

The Queer Fantasies of the American Sitcom / Queering Gender

NECSUS 9 (2), Autumn 2020: 367–374

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/the-queer-fantasies-of-the-american-sitcom-queering-gender/>

Keywords: Book Reviews, Reviews

Comedies and situation comedies have long been a staple of US and British television. How comedies and situation comedies have been consumed, discussed, and decoded during different times and across various viewer communities have become important points of twenty-first century academic and political examinations. Recent scholarship has challenged the frivolous and simplistic character of (situation) comedy by revisiting its basic formula and assumedly rigid grammar. For example, scholars like Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein questioned the assumedly conservative ideology of the sitcom by pointing to its ‘cheeky, humorous and culturally ambiguous’ nature.[1] Towards a similar direction, comedy texts, as John Hartley argues, offer ‘bizarre [...] family set-ups, no matter what their surface “smileyness” suggested about “family values”’.[2] Two relatively new monographs, *The Queer Fantasies of the American Sitcom* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press) and *Queering Gender: Television Comedy and Femininity* (London: I.B. Tauris), both published in 2018, provide media scholars, gender/genre theorists, and television fans the opportunity to reflect upon the history and particularities of television (situation) comedy, from both a genre and gender perspective. In doing so, the authors of both books seek to expose the multiple ways texts can become sites for understanding gender and sexuality among other identity markers.

Tison Pugh’s *The Queer Fantasies of the American Sitcom* provides readers with a thought-provoking account of how family sitcoms incorporate the topic of sexuality in their narratives. The first chapter, ‘Introduction: TV’s Three Queer Fantasies’, offers a comprehensive overview of how sexuality within the sitcom is introduced as a ‘place’ of power, an invisibility cloak, and a cornerstone for family-making. According to Pugh, there are omissions in

how we have come to understand and make sense of the popular. His systematic examination of widely circulated and heavily watched television texts contributes towards re-assessing the kinds of ‘knowledge’ available by viewing US (audiovisual) culture. Pugh is a Pegasus Professor in the School of English Studies at the University of Central Florida. His research is highly interdisciplinary and he has published several LGBTQ-themed monographs such as *Precious Perversions: Humor Homosexuality and the Southern Literary Canon* (2016) and *Chaucer’s (Anti-) Eroticisms and the Queer Middle Ages* (2014).



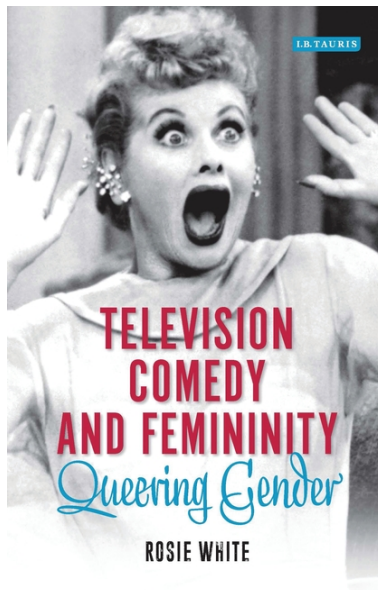
The monograph under examination, which received the Popular Culture Association John Leo and Dana Heller Award for the Best Work in LGBTQ Studies, stems from long-intellectual engagement with gender and sexuality in the United States.[3] This book reveals gaps and fissures in the textual operation and critical reception of family situation comedies through close reading techniques. It studies how comedy’s ambivalent engagement with sex and sexuality may allow for queer pleasures to emerge in the act of reception. This book emphatically states that ‘heteronormative narrative frameworks, such as that of the family sitcom, are structurally incapable of suturing over their aporias and contradictions, such that their surface normativity cannot withstand the steady erosion of their symptomatic queerness’ (p. 2). Such a line of thinking not only nullifies a traditionally common divide between the queer and the normative but also uncovers ‘their radical

intertwining, such that the normative cannot, in the final analysis, obscure the queer at its heart' (p. 2).

