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“The British Sitcom in the 1970s: applied tactics in confined spaces”

1. Introduction

In terms of cultural changes with regard to film and television, the 1970s in Britain mainly stand for two things: the ever-increasing popularity of the mirror to the world, television, and the rise of independent cinema. However, the 1970s were also the heyday of popular British sitcoms. *Steptoe & Son, The Likely Lads, Porridge, Rising Damp, The Good Life, Fawlty Towers,* to name just a few, swept the country and made its population laugh, independent of class, race or gender.

Our argument is contextualized as part of a larger project exploring the construction and articulation of class and gender in British culture through different media—novel, film, and sitcom—from the 1950s to the present day. Located within a broader setting, our analysis here employs a close reading of two classics from the BBC’s stable of sitcom, to stake a claim for British sitcom’s peak in the 1970s as grounded in an interrelationship between a number of incisive cultural changes.

The recession and social unrest in the 1970s driven by the reorganization of work practices and the social fabric made people focus more on the domestic and hence furthered the depiction of closed-off microcosms. In this predicament, Albert and Harold’s court-yard in *Steptoe and Son* or Fletcher’s prison cell in *Porridge* lend themselves well to articulate everyday problems that occur in clearly defined spaces which people at the time—for various reasons—were compelled to withdraw to. In our view, then, the sitcom is a safe haven from which to play out by proxy a series of ‘little victories’ in direct contestation with the disruptive social forces in the world outside sitcom’s confines.

Secondly, changing gender relations in terms of second-wave feminism put British masculinity in a critical spotlight. 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 those created by themselves or ones into which they are thrown—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 centralized upward social mobility (or the lack of it) as 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. Moreover, as mentioned above, being contestations the sitcom performances convey other oppositional readings from representation, the TV form of a social world, to the political experience of a sitcom's audience.

The settings and popularity of two particular examples of the British sitcom of the 1970s, namely *Porridge* (which ran from 1973 to 1977 for 17 episodes with two Christmas specials) and *Steptoe & Son* (which ran in two phases from 1960 to 1965 and 1970 to 1974 with a total of 55 episodes and two Christmas specials), lend themselves perfectly to exemplify our approach against the background of the above made premises. Our analysis, with its theoretical methodology based on the work of the French anthropologist Michel de Certeau, explores the performance of confinement to a particular social space and appraises the ensuing entrapment and reveals how sitcom is a rich site for cultural investigation.

2. The sitcom as subject of analysis

The sitcom has not been given a great deal of scholarly attention since, according to Brett Mills, the two disciplines most likely to engage with the format, cultural and media studies, have not considered the sitcom a worthy object of analysis. For cultural studies, which has traditionally concerned itself with power regimes, the ideological message the sitcom conveys somehow seems too obvious. Media studies has neglected the sitcom, too, because it has focused on forms that seemed ostensibly more socially relevant, such as news formats or documentaries (Mills 2005, 2).

From a critical theory perspective, on the other hand, the study of television genres of any kind has been neglected because "[t]he entertainment it provides has long been considered inferior to the entertainment provided by books or films or plays" (Attallah 2003, 93). Furthermore, as Fiske and Hartley contend "Television realism […] 'naturalizes' the way in which we apprehend the world out-there" [as a] "characteristically 'bourgeois' mode of representation" (Fiske and Hartley 1978, 161f).

We argue, however, that sitcom is based on a complex dramatic set-up that can be compared to cultural products from the spectrum of high culture. Specifically, we can identify three functions that characterize sitcom as a particular TV-format.

Sitcom operates partially through realism in order that the audience can easily identify with its content; at the same time it eschews a totally unmediated view on the world in order that the *dramatic distance* so created allows space for the humour its audience enjoys. Second, there is a degree of *unpredictability* about how an audience will read and react to sitcom, evidenced, for example, by the moral outrage expressed through the tabloid press's initial reception of *Porridge*, on the one hand, shortly followed by its popular success for perhaps the very same reasons that outrage was initially prompted. Third, at the critical level, there is also a degree of *indeterminacy*, for while the writers of a sitcom might aim at comedic entertainment and operate within and in support of the strategies of the institution named television, we as critics may read the discourse of sitcom as a site of contestation.

If we want to offer up a socially relevant and critically valid reading of sitcom as a vehicle of popular culture that does more than satisfy its audience (in other words, to valorize sitcom as worthy of critique), it would be frustrating in the least to assume that the audience simply escapes from the outside world into the comfort of the sitcom with a sympathetic association for the protagonists, viewing sitcom through an uncritical realist window. Rather we contend that sitcom—at many levels—condenses the form and content of the social world outside into its own internal logic.

