

CHANNELS OF DISCOURSE

TELEVISION AND CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM

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FRONTISPIECE

The ideal TV room, as envisioned by Bloomingdale's in 1949.
(Courtesy of Bloomingdale's)

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GENRE STUDY AND TELEVISION JANE FEUER

The term "genre" is simply the French word for type or kind. When it is used in literary, film, or television studies, however, it takes on a broader set of implications. The very use of the term implies that works of literature, films, and television programs can be categorized; they are not unique. Thus genre theory deals with the ways in which a work may be considered to belong to a class of related works. In many respects the closest analogy to this process would be taxonomy in the biological sciences. Taxonomy dissects the general category of "animal" into a system based on perceived similarity and difference according to certain distinctive features of the various phyla and species. As one literary critic has remarked, "biological classification is itself an explanatory system, which has been devised primarily to make sense of an otherwise disparate group of individuals and which is changed primarily in order to improve that sense. While robins and poems are obviously different, the attempt to make a reasoned sense similarly dominates their study."¹ In a similar way, literature may be divided into comedy, tragedy, and melodrama; Hollywood films into Westerns, musicals, and horror films; television programs into sitcoms, crime shows, and soap operas. Genre theory has the task both of making these divisions and of justifying the classifications once they have been made. Taxonomy has a similar task. However, the two part company when it comes to the question of aesthetic and cultural value. The purpose of taxonomy is not to determine which species are the most excellent examples of their type, or to illustrate the ways in which a species expresses cultural values, or to show how that species manipulates an audience, to mention varying goals of genre classification. But rather than discussing genre analysis as a whole, we should distinguish among the uses of the term for literature, film, and television.

Traditionally, the literary concept of genre has referred to broad categories of literature (such as comedy and tragedy) that tend not to be treated as historically or culturally specific manifestations. For ex-

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ample, Aristotle defined tragedy as an ideal type according to which any particular tragedy must be measured. Even though he drew upon the theater of his own society (classical Greece) for his models, Aristotle spoke of "tragedy" as a kind of overarching structure that informs individual works. Once the ideal structure was achieved, Aristotle implied, tragedy could then have its ideal impact on an audience. (In a similar way, although Hollywood film genres are constructed from actual films, the genre itself is frequently spoken of as an ideal set of traits that inform individual films. Thus, although many individual Westerns do not feature Indians, Indians remain a crucial generic element.) Drawing on Aristotle, the literary critic Northrop Frye attempted in the 1950s to further develop the idea of classifying literature into types and categories that he called "genres" and "modes." Frye commented that "the critical theory of genres is stuck precisely where Aristotle left it."² Frye attempted to further differentiate among types of literature. He classified fiction into *modes* according to the hero's power of action—either greater than ours, less than ours, or the same as ours—arriving at such categories as myth, romance, epic and tragedy, comedy, and realistic fiction according to the hero's relationship to the reader. Frye points out that over the last fifteen centuries these modes have shifted, so that, for example, the rise of the middle class introduces the "low mimetic" mode in which the hero is one of us (AC, pp. 33–35). As for *genres*, Frye distinguishes among drama, epic, and lyric on the basis of their "radical of presentation" (e.g., acted out, sung, read), viewing the distinction as a rhetorical one, with the genre being determined by the relationship between the poet and his public (AC, pp. 246–47).

We can see that the traditional literary view of genre would have only a limited application to film and television. The literary categories are very broad ones. Such literary types as drama and lyric, tragedy and comedy span numerous diverse works and numerous cultures and centuries. Film and television, however, are culturally specific and temporally limited. Instead of employing a broad category such as "comedy," we need to activate specific genres such as the "screwball comedy" (film) or the "situation comedy" (television), categories that may not correspond to or necessarily be subspecies of the literary genre of comedy. As we will see, attempts to measure the comic forms of mass media against the norms of drama are doomed to failure. At this point in the development of film genre theory, the concept has been

applied most usefully to American film and television. Moreover, literary genres tend to be—to employ a distinction from Todorov—*theoretical* to a greater extent than do film and television genres, which tend to be *historical*.³ The former are "deduced from a preexisting theory of literature," whereas the latter are "derived from observation of preexisting literary facts."⁴ That is to say, some genres are accepted by the culture, whereas others are defined by critics. *5/10/1 - M. J. Feuer*

