Jez is driven to distraction by romantic as much as sexual desire but is unable to see that his affections are entirely misplaced.

Privy to Mark's thoughts, we know that he is as venal and self-interested as Jez but is just more self-conscious. Mark's long term pursuits of Sophie and Dobbie are akin to stalking at times but his sexuality always exists in association with anxiety, the fear that sex will lead to humiliation or make him vulnerable. When Mark achieves his romantic aims he becomes even more fearful and badly behaved. At the end of series three he agrees to propose to Sophie out of embarrassment. Having bought the ring he realises that he doesn't love her after all but when she finds it he feels he has to go through with the engagement. Unlike Jez's (equally fallacious) mantra of personal freedom, Mark is still bound by what he considers convention, the proper way to do things, whether or not they are emotionally dishonest. He is unable to tell Sophie of his feelings, only making them apparent at the ceremony itself in 'Wedding' (4:6) by hiding in the church at the ceremony but he then compounds his cowardice by insisting that the event continue when he finally appears. Likewise he destroys his promising relationship with Dobbie (whom he describes in 'Jeremy in Love', 6:3, as "the anxious, self-hating man's crumpet") by convincing himself that she doesn't care for him, generating a self-fulfilling prophecy. At the same time as apparently

being desperate for Dobbie to move in he almost has an affair with businesswoman Stephanie (Josephine Butler) in 'Big Mad Andy' (8:4), only deciding not to have sex with her at the last minute, having lied about his relationship status.

Mark's struggles, on the one hand, show his inability to cope with the freedoms that modernity offers – he would clearly be much more comfortable in the 1950s – but at the same time his feelings are representative of the modern condition under “the culture of the new capitalism’ or “liquid modernity”. A number of social theorists have looked at the question of relationships and sexuality as one of the defining examples of a more atomised social sphere. Zygmunt Bauman has been particularly concerned with the issue as a symptom of how the obsession with the personal actually weakens the position of the individual in society – as we have seen ‘personal-life politics’ are something he deplors. He analyses the modern dilemma over relationships in the following terms: “we are unsure how to make the relationships we desire; worse still, we are not sure what kinds of relationship we deserve” (*Identity* 62). He suggests that in the modern sexual landscape “we are inclined to beat relationships flat into the consumerist mode, the only one with which we feel secure and comfortable” (*Identity* 64) and that “our attitudes to human bonds tend to be painfully ambivalent, and the chances of resolving that ambivalence are nowadays slim” (68). Bob in *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* faced the same conflict between security and desire but forty years ago his situation was less ambivalent; for all his lusting after others, his future with Thelma was never really in doubt but, as

Mark discovers, life is just not that simple anymore. Certainly Bauman's view of modern relationships fits the experiences of Mark and Jez in *Peep Show* where "fear and desire fight to get the better of each other" (68) and the show gives a gloomy account of the possibility of happiness through sexual relationships in contemporary Britain. The access to Mark and Jez's inner thoughts as they engage with their lovers has an ironic, distancing effect on the tone of the programme but as Jeffrey Sconce identifies with his American indie films "behind their veneer of studied detachment, cultivated disaffection and ironic posturing, many... are extremely politicized and even rather moralistic" ('Irony' 352). *Peep Show* uses its target demographic's familiarity with ironic discourse to produce a strongly moralistic tone to what, on first glance, might seem to be an amoral landscape.

There is, though, an alternative view to Bauman's arguments about sexuality and relationships in modernity. Many would argue that the situation has improved immeasurably for the better since women are no longer trapped in loveless or abusive marriages with no prospect of divorce, gay men and lesbians can express their sexuality free of legal impediment and desire is no longer something that has to be repressed and seen as shameful. What Bauman terms "liquid love" (*Liquid Love*) and links to his economic and political analysis of modernity, Anthony Giddens sees more positively as "confluent love" (*Transformation* 202). Jeffrey Weeks is a particularly articulate opponent of Bauman's pessimism. He suggests that Giddens' "transformation of intimacy" is a triumph for freedom and democracy that is "overwhelmingly beneficial" (ix) and

that “we are living... in a world of transition, in the midst of a long, convoluted, messy, unfinished but profound revolution that has transformed the possibility of our sexual diversity and creating intimate lives” (3).

Weeks’ vision of modernity is reflected in the matter-of-fact treatment of sexuality across contemporary sitcom – still a source for anxiety, still morally complex but also free of the conformist and repressive norms of the past. Some sitcoms can even represent this more positive worldview in their comic address. In *Saxondale* Tommy’s relationship with his partner Mags is, despite Tommy’s faults, based on love and mutual desire. The show is sexually explicit, with references to their homemade pornography, Tommy’s fetish for the ‘larger lady’ and role play but Tommy resists infidelity (in the episode ‘Janet’) and the show makes a conscious effort to display a sexually active, happy relationship that is not based on conflict or anxiety. Ruth Jones, who plays Mags, has said that “I think the really nice thing about their relationship is that they really love each other and it’s not cynical” (interview in *Saxondale* Series 1 DVD extras). This has an effect on the tone of the series, Tommy is made more sympathetic through his relationship and the sense of detachment between text and audience is lessened as a result. *Love Soup* demonstrates this clearly too; despite its primetime BBC1 transmission it is notably sexually explicit and is themed around the condition of sexuality in modernity. There is an emphasis on the search for compatibility but an acknowledgment that this comes through sexual adventures and experimentation.

While swearing and sex are now established as accepted comic content in sitcoms, helping to define a tone between text and audience that gives a frank reflection of everyday twenty-first century realities, questions of taste and decency can still prove deeply disruptive and controversial. British society is, as Weeks suggests, still in a “world of transition” (3) and that means that arguments over the parameters of what is allowable can be very keenly fought. Comedy has been at the front line of this debate. Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering in their recent edited study of offence in humour argue that “it remains the case that while many people expect comedians to push at the accepted boundaries, take risks, attempt to shock us and shatter our illusions, they do not concede that this means comedians can do or say whatever they like, or that certain ethical lines should never be made, even if this is confined to individual choice or small group consensus” (16). This has proved to be the case, although the debate over what can be seen as funny has been a notable theme in mainstream public discourse over the past few years, with vociferous divergence of opinion.

Recent comic controversies have included comedian Frankie Boyle’s insults and jokes about disability on panel game shows and his series *Tramadol Nights* and particularly the ‘Sachsgate’ affair, when during a BBC Radio 2 programme comedian Russell Brand and presenter Jonathan Ross left messages on the answer phone of elderly comic actor Andrew Sachs about Brand’s sexual encounters with his granddaughter. The storm of protest over this broadcast in 2008 ignited a public discussion on what can and what should never be acceptable modes of comedy. A debate on news analysis show

Newsnight (28/10/2009) suggested that the boundaries of acceptability change as society changes; comedian Natalie Haynes argued both that “there are no jokes if there is respect for human dignity” and that from the comic practitioner’s point of view “if you think we have absolutes you are wrong”, as comedy was driven by the context and audience expectations. The debate has become both politically important – both Gordon Brown and David Cameron felt the need to comment on ‘Sachsgate’ – and politically complex, with left and right voices on both sides of the argument.

Certainly in much recent comedy there is an explicit attempt to engage with the parameters of what the audience might find acceptable. The popular sketch show *Little Britain* used stereotypes for laughs in a more uncomplicated way than had been the case for some time and also tried to shake up its mainstream viewers with recurring sketches that displayed gerontophilia and vividly recreated bodily functions (Lockyer, *Reading Little Britain*). Sitcoms have also sought to challenge their viewers on the limits of humour. The fictional constructs of their humour might mean there is less outrage than for a joke on a live broadcast or a panel show but there have still been moments in recent shows that have courted controversy. *The League of Gentlemen* has been a key text in this regard, as have programmes written by and starring Julia Davis. Comedies that seek to challenge notions of good taste attract viewers by doing so, engaging one set of audience members through the process of being rejected by others. This notion goes to the heart of the shift towards niche audiences but it is also true that, having identified an audience that enjoys and understands the

challenges in affronting good taste, some programmes choose to test the limits of their identification. Viewers who enjoyed the cheerful grand guignol and grotesque take on contemporary Britain in *The League of Gentlemen* may still have bridled at the character of 'Pop' a malignant, creepy patriarch reminiscent of serial killer Fred West (Steve Pemberton) or at the scene in 2:6 where pederast Herr Lipp (Pemberton again) buries alive the object of his desire, sixth former Justin. Leon Hunt refers to a DVD commentary in which League member Mark Gatiss "observes the studio audience's quietly shocked reaction" and suggests that "such material might explain why the second series started to lose viewers". At the same time, "for the cult viewer, the challenge is to find the comic within such disturbing material" (32).

At points in my central texts this process can happen too; the boundaries of taste are pushed to disconcert and test the audience, creating a tone that is deliberately unpredictable and provocative. A couple of canine examples are a case in point. *Peep Show's* core audience might happily deal with the sex and drug references in the show and even take on the satire about their own values but the scene in 'Holiday'(4:5), in which, through a series of unfortunate events and attempts to cover up embarrassment, Jez ends up eating a dog (called 'Mummy', no less) belonging to a girl he was pursuing might have proved a step too far. *Love Soup* was broadcast at primetime on a mainstream channel and is likely to have had a more mixed audience in age and opinions than the other programmes I am studying. It constantly nags at the comfort of its viewers however. A scene in 'Sophisticated Lady' (2:6) in which Alice's friend Millie

recounts an experience (which was depicted on screen) of being sexually harassed by a dog, which had belonged to a colleague who committed suicide – with the clear implication that there had previously been regular inter-species coupling - meant that it was included on a roll call of BBC affronts to decency by the *Daily Mail* (31/10/2008). Jerry Palmer has written that “excessive contentiousness produces offence instead of humour, excessive politeness produces boredom; one of the arts demanded of the comedian is the ability to tread this dividing line” (175). The negotiation of tone between text and audience is a dynamic and provocative process that in some contemporary sitcoms seeks at times to make the viewer conscious of the workings of tone and measure their own distance from the textual moment.

In their collection of essays about the limits of laughter, Lockyer and Pickering emphasise the possibility of offence over the positive potentialities of humour. Their contributors often choose obvious occasions or places, such as jokes on Ku Klux Klan websites (Billig 27-47), where ‘humour’ is clearly being deployed for malign ends. In their introduction Lockyer and Pickering deliberately pitch themselves against the libertarian tones of Jacobson’s iconoclastic but still useful book *Seriously Funny*, which argues that offence in humour is an important part of affirming human endurance and liberation from the tragedy of life. Jacobson sets out what he sees as

the first and last challenge to comedy. If you are so clever and can do so much, make us laugh at death. Because if you can’t, if you are unable to persuade us to go on laughing in the face of our universal fate, you have only ever been an evasion, a way of filling time, not conquering it (223).

This observation is valuable because it goes beyond merely stating the more contentious case (which Jacobson also does) that offence should always be allowable and stresses instead that comedy can and should aim to liberate the audience from their own fate by challenging their own darkest fears and values.

Misanthropy and Alienation

The third area in which 'dark humour' operates in contemporary sitcom is in its apparent misanthropy and sense of social alienation. Here Jacobson's challenge to comedy also applies. The structures of the narration, the uncertainty created by the removal of studio audience laughter and the situations in which characters find or create for themselves, often combine to offer a very bleak view of the way people behave to each other that fundamentally informs the tone of the programmes. This misanthropy, a disavowal of the optimistic potential of human interaction, can be seen both in relationships with family and friends and encounters with strangers.

These sitcoms are after all portraying a world in which there is a perceived crisis in how we relate to one another and old certitudes and ties have passed. For Sennett modernity is built around "an ideal self willing to let go, to surrender possession" (*Culture* 41) and "this idealised person eschews dependency; he or she does not cling to others" (*Culture* 46). Bauman argues that now "family, workmates, class, neighbours are all too fluid to imagine their permanence and credit them with the capacity of reliable reference frames" (*Liquid Modernity* 183).