3. The production of space

Unlike today where we spend a considerable amount of time in what Marc Augé (2000) calls non-places, i.e. supermarkets, airports or motorways, back in the 1970s, the home was a much more important place, at least as far as the hours that were spent in it are concerned. Therefore, the private and domestic played a fairly important role in terms of the social construction of space. Traditional sitcoms are usually divided in two types, the family (or domestic) sitcom and the workplace sitcom (Baker 2003, 27). In the 1970s, the former seemed to be the one given most attention, or, as Stephen Wagg terms it, "[m]ost situation comedies of the 1970s, are, one way or another, about the interior life of the London middle and lower middle classes, and, in particular, about the access, or otherwise, to various satisfactions" (Wagg 1998, 16f).

Sitcom thus offers a weekly visual space, scheduled time, and ritualized experience to both conceptualise and act out the tension between the confined domestic space of the everyday and what Wagg calls 'satisfactions'. While the generic boundaries of the sitcom that are based on the idea of circularity do not allow the characters to escape their fate, the protagonists do succeed in achieving 'little victories'. By conceptualising the production of space as a generic characteristic of the sitcom we are challenging the often made claim that the circularity of the sitcom can be purely put down to its entertaining function and thus its popular cultural nature.

Social space, even in the domestic sense, has to be understood in relation to work. The division of labour in a society is mirrored on the class system that again is responsible for the production of the domestic social space. Even though the 1970s were a time during which the rigid British class system was under deconstruction as it were, the domestic realm was still very much in compliance with the profession exercised by those who lived in the domestic space in question. Thus, the division of labour, in a sense, encompasses the domestic as well. To express this in Marxist terminology, the alienation experienced by the labouring forces at work stretched to the home.

Michel de Certeau's conceptualisation of everyday practice lends itself well to analyse the social space portrayed and produced in the sitcom. De Certeau distinguishes between two types of practice, the strategic and the tactical. Strategic practice is bound up with an institutional place where power is exercised. "A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as proper (*propre*) and thus serve as a basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it" (de Certeau 1984, xix). In other words, political, economic or scientific institutions are strategic. A tactic on the other hand is a ruse employed by those who are not in power and who subvert the strategic place. De Certeau contends that "[e]veryday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others" (de Certeau 1984, xii). Tactics are not spatial but temporal as they rely on the opportunity to act quickly and temporarily create a space for resistance within the strategic place.

Our argument is thus that the space of the sitcom is structured at the institution level of TV format, and within the representation itself as stereotypical and gendered. So the space in which protagonists find themselves is strategically organized in a number of ways as *propre*, but the relations built between men are tactical and in de Certeau's term of the order of *perruque*. That is, those within a strategic space perform for themselves under the disguise of

performing for the *propre*: what is taken advantage of is time for the individual's own enjoyment of activities that are "free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit" (de Certeau 1984, 25), and which thus resist within the strategic order.

In sitcom, we can see how the tactics operate in several intersecting ways: as the solidarity and camaraderie between men who are shaped by the situation they are in, which the protagonists employ to directly resist (yet without destroying) that comprehensive setting; or rather differently, when the protagonists tussle with each other in order to maintain their own individual space within the place they make of the space of the sitcom. This we experience as comedic rivalry, contention, and even friction; or thirdly, when protagonists wrestle against the constraints they have built up within themselves in a psychological development or crisis —a trope which is, however, rarely seen in sitcom. These interactions rather than being intensive and hierarchically arranged are made perceptible in the comedy as extensive and disorganized, much like everyday experience. Especially in the domestic realms of *Steptoe & Son* and *Porridge*, de Certeau's distinction between the strategic and the tactical becomes visible. Furthermore, while *Porridge* often indulges in how tactical victories can be achieved, *Steptoe and Son* by contrast normally lays bare how they are attempted in vain. Nonetheless, in both sitcoms the clear notions of repeated success and failure add to the humour of the respective series.

3.1. The production of social space in *Steptoe & Son*

As rag and bone men, Albert and his son Harold cannot afford a fashionable house but have to make do with the old cottage Albert inherited from his father. The house is derelict and filthy and serves partly as storage for the goods they trade in, and partly as a dwelling. Action is mostly set in either the courtyard or the sitting room, which, in many ways looks more like an extension of the messy courtyard than a proper room to live in. In essence, their home is a neat representation of the profession they pursue.

Harold, the son, has ambition and attempts—repeatedly and unrepentantly—to move up the social ladder. He likes to mingle with the more affluent; he reads books to improve his intellectual abilities, and he harbours the dream of leaving the rag-and-bone business for a more respectable, middle-class profession. He detests the dirt and the low social and economic status his work is associated with. In contrast, his father seems to take pride in his

business, and he literally thrives in the gloom and filth it brings about. Their different attitude to their profession and consequent social status results in endless rows, usually with Albert winning the upper hand and with Harold losing out. Harold, then, is trapped in the social space into which he was born.