Literary criticism, which has been around much longer than either film or television criticism, has described more genres from the theoretical or deductive perspective. Film and television criticism still tend to take their category names from current historical usage. For example, although Homer did not refer to his own work as an "epic" poem, both industry and critics employ the categories of "Western" and "sitcom." One of the goals of film and television genre criticism is to develop more theoretical models for these historical genres, not necessarily remaining satisfied with industrial or common-sense usage. Thus, in film genre study, the theoretical genre called *film noir* was constructed out of films formerly grouped under the historical labels "detective films," "gangster films," and "thrillers." Indeed, even melodramas such as *Mildred Pierce* were discovered to possess the stylistic traits of this newly created theoretical genre. TV studies is too new to have greatly differentiated between historical and theoretical genres; however, we are now attempting to redefine, if not reclassify, some of the received categories such as soap opera. Originally a derisive term used to condemn other forms of drama as being hopelessly "melodramatic," the term "soap opera" has been refined in a confrontation between such historical examples as the afternoon serial drama, the prime-time serials, and British soap operas. British "soaps," for example, cause us to question the equation of the term soap opera with the mode of melodrama, because their own mode might better be described as "social realism," possessing none of the exaggeration and heightened emotion and gestures of their American cousins. And the middle-class, plodding, woman-centered world of afternoon soaps bears little resemblance to the plutocratic worlds of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*.

Out of this confrontation emerges a new conceptualization of the genre, in which the continuing serial format is not necessarily equated with the descriptive term soap opera. Thus we can retain the *method* of the literary definition of genres without necessarily retaining their

content. The literary concept of genre is based upon the idea, also common to biology, that by classifying literature according to some principle of coherence, we can arrive at a greater understanding of the structure and purpose of our object of study. Thus the taxonomist begins with already existing examples of the type. From these, he/she builds a conceptual model of the genre, then goes on to apply the model to other examples, constantly moving back and forth between theory and practice until the conceptual model appears to account for the phenomena under consideration. (Of course, this is a lot easier when the genre is already complete—not, as with television, when the genre is in a constant state of flux and redefinition.)

As Rick Altman points out, every corpus thus conceived reflects a particular methodology. The constitution of a generic corpus is not independent of or logically prior to the development of a methodology.⁵ According to another literary critic, "What makes a genre 'good,' in other words, is its power to make the literary text 'good'—however that 'good' be presently defined by our audience."⁶ Thus, what makes the popular artifacts of movies and television "good" may not correspond to the generic "good" of literary works.

It is due to their nature as artifacts of popular culture that films and television programs have been treated in a specific way in genre studies. Genre study in film has had a historically and culturally specific meaning. It has come to refer to the study of a particular kind of film—the mass-produced "formulas" of the Hollywood studio system. This concept of formula has been defined by John Caweltz:

A formula is a conventional system for structuring cultural products. It can be distinguished from invented structures which are new ways of organizing works of art. Like the distinction between convention and invention, the distinction between formula and structure can be envisaged as a continuum between the two poles; one pole is that of a completely conventional structure of conventions—an episode of the Lone Ranger or one of the Tarzan books comes close to this pole; the other end of the continuum is a completely original structure which orders inventions—*Finnegan's Wake* is perhaps the ultimate example.⁷

In this way, the concept of genre stems from a conception of film as an industrial product. That is, the particular economic organization of the film industry led to a kind of product standardization antithetical to

surface structure that he calls the "genre film." The genre film is the individual instance, the individual utterance or speech act (*parole*). The film genre is more like a grammar (*langue*), that is, a system for conventional usage. According to Schatz, the film genre represents a tacit contract between the motion-picture industry and the audience, whereas the genre film represents an event that honors that contract. According to this linguistic view, a film genre is both a static and a dynamic system. However, unlike language, individual utterances do have the capacity to change the rules.⁸ To take an example from television, by introducing overt political content, *All in the Family* altered the grammar of the television sitcom.

The language analogy sees an active but indirect participatory role for the audience in this process of genre construction. For the industrial arts, the concept of genre can bring into play (1) the system of production, (2) structural analysis of the text, and (3) the reception process, with the audience conceived as an interpretive community. Rick Altman relates the concept of genre to that of the interpretive community. For him, the genre serves to limit the free play of signification and to restrict semiosis. The genre, that is to say, usurps the function of an interpretive community by providing a context for interpretation of the films and by naming a specific set of intertexts according to which the films must be read. The genre limits the field of play of the interpretive community. Altman sees this as an ideological project because it is an attempt to control the audience's reaction by providing an interpretive context. Genres are thus not neutral categories, but, rather, they are ideological constructs that provide and enforce a pre-reading.⁹ In a similar way, Steve Neale sees genres as part of the dominant cinema's "mental machinery," not just as properties possessed by texts. Neale defines genres as "systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject." Any one genre, then, is both a "coherent and systematic body of film texts" and a coherent and systematic set of expectations. Neale agrees with Altman that genres limit the possibilities of meaning, both exploiting and containing the diversity of mainstream cinema.¹⁰ Drawing upon Altman and Neale, we can conclude that each theoretical genre is a construct of an analyst. The methodology that the analyst brings to bear upon the texts determines the way in which that analyst will construct the genre. Thus genres are made, not born. The coherence is provided in the process of construction, and a genre is ultimately an

abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world.

