



Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Master's Degree
in Language Sciences

Final Thesis

**This Is (*Not*) a
Laughing Matter!**
A Diachronic and Cross-Media
Analysis of Political Correctness
in Sitcoms

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Academic Year

2021 / 2022

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INTRODUCTION

Political correctness, henceforth PC, is a term that nowadays will most likely be averted as familiar by the majority of people since it has vastly dominated the cultural and political debate of the last decades (Gring-Pemble and Watson, 2003: 135). The terminology itself is however more obscure because the expression is usually connected with a plethora of diverse social issues such as race, gender, sexuality, disability, the environment, animal rights and so on (*ibid.*).

Nonetheless, merely knowing the topics that PC is concerned with is insufficient to clarify its functions and purposes. Besides, having an unbiased understanding of this phenomenon may prove difficult because the phrase itself is commonly adopted by its detractors who use it to defame PC by either ridiculing it or labelling it as an illiberal concept (Hughes, 2010: 13). Despite this fact, a neutral interpretation on the subject was provided by the *Oxford Dictionary of New Words* (1997, cit. in Hughes, 2010: 13) in which PC was defined as “[c]onformity to a body of liberal or radical opinion on social matters, characterized by the advocacy of approved views and the rejection of language and behaviour considered discriminatory or offensive”. This definition allows to grasp the essence of PC that is, a set of verbal and non-verbal attitudes which aim to eradicate abuse and discrimination from society by condemning such inequities and advancing a more inclusive progressive ideology.

One of the most noticeable effects of PC is the way in which it has affected language choices. Indeed, today using the term HANDICAPPED when referring to a disabled person may be considered offensive. It is hence advisable to opt for a more politically correct phrasing such as DIFFERENTLY ABLED (Hughes, 2010: 195). Likewise, a prostitute is not a WHORE but a SEX WORKER (14).

These changes have not always been welcomed positively by the masses. In fact, apart from deriding the verbose and contrived nature of euphemisms such as those presented above (Hughes, 2010: 15), part of the public opinion harshly criticises political correctness comparing it to a “new form of orthodoxy” (24). As a matter of fact, as Thiele (2021: 52) reported, several critics of PC claim to feel oppressed by the alleged presence of a certain ‘language police’ that supposedly suppresses their freedom of speech. This argument is particularly relevant as it contributes to inflame

the debate about political correctness. Indeed, supporters of PC defend it as a valuable measure to prevent discrimination, whereas its adversaries complain about the infringement of their right to free speech.

This debate becomes even more complicated in the field of comedy where humour is often generated by recurring to stereotypes and offensive language. In this regard, assertions for and against PC have been advanced by critics and comedians alike who, either like Saper (1995: 68), denounced a “climate of hypersensitivity” in which risqué jokes cannot be told anymore; or like Littlewood and Pickering (1998: 291) who stated that renouncing PC altogether might be dangerous as it would not guarantee any protection to at-risk social groups.

When dealing with these contentious disputes, television networks generally followed the safest path, the one that would have caused them less controversy and ensured a larger revenue with their partners, i.e., the advertising companies (Ferguson and Eastman (2002, cit. in Silverman, 2004: 163-164)). As a consequence, they initially censored controversial programmes that they felt might have upset part of their audience, thus strictly respecting a PC schedule (*ibid.*). Only later, as Bucaria and Barra (2016: 2) related, networks realised that they could afford to push further the limits of what was acceptable on TV including subversive humour¹ which may have been appealing to specific target audiences.

The literature has discussed political correctness extensively, even in conjunction with comedy and television. Nonetheless, little consideration has been specifically reserved to the analysis of the relationship between PC and situation comedies (also known as sitcoms). Indeed, most studies inspecting sitcoms have focused on certain distinct controversial issues leaving the issue of political correctness on the side. In fact, the majority of texts that have mentioned PC have treated the topic superficially or only incidentally dedicating it no more than a few lines. A few instances of such studies are those by Pomeroy (1996) and Buonomo (2012) which mentioned PC regarding the sitcom *All in the Family*. The two scholars argued that, by today’s standards, the show would have been considered politically incorrect and, as a result, perhaps some of its most controversial content might not have been

¹ A form of humour which of course could also be expressed within the situation comedy genre (Bucaria and Barra, 2016: 2).

included if the series had been produced in this day and age. Birthisel and Martin (2013), Middleton (2014) and Crepaldi (2020) instead briefly commented on PC claiming that *The Office* (US) is a parody of the obsession that American society has with political correctness and that this is expressed through the words and actions of the office's foolish boss (Michael Scott). Other studies yet, like those by Booker (2006) and Anton (2016), acknowledged *South Park* as the animated sitcom which, due to its crude language and highly subversive material, attacked the notion of PC more than any other similar cartoon succeeded to do.

Nevertheless, as anticipated, these texts do not address PC very deeply but solely made short inconsequential remarks. Inversely, Kocela (2009), Westwood and Johnston (2011) and Ducray (2012) tackled this subject a little more profoundly in their exploration of both the British and American version of *The Office*. These scholars, despite not conducting a full thorough analysis on the matter, still managed to recognise patterns that could explain the success or failure of humour based on the defiance of political correctness in the two series.

However, the research paper that most critically examined this topic was the one written by Zenor (2014), in which the scholar, through the analysis of a survey based on the animated sitcom *Family Guy*, discovered that respondents were divided into four separate groups, each having a different perspective concerning political correctness. This study was particularly significant because, contrarily to those listed above, it handled PC and the moral implications of its debate while concurrently discussing a TV show, a sitcom of all programmes.

The scant presence of similar studies in the existing literature prompted the present research. In point of fact, the lack of published material focusing on meaningful reflections about political correctness in situation comedies triggered the curiosity of the author of this work. Such curiosity was bolstered by both the social prominence of the debate about PC, which is still strong to this day, and the fact that the investigation regards a multimedia genre which, owing to its comic nature, is often not taken seriously enough in the academic world. In truth, sitcoms contain valuable messages that other media may at times fail to convey. Indeed, they have the ability to mirror transformations occurring in familiar environments at various levels of society including the domestic and the working contexts.

Therefore, the current dissertation aims to analyse the relationship between PC and different kinds of sitcoms. In particular, the study is guided by three separate research questions which will be addressed at the end of this work. These three questions can be expressed as follows:

- 1) To what extent did PC culture affect sitcoms aired across different decades and media?
- 2) How may the pilots contribute to understanding the role of PC in the analysed series?
- 3) Does comedy based on controversial issues exclude political correctness a priori?

These questions hence represent both the orientation and goal of the present study. They connect with the main objective of the dissertation since they all concern the relationship between PC and sitcoms. However, they even expand further on this topic by tackling specific issues that require tailor-made answers which can only be provided after a thorough analysis of the sources.

Regarding the sources, these consist both of primary and secondary ones. For the sake of this research, three situation comedies were analysed, namely *All in The Family* (1971-1979), *The Office* (US) (2005-2013) and *Family Guy* (1999-). The data were extracted both from the pilots of the series mentioned above (primary sources) and from scripts of the same instalments found online (secondary sources). On this subject, the websites consulted for the collection of the scripts were *Forever Dreaming Transcripts*, *Genius* and *Dr. Odd*. These three portals offered a crucial contribution to the present work as they contained much of the raw material that would then be complemented with data manually obtained from the original episodes, which would in turn be used for the subsequent examination.

This study adopts an exclusively qualitative approach in order to respect both the main goal of the study and the research questions listed above. In fact, for the purposes of the current investigation, it was deemed unnecessary to focus on numerical evidence considering that the required information relied completely on textual and discursive data.

The preferred methods of analysis are Fairclough's (2010) critical discourse analysis (CDA) and a custom-made framework herein named 'visual analysis'. The former was chosen because, by studying the relationship between discursive practices and power relations (Fairclough, 1989), it could prove a useful tool to reflect on the complicated matter of PC. The latter instead was devised in order to capture meanings that normally escape the verbal dimension, thus allowing to improve the understanding of specific scenes whose humour often relies on non-linguistic factors such as body language and symbolism.

Practical limitations aside (such as time constraints and scope of the present dissertation), the rationale for choosing the pilot episodes hinged on the assumption that these specific episodes, as such, constituted the most representative instalments of their respective shows: the ones that both embodied the spirit and carried the future potential of similar programmes. In this regard, despite the limited selection of episodes, the significance of the present study ought not to be underestimated. As a matter of fact, albeit limited in scope, the present research expands on the existing literature regarding the analysis of political correctness in sitcoms. Furthermore, the relevance of this study is also connected to its ability to amply surpass the boundaries of the examined TV shows and discuss concepts and issues that belong to other disciplinary fields including history, sociology, ethics, media studies and popular culture.

The dissertation comprises four main Chapters, each dedicated to one specific topic. In **Chapter One**, the issue of political correctness is described in detail. The Chapter opens with an inquiry about the problem of finding a working definition of PC. Then, it proceeds discussing the characteristics and history of this phenomenon and finally its relationship with television and comedy. The last part of the Chapter is reserved to the Data and Methodology Section which is relevant to the analytical part of the study.

Chapter Two deals with the first sitcom examined in chronological order, i.e., *All in the Family*. However, before focusing on the show, the Chapter provides insightful background information regarding the decade in which the programme originally aired, namely the 1970s. After a general presentation of the sitcom, this

Chapter proceeds with the analysis of the pilot² and finally with a Section dedicated to the main controversies about the series and its rapport with PC. The structure just described is replicated in the following Chapters with minor variations.

Chapter Three, like the previous one, offers an introductory Section concerning the historical period in which the sitcom analysed in this Chapter, i.e., *The Office* (US), was aired (mainly the 2000s). Then, it too offers background information about the series as a whole before tackling the analysis itself. In this case, the investigation concentrates on two distinct episodes³ instead of only one because these two instalments are both considered pilots in their own right for the reasons contained both in the Data and Methodology Section and inside the Chapter at hand. Alike **Chapter Two**, the last Section handles the controversies emerged during and after the airing of the sitcom and the topic of political correctness.

Chapter Four presents the animated sitcom known as *Family Guy*, which is the last show examined in this study. Contrarily to the pattern followed in the previous Chapters, this one does not provide a historical account of the period in which the show was aired because that period roughly coincided with the one described in **Chapter Three**. Instead, **Chapter Four** opens with a description of the birth and development of animation in the USA. Next, it addresses the programme in its entirety proposing a detour which illustrates the features that make the series unique and memorable. As usual, the remaining Sections are reserved to the analysis of the pilot⁴ and the discussion concerning controversies and political correctness.

The last part of this research is the **Conclusion** Section which, as the title suggests, closes the present study. This last Section summarises the main findings of the study concurrently connecting them with the research questions. **Conclusion** plays a particularly important role in the study because it underlines the salience of the same while also stressing its limitations and offering insightful input which might inspire future research.

To conclude this introductory Section, a necessary clarification should be made. As may be surmised from the structure of the Chapters provided above, the instalments discussing the three examined TV shows not only contain the analysis of the same. On

² The official pilot of *All in the Family* is entitled *Meet the Bunkers* (IMDb).

³ The two episodes are respectively entitled *Pilot* and *Diversity Day* (IMDb).

⁴ The pilot episode of *Family Guy* is entitled *Death Has a Shadow* (IMDb).

the contrary, they dedicate considerable amount of attention to other contextual information⁵ which is undoubtedly secondary regarding the goal of this dissertation, but which is still reckoned indispensable for an adequate understanding of the context in which the examination itself was conducted. Indeed, without this information, it would be difficult for the reader to grasp the implications of the analysis reported in the three Chapters in question. In point of fact, the analysis itself stems not only from the inspection of the data alone but also from a much wider context which is the result of a meticulous research herein summarised in a few Sections. For this reason, although an important portion of this study ‘simply’ reports and discusses the findings and considerations of other scholars, it does so with the aim of providing a richer background for the core of this work (i.e., the analysis), not to merely recycle other scholars’ ideas. This study therefore could be considered a rich compendium of knowledge derived from different disciplines and texts which is enhanced by the contribution resulting from the examination of the pilots of the sitcoms at hand.

⁵ A few examples of such contextual information are the historical background, the general presentation and the controversies about the analysed TV shows.

CHAPTER ONE

Political Correctness: Introduction and Overview

1.1. What Is Political Correctness? Finding a Suitable Definition

Political correctness is a “chimera” term⁶ used to enrich the social discourse (Hughes, 2010: 61). It has become a cultural symbol to which people recur with the same frequency and spontaneity that they discuss the latest fashion trend, or the weather forecast. However, in comparison with these topics, political correctness (henceforth referred to as ‘PC’ for reasons of simplicity) is not a light matter at all. In fact, discussions around it may ignite more than a few sparks of hostile disagreement, as will be examined later.

Providing a precise definition of PC may prove a more challenging task that one might imagine. Indeed, first it should be noted that PC is not interested a single issue, but it addresses several of them from a plethora of social spheres including race, gender, sexuality, disability, the environment and animal rights etc. (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2003: 135). It is true that not all these social dimensions receive the same level of attention from both campaigners and adversaries, as it will be dealt with later, however the polyvalent nature of this phenomenon is already stressed by the mere presence of such diverse subjects. Secondly, the term PC itself has predominantly been used by its detractors to label stances and opinions they did not agree with, therefore some of the attempts to find a valid definition of PC are inevitably skewed and biased. Let us consider for example the definition of PC given by Lessing (2004, cit. in Hughes, 2010: 13):

The most powerful mental tyranny in what we call the free world is Political Correctness, which is both immediately evident, and to be seen everywhere, and as invisible as a kind of poison gas, for its influences are often far from the source, manifesting as a general intolerance.

⁶ Hughes (2010: 61) reported that the term political correctness was a “chimera” that is, “an imaginary monster created by some on the Right of the political spectrum to discredit those who wished to change the status quo”.

Words such as ‘tyranny’ and ‘poison gas’ are certainly not devoid of a strong negative evaluation of the phenomenon at hand and reflect a worldview that opposes the very existence of PC. This interpretation is supported by another attempt of framing PC provided by Short (1995, cit. in Hughes, 2010: 13):

Political Correctness is a concept invented by hard-rightwing forces to defend their right to be racist, to treat women in a degrading way and to be truly vile about gay people. They invent these people who are Politically Correct, with a rigid, monstrous attitude to life so they can attack them [...].

In this quotation it is possible to identify the presence of a political component that is essential to the debate on PC.⁷ As a matter of fact, the quotation above describes the confrontation between “hard-right-wing forces” and possibly their left-wing counterparts who oppose them in such ideological battle. Short (1995) supported the argument that Political Correctness is a term invented by its depreciators concurrently blaming them for such an invention on the grounds of racism and bigotry. The scholar’s position places advocates of PC on the higher moral ground jointly condemning its critics. Therefore, by taking an explicit political position, the scholar’s statement cannot be considered completely unbiased, at least as far as a fair definition of PC would be concerned.

A more neutral consideration of the concept can be found in the *Oxford Dictionary of New Words* (1997, cit. in Hughes, 2010: 13), where PC is defined as “[c]onformity to a body of liberal or radical opinion on social matters, characterized by the advocacy of approved views and the rejection of language and behaviour considered discriminatory or offensive”. This definition, despite having a neutral and unbiased stance, is still excessively vague and not really on point since it is unable to capture the complexity of PC. Indeed, a third problem regarding a neat framing of PC is the fact that being ‘politically correct’ means respecting a series of attitudes, verbal and non-verbal, that are more easily understood than explicitly explained (9). Therefore, it is more practical to make a list of examples than struggling to find the

⁷ It may be hypothesised that the socio-political debate might be the reason for the notoriety and durability of the notion of PC itself (Gring-Pemble and Watson, 2003: 135).

right words to describe such a complex phenomenon. In this regard, it could be interesting to inspect the following *Table 1* taken from Hughes (2010: 11):

Inappropriate activities	Politically incorrect
using ethnic slurs	✓
religious swearing	X
sexual swearing	?
pedophilia	X
rape	✓
chauvinism	✓
sexism	✓
homophobia	✓
pornography	?
blasphemy	X
racism	✓
domestic violence	?
cruelty to animals	✓
smoking cigarettes	✓
smoking cannabis	X
wearing fur	✓
eating veal	✓
eating beef	X

Table 1: Inappropriate Activities and PC

The table compares the inappropriateness of certain common activities with the concept of PC in order to explain what is considered offensive, or *politically incorrect*, by the general public. According to Hughes (2010), it is important to precise that not everyone would agree with all the markings in this list (12). Indeed, some of the markings seem incorrectly placed as though they merely reflected the views of the author, but in truth this ‘strangeness’ may also be due to the quick evolution that our contemporary society underwent in recent years.⁸

Nevertheless, despite such little inaccuracies, this table can still be used as a useful framework to grasp some of the subtleties and apparent contradictions in PC. For instance, it seems absurd to believe that smoking cigarettes is considered

⁸ The rapid transformation of our society would explain the absence of some current pivotal topics from the table, such as climate change (Day and Holborow, 2021: 34) and nonconventional gender identities (Cossman, 2018: 77), which instead were not as popular when this table was made.

politically incorrect whereas smoking cannabis is not. Another interesting example of this apparent contradiction is the fact that according to the table above PC supposedly accepts religious swearing and blasphemy, while simultaneously criticising other types of swearing (e.g., ethnic and sexual ones). These dichotomies highlight the existence of double standards in the system which can be justified as the reflection of the particular sensitivities of the members of the community supporting PC. These very sensitivities are neither arbitrary nor immutable but are firmly ingrained in the society that hosts them and are thus bound to change together with it.

To answer the question that opened the Chapter, and on the basis of the several approaches to the matter, it might be concluded that PC could be briefly described as a cultural construct which emphasises the necessity to use appropriate forms of language and behaviours at all levels of society (Hughes, 2010: 21). As such, it aims to raise awareness on a number of sensitive issues which are not treated with due attention or respect by mainstream culture, e.g., marginalised social groups, ecological matters, reproductive rights etc.

1.2. The Language of PC

Despite establishing the solid non-verbal component of PC, as seen in the table above, what really consecrated political correctness to such a powerful cultural symbol is undoubtedly the prominence given to word choice in the social discourse. In fact, the first thought that comes to mind to anyone who has even a little knowledge of PC is that words and expressions that used to be acceptable in the past are no longer tolerated in our contemporary society and, because of that, some people feel restrained in the way they speak (Thiele, 2021: 50). This constitutes much of the public and political debate about PC, a topic that will be discussed in greater detail in Section 1.3.

1.2.1. Reshaping the Lexicon

What is relevant to address here is the strong focus that PC places on language, even more specifically so on the lexicon that speakers choose to adopt in their daily conversations. As a matter of fact, it is precisely this language component, i.e., lexicon, which plays such a fundamental role in shaping the core of PC. Indeed, as Battistella (2005: 13) argued: “[w]hile grammar and pronunciation are viewed as signals of

education, word choice is often seen as a signal of political beliefs”. In other words, at the heart of the controversial debate surrounding PC is the careful choice of expressions that either its advocates or detractors use to convey their respective ideologies and moral values. As the scholar illustrated (*ibid.*), for PC supporters exploring new forms of language makes part of a natural process of language change that is morally relevant since it aims at subverting unjust “existing privilege[s]” in society. Instead, detractors of PC perceive language more conservatively rejecting PC’s linguistic innovations that are considered intrusive and coercive operations backed by ill-bred political agendas (*ibid.*).

In these terms it is easy to fall prey to the simplistic assumption that PC is nothing more than politicised language with adulterating intentions. In truth, it is an elaborate set of concepts which was created to safeguard the most exposed and unprotected portions of society from the violence they are still subject to (Wilson, 1998: 101).

So far, the discussion has regarded the significance of language in relation to PC. Nonetheless, a fundamental issue has not been addressed yet, that is, how such linguistic relevance translates in practical terms. In other words, it ought to be considered how the application of PC norms (i.e., the careful choice of lexical items) affects the communicative exchange between speakers. To deal with this issue, it could be useful to observe some examples of politically correct language in use. Doing so will increase the chances of finding common underlying patterns that enable to facilitate the subsequent analysis. In this regard, among the existing politically correct expressions, some that are worth mentioning are: HEARING IMPAIRED, DISADVANTAGED, DIFFERENTLY ABLED, MENTALLY CHALLENGED (Hughes, 2010: 195). They are all addressed to people with physical or mental disabilities and substituted previously employed epithets such as DEAF, CRIPPLE, HANDICAPPED, RETARDED. SUBSTANCE ABUSER (206) came to be preferred to ALCOHOLIC or ADDICT, in the same way that SEX WORKER replaced both the vulgar word WHORE and the previous formal term PROSTITUTE (14). Let us now examine the gradual shift between the following terms belonging to a racial context, NEGRO, NIGGER, BLACK, COLOURED and the most recent AFRICAN-AMERICAN (133), or these others concerning sexual orientation, QUEER, GAY, LESBIAN, HOMOSEXUAL (186).

In the first group of words, the one related to disabilities, PC adopts euphemisms to minimise the negative perception that people may have regarding such impairments. While some people reckon these changes genuine and welcome them, others believe that they sound forced and unnatural. The latter argue that those phrases risk putting too much emphasis on the conditions themselves rather than on the person they describe. In this regard, a historical criticism of the use of euphemisms comes from a linguist named Bréal (1900: 100, cit. in Hughes, 2010: 18) who, more than a century ago, already expressed his disapproval of these expressions by arguing that sometimes words “come to possess a disagreeable sense as a result of euphemism”, thus attributing them a sense of “false delicacy” (Bréal, 1900: 101).

In the second group PC operates with euphemism as well. However, in this case, the specific goal of the renaming operation is to remove the guilt associated with the nature of the illicit activities that the euphemisms refer to from the people who practice them. Hence, the consumption of substances is no longer blamed on the individual, but it is considered a medical condition (Hughes, 2010: 205). Likewise, prostitution is not labelled as delinquency and framed as the result of poverty and exploitation, but it is nobilitated and considered on a par with any other ‘normal job’ (182).

The third group of words is somehow different from the previous two. As a matter of fact, even the words that historically used to be connected with discrimination practices, either related to racism or homophobia, have undergone a massive change in their connotation as they were assimilated by their respective communities. Their meanings have shifted to become symbols of pride and belonging. Naturally, that holds true as long as those expressions are used to address members of the same community as the speaker. Otherwise, if they were to be used by outsiders, these would keep their discriminating value (specifically so if they concern the racial sphere) (Hughes, 2010: 270).

Many other politically correct words follow similar rules. For instance, let us consider the word FAT. This expression, exactly like the others presented above, due to its generic negative connotation, received politically correct alternatives. Therefore, saying OVERWEIGHT or OBESE is perceived by some people more neutral, hence less offensive than FAT (Hughes, 2010: 209). Again, as in the case of the first group that was examined, there is no fixed rule that guarantees in universal terms the ‘correct’

epithet for a given category of people. It depends on the sensitivity of the individual or group and the cultural transformation that that specific word might have experienced throughout the years.

The previous examples were useful to identify a defining feature of PC that appears to be a constant in the creation of its neologisms, namely the recursion to euphemism. These linguistic devices avoid crude and offensive language proposing elaborate rephrasing which seldom sound unnatural and humorous too (e.g., SIGNIFICANT OTHER for LOVER) , thus becoming more inappropriate than the word they wish to substitute. The interesting aspect is that many of these new words follow a common pattern. Indeed, as Hughes (2010: 109) noticed, a large number of these neologisms are composed by compounds (e.g., ETHNIC CLEANSING, HATE CRIME, SINGLE PARENT...) that often end with words such as -IMPAIRED, -CHALLENGED, -FRIENDLY (e.g., ECO-FRIENDLY...). Some common prefixes are BIO- ECO-, NON- and UN-; whereas common suffixes are -ISM and -IST, -SEXUAL (e.g., FATTIST, LOOKISM, PANSEXUAL...) (109).

Hughes (2010: 24) also presented a controversial consideration about PC language, namely the fact that it is nothing more than a “new form of orthodoxy”. The author suggested that this cleansing of language is not much different from other historical kinds of linguistic orthodoxies, which had their roots in religion and ethics. The only difference in this case would be that, instead of abiding by the rigid norms of politeness and prudishness of Victorian Britain for instance, people would need to pay attention to ‘progressive’ or ‘liberal’ ethics in order not to disregard this “new form of orthodoxy”. This argumentation may easily lead to controversial discussions on the censorship implemented by our supposedly totalitarian-PC-led society (31). However, such complex issue will be dealt with later in Subsection 1.3.2.

1.2.2. ‘Bad Words’

After the previous illustration of the functioning of PC language, a curiosity arises concerning possible differences between slang, swear words and politically incorrect language. These expressions are apparently very similar since they seem to flout PC regulations in equal measure. However, investigating further this topic could be important because it might be found that this may as well not be the case.

In the past centuries, coarse language did not enjoy much freedom due to ethical and religious restrictions on their use, which were then alleviated after the world wars and the social revolutions of the following decades (Battistella, 2005: 79-82). Slang, on the other hand, has not receive much attention compared to coarse language because of the intrinsic regionalist and short-lived nature that characterises it (86-87). However, what these speech codes (including PC) have in common is the fact that they have been regarded as what Battistella (2005: 100) labelled as “bad language”, that is to say a type of speech code that challenges the norms of the standard variety and creates a sense of discomfort among the speakers who are not used to it.

Notwithstanding, the opposite of PC, political incorrectness, also shares similarities with slang and swearing. In fact, as previously discussed, these two forms of ‘bad language’ have been attacked and suppressed by some sort of language orthodoxy throughout the time. This might be equated to the complaint of censorship that critics of PC now make regarding their right to free speech. In this acceptation, ‘bad language’ would thus acquire a different meaning that would no longer be related to the degree with which it could subvert the norms of standard usage and generate discomfort among speakers, but it would be connected to the concept of inappropriateness. In this context, it is then crucial to identify the line of demarcation between merely inappropriate and actually politically incorrect language. This issue was also tackled during Subsection 1.1. when searching for a suitable definition of PC and examining various examples of inappropriate activities listed in a table.

The reasoning behind some of the markings in that table seemed arbitrary and ambiguous. However, the answers to the questions at hand may be found in what Battistella (2005: 99) reported concerning ‘bad words’. The scholar stated that only “[e]pithets and slurs divide speech communities by direct vilification or by sanctioning intolerance”. According to the scholar, the other types of bad language, which were analysed above, do divide speech communities, but they do so by using different means. In the case of coarse language that goal is achieved by “shocking its more puritan members and establishing a low tone” (*ibid.*), whereas for slang by disorienting “the uninitiated both in terms of meaning and in tone” and for PC by “politicizing language choices” (100). The interesting aspect to detect in this discussion is that neither the vulgarity of coarse language nor the specificity of slang is considered

instances of politically incorrect language because, unlike slurs, these expressions are not offensive or derogatory towards any social groups. They do not reaffirm intolerance, hence resulting in a less negative impact on discriminated communities. What swearing and slang aim to do is to simply challenge standard speech codes to enrich them with new creative and ‘colourful’ expressions.

This argumentation serves to support the assertion that PC does not repudiate ‘bad words’ per se, nor does it intend to ban them altogether. Indeed, those speech codes are considered acceptable as long as they respect the people they address. Otherwise, if they are used in offensive and discriminatory manners, PC intervenes to protect the objects of such verbal abuse (Battistella, 2005: 99).

1.2.3. The Influence of PC Labelling Practices on Society

In this Subsection, it may be relevant to anticipate a key aspect regarding PC, namely the way and the extent to which PC is capable of influencing society. In this regard, Fairclough (2003: 22) affirmed as follows:

Processes of cultural and discursive intervention, including what is referred to as ‘PC’, can be seen in these terms as attempts to change discourses on the assumption that changing discourses will, or may, lead to changes in other elements of social practices through processes of dialectical internalization [...]. Changes of discourse are not merely re-labellings but shifts to different spheres of values.

In the quotation above, Fairclough (2003) stated that PC may have the powerful ability to affect and transform our perception of reality through the practice of renaming and re-labelling. Such practice could have a huge impact on society, for instance, it might be beneficial in the battle against intolerance and discrimination. Indeed, people might slowly start to accept diversity and embrace inclusive language that respects minorities. In other words, using different labels to represent reality is likely to produce a slow shift in values and meanings that might as well alter the very structure of society itself. This result might be achieved owing to the existence of a strong bond between language and cognition, as Vygotsky (1987) expressed in his *Sociocultural Theory of Mind*.

Nonetheless, Fairclough (2003) was not totally optimistic about the enactment of PC. In fact, the scholar (25) warned that linguistic policies alone cannot prevent the perpetuation of other discriminatory practices such as salary differentials or procedures for promotion in the workplace. In addition, the scholar (*ibid.*) also asserted that there is a certain resistance to the “enactment and inculcation of neo-liberal discourses” and that even “relatively successful enactment does not guarantee relatively successful inculcation” because “people may acquiesce to new discourses without accepting them — they may mouth them rhetorically, for strategic and instrumental purposes” (26). Both the open resistance to PC and its false acceptance in case of successful enactment are serious threats to the achievement of the positive outcomes described above. Besides, since the public debate on PC is as intense as ever, the risk of encountering a similar level of opposition is more than a mere possibility.

1.3. History of PC and the Perduring Debate

Now that the concept of PC has been clarified and its most prominent component has been examined (i.e., language), it should be easier to understand the context in which this phenomenon originated and how it evolved through the decades.⁹ Indeed, this Section will deal with the history of political correctness, from its inception, and early periods, to the contemporary developments. It will also address the thorny issue of the everlasting debate on PC presenting different viewpoints on the matter.

1.3.1. The Origins and Development of Political Correctness

The first record for the expression ‘politically correct’ dates to the year 1793 when, during a court hearing, Justice James Wilson objected to the phrase used in a common toast reckoning that “the people of the United States” would be more appropriate, more ‘politically correct’ than just saying “the United States” (Wilson, 1998: 3). This use of the term was quite literal and extremely far from the one that is commonly used in our era (*ibid.*). Moreover, after this isolated case, the expression remained unutilised for more than a century.

⁹ Had history of PC been presented earlier in the chapter, it might have risked confusing the readers not familiar with political correctness. Therefore, it was reckoned necessary to provide some basic background before discussing the historical evolution of the phenomenon.

It is only in the 1930s and 1940s that it started to gain popularity again when it was used among the American Left, in self-mockery, to address someone who adhered with obsessive zeal to the rigid party line of the Communist Party (Wilson, 1998: 4). It is said to have been originated from Mao Zedong's recurrent reference to "correct" ideas, hence reaffirming the connection between PC and orthodoxy (*ibid.*). Therefore, it was not a case that, as Perry reported (1992: 72 cit. in Battistella, 2005: 90), the Chinese leader became an actual cultural icon of the 1960s himself.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, D'Souza (1991: xiv, cit. in Hughes, 2010: 61) observed that the expression came to be associated with a number of liberal movements among which the black power, feminism, homosexual rights, pacifism, environmentalism etc. In the same period, as Perry remembered (Perry (1992: 77, cit. in Wilson, 1998: 4), it also continued to be used as a "double-edged [...] term of self-criticism" by moderate liberals who did not agree with the positions of other more extremist colleagues.

Later, in the 1980s, the phrase had already shifted its meaning approaching the more contemporary one, namely the speech codes for bias-free language that at the time constituted a big part of the cultural debate in American campuses, from where they expanded to the rest of the nation and beyond. In the same decade, the conservative appropriated PC for their own assaults on the radical Left (Wilson, 1998: 4). Being 'not politically correct' passed from being a defence used by liberals in order not to be labelled as extremists to a proud declaration, a "badge of honor", made by conservatives to announce their purity and freedom from the alleged corruption that PC brought into campuses and into society as a whole (*ibid.*).

PC truly entered the public discourse through the backdoor of university debates about diversity and multiculturalism that were spreading throughout the 1980s and 1990s in the United States (Battistella, 2005: 90). Discussions on these topics led many students and professors alike to demand for an expansion of the university curriculum, one which not only accommodated the traditional canon, but which also accounted for non-European forms of cultural expression in different disciplinary fields such as literature and art (*ibid.*). As a result, this growing concern for diversity and multiculturalism spurred the creation of innovative courses that brought fresh new perspectives into the life of American college campuses. Now, a wide variety of

subjects entered the educational system including Women's studies, Gender studies, African American studies, Environmental studies and so on (91).

Critics of this renewed educational system did not wait long to show themselves and attack PC and its advocates. They opposed the inclusion of these subjects in the university curricula as they believed that they constituted a threat to the integrity of the educational standards of university programmes (Wilson, 1998: 78). They feared that those 'unworthy' studies might have impoverished or replaced the canon. As a matter of fact, *The New York Review of Books* (1999, cit. in Hughes, 2010: 81) wrote: "[t]he canon was under attack from feminists and social historians who saw it as the preserve of male and bourgeois dominance". Such was the line shared by many conservatives on the matter.

Another strong criticism moved against PC was the fact that conservatives felt constrained in their faculty to speak because the new speech codes that were circulating in campuses prevented them from uttering 'politically incorrect' remarks. Indeed, as Wilson (1998: 16) indicated: "conservatives in the 1990s present[ed] themselves as the victims of false charges of racism and sexism, victims of the repressive thought police, and victims of reverse discrimination". According to them the new victim is thus the white conservative male who is oppressed and censored by PC, but that is clearly a distorted exaggeration. In fact, as Wilson continued by stating: "[t]he difference between the old victims and the new conservative white male victims is that the conservatives aren't really victims. They are still the same privileged people they have always been" (*ibid.*).

