

# Laughing Hysterically

## The American Sitcom from *I Love Lucy* to *The Big Bang Theory*

**Room and time:** Seminar Room (Attems-gasse 25, Top Floor, SR 34.D2), Wednesday, 15:15-16:45 · **Course number:** 512.332

**Lecturer:** Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan Brandt · **Office hours:** Thur, 4-6 p.m. (Heinrichstr. 18, 1<sup>st</sup> floor) · **Email:** [stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at](mailto:stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at)

**Description:** The sitcom (short for 'situation comedy') has been described as one of the most quintessential genres that American television has produced. Functioning as both 'comic drama' and 'narrative comedy,' the sitcom can be seen as a unique product of the U.S. entertainment industry. The sitcom is also one of television's most enduring genres, originating in the radio variety show of the 1930s and 40s and experiencing its heyday on television in the 1950s and 60s. Often disparaged as the epitome of mass entertainment, it has also been praised for its innovative formula, making it an essentially televisual art form. This course will examine both the history and the politics of the American sitcom, focusing on early successes such as *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-67) and *Mister Ed* (CBS, 1961-66) as well as more recent examples of the genre, such as *Two and a Half Men* (CBS, 2003-2015) and *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007 – present). In addition, we will scrutinize various subgenres such as the 'mockumentary' (*Modern Family*, ABC, 2009 – present), the 'cringe comedy' (*Arrested Development*, HBO, 2000 – present), and the animated sitcom (*The Simpsons*, Fox, 1989 – present). While analyzing the aesthetics, cultural function, and formulaic composition of the sitcom, the course also looks at how the genre negotiates crucial aspects of American cultural identity.

**Teaching and Learning Method:** This is an interactive course. Participation in group discussions as well as contributions to the discussion forum on the Moodle course site will be part of the final grade. Each meeting will be held by 'experts' who organize the session by means of questions, games, video clips, and group work. The most relevant facts will be conveyed in a short information block. The experts will upload their questions for the discussion forum 6 days in advance!

**Materials:** All print texts will be made available on **Moodle**. Please watch video materials online or in the **Media Archive** (Heinrichstr. 18, 1<sup>st</sup> floor).

**Aims:** The course will familiarize participants with the key features (composition, background, effect) of the sitcom and convey a deeper understanding of the genre in the U.S. American context.

**Assessment:** **A.)** regular attendance (no more than 2 absences!) and active in-class participation, as well as **nine** (!) substantial entries in the discussion forum (1/3); **B.)** presentation as part of an expert session plus 3-page handout and online questions (1/3); **C.)** research proposal (2 pages) and final paper (10 pages) (1/3). You need to pass each section to pass the course.

**Deadline for Final Papers** (including declaration of honesty): Wednesday, February 6, 2019. You need to upload a digital version of your paper on Moodle and hand in a printed version. There is no (!) extension of this deadline. Please indicate on a **post-it** attached to the paper if you would like detailed feedback!

## Syllabus

- 10 Oct. Introduction –The American Sitcom as a Genre  
Basic texts:  
Brett Mills, excerpts from *The Sitcom* (2009). [Moodle]  
J. Mundy & G. White, "Television Comedy" (2012). [Moodle]
- 17 Oct. Family Sitcoms – *I Love Lucy*  
Main example (viewing required):  
*I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-57).  
Alternative shows (options):  
*The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriett* (ABC, 1952-66); *The Brady Bunch* (ABC, 1969-74); *Family Ties* (NBC, 1982-89); *My Favorite Husband* (CBS, 1953-55); *Full House* (ABC, 1987-95).  
Keywords: Desilu; Domesticity; Emancipation; Gender; Feminism; Storyform.
- 24 Oct. Animal Sitcoms – *Mister Ed*  
Main example (viewing required):  
*Mister Ed* (CBS, 1961-66).  
Alternative shows (options):  
*Alf* (NBC, 1986-90); *BoJack Horseman* (Netflix, 2014-present).  
Keywords: Anthropomorphism; Bestial Ambivalence; Carnavalesque; Subaltern.
- 31 Oct. Magicoms – *I Dream of Jeannie*  
Main example (viewing required):  
*I Dream of Jeannie* (NBC, 1965-70).  
Alternative shows (options):  
*Bewitched* (ABC, 1964-72); *My Favorite Husband* (CBS, 1953-55); *The Munsters* (CBS, 1964-66).  
Keywords: Cold War; Domestic Life; Escapism; Magic Realism; Orientalism; Supernatural.