Thus we can distinguish a number of different reasons why the concept of genre has figured in both popular and critical discourses as an "instrument for the regulation of difference."¹¹ From the television industry's point of view, unlimited originality of programming would be a disaster because it could not assure the delivery of the weekly audience, as do the episodic series and continuing serial. In this sense, television takes to an extreme the film industry's reliance upon formulas in order to predict audience popularity. For the audience—as members of various interpretive communities for American mass culture—genre assures the interpretability of the text. Through repetition, the cultural "deep structure" of a film genre "seeps to the surface." The audience—without conscious awareness—thus continually rehearses basic cultural contradictions that cannot be resolved within the existing socioeconomic system outside of the text: law and order versus the idea of individual success (the gangster genre); nature versus culture (the Western); the work ethic versus the pleasure principle (the musical).

The approaches to genre we have discussed might be summarized under three labels—the aesthetic, the ritual, and the ideological approaches. Although in practice these are not absolutely distinct, in general we can use them to distinguish among different approaches that have been taken toward film and television genres. The *aesthetic approach* includes all attempts to define genre in terms of a system of conventions that permits artistic expression, especially involving individual authorship. The aesthetic approach also includes attempts to assess whether an individual work fulfills or transcends its genre. The *ritual approach* sees genre as an exchange between industry and audience, an exchange through which a culture speaks to itself. Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch refer to television as a "cultural forum" involving the negotiation of shared beliefs and values, and helping to maintain and rejuvenate the social order as well as assisting it in adapting to change.¹² Most approaches based on the language analogy take the ritual view. The *ideological approach* views genre as an instrument of control. At the industrial level, genres assure the advertisers of an audience for their messages. At the textual level, genres are ideological insofar as they serve to reproduce the dominant ideology of the capitalist system. The genre positions the interpretive community in such

"genre film." The genre film is the utterance or speech act (*parole*). *l'langue*), that is, a system for Schatz, the film genre represents a picture industry and the audience, an event that honors that contract. A film genre is both a static and a dynamic, individual utterances do. To take an example from television content, *All in the Family* altered om. active but indirect participatory role of genre construction. For the industry bring into play (1) the system of the text, and (3) the reception of genre as an interpretive community. of genre to that of the interpretive to limit the free play of significance, that is to say, usurps the function by providing a context for interpretation. The audience's reaction by providing are thus not neutral categories, but, products that provide and enforce a pre-Neale sees genres as part of the dominant, "not just as properties possessed by systems of orientations, expectations, between industry, text and subject." coherent and systematic body of film Neale agrees. Neale agrees with a set of expectations. The possibilities of meaning, both existing of mainstream cinema.¹⁰ Drawing conclude that each theoretical genre methodology that the analyst brings to the way in which that analyst will construct, not born. The coherence is function, and a genre is ultimately an

a way as to naturalize the dominant ideologies expressed in the text. However, some ideological critics allow for constant conflict and contradiction in the reproduction of ideology, as the ruling ideas attempt to secure hegemony. A more reader-oriented ideological model would allow for the production of meanings by the viewer as well. Thus recent approaches to genre have attempted to combine the insights of the ritual approach with those of the ideological approach. According to Rick Altman, "because the public doesn't want to know that it's being manipulated, the successful ritual/ideological 'fit' is almost always one that disguises Hollywood's potential for manipulation while playing up its capacity for entertainment. . . . The successful genre owes its success not alone to its reflection of an audience ideal, nor solely to its status as apology for the Hollywood enterprise, but to its ability to carry out both functions simultaneously."¹³

THE SITUATION COMEDY

As an example of the generic approach to television analysis, I have chosen to discuss the most basic program format known to the medium—the situation comedy. In general, television taxonomy has not yet advanced to the point where a clear distinction between historical and theoretical genres has emerged. Thus all TV genres in some sense remain historical genres, those defined by a consensus between the industry, *TV Guide*, and the viewing audience. The sitcom is no exception. We are all capable of identifying its salient features: the half-hour format, the basis in humor, the "problem of the week" that causes the hilarious situation and that will be resolved so that a new episode may come on next week.

Nevertheless, different methodologies for defining the genre have produced different notions of the sitcom as genre. I will discuss the ways in which three critics have approached the genre in order to demonstrate that each has constructed a *different* genre called the sitcom. David Grote takes a literary approach to the genre and finds that it lacks development of any kind, serving merely to reassert the status quo. Horace Newcomb also finds the genre limited in its capacity for ambiguity, development, and the ability to challenge our values; however, because he takes a ritual view, he does see the genre as basic to an understanding of the reassurance the television medium provides

for its audience. David Marc appears to believe that certain authors can make the sitcom form into social satire; his would represent an aesthetic approach. Finally, my own approach will be a synthetic one, viewing the sitcom as a genre that did develop, for historical reasons, in the direction of the continuing serial.