Several scholars embraced this aversive rhetoric, among these Dinesh D'Souza certainly figured outstandingly. Indeed, in his book called *Illiberal Education* (1992), even the Chapter titles are explicative enough of his position: *The Victim's Revolution on Campus*, *The New Censorship* and *The Tyranny of the Minority* are just to name a few. Besides scholars like D'Souza, even President Bush was captivated by the topic of PC and could not exempt himself from joining the heated debate. On 4 May 1991, the then president held the following speech at the University of Michigan (*New York Times* (1991: 32, cit. in Wilson, 1998: 8)):

The notion of political correctness has ignited controversy across the land. And although the movement arises from the laudable desire to sweep away the debris of racism, sexism and hatred, it replaces old prejudices with new ones. It declares certain topics off-limits, certain expressions off-limits, even certain gestures off-limits. What began as a cause for civility has soured into a cause of conflict and even censorship. Disputants treat sheer force — getting their foes punished or expelled, for instance — as a substitute for the power of ideas. Throughout history, attempts to micromanage casual conversation have only incited distrust. They've invited people to look for insult in every word, gesture, action. And in their own Orwellian way, crusades that demand correct behavior crush diversity in the name of diversity.

It is very interesting to notice that in this speech Bush used a double standard to attack PC, on the one side minimising the social issue of racism, relegating it to a problem of the past, an “old prejudice”; while on the other side describing advocates of PC as fascist brutes who, by means of sheer force and censorship, find “insult in every word, gesture, action” and silence innocent opinions. This speech made part of the counter-rhetoric against political correctness and contributed to inflame the vast debate about it as will be promptly examined.¹⁰

1.3.2. Evolution of the Debate and Overview

The history of the debate over PC is long and cyclical. As described above, it has its roots in the ideological battles fought at university campuses throughout the US in the name of diversity and multiculturalism. As this cultural revolution started to gain a foothold in academic institutions, peculiar speech codes, inspired by the new liberal sensitivities, began to spread throughout the nation carrying the values and ideals of the ‘revolution’ (Wilson, 1998: 22). Certainly, not everyone agreed with those ideals, therefore leading to the first confrontations between supporters and detractors of PC.

However, political correctness did not become mainstream until it entered the radar of politics thanks to media coverage. It approximately coincided with the period of time in which President Bush gave the speech which was reported above. In fact,

¹⁰ The speech was even more incendiary and impactful than it might be imagined, especially considering it was personally uttered by the then President of the United States and not by a simple citizen (Wilson, 1998: 9).

Wilson disclosed a search performed through the *NEXIS* database showing how the number of articles on PC increased significantly over less than a decade, with a noticeable boost registered in 1991, exactly the same year of the presidential speech: “1985, 0; 1986, 7; 1987, 7; 1988, 7; 1989, 15; 1990, 65; 1991, 1,570; 1992, 2,835; 1993, 4,914; and 1994, 6,985” (8).

When the debate passed from the private domain of university campuses and moved to the public sphere, it intensified in tones and gained the notoriety that still possesses today. The main positions of the interlocutors of this debate and the issue of whether there is a more righteous party are going to be addressed in the following paragraphs.

Advocates of PC reiterate the importance of using a ‘correct’ language that is inclusive and that respects all social groups and individual identities. The new cultural wave, which was discussed earlier, raised awareness on a number of socially relevant issues (e.g., racism, sexism and homophobia) that were not treated with sufficient consideration until then and thus needed a call to action (Hughes, 2010: 116). To achieve this goal, several different practices were implemented including the one for which PC is most famous, namely labelling (14). As was explained in Subsection 1.2.1. of this Chapter, this practice mainly employs euphemisms and artificial compounds to create neologisms that replace existing ‘politically incorrect words’ with new and theoretically unbiased ones. The outcome is not always positive since the newly formed expression may sound unnaturally complex and may risk not to be taken seriously by the speakers (e.g., FOLLICALLY CHALLENGED for BALD), thus allowing detractors of PC to deride it (196).

Critics of PC, besides scoffing the unnaturalness of several PC wordings, mainly denounce what they consider a real form of censorship. They feel intimidated and silenced, as though they lived in what Thiele (2021: 52) described as a “persistent cultural hegemony of ‘the 68ers’”. The scholar (51) also added that “[t]here is talk of totalitarianism, manipulation, an Orwellian thought and language police, and even comparisons with the Stasi and the Nazis”. Therefore, as can be evinced, the debate over PC is as much on its content as it is on its form.¹¹ In truth, as emerges from

¹¹ The terms ‘content’ and ‘form’ contained in the text respectively refer to the liberal values dear to PC supporters and the language of political correctness.

Thiele's (2021) work, the language of PC may be arguably even more daunting for their critics than the issues themselves. This point explains why there is such preoccupation with the concept of censorship and with the loss of free speech among detractors of PC.

Thiele (2021) reckoned that these detractors often exaggerate their alleged condition of victimhood and overestimate the social attention given to formerly marginalised groups. Furthermore, de Lora (2021: 133) suggested that there are situations in which free speech can be suspended. For instance, the scholar reported the iconic example of Judge Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. Someone yelling: "fire!" inside a crowded theatre is very likely to create a widespread sense of panic which might escalate in a stampede, thus harming the safety of those present in the theatre. de Lora (2021) also added that free speech is not a green light for other unsympathetic actions among which the scholar (*ibid.*) included "insults, offences, blatant lies that affect the respectability of others, or the public spread of intimate details of the private lives of individuals", some of which may in fact constitute politically incorrect language hence ought to be avoided.

Conversely, critics put forth another argument to discredit PC, namely self-censorship. In fact, according to both Loury (1994) and Morris (2001), there is a concrete risk that information is not correctly conveyed between speakers with diverging ideas since they may wish to avoid adverse inferences. Therefore, they modify the message that they originally intended to disclose in order to reach a sort of false agreement with the interlocutor. While both blaming PC, Morris (2001: 233) stressed the danger of the "suppression of information", which likely results in an unsuccessful and untruthful communicative exchange; whereas Loury (1994: 438) focused on emphasising how nonconformists have to self-censor themselves to evade the so-called "thought-police".

Nevertheless, this kind of self-limitation is not necessarily bad. There are many occasions in which it is advisable to restrain oneself. In fact, as Loury (1994: 449) reminded: "when the rules of permissible expression vary with the audience prudent speakers must be sure to remember to whom they are speaking at any moment [...] [and] how an expression made in one context will sound in another". For instance, in normal circumstances it would be unwise to publicly repeat an offensive joke

previously told in a private and informal setting, such as that of a group of friends. It would be unwise because it would most likely negatively affect the public reputation of the speaker, who concern themselves with such opinions only for what Morris (2001: 250) defined as “instrumental reasons”.

Indeed, reputation plays an important role in the process of communication. Morris (2001) affirmed that certain statements are bound to lower one’s reputation irrespective of the fact that the speaker is biased or not (*ibid.*). Therefore, since reputation is so important for the speaker, they will attempt to avoid utterances that may devalue their reputation. However, by doing so, information will not be conveyed in a truthful manner, hence possibly invalidating the very purpose of communication itself (*ibid.*). In conclusion, although PC-induced self-censorship may be necessary in certain contexts to avoid ruining one’s reputation, in others it could be destructive and misleading even constituting an obstacle to successful communication.

The debate about PC is not simple. Apart from the ideological dichotomies expressed and embraced by the two main sides of the debate, other positions exist in the middle between the two extremes.¹² Such intermediate positions tend to be more moderate in tones and do not wish to establish which side is right or wrong in absolute terms but rather prefer to analyse PC critically, thus highlighting both its positive and negative aspects. An instance of a similar position may be that of Stefanowitsch (2018, cit. in Thiele, 2021: 51) who claimed that PC language is necessary but insufficient to change the world. Nevertheless, Thiele (2021: 51) précised that “by employing such efforts, we show that a fair world is something we aspire to in the first place”. This position recognises the usefulness and ideological significance of PC while jointly doubting the means it adopts because the author deemed them insufficient to produce an actual and lasting change. Similar reflections will continue throughout the rest of the Chapter.

1.4. Social Themes and Cancel Culture

As reiterated several times in the Chapter already, social matters are particularly relevant in the discussion about PC. The concept of political correctness neither would

¹² The two sides of the debate mentioned in the text are: respect for diversity and inclusiveness on the one hand, and the universal right to freedom of expression (free speech) on the other (Wilson, 1998: 22).

have experienced the same success, nor it would have become one of the most divisive cultural symbols of our society had it not been rooted in the social and ethical dimension (Hughes, 2010: 24). Due to the special attention that PC has always dedicated to various historically sensitive issues, people have begun to associate its notion with the progressive and liberal left-wing political sphere (Wilson, 1998: 14). Such interpretation is undoubtedly a sweeping generalisation that risks politicising a discourse that ought to be framed in a more neutral manner, namely in terms of politeness and civic responsibility.

1.4.1. Defending Diversity and Social Rights

As previously mentioned, several are the topics that PC is concerned about. It might be relevant to list them once again in order to have a clear picture of the topic of discussion at hand. The main issues related to PC deal with social domains such as race, women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, animal rights, environmentalism, disability, body shape perception, addictive behaviours, various health issues etc. All these matters have obtained a certain degree of attention throughout the centuries. Some of them have for a long time been the cause of social distress as they have managed to foment the public and political debate for many decades, thus increasing the controversy around them. Others instead have only achieved that in more recent times (Hughes, 2010: 30).

It would be impractical to focus here on each one of these topics separately. Therefore, the central point of the discussion will mainly be racism, with some sporadic references to other prominent issues such as sexism and transphobia.

The West sadly has a long and uninterrupted history of racial discrimination (Wilson, 1998: 156). Its traces can still be found in our contemporary society as shown in the news media reports covering the systematic violence committed against ethnic minorities. Racism, xenophobia, ethnic hatred and intolerance are all key words that describe a society that has yet to come to terms with its underlying fear of the 'other' (Black, 2021: 24). Racial slurs and bigoted prejudices are still commonplace as evidenced by the following extract (McDonald (2002: 325, cit. in Hughes, 2010: 251)):

Our girlfriends/wives are in constant threat of being brutally raped by some AIDS infected Kaffir (or gang of Kaffirs). Everyday someone you know is either robbed, assaulted, hijacked or murdered... Half these black bastards have bought their (drivers) licences from corrupt traffic cops... All I am saying is that AIDS isn't working fast enough!!!

In this regard, PC chooses to fight racism with multiculturalism hoping that bridging different cultures and paying attention to social aspects such as race, gender and class may create a more inclusive narrative which, according to Ehrenreich (1991: 3, cit. in Wilson, 1998: 81), has historically been “neglected by traditional analysis”. Indeed, this attention has proven beneficial to marginalised social groups, among whom migrants, who are finally able to make their voice be heard. This fact, according to Assistant MEP¹³ Lazarevic, annoys conservatives and right-wingers who complain that the requests made by these outgroups are “too loud or outrageous” (Krüger (2020: 33, cit. in Thiele, 2021: 53)). In truth, Lazarevic suggested that what really bothers conservatives is the fact that migrants are demanding to be treated equally and not as second-class citizens who are tolerated as long as they obediently perform the jobs that locals do not want to execute anymore.

When the topic of racism is addressed, it is commonly believed that colour blindness is a virtue of a non-racist politically correct person.¹⁴ A possible reason for this interpretation is that indifference to skin colour allegedly makes a person unaware of the prejudices that racial discourses instead generally embed. In that regard, Norton et al. (2006) conducted a study to ascertain whether colour blindness really allows a white person to be unprejudiced towards non-whites. In his experiments, the author studied the interactions between a group composed by both white and black participants who were asked to participate in activities where a physical description of the interlocutor was requested.

From Norton's (2006: 951) research it emerged that white participants were less efficient at performing the task when paired with a black counterpart in comparison with their performance with other white attendants. In particular, the study showed

¹³ MEP is an acronym for Member of the European Parliament (*Cambridge Dictionary*).

¹⁴ Colour blindness can be defined as “[t]he act or practice of treating all people the same regardless of race” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

that white participants adopting the strategy of colour blindness when performing the joint task with a black partner made the former appear less friendly in their nonverbal behaviour due to decreased eye contact with the latter. This finding seems to indicate that the obsessive impulse to ignore race comes at the cost of reduced spontaneous interracial relations (*ibid.*). On this subject, the scholar (952) concluded that “concerns about appearing biased reflect a desire among Whites to be more egalitarian, [and as such] they represent a step in the right direction toward the amelioration of racial bias”.

Nevertheless, Norton et al. (2006) also stressed the fact that wishing to achieve this goal through colour blindness alone may not be sufficient. Perhaps, even PC as a whole may not be enough to halt racism. This argument is supported by Black (2021: 24) who claimed that even “forms of racial tolerance are pervasively grounded in forms of intolerance [...] [T]he hegemonic power of liberal multiculturalism and political correctness locates the other as both ‘traumatic’ and ‘excessive’”. As a consequence, the tolerance fostered by PC, as seen in the case of colour blindness, is superficial and does not operate deep enough to radically alter the general perception about such a complicated and ingrained issue. According to the scholar (*ibid.*), “such ‘complexion’ is ignored, obfuscated or overlooked in examples of political correctness”. However, according to Norton et al. (2006: 952), despite not representing the end of the road, it could be argued that PC may be considered the first step in the right direction to win the fight against racism because at the very least it is useful to shed light on a serious problem that continues to afflict society.

As established in Subsection 1.3.2., PC is interested in certain social topics as much as in the language used to address them. One interesting linguistic phenomenon that belongs to the racial discourse is the famous phrase: “some of my best friends are... but...”. Everyone might have heard a similar construction e.g., “Some of my best friends are black, but I wouldn’t want my kids to play in their neighbourhoods”. The curious aspect of this construction is the fact that, as Loury (1994: 446) predicted, its literal meaning has been replaced by a rhetorical one. It has become “a sarcastic reference to people who unsuccessfully affect a concern for values they do not really share” (*ibid.*). In fact, the first part of the sentence serves as an attenuating excuse to utter the second bit, the one preceded by the ‘but’, which conveys the real intended message that is constantly the expression of an extremely bigoted mind. What is

interesting about this type of construction is that the apparent concern for certain social and moral values expressed in the first part of the phrase may actually only be a strategy to counter PC norms. Indeed, in order to bypass the ‘censorship’ of politically correct language, conservative speakers choose a seemingly innocuous phrasal archetype to legitimise the most blatant barbarities that they are about to utter. As the phrase construction is widely known, the intent of the speaker is immediately understood (*ibid.*). However, the fact that it is able to bypass PC should be alarming as it implies that PC may be blind to these particular kinds of strategies.

This conclusion is in line with the results of a study conducted by Barreto and Ellemers (2005) on the topic of sexism. They asserted the existence of a new form of sexism that is more subtle than the traditional one which is, as a consequence, able to escape the control of PC. The study compares the traditional form of sexism with a new subtle form respectively labelled as “blatant” and “modern”. The main difference between these two forms is that ‘blatant sexism’ is very straightforward therefore it can be easily rejected. On the contrary, ‘modern sexism’ manages to escape the moral condemnation of PC by expressing more subtle considerations which are not immediately recognised as offensive (76).¹⁵ In addition, as the scholars (78) highlighted, the indirectness of this modern type of sexism disorients women, it makes them anxious and unable to react since they cannot identify the root of this kind of discrimination. They too begin believing the false narrative in which women are excluded from several career opportunities for meritocratic reasons. When it happens, “they are reluctant to perceive themselves as the target of prejudice” (76), therefore they cannot fight it. Men, if somewhat able to distinguish and condemn blatant sexism, are even less aware than women of the dangers of the modern kind of sexism because they are flattered by their supposed superiority guaranteed by the ‘meritocratic’ system in which they live (78). These factors inevitably lead to reaffirm the status quo (77) with the complicity of PC which is ironically bypassed once again.

¹⁵ In particular, Barreto and Ellemers (2005: 76) highlighted the fact that modern sexism denies the presence of discriminatory practices in the workplace while insisting on equal treatment and meritocracy. As a consequence, it implies that lack of career success is only due to women’s inferior effort/abilities.

1.4.2. Cancel Culture

Nowadays PC is not the only player in the field of morality that dictates what is socially acceptable and what is not. In fact, it has now a partner called ‘cancel culture’, a modern re-interpretation of PC which emphasises the ‘cancellation’ of certain elements (e.g., speeches, cultural symbols and even people) that are considered problematic according to the moral standards of our contemporary society (*New York Post*, 2021). Nadine Dorries¹⁶ attacked cancel culture affirming that it is “killing comedy, tearing down historic statues, removing books from universities, dumbing down panto, removing Christ from Christmas and suppressing free speech” (*The Guardian* (2021, cit. in Day and Holborow, 2021: 29)), a series of accusations which have been moved against PC as well. In fact, similarly to PC, even the term ‘cancel culture’ is used primarily by its opponents and “has become a shorthand for everything that conservatives dislike” (Day and Holborow, 2021: 29).

Continuing with the analogies, cancel culture alike PC was at the centre of the cultural debate because of its supposed violations of the right to free speech. Critics claim that democracy is under attack from this form of ‘repressive orthodoxy’ that silences dissenters. However, Thiele (2021: 55) suggested that, in this debate about cancel culture, it is fundamental to determine whose voices are actually at risk of being left unheard and whose opinions are ignored for other reasons. Indeed, according to the scholar (*ibid.*), public attention should not be distracted by complaints about PC, cancel culture and right to free speech because those who make these complaints are not the real victims, they belong to privileged groups who are simply annoyed at losing their power.

An unexpected attack on cancel culture arrived from a radical strand of feminism (TERF)¹⁷ which has always consistently failed to understand and to recognise transgender people’s right to define their own gender identity. In one of these episodes, Kathleen Stock¹⁸ was ‘cancelled’ because of certain transphobic views emerged in a book she wrote (Day and Holborow, 2021: 31). The professor justified her position by rejecting the accusations of transphobia but firmly reiterating her conviction that only biological sex determines the actual gender of a person, thus equating socially

¹⁶ Nadine Dorries is UK’s Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (*The Guardian*, 2021).

¹⁷ TERF is an acronym for trans-exclusionary radical feminists (*Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*).

¹⁸ Kathleen Stock is a lecturer at the University of Sussex (Day and Holborow, 2021: 31).

constructed gender to a deluded fantasy of someone who is “immersed in a fiction” (Stock (2021, cit. in Day and Holborow, 2021: 32)). Such position is not only embraced by TERF feminists, but it is the dominant view among many conservative groups who firmly deny the existence of socially constructed identities. As Zimman (2017: 90) pointed out, while the majority of transgender people try not to pay too much heed to these opinions, their quality of life is surely influenced by the degree of acceptance they receive by the rest of society, even linguistically speaking.

In this regard, a major debate concerning PC is the choice of adequate pronouns to refer to transgender people. While the debate on trans-inclusive language is wider and also includes all sorts of gendered expressions, for the sake of simplicity and brevity, only the problem related to pronouns will be briefly mentioned. As transgender and non-binary people received more attention and recognition by the general public, the necessity for proper linguistic forms to address them came into being (Zimman, 2017). The traditional pronouns (‘he’ and ‘she’) were deemed incapable of representing the newly found identities. Therefore, unconventional pronouns started to be proposed in their stead (e.g., singular third person pronouns such as ‘they’, ‘ze’, ‘ey’) (Zimman, 2017: 93). As de Lora (2021: 138-139) reported, several critics refused to address transgender people by using such unconventional pronouns stating that forcing them to do so could be considered a restriction of personal freedom and a coercion to their right to free speech and conscience. The extreme example of someone not identifying with the human species was brought to support the argument against the coercion of conscience (141):

Suppose someone identifies with the species *canis lupus familiaris* and requests to be greeted with the sound “whoof”. Could it be sensible to impose a universal duty to bark at him? Could it be sensibly affirmed that by not doing so we would be offensive to him? Could our refusal be considered a form of discrimination based on species-identity? It seems preposterous.

This example is indeed extreme and totally extraneous to the topic of transgender identity. Zimman (2017: 95) instead proposed a concrete yet somehow unrealistic solution to make referencing easier for everyone, namely asking each person to state their preferred pronouns and how they would prefer to be addressed. The advantage of

this solution is that it does not discriminate transgender people based on their look. Gender should not be deduced according to physical appearance, but it should be communicated by the concerned person (*ibid.*). Although Zimman (2017) advanced this solution in order to normalise the practice of asking people for their preferred pronouns (*ibid.*), at the present time it seems unrealistic to expect ordinary people to follow such strategy in real life. In fact, the majority of people would probably regard a similar question as uncomfortable, odd and intrusive too.

Another solution to this problem was proposed by de Lora (2021: 144) who simply recommended to follow common sense. Instead of insisting on the right to freedom of speech, people should consider this matter in terms of civic duty and courtesy. In other words, for the sake of peaceful coexistence, de Lora suggested putting aside one's convictions and address trans people with the names and pronouns of their choosing (*ibid.*). After all, as stated above, language plays a fundamental role in creating the narrative concerning transgender people. Quoting Zimman (101-102): "it is language that serves as the most pervasive ground on which trans identities are delegitimised and transphobic violence is perpetuated. By the same token, it is also the ground on which trans identities can be affirmed, reclaimed and celebrated". This argument is particularly poignant as it seems to explain why PC and cancel culture insist so vehemently on using a type of language that is inclusive and respectful of diversity.

Cancel culture, when collective, can become extremely powerful. Relatively recent movements such as *#MeToo* or *#BlackLivesMatter*¹⁹ have demonstrated that cancel culture has the ability to call large crowds under the same banner in the fight against various forms of oppression. Nevertheless, it can also assume rather negative implications. The worst aspect of cancel culture is perhaps its negating and nullifying tendency towards what is perceived as 'bad' or 'wrong', especially when that concerns specific individuals. As Day and Holborow (2021: 30) argued, cancelling individuals does not fix the underlying issue that these people with their actions and words symbolise (may they be racism, homophobia, sexism etc.), it is only a "pyrrhic victor[y]" that does not affect the 'big picture'. Moreover, the 'cancelled' person will

¹⁹ These are two social movements that respectively exposed and challenged women's sexual abuse by powerful men (*#MeToo*) (Day and Holborow, 2021: 33), and the systematic racist violence committed against black people (*#BlackLivesMatter*) (*BBC News*, 2021).

most likely lose the ability to redeem themselves in the future due to digital pillory (Vox, 2022). Therefore, cancel culture should target the system which justifies and encourages the current oppressive status quo and not the individual. Furthermore, as Day and Holborow (2021: 34) proposed, it would be desirable if it abandoned its cancelling attitude altogether “in favour of building revolutionary, inclusionary movements based on solidarity”.

1.5. Political Correctness, Television and Humour

After introducing PC and delving into some of its ramifications, it is finally time to concentrate on the key theme of the whole dissertation, that is to say the relationship between political correctness, television and comedy. To this purpose, the present Section will gradually investigate the manners in which PC interacts with the other two dimensions, both separately and in combination.

1.5.1. PC on TV

Television, as a mass communication tool, has always had the huge potential to reach, and possibly influence, vast and heterogeneous audiences. However, such enormous potential comes at a cost. Indeed, as the old famous proverb recites: “with great power comes great responsibility”.²⁰ The responsibility that television holds is to ensure that its contents are safe and appropriate for the targeted audiences, which unfortunately is not always the case. In this scenario, PC intervened precisely with the aim to protect the most vulnerable portions of society (e.g., children) from the risk of overexposure to socially and morally inappropriate content, such as “violent and sexual programming” as Murray (1997: 315, cit. in Silverman, 2004: 25) sustained. In other words, PC embodied, and to a certain extent it continues to embody, a censoring safeguarding role.

Adams and Eastman (2002, cit. in Silverman, 2004: 2) explained that censors oversee the entirety of the television production process upon which they have great authority. In fact, “[i]f a program fails to conform to a network’s standards, even if they seem arbitrary, the standards and practices department can insist upon changes”.

²⁰ The phrase is an ancient proverb that resurfaced in popular culture when uttered by the character Uncle Ben from the *Spider-Man* universe (*Quote Investigator*).

These standards usually align with the ethical code of PC since they wish to preserve moral integrity, therefore banning “profanity and obscenity, any words derisive of any race, color, creed, etc., any attacks on religion [...] brutality or physical agony [...]” (Gruhzit-Hoyt and Hoyt (1970: 45, cit. in Silverman, 2004: 6)). Other immoral acts can instead be shown only to be deprecated such as narcotics addiction and illicit sex relations, as opposed to “the sanctity of marriage and the values of the home” which on the contrary are re-established (6).

As Silverman (2004: 43) reported, some complained about the arbitrariness of those moral standards. For instance, the actor playing Bat Masterson in the 1967 TV show *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* griped: “[y]ou can kill on television but you can't make love” revealing a double standard in the logic of PC. Unfortunately, these censoring PC policies were so common in the broadcasting industry of the time that TV stations were persuaded to preventively ban a given type of content if it was even remotely suspected of potentially instigating controversies. On this subject the scholar (65-66) reported that “in retrospect [the TV broadcasters] were clearly on the wrong side of history. Had the American public truly found these topics uninteresting — or offensive [...] — the public would have stopped watching the program altogether”. These censoring practices incapacitated the work of many actors and directors alike who felt unable to express themselves freely or even at all. For this reason, one of these figures²¹ threatened to abruptly interrupt his partnership with the TV station as the actor confessed: “this is stifling my creativity and I just can't work under those conditions” (A Pryor Restraint (1977: B1, cit. in Silverman, 2004: 104)).

Sometimes being politically correct on television means avoiding controversial issues, such as joking on Islamic terrorism in the wake of 9/11. Although your TV programme is called *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher*, it is still considered unwise if not completely insensitive to have an exchange like the following on September 17, 2001 (Kim (2002: 11, cit. in Silverman, 2004: 154)):

D'SOUZA: One of the themes we constantly hear is that the people who did this are cowards.

²¹ Richard Pryor is an American screenwriter and comedian. In the body of the text, the reference alluded to his work as both creator and leading actor in the comic show called *The Richard Pryor Show* (1977) (*IMDb*).

MAHER: Not true.

D'SOUZA: Not true. Look at what they did. First of all, you have a whole bunch of guys who are willing to give their life. None of 'em backed out. All of them slammed themselves into pieces of concrete.

MAHER: Exactly... But also, we should — we have been the cowards lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That's cowardly. Staying in the plane when it hits the building, say what you want about it, it's not cowardly. You're right.

Advertisers immediately pulled their support from the programme justifying the action not as a form of censorship but simply out of sensitivity and respect for the recent tragedy. Maher, the creator of the show, apologised twice showing remorse for his lack of sensitivity and particularly for the bad timing of his intervention (de Moraes (2001: C7, cit. in Silverman, 2004: 156)):

In peacetime, talking about the unthinkable and batting around provocative issues and thinking outside the box is okay... I feel that by doing what I have always done I kind of added to the national trauma and I feel terrible about that. I'm sincerely sorry about it... this idea that I somehow made it worse fills me with remorse and regret.

From this episode, two conclusions could be drawn. The first one is that the boundaries of what is socially acceptable are not immutable. Indeed, even in politically incorrect discourses, the timing with which a statement is made can heavily affect what is deemed tolerable by society, irrespectively that what it is said is a joke or not (more on this topic, in the next Subsection).

The second conclusion is that advertising companies have the power to dictate what is broadcast on TV. Ferguson and Eastman (2002, cit. in Silverman, 2004: 163-164) explained the existing arrangement between TV networks and advertisers. In order to be financially supported by advertisers, TV networks agree to broadcast programmes complying with PC standards that may appease a vast and heterogeneous audience to which commercials are then directed. Inversely, controversial programmes, owing to their divisive nature, do not appeal large audiences (*ibid.*). Since they are not profitable enough for neither advertisers nor TV networks, they eventually get cancelled. Silverman (2004: 173-174) confirmed this cynical view by claiming that

“[a]dvertisers and network executives often censor, and systematically suppress dissent, in the name of protecting the public, the government, corporations, or themselves from public scrutiny, but more often than not they do so to maintain their sources of revenue”. According to the scholar (*ibid.*), the current *status quo* guarantees a good revenue, therefore it would be against the interests of those companies and corporations to challenge it.

1.5.2. Comedy in the Context of PC

Humour is a safety valve that allows people to evade the seriousness of their realities by escaping into a dimension where joy and laughter reign and where life preoccupations can momentarily be set aside. For that to happen, humour needs to enter all social discourses, even those that involve taboos which are generally labelled as off-limits. If that is the case, the relationship between comedy and PC becomes complicated.

Let us start this discussion by examining the following dialogue from Saper (1995: 65): "Did you hear the one about the ..." "Hold on there! If it's not politically correct I don't want to hear it". As this short exchange seems to suggest, PC has penetrated the general consciousness so deeply that the phantom of political incorrectness must be avoided at all costs, or one should be prepared for legal redressability for even something as banal as an ‘innocuous joke’. In fact, according to Saper (1995: 68), a “risqué joke told by a man to a woman in the workplace may, in today's climate of hypersensitivity, be viewed as unwelcome — a not-so-subtle form of sexual harassment”. The scholar (72) believed that the form of thought control operated by PC is an exaggeration and that there is no actual proof that casual humour provokes discrimination, violence, or oppression of any kind. In addition, the scholar (74) also sustained that ‘bad’ jokes should not be morally scrutinised by PC. Instead, if reckoned unfunny, the audience should just ignore them until they stop being told. In other words, Saper (1995) proposed to exercise what is known as ‘unlaughter’, which Biling (2005: 192, cit. in Greene, 2019: 39) defined as “a display of not laughing when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for or demanded”.

A similar concept is that of ‘antijoke’, i.e., a stance that kills an inappropriate joke because, in Lewis’ words (2006: 13, cit. in Greene, 2019: 39), that very joke may

be “too serious, too dangerous, too depressing, or too urgent to laugh at” and laughing at it might “undermine attempts to deal with the matter seriously”. Nonetheless, differently from what Saper envisioned, unlaughter and antijokes are actually tactics adopted by PC endorsers and outgroups alike to fight blatant discriminatory narratives presented in humorous camouflages. Some of these narratives are furthered by the so-called ‘internet trolls’, namely people who provoke others by recurring to offensive rhetorics “4 the lulz”.²² Then, when accused of racism, sexism, homophobia etc., they defend themselves by claiming it was “just a joke”. Trolls, according to Greene (2019: 54), believe to elevate themselves on the higher moral ground by thinking to be brave emissaries of the truth who dare to defy the ideological oppression of PC. Besides, they reckon those who adopt unlaughter as an inferior and unintelligent lot who are unable to understand humour and who are incapable to notice how adulterated social norms are, often inviting them in further provocative confrontations.

From what has been discussed so far, it can be presumed that humour has a say in social discourses regarding delicate issues such as racism and sexism. Indeed, these issues are among the preferred topics for comedians who choose to recur to them for various purposes (Krefting, 2019: 249). One of these purposes is to stimulate laughter through the exploitation of existing stereotypes. In this regard, Pérez (2016: 935, cit. in Greene, 2019: 48), while addressing racist humour, contended that it should be taken into consideration seriously because it “continues to play a significant role in affirming, supporting, and naturalizing dominant racial ideologies and inequalities”.

In fact, as Greene (2019: 49) argued, forms of cultural representations concerning race (cartoons, memes, slurs and jokes) are de facto demeaning and derogatory for both individuals and the social groups portrayed in those very representations, which inevitably fuel the racist ideologies that fragment society. A different perspective on the subject is offered by Black (2021) and Samant (2020) who underlined the salience of the context in which a joke is made (Black, 2021: 9)²³ and concurrently invited to distinguish between the comedian who wants to sensitise the audience from the biased one in disguise (Samant, 2020: 114). Furthermore, Black

²² The word is a slang expression which means ‘for the sake of laughter and personal enjoyment’ (*Know Your Meme*).

²³ The concept at hand was expressed as follows: “The context of reproduction is all important” (Billig, 2005: 27, cit. in Black, 2021: 10).

(2021: 3) also proposed to exploit the subversive nature of comedy to inspect and locate the weak points in racist logic with the goal to fight this logic from within. Doing the opposite, that is following PC and suppressing racist jokes does not eliminate the underlying problem of racism. On the contrary, as Samant (2020: 114) pointed out, it only serves to reinforce the social stigma associated with it.

Racist humour is a sub-category of a wider comedy genre called dark humour which is concerned with several taboo-related subjects. This type of humour was compared by Hunt (2013: 167, cit. in Collings, 2015: 19) with ‘cringe comedy’ with which it shares the sense of “taste [...], [what is considered an] unacceptable behaviour, comic transgressions and gross imagery or language”. An analogous connection could be made with Hendra’s concept of ‘boomer humour’ (Hendra (1987: 2, cit. in Silverman, 2004: 39)). It is a kind of comedy style created in the post-war era by the so-called Baby Boom generation which was described with several contradictory labels including “‘black,’ ‘radical,’ ‘underground,’ ‘tasteless,’ ‘sophomoric,’ ‘gross,’ ‘Communitistic,’ ‘anarchist’ [...]”, or simply “sick”.