Consisting of eight chapters, this book sets forth the following structure: in the introductory chapter, Pugh makes a case for an approach to genre studies that recognises how comedy's contradictory engagement with sex and sexuality may allow for queer understandings and pleasures to emerge. The remaining chapters draw on the theoretical framework introduced in the first part of the book and work to expose the complex co-existence of the normative and the queer at the center of the sitcom. *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-63), *The Brady Bunch* (1969-74), *The Cosby Show* (1984-92), *Roseanne* (1988-97), *Hannah Montana* (2006-11), and *Modern Family* (2009-present) are six television programs that Pugh chooses to explore in-depth and in relation to other popular television texts made during the same chronological period. These six case studies unveil interesting cultural phenomena regarding representation and unpack the strategies through which landmark US family sitcoms flirt with the topic of sexuality. A fundamental argument in this book is that specific programs have been locked down as representatives of their era and sealed in particular understandings. Pugh's analysis allows readers to challenge their existing beliefs about these past programs by highlighting the role of nostalgia, chrononormativity, and the changing representational politics of particular groups in different times and places. An example of this is children's holy presence that has dominated much of the literature on queer theory. It indeed becomes clear that '[W]ithin a television show's storylines, children *always* serve as cultural scripts that illuminate how and why they are so constructed and to what ends they are deployed: there is no "real child" in a fictional program' (p. 13). This demonstrates that the child's pictures and fantasies emerging from television programs and their associated politics of permissibility are not the same but always fluctuating and in the making.

Pugh continues with a discussion of viewers' perceptions of actors and how they can influence the reception and understanding of these programs. Pugh is careful to show that meta-narratives and extra-textual information about an actor's biography are likely to serve as points of conflict and filters for making sense of a text, showing *Cosby* as a characteristic example. Again, these issues are front and center with Miley Cyrus, whose trajectory from the Disney series *Hannah Montana* to her later stage appearances as a solo singer reveals the ebbs and flows in how sexuality can be used to launch different versions of oneself. Moving towards the present moment, another critical

discussion in the book is the male and female body's function and embodiment. *Modern Family*, featuring an openly gay couple, posits the impossibility of eliminating queer desires from the family unit, rendering the family an open site of queerness that past television sitcoms had tried hard to keep occult. Through the case studies mentioned above, Pugh's types of families bring attention to sitcom fantasies as intersections of plural fantasies of genre, marketing, and childhood itself, thus delivering a vision of the US that remains trapped between innocence and guilt. The study of the family sitcom through the lens of queer and genre theory permits the emergence of a vision of the US which under its amusing humor and innocent façade harbors bits of perverse and unorthodox knowledge that sometimes come in plain sight while at other times make their appearance sideways.



In *Queering Gender*, Rosie White, Senior Lecturer at Northumbria University, offers a close look at British and US American television, examining the place and role of femininity in particular comedy texts. White has written extensively about the representation of females in visual culture and her latest project appears to be a continuation and extension of her previous monograph *Violent Femmes: Women as Spies in Popular Culture*, thus demonstrating commitment to work on women. Much like Pugh, White posits that television comedy is capable of ‘upsetting heteronormativity as a compulsory practice

and even gesturing toward other possibilities regarding gender identities and sexual desires' (p. 3). The vast possibilities that White envisions in comedy pronounces its potentiality to queer the 'normality' of any concept of gendered identity, thus making it clear that no comedy and no fictional character – irrespective of their gender, age, and sexual orientation – can ever be safe (p. 2).

A key text cited in this monograph with a queer approach is *Gender Trouble* (1988, 1990) by Judith Butler. Butler understands gender as a 'stylized repetition of acts'.^[4] Since subjectivity is contingent on performative politics, gender turns out to be a repetition of behaviors and acts that have no substance and fixity. Yet potential failure to perform gender consistently, repetitively, and appropriately opens up space for feminist and queer appropriation. Since popular television comedy, for White, 'is built upon and exposes normative accounts of gender' (p. 3), it is a valuable terrain where the absolute certainties and hegemonic constructions of gender are dissolved, giving way to peculiar, odd, and unruly characters who may question social norms and 'bring the house down'.^[5] White uses Butler's theory of gender performativity and Rowe's theoretical frameworks in explicit ways to show how male and female characters engage in unstable and ambivalent ways of 'doing' their gender.