The most literary—and consequently the most negative—view of the television sitcom is taken by David Grote. According to Grote, television has completely rejected the type of comic plot that has dominated the comedic tradition from Greek and Roman times—a type that, following Northrop Frye, he calls “new comedy.” In the tradition of new comedy, a very basic arrangement of plot and character has predominated. In it, a young man’s desire for a young woman meets with resistance, usually by her father, but before the end of the play, a plot reversal enables the boy to get the girl. This is the plot of Greek new comedy, which can be dated back to 317 B.C., but it is also the plot of Shakespeare’s comedies, of Hollywood romantic comedies, and of many musical comedies. While few would dispute the longevity of this plot paradigm, many might question Grote’s next step, which is to make a sweeping historical generalization about the social meaning of new comedy and then to use that generalization to disparage the sitcom as a new form of comedy that rejects that social meaning. According to Grote, the comic plot is social in nature because the forces that keep the lovers apart always represent social authority. The resistance of the young lovers to the parental figure thus represents a threat to power, authority, and stability, because, according to Grote, in this type of comedy father *never* knows best.

At the end of the traditional (“new”) comedy, there is a celebration—usually the wedding of the young people—at which the father is involved back in. The authority figure actually admits that he was wrong and the rebellious children right. The basic comic plot uses the young couple’s union to symbolize the promise of the future, guaranteeing the possibility of personal change and, with it, social change. In this way Grote assumes that the basic comedy plot has held the same meaning in different cultures and throughout history, thus conceptualizing the genre as an ideal type with a single, ahistorical, acultural meaning. His next step is even more universalizing: he claims that the TV sitcom completely rejects both the form and the meaning of this traditional comic plot, thus symbolizing the “end of comedy” as a progressive social force.

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Grote bases his static conception of the sitcom form on its nature as an episodic series, that is, a program with continuing characters but with a new plot (situation) each week. Thus, no matter what happens, the basic situation can't change. From this, Grote generalizes that the sitcom resists the change of the traditional comic plot and indeed resists change of any kind:

The situation comedy as it has evolved on American television has rejected more than the traditional comedy plot. Not only does boy not pursue and capture girl, he does not pursue *anything*. The principal fundamental situation of the situation comedy is that things do not change. No new society occurs at the end. The only end is death, for characters as well as for the situation itself, the precise opposite of the rebirth and new life promised in the celebrations of the traditional comedy. The series may come on every week for no more reason than that it is convenient for the network and the sponsors, but the messages that accompany those weekly appearances are the messages of defense, of protection, of the impossibility of progress or any other positive change. . . . That such a change occurred is curious, but that such a change occurred in the largest mass medium known to man, in the most progressive and changeable society in Western history, and was immensely popular, is almost incredible. Everything the traditional comedy stood for, at every level of art, psychology, philosophy, and myth, has been overthrown in this New Comedy of American television.¹⁴

I have chosen to discuss Grote's "construction" of the genre not because I think it is the construction that does the most "good" for the texts, but rather because I think it takes to an extreme a very common view that the TV sitcom is by nature a conservative and static form. The goal of the sitcom, according to Grote, is to reaffirm the stability of the family as an institution. Thus Grote moves, as would any genre analyst, from an identification of the formal features of the text (in this case the nature of the episodic series and the fact that each episode returns to the equilibrium with which it began), to a generalization about the meaning of these features (they represent a rejection of change of any kind) to a social, cultural, political, or aesthetic interpretation of the genre (the sitcom represents the end of the progressive potential of the traditional comic plot). If we accept Grote's premises, his conclusions are not illogical. However, his entire argument depends

on an acceptance of his belief that after centuries of progressiveness, the meaning of comedy suddenly shifted to a regressive one for no other reason than that the television medium has transformed history. Many would find this difficult to accept as an historical explanation.

Yet even the more complex "ritual" view of the genre constructed by Horace Newcomb bases its model for the genre on the formal qualities of the episodic series. For Newcomb (writing in 1974, and thus without full knowledge of the developments in the genre during the 1970s), the sitcom formula provides a paradigm for what occurs in more complex program types and provides a model of a television formula in that "its rigid structure is so apparent."¹⁵ The situation is "the funny thing that will happen this week." Next week there will be a new situation entirely independent of what happened this week. The situation develops through complication and confusion usually involving human error. There is no plot development and no exploration of ideas or of conflict: "The only movement is toward the alleviation of the complication and the reduction of confusion" (TV, p. 34). Thus Newcomb sees the sitcom as providing a simple and reassuring problem/solution formula. The audience is reassured, not challenged by choice or ambiguity, nor are we forced to reexamine our values. When the sitcom shifts its meaning away from situations and toward persons, we find ourselves in a slightly different formula, that of the "domestic comedy," says Newcomb. Newcomb defines the domestic comedy as one in which the problems are mental and emotional; there is a deep sense of personal love among members of the family and a belief in the family—however that may be defined—as a supportive group. Although, as with the sitcom, the outcome is never in doubt, for the domestic comedy "it is also true that there is more room for ambiguity and complexity, admittedly of a minimal sort. Characters do seem to change because of what happens to them in the problem-solving process. Usually they 'learn' something about human nature" (TV, p. 53). Newcomb goes on to point out that the form of the domestic comedy may expand when problems encountered by the family become socially or politically significant (as in *All in the Family* or *M*A*S*H*).