As Collings (2015: 156) argued, dark humour, like political incorrectness, is an alluring asset for a comic performance because it can attract the attention of the spectators by deliberately playing on exaggeration to increase ‘the offensiveness’ or shock value’ connected to certain controversial issues. However, dark humour has also the potential to alter the perception of stigmatised people by making them appear “not properly real” (*ibid.*). Therefore, the audience of this kind of comedy is less likely to empathise with them, thus creating a sort of dehumanising effect that projects these people as non-real. The audience needs to create a safe space where it can cathartically laugh at a representation of reality perceived as false. Inversely, according to Collings (2015: 250), when “viewers are not sufficiently convinced of the ‘unreality’ or non-seriousness of a scenario or joke [...] instances of controversy and lack of enjoyment also occur”. In other words, when fictional representations of given sensitive issues come too close to reality, contentions may arise.

Along with dark humour, new unconventional forms of comic styles have emerged under the broad label of “alternative comedy” (Williams, 1998). Among these are women’s comedy and lesbian comedy, two distinct comic genres which however, as Campbell (1994: 16, cit. in Williams, 1998: 145) explained, both start from the

critique of straight men and their wrongdoings with respect to women. In addition, they also attempt to subvert the very notion of femininity through the use of language. In this regard, lesbian comedian Lea DeLaria once said: “I fart, sweat and swear [...] because I want to change society’s idea about how women ought to behave. [...] I’m into challenging the concept of words” (Williams, 1998: 150).

Black comedy is another type of alternative comedy which instead focuses on key aspects of black cultural lifestyle. Small (1998: 230) listed several of these humorous topics including cuisine, music and dance, hairstyle, parenting methods, black stereotypes etc.

Then, one might wonder what the connection between PC and humour is. As already mentioned in this Section, political correctness is often in antithesis with humour since it tends to suppress comic expressions that are considered offensive and socially inappropriate. Nonetheless, this is not necessarily an issue because, as Littlewood and Pickering (1998: 291) contended, completely renouncing PC would mean legitimating all comic discourses regardless of their content, which would undoubtedly be a dangerous predicament that may lead to unpredictable consequences. On the other hand, critics of PC reprehend the imposing and controlling attitude that PC supposedly abuse to dictate what can be considered funny. Indeed, the focal point of the debate between PC and comedy concentrates on two key issues, what is considered funny and who has the right to decide that (Krefting, 2019: 246). As society evolves, what is amusing today may not be so anymore tomorrow.

Therefore, revisiting the very notion of comedy is the dutiful reflection which PC invites us to do in its goal to create new social sensitivities capable of opposing existing power dynamics. In that regard, Krefting (2019: 250) wondered: “if we no longer found sexism funny, imagine how that could change the substance and stylings of stand-up comedy”. Tropes and themes would need to be reinvented, the old stereotypes which used to be provoke laughter ought to find new butts of their jokes.

Considering what was just proposed, one wonders if that is the direction that comedy should follow, that is whether it should abandon its controversial ‘politically incorrect’ humour for the sake of moral integrity and linguistic orthodoxy. Although this possibility may sound reasonable, in truth, as Cohen (2016, cit. in Krefting, 2019: 250) argued, “even crude, derogatory comedy can be valuable as a barometer of the

national mood, and an opportunity to bring up dicey issues that are otherwise repressed or ignored”. In fact, as previously contended, trying to censor jokes on controversial topics might actually prove counter effective because that would simply hush the problem without solving it. To this end, another viable solution other than recurring to subversive exposure is, according to Litterwood and Pickering (1998: 305-307), to rely on alternative comedy for a change of paradigm.

By letting outgroups be the ones who tell the jokes, the scholars believed that ‘alternative’ narratives could offer new perspectives capable of overturning the old prejudicial and problematic ones. This strategy may or may not work depending on whether the audience becomes accustomed to this particular type of humour. In truth, there is currently no consensus about which tactic is best suited to deal with offensive comedy, it still remains an open question.

1.5.3. The Role of PC in Comic TV Programmes

What is left to discuss is the triangular relationship between PC, humour and television, which is the premise of the current Section. Television comedy in the context of political correctness has progressively expanded the limits of what is considered acceptable on TV networks. For this reason, this type of humour, as Bucaria and Barra (2016: 2) reported, has been described as “‘tasteless’, ‘outrageous’, ‘gallows’, ‘abusive’, ‘gross’, ‘sick’, ‘cruel’, ‘edgy’, ‘transgressive’, ‘aggressive’, ‘dark’, ‘disturbing’, ‘rude’, ‘offensive’, ‘politically incorrect’, ‘quirky’, ‘offbeat’, and ‘explicit’”, just to name a few.

All the adjectives in this list, despite offering different connotations, could be assimilated in the label typically used as a disclaimer in several TV shows, namely ‘strong language’. However, this phrasing is perhaps too vague and may disenchant certain viewers. Indeed, trying to define this type of comic material in simple and universal terms may be harder than expected. Such conclusion is supported by a *BBC* study (2009: 24, cit. in Mills, 2016: 214) which suggested that “opinions on ‘offensiveness’” are highly subjective as they mainly depend on personal taste. In addition, it also implied that since each comic programme has its own specific regulations regarding this matter, a clear unequivocal line cannot be cut.

TV comedy, for better or for worse, has played a huge role in contributing to shape the social discourse on a variety of sensitive issues such as racism, sexism, abortion, terrorism etc. The irreverential style characterising much of this comedy is not always well received as it challenges social taboos and spites moderate viewers who embrace PC ideals. In this scenario, Mills (2016: 224) explained that broadcasters are now faced with a circular dilemma in which they need to choose between being ‘politically correct’, thus avoiding taboos to respect the audience’s current expectations, or subverting and expanding those very expectations in the name of ‘free speech’. It is interesting to notice that controversial TV generally chooses the latter. Indeed, controversial comedy is governed by an “irresistible and unlimited tension to push these boundaries, to overturn the general assumptions and expectations of TV audiences, to constantly expand the limits of what it is possible to say, show, and perform on television” (Bucaria and Barra, 2016: 10). In other words, according to the two scholars, breaking these boundaries means creating new and wider ones to which the audience soon adjusts to. Despite favouring free speech, pushing the boundaries too far might be dangerous, especially when that allows TV programmes to contain ‘bad’ jokes which are not intentionally told to sarcastically sensitise the issue in question but instead embody and endorse toxic mindsets such as machismo. In this regard, let us consider the following example (Lawrence (1993, cit. in Elkins, 2016: 147)):

I’m meeting a lot of women out there, and you got some beautiful women, but ... some of you are not washing your ass properly... I tell a woman in a minute, douche! ... Some women don’t like when you tell them that, when you straightforward with them... I say, well, I don’t give a damn what you do, put a Tic-Tac in your ass. Put a Cert in your ass... But if you’re not clean in your proper areas I can’t, you know, kiss all over the places I wanna kiss. You know, some women’ll let you go down, you know what I’m sayin’, knowin’ they got a yeast infection... Come up with dough all on your damn lip.

These comments on women’s hygiene, even in the context of stand-up comedy, are excessively inappropriate because they sound paternalistic and express a not so veiled misogynist vision of women’s body. Besides, they gain even more resonance by being broadcast on television risking to possibly influence the viewers.

Since the context of production of a joke is all important, it is thus difficult to distinguish the playful comedian from the prejudiced one. TV networks have the hard task to find a balance between censoring all taboo-related humour and permitting it all. They need to create regulations that are not universal but that take into account the history and idiosyncrasies of the particular TV show at hand for which they are specifically tailor-made. This solution might prove to be unrealisable as it may require a disproportionate amount of attention and consideration to contextual information which is not easy to obtain in the first place. However, if successfully implemented, it could also solve the circular dilemma in which advocates of each one of the two opposing and equally problematic sides are currently stuck.

1.6. Data and Methodology

The present Section concludes the first Chapter of this dissertation. This Section, as the title suggests, offers an insight into both the data studied in the following Chapters and the methods of analysis adopted to conduct it.

1.6.1. Data

For the purposes of the analysis conducted in this work, the collected sources, from which the data object of analysis were extracted, consisted of the pilots of certain situation comedies together with their scripts.

To make some clarity regarding terms that not all readers might be familiar with, a brief definition of ‘situation comedy’, ‘pilot’ and ‘script’ are provided below. As will be discussed in the following Chapter, a situation comedy (or sitcom) can be briefly presented as a thirty-minute comedy TV show revolving around recurring characters engaged in everyday life activities triggered by similar premises. Since the structure of sitcoms is cyclical, almost every episode has a self-contained plot (Mintz (1985: 114-115, cit. in Ryan, 2015: 35)).

A pilot instead is, according to Sander (2014: 12), “[t]he first episode of a television series [...] [which is] traditionally filmed separately before the actual production starts, [...] also the episode that not only starts off the story but sets the mood of the whole series”. It is furthermore a crucial instalment because upon its

success rests the decision on whether a certain programme is going to be broadcast or not.

Finally, a screenplay (or script) is a written document realised for a movie, a TV show or other related media that contains all relevant information regarding the product at hand. To be more precise, a screenplay usually includes “scene headings, action lines, character names, dialogue and parentheticals”, i.e., elements that are extremely important in the creation of a given multimedia content as they give precise instructions to directors, actors and the entire staff which can in turn facilitate the whole creative process (*StudioBinder*, 2019).

As stated above, the relevant data collected for the sake of this research were extracted directly from the pilots of the sitcoms taken into consideration. In this regard, the examined series, as anticipated in **Introduction**, were *All in the Family* (1971-1979), *The Office* (US) (2005-2013) and *Family Guy* (1999), which de facto constituted the primary sources of this study.

The size of the corpus was thus relatively limited as it only comprised the pilots of three TV series. The reason for this choice depended on both the scope of the research (which was restricted too) and the belief that, as pilots, those episodes could be the most indicative of the essence of their respective shows. As a matter of fact, examining the pilots was particularly relevant in this regard because, as mentioned above, this initial instalment usually sets the mood of the entire programme and, as a consequence, analysing it resulted quite useful in predicting the future development of the whole show.

Indeed, with the notable exception of *The Office* (US), both the pilots of *All in the Family* and *Family Guy* followed this criterion by perfectly depicting what the respective sitcoms were about. *The Office* (US) however, as will be further explained in **Chapter Three**, differed from the other two cases because its pilot was almost an identical transposition of the original British version of the same. The instalment that truly embodied its spirit was the following one, i.e., the second episode. Therefore, for this specific reason, in the case of *The Office* alone, two episodes were examined (namely the first two) instead of only one (the pilot).

Since the following Chapters already provide plenty contextual information concerning their respective programmes, it was deemed unnecessary to dedicate

further space to this discussion in the present Section. Instead, the current Section will now proceed to discuss the methods of analysis.

1.6.2. Methods

This study unmistakably adopts a qualitative approach rather than a quantitative one in the analysis of the data. Such choice is reckoned coherent with the expressed ambitions of the dissertation itself. Indeed, as anticipated in **Introduction**, the research questions guiding the analysis are the following questions:

- 1) To what extent did PC culture affect sitcoms aired across different decades and media?
- 2) How may the pilots contribute to understanding the role of PC in the analysed series?
- 3) Does comedy based on controversial issues exclude political correctness a priori?

As might be expected, these research questions did not require specific numerical data to be answered, therefore the present study did not take them into account. Conversely, qualitative elements such as the interpretation of verbal expressions and body language were crucial in the research. In fact, they were largely employed in the analysis of the data presented in the previous Subsection.

Furthermore, specifically regarding the data, these were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Indeed, they were partly obtained from screenplays of the pilots found online and then complemented with additional material derived from the episodes themselves. In fact, if the scripts downloaded from websites such as *Forever Dreaming Transcripts*, *Genius* and *Dr. Odd* were overall reliable since they reported most of the necessary information with a decent degree of accuracy; on certain occasions, when these scripts failed to document relevant elements like action scenes and parentheticals or provided slightly incorrect transcriptions, the relevant data were annotated manually by the author of this study. Therefore, the data found online were not blindly trusted. On the contrary, they were constantly compared and contrasted with the original material in order to detect imprecisions and omissions that

either needed to be corrected or accounted for by appending the adequate missing information.

Once the data were properly collected and verified, the next step was finding suitable methods of analysis. In this regard, two distinct frameworks were chosen, namely Fairclough's (2010) 'critical discourse analysis' (henceforth referred to as CDA for brevity reasons) and a more general approach hitherto called 'visual analysis'.

The latter does not require a long explanation since it was crafted by the author of this study as a simple tool for interpreting the content of given screenshots directly extracted from the episodes of the examined shows. The pictures were initially meant to serve as mere accompanying elements that could integrate the meaning provided by the other more significant approach, that is CDA. In truth, the screenshots in question resulted particularly relevant as they managed to capture facial expressions, poses or specific spatial settings that increased the level of comprehension of certain given scenes. After all, by analysing multimedia contents such as the pilots of TV series, the visual component had to be accounted for as well.

On the other hand, CDA, by being devised by Fairclough and employed by several other scholars in their research, necessitates a slightly longer premise. As Huckin (1997: 87) related, CDA should not be considered a method that needs to be followed ad litteram but rather "an approach or attitude towards textual analysis". However, it is crucial to mention that that 'attitude' is not a mere investigation on the texts alone but is part of a strictly interconnected 'three-dimensional scheme' that includes discourse practices (creation and diffusion of texts) as well as the wider socio-cultural context surrounding the text (*ibid.*).

Huckin (1997: 88) also underlined another extremely important attribute of CDA, i.e., the fact that it possesses a strong social dimension as it openly criticises various forms of inequities present in society with the aim of finding a solution which could possibly mitigate them. As a matter of fact, this aspect was stressed by Fairclough (2010: 8) too when the scholar highlighted CDA's concern with power imbalances and its capacity to "both identify the causes of social wrongs and produce knowledge which could (in the right conditions) contribute to righting or mitigating them".

Therefore, according to Fairclough (2010: 6), CDA is a powerful tool that is not limited by the constraints of the contingent discourse but is able to enter spaces that

expand well beyond the textual domain, eventually even merging into unrelated spheres such as the socio-political one. For that relational and dialectic capacity, CDA might be interpreted as a multifaceted “transdisciplinary” approach (3), one that successfully puts in communication distant subjects while retaining a certain moral dimension.

In a more practical sense, as Huckin (1997: 91) reported, a scholar adopting CDA should pay special attention to given textual features such as the genre of a text, the context and viewpoint of the producer of that text (‘framing’), the presence of notions that are either accentuated (‘foregrounding’), minimised (‘backgrounding’) or even omitted (an extreme case of backgrounding) etc. Other discursive practices that CDA practitioners have to be attentive of are ‘presuppositions’ and ‘insinuations’, two textual features that purportedly lead the interlocutor to make false assumptions (93). Yet, words, connotations, labels and metaphors are significant linguistic elements worthy of notice too (*ibid.*).

On the basis of what was discussed above, choosing CDA as a ‘method of analysis’ hence seemed particularly fitting considering that the main topic of the research is political correctness and that the three sitcoms examined all displayed some sort of subversive humour. Indeed, by operating both at the textual and contextual level and having such a solid ethical dimension, CDA seemed the most adequate approach for inspecting the inevitable clash between the TV programmes’ controversial comedy and the dominant PC culture. Lastly, as will be expanded in **Conclusion**, examining sentences and portions of dialogues contained in the episodes through the lenses of critical discourse analysis allowed to expose and criticise potentially negative messages present in those episodes in a way that it would have been complicated without recurring to CDA.

CHAPTER TWO

It's Family Time! Reimagining the Domestic Sitcom Archetype in the TV Series "All in the Family"

2.1. The 1970s and Situation Comedy

The current Section serves to provide some relevant background information regarding both the historical period and the cultural context in which the TV series analysed in the present Chapter was created.

2.1.1. The United States in the '70s

The 1970s was a turbulent decade (Hegeman, 2015: 5). Several impactful events shocked the world, such as the disbandment of *The Beatles*, the terrorist attack at the Munich Olympic Games, Elvis Presley's death, or the election of Margaret Thatcher as the first female Prime Minister of Great Britain (*ibid.*).

In the United States, the Seventies were characterised on the one hand by the protraction of the social revolutions which had started in the previous decade²⁴ and on the other by a widespread sense of distress caused by the emergence of political and economic crises (Hellema, 2019: i). The progressive cultural environment of the Sixties made America more tolerant and egalitarian overall, thus allowing the promulgation of some long-awaited social reforms like the Equal Rights Amendment (1972) which officially recognised and guaranteed equal rights to all American citizens regardless of their sex (Hegeman, 2015: 19).

That moment marked a historical landmark in the process of women's emancipation, hence leading to significant social changes. Indeed, as more and more women sought means to become independent and escape the submissive role of the obedient housewife, they began to access the labour market, which until then had almost always been the prerogative of men (Hegeman, 2015: 19.).

The introduction of women in the workplace together with increased divorce rates subverted traditional gender roles. In fact, although many mothers continued to

²⁴ The protests of the 1960s gave rise to the so-called "counterculture", a broad term indicating a variety of movements and tendencies including the civil rights movement, second wave feminism, pacifism, environmentalism, sexual freedom, atheism, drug experimentation etc. (*WorldAtlas*, 2018).

prioritise the nourishment of their offspring over their careers, this newly gained independence removed women from their fixed position as ‘mistresses of the household’ and required that also men spent some time at home to compensate for their absence (Hegeman, 2015: 19).

The 1970s marked another crucial victory for women’s emancipation, namely the Roe v. Wade legal case (1973) in which the US Supreme Court legalised a woman’s right to abortion (Hellema, 2019: 23).²⁵

Nonetheless, as anticipated, those were not only years of social progress and liberal reforms. This decade witnessed its first serious setback in 1973 when the OAPEC²⁶ placed an oil embargo on the United States which quadrupled fuel prices triggering a tremendous energy crisis (Hegeman, 2015: 15). Fearing that the market value of other common goods would have multiplied in a similar way, citizens bought large quantities of these goods increasing their demand, hence leading to inflation (*ibid.*). However, to make matters even worse, inflation was coupled with a situation of stagnant economic growth and high unemployment rates resulting in stagflation and devaluation. Thus, the combination of these factors produced one of the severest economic crises in the history of the country (*ibid.*).

In the political domain, other than a growing sentiment of dissatisfaction (if not open protest) towards the Vietnam War which was being painfully dragged on since the 1950s, the Seventies witnessed the first presidential resignation in the history of the United States as President Richard Nixon admitted being involved in the Watergate scandal (1974) (Hegeman, 2015: 16).²⁷ Because of this incident, a great number of U.S. citizens felt betrayed and lost faith in their government (15). Therefore, in a scenario where the nation was impoverished due to a grave economic crisis, its citizens were lacking faith in the government, and traditional moral norms were being challenged by new social standards, the only possible point of cultural reference was television.

²⁵ A sentence which unfortunately was recently overturned by the same Court (24th June 2022) (CNBC, 2022).

²⁶ OAPEC is the acronym for the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (*Collins English Dictionary*).

²⁷ The Watergate Scandal revolved around a break-in of the Democratic Party offices in Washington D.C. (Watergate), where five burglars entered the building to spy on the Democratic Party in order to favour the re-election of President Nixon (1972). After being re-elected, Nixon and his administration attempted to conceal the incident. However, his involvement in the cover-up was proven with tapes in his possession which he was eventually ordered to hand over. He was going to be impeached but he chose resignation instead (1974) (*Vox*, 2019).

2.1.2. The Development of Situation Comedy

Situation comedy, generally abbreviated with the term ‘sitcom’, is a television genre which in truth, as Scannell (2014: 72-75, cit. in Kaaronen, 2018: 16) indicated, has its roots in radio transmissions. Thanks to technological developments, as means of mass communication became more popular, comedians found that they needed to re-invent their techniques. In fact, reaching millions of people at the same time instead of performing in front of specific live audiences made recycling of jokes more complicated (*ibid.*).

Situation comedy was probably devised to avoid this problem. As Scannell (2014: 74) continued, the repetitiveness of this comic genre guarantees “an indefinite number of variations on a single theme” where characters are seen re-enacting similar scenarios week after week only to end in the exact same way. To make the genre more interesting, elements of plot and character development were added while leaving its episodic nature intact. This resolution creates a comfortable routine for both comedians and audiences who enjoy expecting what will come next (*ibid.*).

In the ampler context of television, a sitcom can be defined as a thirty-minute show depicting a group of fixed characters involved in everyday life activities around a few single settings such as a living room or a bar. Most of the time, sitcoms are set in domestic environments which expose the private lives of ordinary people to the public eye, thus conveying a sense of relatability (Scarpino, 2016: 2).

A prominent feature of this form of light entertainment is that it aims to generate laughter. According to Hegeman (2015: 12), one of the strategies that the sitcom adopts to achieve this goal is by exploiting what the scholar called “binary opposition”, namely a comic effect obtained by combining contrasting opposite values. In the example the scholar provided, even a character generally depicted as masculine and tough can be shown appreciating his newly decorated room adorned with fluffy pillows and a soft pink bed. The apparent contradiction between this representation and the idea that viewers have in mind of that character produces amusement (*ibid.*).

Another common humour-provoking strategy of sitcoms is their reliance on complications of simple events caused by confusion and human mistakes (Hegeman, 2015: 12). As a matter of fact, misunderstandings and errors of all sorts are quite

frequently employed in humorous contexts since they play on a sense of absurdity and irrationality while being still grounded on reality. The more trivial and illogical the scenario portrayed, the more amusing it becomes for the audience. Indeed, as bizarre as it may become, it still stems from a real-life situation, condition which legitimates it making it virtually possible (*The Cheeky Monkey*, 2020).

Due to its lightness and relatability, the sitcom has always enjoyed great popularity with essentially all demographics (Pomeroy, 1996: 9). As Scarpino (2016: 8) and Glenn (2013: 176) highlighted, the early sitcoms of the Fifties celebrated a conservative representation of society, one based on wealthy and suburban WASP²⁸ families led by benevolent patriarchs who supposedly knew what was best for their dear ones.²⁹

In the Sixties, despite the climate of activism and social protest that characterised the decade, sitcoms did not depict what was happening in the real world but, as Tredy (2013: 9) argued, they chose the simpler and more convenient path of “escapism” focusing instead on either ‘rural’ or ‘supernatural’ contents. The former kind of sitcom displayed “the grassroots wisdom and old-fashioned horse-sense” of the stereotypical American hero or “the shenanigans of country bumpkins striking it rich” (*ibid.*).³⁰ The latter instead showed how ‘strange’ creatures like witches, vampires, werewolves, aliens, ghosts and so on handled ‘normal’ life in small suburban American realities (10).³¹ In these shows there was close to no reference to the social battles which were being fought in those years. When attempts to address relevant topics such as diversity and inclusion were made, these issues were tackled only indirectly using vague metaphors which were far too weak to produce any visible effect on the public (*ibid.*).

Finally, the Seventies marked a paradigm shift. In fact, although sitcoms like *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974), as Hegeman (2015: 44) stated, continued to balk at

²⁸ WASP is a popular acronym for White Anglo-Saxon Protestant people (*Collins English Dictionary*).

²⁹ A few examples of such sitcoms are *The Adventures of Ozzy and Harriet* (1952-1966), *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966), *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963) and *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) (Scarpino, 2016: 8).

³⁰ Examples of ‘rural’ sitcoms are *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-1968), *Gomer Pyle USMC* (1964-1969), *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971), *Green Acres* (1965-1971), *Petticoat Junction* (1963-1970) and *Hee-Haw* (1969-1971) (Tredy, 2013: 9).

³¹ Instances of ‘supernatural’ sitcoms are *Mr. Ed* (1961-1965), *My Mother the Car* (1964-1966), *Bewitched* (1963-1972), *I Dream of Jeannie* (1964-70), *My Favorite Martian* (1963-1966), *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1967-1970), *The Munsters* (1964-1966) and *The Addams Family* (1964-1966) (Tredy, 2013: 10).

representing sensitive issues in order not to upset the viewers, others on the contrary made concrete efforts to raise awareness on such delicate and divisive topics even succeeding to do so. In this regard, Tredy (2013) and Scarpino (2016) both recognised the merits of this paradigm shift to producer-writer Norman Lear and producer-actress Mary Tyler Moore. These two figures, who Tredy (2013: 14) affectionately renamed ‘King Lear’ and ‘Queen Mary’, revolutionised the face of American television thanks to their daring creativity.

Indeed, as Scarpino (2016: 13) mentioned, Moore transformed the image of the American woman on TV with her sitcom entitled *Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) in which she played the role of a self-sufficient working woman who does not intend to abide by social conventions and form a nuclear family. The unprecedented portrayal of such an independent woman on TV, both in this sitcom and in spin-offs like *Rhoda* (1974-1978), contributed to draw attention to relevant social matters such as gender equality and new family dynamics (7). Moore’s predominant interest in feminist issues was complemented by Lear’s principal concern for the underprivileged and the discriminated (12). His most acclaimed sitcom is *All in the Family* (1971-1979), which is the main focus of the present Chapter.

2.2. All in the Family

All in the Family is one of the most influential situation comedies of all times. It was produced by Norman Lear and aired on *CBS* for nine consecutive seasons from 1971 to 1979. The show was so successful that seven spin-offs originated from it making *All in the Family* the most spun-off sitcom in the history of television (*Variety*, 2021).

2.2.1. Lear's Biography

To understand how the programme was created, it might be useful to provide some biographical details concerning the author. Norman Lear was born in 1922 in New Haven, Connecticut. He spent his childhood between Connecticut and Brooklyn in a stifling home environment which would then condition him in the creation of his show (*The Atlantic*, 2021). Indeed, the personalities of his parents, Herman and Jeanette, would then serve as models for those of Archie and Edith, two of the main characters of the show. Their arguments were so intense and frequent that, as reported in the same

article, Lear would often describe his parents as if they “lived at the ends of their nerves and the tops of their lungs”.

After a few semesters in college, he served in the US Army Air Force in WWII both as a radio operator and a gunner in several operations including Pearl Harbor and the German campaign (*The Atlantic*, 2021). A few years after the war, he decided to move to Los Angeles where he partnered with his cousin’s husband, Ed Simmons. The two there discovered a talent for comedy writing and were soon given the chance to work on a television-variety show (*ibid.*). Lear eventually ended his partnership with Simmons but later formed one with producer-director Bud Yorkin with whom he founded a production company under the name of Tandem Production. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Tandem Production released a series of movies which occasionally even starred celebrities such as Frank Sinatra and Dick Van Dyke (Porter, 1981: 9).³²

After reading a short extract from the popular British sitcom *Till Death Us Do Part* (1956-1975) in *Variety*, Lear was so captivated by it that in 1968 he decided to acquire its television rights (*ibid.*). As a matter of fact, as Porter (1981: 10) recounted, Lear explained in a 1976 interview for *Playboy* that the show had reminded him of his own family, precisely of the countless arguments he had with his father:

I was transported immediately to the relationship I enjoyed with my own father. We never agreed about anything; we fought about everything. I'd tell him he was a bigot; he'd call me a goddam bleedin' heart liberal, and we were both right — but also wrong... The whole show came to me full blown. My father used to tell my mother to "stifle" herself.

As Buonomo (2012: 30) related, *Till Death Us Do Part* is a controversial sitcom created by Johnny Speight. It is set in East End (London) where the Garnett family, namely the main characters of the story, live. Alf, the patriarch of the family, is a middle-aged working-class bigot renowned for his religious, sexual, racial and ethnic slurs. He is a hardcore conservative man in constant conflict with his daughter Rita and his son-in-law Mike who instead embrace the progressive views of the Swinging Sixties. Such generational conflict is exasperated by forced cohabitation, an element

³² The two celebrities respectively starred in *Come Blow Your Horn* (1963) and *Cold Turkey* (1971) (Porter, 1981: 9).

which also appears to play a critical role in the relationship between Alf and his wife Else (*ibid.*). In fact, the couple is portrayed in a continuous state of “bickering” which the scholar (*ibid.*) ascribed to “marriage fatigue degenerated into seething hostility”.

2.2.2. The Creation Process behind All in the Family

As Porter (1981: 9-10) recounted, since Lear saw great potential in this programme, he decided to acquire its television rights with the intention to create an American adaptation of the sitcom. The adaptation was never going to be a mere copy of the British version since Lear wished to include many idiosyncrasies of the American society as well (Rich and Weisberg, 2004: 248).³³ With this idea in mind, he worked on the first pilot of the series named *Justice for All* (1968) (*Vulture*, 2015). The title itself,³⁴ as pointed out in *Religion & Politics* (2021), is a direct reference to Lear’s concern with social issues. As discussed in *Vulture* (2015), this first version of the show was allegedly rejected by the broadcasting company *ABC* due to a poor chemistry between the actors playing the young couple.

Nevertheless, Lear was not discouraged by this failed attempt because only one year later, in 1969, he proposed a second pilot called *Those Were the Days*, title which recalled the opening theme of the series (*Vulture*, 2015). From the first pilot, only a few minor adjustments were made in this second version, the most noticeable of which was the recasting of the two disliked actors in *Justice for All*. As a consequence, the two versions were altogether the same show. Perhaps this explains why they were destined to meet the same fate. Indeed, *Those Were the Days*, exactly like its predecessor *Justice for All*, did not manage to receive the approval of *ABC* and was discarded as well. According to Porter (1981: 10), “[a]fter viewing the second pilot, *ABC* decided that the idea was too hot to handle and put it into cold storage”.

It was only after being sold to *CBS* that Lear’s winds of luck began to blow. In fact, as Collins (2010: 119) related, *CBS* president Robert Wood had realised that the network could no longer resist the cultural transformations that were pervading society. Therefore, he cancelled some of the most popular rural comedies of the time (e.g., *The*

³³ The full discussion on the extent to which the two shows are comparable will be dealt with in Subsection 2.2.4.

³⁴ In this first version of the show, *Justice* was the protagonists’ family name which was then changed to *Bunker* (*Vulture*, 2015).

Beverly Hillbillies and Green Acres) to introduce new innovative shows that would attract younger, urban and well-educated audiences. In hindsight, the modernisation of the network proved successful because sitcoms like *All in the Family* did draw considerable attention from all sorts of demographics (Scarpino, 2016: 5).

Thus, as Porter (1981: 12) reported, Lear's third pilot was finally approved in 1971 along with the rest of the first probation season comprising a total of thirteen episodes. The series aired with its current title, i.e. *All in the Family*. Not willing to compromise the content of the sitcom, Lear insisted that even the third version of the pilot kept the bulk of the original script intact only accepting to make minor changes (*ibid.*). One of these changes was for example the removal of all instances of the blasphemous expression "goddamn". Another one concerned the opening scene where the young couple (Gloria and Richard)³⁵ are seen going upstairs to supposedly have sex in their bedroom which was changed to a more subtle yet theatrical act in which they passionately kiss while moving from the kitchen to the living room (*Vulture*, 2015). It is worth mentioning that three out of five actors of the pilot were recast again, thus leaving just Carroll O'Connor (Archie Bunker) and Jean Stapleton (Edith Bunker) from the original troupe (*ibid.*).³⁶

Despite the network's approval, some members of the cast were not very confident of the success of the series. In fact, as reported in *The Atlantic* (2021), both Reiner and O'Connor showed scepticism about the survival of the show. In particular, the latter was specifically concerned with that possibility since at that time he was staying in Rome with his family, and he was thus reluctant to abandon his apartment. O'Connor was convinced to remain in the show only because he made special arrangements with Lear in case the programme were cancelled (*ibid.*).

Other sources of preoccupation concerned the reaction that the audience might have had to the controversial matters tackled in the show. As Marsden (1975: 1) stated, the protests were largely anticipated, hence on the premiere night of the pilot, extra telephone operators were employed to answer possible queries of outraged viewers.

³⁵ In the third and final version, Richard's name is changed to Michael (or Mike) (*Vulture*, 2015).

³⁶ In the definitive version, the three missing roles were assigned to Rob Reiner (Mike Stivic), Sally Struthers (Gloria Bunker-Stivic) and Mike Evans (playing the black neighbour Lionel Jefferson) (*IMDb*).

Even a disclaimer was added before the episode which read as follow (Rolsky, 2019: 200):

The program you are about to see is All in the Family. It seeks to throw a humorous spotlight on our frailties, prejudices, and concerns. By making them a source of laughter, we hope to show — in a mature fashion — just how absurd they are.

Ironically enough, despite all the preoccupations, the first season of All in the Family did not initially receive much attention from the audience. Indeed, as Pomeroy (1996: 53) argued, during its first run it solely attracted the interest of the critics. Lear's sitcom managed to 'hit the mainstream' only with the summer reruns and with the second season of the show which elevated the popularity of the series to unimaginable levels. As a matter of fact, All in the Family scored first in the Nielsen ratings³⁷ for five consecutive years (1972-1976) succeeding to remain in the top positions even after that period (*ibid.*). As anticipated at the beginning of the Section, despite (or perhaps exactly because of) the controversial nature of the programme, its popularity triggered the production of seven spin-offs,³⁸ some of which are not even directly spawned from the main series but from other spin-offs (*Variety*, 2021).