In *Peep Show* family is no refuge for the tribulations of modern life for Mark and Jeremy. The Christmas dinner scene in 'Seasonal Beatings' (7:5) is a study in excoriating embarrassment and simmering loathing. This is the first encounter – over seven series – we have had with Mark's parents, although his ruthless, self-obsessed solicitor sister Sarah has been seduced by Jeremy in series three. Mark's father, Dan, (Clive Merrison) is a monstrous portrait of ageing bitterness who tries to dominate his family through sarcasm, mockery and fits of bullying anger. The insertion of the essentially honest and good-hearted Dobbie into the equation highlights the alienation and lack of warmth between Mark and his family. Dan gives Mark a second-hand paper shredder as a Christmas present and ensures that the occasion is based entirely around his own whim, sneering about 'elf and safety' and supposed political correctness while insisting that cauliflower is a traditional part of Christmas dinner. He demeans Dobbie, asking "why don't you put a muzzle on your woman Marco?" Finally she leaves, telling the Corriganes that "this has all been horrible". Mark fails to defend her until she has departed; when his father remarks "good riddance to bad rubbish, you can do a lot better than that Marco" Mark finally turns on him and, in a display of impotent rage, puts his father's Christmas dinner through the shredder. Close family ties are noticeably absent in many recent sitcoms (though not all – *The Royle Family* and *Gavin and Stacey* are obvious exceptions). Even family sitcoms like *Outnumbered* emphasise dysfunction within the family dynamic; mum Sue (Claire Skinner) has a conflicted relationship with her sister (Samantha Bond) and dad Pete (Hugh Dennis) is unable to talk about

anything with his mother (Rosalind Ayres) who regards him as rather boring. The idea of the family as a source of pleasure or of uncomplicated love is not one that greatly sustains contemporary comedy.

More emphasis is placed on friendship groups in recent sitcom. Robert D. Putnam suggests that “friendship may actually have gained importance in the modern metropolis. The passage in popular culture from *I Love Lucy* and *All in the Family* to *Cheers*, *Friends* and *Seinfeld* exalts informal social ties” (96). The latter shows lay down the template for the comedic dynamic of friendship in the late 1980s and the 1990s but rather than the hugging and learning prototype of *Friends*, British sitcoms have followed the model of *Seinfeld* in its picture of friends as a mutual excuse for one’s own faults in an aggravating and indifferent world. Mark and Jez in *Peep Show* are supposed to be best friends, yet there is little warmth in their relationship. Each is very quick to use the other to their own advantage or to regard them as an obstacle to their own advance. In the disastrous Christmas dinner Jez discovers that the Corrigan’s adjective for anything done badly is that it is has been “jezzed up”. In ‘Funeral’ (1: 6) Jez lunges at Sophie, despite being fully aware of Mark’s adoration and tries to claim that not only does Mark not love or like her but that he draws offensive cartoons of her. Such treachery is the everyday reality of their ‘friendship’. In “New Year’s Eve’ (7:6), when it looks as if they will finally stop living together after Mark asks Dobbie to move in with him, Jez suggests in a moment of reflection that “we’ve always been amazing mates but also lead weights dragging each other down”.

Friendship, rather than being a substitute for the family, turns out to be just as problematic, riven with tensions and simmering resentments as family ever was.

The limitations of friendship are not just a comment on a crisis of masculinity however. In *Home Time* Gaynor returns to Coventry after twelve years away. She expects the discomfort of living at home again, despite the support of her gentle Dad (Philip Jackson) but seeing her friends again proves even more traumatic. In her first encounter with former best friend Mel (Hayley-Anne Standing), Mel rewrites their past; when she starts calling her 'GG' Gaynor reminds her she has never been called that and earns the riposte "I can call you what I like, you bastard traitor". When she is reunited with the aggressively aspirant Becky, Gaynor is seen as a cosmopolitan threat to Becky's domination of the group and so is belittled as having her "tail between her legs and not a starter home to show for it". Fourth group member Kelly (Rebekah Staton) has drug problems and has struggled with bereavement but is indulged because she offers a reminder that things could be worse for the others. Real sympathy is in short supply; she finds out in episode four that the others thought she had 'milked it' when her mother died. Instead of being a source of support *Home Time's* friends primarily cause anxiety for each other. The confusion of intimacy, of the ties that bind, is something that the show does supremely well. It asks: how can you express love in life today? and concludes that no one knows. The women – now at the brink of being thirty – think of unconditional love as a problem, not an answer. In episode four Gaynor admonishes her Dad for giving her "no sense of consequence"; when he says he just wants her to be happy she retorts "yes,

happy – like a jester” while Becky claims “my dad gave me everything money could buy – he created a monster”. In the world of the show there is no sense of understanding how successful interactions can be maintained; all there is, is the loyalty of affiliation to cling onto, as when Gaynor is forced to explain to Kelly why neither of them can leave Coventry; it’s because “you’re needed here, you’ll make friends but there no history, there’s no one to say I know the bones of you. Plus it’s really pricey and everyone laughs at your accent”.

Sennett argues in *Respect* that “the acts which convey respect –the acts of acknowledging others – are demanding and obscure” (59). If family and friends prove deficient, creating a pessimistic tone within the modern sitcom, then the view the programmes propagate of the interaction between strangers is predictably even bleaker. As Sennett implies, the act of knowing and responding to encounters with people you do not yet know is fraught with too many uncertainties to be a comfortable process. Bauman suggests that now “strangers embody risk” (*Liquid Life* 76) – a challenge to what you know and imagine about one self – they may require something of us that we do not wish or are unable to deliver. In *Bowling Alone* Putnam makes the distinction between ‘bonding’ and bridging’; bonding being relations with others like yourself and bridging forming connections across difference to create a cohesive whole: “bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD40” (23) It is ‘bridging’ that is in particular crisis for as Putnam argues:

we have invented new ways of expressing our demands that demand less of us...we are less likely to give strangers the benefit of the doubt. They, of course, return the favour (183).

Characters in the shows routinely dismiss everyone whom they believe is not like themselves. “The idiots” to Dan Ashcroft in *Nathan Barley* are everyone else. Jez refers to the public beyond his immediate purview as “cock-munchers”, those exercised in an endless pleasing of others to conform. Tommy Saxondale tries to negotiate his way through a life in which no one else seems to measure up to his values; in ‘Cockroaches’ his daughter Stevie admonishes him by telling him that “all these people that you look down on – they’re just doing a job, just like you”. In truth, though, Tommy wants to find common cause; he is a believer in society and the collective good as long as he can retain his individuality. He tells off his assistant Raymond (Rasmus Hardiker) in the same episode for expressing trepidation when they go to a job on a rough council estate, reminding him “they are just people mate, imperfect like the rest of us”. Tommy embodies a modern conflict; he doesn’t enjoy the engagement with people like his corporate neighbour Jonathan and part of him craves the anonymity of the atomised new world but he mourns the principles of the ‘good society’. That world of shared interests and aspirations is not one that seems possible in these sitcoms though. Now, as Bauman suggests, “the meeting of strangers is an event without a past. More often than not it is also an event without a future” (*Liquid Modernity* 95). People do still choose to engage with strangers but now this is often online – in a controlled environment where some of these insecurities of who we are can be disguised, or at least less evident. There is a case that new communities and

new, valid, ways of social interaction may be possible virtually and certainly the public have enthusiastically embraced social life online. In contrast to his thoughts on television, Putnam is relatively optimistic about the potential of the Internet but in sitcom the idea of the digital utopia and interconnectivity is not seen as convincing. Mark and Jez are always online but only for the detached gratification of porn or computer games. The computer dates recounted in *Love Soup* (for instance in 'Dream Twister' 2:3) are mired in misunderstanding and offer only encounters with other people's dysfunctions or madness. Our fear of strangers and the discomfort they provoke does not mean that we are confident in our isolation and do not care what they think. On the contrary social theorists see contemporary life as obsessed with this process. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett argue that "at the core of our interactions with strangers is our concern at the social judgements and evaluations they might make; how do they rate us, did we give a good account of ourselves? This vulnerability is part of the modern psychological condition" (42).

Modern sitcoms might seem, from this reading of their tone, to be thoroughly misanthropic, presenting a society in which all that people have in common is their alienation from each other. Scone in his piece on indie films quotes Manohla Dargis who decries "the new nihilism... that encourages our sadism, our scorn and worst of all, our total disinterest toward the world, other human beings and just maybe our selves" ('Irony' 349). Certainly nihilism can sometimes be the impression one can get from the self-serving spin doctors of *The Thick of It* or the scenes in Julia Davis's *Nighty Night* where Davis's

psychopathic Jill torments MS sufferer Cath (Rebecca Front). However in most cases tone is more complicated than that. Even in Davis's most extreme work, the one-off pilot *Lizzie and Sarah*, the unyieldingly abject portrait of contemporary life is fuelled by anger at the cruelty the two central middle aged female characters face and their path of vengeance is meant to represent something more than nihilism. In other shows there is empathy and the possibility of redemption for characters, however flawed. Famously *The Office* allows David Brent to achieve the possibility of happiness and *Saxondale's* tone makes us retain affection for Tommy in spite of his pomposity. In the final episode, instead of retreating into his sense of anger and entitlement, Tommy is forced to concede that it might not be the best way forward. He is redeemed by being a "good man, with good values" (Interview with Coogan on GMTV *Saxondale* Series 1 DVD extra) who ultimately understands his own weakness enough to overcome it.

Old Tones and New Tones

One obvious question to ask is how much of this tone is new and exclusive to TV comedies of the last decade or so? It would be a mistake to suggest that the idea of a 'dark' side to sitcom is entirely new in Britain. There have been elements of cruelty, challenges to conventional values and mores, pathos and even tragedy in British sitcoms since their inception. Much of this has been tied up in notions of a British sense of humour that is sardonic, ironic and self-depreciating. The debates on humour and nationality are documented thoroughly in Medhurst (*National Joke*) and explored in studies of the British (and

especially English) character by commentators such as Kate Fox. Brett Mills

argues that:

the ways in which...comedy is presented, and the kinds of topics which are acceptable for humour, feed into the ways in which cultures make sense of themselves. That is, the preponderance of black humour and the repeated intermingling of serious and comic subjects without clear distinction between the two can be seen as representative of a particularly British way of responding to events (*Television Sitcom* 9-10).

Comedy feeds on and then can become representative of, certain shared values or ways of looking at the world that feel distinctively British. British audiences might feel that some sense of themselves is articulated by the class rivalries and gentle mockery of authority within the platoon in *Dad's Army* or the mundane aspirations and delusions of the bed-sit dwellers of *Rising Damp* and relate to the stoicism exhibited by both these sets of characters. In both shows the sense of the serious – a war going on, class prejudice, loneliness, failure to live up to what one would like to be, impoverishment – comfortably co-exists with the jokes and even makes them funnier by providing a context in which they can work more effectively.

Sitcoms in Britain from the 1950s to the 1990s are far from being light in tone and evasive in their approach to the contradictions and pressures of their society or in dealing with the difficulties of human interaction. Many of their protagonists are uneasy and unhappy in their surroundings and are brought low by their own failings. Hancock's pretensions are shown as laughable and in episodes such as 'The Poison Pen Letter' he is forced to see them stripped away and confront his own isolation. Harold Steptoe's tragedy is not just that he is kept

in an emotional prison by his father but that he knows, as we do, that for all Harold's decency and toil his malevolent father is more intelligent and more capable than he is. When in 'Loathe Story' Albert tells him that "you're useless, you're a scrub-out" it is all the more painful for containing a kernel of truth. *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin* charts Reggie's descent into self-hatred and disgust at what his life has become but his attempts to change it founder on the iniquities of society; his 'grot' shops prove wildly popular rather than demonstrating the emptiness of the system to a public grateful at their own salvation. As I noted earlier, the subject of failure was then, as it still is now, integral to British humour and how sitcom works as a genre. By dealing with the failure of a character or group of characters, a tone is established that allows a resonant reading of the text through empathy and recognition of one's own situation, placed in a context where the reward of laughter enables the audience to be "consoled" (as Ellis would put it; *TV FAQ* 13) by the revelation that comedy delivers what Mast describes as the understanding that "we are all human and mortal and fallible; that existence is irrational; and that we have merely invented the reasons that keep us going" (341).

Rigsby's pursuit of Miss Jones (Frances de la Tour) in *Rising Damp* is rendered comic not just by his pratfalls and blunders but by the audience's knowledge of his snobbery, meanness and desperate insecurity. In turn, the comedic value is enhanced by Miss Jones's own loneliness, overwhelming sexual frustration, reduced circumstances and ferociously retained respectability. The humour of the situation revolves around the fundamental sadness of their

existence expressed through Rigsby's unfulfilled feelings for Miss Jones and her (entirely correct) reading of her landlord as a creep who is unworthy of her, coupled with her own unrequited desire for fellow lodger Philip (Don Warrington). While this situation is mined for comic effect, its sadness and resonance is understood through the audience's own experiences and becomes a vicarious form of consolation.