Chapter One reviews key female comedies like Gracie Allen and Lucille Ball. By examining several radio shows that turned into television sitcoms, White crafts a compelling argument that constructs early American sitcoms of the 1950s as a place and time accommodating grotesque gender performances and queer interpretations. Chapter Two moves to relatively recent sitcoms and the queer postfeminist moments offered by *30 Rock* (NBC, 2006-2013) and *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), identified through a parallel analysis of older, successful shows, including *Friends* and *Sex and the City*. Overall, White's analysis casts women and the professional/personal communities they inhabit as far from perfect or ideal. Instead, they struggle to negotiate spaces that provide 'surprisingly realist commentaries on gender and sexual identity' (p. 90).

Chapter Three engages in a reading of *The Big Bang Theory* and attempts to detect the cost of success and how this may relate to the breadth of non-hegemonic masculinities available within the show. For a show initially interested in representing a gamut of queered masculinities, the commercialisation of *The Big Bang Theory* and its wide distribution is likely to have af-

fectured femininities and masculinities that appear to gesture towards conservative and stereotypical constellations. Chapter Four provides a thorough reading of the British sketch comedy series *Smack the Pony* (1999–2001), which includes a discussion around its production and positioning within postfeminist media and television debates. Analyses of several sketches encourage the understanding of *Smack the Pony* as ‘feminist, not because it makes overtly political jokes but because it examines and queers heterofemininity’ (p. 129). White’s emphasis on the monstrous, grotesque, and campy performances of the *Smack the Pony* characters clearly illustrates the book’s central ideas – that comedy can cast utopian visions and serve as a scathing critique of heteronormativity.

Chapter Five broadens its scope to encompass sitcoms grouped together under the axis of age. *You’re Only Young Twice* (Yorkshire Television, 1977–1981) and *Waiting for God* (BBC 1990–1994) constitute central case studies of an exhaustive analysis that spans many decades of television comedy. The queer temporality of the sitcoms’ static aesthetic together with a focus on elderly characters proffers interesting understandings about the connectivity of queer theory, unruliness, and age within the area of television (situation) comedy. Since older women (both actual actors and television characters) are more often than not positioned at the periphery of television programming, White’s chapter moves these bodies from the margins to the center of her analysis, while offering possibilities to envision old age and femininity in ways which are far from celebratory and successful.

Overall, *The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom* and *Queering Gender* contribute to a growing body of literature on genre studies, cultural, and gender studies to explore new ways of reading US and British television of yesteryear and the present. These books draw from Alexander Doty’s milestone studies on gay representations on television (1993; 2000), Amy Villarejo’s *Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire* (2014), and Lynne Joyrich’s ‘*Queer Television Studies: Currents, Flows, and (Main)streams*’ (2014). More importantly, both books made their appearance roughly during the same period, contributing to a reassessment of television genres and a reconceptualisation of the term *queer* in ways that extend beyond LGBTQI+ bodies. A limitation of the books is their concentration on Anglophone television and specific television programs, thus excluding small nation television productions. However, this focus can still be useful, as the reader may develop their own analysis and reflection.

I have found Pugh's and White's work inspiring for my doctoral research and even used part of their theoretical framework for initiating a discussion on the queer politics and the potentialities of television comedy in Greece (2020). I believe that when focusing on this context, it is possible to excavate how 'old' characters can do masculinities and femininities that break the norms and include instances of coalition and collaboration, disobedience to societal rules, and flexible enactments of gender identity that place them in new zones of knowledge and emancipation.[6] The books are well structured, easy-to-read, and thus of potential interest to beginners in media, television, and queer studies, to televisions fans and researchers wishing to explore Anglophone television fiction through gender-based lenses. Relying on a diverse array of sitcoms and comedies, each monograph makes its distinct contribution to the overall argument: that the supposedly apolitical, naïve, and well-known family-friendly genre of the (situation) comedy can potentially reveal stories, themes, and characters that may not be so familiar at first sight.

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Notes

- [1] Reichl & Stein 2005, p. 14.
- [2] Hartley 2015, p. 97.
- [3] Feldman 2019.
- [4] Butler 1990, p. 140.
- [5] Rowe 1995, p. 8.
- [6] Chairetis 2020.