2.2.3. Themes and Characters

After discussing the convoluted process of creation and evolution of this popular series, an inquiry into the themes of All in the Family is necessary in order to understand what this show is about and why it is often considered a controversial sitcom by critics and viewers alike.

As von Hodenberg (2022: 201) resumed, *All in the Family* is a situation comedy set in Queens (New York). The story revolves around the Bunker's family which is composed by the bigoted patriarch (Archie), the subservient wife (Edith), the outspoken daughter (Gloria) and the open-minded but financially unstable son-in-law

³⁷ The Nielsen ratings were audience measurement systems, namely tools adopted to analyse the composition of the audience and study the degree of appreciation of TV programmes through ratings (*Forbes*, 2015).

³⁸ In chronological order, the spin-offs are *Maude* (1972-1978), *Good Times* (1974-1979), *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985), *Archie Bunker's Place* (1979-1983), *Checking in* (1981), *Gloria* (1982-1983), *704 Hauser* (1994) (*Variety*, 2021).

(Mike) (197). Every episode deals with one or more sensitive issues that always turn into heated generational debates. Indeed, Archie's reactionary positions are matched by Mike and Gloria's progressive ones making the conflict both generational and political (*ibid.*). The clash between such extremely contrasting viewpoints usually generates amusement in the audience, but it also mirrors the real ideological conflict that was present in the American society of the time. The revolutionary aspect of *All in the Family* is that, for the first time on television, viewers were encouraged to reflect on several controversial matters that were contemporary to the show, not to mention the fact that, of all genres, that goal was pursued through comedy (Buonomo, 2012: 39). In fact, during the nine years in which the sitcom was running, a myriad of salient topics was addressed including racism, homosexuality, premarital sex, environmentalism, gender equality, alcoholism, rape, prostitution, affirmative action, masturbation, gun control, feminism, adultery, impotence, draft dodging (desertion), menopause... and the list continues (Porter, 1981: 24).

The members of the Bunker's family are not the only characters in the series. Indeed, other recurrent characters are the black neighbours (the Jeffersons),³⁹ or Edith's cousin (Maude), a middle-aged outspoken feminist who has been married four times. As mentioned in the previous Subsection, she and the Jeffersons were so popular with the audience that they even had their own spin-offs (Porter, 1981: 15).

During the course of the nine seasons, the characters of *All in the Family* have undergone some transformations. The series itself, according to Pomeroy (1996: 70) in later seasons "trades its highly charged discourse for that of a kinder, simpler nature". For instance, Archie progressively becomes softer. In fact, by the end of the series, he even shows his romantic side to his wife, something unimaginable in the first seasons for that old-fashioned man. Edith herself, as Marsden commented (1975: 30) "has outgrown the one-dimensional 'Dingbat' stereotype". She has become more assertive and is now capable of making decisions on her own.

According to Porter (1981: 26), Mike instead "began the series as a long-haired, moustached and sloppily dressed college activist [and] ended the show as a short-haired, clean and well-dressed college professor". Gloria too has undergone major

³⁹ In particular, the most recurring of the Jeffersons is the young adult son Lionel who even makes his first appearance in the pilot (*IMDb*).

changes as she passed from adolescence to adulthood. Indeed, before becoming a mother, she came to face some terrible experiences following the abandonment of the 'protected' environment of her home. In point of fact, she had to endure the physical and psychological toll of a miscarriage and overcome the trauma of an attempted rape (Marsden, 1975: 31).

Such transformations allowed the series to go beyond the episodic nature of the situation comedy genre by bringing some innovations in its otherwise monotonous storylines through character development.

2.2.4. Till Death Us Do Part vs All in the Family

As stated in Subsection 2.2.1., Lear created *All in the Family* by taking inspiration from the British sitcom *Till Death Us Do Part*. The two series share several similarities starting from the characters' archetypes. As a matter of fact, as already highlighted in the brief introduction to the two series, Archie Bunker and Alf Garnett are two working-class bigots who are famous for their frequent racial, ethnic and sexist slurs. Both live with a progressive couple, i.e., a daughter (Gloria, Rita) and a son-in-law (Mike, Mike), with whom they constantly argue. In addition, they are both verbally abusive with their wives (Edith, Else) who are downtrodden and mistreated. However, that is where the similarities end because, apart from the geographical distance, *All in the Family* and *Till Death Us Do Part* are actually rather different shows.

A quantitative study conducted by Rich and Weisberg (2004) attempted to determine how the two sitcoms could be compared both among them and in relation with other contemporary TV programmes. Unsurprisingly, it emerged that *All in the Family* and *Till Death Us Do Part* stand out among the other analysed shows owing to their controversial nature (253). Instead, regarding the differences between the two series, the study proposed that while many characteristics of *All in the Family* do in fact derive from *Till Death Us Do Part*, the American version expands on the crude irreverence of the insults of the British version by adding a more human dimension to the characters (255). For instance, unlike *Till Death Us Do Part*, the controversies tackled in *All in the Family* serve to present a moral message (257). They are not merely inserted for the sake of sensationalism.

Moreover, Rich and Weisberg (2004: 257) claimed that in the American programme, the son-in-law usually confronts the patriarch with passion, not out of spite as instead occurs in the British show. Besides, in *All in the Family*, Archie alters insults with involuntary malaprops which makes him more vulnerable and ‘human’. His foolish ideas are refuted (even by outsiders) to emphasise his ignorance and absurd reasoning (*ibid.*).

Another major difference between the two versions may be identified in the contrasting depiction that each one of them makes of its main characters. Buonomo (2012: 33) analysed the relationship between Archie and Edith. The scholar noticed that, unlike the British couple, even though Archie insults Edith often calling her a “Dingbat”, their non-verbal language seems to suggest that they are actually in love with one another.⁴⁰ A comforting quality not possessed by the British counterpart.

In addition, the character of Edith is profoundly different from that of Else. Indeed, apart from the fact that they are both mistreated wives, their personalities have very little in common. Buonomo (2012: 34) opposed the vocal Else who fights fire with fire the harassment she receives from her husband, with the meek Edith who almost never reacts to Archie’s insults. Edith chooses to defend herself with selective hearing, thus exuding a sense of absent-mindedness.⁴¹ Edith is essentially a good-natured welcoming person and a good Christian too (Kaaronen, 2018: 64). On the contrary of her British counterpart, and of course of the two husbands, she accepts diversity and never discriminates people based on their ethnicity, creed, or sexual orientation (Buonomo, 2012: 34). Her considerate and cooperative attitude is also reflected in her non-verbal behaviour. Edith is always running around the house trying to accommodate Archie’s requests, while Else is instead “mostly stationary, like a solid wall against which her husband collides repeatedly leaving no visible dent” (35).

To conclude this comparison, while the British version is “more shockingly violent than the American counterpart” (Buonomo, 2012: 33), especially in its language, it is also far less daring in terms of exploration of controversial issues (37). As a matter of fact, while it is true that *Till Death Us Do Part* is extremely harsh in

⁴⁰ A clear example of such non-verbal language can be found in the opening theme where the couple happily sing together while playing the piano (Buonomo, 2012: 33).

⁴¹ Nevertheless, sometimes Edith is unexpectedly responsible for dispensing the wisdom in the family (Buonomo, 2012: 35).

tones, even more than *All in the Family*, the British show employs this language for the sole purpose of shocking the audience and raising the bar of what is tolerable on TV. It does not advance any social objective. On the contrary, *All in the Family* as already discussed, is innovative and revolutionary not only in terms of shocking values (e.g., the famous first toilet flush on American television history (*Showbiz CheatSheet*, 2020)), but most of all for the introduction of a wide range of sensitive topics which were previously not considered suitable for prime-time appearance (Buonomo, 2012: 37).

2.2.5. Technical Innovations of the Show

The innovative energy of *All in the Family* did not stop at the controversial themes. In fact, the series was considered ingenious for some of its peculiar technical choices as well. *Vulture* (2015) reported how Lear intended to film his programme in black and white. However, as the network did not allow that measure, he opted for a palette of colours which simulated the sepia tone. As a consequence, according to the journalist, “watching the program would remind viewers of looking through a family album”.

The use of videotape is one of the technical innovations of *All in the Family*, a true novelty in the field of sitcom. The difference between the usual filming technique and videotape is thus expressed by Marsden (1975: 33):

The high definition of film — the velvety blackness of its blacks, the snowy whiteness of its whites, the trueness of its colors — produces a highly polished, slick image. Videotape, on the other hand, has the stark, bland quality reminiscent of the live shows aired in the infancy of television [...] videotape has been hailed as the new visual convention for the expression of realism.

In addition, as Porter (1981: 17) explained, since videotape allowed simple edits, each episode was taped twice using multiple cameras. This practice was quite convenient because it permitted to choose among several takes the most fitting ones to produce the episode.

Another creative choice that separated *All in the Family* from most sitcoms of the time was the fact that, instead of recurring to piped-in laugh tracks, Lear’s programme was filmed in front of a live audience (Marsden, 1975: 34). Such choice is

not only stylistic because it is also directly connected with viewers' participation (150). In fact, if laugh tracks are clear signals of what the producer would like the audience to find amusing, filming in front of a live crowd means giving the viewers the freedom to laugh at what they genuinely perceive as funny (151). In other words, it contributes to increase the feeling of authenticity and realism of the show, even for the home audience who have the chance to hear natural laughter and not mechanically recorded ones (*ibid.*).

2.3. *Meet the Bunkers*

All in the Family has had a convoluted past. Indeed, as already discussed in Subsection 2.2.2., before finally airing on television, two pilots had been discarded in the late Sixties, i.e., *Justice for All* and *Those Were the Days*. A third pilot was released on January 12, 1971 with the title *Meet the Bunkers*, which is the official version that the audience is familiar with. As stated in the presentation of the show, even the plot of this final episode is mostly identical to those of the two previous versions.

In the next Subsection, a detailed summary of the pilot realised after a scrupulous viewing of the episode is going to be provided.

2.3.1. Summary

After the opening theme, the story begins with Gloria and Mike planning a surprise party for Archie and Edith's 22nd anniversary while these are attending the Sunday service at church. Mike wants to be intimate with Gloria and although she is reluctant to cede to it at first, he eventually manages to convince her and the two being to kiss.

In the meantime, Edith and Archie come home earlier from church and surprise the young couple while kissing intensively in the living room. Archie is indignant at such open display of affection and starts a tirade against new sexual conventions as well against new fashion styles. The family is then reunited at the table for the Sunday lunch, but several arguments arising between Mike and Archie interrupt the meal multiple times. For instance, they are seen debating issues related to college life versus work, equal rights and opportunities for minorities, faith in God and racial prejudice.

Lionel, a black family friend, enters the house to give Edith her anniversary present, which was supposedly from Archie, even though he did not know it since it

had actually been prepared by Gloria and Mike. Before letting Edith open her present, Archie asks Lionel if he believes that he is prejudiced against black people, which Lionel feigns ignorance about.

During the conversation, Archie spontaneously uses a Hebrew word to insult Mike, but his attack backfires on him as both Lionel and Mike provoke him by insinuating that he is Jewish. Archie grows more and more frustrated as he cannot seem to convince the family that he is not Jewish.

Lionel eventually leaves and the Bunkers are reunited at the table once again. In the last portion of the episode, Edith opens the present and finds two lace handkerchiefs and a greeting card. The whole family is moved by the romantic verses contained in the card, even though Archie refuses to openly admit it.

Lastly, after being cornered by Mike, Archie accuses his son-in-law of being insensitive for not understanding the beauty of the verses, thus admitting his appreciation of the gift. However, it is then revealed that the card had been in fact selected by Mike.

Now that a relatively detailed summary of the episode was provided, let us move to the central part of the present Section, namely the analysis of the pilot, which will be performed using Fairclough's CDA and visual analysis. The episode will be divided into four thematic cores, each dealing with a specific subject. Lines and screenshots from the instalment will be included to support the analysis of the various thematic cores.

2.3.2. The Opening Theme

The opening theme of *All in the Family* is entitled *Those Were the Days*. According to the music-oriented website *Songfacts*, this theme was produced in 1971 by two renowned Broadway musicians, that is to say lyricist Lee Adams and composer Charles Strouse. Nevertheless, it only became famous during the airing of the programme when it was performed by Jean Stapleton (Edith) and Carroll O'Connor (Archie) who are shown sitting at a piano while playing and singing the track together (*ibid.*). The title already hints at the content of the song which has undoubtedly a nostalgic tone. The lyrics may help to clarify this point:

Boy, the way Glenn Miller played
Songs that made the Hit Parade
Guys like us, we had it made
Those were the days

And you knew where you were then
Girls were girls, and men were men
Mister, we could use a man
Like Herbert Hoover again

Didn't need no welfare state
Everybody pulled his weight
Gee, our old LaSalle ran great
Those were the days

The song is a cluster of cultural references that belong to a bygone era, namely the first decades of the 20th century. The couple is nostalgic of the ‘good old days’ when people knew their place (EDITH: “you knew where you were then”), gender identities were clearly delineated (ARCHIE: “girls were girls and men were men”) and the US government did not intervene to sustain its citizen (ARCHIE: “Didn't need no welfare state”, EDITH: “Everybody pulled his weight”).

The nostalgic tone of the track recalls the greatness of past times to which the two characters want to return. Archie in particular does not like the face of 1970s’ America which he considers deeply declining in cultural standards. His daily confrontations with his son-in-law Mike support this argument.

As a matter of fact, later in the episode, Mike and Archie are arguing about affirmative action. Mike blames poverty on conservatives like Archie who “are unwilling to give the black man, the Mexican American and all the other minorities their just and hard-earned share of the American dream”. Archie is not intimidated in the least by Mike’s attack and contests that if they want their share of the American dream they can “get out there and hustle for it like [he] done”, hence implying that the only reason why these minorities are not succeeding in life is attributed to their own incapacity or laziness. Even when Mike reminds Archie of the great disadvantage that

black people are at just because of their skin colour, the latter exclaims that those minorities have had more opportunities than he has had because “[he] didn't have no million people marchin' and protestin' to get [him his] job”.

Perfectly in line with the opening theme, Archie thus expresses his disapproval of both affirmative action and welfare state which he reckons cheap shortcuts to success designed for weak individuals. On the contrary, true Americans like him “had it made” pulling “[their] weight”. In other words, according to Archie, the only way to make a living and be a respectable person in life is through hard work, not through social assistance, even if that means denying the existence of systemic racism. However, as Edith reveals, the irony of the story is that Archie’s job was in truth handed to him by his uncle. This fact makes him a hypocrite since he did not really “hustle for it” like he claimed.

As far as the visual component is concerned, the theme opens with the Bunkers playing the piano in their living room. The camera moves to show a panoramic view of New York (*Figure 1*). Then it frames townhouses both from above and from a moving perspective at around ground level as if passing by with a car (*Figure 2*). As the camera approaches the Bunkers’ house, it begins to move slower. Then it finally stops and zooms in on the house itself where the couple can be seen sitting at the piano while finishing the song.



Figure 1: New York View from above



Figure 2: Townhouses in Queens, NY

The pictures of the city and the townhouses contribute to creating a certain effect of nostalgia as well. The viewers are transported to the peaceful and comforting reality of the traditional domestic situation comedy, or so it may look at first.

In reality, the content of the show is all but peaceful and comforting. Indeed, as discussed in the previous Section, its controversial nature constitutes a point of rupture with tradition. More than lulling the audience, the programme keeps them on the edge of their seats.



Figure 3: “It’s been a gay, gay lark together”⁴²

To conclude, it is interesting to observe the behaviour of Edith and Archie in *Figure 3*. The two seem perfectly ‘harmonised’ while playing the piano as if they were a loving couple.⁴³

Judging by the opening theme alone, it is difficult to imagine Edith being verbally abused all the time by her husband who calls her a “Dingbat” and tells her to “stifle”. The cheerful moment in the opening theme portraying the couple smiling and singing happily together may suggest that, despite the invectives and ill-treatments that Edith bears on a daily basis, she and Archie still love one another. Perhaps the sitcom does not show it explicitly often enough, but the viewers know that such affection exists at heart, and this fact alone is enough to reassure them.

2.3.3. Sexual Life and Romance

Sex has always been a taboo subject for prime-time television (*Far Out Magazine*, 2022). *All in the Family* broke this taboo since the first minutes of its pilot. Indeed, as anticipated in the summary, the episode starts with Mike trying to persuade his wife to

⁴² The caption refers to the last line of the greeting card that Edith received in this episode for her 22nd anniversary with Archie.

⁴³ They are ‘harmonised’ more figuratively than literally since Edith is exaggeratedly out of tune for comic reasons.

go to bed with him (MIKE: “Gloria, we have been living with your folks since we're married. We don't get the house alone much”).

Nonetheless, as *Figure 4* shows, in this third version of the pilot they are eventually found in the act of ‘just’ kissing,⁴⁴ the sexual reference is more than explicit in the scene. In fact, that is not an ordinary kiss, Mike is carrying Gloria around the house while lifting her from the ground. She has her legs curled to symbolise a feeling of strong passion and they are entwined in an embrace so tight that it looks as if they were one.



Figure 4: A Passionate Kiss in the Living Room

Archie is rather scandalised by such open display of affection, especially in plain daylight. In fact, he promptly remarks: “11.10 on a Sunday morning, Edith” calling attention to his wife on the supposed wrongdoing of the young couple. Indeed, the couple not only engage in intimate activities early in the morning, but they even choose the worst day of the week to do so, that is the Christian Sabbath (Sunday), which is a sacred day for religious people like Edith and, to some extent, Archie. The following dialogue expands on his conviction on the matter:

ARCHIE: Used to be the daylight hours was reserved for the respectable things of life.

MIKE: Certain things are no different now than they ever were.

ARCHIE: What are you talkin' about? In my day... [...] In my day, we was able to keep certain things in the proper “suspective”. Take keep in company, for instance. When your mother-in-law and me was going around together, it was two whole years. We

⁴⁴ Whereas, as already mentioned in Subsection 2.2.2., in the other two versions of the pilot the young couple go upstairs to explicitly hint at an even more intimate situation.

never... I nev... I mean, there was nothin'. I mean, absolutely nothin'. Not till the wedding night.

EDITH: Yeah. And even then...

In this dialogue, Archie expresses his disapproval of the sexual freedom that the new generations are experiencing. He uses himself as a model of moral virtue to dictate how couples are supposed to live their sexual relations.

In this regard, the family patriarch is adamant in the belief that couples should absolutely abstain from premarital sex because that is what 'respectable people' like Edith and he did despite knowing each other for two years. Once again, it is ironic how the subdued Edith provides the key to interpreting the true moral message that the show conveys on the issue. As a matter of fact, Archie's rhetoric about the importance of delaying sexual relations until marriage did not prove successful for Edith, who by stating "and even then..." indirectly complains about the miserable condition of her married sexual life. This remark might be read as an accusation to Archie's supposed lack of virility, a statement which offends him and makes him feel betrayed by his wife.

The sexual revolution of the Sixties and Seventies went beyond the erotic practices themselves eventually embracing personal spheres apparently disconnected from it, such as physical appearance and fashion. Archie does not understand and thus disdains the new fashion trends of the time. He scolds his daughter for the length of her skirt, then rants about the inappropriateness of clothes and hairstyles that were popular in that period:

ARCHIE: What the hell is it nowadays? Will you tell me? Girls with skirts up to here, guys with hair down to there... I stopped in the gents' room the other day. So, help me, there was a guy in there with a ponytail. My heart nearly turned over in me. I thought I was in the wrong toilet.

The family patriarch despises those modern fashion styles because he discerns in them a subversion of the traditional gender identities which according to him ought to be respected and clearly differentiated, not contaminated through vulgar mixtures. For

that reason, he refuses to consider a person with a ponytail a ‘real man’. Accepting otherwise would simply be inconceivable for him.



Figure 5: "And pull that skirt down..."

In accordance with his staunchly conservative views, Archie is a male chauvinist who regards women as inferior to men and treats them correspondingly. In addition, his toxic masculinity causes him to oversexualise young and attractive women reducing them to mere objects of male lust, nothing more than subhuman beings.

Nonetheless, it is arguably excessive even for a misogynist like Archie to think of his own daughter in such abominable terms. However, a few lines in the episode seem to suggest that it might actually be the case. Let us consider for instance his reprehension of Gloria’s skirt length. On that specific occasion, he utters: “[a]nd pull that skirt down”. He could just stop there. Instead, he adds a subtle sexual remark: “[e]very time you sit down in one of them things, the mystery’s over” which alludes to the ability to see what is between her legs. This comment is the expression of an abhorrent incestuous thought, something that a father should never think, let alone say in front of his own “flesh and blood”.⁴⁵ Moreover, noticing the direction of his gaze in *Figure 5* only ‘adds fuel to fire’.

A similar but less outrageous consideration is made around the end of the episode when Archie admonishes Mike and Gloria for kissing on the sofa next to him. He calls their attention, especially Mike’s, by scornfully saying: “[h]ey, do you have to always be doin’ that? It’s as if she was a hamburger”. Although Archie may not be sexualising his daughter on this occasion, he does however seem to objectify her. According to his

⁴⁵ “My flesh and blood” is the epithet that Archie himself uses to define Gloria later in the same episode.

conception of hegemonic masculinity, she is nothing more than food for the voracious male predator (Mike). Following this logic, she would play a completely passive role in the kissing activity, which in turn would give complete control to Mike. Such interpretation of couple dynamics raises a few concerns about Gloria's consent.

Fortunately, in this case Archie is simply misjudging the situation and Gloria is not being forced to indulge in the kissing activity. Nevertheless, Archie's ill-founded notion of couple dynamics might be problematic due to the power and authority that the figure of family patriarch provides him (e.g., in his relationship with Edith).

A common trait of the so-called 'toxic masculinity'⁴⁶ mentioned above is for a man to avoid displaying his emotions in front of other people.⁴⁷ In this episode, when the family is gathered in the living room to listen to Edith as she reads aloud the verses contained in the greeting card that she received as part of her 22nd anniversary present, each member of the family is moved by the beauty of the following romantic composition:

Through all the years I've been with you,
we've had our ups and downs, 'tis true.
But life with us has just begun.
We've yet to have all of our fun
As long as we're together.
And when, my dear we're old and gray,
And life for us is sunny weather
We'll look back on our lives and say,
It's been a gay, gay lark together.

As can be observed in *Figure 6*, Archie is no exception since he feels emotional too, even though he does not want to admit it. In fact, when he realises that Mike and Gloria saw him entranced by the verses, he snarls: “[w]hat are you lookin’ at?” to make them stop.

⁴⁶ Toxic masculinity can be defined as “a set of attitudes and ways of behaving stereotypically associated with or expected of men, regarded as having a negative impact on men and on society as a whole” (*UNE Life*, 2021).

⁴⁷ This fact is confirmed by the title of one of *The Cure*'s most famous songs: *Boys Don't Cry* (*Genius*).



Figure 6: Archie Got Emotional

A few moments later, when Mike and Archie remain alone in the living room, the former provokes the latter by insinuating that the card has “got to [him]”. Archie promptly denies the insinuation feigning ignorance and replying “What do you mean? It got to your mother-in-law, women”. He wants to preserve intact a stereotypical image of manhood in which he recognises himself. However, that is but a fabrication that Mike uncovers before proceeding to further provoke him (MIKE: “No, no, it got to you too. I never knew you were so soft and sentimental”). Archie can no longer pretend. He is forced to admit his emotions to Mike.

However, to retain the upper hand in the argument with his younger rival, he sacrifices that image of male impassivity which he so fervently wished to convey and changes the perspective of the discourse. He capitalises on his ‘newly found’ emotional side by interpreting it as a sign of superior intellect that he can exploit to discredit Mike. “You don’t know much anyhow [...] You are a person of very little quality. You got no appreciation for some of your finer things”, says Archie. Mike plays along pretending to be insensitive about the card only to make Archie care even more about it. “What are you getting so excited about? It’s a greeting card. It’s not like you wrote the thing” provokes Mike. Archie takes the bait and replies: “[n]o, I didn’t write it. But who had the good taste to pick it out?”

Ironically, Archie could not imagine that it had in fact been Mike the one who selected it. When Mike indicates himself, Archie understands that he has lost completely. He has both revealed his emotions and has also failed to win the intellectual battle that he started.

2.3.4. It Is (Not) a Matter of Faith

One of the possible reasons why the first two pilots of *All in the Family* were cancelled is probably connected with the sitcom's subversive take on religious matters. In fact, as mentioned in the previous Section, among other topics, the show tackles the issue of atheism as well. Even in the third and final version of the episode, this theme is addressed quite openly by the Bunker's family. In the scene in question, Edith reproaches her husband for badmouthing the local clergyman, hence unexpectedly triggering the following argument:

ARCHIE: Don't blame me! You and that reverend bleedin' heart Feltcher up there in his ivory "shower".

EDITH: Now, that's enough. Talking about a man of the cloth that way. God could punish you for that.

MIKE: God? What God?

GLORIA: Yeah, what God?

ARCHIE: What was that? [To Edith] Did you hear him? Did you hear her? [To Mike] What was that remark, sonny?

EDITH: I think we'd better eat now.

ARCHIE: I wanna know what you meant by "What God?"

MIKE: It's nothing Archie. It's nothing. You need God, so forget it.

EDITH: That's no way to talk on the Sabbath, Mike.

ARCHIE: Stifle, Edith.

EDITH: That's no way to talk to your father-in-law either.

ARCHIE: Edith, I told you...

EDITH: I mean, Sunday is a day for peace and rest and eat a nice brunch.

ARCHIE: Edith, will you stifle?

EDITH: Archie, we're all hungry.

ARCHIE: [To Edith] Will you stifle?! [To everyone] Don't touch nothin'. Nobody eats nothin' around here until we get this thing straight. [To Mike] Now, sonny boy, you made a certain referential remark there a minute or so ago along the following lines, "What God?" you said. And I heard your wife, my flesh and blood, repeat it. So, let's hear it again. What did you mean by "What God?"

MIKE: We just don't see any evidence of God, that's all.

GLORIA: That's right, daddy.

ARCHIE: [Mimicking Gloria's voice] "That's right, daddy". Well, I knew we had a couple of pinkos in this house, but I didn't know we had atheists! Did you know that, Edith? That we had a pair of atheists under this roof?

As can be surmised from the dialogue above, the characters are engaged in a heated theological discussion concerning the existence of God. Besides the controversial nature of the scene, which pushed the limits of social discourse on television, it is worth observing the reactions that the various members of the family have displayed during this discussion.

As an ardent believer and a God-fearing woman, Edith does not appreciate when others disparage her faith and the religious institutions which she is loyal to. Therefore, contrarily to her otherwise commonly quiet and subdued disposition, she challenges the authority of her husband criticising his lack of moral judgment and reminding him of the cost of such impiety, that is divine punishment. She also admonishes her son-in-law Mike for raising a blasphemous argument on a sacred day (Sunday) ignoring Archie's aggressive requests that she keep silence. She represents the moral compass of the family, a figure with whom many Americans can empathise with.

Mike is a young socialist who expresses progressive ideas that usually conflict with the traditional values of his parents-in-law. His provocative remark ("What God?") serves to distance himself from the religious imagery evoked by Edith while proposing an alternative outlook on reality, a substantially secular one.

Nonetheless, it is undeniable to detect a hint of derision in his tone. He conveys his atheistic position with a shrug implying that he finds the very concept of God ridiculous, thus placing himself on a level of intellectual superiority. Gloria promptly agrees with him revealing a similar attitude towards the matter. Indeed, *Figure 7* depicts her as she repeats her husband's provocative question. Her face is pointing upwards as if to show her contempt for her parents' religious faith, which she appears to look down on, both literally and figuratively.

Although Edith is clearly offended by Mike's blasphemous remark, the scene would not have been as funny and incendiary without Archie's reaction. Archie becomes immediately outraged by Mike and Gloria's provocation. If they probably intended to make just a quick taunting observation without further developing their

point, Archie's insistence on receiving clarifications forces the young couple to admit their scepticism concerning the existence of the deity.



Figure 7: "Yeah, what God?"



Figure 8: A Couple of Atheist 'Pinkos'

The interesting aspect about his furious reaction is that Archie seems to be more enraged at the socially constructed label of 'atheist' rather than at their actual belief system. In other words, unlike Edith, for Archie it is *not* a matter of faith. The real issue is the fact that he has to share the house with some of his worst ideological enemies, namely a "pair of pinkos" (socialists) who he now discovers to be atheists too. Most of all, he cannot tolerate that, of all people, his own daughter happens to be one of them.

Figure 8 captures his outburst of rage when he discovers that the two are atheists. His imposing stance is stressed by the standing position which contrasts with the rest of the family who is sitting at the table. In addition, Archie's accusatory gaze is addressed at Mike who keeps his head down to avoid his menacing stare.

However, Archie is not the champion of Christianity he wants other people to believe that he is. As a matter of fact, according to Edith, Archie has accompanied her to church only seven times in twenty-two years of marriage (including the wedding day). He prefers to consider himself a Christian even though he is not a practitioner.

In the pilot, he comes home earlier from church as he only manages to sit through for half a sermon because according to him "[h]alf a sermon was plenty. [The reverend] said all [Archie] wanted to hear". In truth, as Edith reveals later in the episode, the real reason for their early leaving is due to him⁴⁸ "not seeing eye-to-eye with the sermon"

⁴⁸ Archie is jokingly nicknamed "Mr Religion" by Edith to remark the fact that she too does not consider him very devout.

itself. He is said to have cursed the reverend from the front pew for what he describes as “socialist propaganda, pure and simple”.

Archie interprets Reverend Feltcher’s words as unjust accusations for a situation of civil unrest which he does not feel responsible for. He feels that focusing on the problems of the underprivileged and blaming ‘respectable’ people for these problems is in fact nothing more than “socialist propaganda”. Once again, as in the case of atheism, Archie transforms the religious discourse into a political dispute manifesting his open antagonism for the progressive direction that society around him is beginning to take.

To conclude this reflection, it is ironic to point out that the same sense of religion that drives Archie to use the Bible as reference to justify many of his bigoted ideas is in fact based on ignorance of the same Holy Text. Indeed, around the end of the episode, he demonstrates his little knowledge of the scriptures as he affirms: “David and Sarah, two names right out of the Bible, which has got nothin’ to do with the Jews”.

Figure 9 confirms Archie’s deep ignorance on the matter because his face is absolutely serious while making this foolish statement. He is not trying to be funny by telling a joke, he is being completely honest, which makes the scene even more amusing⁴⁹.



Figure 9: "Two names right out of the Bible"

⁴⁹ As a matter of fact, Archie’s seriousness is contrasted by the laughter of some of the actors themselves (Rob Reiner, Sally Struthers, Mike Evans, respectively playing Mike, Gloria and Lionel) who can be seen momentarily break character and chuckle at this absurd line together with the live audience.

2.3.5. Racial Prejudice and Rejection of Ethnic Minorities

Racism is perhaps the most pungent topic of *All in the Family*. In fact, as will be discussed in the next Section, much of the critical attention that the show received during its transmission concentrated on this particular societal issue. In this regard, what better character than Archie, the ultra-bigoted family patriarch, to represent the face of racist America?

The pilot introduces this recurring theme with a sarcastic comment in which Archie defines his son-in-law as “the laziest white man [he has] ever seen”. Mike immediately notices the implicit racial discourse in Archie’s statement and criticises him for “implying that the blacks are even lazier” (MIKE: “It’s bad enough you gotta make fun of me, you don’t have to make it worse by attacking a whole race”). Archie rejects the accusations and tries to convince the family of the respectability of his opinions as he replies: “[w]ait a minute, meathead. You said that, not me. I never said your black beauties was lazy. It’s just their system is geared a little slower than the rest of us, that’s all”.

Of course, his justification only serves a rhetoric purpose because rephrasing his message does not change its content. On the contrary, it only further exposes his prejudice as he mockingly refers to black people as “black beauties”⁵⁰ even refusing to understand the inappropriateness thereof.

As usual, Edith intervenes with an ironic remark showing Archie’s ‘true colours’. Indeed, she indicates that the new nickname that her husband just coined (“black beauties”) is less offensive than some other expressions which he has used in the past (EDITH: “It’s nicer than when he called ‘em ‘coons’”), hence implying that Archie has always been a racist.

Lionel providentially entering the Bunker’s house during the discussion on racial prejudice provides further evidence of Archie’s racism. The patriarch approaches the young black neighbour with the intention to have him admit that he is not prejudiced. However, as the following lines illustrate, the exchange contains several racial stereotypes:

⁵⁰ The epithet in question according to Archie is not racist because it would come from a bumper sticker saying “Black is beautiful” which one of Archie’s black co-workers supposedly has on his car.

ARCHIE: Come here, Lionel. I wanna ask your opinion on somethin'. When you first started doin' odd jobs around the neighborhood, one of the first guys to throw a little work your way... By the way, did you fix the TV up there in the bedroom?

LIONEL: Sure did, Mr. Bunker.

ARCHIE: That's well. Good boy. [Hands Lionel some spare cash] Here, put that in your pocket.

EDITH: Cheaper than a repairman, believe me.

