Cinema Studies/Department of Culture & Communication  
New York University  
The Sitcom  
Fall 2007

**Professors:** Anna McCarthy and Susan Murray  
**Office hours:** TBA  
**Class schedule/Location:** Wednesdays 4:55 – 7:15; Silver 208

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**  
This course examines the history and politics of television’s most enduring genre, the situation comedy. The sitcom occupies a particularly important place in U.S. cultural hierarchies. Both lauded as an innovative, quintessentially televisual form and denigrated as the epitome of mass media’s formulaic cultural dross, the genre is a discursive locus in which U.S. preoccupations with class, race, gender, and other forms of difference are negotiated. Yet along with these extratextual processes, the sitcom defines a particular kind of televisual aesthetic. How to talk about this aesthetic—the distinctive typologies of character, plot, and mise-en-scene, and the unique institutional and narrative voices that find expression therein—is a question that invites us to think about new ways of conceiving, and writing, genre criticism in TV. Screenings, readings, and discussions explore this complex relationship between sitcoms, form, and culture, drawing not only on literature in television studies but also on historical and theoretical materials from other disciplines such as American Studies, Literary Studies, and Cinema Studies. Students are responsible for class presentations throughout the semester, and develop research projects, in consultation with the instructors, that they present to the class on the final day.

**REQUIRED READINGS**  
Weekly readings online at Blackboard site  

**ASSIGNMENTS & RESPONSIBILITIES**  
1. Attendance and Participation  
2. Position paper on the Sitcom – 2 pages  
2. Short Presentation  
3. Research paper—15-20 pages

**September 5 INTRODUCTION**  
**Screenings: Families Through the Decades**  
Fifties: *Father Knows Best*  
Sixties: *The Brady Bunch*
Seventies: Good Times

September 12: Comedy Theory
Screening: Home Improvement
Reading: Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, “Broadcast Comedy and Sit-Com”
(Chapter 9 of Popular Film and Television Comedy)
Sigmund Freud, “Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious” (chapter 5)
Albert McLean, “Comic Character Artists: Tramps, Blackface, Negro, Jew (From
American Vaudeville)
*Kenneth Burke, “Kenneth Burke, "The Serious Business of Comedy," (New
Evan Smith, p. 1-44.

*DUE: POSITION PAPER ON THE SITCOM

September 19: Radio
Listening: My Favorite Husband, Burns & Allen, Jack Benny, Fred Allen
Reading: Michele Hilmes, “Who We Are, Who We are Not: The Emergence of
National Narratives”
Susan Douglas, “The Invention of the Audience”
Lizabeth Cohen, “Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots”
Margaret T. McFadden, “America’s Boyfriend Who Can’t Get a Date: Gender,
Race, and the Cultural Work of the Jacky Benny Program.”
Leah Lowe, “IF the Country’s Going Gracie, So Can You”

September 26: 1950s TV (ethnic sitcoms, variety-sitcom blends)
Outside Screening: Duffy’s Tavern, I Love Lucy, Burns & Allen
In-Class Screening: The Goldbergs,
Reading: Lynn Spigel, “Screen Memories”
George Lipsitz, “The Meaning of Memory”
Vincent Brook, “The Americanization of Molly”
Susan Murray, “TV is a Killer”
Patricia Mellencamp, “Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of
Gracie and Lucy”
Susan Carini, “Love’s Labor’s Almost Lost: Managing Crisis During the Reign of
I Love Lucy”
Derek Kompare, “Our Television Heritiage”

September 26: 1960s
Outside Screenings: Patty Duke, Beverly Hillbillies, Bewitched
In-Class Screenings: Gidget
Readings: Mark Alvey, “Too Many Kids and Old Ladies’: Quality Demographics
and 1960s U.S. Television”
Moya Luckett, “Patty Duke and Teen TV”
Carol Stone, “Some Family Characteristics of Socially Active and Inactive Teenagers” (1960)
Leerom Medevoi, “Identitarian Thought and the Cold War World”
Lynn Spigel, “The Fantastic Family Sitcom”
Janet Staiger “The Beverly Hillbillies”