There are, then, certainly continuities between past and present and contemporary sitcoms draw heavily on a tradition established by earlier programmes. While I acknowledge these continuities it is clear that there has been a shift in tone because there has been a shift in context. The difference in the operations of the individual in society inevitably leads to a different reading of tone in texts by the audience. Programmes are bound to reflect this shift and to react to the audience expectations that arise from it. Whether sitcoms merely reflect what is around them or articulate their own vision of modernity is an important question underlying contemporary comedy. Some recent sitcoms seek to raise laughs from their particular diagnosis of social ills and I will consider this at the end of the chapter with an analysis of an episode of *Love Soup*, a series that I believe attempts to do so by combining familiar comic tropes with a complex and deliberately provocative tone.

The continuities in tone between old and new sitcoms exist both through comic structures and the use of characters within them. There are, for instance, clear parallels between *Peep Show* and *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* (Wickham, *Likely Lads* 81-82). Both shows feature long-term male friendships at

their heart, relationships in which one man is determined to conform to social conventions and the other to rebel against them. The tone in each show is satirical of both men's values and aspirations and the comic set-ups rely on their inability to live up to their own much vaunted principles. Bob chases women while pompously upholding his married status, just as Mark yearns for respectability while jilting his bride at the altar. Likewise Terry plays the righteous working man while avoiding any possibility of employment, just as Jez sees himself as a renegade spurning 'straight ' society. Their faults and weaknesses create situations and crises from which they have to try and extricate themselves with varying degrees of failure.

Yet, despite such similarities and influences between the older programme and its successor, there are also distinct differences in the tone of the shows and in the way in which the audience reads the comedy. The greater licence that allows us to watch the characters swear, take drugs and have sex has something to do with this but it goes much deeper, to the different social contexts in which they are situated. This means that the resonance of both the comedy and the serious moments and ideas that underpin it are to be interpreted differently. The work of social theorists is a useful guide to understanding the tonal shifts that arise from this transformed context. Richard Sennett's analysis of the move from dread to anxiety (*Culture* 53) enables an effective framework in which to consider this change because it is in the light of this anxiety, an uncertainty about what will happen, that the new tone is understood and read; after all, as Sennett points out, "those who prosper in this milieu have a high tolerance for ambiguity"

(*Culture* 50). In *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* Bob and Terry exist in a clearly ordered and defined world, a world that is certainly changing fast and is at the beginning of a course that will lead to 'liquid modernity' but it is still informed by a set of agreed principles. In the lads' case these are dictated by the values of provincial, industrial Britain: of class ties, a strict moral code based on marriage, a communal solidarity, a national self-image of superiority and the expectation of jobs in life in which delayed gratification will deliver rewards. Both Bob and Terry sometimes rail against these strictures and the programme discusses the challenges that are being made upon them by the sexual revolution, de-industrialisation, unemployment and greater social and geographic mobility but they are still very much in place (Wickham, *Likely Lads*).

Sitcom and “the Runaway World”

By the time *Peep Show* started broadcasting in 2003 these values had largely lost their currency and their relevance. Mark and Jez exist in a confusion about the rules and requirements of emotional and sexual commitment and do not inhabit any kind of recognisable community – certainly not one in which they have any ties. Class most certainly still exists but no longer has the clear dividing lines or social influence it used to. Mark and Jez are middle-class and exist in a middle-class sort of world but they are not able to gain any sense of identity or strength from it in the way that Bob and Terry do from their working-class roots. In fact they have very few valued or fixed references to call upon at all; Brett Mills argues that this

results... in a complete absence of any moral code that might be based on their own ethical standpoint or a personal expression of what they feel is right or wrong. Mark assumes that everything he does or feels is socially wrong, and so measures the correctness of all his actions against the opinions and responses of those around him ("Paranoia" 58).

Audiences respond to this view of modernity because they recognise it – and they, too, struggle with developing an ethical sense of self in a world that does not offer this kind of clarity. There was plenty wrong with the codes of the past and *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* does not shy away from making both comic and serious points about the stifling conformity, self-righteous small-mindedness, social hypocrisy, sexism and the dread of lives mapped out ahead with no prospect of deviation. However these critiques are made within a coherent society with tensions and disagreements but also a degree of security and a framework that, at least, offers the possibility of an easier life with a clearly understood set of rights and responsibilities and ties to family, partner, friends and community. Mark and Jez float free but adrift within society; in 'Jeremy Makes It' (2:2) Mark tells us in voice-over that "it's the 21st century and no one likes each other anymore" - as Bauman argues, "contemporary fears, anxieties and grievances are made to be suffered alone" (*Liquid Modernity* 148). Ulrich Beck describes this process as part of the "daily struggle" of "living your own life in a runaway world" ("Living your own Life" 164), a quest he considers inevitable and broadly positive but which contains many perils as "the space left behind as once dominant certainties lose their power becomes a junkyard for the wreckage of people's own lives" (165).

Beck's work is useful in understanding how "the space left behind" affects the reading of tone in current sitcoms by the contemporary audience. Beck's concept of the "runaway world" ("Living your own Life" 165) functions in a similar way to Sennett's "culture of the new capitalism" or to Bauman's "liquid modernity". The notion of "the runaway world" has also been explored by Anthony Giddens (*Runaway World* 5) but his reading is more concerned with global socio-economic developments on a grand scale. Beck is interested in the consequences of "the runaway world" for individuals, offering a sense of how the audience for sitcoms might experience the pressures of modernity in their own lives as they attempt to "live a life of one's own" (164). To acknowledge these pressures the tone of the shows needs to be harder and darker as the comedy inhabits that "junkyard for the wreckage of people's own lives" and the audience recognise (and learn to laugh at) their own proximity to this "junkyard". Beck's analysis governing the realities of wanting to "live your own life" (165) also defines how tone can be navigated in modern texts and how that might be different from what has gone before. He suggests for instance that "failure becomes personal failure" ("Living Your Own Life" 167) and that this "is a culturally binding mode of attribution" (167). Terry blames his problems on class and knows that many others would share his analysis; there is no such notion of social forces beyond the self offered to Mark and Jez. "The runaway world" gives the impression of an ever-shifting contingent mode of living and Beck sees "the choosing, deciding, shopping human being" (165) as someone who has to make a continual set of judgements in the empty space vacated by those 'dominant

certainties' about who they are, creating "do-it-yourself biographies" (166) and what they think about those choices. This is necessary because "your own life is a reflexive life" (170). Tone, then, is negotiated in the light of this "daily struggle" and thus reflects the anxieties of modernity by creating anxiety and uncertainty in turn, within the reading of the texts. If the audience's lives are now lived without recourse to a strong set of shared values or widely agreed views on the workings of society, one might think that tone would become less important, that it would simply be a myriad of personal readings of jokes that would no longer be able to derive strength from audience recognition as *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* or *Dad's Army* did. However I don't believe that this is what has happened and would argue that tone is more crucial than ever. This is because as Beck argues, "paradoxically enough, a new immediacy develops in the relationship between the individual and society, an immediacy of disorder such that social crises appear as individual and are no longer – or are only very indirectly – perceived in their social function" (167). Thus viewers relate the tonal address to their own circumstances, even if they don't see it as part of a social whole.

Contemporary sitcoms reflect and represent the tensions of 'the runaway world' and are a site where those anxieties are absorbed and recognised by the audience. Even theorists like Beck, Giddens and Weeks who, unlike Sennett and Bauman, believe that social changes and a more fluid way of life are ultimately changes for the better, acknowledge that along with freedom comes fear, alienation and confusion. Individuals can still end up in Beck's "junkyard" or experience "personal meaninglessness – the feeling that life has nothing

worthwhile to offer" (Giddens, *Modernity* 9) or feel their existence is "convoluted" and "messy" in Weeks's "world of transition" (3). How, then, are these texts seen as being funny? If they communicate such a bleak view of life and the comic signals that guided the audience for sitcoms in earlier periods have disappeared then how can comedy be produced from this material?

Yet, despite their mordant analysis of modern life, many of these programmes remain funny and their primary purpose as texts is still to make their audience laugh. It is just that to do so within "liquid modernity" is a complex process. I have already discussed the importance of resonance and the possibilities of liberation from the pressures of life that even, perhaps indeed most particularly, the darkest comedy can offer. Here I will consider how recognition and expectation "work through" for comic effect and I will analyse two concepts that have always existed within British sitcom but have taken on a greater emphasis over the last decade or so: irony and embarrassment.

Within their aesthetics, despite the shifts described earlier, texts still retain comic signs that indicate to audiences that they should recognise the comic potential of a situation or character and expect to find what is about to happen funny. Sometimes this can occur through personality traits, especially in characters that seem somehow representative of attitudes within contemporary culture. The appearance of Becky in *Home Time* for instance is always signalled as comic because of her inappropriate aggression and determination to dominate the group. The first encounter between her and Gaynor on the latter's return in episode one is built up by Mel as a test of whether Gaynor will ever be accepted

back in to the fold. At an arranged meet in a pub Gaynor is ushered into the garden to face Becky who, sitting in judgment on a children's climbing frame, demands back a coat that was borrowed twelve years earlier before impressing on Gaynor her own success: 'I'm doing more here than you could do anywhere – and right here in Cov". Once Gaynor is accepted, the woman who had taken her place in the friendship group is summarily dismissed. The comedy comes from the extremity of Becky's words and actions and her monstrous insecurity masquerading as self-regard, as well as her encapsulation of a new sense of thrusting, ruthless self-promotion within British culture. The audience is clearly encouraged to recognise this through the disparity between the actuality of the situation and the character's overreaction to it and through the terms of reference she chooses to employ, such as her emphasis on ancient slights and her insistence that she can control the world by conquering Coventry. Once we meet Becky we read her and her boasts as comic, despite her cruelty and meanness.

All new sitcoms, however 'dark' or blank in address, still encourage the audience to expect jokes or at least obviously comic situations. As an audience for comedy we adjust our expectations to particular types of comic tone so things become funny within that context. In a show like *Saxondale* or *Roger and Val Have Just Got In* this can be based around the mundane minutiae of domestic living; conversely in *Psychoville* it can be mass-murder or torture. If the scenes in the latter suddenly appeared in the former it would disrupt the reading of comic tone beyond repair; in a show like *Psychoville*, which emphasises extremity and grotesquery, it can form part of the "comic climate".

If as an audience we inhabit this “runaway world” of “the culture of the new capitalism” then we are familiar with its situations and absurdities, which create comic signals we can recognise. The recent series *Twenty Twelve* worked in this way. In many respects the series was very formulaic in its adherence to new comedy tropes. It was a mock docusoap that had a voice-over explaining events and characters addressing the camera; there was no studio audience and lots of handheld shots as the show followed a fictional organising department for the (real) forthcoming Olympics in London. Yet the show was still funny because of its tone. It satirised experiences that many audience members working in large organisations or at least dealing with them understand. The trials of the team and boss Ian Fletcher (Hugh Bonneville) in dealing with a tick-box culture based on rhetoric rather than results; the portrayal of Siobhan Sharp, the boss of PR firm ‘Perfect Curve’ (Jessica Hynes) who speaks entirely in upbeat clichés and the inevitability of the failure of ill-thought through plans brought a set of comic expectations to every situation, however apparently predictable. The insistence that sustainability was different from legacy, the determination by Fletcher to spin every defeat into some kind of triumph with the words “so that’s all good”, were repetitive comic rhythms that could be enjoyed by the audience who read a comic tone of light, bemused but pointed and sardonic satire on contemporary Britain and its operations. The tone remains constant and made a detached, wry address to the viewer that once it had been identified could be read relatively comfortably.