Newcomb thus constructs the sitcom as the most "basic" of the television genres in the sense that it is the furthest from "real world" problems such as are encountered in crime shows, and from real world forms and value conflicts such as are encountered in soap operas. It is, in a sense, formula for formula's sake; the very ritualistic simplicity of

the problem/solution format gives us a comforting feeling of security as to the cultural status quo. Newcomb thus constructs a ritual view of the genre, but a ritual view based upon an essentially static conception of the episodic series such as had informed Grote's more universalized and literary account. Newcomb's major interpretation comes in the equation of the form with a cultural meaning of stability and reassurance. For it is equally possible to view the static nature of the sitcom form as having the potential to challenge our received norms and values.

This is the position that David Marc appears to take in his chapter on "The Situation Comedy of Paul Henning."¹⁶ Marc attributes the subversive potential of sitcoms such as *The Beverly Hillbillies* to the presence of an author—in this case, the producer Paul Henning—thus making his an aesthetic conception of genre (i.e., an author can work in a banal genre such as the sitcom and transform it into an individual statement). Nevertheless, the argument for the subversive potential of the static sitcom form need not depend upon the aesthetic conception but may be seen to lie in the ideology of the genre itself, quite apart from what a particular author may choose to do with it.

For Grote and, to a lesser extent, Newcomb, *The Beverly Hillbillies* would qualify as a basic episodic sitcom that endlessly replays the theme of the virtue of plain values and the rejection of materialism. For Marc, the show is a brilliant caricature of cultural values and conflicts, in its way as much of a social critique as *All in the Family*. We can find the theme of the backwoodsman versus the city slicker in American folklore and in other television genres as well (the family dramas of *Little House on the Prairie* and *The Waltons* frequently feature this theme). In the sitcom, however, the theme is treated comically, giving it a satirical potential.

Marc would agree with Grote and Newcomb that on *The Beverly Hillbillies*, the plots never develop very far: the Clampetts never adjust to life in Beverly Hills; the family is never accepted by their neighbors; Elly May never marries; Granny never gives up her mountain ways. But Marc does not evaluate this lack of development in a negative light. Rather, he sees the Henning sitcoms as a departure from the formula of the 1950s sitcom. Unlike Newcomb's domestic comedy, in Henning sitcoms the individual crisis of a family member does not provide us with the weekly situation. We don't identify emotionally with the Clampett's problems, as we would in a program with more psycho-

logical development of characters, so that instead, *The Beverly Hillbillies* provides us with an almost pure cultural conflict. Marc says that we are invited to test our own cultural assumptions because "the antagonists are cultures" and the characters "charged cultural entities." He concludes that Paul Henning's *The Beverly Hillbillies*, while not satire per se, is nonetheless a "nihilistic caricature of modern life."

Thus Marc differs from Grote and Newcomb not over their description of the sitcom's lack of plot and character development, but rather over their interpretation of what this essentially static genre means. For Grote, it means that the sitcom is inferior to the dominant literary form of comedy; for Newcomb, that it aids in the restoration and maintenance of society. For Marc, it would seem to mean something entirely different: he implies that Henning's comic treatment may be more socially satirical than the expansive form of domestic comedy that accommodates social and political issues (the Norman Lear sitcoms of the early- to mid-1970s being the epitome of this type). In this way the static sitcom structure can explore ideas and challenge dominant cultural values, and it is able to do so precisely because it does not allow our individualistic identification with well-developed characters to get in the way. If we follow out the logic of this point of view, it could lead to the conclusion that *The Beverly Hillbillies* was more of a social satire than *All in the Family*, in which our identification with the more well-rounded Archie Bunker was likely to outweigh the positive liberal benefits of the show's intended satire of his racist beliefs.

Although all three models represent useful individual constructions of a television genre, none seems to me to account for the role of the interpretive community in the construction of a genre or the role of history in generic "evolution." In fact, one of the dangers of a generic approach is a built-in tendency to structuralize the model in such a way that it is impossible to explain changes or to see a genre as a dynamic model. The basis of much genre theory in the language analogy tends to remove it from history as well and to emphasize structure over development. When applied to the television medium, this danger is even greater, for we already have cultural preconceptions as to the "sameness" of television programming, that is, "if you've seen one sitcom, you've seen them all." The impression of continuity over difference intensifies when television is evaluated according to literary conceptions of genre, with their centuries of evolution, or even according to the half-century span of film genres such as the Western. I would

argue, however, that the sitcom has "evolved" in its brief lifetime, in the sense that it has gone through some structural shifts and has modulated the episodic series in the direction of the continuing serial. This is not to say that the genre has "progressed" or become "better," but rather that it has become different. Unlike Groie, I think the changes need to be explained, but I also think that explaining such changes must be part of a complex construction of the genre.

