

CLASSISM, SEXISM, RACISM, AND THE SITUATION COMEDY

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Television transmits values and shapes attitudes and behaviors. The National Institute of Mental Health's report on the subject, released in May 1982, concludes that exposure to violence on the tube produces aggressive behavior among young viewers, from pre-schoolers to teenagers; that heavy viewing may lead youngsters "to accept violence as normal"; and that adults' perceptions of the world as violent relate to viewing habits. The report's findings indicate, then, that adults as well as children are influenced by what they watch. Furthermore, the study establishes a relationship between television and behavior which extends beyond aggression and aggressive response: *Repeated exposure to a given set of values will eventually ingrain that set of values in the audience.*

Clearly, television's capacity to mold attitudes and behaviors requires that we examine carefully the values which TV projects. We need to determine to what extent television exposes and helps to expel harmful myths and negative stereotypes within our culture and to what extent television reinforces and perpetuates discrimination and prejudice.

This is an unwieldy task, one which has been complicated by the attention given to TV violence. By focusing almost exclusively on violence, we have overlooked issues of sexism, racism, and classism; we have riveted concentration on sex-crime dramas and Saturday morning cartoons while ignoring situation and domestic comedies which rely heavily on stereotypical characterizations and which present the most likely area for misrepresentation of women, minorities, and other vulnerable groups. Additionally, in demanding programming "more suitable for family viewing," we have applied absence of excessive violence as the major criterion of "wholesomeness." Again, we have exempted the sitcom from scrutiny.

Just as squashing the roach caught scampering across the kitchen floor doesn't mean one has exterminated one's lodgings, attacking TV violence alone won't purify the medium. We need to get behind the stove and under the sink. We need, especially, to look at situation comedies.

COMIC TECHNIQUE: STEREOTYPES AND DISPARAGEMENT

The comedy of the sitcom relies on stereotypes and disparagement. Each character represents a group and is defined largely by stereotypical traits associated with that group. The "humor" occurs when the character, because of one or more of his/her assigned traits, is made to appear ridiculous. The disparagement attributes a negative value to the trait and ultimately to the group defined by that trait. In order to find the situation amusing, the audience must accept--if only temporarily--this devaluation.

For example, many recent sitcoms employ a concealed identity which requires that the major male character maintain a less-than-macho facade. Jack Tripper on *Three's Company* poses as a homosexual, the main characters on *Bosom Buddies* masquerade as women, and Greatest of *The Greatest American Hero* roams about clad in tights and a cape. In each case the structure of the series depends on this double role, and in each case, much of the comedy arises from the degradation of the double, "unmasculine" role: Jack Tripper prances and lisps, the Buddies in drag fuss over their appearances and feign helplessness, while Greatest avoids getting arrested as a pervert. The masculine traits of each character's true identity carry a positive value against which the "unmasculine" characteristics are pitted. For the humor to succeed, the audience must agree to accept the value system presented.

To appreciate how heavily situation comedies apply stereotypes requires extensive examination of individual series. The following case study of *Gilligan's Island* demonstrates how classism, sexism, and racism form the basis for the program. *Gilligan's Island* has been chosen because the series has been on the air for nearly two decades and because its structure lends itself readily to analysis and generalization.

"GILLIGAN'S ISLAND": A CASE STUDY

Introduced in 1964, *Gilligan's Island* ran for three years on prime time, ranking among

the Nielsen top twenty during its '64 and '65 seasons. Reruns have been broadcast nationwide during late afternoon and early evening hours for nearly fifteen years. In addition, the program has spawned an animated series, aired on Saturday mornings, and several ninety-minute specials. *Gilligan's Island*, then, has reached a broad audience over the years and has been considered--at least by the networks--a program suitable for family viewing.

The situation on which the series depends, seven people shipwrecked on a tropical island, limits direction of the plot to rescue and survival; settings, for the most part, must be restricted to the island; and the isolation of the group prohibits introduction of other characters on any regular basis. Given these restrictions, the approaches used to discuss one episode can be applied to any other, and conclusions drawn about a single show generally will hold true for the others. Furthermore, because *Gilligan's Island* follows strictly the formula of the sitcom genre, the critical analysis used can be applied with little modification to other sitcoms.

In the series, the stranded group of seven forms its own society which serves as a microcosm preserving the values of American culture: money, prestige, privilege, and white male supremacy. Therefore, the comic elements must turn on the antithetical, i.e., lack or absence of money, prestige, privilege, maleness, or whiteness.

Comedy of this type requires a stratified social structure to establish "prestige" groups and "butt" groups. Consequently, the characters are arranged in a patriarchal hierarchy reflecting class differences. This structure can easily be discerned by examining the characters' names and activities.