ARCHIE: [To Edith] Is anybody talkin' to you? [To Lionel] Now, Lionel, you could say, by throwin' you these little jobs that in a way I was helpin' you get some money so you could go to college, and you could become...

LIONEL: [Talking with a fake stereotypical accent] A 'lectrical engineer!

ARCHIE: Yeah. [Laughs]. [To Mike] You hear that?

MIKE: All right, would you ask your question already?

ARCHIE: [To Mike] Will you keep your drawers on? [To Lionel] By the way, Lionel that's a nice suit you got on. It's classy, it's different, it's quiet, where'd you get it?

LIONEL: Up in Harlem.

ARCHIE: No!

LIONEL: [Talking with a fake stereotypical accent] I got two more, but one's yellow with stripes, the other's purple with checks. You know, for when I'm with my people.

ARCHIE: Well, anyway, Lionel, uh, I would say that you know me pretty good, wouldn't you?

LIONEL: [Talking with a fake stereotypical accent] Oh, yes, sir, I got a bead on you, all right. I know you real good.

ARCHIE: Good, good.

MIKE: Okay, all right, let's get to the point, uh? Lionel, what he wants to know is if you think he's prejudiced.

LIONEL: Prejudiced?

MIKE: Yeah

LIONEL: Against who?

MIKE: Against black people.

LIONEL: [Talking with a fake stereotypical accent] Against black people? Mr. Bunker? Why, that's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard.

ARCHIE: There! You see that, wise guy? [Laughs]. You thought you knew him, you thought you knew me. Oh, these liberals. They're supposed to be so sensitive, you know.

The first stereotype in the dialogue is that black people are needful, and they only do odd jobs. From this episode, it can be assumed that Archie frequently calls Lionel into the house to help him with small labours which he recompensates with little tips. Archie claims that giving Lionel these odd jobs will help him go to college. However, that sounds preposterous because the tips that Lionel receives from Archie might be compared to pocket money or alms rather than proper retribution. Indeed, Edith sarcastically comments that with the little money he was given, Lionel is in fact “cheaper than a repairman”.

Paying black people little money might come from the biased assumption that they both deserve and need less due to their qualitatively inferior life standards. Archie does not really believe that Lionel will eventually go to college and become a “lectrical engineer”. In his mind he probably pictures Lionel doing odd jobs for all his life. He only encourages the boy to tell his dream out loud so that he can have a laugh, as *Figure 10* shows.

Lionel is well aware of Archie’s biased convictions but prefers to second him ‘giving him what he wants’. It is a defence mechanism that allows Lionel to take advantage of Archie’s bigotry to indirectly deride him either through his voice or through his body language. For instance, he does so by exaggerating a stereotypical black accent or looking sideways, as in *Figure 10*, to silently draw the attention of wiser minds on the absurdity of Archie’s propositions.



Figure 10: "I'm gon' be a 'lectrical engineer"

Another racial stereotype that emerges in the dialogue is the belief that black people dress poorly. In fact, Archie is surprised to see Lionel wearing an elegant suit. It almost sounds as if he were envious of his possession, as though he wanted to buy one for

himself (ARCHIE: “It’s classy, it’s different, it’s quiet, where’d you get it?”). When Lionel replies that he bought it in Harlem, Archie cannot believe him because he internally associates that neighbourhood with poverty and decay. Such a fine piece of clothing cannot have been sold in Harlem.

Lionel understands the reason for Archie’s scepticism and reassures him telling him a lie, namely that he also possesses two other suits that better reflect the clothing style which probably Archie attributes to black people (LIONEL: “one’s yellow with stripes, the other’s purple with checks”).

Continuing to play with Archie’s prejudices, Lionel suggests that his elegant appearance is only a matter of circumstances. Indeed, if he had not been in the company of white people, he would have not dressed so formally. He claims that the other two suits are “for when [he is] with [his] people”. Nevertheless, as in the previous example about his dream job, both Lionel’s voice and body language indicate that he is mocking Archie telling him what he wants to hear. In fact, he uses the same fake tone and gives the same sideway look to express that.

It is no surprise that, when confronted with the ‘million-dollar question’ about Archie’s presumed racial prejudice, Lionel decides to dissimulate complete ignorance on the matter rather than telling the truth. Indeed, as a consequence of the already mentioned defence mechanism which protects him from Archie’s harassment, Lionel seems unable to be himself around Mr. Bunker. However, as a smart boy, he exploits Archie’s blissful ignorance to mock him without Archie even noticing it.

As a result of his desire to retain a sense of respectability, Archie has Lionel admit that he is not prejudiced against black people. Nevertheless, his alleged tolerance of ethnic minorities terminates when, because of his spontaneous recurrence to Yiddish expressions, he is jocosely suspected of being Jewish:⁵¹

LIONEL: Uh, I was just wondering, Mr. Bunker, what's with the *Jewish word*?

ARCHIE: Ah, well, I hear them. We got a couple of Hebes workin' down at the building.

LIONEL: [To Mike] Does he use words like that very often?

MIKE: Now and then.

ARCHIE: I told ya. I work with a couple of Jews.

⁵¹ In the episode, Archie scoffs Mike telling him that he is sensitive “right in his tuchus”, a Hebrew word for ‘buttocks’ (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

LIONEL: Uh, beggin' your pardon, Mr. Bunker, but you wouldn't happen to be one of them, would you?

Archie attempts to justify his linguistic choice as the result of external factors independent of his will such as passive language learning. By doing so, he hopes to create enough distance between himself and the language community from which he supposedly learned the expressions at hand. In other words, Archie is trying to indict others for some knowledge that he believes he should not possess, hence removing all responsibility from himself.

In *Figure 11*, it is possible to observe Archie's appalled reaction to the insinuation about his Jewish heritage. As soon as he hears that, Archie immediately turns his head to face Lionel, the responsible person for such an absurd innuendo, whom in repulsed disbelief, he simply asks "What?". Archie is incredulous and outraged, he cannot believe that the purity of his American blood is being contested so blatantly while he is in the comfort of his own home.



Figure 11: "What?"

Enjoying the indignant reaction of their victim, Mike and Lionel continue taunting Archie adding more elements in favour of their thesis, namely the fact that Mr. Bunker may indeed be Jewish. First, they insist on the suspect unusuality of Yiddish words in Archie's vocabulary (LIONEL: "Well, people don't use Jewish words just like that, do they Mike?", MIKE: "No, not in my experience.", ARCHIE: "Maybe people don't, but I do, and I ain't no Yid").

Then, they suggest that the names of Archie's parents (David and Sarah) sound in fact stereotypically Jewish. However, as commented in a previous part of the

analysis, he unwittingly ignores the content of the Holy Book claiming instead that since those names come from the Bible, they must have “nothin’ to do with the Jews”.

Next, Mike draws attention to “the way [Archie] uses his hands when he argues” asserting that that is a “very semitic gesture”. Because Archie does not know how to reply to this allegation, he attempts to offend Mike invoking his Polish background and calling him a “dumb Polack” and a “Polack joke”. Nevertheless, Mike’s reaction disappoints Archie since the intended insult does neither offend him nor irritate him. Mike instead proudly accepts his ethnic heritage and together with Lionel invites Archie to do the same (MIKE: “[...] I don’t mind though. I am Polish. I am proud of it.”, LIONEL: “There you are, Mr. Bunker. You oughta be proud you’re Jewish”).

After the umpteenth denial, Archie receives the decisive stroke when Edith joins the discussion and absent-mindedly remarks: “I didn’t know you was Jewish” which prompts an incendiary reaction from Archie who jumps from his chair while exclaiming: “[w]hat the hell are you talkin’ about? You, of all people, should know that I ain’t Jewish”, perhaps referring to the fact that she should know that he is not circumcised.

As in other instances throughout the episode, Archie feels betrayed by the person he considers closest to him, the one who is supposed to know him the best and who is expected to stand by his side unconditionally, that is his wife. Comically, Edith responds to her husband’s outburst by simply noting that he does indeed ‘talk with his hands’, thus supporting Mike’s previous argument and letting him add one last stereotypical feature about Jews, which allegedly justifies Archie’s bad temper, namely the fact that they “tend to be emotional”. Cornered by the whole family, Archie can only be on the defensive and repeat his mantra denying once again his Jewish background.

The scene ends with a moral teaching in which Lionel tells Archie: “[e]ven if you are [Jewish], it doesn’t change things between you and me. I’m not gonna throw away nine years of friendship over a little thing like that”. This declaration is particularly poignant considering the fact it comes from a black person addressing a white bigot. As a matter of fact, the underlying discourse contained in these utterances goes far beyond the discussion on Jewish heritage. In this scene, Lionel is for once given the opportunity to be sincere with Archie while teaching him a lesson about

tolerance and respect. Indeed, as Lionel is willing to overlook Mr. Bunker's imagined ethnic background and be friends with him, so should do Archie starting from overcoming his not so hidden racial prejudice and accept Lionel and his peers for who they are.

Figure 12 is the embodiment of that philosophy. The handshake symbolises the formation of a pact between two individuals of equal standing. By shaking hands with a white bigot, Lionel makes a bold antiracist statement demonstrating that friendship can exist irrespective of ethnic or racial differences. On the other side, as can be observed, Archie is completely dumbfounded by Lionel's action and only manages to compose himself after the boy's departure from the house.



Figure 12: Crossing the Racial Divide

2.4. Controversies and Political Correctness

What is left to be discussed in this Chapter are the controversies surrounding Lear's most acclaimed sitcom and the possible relationship existing between the series and political correctness (PC).

2.4.1. The Controversies over All in the Family

As the analysis of the pilot evidenced, the programme broke several social taboos by introducing on television topics that were until then considered inappropriate for prime-time entertainment. This revolutionary choice generated more than a few controversies, specifically in the moral/ethical domain. In fact, as Marsden (1975: 2) wondered: "[w]as it moral/ethical to create a lovable bigot and thus possibly distort the issue of prejudice? [...] Was it moral/ethical for fifty million viewers to weekly

pay homage to a villain as though he were a hero?" These questions trigger a necessary reflection on whether a certain degree of imputable responsibility could be attributed to the creators of the show for choosing 'a lovable bigot' as the main protagonist of their sitcom.

Indeed, the parodical means through which the family patriarch is presented in the series, according to Kaaronen (2018: 88), creates an ambivalent and ambiguous setting for the treatment of certain sensitive issues (e.g., racism and sexism) which are contemporarily criticised and reaffirmed. The coexistence of such binary oppositions is due to Lear's decision to represent both extremes of the political spectrum in the USA through contrasting viewpoints (52). However, the interpretation that each viewer gives to the programme depends in large part on their political affiliation and level of sensitivity towards the topic in question (*ibid.*).

In truth, as discussed in the analysis of the pilot, the show does convey a precise message,⁵² but perhaps it does so in such a subtle way that not all spectators are able to grasp it (Vidmar and Rokeach, 1974: 37). Due to the controversial nature of the topics appearing in the series, the issue of reception was accounted for since the early transmissions of the programme. In fact, the same broadcasting company (CBS) commissioned an opinion survey in 1971 to understand the audience's response to the sitcom (Marsden, 195: 16-17). The results of this preliminary survey indicated that most respondents (including minority group members) declared not to be offended by the show. After this survey, other studies were published in the following years, among which it is worth mentioning again that by Vidmar and Rokeach (1974) as one of the most credited. The conclusions to which the two scholars arrived contrasted with the CBS survey depicting a rather different scenario.

In particular, Vidmar and Rokeach (1974: 43) argued that those who already had prejudiced views did not understand the satire of the show and instead empathised with the bigoted character (Archie). In addition, they also found that prejudiced individuals were statistically more likely to watch (and perhaps enjoy) the programme than non-prejudiced ones (45). Therefore, they concluded that the show potentially had a detrimental effect on the audience because, if the satirical representation of bigotry

⁵² The programme often ridicules bigotry by mixing it with humour aiming to reduce prejudiced views (Marsden, 1975: 13).

was not interpreted as such by high-prejudiced people, the concrete risk would be reinforcing racial and ethnic intolerance rather than challenging it (47).

Not all scholars agreed with that position. In fact, as quoted in Porter (1981: 19-20), Brigham and Giesbrecht (1976) arrived at diametrically opposed conclusions claiming that Vidmar and Rokeach (1974) had impaired the magnitude of their study by exclusively selecting white participants to create their sample. Brigham and Giesbrecht (1976, cit. in Porter, 1981: 20) instead included a considerable percentage of black viewers (up to one third) in their two samples. They found that despite the representations of bigotry in the series, the show did not return negative feedback from black respondents and, most importantly, that the programme did not seem to fuel racial hatred. On the contrary, there was evidence that people enjoying the show regarded it somehow helpful for the improvement of racial relations (*ibid.*). Lastly, as a further point of disagreement with the findings of Vidmar and Rokeach's (1974) study, Brigham and Giesbrecht (1976) also denied that factors such as enjoyment and frequency of viewing could be directly correlated with high-prejudiced tendencies.

The debate on the moral dimension of *All in the Family*, namely whether the show positively or negatively affected the audience due to its offensive language and portrayal of real controversial issues was (and to some extent is still) complicated (Marsden, 1975: 144).

The perspectives of both critics and public were varied and essentially hinged on whether the sitcom's satirical message was understood by the viewers as well as if satire were the right tool to deal with those delicate issues in the first place. According to Rolsky (2019: 57), "Lear's trust in the American people to handle his programming without any televisual marginalia or commentary was the quintessential expression of this very idealism, [...] it was as much a product of humanistic thinking as it was Lear's own naivete". By stating so, Rolsky (2019) claimed that leaving the spectators free to grasp the underlying moral of the sitcom was perhaps a hazardous move on Lear's part because he supposedly overestimated the critical capacity of his compatriots to understand satire leading many viewers to completely misunderstand the message of the series.

Indeed, despite the optimism of scholars like Nash (2008: 195) who sustained that the audience would "get" the sarcasm of the show because of the malaprops and

nonstandard grammar characterising Archie’s speech, thus discrediting his own bigoted statements; the truth is that, as Rolsky (2019: 46) reported: “many laughed at what they saw not because of the satirical treatment of Archie Bunker but because of what he said — literally”. Therefore, the fear that part of the nation would misinterpret the series and that this might cause a reinforcement of prejudiced ideas in certain viewers was an arguably well-founded point made by the detractors of *All in the Family*.

Nonetheless, it may be unjust to blame Lear for the narrow-mindedness of the nation because, quoting a statement from his 2014 autobiography reported in *Variety* (2021): “[i]f two thousand years of the Judeo-Christian ethic hadn’t eradicated bigotry and intolerance, I didn’t think a half-hour sitcom was going to do it”. In other words, despite his noble attempts, he is only a TV producer. He could not be expected to extinguish racial hatred and prejudice on his own with a mere situation comedy.

2.4.2. PC and the Merits of the Series

Considering what was discussed in **Chapter One**, one may wonder whether *All in the Family* can indeed be classified as a politically correct show. The simple and straightforward answer to that question seems apparently negative. In point of fact, *All in the Family* cannot respect the definition of PC because, as this Chapter has underlined, its comedy is based on the satirical yet unfiltered representation of the very concepts and linguistic registers which, as discussed in **Chapter One**, urged the creation of PC in the first place. Strictly speaking, it might be argued that the key to success of the show is precisely its unprecedented and continuous flirtation with what is commonly perceived as ‘political incorrectness’, that is to say the exact opposite of PC.

Pomeroy (1996: 69) justified this thematic freedom alluding to the fact that PC was not sufficiently developed in the early 1970s when the show was first broadcast. In fact, Pomeroy (1996) added that if the series had been aired during 1990s,⁵³ the producers might have reconsidered some of the controversial choices which made the sitcom famous because of political correctness (*ibid.*).

⁵³ The 1990s is the historical period in which Pomeroy (1996) was writing the manuscript.

Anyway, regardless of being politically correct or not, *All in the Family* played a really important role in awakening the conscience of the American nation and stimulating the socio-cultural debate about the several issues that were tackled during the nine years of the show's original runtime (Pomeroy, 1996: 71). Indeed, as established several times already in the Chapter, the daily confrontations between Archie and Mike along with the presence of a smart black character like Lionel (and the rest of the Jeffersons) contributed to reshape the social discourse on racism, ethnic prejudice, affirmative action and discrimination. In addition, characters such as Edith and Gloria, as von Hodenberg (2022: 204) argued, inspired discussions about women's emancipation as well as many other topics⁵⁴ dear to that moderate, liberal "self-help feminism" (207)⁵⁵ which the series endorsed.

When *Judging Books by Covers*⁵⁶ aired on television, the degree of controversy around the episode was so high that even the then President of the United States (Richard Nixon) privately commented it (Buonomo, 2012: 37). Indeed, Nixon denounced the episode's exaltation of homosexuality because according to him normalising this practice would have endangered the strength of the nation possibly leading to its collapse exactly as it had happened to other great empires of the past including Greece, Rome, 'the Popes', France and Britain (38). Conversely, Nixon admired strong nations like Russia where homosexuals were 'rooted out' (*ibid.*). Therefore, judging from such violent expression of blatant homophobia delivered by none other than President himself, addressing homosexuality was a necessary action to sensitise the average American citizen on the dangers of stereotypical representations of the same issue, which usually originated from ignorance and prejudice.

Lastly, *All in the Family* also has the fundamental merit to have set the basis for the future generations of television programmes of the following decades (Tredy, 2013). In point of fact, the innovative nature of the show in terms of themes, language,

⁵⁴ Such topics include breast cancer, rape, Lamaze method of natural childbirth, menstruation, menopause etc. (von Hodenberg, 2022: 210).

⁵⁵ 'Self-help feminism' is a type of feminism which supports personal liberation rather than collective activism (von Hodenberg, 2022: 207).

⁵⁶ *Judging Books by Covers* is the fifth instalment of the first season of *All in the Family* (1971). The episode introduces a seemingly effeminate character who Archie believes to be homosexual, whereas in truth he is not. It is also revealed that one of Archie's old-time friends, an unsuspectedly tall, virile former football player, instead is. (Buonomo, 2012: 37).

techniques and character development generated new standards for all the situation comedies after it (30). As the scholar (33) added: “today’s television world was truly built *upon* the breakthrough sitcoms of the 1970’s and not simply *after* them”, thus stressing once again the enormous cultural impact of shows such as *All in the Family*.

To conclude the Chapter, a brief mention should be made to Archie, the most iconic among Lear’s creations. According to *The New Yorker* (2014), “Archie represented the danger and the potential of television itself, its ability to influence viewers rather than merely help them kill time. Ironically, for a character so desperate to return to the past, he ended up steering the medium toward the future”. In other words, despite remaining an extremely controversial character, the family patriarch has eventually managed to become the cultural symbol of a changing society ultimately surpassing the bidimensional limits of the TV screen and consequently entering the lives of real people as well. As a result, his testament, as contentious as it might be, will be able to ‘stand the test of time’.

CHAPTER THREE

“The Office” - Recording the Ordinary Reality of the Most Eccentric American Workplace

3.1. New Millennium, New Sitcom Trends

The present Section offers a general overview of the complex socio-cultural environment of the first decade of the 21st century along with a description of the new trends developing in the field of situation comedy around that period.

The aim of this introductory Section is to provide the reader with the necessary background information to understand the main topic of the Chapter i.e., an insightful analysis of the popular TV series *The Office*.

3.1.1. The 2000s

With the inauguration of the new millennium, many hoped that year 2000 could mark the beginning of an era of prosperity and well-being (*Life*, 2009: 6). However, those expectations were going to be betrayed rather soon (13). Indeed, within less than two years into its first decade, a terrible happening, which would permanently scar the American (and the world's) consciousness, occurred. On September 11, 2001, nearly 3,000 people lost their lives following the suicide attack committed by a group of Islamic extremists associated with terrorist organisation Al-Qaeda (Robson, 2012: 29).⁵⁷ The event was so unexpected that it was designated as a “failure of imagination” (*ibid.*). No one could predict that such large-scale attack might take place on the soil of the arguably most powerful country in the world, something that had not happened in the USA since Pearl Harbor in 1941 (*Life*, 2009). The response was severe and led to the US' invasion of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) (Robson, 2012: 31).

Albeit the most impactful, 9/11 was not the only act of terror of the decade. In point of fact, following the incident, three other major bombing attacks occurred, chronologically in Madrid (2004), London (2005) and Mumbai (2008) (Robson, 2012:

⁵⁷ During the attack, four airplanes were hijacked in total: two were flown into both north and south tower of the World Trade Center, one hit the Pentagon and the last one, which was probably aimed at US Capitol in Washington D.C., crashed in a Pennsylvania field as passengers tried to take control of the vehicle. (*Life*, 2009: 19-23)

32-34). As a result, it could be affirmed that terrorist activity was not limited to circumscribed cases, it was rather a widespread global threat throughout the 2000s.

Terrorism aside, the decade was also affected by the destructive power of natural disasters. In 2004, one of the strongest earthquakes ever recorded provoked a massive tsunami which destroyed coastal areas in several Southeast Asian countries resulting in around 230,000 casualties (Robson, 2012: 46). One year later, another grave cataclysm occurred as Hurricane Katrina, from its epicentre in the Gulf of Mexico, hit the states of Mississippi and Louisiana, in particular the city of New Orleans where considerable amount of damage was dealt (*ibid.*). In 2008, China too suffered a tremendous earthquake in the Sichuan province where around 70,000 people perished (*Life*, 2009: 95). Confronted with the frequency of these calamities, scientists found possible connections with the looming danger of climate change and urged governments and policy makers to stop global warming (Robson, 2012: 47).

Terrorism and natural disasters were not the only problematic factors to account for in the 2000s. To exacerbate matters even further, around the end of the decade a grave economic crisis afflicted the world's economy. Indeed, following the collapse of the housing market in the USA (2007), financial institutions around the globe suffered as they struggled to lend funds to consumers (Robson, 2012: 62). Thus, the world had entered in what was later called the Great Recession (2008), one of the severest economic downturns in recent history (*Investopedia*, 2022). As a result of this crisis, millions of people lost their jobs, their homes and their life savings (*ibid.*). Governments and institutions attempted to contain the issue by injecting large quantities of money into the system, but the downturn had already started and was inevitable (Robson, 2012: 62). The recession itself ended in 2009, but its aftermath lasted well into the 2010s (*CBPP*, 2019).

Fortunately, the 2000s are not only remembered for those negative happenings. As a matter of fact, 2009 witnessed the Presidential election of Barack Obama, the first African American president in the history of the USA, which constituted a particularly meaningful landmark considering the long history of racism in the USA (Robson, 2012: 68).

In the medical field, the successful codification of the human genome in 2000 allowed to better understand certain key processes related to the human body including

aging, illnesses and death (Robson, 2012: 37). During those years, scientific advancement was also made regarding the possible treatment of debilitating diseases like Parkinson and Alzheimer by employing stem cells whose use is however considered controversial, hence resulting in little government support in countries such as the USA (39).⁵⁸

Technology improved considerably during this period both in terms of products and services provided. Indeed, as mobile phones evolved, new ways of communicating became more and more popular (e.g., texting), a tendency which was pushed even further by the advent of early smartphone models⁵⁹ and subsequently by an increasing use of the internet (Robson, 2012: 41). Concerning the internet, this service was also crucial for the invention of social media like *Facebook*, created by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004, which just in a few years remodelled our way of connecting with the rest of the world (45).

Popular culture flourished enormously in the 2000s occasionally even introducing successful franchises that would persevere in the following decades and eventually convert into cultural icons such as *Pokémon* (Robson, 2012: 52) or *Harry Potter* (59). In this context, television also contributed to the establishment of a certain collective imaginary. Sitcoms, as one of the most appreciated genres, were no exception (*Parrot Analytics*, 2021).

3.1.2. “Comedy Vérité”

While the previous Chapter offered a general overview of sitcom as a genre, it only recounted the early stages of its evolution. The present Subsection will expand on that knowledge by covering more recent developments of situation comedy.

The traditional comic style of sitcoms had proved to be such a successful formula that it remained substantially unaltered for a long time. Indeed, it continued to attract viewers for several decades eventually reaching its peak with extremely popular series such as *Cheers* (1982-1993), *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), *Seinfeld* (1990-1998), *Frasier* (1993-2004) and *Friends* (1994-2004) (Sander, 2014: 13). According to

⁵⁸ In particular, the use of embryonic stem cells is considered especially controversial because it would involve destroying human embryos (Robson, 2012: 39).

⁵⁹ For instance, Apple released the first iPhone model in 2007 (Robson, 2012: 41).

Bonaut Iriarte and Grandío Pérez (2009: 756), when shows like *Frasier* and *Friends* ended, an important stage of global television culminated with them. Indeed, the lack of noteworthy replacements incited some critics to even wish for the death of TV comedy as a whole (754). Nonetheless, situation comedy did not disappear from the television panorama. On the contrary it underwent a significant transformation that revolutionised the genre. The shift unexpectedly came from the world of reality TV (*ibid.*).

Programmes like *Big Brother* (2000-) and *Survivor* (2000-) captivate the audience thanks to what Roscoe (2001 cit. in Middleton, 2014: 113) described as “flickers of authenticity”, namely situations in which participants reveal their true selves in front of the camera, hence creating a special emotional bond with the viewers. In this regard, the audience is engaged in a reality show not merely for the setting of the programme itself but, as Kocela (2009: 163) argued, because that particular enclosed setting enables the creation of meaningful relations among the participants who gradually pass from being complete strangers to intimate friends and lovers. The craving for these emotional connections is what normalised and gave popularity to the activity of monitoring the lives of ordinary people, which is the essence of reality TV (166). In turn, it inspired the creation of fictional documentary-like programmes such as the so-called British docusoaps of the 1990s in which ordinary people perform ordinary jobs (Sander, 2014: 4).

In the field of comedy, Mills (2004) labelled the search for realism of docusoaps as “Comedy Vérité”, a term coined from the filmographic tradition of Cinéma Vérité.⁶⁰ This new type of comic style transcends traditional sitcom as it combines its conventions with those of reality television (78). As Bonaut Iriarte and Grandío Pérez (2009: 757) highlighted, Comedy Vérité is characterised by a great number of features that distance it from the classical archetypes of situation comedy. To be more precise, these could be summarised as follows:

⁶⁰ Cinéma Vérité is a style of filmmaking introduced in France in the 1960s which sought to achieve realism by portraying everyday scenarios and avoiding all sorts of artificial and artistic embellishments. It differs from Direct Cinema, its American counterpart, because the latter is purely observational while the former is also interactive in its use of the camera (*No Film School*, 2019).

- Increased episode runtime. Instead of the usual 22 minutes plus advertising, episodes now last 30 minutes excluding commercials, element which intensifies the pace of the story.
- Removal of canned laughter (laugh tracks).
- More saliency to the figure of the narrator in the story.
- Greater number of themes, including controversial ones (e.g., homosexuality, sex, violence, racism, disability etc.).
- Mixture of formats and genres (e.g., docusoap, dramedy, mockumentary etc.).⁶¹
- Greater number of outdoor scenes (not exclusively in the limited space of the household like in domestic comedy).
- Shooting with a single handheld camera instead of multiple studio cameras, thus allowing greater mobility and increased realism. In addition, the intentional shaky footage and the ‘talking head’ interviews recall the documentary style.⁶²
- More complex camera movements influenced by cinematographic techniques (e.g., tracking shot)⁶³.
- (Partial) forsaking of leitmotifs and catchphrases typical of classical humour. More importance given to irony generated through the subtext rather than text.
- More relevance to the anecdotal and the absurd in the creation of humour.
- Prominent use of silence for comic means. Silence in absurd and embarrassing scenes creates discomfort in the viewer. It is not just a substitute for canned laughter, but it constitutes an improvement of it as silence leaves more freedom to the audience who is actively called to participate in the creation of humour.

⁶¹ Dramedy is a type of comedy that also includes elements of drama. Mockumentary is a comic fictional work that is presented in a documentary fashion (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

⁶² Talking head is a particular television shot which frames the head and shoulders of the interviewed person speaking in front of the camera (*The American Society of Cinematographers*, 2021). In mockumentaries, this technique allows a character to talk directly to the audience, often making confessions and revealing facts not known by other characters (Sander, 2014: 64).

⁶³ A tracking shot designates all kinds of cinematographic shots in which the camera extensively moves through the scene over a certain period of time. It can be performed through different means and techniques each having their own specificities (e.g., Steadicams, cranes, drones etc.) (*Boords*, 2022).

- The narrator or the camera operators can now influence the story with more or less implicit intrusions (e.g., sarcastic comments, reaction shots to particularly humorous scene etc.).

The success of the documentary style during the 2000s prompted the production of several sitcoms adopting the Comedy Vérité approach, each of them interpreting it with their own peculiarities (Bonaut Iriarte and Grandío Pérez, 2009: 754).⁶⁴ Thus, as already established, a new age of television comedy was born.

3.2. The Office

Among the various sitcoms that adopted the documentary format in the first decade of the 21st century, the one that is commonly believed to have had the biggest impact on the spectatorship and on the genre as a whole is probably *The Office* (Sander, 2014: 11).

3.2.1. The British Show

The programme was created in 2001 by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant and it can be considered one of the earliest examples of mockumentary sitcoms. It originally aired on BBC One and Two between 2001 and 2003 for a total of two seasons composed by six episodes each plus a two-part Christmas special episode (Boseovski and Marcovitch, 2011: 143).

As the title suggests, the story takes place in a regular office where the life of a group of ordinary people is documented by a filming crew (Boseovski and Marcovitch, 2011: 143). Judging by this premise alone, one might be tempted to regard the show as dull and uninteresting. Indeed, it may be hard to imagine how a plot apparently so plodding could entertain an audience, let alone amuse them. In actuality, this assumption is ill-founded since it does not take into consideration the true driving force of this sitcom, namely the technical innovations and the characters. However, before

⁶⁴ Some of the most noteworthy and influential shows among the new generation of sitcoms are, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-), *The Office (UK)* (2001-2003), *Arrested Development* (2003-2006/2013-2019), *Extras* (2005-2007), *The Office (US)* (2005-2013), *30 Rock* (2006-2013), *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) and *Modern Family* (2009-2020) (Bonaut Iriarte and Grandío Pérez, 2009: 754).

discussing these points, it might be useful to provide further information on the nature of the programme and how it was created.

In this regard, Greene (2020: 23) reported that the two showrunners, long before producing *The Office*, had had their own experiences working in actual offices, a common background which would later become a source of inspiration for the creation of the show. “Why don’t we do something using these character observations we’ve made at offices over the years?” supposedly asked Merchant during one of his first meetings with Gervais (25). The two authors hence created a sitcom dense with extravagant characters and absurd situations by relying directly on the (possibly) overemphasised and distorted version of their biographical anecdotes (26). In these terms, even the apparently boring life at the Wernham Hogg Paper Company already seems less uneventful.⁶⁵

When discussing *The Office*, it would be impossible not to mention David Brent (Ricky Gervais), the regional manager of the Slough branch of Wernham Hogg paper merchants. He is a deluded man who believes to be a friendly entertainer, even though he does not realise his offensive demeanour towards his co-workers (Beeden and de Bruin, 2010: 12).

Another major character is Tim Canterbury (Martin Freeman), one of the salesmen in the office. He is a smart young man who feels trapped in a job he detests and who consoles himself by spending most of his time playing practical jokes on the obnoxious colleague Gareth Keenan (Mackenzie Crook) and flirting with his impossible love interest, the receptionist Dawn Tinsley (Lucy Davis) (Beeden and de Bruin, 2010: 13-14).

Gareth is a job-oriented man who is obsessed with rules. In point of fact, he takes great pride in boasting his status as a lieutenant in the Territorial Army (Beeden and de Bruin, 2010: 12).⁶⁶ Moreover, he is the only person in the office who thinks highly of his boss although the respect is not reciprocated.

Dawn instead is presented as a rather afflicted character because, like Tim, feels at odds with her job (Beeden and de Bruin, 2010: 15). Furthermore, she is unhappily

⁶⁵ Wernham Hogg is the name of the fictitious paper company where the main characters work. It is set in Slough, Southeast England (Boseovski and Marcovitch, 2011: 144).

⁶⁶ The Territorial Army is a volunteer-based, military-like division of the British Army composed by non-professional soldiers who are periodically given military training (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

engaged with a warehouse brute who treats her with little respect (Greene, 2020: 28). She is also the butt of many offensive and insensitive jokes performed by her boss David Brent. For instance, in the pilot episode when rumours of downsizing are circulating, Brent pretends to dismiss Dawn for supposed gross misconduct right in front of the new office apprentice (Middleton, 2014: 143-144). In truth, it was meant to be a joke to gain the respect and admiration of the novice, who on his part could not help but feel particularly embarrassed and uncomfortable for being Brent's accomplice in the joke (*ibid.*).

