

Peter Burleigh & Andrea Ochsner
(University of Basel, Switzerland)

The British Sitcom in the 1970s: a site of cultural discourses.

In terms of cultural changes with regard to film and television, the 1970s in Britain mainly stand for two things, namely the ever-increasing popularity of the mirror to the world, the television, and the rise of the independent cinema. However, the 1970s were also the heydays of popular British sitcoms. *Steptoe & Son*,

The Likely Lads, *Porridge*, *Rising Damp*, to name just a few, swept the country and made its population laugh, independent of class, race or gender.

Based on a larger project on British culture in different media (novel, film, sitcom) from the 1950s to the present day with regard to class and gender, our paper argues that the reason the British sitcom was at its peak in the 1970s is grounded in an interrelationship between a number of incisive cultural changes. The recession and social unrest in those days made people focus more on the domestic and hence furthered the depiction of closed-off microcosms. In other words, the Steptoe court-yard or Fletcher's prison cell in *Porridge* lend themselves rather well to articulate everyday problems that occur in clearly defined spaces that people at the time for various reasons were compelled to withdraw to.

Secondly, the changing gender relations in terms of second-wave feminism put British masculinity in a critical spotlight. Therefore, in the sitcom of the 1970s we witness a process of re-signification of masculinity in terms of male subject positions. We often find men trapped in homosocial spaces, either created by themselves or ones which they are thrown into, where they make each others' lives difficult.

Third, against the backdrop of emergent Thatcherite politics and its promotion of middle-class values, the sitcom of the 1970s make upward social mobility (or the lack of it) one of its most important topics. The circular narrative closure of the sitcom is a perfect form to show the characters' entrapment.

Minor achievements and little victories are pitched against the big social change never to be achieved.

Last but not least, our paper highlights the humour the British sitcom of the 1970s typically displays. Recognizable social types in likewise recognizable social positions, harbouring hopes and fears that were typical for that era, make Harold Steptoe *et al* unforgettable and the British sitcom of the 1970s a most valuable source for cultural analysis.