Irony and Awkwardness

Marshall Berman wrote that “modern irony animates so many great works of art and thought over the past century; at the same time it infuses millions of ordinary people’s everyday lives” (14). Irony has been seen as an integral part of the contemporary “comic climate” and has become an ever increasingly important mode of address. While Britons have sometimes claimed irony as a tone that is nationally specific - usually a claim meant to contrast with a perceived inability to read irony in the USA (Jeffries, Pegg) - it has been extensively employed in both Britain and America over the past couple of decades and in both cultures has caused controversy in its application to comedy. If one is reading a text ‘ironically’ you are actively counter-reading what may be being shown on screen or at the very least understanding that what is being said or done is not to be taken literally or sincerely. Thus the proclamations and lifestyle of Alan Partridge are read ironically as comedy; the audience understands that Alan’s own jokes are not meant to be funny rather his words are the subject of the joke, as are his expressed tastes and desires. If you really think that being allowed to shop after hours at Tandy electronics, as Alan boasts, is genuinely something to aspire to then you are not likely to find the sitcom that funny. Sconce suggests that “the entire point of ironic address is to ally oneself with sympathetic peers and to distance oneself from the vast ‘other’ audience” (“Irony” 352). While it’s not quite the ‘entire’ point, certainly the notion of being ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ the joke is very important. The negotiation of irony can be complex and the existence of an ironic meaning can be keenly contested. The personas of Ali

G, Borat and Bruno adopted by Sacha Baron Cohen are an obvious case in point; they generated a public discourse which centred on the extent of ironic intention.

To attempt irony is to take a risk – one might be misunderstood or, if the comedy is not sufficiently skilled, then ironic meanings might be closed off from the audience. This can be illustrated by analysing two recurring characters adopted by Matt Lucas in his sketch shows. The racist and abusive slimming club leader Marjorie Dawes in *Little Britain* is clearly demarcated within a comic tone; the audience has to try very hard to read her comments about her Asian club member 'straight' because the tone of the sketches undercuts the opinions. The joke is on Marjorie herself, not the objects of her scorn. However, in the series *Come Fly with Me*, Lucas's character 'Precious Little', a Jamaican woman who minds a coffee stall at the airport, fails to support an ironic reading. Lucas is blacked up, which doesn't help matters but the running joke is that the woman is lazy and makes any excuse to close the stall. There isn't really an ironic reading that is possible here; the only way it can be thought funny, other than perhaps through the exaggerations of Lucas's own performance, is if a viewer actually really thinks that black people are likely to be lazy. *Come Fly with Me* shows the limits and consequences of failure for irony. It ends up being as bad as vilified sitcoms of the past, such as *Love thy Neighbour*, which at least used real black actors.

Sconce's essay on irony as a discourse in American independent films outlines the debate between those who see irony as a retreat from meaning and

those, such as himself, who see ironic discourse as one appropriate to understanding how self and society in the modern world operate. He argues that “all irony may confuse issues of tone and perspective, but no form of irony is truly disengaged from its material” (“Irony” 352). The films he analyses aim to detach the audience from what they are seeing and make them reflect on what it might mean. He suggests that this works because it is resonant for a large section of the audience who “find this to be the most compelling voice through which to intervene in the contemporary cultural, artistic or political terrain” (353).

In “liquid modernity”, where codes are opaque and anxieties about how to “live your own life” (Beck, “Living Your Own Life” 164) colour the experience of the audience, it makes sense to have those ambiguities represented on screen. In comic terms the ironic address now allows the audience to confront and laugh at their own anxieties. Back in 1982, Andy Medhurst and Lucy Tuck wrote that “comedy does not deal with the uncomplicatedly positive in any sphere but with manageable qualities of upheaval and disruption” (52). In a world in which the potential for upheaval and disruption has greatly increased, irony, for all the possibility of its failure and its potential pitfalls, such as smugness, snobbery or exclusivity, can offer a comic tone that allows space to reflect on that disruption.

Another central aspect of comic tone in recent sitcoms has been embarrassment or awkwardness. Humour arises from the display of awkwardness by a character or within a situation and the result is funny partly because our responses are heightened by the embarrassment we feel on seeing this happen. It relies on a feeling of empathy towards the discomfort of the

character but laughs come from the audience's knowledge of the gap between the character's actions and reactions and an appropriate reading of the social situation on screen. The comedy of embarrassment has a long tradition within British sitcom. For instance *Fawlty Towers* plays heavily upon the embarrassment engendered by Basil's inability to judge what appropriate behaviour might be in particular situations, seen in episodes such as 'The Hotel Inspector' and 'The Germans'. Characters like Basil or Rigsby are desperate to be accepted but prove incapable of achieving their goal. However the anxieties of "liquid modernity" create much greater scope for awkwardness because the appropriate course of action can be much harder to discern.

Much contemporary comedy has dealt with characters that create embarrassment by their misreading of social and moral codes about how people should deal with difference; especially to do with race, sexuality or disability. *The Office* notably created comedy from David Brent's failure to understand the implications of this without causing offence or being patronising. The awkward moments in the show allow the audience to laugh at the disbelief of those around him and his own inability to understand what he has done wrong. This represents a comic response to the audience's uneasiness around 'political correctness'; it is not that viewers are necessarily against the goal of avoiding offence but that they are anxious that they may not be socially skilled enough to avoid making a mistake while negotiating the minefield of modern manners. *The Office* offered the vicarious pleasure of seeing Brent fail to do this instead, with his inept

handling of questions of race, disability and other disputed areas of public discourse. This 'comic climate' has arisen because according to Sennett:

inequality can breed unease, unease breed a desire to connect... this emotional chain of events complicates the precept to 'show respect' for someone else lower down the social or economic ladder. People may feel that esteem yet fear to seem condescending and so hold back...the anxiety of privilege may sharpen awareness of those who have less –an anxiety one would not easily declare (*Respect* 22).

The tendencies within contemporary culture to deny the fact of inequality serve to heighten the comic possibilities of these situations as the truth of its existence is laid bare.

Awkwardness may be painful, both for those suffering it and those observing it but it also has an attraction to the audience. Adam Kotsko has written an interesting recent analysis of the role of awkwardness in modern life, claiming that "if the 1990s were the age of irony, our just expired decade (the noughties) will surely go down in history as the age of awkwardness" ("Bond"). Kotsko suggests that "the experience of awkwardness itself is intrinsically social... (it) creates a weird kind of social bond. And it's a good thing, because otherwise we'd increasingly have no social bond at all" (*Awkwardness* 9). He cites *Peep Show* as one of his main sources of evidence ("Bond"). He sees awkwardness as a positive result of modernity and as an active "breaking of social norms" that "can bring us joy", offering the audience a better alternative to the stability, conformity and restrictions that have been removed from everyday life. He argues that "awkward humour is more than entertainment – it is a lesson in solidarity" ("Bond"). To Kotsko the shared qualities of awkwardness offer a

social form of “working through” of our anxieties: “awkwardness will endure as long as we remain human because it is what makes us human... it is the peculiar kind of grace that allows us to break down and admit that we are nothing more or less than human beings who will always be stuck with each other, and more importantly, to admit we are glad of it” (*Awkwardness* 88). Awkwardness creates the empathy that Sennett senses we need to co-operate together that creates “its own emotional reward” (*Together* 22).

Case Study: *Love Soup* –‘The Reflecting Pool’

This chapter concludes with a detailed look at an episode from one of my central texts – *Love Soup*. *Love Soup* is particularly interesting in its use of tone, with a complex interplay between the comic and the serious and in its negotiation with its audience through mode of address. The series was written by David Renwick, who made his name with the success of *One Foot in the Grave*. While that show appealed to a very wide audience and looked very much like a traditional sitcom with its studio audience and suburban setting, Renwick made extensive use of complex story structures and narrational devices. He also experimented with tone. Some episodes of *One Foot in the Grave* would feature sudden shifts from farcical comic set-pieces to serious moments of reflection on life’s cruelties (‘Who Will Buy?’ or ‘Dreamland’ for example) while also sometimes switching from a naturalistic to an allegorical mode. The audience learnt to negotiate this complex tonal register, although there were still occasions when the show became controversial because their expectations were challenged. One

episode, ironically entitled 'Hearts of Darkness' was censured by the Broadcasting Standards Council (BSC) because some viewers objected to such a dramatic tonal shift. In the episode the Meldrews go for a day out in the country with their neighbours. A series of farcical adventures ensues, each more wildly funny than the last, culminating in the party becoming lost and Victor Meldrew heading off to find help. He stumbles on a remote old people's home, where he discovers that the staff are neglecting and abusing their charges, abuse that we see on screen. An appalled Victor enacts revenge on the staff and rights the wrong. The BSC judgement found against the programme on the basis that audiences would not have expected such events to occur in a popular family show and that they would be disturbed to find such scenes (however moral and righteous) in a sitcom (BSC Bulletin). Yet to regular viewers it would have been less of a shock because they were used to the way that Renwick mines the tension between text and audience through the use of sudden changes in tone.

Love Soup, first broadcast five years after the finale of *One Foot in the Grave*, develops and extends these ideas; instead of sudden lurches between comic and serious they are entwined so that scenes reflect the absurdities of human behaviour for both comic and serious effect. It was shown on BBC1, precisely because of Renwick's pedigree but eschewed the laugh track and in its first series each episode lasted an hour, charting the parallel lives of perfume counter worker Alice and American comedy writer Gil. Gil and Alice's introspective take on a world that they both struggle to understand forms an entry point for the audience, guiding how the series might be read and Renwick aims

for viewers to be aligned with Gil and Alice's position as outsiders in modernity. Renwick also uses irony and especially awkwardness to great effect in the show. The ironies of contemporary living are fully aired and each episode often ends with an ironic resolution of a storyline. The audience is made to feel awkward at moments in judging how to respond to the events unfolding on screen. Awkwardness is also performed through the series as Gil and especially Alice, experience intense awkwardness when they are exposed to modernity and worry over what their responses should be.

I will examine the third episode of the first series, entitled 'The Reflecting Pool', to observe the tonal pattern and consider how this is used to engage with the audience. I will argue that this is explicitly planned to make the audience think about their experience as individuals in contemporary society, a society that Renwick critiques through his use of tone.

In 'The Reflecting Pool' Gil and Alice are affected by distinct events in their parallel storylines. However the two storylines are linked by visual edits – Gil compliments the food in a pub and we see Alice tucking in to her dinner, he puts a glass down and there is a cut to her lifting one up – and some thematic motifs and co-incidences. In this episode, the theme is the nature of looking and how appearances can be deceptive and Gil and Alice's adventures are united by this idea.

The episode begins with Gil queuing in his village shop. The shopkeeper and a female customer are laughing uproariously over their mundane small talk and in voice-over Gil says "what an asset that is in life – the ability to laugh at

nothing...this is why I'm such a social misfit, I can't grin to order". Immediately the audience is receiving a tonal signal; they are being told that they will not be laughing "at nothing" and that they should expect a show that will derive laughter from 'something' that is significant. It is a call to attention for the audience, reinforced by the reference to Gil as a social misfit, thus telling us that we will be looking in on society from the outside, observing its quirks and cruelties. The episode closes with an echo of this scene; a dinner lady at Alice's works canteen (looking very much like the shopkeeper) laughs at her own small talk observation that Alice has a sweet-tooth. In seeing this we are pulled back to this initial encounter and Gil's thoughts.

Over the hour two main, interlinked, plot lines occur for each lead character. As the episode cross-cuts between character and story-line, tone often shifts backwards and forwards between the comic and serious but a dialogue builds up with the audience through the storylines. Viewers are encouraged to anticipate an ambiguity of tone and to measure their responses accordingly. The *Love Soup* audience also learns to be aware that the random incidents and causal actions that Renwick introduces to the script, which may appear hard to read at the time, will have consequences; that they will ultimately come together to clarify both the plot of the episode and to make a commentary on modern living. The show encourages thematic readings of the action through metaphor and symbol, often allowing simultaneous comic and serious readings of the same scene. In 'The Reflecting Pool' the notion of reflection and of things not being as

one sees them are to the fore and signalled as a subject for contemplation and dialogue between text and audience.

Gil's two storylines involve his neighbour Irene's romance with a bin man and his own encounter with a fan of his comedy-writing and her mother. Irene has kicked out her husband after discovering he has been seeing a prostitute and she inveigles Gil in a plan to discover what the woman looks like. Observing the house they are surprised to see she is a plain, middle-aged woman with very prosaic underwear on the washing line – Gil observes that “real life is sometimes too real to be convincing”. Gil's words draw our attention to the co-incidences and unusual consequences and motivations of actions. A tone is being established whereby we should expect the unexpected. In his piece on irony, Sconce talks about the shared elements within his cinema of “ironic distance”, one of which is “a fascination with synchronicity” and another “a related thematic interest in random fate” (“Irony” 358). He goes on to argue that “the favoured narrative structure is no longer the passive observer of an absurd world who eventually experiences some form of epiphany, but rather a range of characters subjected to increasing despair and/or humiliation captured in a rotating series of interlocking scenes in which some endure while others are crushed” (362).