Given the unsatisfactory and deluded existences that the main characters lead, the sitcom itself has been regarded by several critics as sarcastically bleak (Middleton, 2014: 18). For instance, Berlant (2011: 290, cit. in Middleton, 2014: 154) described it as a "situation tragedy", a peculiar genre characterised by "episodes of personality caught up in a form of despair not existential or heroic but shaped within the stresses of ordinary life under capitalism". The pessimistic nature of the show is underlined by the fate that two of the main characters face by the end of the two seasons. David Brent is made 'redundant' over his incompetence and inappropriateness, but even more sadly, he leaves the office among the indifference of his co-workers (153-154). Tim instead eventually abandons his dream of leaving the office and returning to university, thus resigning himself to consolidate his position in a career he despises (151). Furthermore, the main love story of the sitcom culminates in disaster as Dawn rejects Tim twice (154). A happy ending only seemingly arrives with the Christmas special episodes in which Brent is partially redeemed and becomes more relatable as he decides to defend his new date from a sexist remark which, in the past, he would have probably participated in (155). The second happy moment concerns the formation of a love relationship between Dawn and Tim which finally occurs as she decides to terminate the engagement with her abusive fiancé, and she reunites with her real romantic interest (*ibid.*).

Regarding the technical side, *The Office* was particularly innovative because, as Ducray (2012) underlined, it broke with the past tradition by introducing some of the key elements listed in Subsection 3.1.2. when discussing Comedy Vérité. To be more precise, as the scholar pointed out, the show discarded elements of traditional sitcom formats like the presence of a studio audience or canned laughter in favour of reaction

shots and silence as means to provoke humour. The classic triple camera was replaced with a single handheld one to allow greater mobility and to better convey the idea of a documentary production (*ibid.*). These innovations consecrated the show as a sort of “televsual experiment in mockumentary form”, as Middleton (2014: 161) acutely described it, namely one of the first instances of the format in the medium which undoubtedly contributed to its expansion as a global phenomenon.⁶⁷ Furthermore, the success of this British sitcom propelled the production of several national adaptations of *The Office* including its most well-known rendition that is the American version, the true focal point of the present study (Ducray, 2012).⁶⁸

3.2.2. The American Adaptation

When Ben Silverman, *NBC*'s executive producer, casually discovered *The Office* on *BBC Two*, he immediately became infatuated with it. According to an interview contained in Greene (2020: 36) he confessed: “[f]or the first couple of minutes I was like, ‘Are they doing a reality show or making fun of a reality show?’ Then I just started to laugh. I thought it was absolutely brilliant”. He was so captivated by the series that he decided to contact Ricky Gervais to discuss a possible American adaption (SILVERMAN: “I want to remake this. I know how to do this. I see a vision for how this could work in America and what we’d need to change. I’d love to do this with you” (37)).

Due to a long series of failed adaptations of British sitcoms in America (Beeden and de Bruin, 2010: 17), Gervais and Merchant were at first hesitant to agree to Silverman’s proposal but ultimately acceded to it (Greene, 2020: 37). Despite retaining their authorial status for both UK and US versions, their participation in the production of the American adaptation was not central. They did contribute by writing and directing a few episodes (Schwind, 2014: 30), including the pilot, however, the role of leading executive producer was handed to Greg Daniels, an American screenwriter and director who had already worked in ambitious projects such as *The Simpsons* (Greene, 2020: 234). Gervais and Merchant agreed to choose Daniels as the

⁶⁷ These same technical innovations would then be implemented in the American version as well.

⁶⁸ The British show was replicated in other eleven countries, chronologically in Germany (2004-2012), United States (2005-2013), France (2006-2006), Canada (2006-2007), Chile (2008-2008), Israel (2010-2013), Sweden (2012-2013), Czech Republic (2014-2014), Finland (2017-2019), India (2019-2019) and Poland (2021-) (*BBC Media Centre*, 2021).

primary adaptor of their creation because according to them, among all interviewed writers, he was the person who best “understood the heart of the Office”, the one most in line with the sense of humanity and romance that the show attempted to convey (38-39).

The American version of *The Office* is much longer than the British one. Indeed, it originally ran for nine consecutive years on *NBC* (2005-2013) with most seasons having more than twenty episodes each (Middleton, 2014: 160).⁶⁹ Spatially speaking, the office was ‘moved’ from the British town of Slough located in Southeast England to Scranton, Pennsylvania. Besides, the name of the paper company itself ‘changed’ from *Wernham Hogg* to *Dunder Mifflin* (140). Nevertheless, despite these minor geographical differences, the ambiances of the two shows perfectly match one another. As mentioned in footnote 67, even the technical innovations introduced by the British counterpart were replicated in the American version because the original creators, Gervais and Merchant, insisted on the significance of the documentary style of the programme (Booth and Ekdale, 2011: 197).

3.2.3. Characters and Plot

By being an adaptation of a previous sitcom, the main characters of *The Office* (US) share many similarities with those of the British version, at least in the early seasons, specifically the first (*The Bucknellian*, 2011).

Michael Scott (Steve Carell) is the eccentric boss who leads the Scranton branch of Dunder Mifflin. He occupies the position of regional manager even though he rarely shows any managerial qualities around the office (Crepaldi, 2020: 815-816). Michael’s desperate attempts to seek the attention and the approval of the people around him make him a goofy caricature of a clown who is unable to build any interpersonal relationship in the office because of his awkward, inappropriate and offensive behaviour (*ibid.*).

Jim Halpert (John Krasinski) is the clever but somehow lazy salesman who disdains his job at Dunder Mifflin but is unable to quit (Beeden and de Bruid, 2012: 13). He spends his time playing pranks on his colleague Dwight Schrute (Rainn Wilson)

⁶⁹ Such quantity should be compared to the total amount of episodes of the UK version (merely fourteen) which, as already mentioned, include both seasons and the two-part Christmas special episodes.

and flirting with the receptionist Pam Beesly (Jenna Fischer) (Boseovski and Marcovitch, 2011: 145-146).

According to Booth and Ekdale (2011: 203) we, as the audience, tend to empathise with Jim because “he makes fun of the character that we make fun of and hates his job almost as much as we are supposed to hate ours”.

Furthermore, Jim is able to create a special bond with the audience because, as both Kocela (2009: 164) and Detweiler (2012: 732) argued, he is able to recognise irony and to break the fourth wall by looking straight into the camera, thus letting viewers know that certain social norms have been violated. By acting in this manner, Jim becomes a relatable character. Indeed, he typifies the average well-educated liberal American viewer who recognises in Jim’s puzzled expression his awareness of Michael’s inappropriate demeanour (Kocela: 2009: 167).

In this regard, the way in which the camera frames Jim’s reaction in response to one of those impolite comments is the catalyst for laughter. It substitutes laugh tracks by directing the viewers’ attention to the socially unsuitable statement in a silent unintrusive manner that lets them participate in Jim’s scorn of said statement without forcing them to do so (Kocela: 2009: 167).

The next character to introduce is Dwight, a contradictory figure because, as Booth and Ekdale (2011: 194) pointed out, he is both “laudable and laughable”. He possesses the qualities of a good worker. He is in fact loyal, dependable, self-reliant and rule-abiding (200). Nevertheless, his obsession with rules and hierarchy together with his excessive zeal for his job make him the perfect target for Jim and Pam’s practical jokes (202).

As his boss, Dwight respects Michael very highly and he is ready to come to his aid whenever the boss is in need (Greene, 2020: 99). On his part, Michael does not seem to appreciate Dwight’s sycophancy and usually rejects his help unless he is unable to find it in other people (*Screen Rant*, 2020). Michael’s disregard of Dwight is also evident whenever the title ‘Assistant Regional Manager’ is mentioned. In fact, although the title does not hold any real legal significance, it rhetorically positions Dwight as second in command in the office. However, since Michael is either unaware that that is a fabricated title which holds no real validity, or he is simply unwilling to

recognise it to Dwight, he constantly demotes it to ‘Assistant *to* the Regional Manager’, thus reaffirming his undisputed authority (*ibid.*).

Pam is the receptionist of the office. She is engaged with a crude burly warehouse man called Roy even though she is secretly infatuated with her colleague Jim (Crepaldi, 2020: 818). Birthisel and Martin (2013: 69) described her as a “plainly pretty yet professionally powerless” female figure. As a matter of fact, other than being stuck in a complicated love triangle, Pam does not feel realised in her current job as she dreams of becoming an artist, wish which will eventually come true only after the end of the series (Booth and Ekdale, 2011: 204). In the early seasons, Pam is usually the target of many sexist remarks mainly made by her socially insensitive boss Michael (Sumner, Scarduzio and Daggett, 2020: 135).

Ryan Howard (B. J. Novak)⁷⁰ is an arrogant, career-oriented former business school student who starts his career in the office as an intern (Crepaldi, 2020: 818). Despite being based on Ricky Howard (Neil Godwin), the British equivalent version of that character, Ryan arguably plays a more central role than his counterpart because, unlike Ricky, he is credited as a main character since season one (*Office Ladies*, 2019). Ironically, he is selected to join Dunder Mifflin when the company is undergoing a period of financial difficulties and is least prepared to welcome new workers. Nevertheless, he not only manages to retain his newly obtained job, but he also makes a quick career advancement since not long after he is hired, he is even proposed a corporate position (Detweiler, 2012: 741).⁷¹ Much of the humour concerning the character regards his discontinuous relationship with Kelly Kapoor, whom will be shortly mentioned as one of the secondary characters of the show (Greene, 2020: 140).

Like the majority of sitcoms, the plot of the Office is not particularly complicated. It depicts the everyday life of a group of office workers while being busy doing all sorts of activities except real work (Crepaldi, 2020: 826). Indeed, when a new employee asks when people do their job, Phyllis, one of the veteran workers in the office, responds: “[o]h, we find little times during the day” (816). This statement seems to imply that during most of the working hours the characters either procrastinate or

⁷⁰ Interestingly, B.J. Novak both plays Ryan Howard and acts as one of the writers of the show (Greene, 2020: 10).

⁷¹ Ryan only holds such position only temporarily since he is then arrested for committing fraud. He will later come back to the office as a regular employee (Detweiler, 2012: 741).

are occupied with trivial matters like joining Michael in the conference room which, among other activities, is used for “educative” purposes, such as for instructing the workers on how to properly conduct in the office (819).⁷²

Another major plot device regards the development of love relationships, the most important of which is the one between Jim and Pam which is hinted since the very first episode and which slowly develops, with its high and lows, throughout the nine seasons (Crepaldi, 2020: 818). Assisting to their love story provides the audience with a feeling of dramatic tension and it allows for emotional investment (Ducray, 2012).

With the expansion of the story throughout the course of the nine seasons, more and more characters have been gradually introduced in the show concurrently developing those already present in it. As Crepaldi (2020: 818) noticed, several of these secondary characters embody stereotypical representations of members of the extremely diverse and multifaceted American society.⁷³ For instance, Oscar Martinez (Oscar Nuñez) exemplifies both the Mexican American and the homosexual cliché; Angela Martin (Angela Kinsey) typifies the rigidly observant middle-aged white protestant woman obsessed with her cats; Kelly Kapoor (Mindy Kaling)⁷⁴ is the superficial gossipy Indian American girl continuously forming and unforming an unstable love relationship with the young apprentice Ryan... and the list continues (*ibid.*).

The most noticeable example of character development in the series regards Michael Scott (Greene, 2020). His character changed considerably from season two onwards as the authors realised that his lack of ‘heart’ was what made him particularly unlikeable in season one (103). Therefore, while retaining his goofiness and lack of self-awareness, Michael was now given a more sympathetic and less harsh personality (165). However, the task of characterising Michael Scott resulted more complicated than expected because it presupposed having a clear authorial perspective of the

⁷² The fact that Michael gives instructions on work ethics is ironic considering that he is the one who most often disregards those very social norms that he is supposed to enforce (Sumner, Scarduzio and Daggett, 2020: 141).

⁷³ As the seasons progress, some of these characters eventually outgrow the clichéd façade seemingly defining them by showing more nuanced personalities (Ducray, 2012).

⁷⁴ Like Novak, Kaling, besides impersonating a character, also works as one of the writers of the show (Greene, 2020: 10).

character, which was difficult to obtain given the multitude of writers who had worked on the show over the years. In fact, as one of them confessed (166):

Basically every writer on the show had a different vision of who Michael was. So there is Michael the unbearable oaf. There is Michael the guy who's somewhere on the autistic spectrum, who just doesn't understand how to relate to people. There is Michael the largely well-meaning and talented guy who's just sort of socially clumsy. Like there's a lot of different Michaels in there and sort of from episode to episode it really varied. Basically it's a testament to how good Carell was that these all felt like the same guy.

3.2.4. Failures and Successes

When the first season of *The Office* aired in 2005, Greg Daniels was disappointed to discover that both the ratings and the critics were negative and that the show risked being cancelled (Greene, 2020: 16). The critics in particular wrote harsh comments on the national press denouncing the poorness of the American adaptation of the *BBC* series. Indeed, as reported by Greene (2020), the *New York Daily News* compared the US adaptation to “muddy water” (73); whereas other newspapers like the *Los Angeles Times* and *USA Today* criticised Steve Carell's performance respectively describing it as “too cartoon[y]” or similar to that of “an actor doing a bit, not a person running an office” (73-74). In other words, all critics agreed that the brilliantness of the British version had been ‘lost in translation’ (*ibid.*).

When Ricky Gervais discovered the initial poor reception of the US counterpart, he consoled Daniels telling him that (Greene, 2020: 75):

That's a good sign. Anything to do with innovation suffers on the test score because people go, ‘That's not what I expected.’ They mark it down because it's not like the sitcom they thought it was going to be. You can't let that stop you.

Daniels and the rest of the staff continued to believe in the project and their loyalty would soon be recompensated. Indeed, since season two, the sitcom eventually started to become more successful as the programme found its own identity by creating original more fitting storylines that distanced it from the British version (Greene, 2020:

112). In addition, another source for the increased popularity of the show was also due to that of Steve Carell himself, who had recently impressed the American audience with a brilliant performance in the movie *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* in which he played the main character (91). The film consecrated him as an affirmed movie star, fact which benefited the series (*ibid.*).

From that point onwards, the success of *The Office* (US) only grew higher and higher making the show turn into one of the most successful television programmes on air (Greene, 2020: 266). Unfortunately, the ascending curve of popularity suffered a severe downturn at the end of season seven when the beloved character of Michael Scott left the show (359). Season eight is considered by both fans and critics as the lowest point of the sitcom due to several factors which, besides the departure of Steve Carell, are related to the absence of several historic writers from the programme (including Greg Daniels) and a state of story staleness due to lack of original ideas (*ibid.*). With the return of Daniels in season nine (381), the show came to a satisfactory end by closing all characters' plotlines (403-404) and with a surprise cameo of Steve Carell in the last episode (400).

Despite the insistencies of Ben Silverman, in the end no spin-offs were realised because the creative team could not manage to find any admissible proposal (Greene, 2020: 312). During the years, rumours of possible reboots circulated on the net, but to this day none were effectively brought to the small screen (420).⁷⁵

Nonetheless, *The Office*'s frenzy continued to rise ceaselessly possibly because of the popularity of contemporary streaming services like *Netflix* that allow viewers to binge-watch entire shows at their own pace (Greene, 2020: 415).⁷⁶ As a matter of fact, according to *Variety* (2021), in 2020 alone *The Office* was watched for more than 57 billion minutes by American users making it by far the most streamed programme on *Netflix* of 2020. Despite that, the enormous success of the show cannot be attributed to the streaming platform alone. Indeed, if *The Office* continues to attract new generations of viewers even after nearly ten years of its conclusion, it means that it has a special appeal to it that makes it timeless and relatable for all sorts of audiences.

⁷⁵ It was speculated for instance that *NBC*'s streaming service *Peacock* was considering the possibility of releasing a revival of *The Office* for the 2018-2019 season. This possibility was later discarded (Greene, 2020: 420).

⁷⁶ *Netflix* is currently the world's largest streaming platform with over 200 million subscribers (*Cleveland.com*, 2022).

In this regard, Amelie Gilette, one of the writers of the late seasons of the show, attempted to explain the reason of such popularity. According to Gilette (Greene, 2020: 17):

Nothing on TV was like *The Office* back then. The comedy was small and it was dry. The people looked like real people, which was a rare thing, especially for a sitcom. It proved that you could do something romantic without being dramatic and that you can do something that feels real, that feels grounded, even though there is this artifice of it being a documentary that tricks you into thinking it's real.

3.2.5. Comparing the Two Sitcoms

As Beeden and de Bruin (2012) argued, the two versions of *The Office* may derive from the same creative minds and may also share some similarities in terms of setting, plot and (partly) characters, but they are essentially two different shows each having its own personal identity. The most banal divergence depends on distinct national handlings of TV commercials (9). While the American television industry needs to allocate time for advertisements during the airing of a programme, the British one seems to be freer from these constraints, element which directly affects their respective runtime (*ibid.*). Indeed, if each episode of *The Office* (US) lasts approximately twenty-two minutes, those of the original counterpart are seven minutes longer on average.

Nonetheless, apart from this merely technical issue, more pronounced differences between the two sitcoms might be identified in relation to aspects connected to the idiosyncrasies of the two nations and how they approach humour. For instance, various symbols of national identity are clearly recognisable in both versions of the show like the Homer Simpson doll in the Scranton office or the Tudor-themed nightclub in Slough (Beeden and de Bruin, 2012: 10). Those differences are also noticeable from the pastime activities (11) and cultural references (14) present in parallel episodes of the two programmes.

In fact, while in the original version competition is celebrated as an intellectual challenge (the pub quiz) that exalts one's knowledge, the adaption focuses instead on a physical confrontation (the basketball game) in which winning equates to proving superior athletic prowess (Beeden and de Bruin, 2012: 11). Moreover, if a British spectator feels at ease understanding references to the Royal Family, so does the

American one in relation to famous figures such as Abraham Lincoln or Hillary Clinton (14).

Certain themes are either exclusive of one version or simply treated differently in the two shows. For example, as Boseovski and Marcovitch (2011: 145) examined, work is only actually done at Dunder Mifflin. As a matter of fact, despite the frequent distractions, Jim and Dwight are depicted as capable and proficient salesmen. Michael too can display some business shrewdness from time to time. On the contrary, the workers at Wernham Hogg are negligent and completely inefficient in the workplace (*ibid.*).

Another major thematic difference regards the contrast between class and race. According to Beeden and de Bruin (2010: 15-16), while the British show constructs its humour based on “the aspiration of characters of different social standings”, thus following the traditional reflection on class; its adaptation, in accordance with the ethnically diverse composition of the American society, chooses to address the issue of race by delivering jokes that result funny not because of their inappropriateness but due to Michael’s complete ignorance of the socio-cultural conventions surrounding this sensitive topic.

The general mood set by the two series differs as well starting from their respective opening themes (Beeden and de Bruin, 2012: 10). Indeed, the theme of The Office (UK) is dark and depressing. No characters are depicted, the buildings are all grey and the sky is cloudy. The boring monotonous office routine is accentuated by a view of cars endlessly circling around a rotary (*ibid.*). Conversely, The Office (US)’s intro is catchy and memorable. The accompanying tune is cheerful and festive, most of the main characters make their appearance on screen, and the Scranton welcome sign invites the audience into the story (*ibid.*).

The Office (UK) seems to illustrate a bleaker satirical representation of workplace dynamics than its American counterpart. Indeed, as Yu (2017) argued: “while the British version portrays corporate life to be hopeless and dystopian, the American version sugarcoats corporate life and frames it to be reassuring and positive”, almost utopian.

This aspect is also reflected in the characterisation of the two regional managers. In fact, as already discussed in Subsection 3.2.3., although in the early seasons they

share similar personalities,⁷⁷ as the series progresses Michael matures becoming a more empathic character and a better boss.

In this regard, Beeden and de Bruin (2010: 12) suggested that, unlike David, Michael does not act foolishly to seek attention from his co-workers in order to solidify his position in the office as a respected boss. He does so to foster a sense of belonging, a community spirit that could unify them as though they were a big family (*ibid.*).⁷⁸ However, that sentiment of belonging eventually stops being one of the boss' delusions and it becomes a shared feeling among the co-workers as well. As a matter of fact, according to Middleton (2014: 167):

Michael manages to make a dead-end job into a space of group belonging and sentiment. In this world, you no longer need to aspire to something different professionally, because the forms of emotional connection that are meant to give greatest meaning to our lives are in fact to be found in the workplace.

Such warmth comes to affect comic styles too. Indeed, as Middleton (2014: 168) reflected, although both series might be associated with the 'cringe comedy' genre, the British version of the show utilises a type of cringe humour that makes the audience avert from the screen in shame and embarrassment. Instead, the American adaption alternates cringe moments with moving scenes that produce an emotional response in the viewers who become more attached to the story and to its characters (*ibid.*). "Rather than wanting to look away in shame, we may find ourselves wanting to watch these moving and cathartic scenes again, and again. They deliver us from awkwardness" (*ibid.*).

3.3. *Pilot* and "The Pilot after the Pilot"

The current Section presents a CDA and visual analysis of the pilot(s) of *The Office* (US). Contrarily to other Chapters in this work, this Chapter intentionally focuses on two distinct episodes, namely the first two (*Pilot* and *Diversity Day*) because they may

⁷⁷ Michal and David are both self-centred individuals with delusions of grandeur and a strong need to be approved and idolised by other people. They are "overgrown adolescents" who are unable to understand the notion of appropriateness (Boseovski and Marcovitch, 2011: 146-147).

⁷⁸ In point of fact, Michael often refers to his dependents as if they were his children (Boseovski and Marcovitch, 2011: 151).

both be interpreted as legitimate pilots of the show. As a matter of fact, although the very first episode is, as the title suggests, the pilot of the series; in truth that episode is merely an almost verbatim adaptation of the script of the original debut episode of the British version of the show (Ducray, 2012).

On the contrary, as revealed in the second episode of *Office Ladies* (2019),⁷⁹ Diversity Day was recognised by the writers themselves as the true pilot of the series. Indeed, quoting Fischer: “[t]his was the first totally original script of the American version of *The Office* [...] the writers referred to this episode as ‘the pilot after the pilot’ because they felt like this was establishing what is the American version gonna be like”.

In other words, if Pilot serves the function of introducing the documentary style of the sitcom together with its main characters and relational dynamics,⁸⁰ Diversity Day is the episode that really separates the series from its British counterpart by specifically addressing some of the most controversial issues in American society such as racial and ethnic prejudice (Ducray, 2012). Therefore, in order not to make the analysis of the pilot incomplete, both episodes will be examined in the following Subsections.

3.3.1. Pilot

As anticipated in the previous Subsection, the very first episode of the series faithfully adapts its British counterpart by maintaining most of the plot identical and leaving several jokes intact while arranging others to better suit the American audience. The following summary, crafted by watching the episode, outlines the plot of the instalment.

The episode opens with Michael Scott, Scranton’s regional manager of Dunder Mifflin, introducing a documentary crew (and by extension the viewers) to the ‘office’. As confidential reports from corporate warn the boss of possible downsizing measures, the branch welcomes a new temporary worker, Ryan Howard. Despite the surreptitious nature of the information, rumours regarding downsizing circulate in the workplace,

⁷⁹ *Office Ladies* is a podcast (2019-) starring Jenna Fischer and Angela Kinsey (respectively playing Pam Beesly and Angela Martin) in which the two actresses tell behind-the-scenes stories regarding the show (*Office Ladies*).

⁸⁰ A couple of instances of such relational dynamics might be Jim pranking Dwight or the hinted romantic interest that Jim and Pam have for each other (dynamics already discussed in the previous Section).

thus alarming the workers. A few scenes later, Michael involuntarily generates even more panic among the staff as he confirms the truthfulness of said rumours.

In the meantime, the episode presents one of the central themes of the show, namely the inimicality between the two top salesmen of the office, Jim Halpert and Dwight Schrute. Such peculiar relationship is expressed in the form of spiteful teasing and practical jokes that the two exchange with the aim of either annoying or deriding the other. In this regard, as will be tackled in the subsequent analysis, one of the highlights of the episode is when Jim places Dwight's stapler in gelatine.⁸¹

The pilot also introduces another key theme of the series i.e., the complicated romance between Jim and Pam Beesly, the office receptionist. In particular, in the episode, the subtle flirtation between the two characters is abruptly interrupted by the arrival of the latter's fiancé, a warehouse worker called Roy Anderson.

In one of the last scenes of the episode, Michael exploits the tension regarding the issue of downsizing by pretending to discharge Pam in order to amuse himself and the newcomer, Ryan. However, by doing so, he only succeeds in making the secretary cry and embarrassing the intern.

For the sake of the following analysis, three thematic cores will be examined using lines and screenshots as supporting elements in the discussion of the same.

3.3.1.1. Fake Accents

Michael's proverbial inappropriate attitude can be recognised since the first lines of the pilot. The episode begins with a scene in which he and Jim are talking in Michael's office. The boss asks the salesman whether he succeeded in making a deal with the librarian. As Jim replies that he could not do that, Michael wrongly assumes that the salesman came to him for advice, while in truth it had been Michael to call him there in the first place.

Nonetheless, what is interesting to notice in this scene is the way in which the manager communicates with his dependent. The tone is so friendly and informal that it can playfully accommodate cultural references as well. Indeed, Michael exploits his pop-culture knowledge to make a direct reference to the TV series *Kung Fu* (1972-

⁸¹ Such prank is iterated at the end of the instalment as well. In fact, as soon as the staff leaves, Jim places Michael's favourite coffee mug, previously put in gelatine, on top of the boss' desk.

1975) by establishing a master-disciple relationship with Jim. He refers to himself as a “master” to whom guidance is asked while concurrently addressing his subordinate as “grasshopper”, the same term that the martial artist calls his pupil in the show (*Kidadl*, 2021). However, to make the reference more evident and ‘faithful’ to the original or simply for the sake of comedy, the boss utters the “grasshopper” line by jokingly imitating an Asian accent, thus providing a first example of his racially insensitive sense of humour.

This is not an isolated case since Michael showcases this type of comic insensitiveness several times both in the series and in this episode too. In point of fact, after making an impression of an Asian accent, in the same scene he also seems to be faking an Irish one during a telephone conversation with the librarian that Jim is said to have been previously talking to.

In that scene Michael successfully closes the already mentioned sale and thanks the interlocutor saying “All right, done deal! Thank you very much, sir. You're a gentleman and a scholar” speaking with a vaguely resembling Irish accent. It might be possible that he acts in that fashion because misled by the librarian’s voice which he probably confuses with an Irish sounding one. In reality, he is indeed mistaken because it is revealed that the person whom he speaks with is neither Irish nor a man, that is in fact a woman.

Michael attempts to justify his mistake by inappropriately suggesting that the woman on the telephone did sound like a man owing to her alleged “very low voice” even adding that she might be a smoker. In this example Michael’s disrespectful behaviour is not properly intentional because it is caused by a misunderstanding, a false assumption which makes the scene even funnier and reveals Michael’s social awkwardness.

Later in the episode, another instance of mocking a non-standard American accent occurs when the manager tries to reassure his black colleague Stanley that corporate will not close the Scranton branch and that he and the rest of the staff will not lose their jobs:

STANLEY: So, you can't say for sure whether it's gonna to be us or them, can you?

MICHAEL: No, no, no Stanley, no you did not see me in there with her. I said, if corporate wants to come in here, and interfere then they're gonna have to go through me,

right? You know, you can go a mess with Josh's people, but I'm the head of this family, and [fakes a black accent] *you ain't gonna be messing with my "chillen"*.

The last line (MICHAEL: "you ain't gonna be messing with my 'chillen'") exemplifies the already mentioned racial insensitiveness of Michael who cannot understand that imitating the African American vernacular language is considered at best cultural appropriation and worst a racist behaviour which is thus conventionally frowned upon.

On his part, as *Figure 13* and *Figure 14* show, Stanley first reacts with an appalled expression that displays his disbelief for the violation of such social norm, then shakes his head as if resigned to the impossibility of reasoning with Michael's foolishness.



Figure 13: Stanley Cannot Believe What He Heard



Figure 14: Stanley Decides not to Argue

Finally, the last instance of this kind of inappropriate behaviour in the debut episode takes place around the end of the instalment when, in a talking head interview, Michael tells what he considers one of his proudest moments as a boss at Scranton. He mentions hiring "a young Guatemalan guy" who could barely speak English and who supposedly held Michael in such good esteem that he asked him to become his child's godfather.

As Michael tells this story and quotes the supposed words of that young Guatemalan man, he intentionally fakes a thick foreign accent that makes fun of that man's poor mastery of English, hence belittling him as a person. Michael tells this story only to praise himself for being inclusive, open-minded and a role model to all his employees.⁸² In truth, he did not care much about the "young Guatemalan guy", in fact he discharges him soon enough because of his alleged incompetence. "Didn't work out in the end. We had to let him go. He sucked".

⁸² After all, it is hard to believe that a freshly hired employee asks his boss to become the godfather of his child.

3.3.1.2. Misogyny and Sexism

The pilot of *The Office* presents more than a couple of examples of demeaning attitudes towards women most of which are addressed to the female receptionist Pam. Indeed, the first of those instances occurs during the presentation of her character. As Michael is introducing the various characters of the office to both the documentary crew and the audience, he stops at the reception to talk to Pam. Immediately after stating that she has been working there for a very long time, he adds a humiliating comment which he probably intended as a compliment on her physical appearance, but which results completely inappropriate and cheapening (MICHAEL: “If you think she's cute now you should have seen her a couple of years ago!” [Makes faces and odd noises]). In fact, not only is the compliment totally unsolicited as it embarrasses Pam in front of the camera, but it insults her by comparing her actual beauty with that of her past self.

Looking at *Figure 15* the sexual allusion in Michael’s remark is quite evident. Indeed, he distorts his face and produces strange noises from his mouth as if he were an animal savouring the taste of a succulent prey.



Figure 15: "Reow, Reow"

The sexual nature of this scene was however downplayed in the final version of the pilot because, as *IMDb* reports, in an alternate introduction to the character which figures among the deleted scenes, Michael would have stated: “at one time or another every guy in the office has sprayed on Pam”, which is a clear reference to male masturbation.

The next victim of Michael’s misogyny is his boss Jan Levinson-Gould (Melora Hardin) who works as the Vice President of Northeast Sales at Dunder Mifflin. She

has a strong, severe and commanding personality that intimidates Michael.⁸³ For that reason, he sometimes refers to her as “Hillary Rodham Clinton” discourteously comparing her authoritative and outspoken demeanour to that of Bill Clinton’s wife.

Nonetheless, even harsher sexist remarks on the character come from Michael’s coarse friend and colleague Todd Packer⁸⁴ who in the episode incidentally calls Michael on the telephone when the latter is having a meeting with Jan and Pam just to make offensive misogynist observations on the Vice President of the company.

Packer scornfully calls Jan “old Godzillary”, thus devising both an ageist and misogynist label which exhibits his hatred for her as a person and womankind in general. Not satisfied with the insult, Packer immediately adds a rhetorical question related to the colour of her pubic hair which sexualises and belittles Jan (PACKER: “I’ve been meaning to ask her one question. ‘Does the carpet match the drapes?’”). Packer’s phone call reveals his consideration of Mrs Levinson. To him she is nothing more than a hateful sex doll whom he despises because he cannot control and subdue to his will.

During (and especially after) the call, Michael pretends to distance himself from his friend saying that his comments are not appropriate and that he is a “horrible person”. What Michael actually intends to do is to save his reputation in front of his boss by whom, as already stated above, he is intimidated. Had Jan not been present at that moment, he would have probably joined Packer contributing to the conversation with his own sexist jokes.

However, Michael’s awareness of his language choice in front of Jan does not prevent him from associating a negative event like downsizing with unpleasant feminine features. As a matter of fact, he defines downsizing “a real bitch”, a rude slang which according to *The Free Dictionary* indicates both “an extremely difficult, aggravating, or stressful situation or “a woman or girl considered unpleasant, difficult, or strident”. The two interpretations seem related. Indeed, although in this case the context seems to be more in line with the first definition, this connotation may very likely derive from the other one because ‘bitch’ is a swear word which is usually

⁸³ Michael and Jan eventually develop a dysfunctional intimate relationship that lasts a few seasons (*CBR.com*, 2021).

⁸⁴ Todd is Dunder Mifflin’s Travelling Salesman (Greene, 2020: 49). He is a vulgar, boorish middle-aged man famous for his recurrent sexist and homophobic jokes (Birthisel and Martin, 2013: 71-74).

addressed to women. Therefore, calling downsizing “a real bitch” means not only emphasising its distressing and dreadful undertones but also comparing these negative qualities to those improperly attributed to women. This is how an apparently innocent comment betrays a whole misogynist worldview.

The last example of sexist behaviour in the episode takes place during the introduction of the new temporary worker at Dunder Mifflin, Ryan Howard. Michael exploits Ryan’s last name to make a reference to Moe Howard of the *Three Stooges*.⁸⁵



Figure 16: *The Three Stooges*

As *Figure 16* depicts, after imitating Moe and giving ‘a high five’ to the new intern establishing a first brotherly bond with him, Michael addresses Pam, who has remained quiet and impassive during his performance, saying: “[o]h Pam, that’s a guy thing Pam” implying that as a woman she cannot understand men’s humour. Michael’s patronising attitude excludes Pam from the bonding relation with Ryan concurrently relegating her to the intellectually inferior group of womankind.

3.3.1.3. Crossing the Line

As illustrated in the previous Section, one of the key aspects of the personality of Scranton’s regional manager is the fact that he is unable to understand when a certain joke crosses the line of what is considered socially acceptable.