As an example of how I would construct the genre, let's trace the development of the situation comedy from the late 1960s to the present. In order to do this, we have to take into account developments in the industry, social and cultural history, and developments more or less internal to the genre.¹⁷ A common explanation for the move away from the "rural" sitcoms of the late 1960s and toward the social and political domestic comedy of the early- to mid-seventies is that the audience "felt a need" for a more sophisticated conception of the genre. Then, in the mid-seventies, they wanted the "mindless" teen-oriented sitcoms. In the 1980s, they desire family warmth, which signifies a return to the wholesome domestic comedies of the 1950s. The explanation of generic evolution/programming trends according to an assumed "need" on the part of the interpretive community is the most common way in which industry observers and participants construct TV genres. As an historical construct, it is worthy of analysis in itself (why this construction and not another?); as a theoretical construct, however, it begs the question. The concept of audience "need" is a substitute for an explanation of shifts in a culture, in an industry, and in a narrative form; in itself it does not explain anything. In at least one instance—the emergence of the MTM and Lear sitcoms in 1971—it can be demonstrated that what changed was *not* the demands of any empirical audience, but rather the industry's own construction of network television's interpretive community. Whereas in the era of the Paul Henning "hayseed" sitcoms the industry had conceptualized the audience as an aggregate or mass, it was now reconceptualizing the audience as a differentiated mass possessing identifiable demographic characteristics. This also caused the industry to redefine the measure of the popularity of a particular genre or program. Now "popularity" came to mean high ratings with the eighteen- to forty-nine-year-old urban dweller, rather than popularity with the older, rural audience that had kept the Paul Henning sitcoms on the air throughout the 1960s. Later, the industry refined its model audience once again. During the "Silverman

years" of the mid- to late-1970s, the audience for sitcoms was defined as mindless teenagers; hence *Three's Company*, *Happy Days*, and *Laraine and Shirley*. In the 1980s, the desirable audience—at least for the NBC network—became the high-consuming 'yuppie' audience, thus defining the popularity of shows such as *Cheers* and *Family Ties*.

Of course, the audience itself no doubt changed from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s—specifically, the baby boomers matured during this period. And, of course, cultural changes no doubt influenced the generic shifts in the sitcom. But they did not directly cause the genre to change. It seems clear that the industry acted as an intermediary factor, in that it was continually redefining the audience for its own ends. An interesting question to pose would be: what caused the industry to redefine the audience at certain points, and to what extent did this really correspond to material changes in the culture? To further complicate the causality, the sitcom itself was responding to changes in other television genres—specifically, to what I would label the serialization of American television, throughout the 1970s.

Thus the sitcom, around 1970, shifted away from the "one dramatic conflict series" model of *The Beverly Hillbillies* and toward an expanded conception of the domestic comedy.¹⁸ This was not necessarily as abrupt a shift as it now seems; earlier programs such as *The Dick van Dyke Show* (1961–66) had prepared the way for a reconceptualization of the domestic comedy in the direction of the home/office blend that would characterize the MTM sitcoms of the 1970s. Specifically, in the early seventies the sitcom was developed by two independent production companies (themselves responses to industrial changes): MTM Enterprises, which produced *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *The Bob Newhart Show*, *Rhoda*, and others; and Norman Lear's Tandem Productions, which produced *All in the Family*, *Maude*, *The Jeffersons*, and others. The aesthetic view comes into play here in the sense that the independent production companies encouraged the development of the writer/producer as a crucial creative component in the development of the new form of domestic comedy. (Of course, the emergence of the writer/producer was itself dependent upon cultural and industrial factors.)

We might say that the MTM and Lear sitcoms transformed the situation/domestic comedy by adapting the problems encountered by family members either in the direction of social and political issues (Lear) or in the direction of "lifestyle" issues (MTM). Thus the Bunker

family had to deal with problems caused by blacks moving into the neighborhood, whereas Mary and Rhoda had to deal with problems caused by their being representatives of a new type of woman—working, single, independent, and confused. The basic problem/solution format of the sitcom did not change. Rather, the nature of the problems shifted and the conception of character held by the sitcom genre altered.

The Lear sitcoms were more influential in shifting the terrain of the characters' problems, whereas the MTM sitcoms were more influential in altering the conception of character. We have already seen that the assumed apolitical nature of the pre-1970s sitcom is called into question by new constructions of the genre through readings of programs such as *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Such readings assume that over the years the cultural conflict endlessly repeated in that show must have had some impact on the audience, however unconsciously that impact was assimilated. Nevertheless, the Lear sitcoms introduced an overtly political agenda into the genre. But it was in their conception of character that the "new wave" sitcoms of the 1970s most markedly altered the "grammar" of the formula.