- 7 Nov. Workplace Comedies – *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*  
Main example (viewing required):  
*The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-77).  
Alternative shows (options):  
*2 Broke Girls* (CBS, 2011-17); *30 Rock* (NBC, 2006-2013); *Cheers* (NBC, 1982-93);  
*Frasier* (NBC, 1993-2004); *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-98 & 2018-present);  
*Scrubs* (NBC/ABC, 2001-10); *Taxi* (ABC, 1978-82).  
Keywords: Economy; Liberation; Public Sphere; Self-Referentiality; Star Persona; Workplace.
- 14 Nov. Blue-Collar Domestic Sitcoms - *Roseanne*  
Main example (viewing required):  
*Roseanne* (ABC, 1988-97, 2018).  
Alternative shows (options):  
*All in the Family* (CBS/ABC, 1971-79); *King of Queens* (CBS/TBS, 1998-2007); *Married with Children* (FOX, 1986-97).  
Keywords: Adolescence; Blue Collar; Class; Memory; Stand-up Comedy.
- 21 Nov. Jewish Sitcoms - *Seinfeld*  
Main example (viewing required):  
*Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-98).  
Alternative shows (options):  
*Curb Your Enthusiasm* (HBO, 2000-present); *The Nanny* (CBS, 1993-99).  
Keywords: Hanukkah; Jewish Humor; Quotidian; New York.
- 28 Nov. Independent Study Unit- Research Proposal  
Stay at home and create a 2-page research proposal for a potential final paper.
- 5 Dec. Romantic Sitcoms - *Friends*  
Main example (viewing required):  
*Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004).  
Alternative shows (options):  
*How I Met Your Mother* (CBS, 2005-14); *Two and a Half Men* (CBS, 2003-15); *Golden Girls* (NBC, 1985-92).  
Keywords: Alternative Families; Career; Romance; Sexuality.
- 12 Dec. Queer Sitcoms – *Will & Grace*  
Main example (viewing required):  
*Will & Grace* (NBC, 1998 - present).  
Alternative shows (options):  
*Ellen* (ABC, 1994-1998); *Grace & Frankie* (Netflix, 2015-present); *Transparent* (Amazon Prime, 2014-present).  
Keywords: Diversity; Heteronormativity; LGTQI; Performance/Performativity, Queerness.
- 9 Jan. Animated Sitcoms – *The Simpsons*  
Main example (viewing required):  
*The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989 - present).  
Alternative shows (options):  
*Beavis and Butt-Head* (MTV, 1993-97); *American Dad!* (Fox, 2005-present); *Family Guy* (Fox, 1998-present); *King of the Hill* (Fox, 1997-2010); *Rick and Morty* (Adult Swim., 2013-present); *South Park* (Comedy Central, 1997-present).  
Keywords: Intertextuality; Pastiche; Postmodernism.
- 16 Jan. Cringe Comedies – *Modern Family*  
Main example (viewing required):  
*Modern Family* (ABC, 2009 - present).  
Alternative shows (options):  
*The Office* (NBC, 2005-2013); *Arrested Development* (Fox, 2003-2006 /Netflix, 2003-present).  
Keywords: Authenticity; Cringe Comedy; Interviews; Mockumentary; Reality-TV; Sofa; Voice-Over Narration.
- 23 Jan. Black Sitcoms – *Black-ish*  
Main example (viewing required):  
*Black-ish* (ABC, 2014 - present).  
Alternative shows (options):  
*Family Matters* (ABC/CBS, 1989-97); *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1975-85); *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (NBC, 1990-96).  
Keywords: Black Liberation; Civil Rights; Ethnicity.
- 30 Jan Nerdcoms – *The Big Bang Theory*  
Main example (viewing required):  
*The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007 – present).  
Alternative shows (options):  
*Freaks and Geeks* (NBC, 1999-2000); *Glee* (Fox, 2009-15);  
*That '70s Show* (Fox, 1998-2006).  
Keywords: Comics; Digital Age; Nerds.

DEADLINE  
Research Proposal PRESENT!

FINAL PAPER DUE ON Feb. 6, 2019