

Georges-Claude Guilbert
Université de Rouen

FOREWORD
Women's Lib Don't Mean We Want to Stop Being Women
It Just Means We Want Our Chance in This World, Too

When I was a boy my parents taught in an exotic country which boasted only one television channel; it was so bad that they never felt the need to buy a TV set. So when we vacationed on the French Riviera in the summer I spent a considerable amount of my time glued to my grandmother's set, indulging my couch potato tendencies—when I wasn't roaming plentiful supermarkets, that is. Just as I sought out ketchup, Coca Cola, chemical cheese paste and pink bubble gum in the supermarkets, I got hooked on American TV shows—especially sitcoms, and more particularly *Bewitched*. As I grew up I longed for the day when I could finally hear the sound of Elizabeth Montgomery's voice, as opposed to the halfhearted dubious efforts of the French woman who dubbed her. This no doubt partly explains why I became an American Studies scholar.

After I had edited an issue of *Cercles* devoted to pop and rock, and before I edit one on superheroes, a reflection upon gender, race and class in American TV sitcoms seemed in order. Drawing from Gender Studies and Cultural Studies, this issue hopes to shed some light on the way sitcoms reflect (more or less distortedly) and/or influence American society. Good old Title VII was supposed to help eliminate discrimination and segregation, to help protect most minorities and women (thank you Congressman Howard W. Smith) from rejection, but of course the U.S. still has a long way to go. Sitcoms are a valid indicator of progress or lack thereof, as I hope this issue will

exemplify, taking on notions such as Affirmative Action, quotas, tokenism, stereotyping, positive clichés and negative clichés.

I specified in my original call for papers that sitcoms' texts and subtexts would be studied, with a preference for subtexts; and I suggested the following as worthy of analysis: *I Love Lucy*, *Bewitched*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *The Cosby Show*, *The Nanny*, *Will & Grace*, *Sex and the City*, *Spin City*, *Ally McBeal*, *That 70s Show*, *Mad About You*, *Dharma & Greg*, *Love & Money*, *Friends*, *Rude Awakening*, *The King of Queens*, *The Drew Carey Show*, and *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Some of them made their way into this issue, but not all. I nearly obtained a piece on the Reality TV show *The Osbournes* discussed as a sitcom, which would no doubt have been intriguing. *The Simpsons* is an animated series, it is also a sitcom. No one delivered a paper on the subject but Valerie A. Reimers, for one, refers to it.

Just so we get the yes-we-do-speak-from-somewhere question out of the way: some of our writers belong to racial and/or sexual minorities, some are "simply" women, several have directly experienced some form of ostracism, and all have enjoyed watching sitcoms. Everybody does in academe, but Cultural Studies practitioners are possibly more candid about it. In a review I once wrote for *Cercles*, I ranted against Paul A. Cantor, who heavily insists in his book *Gilligan Unbound: Pop Culture in the Age of Globalization* (2001) on the fact that not only morons watch TV series, and not only morons write about them. Must he state that "intelligent and well-educated people are genuinely interested in hearing shows such as *The Simpsons* and *The X-Files* analyzed in a serious academic manner"? Must he add that he regards his book "as an experiment—to see what happens if we provisionally drop our intellectual prejudices against television." What point is he really trying to make? Who is he trying to convince that a little bit of slumming can do no harm? The educated people who are prejudiced against television are often the same who are prejudiced against popular culture in general, and the study of popular culture; does he think he's going to make them change their mind? Just because he's initially a Shakespeare scholar? My guess is that his readers are more likely to be, like me, people who have happily never had such prejudices, and so his half-apologetic remarks will irritate them more than anything. Or is it that he merely wants to make clear that he is not one of those left-wing Cultural Studies specialists he criticizes at some point, who always, he unfairly believes, see all TV series as "telling the same sad tale of racist and sexist stereotyping?" He even feels compelled to write things like: "*The Simpsons* may seem like mindless entertainment to many, but in fact it offers some of the most sophisticated comedy and satire ever to appear on American television." In this issue of *Cercles* I will not indulge in such provisions. *Sex and the City*

might not be *Hamlet*, but I trust our contributors' musings about it and other sitcoms will constitute self-sufficient validation, of the shows and of their study. Of course, seeing that the title of this *Cercles* special issue is "Gender, Race and Class in American TV Sitcoms," it will probably do little to dispel Cantor's misgivings; but the pieces themselves might. Our contributors do not see all sitcoms as "telling the same sad tale of racist and sexist stereotyping," and they wonder if sitcoms can constitute sites of resistance.