The new domestic comedies introduced a limited but significant concept of character development into the genre. Although all comic characters are of necessity stereotyped (i.e., they possess a limited number of traits compared to actual individuals), the new sitcom characters were less stereotyped than their predecessors, especially in the MTM "lifestyle" variety. If the hillbillies never adapted to modern life, the same could not be said for Mary, who began her show by moving from a small town to Minneapolis in order to start a career. If previous characters in domestic comedy learned a little from experience, Mary learned a lot. Over the seven years the program was on the air, she became more assertive, more her own person. Similarly, Rhoda went from single womanhood to marriage to divorcee status within the span of her own series, each experience registering on the character and deepening our sense of her life experience. As television characters, the MTM women appeared to possess a complexity previously unknown to the genre. As both the nation and the industry became more conservative in the mid-1970s, the grammatical innovations of the Lear programs appeared passé, as political relevance faded from the sitcom's repertoire. But MTM's "character comedy" survived the transition from the new wave sitcoms of the early 1970s to the Silverman

programs of the mid- to late-1970s. Then, under the impetus of an overall serialization and "yupification" of American television in the 1980s, the MTM sitcom emerged as the dominant form of the genre.

The idea of character development inevitably moves a genre based on the episodic series model toward the continuing serial form. This is what occurred, for example, when Rhoda's wedding and subsequent divorce gave the episodes of that sitcom a continuing plot line and character continuity. But character development is also a quality prized by the upscale audience, which tends to have a more literary standard of value. We have already seen that the idea of character depth and development does not necessarily make for "better" or even for more sophisticated programming. To value "character comedy" over other comic techniques is to take up an ideological position, to construct the genre in a particular way and to value it for a kind of depth that some would construe as ideologically conservative. According to certain Marxist analyses of art (in particular, Bertolt Brecht's concept of the epic theater), flat characters are more politically progressive because they take us away from our identification with the characters and force us to think about how the play is constructed. According to this view, character complexity and development is merely a representation of bourgeois values. We have already seen a version of the Brechtian position in the argument that the concept of character in *The Beverly Hillbillies* is more socially critical than the concept of character in *All in the Family* or in *Cheers*. And, finally, character growth and development over time, along with an awareness of its own past, has always characterized the continuing serial, which, with the growing popularity of daytime serials in the late 1970s and the emergence of the prime-time serial genre with *Dallas*, finally emerged as a new narrative paradigm for generic television. The evolving sitcom had helped to prepare the way for the growth of serial drama; reciprocally, serialization gave a new grammar to the upscale comedies of the eighties. *Cheers* is a good example of the eighties sitcom designed to capture the upscale demographic audience. Sam and Diane develop from season to season. After their torrid affair of the second season, and their breakup in the third season, an episode in the fourth season harks back to the past. Thinking they are about to perish in an airplane crash, Sam confesses that he should have married Diane. That same season, they almost rekindle their lust for one another. This gives their relationship a sense of development and the series a sense of history.

At the same time, another "lifestyle" sitcom, *The Cosby Show*, returns us to the father-knows-best world of the 1950s domestic comedy, a world from which class and racial conflict are once again absent. The element of struggle in the Lear sitcoms would seem to have been put aside. Yet this absence has a different ideological motivation in the 1980s. The implication is that racial and economic equality have already been achieved, whereas in the fifties they were not yet seen as problems worthy of incorporation into the ideology of the domestic comedy. In this manner the sitcom genre develops unevenly, with different sitcoms operating at different points in the genre's ideological transformation.

The argument just made might lead a genre analyst to conclude that the sitcom does not fit theories of generic evolution developed for Hollywood film genres. According to the most teleological version of the theory of generic evolution, a genre begins with a naive version of its particular cultural mythology, then develops toward an increasingly self-conscious awareness of its own myths and conventions. It is implied that the genre is also progressing toward a higher version of its type. Although it is possible to construct the TV sitcom according to this evolutionary model, one could equally argue that the sitcom has gone through repeated cycles of regression to earlier incarnations, as exemplified by the cycle of "mindless" teen comedies of the 1970s and by the return to the traditional domestic comedy in the mid-eighties. Another theory of film genre development argues that after a period of experimentation, a film genre settles upon a classical "syntax" that later dissolves back into a random collection of traits, now used to deconstruct the genre.¹⁹ This theory does not attempt to judge the value of any stage of generic development, nor does it see a genre as necessarily progressing toward a more perfect form. Yet it is difficult to see how this theory would apply to the TV sitcom either. There have been sitcoms that reflect back upon earlier ones (elsewhere I have argued that *Buffalo Bill* represented an inversion of the idea of the family of cowboys epitomized by *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*).²⁰ Yet even when it is possible to identify a period during which a stable "syntax" prevailed in the genre—such as the MTM/Lear hegemony of the 1970s—it is not as easy to point to a movement toward ever-greater self-reflexivity in a genre such as the sitcom. Rather, it would seem that the genre has gone through a series of transformations, some of which returned it to earlier versions of its own paradigm. Indeed, when

U.S. network television took on a greater self-reflexivity in the late 1970s with programs such as *Saturday Night Live* and *SCTV Comedy Network*, self-consciousness tended to emerge across genres rather than within them.