Renwick's work is obsessed by synchronicity and “random acts of fate”. Gil and Alice encounter all manner of unexpected events, based on the unknowable consequences of human behaviour or just bad luck. While skirting the boundaries of comedy-drama *Love Soup* does still play for laughs and in Alice and Gil he retains something of “the passive observer of an absurd world”.

Alice does ultimately experience an epiphany so *Love Soup* is not quite Sconce's "favoured narrative structure" of "smart cinema" but the series also exhibits plenty of "despair and humiliation" where "some endure while others are crushed". The use of synchronicity does lead to a tone of ironic distance, reinforced in *Love Soup* by the use of voice-overs, re-enactment of events that have already happened that are recounted by characters and acted bits of scripts from imaginary TV shows and films.

Irene herself then starts a relationship with a young bin man (Ben Turner), meeting him when her wheelie bin is apparently caught in the refuse lorry's crusher. On their date she feels that he has "so much in common" with her and that this shows that "you can't judge a book by the cover", a cliché which is immediately signified within the address to the audience. Gil however overhears the bin man boast to his friend that he has 'researched' his seduction of Irene by going through her recycling bin; they 'have so much in common' because he knows from her refuse that he should talk about "Napa Valley Wine, Harry Connick Jr and Daily Mail politics". When Irene sees her new lover work his crushed wheelie bin trick with another woman, she, like the audience, realises that the appearance of compatibility and companionship can be constructed and illusory, rather than real.

Gil also comes to realise this himself in his other major storyline but interestingly this time he himself proves unable to go beyond the surface of how things appear. He receives a fan letter, from Tina (Andrea Lowe) a woman who sounds like "she's inside my head". Gil goes to meet Tina, first encountering her

mother Moira (Penny Ryder), who he is later told needs money for surgery on “a breast thing”. On their date Tina tells him about her wild youth as a Hell’s Angel, telling him “sexually I was pretty carnivorous”. This scene also covers a wide tonal register. Tina’s revelations and observations about the need to go beyond the surface, on the inequity of judging people on how they appear rather than how they really are, is another clear signal to the audience to take note; that at some point both Gil and the viewer should expect that appearances can be deceptive.

A pompous neighbour, Geoffrey (George Pensotti), insists that Gil, as a ‘local celebrity’, should make an amusing speech at a party to celebrate the opening of his new swimming pool. Gil invites Tina to the pool party and when she asks whether he is ready for the sight of her in a bikini, we receive another signal of expectation, both for some sort of comic pay-off and of a thematic link to the notion of deceptive appearances. We see Gil at the pool party with an obviously outraged but tight-lipped Geoffrey surrounded by uncomfortable looking guests. They are all looking at Tina in a bikini, who is revealing a body covered in biker tattoos of spiders, snakes and skulls. The awkwardness and comic embarrassment is accentuated as Gil’s speech falls very flat. Tina sets him a challenge to his self-proclaimed open-mindedness by telling him “if people can’t see past this then tough”.

The apparent resolution to the Tina story is this comic revelation, trading on Gil’s self-consciousness and neurosis for an effect that satisfyingly fits with the thematic signals (it is one of two obvious applications of the idea of ‘the

reflecting pool'), which have been set out throughout the storyline but is still funny in its concept and execution. However the actual conclusion, as Gil tells Irene (and we see dramatised), is that, embarrassed by Tina's tattoos, he hadn't called her and had felt very guilty that he had failed her test to "see people as people". Finally, he drives to see Tina and finds her furious with him; we had seen him write a cheque to Moira assuming, like him, that she needed cash for medical reasons but in fact it was for breast augmentation. As Tina says she never wants to see him again and as Gil has unwittingly compounded his failure to look beyond the surface, Moira invites him to admire the results of his gift. As Gil worries over his failure of character, Irene (a woman who is signalled as not wholly unsympathetic but is fundamentally superficial) tells him that "all you ever do is question yourself".

Alice's two storylines involve a surprise visit from the parents of an old boyfriend and her trip to a work conference, where she has to share a room with a glamorous colleague and model called Rochelle (Rosalind Halstead) who has "the personality of a pencil". She ends up involved in a political and moral stand where the tone shifts from comic to serious, if satirical, intent. At home Alice is disturbed by an old couple suddenly arriving at the door. They announce themselves to be the Bedsoes, parents of a long-ago short term boyfriend of Alice's. They reveal their son, Gareth, had been obsessed with her, so obsessed in fact that he had recorded all their sexual encounters on a camcorder hidden in a giant teddy bear. Now he has died after a long wasting disease and his dying wish was that Alice should have the tapes. The tone is deliberately mixed here.

There is a cruel undercurrent in making the boy dying from a wasting disease that may cause some discomfort to viewers, as would his voyeurism but the notion of the parents returning the tapes to Alice is rich in dark comedy, heightened when Mrs Bedsoe (Doreen Mantle) cheerfully reveals she has watched them to remind her of her son and got other family members to transfer copies onto M-Peg. Later Alice watches the tapes and the tone again is ambiguous. Her thoughts on seeing them are a mixture of embarrassment, fascination, excitement and wistfulness for both times past and her youthful body. We actually see the content of the tapes, which complicates the tone further as these scenes are unusually sexually explicit for primetime BBC1. The discourse between text and audience is set up as one that will reveal the truth, not be bound by broadcasting convention that would usually just refer to the tapes rather than show them. It is necessary to demonstrate the contrast in Alice's mind between her energetic sexual younger self and her current self-image as unattractive and asexual. Likewise, in Gil's storyline we see another fairly explicit sex scene dramatised as a distancing device, although played for more obvious comic effect. This is a French film Tina is showing to Gil with all the subtitles (giving comically overblown 'profound' art house dialogue) invariably appearing over the genitals of the actors. *Love Soup's* frankness about sex is assumed to be accepted even by a mainstream, older, audience than that of *Peep Show* or *The Inbetweeners*.

The other Alice plotline in 'The Reflecting Pool' similarly seeks to challenge the programme's audience through variations in tone. Alice is the

manager of a department store perfume counter and discusses with her colleagues Cleo (Sheridan Smith) and Millie (Montserrat Lombard) her forthcoming attendance at the corporate conference where she has to present the new products on stage with Rochelle. There is a reference to Alice's disquiet about the presentation, mentioning that "Martin Luther King will be turning in his grave" and Cleo, looking at the script, agrees. This serves to set up an uneasiness of tone: we wonder how the notion of Martin Luther King turning in his grave will feature in this comic text? What point is being made by this reference?

At the conference hotel we see that Rochelle is very beautiful but appears to have no intelligence or sense of humour. Her beauty illustrates the insecurities of Alice, already explored through the tapes; in voiceover she ponders that "it's like evolution has decided that there is no need for a mind with a body like that – warmth, depth, sense of humour have no role to play in the mating process". There is a shift to the comedy of awkwardness as Alice decides to get dressed when Rochelle goes downstairs, forgetting that the webcam with which Rochelle had been communicating with her boyfriend is still on. The moment of Rochelle's return when Alice realises what she has done is mined for comic impact as Tamsin Grieg's face remains fixed in mute horror. The tone then alters again as we see that Rochelle and Alice are expected to deliver a sales pitch in which Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech is being used to launch the company's range of facial creams and exfoliants. It becomes clear that Rochelle has not heard of the speech before. This discovery by the viewer delivers on the

anticipation over the earlier reference, as withheld information is revealed to us and is both signalled as funny as a satirical commentary on the insensitivity and amorality of contemporary capitalism but also as shocking; its presentation within the text invites the viewer to feel angry as well as amused. Alice finally tells her boss Laura (Geraldine Alexander) that she can't go through with the presentation. Laura is furious with her, mocking the objections and asking "do you imagine that anyone else in that room will give it a second thought?" Alice tells an amazed Rochelle that she will not be doing the presentation and that Laura will take her place.

The angry satire of the superficiality of modernity in the appropriation of King's speech for profit is intertwined with a more comic take on mistaken appearances by Alice. Her camp colleague Guy (Adam James) visits her room, distraught that a barman had tried to accost him through a 'glory hole' in the toilets. Alice comforts him and tells him about the incident with the tapes. Slowly it dawns on her after he mentions that he wouldn't have been interested in the barman "even if he was that way inclined" that he isn't in fact gay and that he seems to be rather aroused by her story.

The presentation at the conference however is played entirely seriously and the tone is one of righteous anger, with a twist that reveals a thematic pay-off that we were not led to expect, in common with the other storylines. Rochelle and Laura go through their crass presentation intoning Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' line as they go. Suddenly on the screen the pictures of beauty products are interrupted by a slide of the famous photograph of lynching victims in the

Deep South in the 1960s. After the event Laura accuses Alice and, despite her denials, threatens to sack her. Rochelle admits her guilt, saying that she was amazed by Alice's stand and had looked up the story of the speech online. She discovered that King led his followers to 'the reflecting pool' in Washington D.C to deliver these words and "knew that everyone had to see that picture". She then resigns from the company to pursue her successful modelling career and marry her millionaire boyfriend.

Love Soup demonstrates the complexities of tone in contemporary sitcom and the negotiations and dialogue that takes place between the text and the audience. This episode illustrates how tone can work with the audience as a form of address in the ways that I have described through this chapter. While David Renwick uses some traditional sitcom set-ups and structures, the tonal register present in this episode shows how tone of voice and mode of address plays an increasingly important part in the audience making meaning from sitcom. The show uses the new aesthetic norms; unlike *One Foot in the Grave*, Renwick does not have the standby of studio laughter or learnt comic conventions of style to orientate the viewer. His previous hit had plenty of 'dark' moments but whereas they revolved around sudden shifts in tone *Love Soup* relies less on a clear break from funny to serious and more on a tone that combines both possibilities. Events are presented that can be viewed as funny but also potentially serious, contingent, cruel or disturbing.

The programme is audacious enough to risk alienating some viewers in eliciting these responses and Renwick, often through Gil, offers a sub-text that

asks the audience to reflect on this and on what the implications of comic writing might be. There are two meta-textual scenes, where the ideas and comic philosophy of the programme are expounded. Tina asks Gil about his work as a comedy writer and he responds that “even when you’ve thought of the funniest thing in the world you know it’s still going to leave half the nation cold”. At many points Gil is identified as a surrogate for Renwick. Although Alice sometimes takes up this position through her reading of modernity, Gil’s role as a comedy writer allows a clear authorial voice to be expressed directly at moments like this, when Renwick seems to be defending himself against those that might ‘be left cold’ by the show. Tina admires one of Gil’s sketches because it shows that his work has a point to it – “it has attitude”. The tone here takes a rather self-laudatory air, presumably Renwick thinks we also will see that his work has “a point to it”. We see Gil’s sketch on screen with his explicatory voice-over; it is “a fable” in which a beautiful woman makes herself as unattractive as possible to go on dates in order to find partners that would appreciate her for her true self, only to find herself saddled with an ugly man because she can’t sacrifice her principles. Again, as well as offering an illustration of Renwick’s comic writing “with a point to it”, we also anticipate that this “fable” may offer a reading through the complexities of the episode. In a similar fashion our first sight of Alice is as she watches a TV comedy sketch set in a lift where, within two or three minutes, a relationship takes its whole course. We learn from her voice-over that she has seen this many times before and enjoys it. In one of the many reflexive moments of meta-textual comment (and regular point-scoring against critics from Renwick)

her voice-over tells us she can't believe that the *Radio Times* called it lame and that she may write a letter to remonstrate.

Renwick uses his characters to comment on the difficulties of writing comedy for television. This strategy is continued in the second series through the figure of Alice's writer boyfriend Douglas, his references to both bitter old comics (Ronnie Corbett appears as the mean-minded veteran Gordon Bexter) and his distaste for the vulgarity of BBC3 and 'youth' sitcom in the episode 'Lobotomy Bay' (2:8), discussed in the previous chapter. Renwick sets himself apart from much new comedy and critiques both contemporary television and its audience (as in the depiction of the focus group in 'Green Widow'), claiming that "I don't relate to the more cutting-edge work I see on screen these days, which has a cruelty to it which I'm not so crazy about" (interview with Lambert *Love Soup* Series 1 DVD Extra) but in fact despite this he uses new sitcom structures and tropes very skilfully.