In the pilot episode, there are three instances in which this trait emerges clearly. The first is realised immediately after the imitation of Moe Howard of *The Three Stooges* that was examined above. Indeed, in the same scene, Michael proceeds to make his best impression of none other than Adolf Hitler. Michael thinks of himself

⁸⁵ *The Three Stooges* is an American comic trio who worked doing both vaudeville and television from 1922 to 1970 (*Movieweb*, 2021).

as “a sort of student of comedy” and wants to prove his point by imitating Adolf Hitler. He does not seem to realise how sensitive the topic he chose to parody is and that it could make his employees extremely uncomfortable. On the contrary, he proceeds with the impersonation anyway considering it a funny comic exercise to demonstrate his worth as a comedian in front of his colleagues. *Figure 17* portrays this enactment.



Figure 17: “I’m Hitler, Adolf Hitler”

Observing the picture above, it is possible to notice how Michael’s nonverbal parody relies on body language to recreate a caricature of the German dictator by emphasising his hysterical and erratic demeanour. He accompanies the nonverbal impersonation with incomprehensible noises that possibly attempt to burlesque Hitler while giving commands in German followed by what sounds like the drumming cacophonous clatter of a machine gun.

Later in the episode, while introducing Ryan to Jim and Dwight, Michael assists to the infamous stapler in gelatine prank which, according to Dwight, Jim has already played on him three times. Michael however does not appear to be bothered by the joke. In fact, he tells Dwight not to remove the stapler with his hands but to “eat it out there because there are starving people in the world”. In other words, he exploits Jim’s joke to make a sarcastic comment on world hunger, only to momentarily correct himself saying that he hates it because it is a waste of food (still referring to the gelatine not famine). Michael not only overlooks an incorrect behaviour made by one of his employees towards another, but he also minimises and makes fun of one of the most serious social problems on the planet, i.e., global hunger.

Exasperated by his colleague’s behaviour, when Dwight explicitly asks Michael to intervene and to discipline him, Michael makes an effort to admonish Jim even if he is not very convincing:

DWIGHT: [Points at Ryan] Ok, you know what? You can be a witness. [To Michael] Can you reprimand him please?

JIM: [Eating gelatine from a Jell-O cup] How do you know it was me?

DWIGHT: It's always you. [To Michael] Are you gonna discipline him or not?

MICHAEL: Ooh discipline, kinky! [Laughs] All right, here's the deal you guys. Thing about a practical joke is that you have to know when to start as well as when to stop. And yeah, Jim, now is the time to stop putting Dwight's personal effects into Jell-O.

As a matter of fact, Jim only needs to make a pun by stating: “[o]k, Dwight I'm sorry because... I've always been your biggest *flan*” that Michael already forgets the reproach he gave. Conversely, he begins to laugh and together with Ryan he joins a pun-making contest where they invent sentences describing the situation at hand using dessert names e.g., “You should have put him in *custard-y!*”. Michael does not behave like a good boss because he does not take his employee’s complaint seriously. He ultimately ignores the misdeed and sides with Jim, hence prioritising his own amusement over Dwight’s discontent.

Lastly, the boss crosses the line again when, in one of the last scenes of the episode, he pretends to discharge Pam as if she were in a show like the *Jamie Kennedy Experiment* (2002-2004) or *Punk'd* (2003-2007).⁸⁶ In this scene, Michael convinces Ryan to be his accomplice in the joke. He calls Pam in his office telling her that due to downsizing he is “going to let [her] go first”. The following exchange describes how the conversation developed:

PAM: You got a fax.

MICHAEL: Oh, thank you Pam. [Pam tries to leave] Pam? Can you come in here for a sec? Just have a seat, I was gonna call you in anyway. You know Ryan? Um, as you know, there is going to be downsizing and you have made my life so much easier in that I'm going to have to let you go first.

PAM: What? Why?

MICHAEL: Why? Well, theft. And stealing.

⁸⁶ These were two hidden camera-practical joke reality TV programmes popular in the early 2000s (Kocela, 2009: 162).

PAM: Stealing? Um, what am I supposed to have stolen?

MICHAEL: Post-it notes.

PAM: Post-it notes?

MICHAEL: Yeah.

PAM: What are those worth, like 50 cents?

MICHAEL: 50 cents, yeah. You steal a thousand post-it notes at 50 cents apiece, and you know, you've made a profit... margin. You know, gonna run us out of business Pam.

PAM: Are you serious?

MICHAEL: Yeah, I um...

PAM: Oh, my... I can't believe this. I mean, I have never even stolen as much as a paper clip and now you're firing me.

MICHAEL: And the best thing about it is that... we are not gonna have to give you any severance pay because that is... gross misconduct, and uh... just clean out your desk. I'm sorry. [Silent pause. Pam starts to cry. Michael realises it] You've been X'd, punk! [Laughs] Surprise it's a joke, we were joking around [continues to laugh]. You see? Okay, [referring to Ryan] he was in on, he was my accomplice [Ryan shakes his head] and that was just kind of a morale booster thing, and we were showing the new guy around the kind of... kind of giving him the feel of the place. So... you sh... God, you were... we totally got you.

PAM: You're a jerk.

MICHAEL: Well, I don't know about that [Pam leaves].

Michael intended it to be a funny joke to make another spectacle of his comic genius in front of the newcomer, but he fails miserably because he deeply embarrasses Ryan and makes Pam cry. This prank exhibits Michael's insensitiveness at its peak.

Interestingly enough, as Jenna Fischer (Pam) explained in the comment to this episode in the *Office Ladies* (2019) podcast, the scene in question was not meant to be adapted in the American version of the show because the original creators, Gervais and Merchant, felt that Michael could appear too mean and that it would have been difficult to redeem the character. Despite this objection, the scene was ultimately added because Daniels insisted on it. Nevertheless, instead of calling the boss a "sad little man", like Dawn did in the British version, Pam calls him a 'jerk' since, according to Fischer, the writers deemed the line "too harsh" (*ibid.*).



Figure 18: The Fake Firing Prank on Pam

Figure 18 portrays the gap in the emotions felt by the two characters. Pam is desperate because she has just received some terrible news. In fact, although she hates the job like the majority of the employees at Dunder Mifflin, she still needs it. She is frustrated because she has been unjustly dismissed for an absurd reason.

Michael on the other hand looks completely at ease, he is smirking at his own prank anticipating the surprised expression in the receptionist's face when he is going to tell her that it was a just joke. However, he is the only person laughing. Neither Ryan nor Pam (perhaps not even the cameraman filming it or the audience watching it) finds it as amusing as Michael does.

3.3.2. Diversity Day

Diversity Day, as already mentioned, embodies the true spiritual pilot of the series because it follows the first original script of the American version of the sitcom. Moreover, the simple fact of organising a diversity day in the workplace calls into play the notion of political correctness making the analysis of this episode crucial for the sake of this work.

The plot revolves around a diversity training requested by corporate because of inappropriate comments made by Michael Scott, the regional manager of the office. An instructor is sent from corporate to guide through the training process, but Michael continuously disturbs the session as he does not believe in its efficacy. After having Michael forcefully sign a pledge demanding him to respect the norms taught in the session, the instructor leaves. Michael then decides to deliver his own diversity training which consists of a series of inappropriate and offensive activities.

In the meantime, Jim is trying to close a very important sale call which constitutes around 25% of his annual commissions, however he is constantly

interrupted by external disturbances including Dwight shredding paper right next to him, or Michael involving him in the diversity training. In the end, it is revealed that Dwight closes the sale in Jim's place to spite him, but the latter consoles himself having Pam, his romantic interest, fall asleep on his shoulder.

For the purposes of this analysis, two main thematic cores will be examined using screenshots and direct quotes from the episode as reference.

3.3.2.1. Failing to be Politically Correct

Despite the contrasting evidence provided throughout the course of this Chapter, Michael is not completely unaware of political correctness, especially in season one where his personality is more similar to that of David Brent, his British counterpart. In fact, the specific focus of this Subsection concerns the way in which Michael fails to be politically correct despite trying to be so. Among the several instances of this sort of behaviour present in the episode, four examples will be discussed.

Colour blindness is the first to appear chronologically in the episode. Indeed, at the beginning of the diversity training session, the instructor Mr Brown is confronted with Michael's own PC idea of how to tackle racial prejudice. As Mr Brown comments that the majority of problems in the workplace arise due to ignorance, Michael addresses his black co-worker Stanley saying that that is "a color-free zone" and that "[he does not] look at [him] as another race". Mr Brown immediately replies that this type of comment is exactly the reason why he is there. He argues that it is futile to "fight ignorance with more ignorance".

Michael does not seem to listen to the instructor as he says 'tolerance' instead of 'ignorance'. The two figures appear to be out of sync. Indeed, their disagreement comes from a misalignment in values. Michael apparently believes that colour blindness is a good strategy to fight racism and be tolerant of minorities, whereas Mr Brown finds an alternative solution to deal with such sensitive issue.⁸⁷ Instead of ignoring race, he proposes to acknowledge it because only through acknowledgment can diversity be truly celebrated.

⁸⁷ Even though in the series Michael does not follow this strategy very often since he likes to stress contrasting personal traits including race and sexual orientation (Sumner, Scarduzio and Daggett, 2020). Therefore, it can be argued that he mentions colour blindness only because he thinks it is appropriate to do so.

Later in the episode, after Mr Brown has left, Michael organises his own diversity training. He debuts stating: “[d]iversity is the cornerstone of progress” before inviting his employees to watch a tape in which he filmed himself talking about diversity. The following lines summarise the content of the tape:

MICHAEL: Hi. I'm Michael Scott. I'm in charge of Dunder Mifflin Paper Products here in Scranton, Pennsylvania but I'm also the founder of Diversity Tomorrow because today is almost over. Abraham Lincoln once said that "If you're a racist, I will attack you with the North". And those are the principles that I carry with me in the workplace.

These few lines, other than exhibiting Michael’s self-centredness, underline a reactionary and simplistic vision of racism.⁸⁸ Judging by the example he provided, Michael probably equates contemporary racism in the USA with 19th century slavery. His remark feels totally anachronistic if not useless, in fact Jim asks him if that is all he has prepared for the meeting, which ironically is the case.

Nevertheless, when he utters his lines, Michael is extremely self-confident. He poses as a successful communicator who through his body language tries to persuade the viewers of the wisdom of his words.

Figure 19 can be helpful to visualise this concept. His leg is laying on a chair and his arms are partially folded in an orderly resting position. His gaze is initially directed towards the floor as if pensive before looking straight into the camera.



Figure 19: "If you're a racist, I will attack you with the North"

As part of Michael’s diversity training, the boss encourages the employees to introduce themselves in front of the other colleagues in order to familiarise with one another.

⁸⁸ The self-centredness is explained as Michael chooses himself as the source of an inspirational quote.

Michael intentionally asks Oscar to share his personal story. Oscar says that his parents were born in Mexico but then moved to the US before he was born. The failed attempt to be politically correct occurs when Michael asks Oscar whether there is another word that he prefers to be labelled as other than ‘Mexican’, term which according to Michael is offensive because “it has certain connotations”. Michael makes a blunder genuinely thinking that ‘Mexican’ is offensive therefore willing to find a more adequate expression which could replace it.



Figure 20: “What connotations, Michael?”

As depicted in *Figure 20*, when Oscar asks Michael what connotations that term has, the latter realises his blunder and feigns ignorance and forgetfulness. From the expression on his face, Oscar seems to have overcome the uneasiness generated by the inquisitive question that Michael asked him. Indeed, the employee now looks amused by the boss’ blunder, in fact he tries to have Michael compromise himself even further by encouraging him to express his prejudiced views in front of all the co-workers. However, comprehending to be in a difficult situation, the manager immediately changes the subject of the conversation restating the principles contained in the pledge which he unwillingly signed. By doing so, Michael shows not to be an unintelligent person, on the contrary, he proves to be quite clever. As a matter of fact, the problem with Michael is his ignorance about social conventions which produces that specific form of cringe humour discussed in Subsection 3.2.5.

One last example of Michael attempting to be PC but miserably failing to do so occurs when, in a talking head interview, he confesses that “Martin Luther King is a hero of [his]” to justify the card sticking to his forehead which indeed recites “Martin Luther King”, as can be observed in *Figure 21*.



Figure 21: "Martin Luther King is a hero of mine"

If the choice of the subject seems preposterous considering the manager's personality, what instantly exposes his insensitive mindset is the line that follows the one about Martin Luther King being his hero (MICHAEL: "There's this great Chris Rock bit about how streets named after Martin Luther King tend to be more violent. I'm not going to do it but it's...").⁸⁹

It is particularly ironic that Michael contradicts his own previous statement with a racist consideration using the name of the same historic figure to support two opposing arguments. Perhaps, this formulation resembles the "I am not racist but..." archetype discussed in **Chapter One** where a prejudiced individual wants to convey their message without being labelled as politically incorrect.

3.3.2.2. Racial and Ethnic Insensitiveness

This Subsection closes the analysis of the episode and that of the series. As the title suggests, it specifically focuses on various instances of racial and ethnic insensitive behaviours mainly perpetrated by Scranton's regional manager Michael Scott. In particular, four scenes relevant to this topic are going to be discussed.

The first example of this sort of inadequate attitude occurs around the beginning of the training session. Indeed, after having his suggestion regarding the use of colour blindness refuted, as mentioned in the previous Subsection, Michael attempts to 'steal the spotlight' once more by inviting the employees to state a 'race' that they are sexually attracted to. While the proposal sounds completely absurd and inconsequential, perhaps the logic behind it is that if a person is sexually attracted to

⁸⁹ Not to mention the fact that in this scene Michael 'cheated' because he chose his own card while the rest of the staff were assigned a (seemingly) random one; or the fact that the cards were supposed to indicate a race, an ethnicity or a nationality, whereas his regarded a single individual who ironically happens to be one of the greatest heroes of the African American community.

another of a different ‘race’, then that person cannot be racist. Such argument may seem alluring to some because it creates a convenient and comfortable solution that virtually exempts them for being targeted as racists.

In truth, this is a misconception and an ill-founded argument because, in a similar fashion, even though heterosexual men are attracted to women, it does not mean that they cannot adopt sexist and misogynist behaviours. On the contrary, people who hold these sorts of beliefs are possibly even more abusive towards minorities, and therefore more racist, because they think they possess a valid justification for conducting in a socially improper manner.

Therefore, Michael too falls victim to this logical fallacy, hence displaying his racial and sexual insensitiveness. As a matter of fact, the only response he receives comes from the eccentric and hierarchy-obsessed Dwight, a character who too suffers from some form of social awkwardness himself. The salesman replies saying that he has two preferences in that matter, “White and Indian”, thus alarming Kelly, the American Indian girl seated next to him. *Figure 22* illustrates Kelly’s immediate reaction to Dwight’s confession.



Figure 22: Kelly Is Afraid of Dwight

From this camera close-up of her face, it is possible to observe her terrorised look as she realises that she might be seated next to a degenerate person who could do her harm.

Returning to one of the last points made in the previous Subsection, it is also interesting to notice that Michael exploits the black stand-up comedian (Chris Rock) to express his racially inconsiderate comments more than once in the same episode. Indeed, other than quoting him about the alleged violence connected with certain street

names, Michael also makes an impression of one of Chris Rock's famous routines in which the comedian also uses the 'n-word'.

Judging from his insistence, it is possible to presume that Michael respects and admires Chris Rock. In point of fact, the boss makes an impression of his routine during Mr Brown's diversity training.⁹⁰ When this happens, the instructor becomes furious with him because Michael has behaved in the exact opposite manner of what the instructor wanted him to. In fact, instead of deconstructing the comic's performance with the aim of understanding and contextualising it, Michael has simply repeated it as it was. By doing so, he has charged it with negative racial connotations which, precisely as Michael himself guesses in the quote below, may also be contingent on his skin colour. After all, as discussed in **Chapter One**, the context of production of a joke is all important:

MICHAEL: How come Chris Rock can do a routine and everybody finds it hilarious and ground-breaking and then I go and do the exact same routine, same comedic timing, and people file a complaint to Corporate? Is it because I'm white and Chris is black?

The central part of Michael's diversity training is dedicated to a peculiar guessing game in which office workers are asked to have simulated interracial conversations in pairs where they need to address the interlocutor according to the randomly assigned card that they have on their foreheads.

Michael encourages the employees to interact using the stereotypes associated with the race, ethnicity or nationality written on their partners' cards in order to create what he believes to be a realistic scenario (MICHAEL: "I want you to really go for it 'cause this is real. You know, this isn't just an exercise. This is real life"). While the employees generally try to be polite with one another avoiding offensive topics, Michael continuously incites them telling them to "push it", to "stir the melting pot" and "get ugly".

One of the most ironic interactions in the scene is the one between Pam and Stanley. Indeed, the card on her forehead says "Jewish", whereas his 'incidentally'

⁹⁰ In the routine in question, as recounted in the episode, Chris Rock claims that black people are more racist because if one group of blacks is described as peaceful, the other, the one labelled using the n-word, is intrusive and chaotic.

says “Black”. When the boss perceives that the two are not having the kind of heated discussion that he expected from that couple, he instigates them by saying: “[g]ood. Bom bom bom-bom bom. Come on Olympics of Suffering right here. Slavery versus the Holocaust. Come on”.

The complete lack of respect for the ethnicities in question as shown in this quote is the epitome of the manager’s idea of diversity training. In point of fact, instead of celebrating diversity as a way to achieve mutual respect despite cultural differences, Michael appears to be doing the exact opposite. Perhaps, he is not motivated by bad intentions. He may be simply doing it because he honestly believes that his realistic approach will have a positive impact on cross-racial relations. However, it is clearly not the case since most of the employees feel embarrassed or ashamed.

Furthermore, the inappropriate nature of Michael’s remark is worsened by the fact that Stanley is unknowingly representing his own ethnicity. When the latter discovers that, Michael justifies himself saying that it “was inadvertent” and unplanned, even though it most likely was not. Nevertheless, even if it were, it surely did not stop the manager from being insensitive anyway.

The last scene that is going to be examined is one of the key moments of the episode and one of the most famous scenes in the series overall. Feeling frustrated that his co-workers are not following his suggestions on how to interact with one another as he meant them to, Michael decides to show them himself how the seminar was supposed to proceed by approaching Kelly who, when she entered the room, did not know about the activity since she had been busy with other tasks. Therefore, without explaining her what he and the other colleagues were doing in the conference room, Michael addresses her by making an impression of the owner of an Indian convenience store. The scene developed as follows:

MICHAEL: [Voice raised, fake Indian accent] Kelly, how are you?

KELLY: I just had the longest meeting.

MICHAEL: [Voice raised, fake Indian accent] Oh! Welcome to my convenience store. Would you like some googi googi? I have some very delicious googi, googi. Only 99 cents plus tax. Try my googi, googi. [Lowering voice] Try my googi, googi. [High-pitched voice] Try my googi, googi. Try my... [Kelly slaps Michael in the face].

In this scene, Michael shows not only to be tactless and impolite, but he definitely manages to be racist as well by belabouring the stereotypical representation of an Indian seller insistingly trying to trade whatever the “googi, googi” is supposed to refer to.

As *Figure 23* displays, Kelly is at first puzzled by Michael’s demeanour. She looks at him not knowing why he is speaking in that manner, if he is serious at all, and most of all, she must be wondering how she ought to react to that unusual situation.



Figure 23: "Try my googi, googi. Try my googi, googi"



Figure 24: An Indignant Silent Stare

After enduring his offensive imitation for a while, Kelly decides to smack Michael in the face to let him understand that he has crossed the line. This is one of the first times that Michael is directly punished for his inconsiderate and rude behaviour. Nevertheless, he does not apologise and instead argues that his attempt has been successful because “[n]ow she knows what it’s like to be a minority”. In other words, he transforms the chastisement he received into an exemplar lesson for the whole office of the ‘proper’ way to behave when interacting with minorities. Nonetheless, the office workers do not seem share his enthusiasm. As a matter of fact, as illustrated in *Figure 24*, all the employees look rather shocked by their boss’ demeanour. It seems as if they can hardly believe their eyes. Indeed, judging from their reactions, they must be both sorry for Kelly and extremely outraged about the umpteenth display of rudeness and racial insensitivity exhibited by their disrespectful boss.

3.4. A Controversial Office

Criticisms, political correctness and Michael Scott are the topics of the current and last Section of the Chapter. Each of them has a dedicated Subsection that aims to examine the impact that this popular yet somehow controversial series has had on society.

3.4.1. Contentions and Criticisms

Despite the longevity and the high degree of popularity that the sitcom has enjoyed, *The Office* has spurred several controversies among critics. Indeed, by providing a satirical portrayal of sensitive social issues (e.g., race, gender, homosexuality, work ethics etc.) while indulging on the ordinary life of office workers, the series, according to scholars such as Schoeneberger (2018), trivialised these topics, thus impeding any critical reflection on them. In particular, the scholar criticised the recurrent use of stereotypes as a strategy to achieve comic results:

Outsiders, or those different than the hegemonic elite, are not usually fairly represented in the media because the producers (insiders) who create these characters have little knowledge of the designated group as a whole or as individuals. As a result, stereotypes proliferate as a means of reducing complexity, and may also be used to appeal to the program's target audience.

While arguing that the show does not typically employ demeaning humour, Schoeneberger (2018) denounced the adoption of traditional racist or sexist stereotypes to please and comfort the mainstream audience (*ibid.*). By doing so, the minorities depicted in the series would continue to be represented as rigid caricatures rather than becoming realistic characters, furthermore, failing once again to adequately portray their real-life counterparts.

A related controversial issue is presented by Birthisel and Martin (2013) who discussed the sitcom's depiction of gender stereotypes. They argued that the show bolsters a hegemonic patriarchal status quo because heterosexual white men, albeit extravagant and sometimes incompetent, occupy all management positions, whereas women when willing to lead or realise themselves tend to be "put back in their place" (75-76). A similar assessment was made by Detweiler (2021: 736), who specifically concerning the character of Pam, suggested that "Pam's ironic awareness of the banality of her (gendered) position at Dunder Mifflin does offer a critique of cultural and institutional constraints on women's literacy practices". In other words, Pam's recognition of her own talent misspent in the subaltern position of a receptionist for an

anonymous paper company is both a critique and a reaffirmation of the institutional power dynamics proper of the patriarchal capitalist American society (*ibid.*).

In addition, returning to the criticism concerning gendered stereotypes, according to Birthisel and Martin (2013: 75), if female characters are highly clichéd due to the presence of common archetypes such as “the shrew, the ball buster, the damsel in distress, the valley girl, the hot mess”; male characters like Michael Scott or Todd Packer, albeit greatly standardised as well, are almost never disciplined for their offensive actions (77), fact which highlights a certain disparity between gender roles.

This preoccupation with stereotypes that both Schoeneberger (2018) and Birthisel and Martin (2013) share is at least partially addressed by the evolution that most of these characters undergo throughout the show. As a matter of fact, still within the standards of character development for sitcom series, *The Office* attempts to re-elaborate its characters, hence having them become less one-dimensional and more credible (yet still retaining all their defining traits) (Ducray, 2012).

Other criticisms connected with the sitcom’s controversial nature was advanced by Sumner, Scarduzio and Daggett (2020) who conducted a qual-quant analysis of bullying behaviours in *The Office*. The scholars recognised five different kinds of bullying attitudes, namely sexual jokes, public humiliation, practical jokes, belittlement, and misuse of authority. Their research aimed to investigate the extent to which these behaviours are displayed in the show concurrently wondering what repercussions these representations might have on actual workplace dynamics.

After offering a detailed analysis of the various kinds of bullying conducts identifying a total of more than 300 instances of bullying practices in just around fifty episodes, they concluded that *The Office* trivialises the issue of bullying by making it appear funny and unimportant as if it bear no “lasting effects” (Sumner, Scarduzio and Daggett, 2020: 145). In this regard, they also argued: “*The Office* seemed to portray the democratization of bullying; everyone was a target and everyone was a bully”(143). According to the scholars (*ibid.*), this is a dangerous conception because it promotes the idea that bullying can be fought by having the victim reciprocate the offense received, thus ignoring the psychological trauma associated with being a target.

Moreover, in line with theories of observational learning, they argued that watching the sitcom may lead people to normalise these negative attitudes and

downplay the seriousness of the issue at hand perhaps inviting them to imitate the characters in the show (143-145). Sumner Scarduzio and Daggett (2020) may be right to be concerned with the risk of trivialising the issue of bullying. However, they seem to underestimate the ability of the audience to understand the satirical intention of a TV show like *The Office* which quite plainly employs incorrect work dynamics on purpose both for the sake of comedy and to teach the spectators what office life *should not* be like.

Similarly, Meier and Medjesky's (2017) claim that Michael's famous catchphrase "that's what she said" normalises and contributes to rape culture seems exaggerated. Michael recurs to this phrase whenever a character makes a statement which, taken out of context, may be interpreted as a sexual innuendo (*The Free Dictionary*). In other words, this phrase is intended as a verbal joke that exploits the double entendre behind a particular utterance to suggest a sexual reading of the same.

It may be argued that by almost exclusively using a feminine subject, the joke might be reckoned sexist.⁹¹ Nonetheless, a sexist joke that oversexualises otherwise normal communicative exchange is not necessarily a rape joke as Meier and Medjesky (2017) instead argued in their essay. To be more specific, they claimed (13) that "the joke represents rape by re-contextualizing an otherwise benign discourse in terms of nonconsensual sexual acts done to an ambiguous female subject who lacks the capacity for consent". In truth, the joke does neither mention nor hint at a non-consensual sexual act. There is no indication at all that the 'she' in question is being abused or coerced into doing something that she did not agree with. However, in this regard, the two scholars (14) affirmed that:

Although the joke does not mention rape by name, it nevertheless speaks in the idiom used to blame rape victims for having been raped, trivializes sexual harassment and sexualized violence, and does so while building communities where rape is more common than exceptional.

⁹¹ There are just a few instances in which Michael attempts to be more inclusive by using a masculine version of the catchphrase. However, it should be noted that it is always directed towards Oscar, the homosexual character in the office (*IMDb*).

Yet, this argument is still debatable. In point of fact, it seems to assume as an assured fact that the joke is implicitly supporting rape culture by simply playing with words and their multiple readings. In reality, as already stated, it does not seem the case because, although inappropriate and childish, the catchphrase is merely a pun. There is no hidden underlying discourse about victim-blaming or perpetuation of rape because rape is not an issue in those contexts. The joke does not aim to humiliate the teller of the original sentence. It just raises their awareness on the existence of a double entendre which ultimately comes to humorously oversexualise a normal conversation.

Again, the criticism towards the phrase may be directed to the fact that it is sexist because it practically only uses a feminine subject, hence always imagining a woman involved in a sexual activity. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the imagined sexual scenario is forced since the sentence triggering the catchphrase may be uttered by a consenting party in virtually all cases.

Another argument to support that the phrase has not such a negative connotation is the fact that Michael is not the only character who is seen to use or enjoy this catchphrase. As a matter of fact, during the course of the show, various employees also use it or intentionally provoke it (*YouTube*). Contrarily to what Meier and Medjesky (2017: 11) believed, namely that the shared use of this punchline “reinforces the bonds of community” through the collective violation of ‘her’, a simpler reason may be given to justify the same result but achieved through different means. Indeed, instead of accepting to believe that the whole office tolerates a joke about violence and abuse, hence making all the employees as condemnable as the boss; it is more reasonable to conclude that they have created stronger internal bonds by learning to gradually assent to a childish punchline which becomes the office ‘inside joke’.

In conclusion, blaming a diverse group as that of the office for promoting rape culture is a rather serious accusation that seems disproportionate and absurd knowing the dynamics of the show and the global resonance it has had.

3.4.2. Working in a PC Office

The Office certainly has a deep connection with the issue of political correctness. As examined in the pilot(s), both the British and the American version establish a connection with PC since the beginning of their respective shows. Indeed, their

controversial themes and eccentric characters are the clearest examples of these sitcoms dealing with PC discourses (Crepaldi, 2020: 821).

This argument is also backed by Westwood and Johnston (2011: 790) who asserted that political correctness exerts a certain type of “workplace justice” that reorganises attitudes, rules of appropriateness and interpersonal relations. In particular, these aspects affect TV shows like *The Office* when these sitcoms display characters reacting to instances of ‘appropriate behaviours’ regarding delicate issues such as race, gender equality, homosexuality and so on (*ibid.*). According to Westwood and Johnston (2011: 795), it would be unwise to interpret *The Office* as a mere critique of incorrect behaviours in the workplace because doing so would ignore “not only the polysemousness of popular culture texts and the variable pleasures sought therein by audiences, but also the parody, ambiguity and nuance invested in the program’s scripts”.

The Office complicates the discussion about political correctness by parodying its very notion and showing its limitations. In this regard, Westwood and Johnston (2011: 796) contended that the series does not parody inappropriateness itself but the ‘inauthenticity’ characterising the office workers who are unnaturally struggling to behave in a politically correct manner while miserably failing to do so (specifically the boss). In other words, the comic value of these sitcoms comes from the inability of characters like Brent or Scott to adapt to social norms that they are aware of which however they struggle to follow since they perceive these regulations as contrived. Therefore, whenever they attempt to act on them, they only manage to provide an unnatural ‘performance’ that lacks authenticity (803).

A similar take on this matter was shared by Nys (2008: 178, cit. in Schwind, 2014: 24) who stated: “on *The Office*, the rude person isn’t totally unaware of the damages he does, and so the comedy is enhanced by revealing the complexity of the issue”. As a matter of fact, the same co-creator of the original British show, Stephen Merchant, during an interview for *The Daily Beast* (2022), confirmed this interpretation by stating that the character of David Brent (exactly like Michael Scott) is not the stereotype of the vulgar obtuse man who simply speaks outrageously. Instead, he is aware of the existence of PC and tries his best to respect that notion despite ultimately being unable to do so.

In the same interview, the showrunner also compared the different social sensibilities concerning PC topics between the period when the series first aired and today. The screenwriter argued that nowadays it would be more complicated to deal with certain delicate issues, even if handled in a satirical way, because nowadays people become more easily offended than they used to do in the past. Therefore, Merchant explained that even well-intentioned creators who simply want to reflect on a given controversial topic by parodic means, like he and Gervais did in *The Office*, are now more cautious because they are afraid of the audience's outraged response. This consideration is particularly poignant because it emphasises one of the biggest limitations of contemporary acceptations of political correctness as was discussed in **Chapter One**.

3.4.3. Redeeming the “World’s Best Boss”⁹²

Concluding this Chapter without redeeming Michael Scott would not make justice to his character. As a matter of fact, he is a more complex figure than the pilot(s) make him to be. As mentioned in Subsection 3.2.3., he is the character who grows the most throughout the seven seasons in which he was present. By the time he leaves the office, both his colleagues and the audience have created an emotional attachment to that character and are sad for his departure. As a matter of fact, as Aust (2022: 72) related, the song that the employees have written in honour of Michael's departure (*9,986,000 Minutes*) is a true love letter that expresses their affection for him. The song is really moving as it mentions some key moments in the show told by the characters' perspective who are now forgetting Michael for his inappropriate behaviours over the years, while he, on his part, acknowledges them for staying by his side despite his eccentricity (*ibid.*).

In this regard, Aust (2022: 72) recognised that the gratitude which the office workers expressed to their regional manager is a sign of Michael's greatest leadership quality, namely his dedication to the creation of meaningful personal relationships in the workplace. In fact, as the scholar (70) argued, leadership “is not about the leader,

⁹² The epithet in question is printed on Michael's favourite coffee mug, a notorious item which makes its first appearance on the show in the pilot episode (*IMDb*).

it is about the followers”, a message perfectly understood by a character with a “caring heart” like Michael Scott who made it his guiding moral principle.

The relationship with the audience is no less intense. In point of fact, as *ArteSettima* (2022) argued, although the spectators initially struggle to empathise with a seemingly racist and misogynist character, season after the season they learn more about his personality eventually learning to normalise and accept his most eccentric attributes. He gradually reveals his fragile side by appearing as the simple man that he is.

According to *ArteSettima* (2022), Michael is akin to the antihero archetype. Indeed, he starts as a tormented character who wishes to escape his loneliness while seeking love and affection from the people around him (*ibid.*). However, he fails to achieve that goal since he is led astray by his social awkwardness that keeps pushing others away.

Then, as the sitcom progresses, the audience become more acquainted with him as they witness his nuanced personality being exposed both in his high and low moments (*ArteSettima*, 2022). Furthermore, the documentary nature of the series also contributes to the establishment of an emotional bond with the viewers who have the privilege of hearing his most intimate confessions in the recurring talking head interviews present in all episodes (Kocela, 2009: 165).

When the time to say goodbye finally comes, Michael leaves both the characters and the spectators to lament his departure. As stressed in *ArteSettima* (2022), it is then that the greatness of Michael Scott emerges. He is a character who is meant to remain in the collective consciousness forever thanks both to his extraordinary simplicity and to the fact that he embodies the soul and beating heart of *The Office*, i.e., a true masterpiece of ‘cringe comedy’.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Family Guy” - The Age of Irreverent Animated TV Shows

4.1. The Advent and Development of Animation on TV

The present Section opens the fourth and last Chapter of this dissertation. The Chapter itself revolves around the popular animated TV series named *Family Guy*. In order to help the readers to navigate through its contents, the current Section provides a short overview of the world of animation. In particular, this Section deals with the evolution of the most prominent techniques defining the medium itself along with its relationship with television (specifically with the comic genre).