In their symbiosis, father and son loathe and love each other at the same time. Albert resents Harold for not taking greater pride in their business and for the fact that he does not work as hard as Albert wants him to. Harold, on the other hand, hates his father because to him, he embodies the social drawback that limits him to his place, i.e. being working class and deprived of the commodities a middle-class lifestyle would allow him to have. Albert is old, lazy and stubborn and does not give his son the space he wants to himself. Therefore, Harold is usually busy trying to create his own space, and in a couple of episodes, he actually moves out and gets a flat on his own. However, he fails miserably. The following two episodes are examples where this happens.

In "The Lodger" (Series 3, 1964), Albert wants to create an additional income source by getting a lodger. As he has no room to spare, he decides to let Harold's room, which would leave Harold to make to do with the sitting room sofa. Harold threatens to leave if this happens, but secretly removes the ad Albert has put up in the sweetshop. Albert observes him doing this but does not let on. They continue as ever, both thinking that they have tricked the other, i.e. that they have achieved a little victory. When Albert finally tells Harold the truth, Harold is most offended and threatens to leave again. But Albert confesses that he has not found a lodger either which brings them back to square one. This shows that Harold cannot break loose; he is not capable of creating a space in order to escape his father, not even by getting a place on his own. In short, he is trapped in the strategic place he has been placed in by birth and does not succeed in establishing a tactical space that would enable him to escape his father or his fate.

Harold's predicament can also be exemplified by "Cuckoo in the Nest" (Series 6, 1970). In this episode, Albert's older, illegitimate son from Australia makes a sudden appearance. Harold did not know he had a stepbrother and gets terribly jealous. He leaves his home and rents a shabby flat. He pretends to make a living on his own when in truth he barely manages to survive. When Albert tells him that his first son has turned out to be a lazy good-for-nothing, was not prepared to do any work at all, and has left again, Harold admits

that he is miserable as well and moves back in with his father. It becomes clear that Harold is unable to escape; he is trapped in the strategic place, his working-class home which the class system confines him to. He has neither the means nor is he clever enough to transgress the boundaries, either spatially or ideologically, his father has placed him into.

It goes without saying that the circularity of *Steptoe & Son* is first a generic characteristic of the sitcom, and secondly, the source of its humour. If it was not for Harold's vain attempts to escape his fate, as half-heartedly as they may come across at times, the sitcom's success would not have been as huge. *Steptoe & Son* is so popular because the audience knows in advance that the two characters are drawn together and whatever ruse is put to the test, they will always end up where they began.

However, this kind of circularity, i.e. the failure of one particular character, is not the only possibility to make the sitcom work. Some characters are rather successful in achieving little victories in de Certeau's sense. This is the case in *Porridge* to which we will turn now.

3.2 Tactical poaching in *Porridge*

Entrapment often considered a key theme of the British sitcom (Baker 2003, 40) is a motif articulated across the spatial situation, relations, circumstances and repeated cyclical micro-narratives. Nowhere is this more so than in the confinement of Slade Prison, the setting for Porridge: persistent petty-crime recidivist Norman Stanley Fletcher ironically condemned by his own voice in the title sequence is confined at Her Majesty's pleasure to the proper space of a state institution. Despite the restrictions on movement, location and time imposed by the realisation of institutional propre space as the place of a prison, Fletcher, the unequivocal hero of Porridge, acts out many little tactical victories which contest the dominance of the system over the individual. The confined spaces, particularly Fletcher's and Godber's cell, and the recreation hall, become a network of smaller spaces within the place of the prison beset with tactical ploys, manoeuvres, tricks. So in this most restricted of worlds there remains a hope and optimism; in the first place that the protagonists are projected through circular localized plotlines is necessary functionally to drive the episodic nature of the form. Inherent in this repetition true to all sitcom is the optimistic outlook that finally the entrapped will escape the reiterated cycle articulated through containment. In the case of *Porridge*, this would coincide with Fletcher's release from prison and consequently the end of the sitcom, as the dramatic

distance between sitcom character and a real-lived world experience of prison tariffs would collapse. A further ground for optimism lies in the indeterminacy of Fletcher's predicament. We as an audience repeatedly witness what de Certeau has termed 'making do' (de Certeau 1984). Fletcher may be imprisoned but he is still able to make the most the space he creates in the place of the prison, and his resistance to this dominant order is both comedic and sanguine.