Love Soup confronts its audience and stimulates a dialogue through this intermingling of the serious and the comic in its tone. It is also 'dark' in its content; whether that is the references to lynching or disturbing events such as the Bedsoe's return of the illicit recordings of their dead son or indeed for some viewers the sexually explicit scenes. In other episodes there is often a nightmarish flavour to many of Alice's and Gil's entanglements. Alice and Gil feel they are 'misfits', establishing a voice that aims to look askance at the world, seeing a society that appears to them frequently mad, frightening and nonsensical. The parallel storylines based on their mutual search for romance, a

search that never is resolved until it is too late, allows both a male and female perspective to be expressed.

As in *One Foot in the Grave*, there is a pointed critique of modernity as being intrinsically based on selfishness and devoid of decency but the worldview is even bleaker and more intense. Although they seem to have more materially, Alice's and Gil's lives lack the security the Meldrews retained and this stability no longer seems an available option. The idea of civility – its necessity and its absence from the world – is stressed through their encounters with those around them. Alice values civility and still tries to perform it at all times and is upset at its departure from everyday living. As Sennett suggests:

[c]ivility implied a certain sense of self: subjective or indirect, ironic or restrained in expression but not self-ashamed. Civility was the social frame our reformation ancestors put around lively communication. It remains a good frame. (*Together* 127)

Without that frame she feels insecure and frightened. Bauman argues that “the main point about civility is the ability to interact with strangers without holding their strangeness against them and without pressing them to surrender it or to renounce some or all of the traits that made them strangers in the first place” (*Liquid Modernity* 104-5). Alice and Gil find it increasingly difficult to make connections with others. They find other people strange and confusing but are also consumed with a concern over their own possible strangeness to others. The values represented by Alice and Gil – civility but also thoughtfulness, self-doubt, modesty and moral considerations of decency and respect – are viewed, they feel, as weaknesses and they have to assert themselves in the face of a

world they find hard to navigate. As seen in the scenes around the cosmetics conference, *Love Soup* seems to share the analysis of Sennett about the effects of “the culture of the new capitalism” on humanity and respect and displays concerns over the commodification of the self in what Giddens and Will Hutton characterise as “the business civilisation” (ix). Thus the title ‘The Reflecting Pool’ is both the swimming pool where Gil proves unable to live up to his own values about judging people ‘as people’ rather than on appearances and a reference to the place in Washington D.C where Martin Luther King made his ‘I have a dream’ speech, an event read here as representing something pure, true and dignified in a largely crass and corrupt world.

The show is skilled enough to ask challenging questions of its audience and it does this through a tone that combines an ‘ironic distance’ with a clear set of signals that are embedded within the text – signs that can instigate laughs, reflection or confrontation. Through its characters and its meta-textual diversions, *Love Soup* seeks to explore what living in Beck’s “runaway world” means for those who find it frightening and uncomfortable. For Alice and Gil, as Bauman says, “it is such patterns, codes, and rules to which one could conform, which one could select as stable orientation points and by which one could subsequently let one be guided, that are nowadays in increasingly short supply” (*Liquid Modernity* 7). The implication is that this is the case for the audience as well and that Alice and Gil’s struggles will find resonance with their own. However complex modernity requires complex texts so *Love Soup* demands a close and active reading through tone; the “patterns, codes and

rules” that used to govern sitcom no longer have enough currency to be effective and “stable orientation points” can only work in a world that has them elsewhere. Without them tone is now the prime route to make meaning and to create a “comic climate” in sitcom.

CONCLUSION

British sitcom has then changed its form and address in response to the particularities of twenty-first-century modernity in the United Kingdom. This context shares many features with contemporary modernity in other Western democracies (and indeed the rest of the world): the rise in social media and digital technology; globalised economics and politics; much greater flows of population from around the world; changes to working patterns and structures; and the move away from a shared mass television culture towards Parks's "flexible microcasting" (134) and Jenkins's "Convergence Culture". All these social shifts together comprise Bauman's "Liquid Modernity" and Sennett's "Culture of the New Capitalism", which are broadly compatible (if with some differences in emphasis) analyses of modernity as a set of global forces and practices which make individuals anxious, lonely and adrift in a society that is ever harder to read. Sennett argues that "a person's life-narrative therefore has to be continually recast in the course of experience" ("Street and Office 177") and, according to Hutton and Giddens, "individuals are beset by new forms of anxiety and rootlessness" (217).

In Britain this modernity is also coloured by the nation's own cultural and historical inheritance. As a post-colonial power still adjusting to a decline in International status and as a post-industrial country affected by manufacturing decline and indeed by the crash in international finance since 2007, Britain feels some aspects of these global shifts acutely. As a culture traditionally based around rigid class positions, conflicts and hierarchies and with strong centralised

institutions (including broadcasters), such fluidity represents a real, substantive, transformation in how society works. I have described how these circumstances are reflected in the evolution of sitcom in the UK since the mid 1990s, for instance in its institutional position at the BBC and Channel 4 (and more recently Sky) and in its patterns of consumption. Although scheduled television is proving more durable than expected, increased competition and deregulation means that what was a stable and successful television industry, based around broadcasting a limited amount of material to the widest possible constituency in their own homes, is now a constantly changing, perhaps even 'anxious', business offering "plenty" (Ellis, *Seeing Things* 162) to audiences determined by interest group or demographic, who are surrounded by media available to them at all times in all spaces. As detailed, the particular nature of modernity over the last fifteen years - the extraordinary pace of change, of globalisation, of technological developments and their influence on social interaction and everyday experience, the elision of work and home, of the formal and the informal, the apparent shift from the collective to the individual - have necessitated new forms through which the sitcom can carry out its "working through" functions.

Richard Sennett points out that "the flexible organisation permits a sharper distinction between elite and mass" (*Respect* 184) and sitcom is adjusting to the decline in mass address by broadcasters. Sitcoms can no longer necessarily exist as part of mass culture because the communities and social structures that they used to inhabit are no longer coherent or homogenous; it is no longer easy to appeal to all viewers because audiences are ever more fragmented and

individuated. The old circular narratives, studio laughter tracks and acting styles are no longer adequate as tools to create texts for “working through” and so have had to be largely jettisoned. The challenge is to remain relevant in the face of all this change, to reach people and to resonate with their experience. This raises the problem of what people want from comedy. In *Grandma’s House* Auntie Liz (Samantha Spiro) complains to her comedy writing nephew Simon Amstell “why don’t you do something that is actually entertaining for people – normal people don’t have time to concentrate all the time, that’s all I’m saying”, to which Simon retorts, “what do you want? People wandering in and out of rooms just saying something funny?” (2:1).

In some ways this has been comedy’s dilemma with the contemporary audience in “liquid modernity”. How can a text resonate when people no longer necessarily share the same culture or experiences? One of the most problematic issues ahead is, then, what John Corner has described as “the popular-elite tension” in television (367). Sitcom was once firmly part of the “popular” and that is what gave it power as a vehicle for “working through”; if it becomes something that is “elite”, that is a form predominantly consumed by educated, white, tele-literate, niche audiences, then the concern will be that its social impact will be considerably dissipated.

The “working through” conversation in the sitcoms of the 1960s and 1970s contributed to a national conversation about how society should work. Immigration, women’s rights, sexuality, party politics and labour relations were included and at least addressed in this popular form to a mass audience of many

millions. Much of this discourse may have been reactionary but it wasn't always so; some of the language may seem offensive to modern sensibilities but audiences were often invited to think about and challenge their own prejudices. Similarly these shows asked their audiences to reflect on deep social structures and their place within them; questions about how life was lived were raised and dramatised. Comedy allows a space where different positions can happily co-exist.

This kind of national conversation has become harder to do. The status of sitcom in the USA is such that, despite dwindling audiences, it still retains that voice (Morreale 250, *Family Guys?*) but is that still the case in Britain? Certainly recent sitcoms make little attempt to tackle social issues directly in the way they once did. There have been few attempts, for instance, to create a conversation about Eastern European immigration into the UK in the last decade. A form which was for better or worse, a leading part of popular debate over the first steps to a multi-racial Britain thirty or forty years ago is reduced to a few stock Polish cleaner, waitress and plumber characters in shows like *Lead Balloon*.

There is an argument that that audiences are sophisticated enough not to need this kind of broad dialogue anymore. In *Peep Show*, Jez's girlfriend Elena in series six is portrayed without any real comment on her Eastern European background. At no point is her lack of sympathy as a character attributed to her ethnicity. The same applies to Mark's maniacal boss Johnson. Johnson's blackness is only an issue in respect of the discomfort dealing with difference means for Mark. In 'Jeremy Makes It' (2:2) Mark makes friends with Darryl (Steve

Edge) who, it emerges, is a racist. Darryl alienates others by his stereotyping of Johnson through learned racial tropes and comedy comes from Mark's inability to make moral decisions around the issue (Mills, "Paranoia" 57). While, as I have demonstrated, shows remain insightful about modes of living, the self and society and underlying attitudes, the move to elite audiences inhibits the ability of sitcom to make a broader appeal and the fear of offence can compound a tendency to avoid creating a show that tries to engage with explicit issues. With race this can be seen in the critical opprobrium that greeted *Citizen Khan*, an attempt to make a broad, popular, Asian-based sitcom (Ferguson).

The popular voice of sitcom was a powerful one and its potential loss raises questions about who sitcom will be for in the future – will it become irrevocably split between critically dismissed attempts at mainstream fare and acclaimed texts for a niche viewership rich in "cultural capital"? Mark Lawson has written of *One Foot in the Grave* and *The Royle Family* that "they alternate broad and narrow comedy, appealing simultaneously to two audiences" ("Sofa") so diminishment to irrelevance is far from inevitable as *The Office* has also shown but it remains sitcom's great test as it goes into the future.

However British sitcom has had some particular advantages in its response to modernity in "the culture of the new capitalism" that indicate a potential to retain its role of "working through" with audiences. Sitcom has had a firmly established place and role within popular culture in the UK for fifty years, not just as a familiar fixture in the schedules and a site of public affection but also as an accepted commentator on social change. Furthermore some of the

aesthetic and thematic responses to modernity that have seemed the most appropriate modes for artistic works to talk about the self and contemporary society in the last decade or two are already ingrained in British sitcom; irony and awkwardness are types of address long employed in British discourse and thus mined in its humour. Sitcoms from thirty or forty years ago, such as *Fawlty Towers*, relied heavily on the comic possibilities of awkwardness, while popular shows as diverse as *The Good Life* and *Hancock's Half Hour* make much play of ironic readings. Contemporary sitcoms, such as *Peep Show*, *Love Soup*, *Saxondale* and *Home Time*, have then emphasised traits already used in the sitcom tradition and applied them to the new situations and dilemmas experienced in “liquid modernity” to talk to their audience.

Sennett and Bauman paint a particular picture of this modernity. Essentially theirs is a bleak view of a world in which individuals have a dwindling connection to their communities and wider society and an increasingly insecure sense of self. The condition of modernity that they see evident today is rather like that imagined by Jonathan Coe in his novel *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*. Here the eponymous protagonist describes his life:

As for human contact, I'd lost all appetite for it. Mankind has, as you may have noticed, become very inventive about devising new ways for people to avoid talking to each other, and I'd been taking full advantage of all the recent ones. I would always send a text message rather than speak to someone on the phone. Rather than meeting with any of my friends, I would post cheerful, ironically worded status updates on facebook, to show them all what a busy life I was leading. And presumably people had been enjoying them, because I'd got more than seventy friends on facebook now, most of them complete strangers (19).

Maxwell's testimony illustrates the isolation, atomisation and lack of engagement with society that Sennett and Bauman perceive as endemic in early twenty-first-century modernity. Apparent new freedoms and choices are, in their view, largely spurious and are in fact further manifestations of the iniquities of a capital-led system – an attempt at hegemony that aims to deflect the realisation that our lives are increasingly outside our own control. Bauman argues, for instance, that “everything in a consumer society is matter of choice, except the compulsion to choose” (*Liquid Modernity* 73), while Sennett suggests that “flexibility begets disorder, but not freedom from restraint” (*Corrosion* 59). The financial crash of the last five years underlines this as the material rewards seen as the price of fluidity and uncertainty in the West have not been forthcoming for much of the population of places like Britain. In this conclusion, however, it's important to consider to what extent their analyses of the modern condition might be correct or indeed to some degree either limited or mistaken. Are there other, more positive, ways to read the modern experience? And do the sitcoms I have looked at offer any opportunity to do this?