October 3rd: Industrial Issues: Quality & Quantity
Outside screening: Green Acres
In-Class Screening: Mary Tyler Moore
Readings: Staiger, introduction
Jane Feuer, Genre Study and Television
Jane Feuer, MTM chapter
Thomas Schatz, “Desilu, I love Lucy and the Rise of Network TV”
Derek Kompare, “Familiarity Breeds Content”

October 10: Industrial Issues: Political Economy of
Outside screening: Steptoe and Son, A Different World
In-class Screening: Small Wonder
Readings: Derek Kompare, “old wine in new bottles” Rerun Nation
Albert Moran, Copycat TV, p. 1-40
Timothy Havens, “African American TV in the Age of Globalization”

October 17: Discourses of Social Context
Outside Screening: Maude, All in the Family (Edith’s Cousin), Soap
In-Class screening: Till Death Do Us Part
Reading:
Janet Staiger, “All in the Family”
Gitlin, “The turn towards relevance”

*PAPER PROPOSAL DUE

October 24 Mise-en-scene: spaces of work and leisure
Outside Screening: Cheers, Frank’s Place
In-Class Screening: The Facts of Life
Readings:
Horace Newcomb, “The Sense of Place in Frank’s Place”
Herman Gray, “Frank’s Place”
Mimi White, “Frank’s Place in Television”
Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual” (Disorderly Conduct)

October 31 Mise en scene: Body, Performance and Excess
Outside Screening: Mork & Mindy, Bosom Buddies, The Honeymooners, Roseanne
In-Class Screening: *Gimme a Break!*

Read:
Mikhail Bakhtin, “The Grotesque Image of the Body and its Sources” (Rabelais and his World)
Virgina Wright-Wexman, “Back from the Moon: Jackie Gleason, TV Comedy and the Carnivalesque” (Journal of Film and Video 42; 1990)
Jenkins “Gag Performance and Narrative” (Pistachio)
Laura Kipnis, “Life in the Fat Lane”

**November 7 Character: Race, Class & Servitude**

**Outside Screening:** *Laverne & Shirley, Married with Children*

**In Class Screening** *Benson (The Nanny, Who’s the Boss = clips)*

Readings:
Alex Doty, “I Love Laverne and Shirley”
Robert Sklar, “The Fonz, Laverne, Shirley and the Great American Class Struggle”
Denise Kervin, “Ambivalent Pleasure from Married with Children”
Staiger, “Laverne & Shirley”
Linda R. Anderson, “Good Counsel: Servants’ Advice and Commentary” (Servants and Service in Shakespeare’s Plays)

**November 14 Characters: Black Masculinity**

**Outside Screening:** *Family Matters, Diff’rent Strokes, Fresh Prince, Webster*

**In-Class Screening:** Sanford & Son

Readings:
Christin Acham, “This Ain’t No Junk”
Staiger, “Cosby “
Mark Anthony Neal, “Baby Mama (Drama) and Baby Daddy (Trauma)” (Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic)

**November 28 Narrative: The Narrative Challenge of the Sitcom**

**Outside Screening:** *Ellen* final episode, *M*A*S*H* final episode

**In-class Screening:** *Happy Days, Simpsons* (clip episode)

Readings:
Anna McCarthy, “Must See Queer TV”
Jane Feuer, “Narrative Form and Television”
Frank Kermode, “The End” (The Sense of an Ending)

**December 5 Narrative: Revival Strategies**

Screening: *It’s Gary Shandling’s Show, Arrested Development, The Office, Lucky Louie*—web sitcoms—“Studio 102”
NO READINGS THIS WEEK

**December 12 Presentations**
This is a sample syllabus only. Syllabi vary among instructors and are subject to change.