The problems involved in applying the theory of film genre evolution to television should remind us that genre theory as a whole might work better for film than for TV. Film genres really were mechanisms for the regulation of difference. The genre organized large numbers of individual works into a coherent system that could be recognized by the interpretive community. Television has always employed standard program types, but arguably this has not been the main principle of coherence for the medium. Television programs do not operate as discrete texts to the same extent as did movies; the property of "flow" blends one program unit into another, and programs are regularly "interrupted" by ads and promos. Thus many critics have argued that perhaps the unit of coherence for television is at a level larger than the program and different from the genre—for example, an evening's viewing on a particular network or all the possible combinations of programs a viewer could sample on an evening.

Theories of the evolution of film genres have argued that genres such as the Western and the musical develop by recombining and commenting upon earlier instances of their *own* genre. Of course, it was not uncommon during the Hollywood studio era (and it is even more common in contemporary Hollywood films that no longer exhibit the distinct genre boundaries of yore) for new instances to develop out of the recombination of previous genres. After all, one of the best-known "musicals" ever—*Oklaoma!*—could be considered a musical Western. But it is arguable that Hollywood genres had a greater tendency to draw upon their own predecessors, thus keeping generic boundaries relatively distinct and enabling them to serve an ideological function for the interpretive community as they recombined in ever more complex ways. Television genres, on the other hand, appear to have a greater tendency to recombine *across* genre lines. For instance, *Hill Street Blues* might be described as a crime show soap opera documentary that resembles the medical show *St. Elsewhere* far more than other crime shows or soap operas. And there exists an entire TV "genre"—the late-night comedy show—whose raison d'être appears to be to comment upon the whole range of television genres. This greater horizontal recombination also points to the limitations of

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the typically vertical consideration of the development of film genres. The genre approach has its limits in the process of constructing an understanding of the medium. Yet, as this chapter has tried to demonstrate, it also has its virtues.

NOTES

1. Adena Rosmarin, *The Power of Genre* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 167.
2. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 13. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.
3. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Cleveland, Ohio: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1975), pp. 13-14.
4. Rosmarin, *Power of Genre*, p. 26.
5. Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
6. Rosmarin, *Power of Genre*, p. 49.
7. John Cawelti, *The Six Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1970), p. 29.
8. Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* (New York: Random House, 1981), pp. 15-20.
9. Altman, *American Film Musical*.
10. Steve Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), p. 20.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
12. Horace M. Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, "Television as a Cultural Forum: Implications for Research," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 8, no. 3 (1983): 45-55.
13. Rick Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genres," *Cinema Journal* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1984): 14-15.
14. David Grote, *The End of Comedy: The Sit-Com and the Comedic Tradition* (Hamden, Conn.: Shoestring Press, 1983), p. 105.
15. Horace Newcomb, TV: *The Most Popular Art* (New York: Anchor, 1974), p. 28. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.
16. David Marc, *Demographic Vistas: Television in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), pp. 39-63.
17. For a more extensive discussion of the sitcom, see Jane Feuer et al., *MTM: Quality Television* (London: British Film Institute, 1984); and Jane Feuer, "Narrative Form in Television," in *High Theory, Low Culture*, ed. Colin MacCabe (Manchester, Eng.: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 101-14.
18. The phrase "one dramatic conflict series" is from Marc, *Demographic Vistas*, p. 62.
19. Altman, "Semantic/Syntactic Approach."
20. See "The MTM Style," in Feuer et al., *MTM*, pp. 52-56.

FOR FURTHER READING

This chapter has emphasized traditional literary conceptualizations of genre. For a contemporary Marxist view of literary genres (at an advanced level), see Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative As a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), particularly ch. 2, "Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism."

A readable work on film genre theory that also contains detailed critical and historical analysis of particular genres is Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* (New York: Random House, 1981). The most complete treatise to date on film genre theory is Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), which also contains a complete examination of the musical genre. Less readable, but more in the tradition of continental theory, is Steve Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980).

The major work to date on television genres, and also a highly accessible one, is still Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art* (New York: Anchor, 1974). A number of books and articles deal with television genres, although not necessarily from a "genre studies" perspective. An article that does deal specifically with the concept of genre, employing Neale's theory of genre, is Paul Attallah, "The Unworthy Discourse: Situation Comedy in Television," in *Interpreting Television: Current Research Perspectives*, ed. Willard D. Rowland, Jr., and Bruce Watkins (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1984), pp. 222-49. *Wood Musical* (London: Macmillan, 1982), especially ch. 5. This type of theory is tested upon television genres in Mimi White, "Television Genres: Intertextuality," *Journal of Film and Video* 37, no. 3 (1985): 41-47.

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