Sennett and Bauman offer some very useful interpretations of contemporary modernity and the former in particular articulately outlines many of the anxieties that underline and undermine our status in work, community and in relationships with others. Sennett's analysis of the anxieties and uncertainties of working life seems very plausible; he is surely right to point out its lack of accountability, the shift in the perception of failure from dread to anxiety (*Culture* 53), the “farce” of the rhetoric about teamwork (*Corrosion* 106) and work's

increasing “illegibility” (*Corrosion* 68). However his acknowledgments of the boredom, complacency and frustrations of older hierarchical structures, both at work and in wider society (*Corrosion* 117) don’t go far enough. In his latest volume *Together* he finally explicitly says that “it’s important not to view post-war stability with nostalgia” (157) and seems to be moving to a potentially more optimistic position in which he tries to suggest possible co-operative solutions to the crisis of modernity but there is little sense of why people felt that the strictures that went before were worth casting aside, even if their replacements have brought their own problems. Bauman’s multiple reflections on the nature of “liquid modernity” in terms of love, culture, work and politics aim to illustrate how people might feel about themselves in the face of these changes. However, they vacillate from perceptive assertions, such as his comment that “the prime technique of power is now escape, slippage, elision and avoidance” (*Liquid Modernity* 11), to repetitive jeremiads that seem to paint a picture of modern Western living as an endless chasm of misery for all.

Jeffrey Weeks’s book *The World We have Won* is a useful corrective to some of Bauman’s gloomy excesses. He takes issue with Bauman’s claim that “we live in what... can properly be called “dark times” (*Liquid Life* 129), challenging his relentless pessimism and asking of both Sennett and Bauman (with their progressive credentials) “if they think like this imagine what real Conservatives must imagine is happening to us” (131-2). Indeed Conservative theorists such as Roger Scruton or commentators like Peter Hitchens are, as he suggests, condemnatory about the nature of modernity, even if they choose to

blame it on personal morality or the Left rather than the forces of capitalism. Scruton talks about his quest to “understand... what we are losing as our form of life decays” (ix) and proclaims that “the new media culture has been a particular misfortune for the English” (246). Weeks (and others like Giddens and Beck) take a more positive view of modernity, acknowledging its confusions, iniquities and anxieties but seeing greater opportunities for freedom, self-expression and co-operation. Weeks argues that “I do not believe this to be an age that is seeing a decline of values... on the contrary, it is an age *of* values in which uncertainty forces us to be creative, inventive and generative of values” (223; Weeks’ italics). In his more hopeful analysis, change is portrayed as a challenge but one that offers opportunities to improve long-standing faults in society; in particular he believes that sexuality as self-expression can create new moral values that are just as valid as the old ones. In general Weeks’s worldview hinges on the belief that people are still as inclined to virtue as before – twenty-first-century modernity has not turned them into moral vacuums incapable of making a better world.

Do the sitcoms I have been examining just conform to Sennett and Bauman’s assessment of what modern life might mean for individuals and society or is their dramatisation of modernity and their characters’ place in it more complex than just a critique? Here I would like to briefly consider each of my central texts’ take on modernity and ask how they characterise contemporary British life.

Peep Show is perhaps the closest to Sennett and Bauman’s view of the world. The show uses the language and tropes of modernity – drugs,

consumerism, self-help, new technology and sexual mores – to condemn it as vacuous, amoral and corrosive. Its star, David Mitchell, has said that “I entirely agree that the show itself exhibits a horror of the modern world” (Marshall 6) and Ben Marshall argues that “the show’s contempt for modernity is coupled with a near forensic understanding of contemporary culture. Otherwise *Peep Show* could resemble a particularly bitter *Daily Mail* editorial” (6). While contempt for modernity is discernable, I don’t agree with Marshall’s idea that it is “a deeply conservative show” (6).

There are conservative comedic responses to modernity on current British television, most notably in sketch shows such as *Harry and Paul* and *The Armstrong and Miller Show*. In the latter an (admittedly quite funny) recurring sketch shows RAF Battle of Britain fighter pilots talking in the argot of present day youths, refusing to put in any effort or obey authority and observing that “I could get compensation for that” when faced with the death of comrades. The clear implication is that courage and honour are unthinkable in the present day. In *Harry and Paul*, middle-aged comics Harry Enfield and Paul Whitehouse (ironically former members of the ‘alternative comedy’ wave of the 1980s) appear in a slew of sketches in which modernity is seen as inherently grim and immoral. At their most reactionary and basic, this includes negative portrayals of benefit claimants as swindlers and thugs, African traffic wardens as officious, Polish waitresses as rude or young work experience employees as inherently dumb, insolent and incapable of the simplest task. In the 2012 series there was even a

set of recurring sketches called “when life was simpler” and UKIP leader Nigel Farage made a cameo appearance.

In *Harry and Paul* we see an unambiguous attack on modernity from the right but this is not the approach in *Peep Show*. Characters such as Mark’s boss Johnson represent a right-wing embrace of “liquid modernity” and his relentless, maniacal pursuit of money and power is painted as being even more dangerous and deluded than the selfish libertinism of Jez and Super Hans. Yet other reactionary characters that reject modernity fare no better. Sophie’s farmer Dad, Ian (Paul Clayton), is a pathetically pompous sexual inadequate and Mark’s father Dan is a loathsome fount of sneering bitterness, representing all the old values of misogyny, hierarchy and snobbery. Most of all Mark himself makes any attempt to uphold the superiority of older structures over modernity problematic. For Mark’s problems partly come from his old-fashioned attitudes and self-repression. If he took up some of the opportunities presented by modernity then he might be happier; it was after all his insistence in going ahead with an engagement and wedding he didn’t want for the sake of convention that created misery for everybody in his orbit and it is his avoidance of all risk that drives Dobbie away. As early as ‘The Interview’ (1:2), he is telling Jez that “nothing you want is ever going to happen. That’s the real world”; this allows little room for hope, and the next eight series remain an exercise in self-defeat. Indeed Jez’s immorality, frequent stupidity and unquestioning acceptance of novelty are sometimes presented as preferable to Mark’s inhibited self-loathing. Mark’s ‘old-fashioned’ values are often as lacking in empathy and warmth as those

associated with modernity. *Peep Show* sees modernity as being as compromised and problematic as Sennett and Bauman do. Its characters notably fail to forge a “life-narrative” but it offers a more nuanced picture than might seem initially apparent. Jesse Armstrong and Sam Bain explore some of these ideas in a more sympathetic way in *Fresh Meat*; its student protagonists have grown up imbued in the values of modernity but while this brings problems they remain convincing characters capable of moral choices and acts of kindness. “Liquid Modernity” has made them but not destroyed them and they can plot a route for the self in society.

Love Soup also opens up a dialogue with its audience (largely older, more mainstream, viewers than *Peep Show*) that is often critical of modern attitudes. The show dramatises Alice and Gil as isolated by the cruelty, selfishness and lack of morality that they perceive around them in society. However David Renwick’s writing does not simply equate all that is modern as bad and some notion of older values as being straightforwardly good. In ‘The Reflecting Pool’, after all, it is the thoroughly modern Rochelle who proves to have the moral backbone that Alice ultimately lacks. Likewise in ‘There Must be Some Kind of Way Out of Here’ (1:1), Alice thinks she finds a kindred spirit in locksmith Adam (Darren Boyd) whose father has been killed by a criminal and who also thinks “you feel you’re the only sane voice in a mad world” but she is appalled when she discovers that Adam is keeping the perpetrator of the crime locked in a prison cell in his home. The show does not allow the audience to feel comfortable in moral certainty but frequently introduces twists that challenge the assumptions of

those watching. In 'Ragged Claws' (2:5), Alice's voice-over tells us "there's so much certainty and swagger to everyone these days. I must belong to a completely different species". It is this "certainty and swagger" that is the real target of the show's ire rather than modernity *per se*. After all, *Love Soup* offers a rounded picture of everyday modernity and some things are portrayed broadly positively throughout. The series embraces the idea of sexual freedom, for instance, offering an unusually frank and positive picture of the new sexual world that is very much closer to Weeks' vision than Bauman's. Equally the denuding of class conflict and restrictions is positively portrayed. It is interesting that Renwick, a writer from a working-class background, shows absolutely no nostalgia for class based identities and structures, arguing twenty years ago that "comedies had been too hidebound by classification and class. I'm not saying we all live in... a classless society but has TV sitcom kept pace with reality? The answer is no" (qtd in Brooks).

Home Time is, in contrast, very much concerned with ideas about identity and the struggle to make sense of oneself in society through them. Gaynor's dilemma in the show is the pull of the past and its influence on the present. She tries to find the balance between her old certainties that roots will hold her back and her hopes that they can now give her strength. She discovers that her friends left behind in Coventry are just as unhappy and desperate as she is, although different solutions are offered. Thus in episode five, while Gaynor determines that "the only option I have now is to move forward and start again, embodying bravery and strength like Boudicca or a land girl", Mel's analysis is

that “the difference between our generation and those preceding is we’ve got a disposable income and a stack of pamper products to fend off your scary, doom-mongering bull-crap”. *Home Time* sets up a debate over whether it is better to accept one’s situation and adapt to whatever modernity brings to everyday lives, problematic though that is or to proactively change oneself in the hope that life might be better than before. More than any of the other series it considers the attractions and problems of identity and belonging. It asks what we can do if the identity we have has little currency and offers little to us. Can we create something new? Through the series Gaynor’s mother, Bren (Marion McLoughlin), in reality a middle-aged woman from the Midlands on the cusp between the upper-working and lower-middle classes, affects a ludicrous stage Irish accent. In the final episode she is thrown out of the Irish club for this lack of authenticity because it “made it more like a theme park than a lunch club”. She and Gaynor have a furious row, as Gaynor tells her, “which part of this surprises you?... who are you going to be next time? ... you’ve had carnival Brenda, little orphan Brenda, Lady Brenda - fallen aristocrat, bhangra Brenda, brave Brenda with her wacky wheelchair stunts”. Her gentle Dad, Roy, intervenes, angrily sending Gaynor to her room in his only cross word to her in the show. He tells her “we all want to belong to something Gaynor”, she retorts that “you don’t” and he replies “oh yes I do, I just don’t have your mother’s imagination”. Sennett and Bauman might complain that “modern culture is flooded with identity-talk” (Sennett, “Street and Office” 175) or that “in our world of rampant ‘individualisation’ identities are mixed blessings that vacillate between a dream and a nightmare” (Bauman,

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Identity 32) but *Home Time*, while laughing at Bren's absurdities, also acknowledges their attractions when nothing else is available. In the series the drawbacks and attractions of both modernity and the past certainties are always in tension.

It is *Saxondale*, despite its central conceit of a character that ostensibly rejects the present in favour of the past, which offers the most positive view of modernity. Much of the comedy does come from Tommy's baiting of contrasting symbols of modernity, from the self-help culture of the anger management sessions at the beginning of the show, to his besting of yuppie neighbour Jonathan and Mags's hippie friend Penny (Rosie Cavilliero). However Tommy's own obsessions with the golden era of rock 'n' roll roadies and a utopia of personal freedom that has never existed are just as much the object of the joke, as are his libertarian rhetoric and pomposity, displayed in 2:4 when he tries to lecture kids at a local school about his 'rebel' philosophy and they contemptuously glue him to a chair. While Tommy's stance on corporate culture is at least in some respects acknowledged as admirable, he too is forced to construct an identity - the libertarian outsider - in part because he lacks alternatives. Tommy is a well-read, self-educated, working man but old structures of support from unions or other forms of socialism that traditionally nurtured that identity have been diminished. For all the talk of a classless society, Tommy still finds himself patronised by middle manager Jonathan who takes part in a work's quiz team because "some of those semi-skilled guys know a damn sight more than they think" and tells him that he likes "real people, like yourself". At the same

time he is embarrassed by the school caretaker who sneers at all education and art and who just wants to drink beer and watch porn (2:4). Tommy's dilemma in modernity is not quite fitting in but his world has much that is good in it as well: he is able to exercise a good deal of freedom; he is not bound by convention but can express his tastes and philosophy in all sorts of ways; he can make a reasonable living in some comfort; and he enjoys a happy, loving relationship with Mags. In the final episode, when Mags rails against his "constant cynicism" and makes him confront the less attractive side of his personality, he seeks out his counsellor Alistair (James Bachman), normally an object of scorn, because "I'm a wee bit sad" and ends up hugging him with thanks for helping him.