Considering the visual aspects, too, the prison space is delineated by the static camerawork inherent to sitcom; with few eyeline, shot-reverse-shot, and points-of-view shots, the camera positions the audience as observers, even quasi-panoptical spectators, of the scenes played out. This rather stationary recording of Fletcher's days further instils the spatial confinement he and his inmates find themselves in, since although the camerawork is blocked to adopt different positions, these are almost always objective rather than subjective, examining the objects of our gaze from a variety of perspectives. Yet, for an ostensibly visual medium, very little occurs which requires to be represented through visual means. Rather, as exemplified below, it is the text of the sitcom that dominates, and this not only points to its history as a form that migrated from radio to television and back again, but also to the fact that social relations, bonds and structures are less constructed through actions than through discourse.

From the first episode on, Fletcher is quick to turn the system to his own advantage even at the medical seeking out a cushy job, claiming he has flat feet, requesting a single cell. Fletcher doesn't break down the strategies of the system, but plays against the system in his own tactical way. In "New Faces, Old Hands" (Series 1, 1974), we see how Fletcher uses a sleight of hand, quick timing and an egregious smile to assign prison officers to a different role from the one they occupy in the system's regime. The sequence runs so: at the end of a snack meal, as he is carrying away his tray, Fletcher takes the prison warder Mr Barraclough aside (already making his own private space inside the prison) and appeals to the prison officer about his cell assignment:

> "Talking of cages, you have tried to get me one facing south, haven't you, eh. And I must be on my own; 'cos I don't like sharing"

Mr Barraclough admonishes Fletcher:

> "I'm not here to be cajoled or coerced into doing what you want, whenever you want it."

Fletcher replies, as he slides the tray into Mr Barraclough's hands:

"Oh Mr Barraclough, of course you're not. I mean would I ever!"

Fletcher turns on his heels, leaving Mr Barraclough rather bemusedly holding the tray.

Another form of discourse occurs in episode three "A Night In" (Series 1, 1974) when Godber has been temporarily moved into Fletcher's cell and confesses as the cell doors are slammed shut and locked:

"This is the bit I can't stand: lock-up."

Fletcher retorts:

"That's the point son; you're in here to be punished, ehh. You're in here to forego all them little pleasures you took for granted over the years, ain't yer?"

However, Fletcher then goes on to say:

"If you're keen we could go out, yer know."

And he draws up an imaginary scene of himself and Godber going "up West" with "a couple of birds", only to end:

"…trouble is I done all that last night; I'm a bit knackered."

With linguistic performance, Fletcher thus projects himself and Godber into a different space where they have the choice to imagine how they might behave.

In a third example, the episode "Poetic Justice" (Series 3, 1977), in which the unfrocked High Court judge who sentenced Fletcher is obliged to share Fletcher's and Godber's cell, we see the intersection of the strategic and tactical. Fletcher objects to the invasion of his space saying:

"He is the enemy within; within my cell what's more. I don't fancy the establishment breathing down my neck all night as well as all day."

And shortly afterwards in a reversal of roles, Godber explains to the Judge how to behave in Fletcher's space:

"Here, rules of the house. Top bunk's his—seniority, like. Best not to read the paper first 'till he's finished with it and don't speak unless you're spoken to. His is the toothpaste in the marked tube."

Fletcher's animosity towards Judge Rawley is tempered when he finds out from looking them up in *Who's Who* that Rawley and the prison governor went to the same school. Thinking that he might be able to turn this relationship to his advantage, Fletcher steps in to defend the judge from violent attack by other inmates, in a later scene from this episode. In this exchange we clearly recognise Fletcher's authority when one of the would-be assailants says:

“Naffin’ hell! Is that it?”

The other replies:

“If Fletch says so; that’s it.”

In *Porridge*, then, we see how the tactics played out by Fletcher affecting the arrangement and order of his world, such as his place—the cell, his position within the cell—the bunk, his personal objects—the toothpaste, both reassign power to him and are vehicles of transgression within the strategic constraints of the prison space.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, then, the format’s comic aspects combined with the huge popularity and consequent cultural impact of the sitcom and individual sitcoms themselves raise the question of what associations and identifications are available to an audience with a protagonist who is constrained by the space of the setting—home or workplace, by the lack of “class and social mobility” (Bowes 1990, 129) and by the limitations that the genre places on narrative and character development. As Barry Langford argues “British sitcom has focused on protagonists whose ineradicable yet unrealisable desire to be different encounters its ultimate horizon of impossibility in the very limits of the form in which they have been conceived” (Langford 2005, 22). It is our contention, however, that in the very overlaying of form with content at different levels, the classic situation comedy set against a backdrop of uncertainty and change in the worlds of work and home, gives voice to the very milieu which the sitcom addresses as its locale and sphere of representational practice. But that in this vicariously experienced world the playing out of tactical practices of the everyday articulated through comedy in a familiar, unchanging setting signals the resistance to the strategic order of the propre. Thus we often see a number of “small victories” played out in any one episode, and overall a sitcom series locates a victory for the voiceless in the weekly TV schedules.

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