At the pinnacle sits Thurston Howell III, who holds his position of authority because of his wealth, education, and heritage. The III informs the viewer that Mr. Howell ranks above the nouveau riche; he is an heir of the ruling class. Accordingly, he is addressed as "Mr. Howell" by the others--with the exception of his wife, who calls him "Thurston, Dear." Mr. Howell's primary activities consist of sipping exotic drinks from coconut shells, reclining on a settee, and overseeing the labors of the group.

Mrs. Howell is also of prime stock. Her first name appears to be "Lovey," but only Mr. Howell uses this expression. To the others, she is "Mrs. Howell," and her title suggests that her status and identity rely on her relationship to her husband. Lovey's main responsibility is to assure the comfort of Mr. Howell: she serves the

drinks. But Mrs. Howell, being a woman, must be included in women's work. Although spared most of the cooking and scrubbing, she fulfills her domestic role by supervising the work of the "girls" (see below).

The Professor is known only as "the Professor." Because the group's survival rests on his knowledge and intelligence, he occupies a position of authority and assumes most of the decision-making power. However, his research is "financed" by the Howells, whose abundant possessions, recovered from the wreck, furnish him with most of his materials.

Like the Professor, the Skipper is called by his professional title. As a property owner--of the wrecked ship--he commands some respect. But his power is as defunct as his boat. (Note, the Skipper is not called "Captain.") He functions as foreman and gives orders to his crew, Gilligan, and the "girls."

"Gilligan" appears to be a surname, but the first mate and title character is never addressed as "Mr." Gilligan serves as the group's common laborer although his slight build renders him unsuitable for the heavy chores which he is assigned. In keeping with the stereotype of the blue-collar worker, Gilligan isn't too bright.



Ginger, one of the "girls," provides the series with a sex object. A Hollywood starlet, Ginger wears evening gowns, frets over her appearance, and carries out those tasks least likely to result in a broken fingernail or a snagged nylon.

Offsetting Ginger's "spice," Mary Ann, a wholesome farm girl from the Midwest, is "everything nice." But, lacking Ginger's beauty and possessing neither status nor valuable skill, Mary Ann is relegated to domestic duties and spends much of her time cooking meals, doing laundry, and tidying the huts.

Thus, classism and sexism form the basis of the social structure from which the comic situation draws its material. Money/ownership of property and education/profession determine the hierarchy for the males. Women's positions are assigned in accordance with attachment to men; the "unattached" women occupy the lowest stratum.

Additionally, racism appears. Implicit racism derives from the all-white composition of the main characters; however, overt prejudice surfaces in episodes which introduce nonwhites. On occasion, dark-skinned savages invade the island, threaten to devour the men, and carry off the women. A similar situation occurs when a Japanese soldier, unaware that World War II has ended, captures the island and imprisons its inhabitants. In each case, nonwhites pose a threat to the white society; predictably, the "superior" intelligence of the white males prevails and disaster is averted.

As one can observe from the treatment of nonwhites, the series exploits stereotypical traits of the "butt" groups to create the comic situation. Many of the plots, for example, center on Gilligan's stupidity. Repeatedly, Gilligan's blunders prevent anticipated rescue. When survival is the issue, Gilligan manages to place the entire group in apparent danger, which is then resolved serendipitously through another of Gilligan's mistakes.

Verbal exchanges in all of the programs play up Gilligan's ignorance. In a typical scene, Gilligan echoes the Professor:

Professor: The question is, "Is the vessel navigable?"

Gilligan: Never mind that, Professor. Will the boat sail?

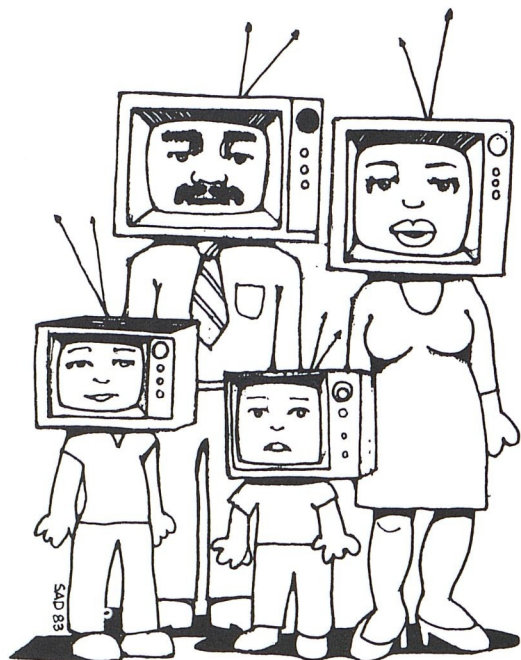
Or Gilligan's literal interpretation of an idiomatic expression results in a bit of slapstick involving the Skipper:

Skipper: (Struggling to maintain his balance while carrying a heavy load) Gilligan! give me a hand!