Saxondale offers an open approach to modernity. Tommy is from a previous generation "at the vanguard of a cultural revolution" (interview with Coogan DVD extras series 2) and has trouble dealing with aspects of contemporary life but ultimately modernity is seen as being made up of good and bad elements like anything else, including Tommy's own philosophy. Voices in the show like Mags or Tommy's daughter, Stevie or indeed his young assistant, Raymond, show that modernity does not have to be as difficult as Tommy makes it, nor do you have to be morally compromised to flourish within it. These correctives make the show a subtle commentary on living in the modern world, supporting Marshall Berman's assertion that "the process of modernisation, even as it exploits and torments us, brings our energies and imaginations to life, drives us to grasp and confront the world that modernisation makes and to strive to make it our own" (348).

Sitcom is a particularly articulate vehicle for discourse about modernity. In *Together* Richard Sennett speculates about how people can talk and work together productively:

we sought some principle that would make cooperation more open. That principle is a dialogic cooperation. This kind of cooperation is our goal, our Holy Grail. Dialogic cooperation entails a special kind of openness, one which lists empathy rather than sympathy at its service (127).

Sennett rates empathy as more desirable because “empathy is the more demanding exercise... because it makes people “get outside him or herself” (21) in their response to others. Sitcom offers the viewer this kind of empathetic response to modernity. The dialogue that programmes like my central texts create with the audience is resonant of their experience but also allows a distance from the subject that challenges and encourages reflection. Sitcoms revolve around patterns of interactions with other people and the experience of everyday living. They are, therefore, perfectly positioned to ask questions about how we live and to articulate arguments about how we should deal with the travails of modernity.

Here we return to John Ellis’s concept of television as a form of “working through” for society. He suggests that sitcom is “in many ways the ideal television genre: a stable format that can take on and work through virtually anything that comes its way” (*Seeing Things* 120). A decade on and the format is far from stable but its instability has served in its dialogical process of “working through”. Sitcoms raise questions about how people can or should react to change and ask audiences about how they might respond – about how individuals can fit into

society. This creates a climate in which the way we live now can be critiqued and the changes in the lives of the audience can be acknowledged and understood by them.

Barry Langford argues that “situation comedy articulates the longing to be fully human in a world that denies full humanity” (31), a function that is becoming more, not less, important. This articulation becomes almost an ethical impulse within sitcoms; an expected element for the audience is that the programmes will try to undertake this discursive task of deriving humour from contemporary anxieties. Sitcoms are also rich texts that can set up opposing viewpoints within a discourse through their characters and situations and give a space to more than one position. As demonstrated above, *Peep Show*, *Saxondale*, *Love Soup* and *Home Time* all do this so that they offer a nuanced portrait of contemporary modernity in which anxieties are aired and dramatised but the comic impact gives a space for reflection on how they might be addressed. *Peep Show* for instance offers a divergent approach to modern life through Mark and Jez but ensures that both their responses are found wanting, rather than simply privileging one over the other.

In conclusion then sitcom dramatises tensions and debates within modernity. Crucially it also makes them funny, partly through adopting an empathetic approach that allows us distance to reflect on our own anxieties and issues with modern life. Despite the genre’s changing position in contemporary television and the adoption of new forms and modes of address, sitcoms still aim to help audiences to “work through” modernity and think about their place within

society and programmes still succeed in creating humour from the modern condition.

My central texts question our experience of modernity and celebrate its ambiguity; the opportunities that it offers are shown as well as its problems. As Ellis argues, “television refuses the advantages of certainty in favour of the pleasure and pain of living in the uncertain present” (*Seeing Things* 99). These four shows and other sitcoms of the last decade or so offer a rich and comprehensive document of the pleasure and pain of twenty-first-century lives in Britain, of Williams’s “structure of feeling” (*Long Revolution* 64) and of what it means to be alive, here, now.

Appendix: Illustrations

Figure 1 *Saxondale* 'Cockroaches' (see Page 202)

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Figure 2 *Saxondale* 'Cockroaches' (see page 202)

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Figure 3 *Saxondale* 'Cockroaches' (see page 202)

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Figure 4 *Saxondale* 'Cockroaches' (see Page 202)

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Figure 5 *Love Soup* 'Lobotomy Bay' (see page 205)

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Figure 6 *Love Soup* 'Lobotomy Bay' (see Page 206)

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Figure 7 *Love Soup* 'Lobotomy Bay' (see page 206)

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Figure 8 *Love Soup* 'Lobotomy Bay' (See page 206)

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Television Programmes

Home Time (Baby Cow/BBC 2009)

Love Soup (Cinema Verity/BBC 2005, 2008)

Love Soup Series 1 DVD extras features an interview between David Renwick and the show's producer, Verity Lambert

Peep Show (Objective Productions/Channel 4 2003 -)

Saxondale (Baby Cow/BBC 2006-7)

Saxondale Series 1 DVD (Baby Cow) extras features an interview with Steve Coogan and Neil McCormick; an interview with Ruth Jones and an interview with Coogan on *GMTV*. Series 2 DVD extras also feature an interview with Coogan.

Note: *Peep Show* has episode titles on the DVD releases but they do not appear on screen. *Saxondale* has episode names for series 1 but not Series 2. *Home Time* has no episode names.

and

Absolutely Fabulous (Saunders and French/BBC 1992–1996)

Agony (LWT/ITV 1979-1981)

All in the Family (Tandem/CBS 1971-1979)

The Armstrong and Miller Show (Hat Trick/BBC 2007 -)

Are You Being Served? (BBC 1972-1985)

Benidorm (Tiger Aspect/ITV 2007 -)

Birds of a Feather (Alamo Productions/ BBC 1989-1997)
Blackadder Goes Fourth (BBC 1989)
Black Books (Big Talk/Channel 4 2000-2004)
Bottom (BBC 1991-1995)
Brass Eye (Talkback/Channel 4 1997-2001)
Bread (BBC 1986-1991)
Butterflies (BBC 1978-83)
The Café (Jellylegs Productions/Sky 2011 -)
Channel 4's 30 Greatest Comedy Programmes (Shiver/Channel 4 25 August 2012)
Cheers (Charles-Burrow-Charles Productions/NBC 1982-1993)
Citizen Khan (BBC 2012 -)
The Clampers (BBC 1998)
Come Fly with Me (BBC 2010)
Coronation Street (ITV/ Granada 1960 -)
Coupling (Hartwood/BBC 2000-2004)
Dad's Army (BBC 1968-1978)
Dallas (Lorimar TV/CBS 1978-1991)
The Diary of Anne Frank (Darlow Smithson/BBC 2009)
Downton Abbey (ITV 2009 -)
Driving School (BBC 1997)
Dynasty (Aaron Spelling/ABC 1981-1989)
Episodes (Hat Trick/Crane-Karik/BBC 2011 -)
Ever Decreasing Circles (BBC 1984-1989)
Extras (BBC 2005-2007)
The Fall and the Rise of Reginald Perrin (BBC 1976-78)
Family Guys? What Sitcoms Say About America (BBC 27 October 2012)
Father Ted (Hat Trick/ Channel 4 2005-2007)
Frasier (Grub Street Productions/Paramount/NBC 1993-2000)
Fresh Meat (Objective Productions/Lime Pictures/Channel 4 2011-)
Friday Night Dinner (Popper Productions/Big Talk/ Channel 4 2011-)

Friends (Crane-Kaufmann/NBC 1994-2004)
Gavin and Stacey (Baby Cow/BBC 2007-2010)
George and Mildred (Thames/ ITV 1976–1979)
Getting On (Vera Productions/BBC 2010-)
The Good Life (BBC 1975-1978)
Grandma's House (Tiger Aspect/BBC 2010 -)
Green Wing (Talkback Thames/ Channel 4 2004-2007)
Harry and Paul (Tiger Aspect/BBC 2007 -)
How I Met Your Mother (20th Century TV/Fox 2005 -)
I Love Lucy (Desilu/CBS 1951-1957)
I'm Alan Partridge (Talkback/BBC 1997, 2002)
The Inbetweeners (Bwark/ Channel 4 2008 -)
In With the Flynns (BBC 2011-)
The I.T. Crowd (Channel 4 Talkback Thames 2006 -)
The I.T. Crowd Series 0.2 DVD (2Entertain 2008) 'Recording the I.T. Crowd'
Jam (Talkback/ Channel 4 2000)
Just Good Friends (BBC 1983-1986)
Keeping Up Appearances (BBC 1990-1995)
The Killing (Forbrydelsen) (D-R 2007-2012)
Knowing Me, Knowing You (BBC/ Talkback 1995-1996)
The League of Gentlemen (BBC 1999-2002)
Leave it to Beaver (Gamalco/Kyro/CBS/ABC 1957-1963)
Life of Riley (BBC 2009-)
Life's Too Short (BBC 2011)
Little Britain (BBC 2003-2005)
Lizzie and Sarah (Baby Cow/BBC 2010)
Love Thy Neighbour (Thames/ITV 1972-1976)
Mad Men (Weiner Bros/ AMC 2008 -)
Men Behaving Badly (ITV/BBC/ Hartswood Films 1992-1998)
Mind Your Language (LWT/ITV 1978-1979)
Mid Morning Matters with Alan Partridge (Baby Cow/Sky Atlantic 2012)

Miranda (BBC 2009-)
Mrs Brown's Boys (RTE/BBC 2011-)
Modern Family (Levitan Productions/ABC 2009 -)
My Name is Earl (20th Century TV/NDC 2005-2009)
Nathan Barley (Talkback Thames/ Channel 4 2005)
Newsnight (BBC 28/10/2009)
Nighty Night (Baby Cow/BBC 2003–2005)
Not Going Out (BBC/Avalon 2007-)
The Office (BBC 2001-2003)
Omnibus: Whatever Happened to Clement and La Frenais? (BBC 20 July 1997)
On the Buses (LWT/ITV 1969-1973)
One Foot in the Grave (BBC 1990-2000)
Only Fools and Horses (BBC 1981-1996)
The Only Way is Essex (Lime Pictures/ITV 2010 -)
Outnumbered (Hat Trick/ BBC 2007 -)
Peep Show and Tell (Objective Productions/ Channel 4 24 December 2011)
Pete versus Life (Objective/ Channel 4 2010)
The Phil Silvers Show (CBS 1955-1959)
Porridge (BBC 1974-1978)
Psychoville (BBC 2009-2011)
Pulling (Silver River/BBC 2006-2009)
Rab. C.Nesbitt (BBC 1990-1998; 2009 -)
Rev. (Big Talk Productions/BBC 2010 -)
Rising Damp (Yorkshire/ITV 1974-1978)
Roger and Val have Just got In (BBC 2010-2012)
The Royle Family (BBC/Granada 1998-2000 +Specials)
Seinfeld (West-Shapiro/NBC 1990-1999)
Stella (Tidy Productions/Sky 2012 -)
Steptoe and Son (BBC 1962-1974)
The Singing Detective (BBC 1986)
The Sopranos (Brillstein-Grey/HBO 1999-2007)

Terry and June (BBC 1979-1987)
Terry and Julian (Wonderdog Productions/ Channel 4 1994)
The Thick of It (BBC 2005- 2012)
Till Death Us Do Part (BBC 1965-1975)
Top Gear (BBC 1976-)
To the Manor Born (BBC 1979 -1981)
Tramadol Nights (The Comedy Unit/ Channel 4 2010)
The Trip (Baby Cow/ BBC 2010)
Trollied (Roughcut TV/Sky 2011 -)
Twenty Twelve (BBC 2011-2012)
Two Pints of Lager and a Packet of Crisps (BBC 2001-)
Two Point Four Children (BBC 1991-1998)
Waiting for God (BBC 1990-1994)
Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads? (BBC 1973-1974)
White Heat (BBC 2012)
The Wire (HBO 2004-2007)
A Word in Your Ear (Channel 4 1992)
The X-Factor (Syco Productions/ ITV 2004 -)