Kristin C. Brunner's paper, "Sex and Subjectivity: Gazing and Glancing in HBO's *Sex and the City*," allows us to strive to determine the degree of feminism of *Sex and the City*, notably using Laura Mulvey's capital research. Several of today's seemingly progressive sitcoms do not necessarily question or threaten the secular hegemony of the "male gaze" and the objectification of women. Richard Butsch's paper, "A Half Century of Class and Gender in American TV Domestic Sitcoms," examines "the pattern of images across many series and over several seasons;" within a historical perspective it "investigates how valuations of class on television have been constructed by manipulating gender and age traits," among other things.

Gerald R. Butters Jr.'s paper, "'Nobody Asks Me the Questions:' *Beulah* and the Moynihan Report," evokes the (in)famous report published by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan in March 1965, entitled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." It looks at "racialized gender and familial roles within the television sitcom *Beulah* (1950-1953), the first nationally broadcast weekly television series starring an African American in the title role." Miriam Miranda Chitiga's paper, "Black Sitcoms: A Black Perspective," is a sociological survey I asked her to conduct for us. Chitiga interviewed a number of African Americans to find out what they made of black sitcoms, which they liked or disliked and why.

Robb Leigh Davis's paper, "For the Love of Cliff & Claire," concentrates on *The Cosby Show* (as well as other sitcoms) and its relevance to the black community. Davis is a freelance writer, the only one among us who is not attached to a university, and I am particularly grateful to him for agreeing to write a piece for *Cercles*. Daniel Opler's paper, "Between the 'Other' Classes: *The Nanny* and the Ideological Creation of the American Middle Class," takes on both class and gender in the hilarious sitcom *The Nanny*. I was very much hoping when I circulated my call for papers that someone would. Of course, ethnic and religious issues are also addressed in *The Nanny*, but even in cyberspace one has to limit one's scope of research.

Tasha G. Oren's paper, "Domesticated Dads and Double-Shift Moms: Real Life and Ideal Life in 1950s Domestic Comedy," interestingly concentrates on a period more than a particular sitcom. Like Richard Butsch, Tasha G.

Oren uses the word “domestic” in her title; Valerie A. Reimers, for her part, uses the word “family”, but of course most sitcoms are set in kitchens and living rooms, that is what makes them useful yardsticks to measure the evolution of American mores and their representation. Valerie Palmer-Mehta’s paper, “Media Representations of Corpulent Embodiment: A Case Study of *The Drew Carey Show*,” examines the lookist (or not) politics of *The Drew Carey Show*. That sitcom seems at first glance to offer a refreshing alternative to middle-of-the-road series: it is set in Cleveland, rarely shies away from thorny issues, and often presents losers in an endearing way. But things are not so simple, and hierarchies of gender or national origin sometimes creep up in unexpected places.

Matthew Pateman’s paper, “‘You say tomato:’ Englishness in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,” may seem out of place in this issue for two reasons: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is not generally seen as a sitcom, and Englishness may sound more concerned with national origin than either race, gender, or class. But isn’t Englishness all about class? Especially as seen from an American angle? And even though the series is not primarily a sitcom, it certainly features a great deal of situation comedy. It is worth noting, in passing (pun intended), that James Marsters who plays the English vampire Spike is an American actor. *Buffy*, of course, would rightly deserve a whole issue of *Cercles*, but everybody is editing collections of academic essays about the *Vampire Slayer* and her entourage these days...

Valerie A. Reimers’s paper, “American Family TV Sitcoms, the Early Years to the Present: Fathers, Mothers, and Children—Shifting Focus and Authority,” offers a wide scope of analysis and a historical perspective, looking at the nature and extent of sitcom changes. Kimberly Springer’s paper, “*Good Times* for Florida and Black Feminism,” looks at black sitcoms and black feminist reactions to them, helping us ponder the very notion of black feminism. Barbara Villez’s paper finally, “Clair Huxtable, Meet Renée Raddick: How Long a Way Have You Really Come, Baby?,” helps us compare different shows and wonder just how much the televisual landscape has improved (or not) between *The Cosby Show* and *Ally McBeal*.

The reader should not be surprised not to find many names of scriptwriters and directors in our papers. This has become accepted practice in academic studies of television shows, authorship being so uneasy to determine—and quite frankly often useless, as chillingly postmodern as this may sound. The great Joss Whedon, of course, is an exception. I trust we will be forgiven for the absence of references to the very latest developments of this or that sitcom—academics obviously do not move quite as fast as TV networks. There has recently been some furious lesbian activity in *Sex and the City*, for instance.

I hope we will also be forgiven for the frequent use of *ism* words such as “classism” or “lookism,” they were quite inevitable seeing our theme.

This sitcom issue is primarily intended for teachers and students of American Studies, Cultural Studies and Gender Studies, but it should be of interest to anyone who is keen on observing the evolution of American society, as well as anyone who enjoys watching American TV sitcoms—we are millions.