Gilligan: (Applauding) Wow, Skipper! You sure are strong! (The Skipper collapses and is buried by whatever burden he's been struggling with, while at the same time Gilligan is knocked backwards into the lagoon, a trough of cement, or a bucket of paint.)

Although the female characters are spared pratfalls and immersions in goo, the women become sources of humor through their "feminine weaknesses." Mrs. Howell, Ginger, and Mary Ann are frequently sent shrieking in terror across the island, frightened by the sudden appearance of the muck-covered Gilligan after one of his many mishaps. As the fear of the women is offered up for enjoyment, the audience is again reminded of the women's inability to function in a crisis. Likewise, the women's over-concern with trifles provides comic relief while reinforcing the myth that women are capable of thinking only on a trivial level. Faced with a life-threatening upheaval of the elements, Mrs. Howell laments that she has nothing suitable to wear to a storm shelter, Ginger complains that her nail polish won't dry in the torrential rains, and Mary Ann fears that the thunderclaps will cause her pineapple-coconut cake to fall.

Inappropriate response is not limited to the working-class and the female characters, for Mr. Howell's pretension draws a share of the laughter. But there are some significant differences. Whereas the other characters' misdirected values reflect ignorance or the mundane, Howell's concern with decorum



represents his good breeding. When Mr. Howell finds himself standing at the lethal end of a spear, he's likely to respond to the cannibal with, "My good man, I say, why don't we enjoy a light repast and discuss the matter." The contrast between the savage's primitiveness and Howell's sophistication triggers the laughter. In other words, comic situations involving Mr. Howell employ both incongruity and disparagement so that, although one may chuckle at Howell's pomposity, one snickers at the unfortunate character who becomes the butt of the joke. Comedy involving the Skipper, Gilligan, Mrs. Howell, Ginger, and Mary Ann directs disparagement at each one of the participants. The humor of the series repeatedly degrades these characters, who represent women and the working class, while the dominant males, Mr. Howell and the Professor, generally escape humiliation.

So far, the comic devices presented have relied on the established class structure, but another very common plot involves change or disruption of the structure. Of course, only the members of the lower echelons desire change in status, and at the climax of such episodes, the errant soul returns to his or her proper position. Mary Ann covets Ginger's beauty, Mrs. Howell aspires to a successful theatrical career, or Ginger seeks the sophistication of the Howells or the intelligence of the Professor. (Nobody, of course, wants to be Mary Ann.) In these episodes, the group unites to convince the misguided woman that she should be content to be herself, accept her limitations, and stay in her proper place.

However, the plots in which Gilligan attempts to "prove his manhood" through acts of heroism take on a different twist: The other characters join forces to assist Gilligan in his quest and stage incidents which will permit him to exercise some macho daring-do. Gilligan bungles the set up job but is finally able to demonstrate his true courage when a real, unexpected danger confronts the group.

Two observations can be made: First, the group supports attempts by the male character to enhance self-esteem but discourages the female attempting to improve her self-image. Second, the male is able to achieve self-recognition and acceptance independently, through his own actions,

whereas the female must be forcefully disabused by the others of her delusions.

Program after program confirms these observations: Male rationality triumphs over female irrationality; the group directs its efforts toward preserving the existent patriarchal hierarchy, which is threatened when a woman desires change in status. The comic elements of the series rest on a value system immersed in classism, sexism, and racism; the "humor" of the program degrades the working class, women, and minorities; such degradation trades on misconceptions and myths, the established negative stereotypes. Perhaps *Gilligan's Island's* only redeeming quality is its lack of excessive violence.

THE SITCOM GENRE: A NEED FOR CHANGE

Sexism, classism, racism, and other forms of prejudice are not unique to situation comedies, nor are all sitcoms as pernicious as *Gilligan's Island*. However, the sitcom does promote these isms through use of stereotypes and denigration. Furthermore, sitcoms present a special problem in that they are generally considered suitable family entertainment and are broadcast during times when children compose a large percentage of the audience.

Based on the NIMH study, we can predict the results of a steady diet of sitcoms like *Gilligan's Island*: Heavy exposure to classism, sexism, and racism will produce prejudiced behaviors among young viewers, who will, in turn, regard their responses as normal. Adults may be encouraged to accept discrimination as an unalterable fact of life. In short, television has the power to entrench a deplorable set of values in a substantial portion of our society.

But television's ability to teach values can also work positively. Comedy need not be vicious, and sitcoms need not exploit harmful stereotypes. To bring about necessary change in programming, we must expose the myths, misrepresentations, and negative stereotypes which television conveys, and we must apply pressure to the networks to alter what they air. But first, we must increase our own awareness of attitudes toward class, sex, and race which underlie major series. This is a beginning. ■