For the purposes of this Chapter, offering a historical background describing the socio-cultural context in which *Family Guy* was created was reckoned unnecessary because that period roughly coincides with the one discussed in the previous Chapter, namely the 2000s. Consequently, as mentioned above, the following Subsections will focus on animation instead. Furthermore, to stay on topic, the following overview only concentrates on the history of American animation (with a focus on animated sitcom). Therefore, other examples of cartoons produced outside the US are not going to be covered in this Section, thus excluding such notable traditions as European and Japanese animation (also known as ‘anime’).⁹³

4.1.1. A Brief Account of Animation History

The word ‘animation’, as Perlmutter (2018: xvi) explained, comes from the Latin expression for “‘giving life’ to inanimate objects”, a concept which calls to mind an extremely wide range of possible applications of the same. Early forms of animation, interpreted as moving drawings, already existed in the 19th century but gained more popularity as they were refined by artists such as the American J. Stuart Blackton and the French Emile Cohl (*ibid.*). These artists exploited the so-called ‘stop-animation’ technique which consists in juxtaposing frames of static three-dimensional objects (or

⁹³ Outside of Japan, Japanese animation is commonly referred to using the term ‘anime’ to distinguish it from Western animation. Curiously, Japanese people do not make such distinction (*Lifewire*, 2021).

drawings) shot in sequence to convey the illusion of movement (Stabile and Harrison, 2003: 3).⁹⁴

Another key figure of this early period was undoubtedly American animator Winsor McCay whose greatest legacy is arguably the creation of the “first major ‘cartoon character’”, namely Gertie the Dinosaur whom McCay featured in vaudeville style according to the fashion standards of the time (Perlmutter, 2018: xvi). The success that McCay enjoyed in those years suggested the possibility of transforming animation from a simple attraction to a commercially viable good, an intuition that would change the history of the medium forever. Indeed, the same McCay would then complain about this choice underlying how his “art” had been converted into a “trade”, a conceptual opposition that still echoes in the debate surrounding the industry’s contemporary productions (*ibid.*).

By the late 1920s, Walt Disney and his studio had become the new ‘star’ of the animated industry thanks to several technical innovations and stylistic practices that would result so successful as to become the model to follow for many generations of producers and animators in the world (Stabile and Harrison, 2003: 5). Among these innovations, some of the most noteworthy are the introduction of sound and colour (Perlmutter, 2018: xvi-xvii);⁹⁵ the standardisation of the characters’ habits and appearances; the elimination of graphic excesses in favour of narrative cohesion; the adoption of a Fordist division of tasks; and the constant recursion to ‘cel animation’ (Stabile and Harrison, 2003: 5-6).⁹⁶ The power of this formula became apparent with the success of *Disney’s* first animated feature film entitled *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) (Perlmutter, 2018: xvii).

Stylistically speaking, the animation of the 1920s and early 1930s is generally described as ‘rubber hose’ animation, a style in which characters are portrayed with “flowing arms and legs rather than solid limbs” (Taberham, 2018: 146). With the

⁹⁴ Two early movies using the stop-action technique were *The Haunted Hotel* (1907) by Stuart Blackton and Albert E. Smith, and *Fantasmagorie* (1908) by Emile Cohl (Stabile and Harrison, 2003: 3).

⁹⁵ On this regard, the short *Steamboat Willie* (1928) should be mentioned both because of the introduction of sound and because it features the first appearance of *Disney’s* most famous character, i.e., Mickey Mouse. *Silly Symphonies* (1929-1939) are instead credited as the first series of shorts to introduce colour to cartoons (Perlmutter, 2018: xvi-xvii).

⁹⁶ Cel animation is a technique that allows the animator to superimpose a character over an already drawn background thanks to overlapping cellophane sheets, thus avoiding drawing the entire setting a second time (Stabile and Harrison, 2003: 5).

introduction of sound, this type of animation often appeared in ‘syncretic cartoons’, namely cartoons in which the music takes precedence over the plot and the characters’ movements are synchronised with the track (133).

The emergence of other studios such as *MGM* and *Warner Bros.* captured the industry and the audience of the 1940s and 1950s with their seven-minute-long cartoons (Taberham, 2018: 136). In this period, the syncretic style was being replaced by a new sound mode called ‘zip-crash’ in which music does not dictate the action anymore. Instead, this mode is characterised by sound effects that, albeit “flamboyant and incongruous” (*ibid.*), feel authentic because they match what is happening on screen with fitting sounds. Indeed, they may have been created for comic purposes, but they also contribute to a vague sense of realism (137-138).

Unfortunately, the prosperity that such big studios in the industry experienced at the time thanks to animation was greatly affected by the decision of the Supreme Court of the USA (*Paramount v. United States*, 1948) to limit the economic control that those studios had over the theatres where their films were shown, hence removing an important source of revenue for their productions (Perlmutter, 2018: xvii). As a consequence, since cartoons were relatively costly and did not generate much profit, several studios chose to sacrifice their animation divisions, and as a result, interrupting the creation of new shorts (Mittell, 2003: 35-36).

While Hollywood was abandoning the medium due to the Paramount case, many animators left unemployed decided to migrate towards the ‘small screen’ (i.e., television) in search of a new occupation (Mittell, 2003: 35-36.). However, in the 1950s cartoons were merely considered “low-budget filler” designed for children. Therefore, their televised content solely consisted of either reruns of old Hollywood shorts assorted together to fill the allotted timeslot or unconvincing low-budget original shows with very little quality (38). During this time of economic difficulties for the production of new cartoons, a novel technique called ‘limited animation’ was devised (*ibid.*).⁹⁷ Its use was also justified by the ill-founded supposition that since animation was uniquely aimed at children, they could afford to produce low-quality

⁹⁷ In a nutshell, limited animation allows to minimise the number of motions that an animator needs to draw in a particular scene. This technique was adopted to lower production costs (Mittell, 2003: 38).

content because children, as such, do not possess a refined sense of taste as adults do (41).

Limited animation was not employed in the Fifties exclusively. On the contrary, this technique continued to be adopted in the following decades even becoming a staple of recent made-for-TV animated sitcoms like *The Simpsons* (1989-), *Family Guy* (1999-) and *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020) (Taberham, 2018: 140). On the acoustic side, that visual style is usually accompanied by what the scholar labelled as ‘functional mode’, which is a type of audio setting that prioritises dialogue over other forms of audio outputs like sound effects, ambient noises and soundtrack. By doing so, functional mode downgrades the importance of accessory sonic features while highlighting instead the function of voice and dialogue (141).

In the 1960s, the bold experimentations of the animation studio *Hanna-Barbera*⁹⁸ led to the establishment of a “kidult” audience which included both children and adults and which also allowed cartoons to enter prime-time television for the first time since their debut on the ‘small screen’ (Mittell, 2003: 44). In point of fact, *The Flintstones* (1960-1966) was a revolutionary series because for the first time an animated programme was given the same emphasis as a live-action one on television. *ABC* took the risk to broadcast it in prime-time because the show, although animated, faithfully followed the standards of regular sitcoms and intended to capitalise on the adult audience which the series principally addressed (45).⁹⁹

Other animated shows attempted to replicate the successful formula of *The Flintstones* but to no avail. Indeed, as Mittell (2003: 47) recounted, none of those programmes managed to survive more than one year in prime-time. Such failure is likely due to the inability of those cartoons to attract adult audiences like *The Flintstones* previously succeeded to do (*ibid.*). As a result, animation returned again to be synonymous with entertainment for children. In fact, it was soon relegated to the Saturday morning timeslot, which Perlmutter (2018: xxi) for these reasons described as a “programming ‘ghetto’”. Such unfair consideration of animation would remain unchallenged until the arrival of *The Simpsons* on TV in 1989, but this topic is going to be addressed in the next Subsection.

⁹⁸ The studio was co-founded by two former animators from *MGM*, namely William Hanna and Joseph Barbera (Wells, 2003: 17).

⁹⁹ In fact, *The Flintstones* was inspired by *The Honeymooners* (1955-1956) (Mittell, 2003: 45).

From a technical perspective, the restraints proper of limited animation were finally overcome owing to the advent of ‘CGI’ (computer-generated imagery), an innovative technology that marks a point of separation between analogue and digital worlds. Indeed, by using specific computer programmes, CGI enables to generate and visualise keyframes¹⁰⁰ through the manipulation of data (Crawford, 2003: 113). However, what is perhaps even more surprising is the fact that CGI has finally consented animators to work with three dimensions, a possibility that was previously considered unimaginable when only analogue technology was available (*ibid.*). CGI not only permits to work with three dimensions, but it also simplifies the animation process overall concurrently giving the final product a sense of ‘realism’ which was unattainable until its invention (*ibid.*).

Several animated films realised in CGI by modern studios such as *Pixar* and *DreamWorks* adopt the ‘poetic-authentication’ mode, a sonic style which, despite its creative license, most closely imitates that of a live-action movie, and as a consequence, that of the real world (Taberham, 2018: 143-145). In fact, it allows the overlapping of sounds without sacrificing the quality of the track; it often employs non-caricatured voices; and its background music, like in live-action movies, among other goals serves narrative purposes (*ibid.*). For these reasons, according to Taberham (2018), poetic-authentication is the most realistic sound designs ever used in animation (*ibid.*).

4.1.2. Animated Sitcoms and Adult Animation

Contrary to popular belief, “animation is a medium, not a genre”. This is what several filmmakers and screenwriters including Guillermo del Toro and Brad Bird¹⁰¹ are affirming in order to elevate the medium from the common misconception of being mere entertainment for children (*Comicon.com*, 2021) to a form of art that is capable of encompassing any genre (*Cartoon Brew*, 2015).

As anticipated in the previous Subsection, the history of animation took a drastic turn with the arrival of *The Simpsons* in prime-time television in 1989. Until then, no animated series had survived long enough to be acknowledged a position in prime-

¹⁰⁰ Keyframes are drawings defining the starting and ending points of an animated action (*Oxford Reference*).

¹⁰¹ Guillermo del Toro is a Mexican film director, producer, screenwriter and novelist. Philip Bradley, commonly known as ‘Brad Bird’, is an American director, animator, screenwriter, producer and voice actor (*IMDb*).

time since *The Flintstones* in the Sixties (Cohen, 1997: 197). The most revolutionary aspect of the show created by Matt Groening was the experimentation with controversial topics that were considered unsuitable for a televised programme, especially in a context where cartoons were still regarded as a product for children (*ibid.*). Indeed, the show had no shame in subversively breaking taboo subjects by depicting its characters involved in all sorts of mundane situations that could range from challenging authority to drinking problems, swearing, mocking religion, making explicit sexual allusions, gambling debts and so on (*ibid.*).

By challenging these social conventions and presenting a cartoon like it had never appeared on TV, *The Simpsons* succeeded in attracting an adult audience that grew up with television and who was patiently waiting to find an animated series that was not exclusively aimed at children but that could speak to their mature sensibility as well (Hilton-Morrow and McMahan, 2003: 81). When producing the first season, Groening (the creator of the programme) himself was worried that adults would not give a chance to *The Simpsons* believing “it was just another kiddie show”, but fortunately the sitcom was a success with that demographic, which even constituted about sixty percent of the whole viewership (*ibid.*).

The Simpsons set the foundation for the creation of a long tradition of other animated sitcoms that are still popular nowadays. In addition, as Perlmutter (2018: xxv) argued, despite a state of creative stagnation and decline that the series has experienced in recent years, the show “remains one of the shining achievements of both its network and its genre” making it the most longevous animated programme in the history of American television, thus surpassing both predecessors and contemporaries.

The animated sitcom genre, despite clearly imitating its live-action counterpart, presents some peculiar characteristics that are proper of the animated medium. In this regard, Feltmate (2017: 14) suggested that “animation allows for a much broader and more vivid world than live action. Rather than being limited by casting costs, the creation of sets, [...] animation is limited only by the artists’, writers’, and voice actors’ imaginations and abilities”.

Concerning animated sitcom, *ScreenCraft* (2022) reported some of the features that make this specific genre stand on its own when compared to its live-action counterpart. First, it should be mentioned that animated sitcoms do not need to follow

a stringent structure like most ‘regular ones’ need to. On the contrary, they are usually looser and tend to adapt to the content and idiosyncrasies of the particular show at hand, hence having more creative license. For instance, some choose to employ a ‘cold open’ and a ‘tag’, whereas other do not (*ibid.*).¹⁰²

The formula of an animated sitcom, just like its structure, is not universal but depends on the specific series in question. Nonetheless, despite this fact, a constant element of animated sitcoms that distinguishes them from serial cartoons is their episodic nature (*ScreenCraft*, 2022). Indeed, every episode features a distinct adventure that generally comes to a close during the course of the same instalment. The progression and growth that a character may have experienced during a single episode is then reverted by the end of it, thus portraying ‘static’ characters that are unable to really outgrow themselves. After all, as reported in the same article, the characters are central to the story and not the opposite, as it happens in serial animation instead.

Finally, as in the case of *The Simpsons* discussed above (or perhaps precisely owing to it), another common trait of animated sitcoms is their recursion to adult themes for humorous purposes, a combination that has proved amply successful in the animated domain as well (*ScreenCraft*, 2022). On this subject, according to Zsila et al. (2021), viewers with a compatible sense of humour tend to appreciate animated sitcoms more than other kinds of audiences. In particular, Zsila et al. (2021: 405) found that people with self-enhancing humour are more likely to become attracted to these sorts of shows because these programmes, by displaying absurd situations in comic manners, encourage the spectators to retain a positive attitude even in troublesome real-life situations therefore contributing to their personal wellbeing.¹⁰³

Following the popularity of *The Simpsons*, its sitcom formula in the 1990s sparked the production of several successors such as *Beavis and Butt-Head* (1993-), *King of the Hill* (1997-), *South Park* (1997-), *Family Guy* (1999-) and *Futurama* (1999-2013) (*Vulture*, 2013). In more recent years, the rise of streaming platforms has expanded the market of adult animation to international spectatorships, hence making

¹⁰² A cold open is that section of the episode that occurs before the opening credits and which may or may not be related to the content of the episode itself. A tag is similar to a cold open but takes place around the end of the episode instead (*The Script Lab*).

¹⁰³ Self-enhancing humour allows a person to maintain a positive mindset and a cheerful disposition even in unsettling scenarios (Zsila et al., 2021: 395).

it a global phenomenon (Evershed, 2021: 74). The global reach and possibility to cast to specifically tailored audiences have favoured newer contemporary shows in terms of popularity and recognition of the same (*ibid.*). As a consequence, more and more animated series for adult are expected to be realised for these streaming services in the next years (76).

In this fragmented context encompassing the mutual coexistence of several media distributors (i.e., broadcast, cable and streaming services), some of the animated sitcoms that have resulted most successful are *Archer* (2009-), *Bob's Burgers* (2011-), *Rick and Morty* (2013-), *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020), *F Is for Family* (2015-2021), *Big Mouth* (2017-), *Close Enough* (2020-2022) etc. (77).

4.2. Family Guy

As mentioned in the previous Section, *Family Guy* (1999-) is one of the direct successors of *The Simpsons* (1989-), the ground-breaking animated sitcom that revolutionised the history of television. Nevertheless, the reason why *Family Guy* was preferred in the current analysis to its predecessor is because the former (i.e., *Family Guy*), as Ryan (2015: 5) correctly indicated, is “thematically cruder” than the latter (i.e., *The Simpsons*). This apparently insignificant aspect might in truth result relevant when discussing political correctness in Subsection 4.4.2.

4.2.1. Creation and Development of the Series

As Feltmate (2017: 20) related, the idea behind *Family Guy* dates to the days when a certain Seth MacFarlane, a then unknown student from New England, was still an aspiring cartoonist graduating at the Rhode Island School of Design. In that period, MacFarlane produced an animated short film called *The Life of Larry* (1995) as his graduation project, which he then revisited in a subsequent work entitled *Larry & Steve* (1997) that featured the same characters, respectively an unintelligent man (Larry) and a smart but sarcastic dog (Steve) (*ibid.*). These two would then serve as models for Peter and Brian, two of the main characters of *Family Guy*.

As Booker (2006: 82) recalled, MacFarlane was only twenty-five years old when the program debuted. Despite being so young,¹⁰⁴ he had already worked for prestigious studios such as *Hanna-Barbera* and *Walt Disney* before directing *Family Guy* (*ibid.*). The pilot of the show originally aired on *Fox* on January 31, 1999, right after the Super Bowl XXXIII, a timeslot which was supposedly contended by another tremendously popular series, namely *The Simpsons* (Klosterman Martin, 2005: 5). The fact that *Family Guy* managed to convince *Fox* executives to air its pilot instead of an episode of an already successfully established program like *The Simpsons* suggests that the series was revolutionary and worth investing on.

However, unfortunately *Family Guy* initially suffered an unlucky programming schedule. Indeed, after a first trial season comprised of only seven episodes, the second one, which was supposed to establish the series by exploiting the length of a full season, was frequently moved to different days and times, often even having to compete against other hits of the network (Booker, 2006: 82). As a result, *Fox* announced that the programme was going to be cancelled after that season. A few months later, the network decided to revive it for a third season over the fans' insinences. However, by failing once more to provide an appropriate timeslot, the series was cancelled again in 2002 (*ibid.*). Reruns on *Adult Swim*¹⁰⁵ and success with DVD sales spurred a new revival of the show which made its third debut in 2005 remaining on air ever since (Perlmutter, 2018: 192).

The renewed popularity of *Family Guy* granted the programme numerous accolades including a nomination for Outstanding Comedy Series at the 2009 Emmy Awards, a nomination which had not been made for an animated series since *The Flintstones* (Perlmutter, 2018: 192). Despite its growing popularity, Perlmutter (2018: 191) argued that, after its revival in 2005, the show began to suffer a steady decline in quality probably due to MacFarlane's reduced involvement in the production of the programme. Nevertheless, with its twenty seasons and 389 episodes already on air, *Family Guy* remains among the longest and most successful TV shows on the network.

¹⁰⁴ Seth MacFarlane is credited as the youngest-ever executive producer (Goodale (1999: 18, cit. in Klosterman Martin, 2005: 5)).

¹⁰⁵ *Adult Swim* is a night-time programming block airing on the same channel as *Cartoon Network*. It was created to cater for an adult audience (*The New York Times*, 2021).

In fact, the series recently resumed to air with season twenty-one which premiered on September 25, 2022 (*Alpha News Call*, 2022).¹⁰⁶

Seth MacFarlane also produced a spin-off of *Family Guy* called *The Cleveland Show* (2009-2013) based on a family of African American people who are secondary characters in *Family Guy*. As Perlmutter (2018: 128) reported, the programme was cancelled after a few seasons for lack of originality because it “was [expectedly] doomed to repeat the formula of its predecessor”. In point of fact, other than a few effectively amusing episodes, *The Cleveland Show* failed to live to its expectations. As a consequence, after its cancellation the characters returned to their normal roles in the main series (*ibid.*). Interestingly, as Tredy (2013: 33) pointed out, a parallelism can be found between *The Jeffersons* and *The Cleveland Show* because just like the former features an African American family who used to star in the main series before obtaining its own spin-off, so does the latter.¹⁰⁷

4.2.2. Characters and Themes

The show is set in the fictional town of Quahog,¹⁰⁸ more precisely in the suburbs of Providence (Rhode Island), a fact which is confirmed by the skyline of the city that is visible in most episodes from the establishing shot of the Griffin house (Booker, 2006: 86).

The protagonists of this animated sitcom are the members of the Griffin family. The title character, Peter Griffin (voiced by MacFarlane),¹⁰⁹ is an overweight childish feeble-minded working-class buffoon who has an Irish Catholic background (Pinsky, 2007: 233). Although he is supposed to be the breadwinner in the house, he is often unemployed and causes troubles to the rest of the family. His main occupations have included working as a safety inspector at a local toy factory, fishing on a personal boat

¹⁰⁶ Season 21 comprises 23 new episodes which are currently released on a weekly basis (*Dual Shockers*, 2022).

¹⁰⁷ Indeed, as discussed in **Chapter Two**, *The Jeffersons* is a spin-off of *All in the Family*, whereas *The Cleveland Show* is a spin-off of *Family Guy*.

¹⁰⁸ The name of the town is among the several cultural references to Rhode Island, state where, as discussed in the previous Subsection, MacFarlane himself lived during his studies. In particular, the name Quahog originates from a kind of clam typical of Rhode Island, hence the various references to clams in the series (Booker, 2006: 86).

¹⁰⁹ MacFarlane voices numerous characters in the programme other than Peter Griffin, some are part of the Griffin family (Stewie and Brian), others are supporting characters (Quagmire, Tom Tucker...) (*Behind the Voice Actors*).

and currently working in the shipping department of a brewery in Quahog (*Showbiz CheatSheet*, 2014). Peter has also covered other minor mansions in isolated episodes mainly depicted for humorous purposes (*IGN*, 2012).

Peter's wife, Lois Griffin (Alex Bornstein), is a stay-at-home mother who also gives piano lessons as a part-time job. She is the daughter of a wealthy Protestant family (Pinsky, 2007: 233). Although at first glance she seems to embody the stereotype of the ideal mother, in reality as Anton (2016: 34) pointed out, her personality is more nuanced as it includes traits that make her a rather unconventional maternal figure. For instance, she is a very libidinous woman (a nymphomaniac who enjoys sadomasochism) seldom portrayed as a drug user who often even lacks maternal instincts (*ibid.*). Despite these negative traits, Lois acts as a 'voice of reason' in the Griffin family as she tries to put some good sense into her husband whenever one of his antics causes troubles to the family or the town .

Peter and Lois have three children, the eldest being their 16-year-old daughter, Meg (Mila Kunis since season two), an insecure teenager who is unpopular at school as she seems unable to make any friends (Booker, 2006: 83). As the series progresses, Meg becomes a hated character who is constantly mistreated by both family and acquaintances. In this regard, particularly complicated is the relationship with her father which is analysed in detail by Ryan (2015). As a matter of fact, as the scholar illustrated, Peter is most abusive towards Meg. He maltreats her so often and so roughly that the audience comes to wonder whether he loves her at all. An example of this behaviour is the catchphrase "Shut up Meg" which is repeated so many times that it even has a dedicated page on *Urban Dictionary*, the popular website defining slang expressions (Ryan, 2015: 76).

The second oldest child of the couple is Chris (Seth Green), a 13-year-old boy who is seemingly a miniature of his father since, like Peter, he is obese and overly unintelligent (Booker, 2006: 83). Moreover, as Klosterman Martin (2005: 5) expressed, he can be characterised as "oblivious to almost everything, yet [as a person who] suffers through the pangs of puberty".

The youngest child of the Griffin family is Stewie (MacFarlane), a diabolic infant who, especially in the early seasons, dreams about matricide and world domination (Booker, 2006: 84). Despite being a toddler, Stewie is a genius capable of

devising advanced weapons and powerful machines. In addition, he has a rich vocabulary too which is exalted by a somewhat snobby British accent. His design makes him most recognisable because of his baseball-shaped head (*ibid.*). The contradictory aspect of Stewie's personality is that despite being a diabolic genius, he still seldom behaves like an infant. Indeed, he wears a diaper, he plays with a teddy bear and finds a children's TV series as the *Teletubbies* (1997-2001) strongly alluring (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, according to an interview with MacFarlane contained in *The Advocate* (2008, cit. in Johnson, 2010: 266), this character was greatly blandished over the seasons. As a result, he abandoned his evil plans of world domination in favour of exploring an even more controversial aspect of his personality (especially considering his young age), namely his sexual identity (*ibid.*):

[Stewie] originally began as this diabolical villain, but then we delved into the idea of his confused sexuality. We all feel that Stewie is almost certainly gay, and he's in the process of figuring it out for himself... we treat him oftentimes as if we were writing a gay character.

The last member of the family is Brian (MacFarlane), a highly intelligent anthropomorphic talking dog who attended Brown University, enjoys classical music and creative writing (Booker, 2006: 84). Despite being a dog, Brian has all the virtues and vices of a real human being, for example he is portrayed as addicted to alcohol (Zenor, 2014: 24). Moreover, like Lois, he is considered a voice of reason in the family as he tries to help Peter when he is in trouble (*ibid.*). In addition, Brian, like Stewie, reveals a contradictory personality because, despite behaving as a normal human being, he remains a dog and sometimes acts accordingly. For instance, he likes to sniff other dogs' bottom, he drags his own behind on the carpet and pees on the rug (Booker, 2006: 84).

Other recurring supporting characters are Peter's friends and neighbours, i.e., Quagmire, Cleveland and Joe. Glenn Quagmire (MacFarlane) is the sex-craved bachelor friend whose official job is being a pilot but whose main dedication is engaging in depraved sexual activities with all sorts of attractive young women (Booker, 2006: 85). Cleveland Brown (Mike Henry until season 19) is a mild-

mannered African American Deli owner (later a postman) who is famous for his calm and composed attitude (*ibid.*). The third of the trio, Joe Swanson (Patrick Warburton), is a paraplegic police officer who was injured several years earlier while allegedly trying to stop the Grinch from stealing Christmas.¹¹⁰ Despite being forced to a wheelchair, he is a rather competent man so much so that Peter initially even envies his physical prowess (*ibid.*).

Being an animated sitcom, the plot of *Family Guy* is not linear but develops and concludes itself during the course of each single instalment. In fact, every episode revolves around an absurd new adventure where a given problem interrupts the ordinary life of the family and requires its members to address it (Klosterman Martin, 2005: 17). Moreover, some of the characters may also be involved in secondary narratives that might be unrelated to the main happening of the episode but are presented as equally pressing (*ibid.*).

Owing to its episodic nature, the show has already managed to cover a myriad of controversial topics (e.g., violence and sex) in a humorous manner therefore eventually even being labelled as an ‘equal opportunity offender’. Indeed, as *Collider* (2022) reported, the series has already offended “almost every religion, ethnic group, gender, disease sufferer, the LGBTQ+ community, and both sides of the political spectrum, just to name a few”. However, as will be discussed in Subsection 4.4.1., this justification is not enough to quell the many criticisms that the programme continues to receive for its supposed insensitivity. One of these criticisms is for instance the fact that *Family Guy* jokes about all sorts of issues without making distinctions, as if those matters shared the same degree of seriousness (Ryan, 2015: 9).

4.2.3. Humour and Quirks

According to Ryan (2015: 13), *Family Guy* is a programme that employs satire to challenge the authority of traditional institutions like family by offering a subversive representation of the same. More specifically, as the scholar (21) continued, the type of humour adopted by the show is not exclusively satirical because that would necessitate a social purpose that the jokes in *Family Guy* not always possess. Instead,

¹¹⁰ The Grinch is a reference to the main character in Dr Seuss’s story *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* (1957), a famous children’s book about a crochety human-like beast who initially hates Christmas then changes his mind and understands the spirit of the holiday (*Smithsonian Magazine*, 2020).

it is a mix of other comic styles such as parody, lampoon and burlesque which, contrarily to satire, exist for their own sake and do not need to carry any moral significance (16).

Nonetheless, to discuss humour in *Family Guy* without mentioning the series' most relevant quirk would be both unjust and reductive. In fact, the narrative device that the programme most often employs to generate humour does not rely on the contingent situation in which the characters are placed but depends instead on non-sequitur scenes presented in the form of flashbacks, narrative digressions and different sorts of cutaways that are filled with pop-culture references (Marx, 2013: 178). *Family Guy* adopts this narrative device not only for the intrinsic comic value added by the sudden insertion of a bizarre cutaway gag, but also because it rewards the viewers who possess the same level of knowledge in the field of popular culture as the writers of the series do. In fact, as Crawford (2009: 63) claimed, the ability to recognise a certain obscure reference gives pleasure and satisfaction to the knowledgeable viewer of the programme while simultaneously contributing to create a loyal fandom of TV geeks.

Interestingly, *Family Guy* presents another curious quirk that is partially related to the one concerning non-sequitur jokes. Indeed, as Crawford (2009: 57) argued, the series, by offering a balanced mix between the realism proper of the sitcom format and the magical elements typical of animation, attains a state that can be de facto compared to the peculiar literary genre known as 'magical realism'.¹¹¹ However, it might be wondered how the scholar arrived at a similar conclusion. It should not be surprising if a cartoon like *Family Guy* presents fantastical elements because animated shows have always challenged the rules governing the physical world (53). Nonetheless, it ought to be noted that several animated programmes since *The Simpsons* have attempted to come closer to the realm of reality by trying to minimise the interference of supernatural factors in their stories (*ibid.*).¹¹²

Family Guy instead, while providing an accurate portrayal of the real world (e.g., offering an authentic display of Rhode Island culture (Crawford, 2009: 60)), does not refrain from exhibiting its fantastical aspects; on the contrary, it exalts them. In fact,

¹¹¹ Magical realism is a literary genre (mainly connected to Latin America) in which fantastic and supernatural elements are inserted into an otherwise realistic fictional narrative (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

¹¹² This fact is true except for the brief parathesis of *The Flintstones*, a show that partly moved towards realism thirty years in advance compared to *The Simpsons* (Crawford, 2009: 53).

considering the characters alone, Brian and Stewie are two perfect examples of this stylistic choice. The former is an intelligent anthropomorphic dog who behaves just like a regular human being. He is able to walk on two legs, he can drive a car and most importantly he can talk (61). The latter is a genius infant who speaks with an eloquent British accent and designs sophisticated machines with which he wishes to conquer the world (*ibid.*). Crawford (2009) indicated that the series presents conflicting evidence regarding Stewie. Fans speculate whether adults understand his rants or if they simply dismiss them as baby talk (*ibid.*). Anyway, since such advanced behaviours do not surprise other characters in the show, it could be argued that normalising these attitudes inevitably contravenes the overall realism of the programme.

It is nevertheless through the non-sequitur sequences that the show truly achieves magical realism. As a matter of fact, by means of the cutaway gags, characters in Family Guy are able to defy the rules of space, time and causality (Crawford, 2009: 62). Such brief diversions allow the programme to introduce absurd situations that would normally never occur, but which concurrently have no impact on the main narrative. Peter for instance can appear in places and eras that are completely detached from his reality, often beyond the limit of physical plausibility (*ibid.*). Moreover, in cutaway scenes characters can gravely injure themselves (and even die) without any repercussions to their real selves, in fact in the next sequence they appear to be totally fine.¹¹³

Lastly, Family Guy makes use of magical realism whenever mythical or imaginary characters (mostly taken from popular culture and introduced through non-sequiturs) are shown effortlessly capable of interacting with regular human beings. In this regard, a rather controversial use of this strategy is when the programme includes deities like God and Jesus who are treated like any other cameo appearances that intrude on the everyday life of the Griffins (Crawford, 2009: 59).

Even though the cutaway gags are a trademark of Family Guy's comedy, the show has been criticised for its frequent recursion because, as DeRochi (2008: 45) advanced, the randomness of the non-sequitur sequences disrupts the cohesion of the

¹¹³ For example, in a cutaway scene, Peter opens the emergency exit inside the cabin of an airplane which causes him to fall outboard and probably die (Crawford, 2009: 59).

narrative which consequently results impoverished. A similar comment was made by Trey Parker, co-creator of *South Park*, who attacked Family Guy for “continually chasing gags” and “never arising to ‘art’” (37). Such criticism coming from the creators of South Park makes part of a larger teasing confrontation between various animated sitcoms also reproduced in their respective shows in the form of intertextuality.

As a matter of fact, this phenomenon was studied by Anton (2016) who analysed how *The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *Family Guy* interacted with each other within their own series. With reference to *South Park* and *Family Guy*, it is interesting to report the words of Cartman, one of the main characters of *South Park*. During an episode called *Cartoon Wars I*, Cartman becomes infuriated after being compared to *Family Guy* by his friend Kyle (37). The authors use this character to mouth their criticism of the rival show, hence having him exclaim: “I am NOTHING like *Family Guy*! When I make jokes, they are inherent to a story! Deep, situational and emotional jokes based on what is relevant and has a POINT! Not just one interchangeable joke after another!!” (*ibid.*). This is another provocative comment meant to attack the cutaway gags, *Family Guy*’s most distinctive comic feature.

Nevertheless, criticisms to *Family Guy* did not only come from *South Park* and did not just concern cutaways. In point of fact, Groening, the mind behind *The Simpsons*, often gave negative judgments of MacFarlane’s creation even including direct accusations of plagiarism in some episodes of his show (Anton, 2016: 40). In one of such episodes of *The Simpsons* entitled *The Italian Bob*, a picture of Peter Griffin appears inside a book about international criminals under the label ‘Plagiarismo’ followed by another picture, that of Stan Smith,¹¹⁴ accused of ‘Plagiarismo di Plagiarismo’ (40-41).¹¹⁵ In this case, it is evident how Groening chooses to employ intertextuality as a satirical measure to attack his rival and his programmes.

MacFarlane on his part did not feel too bitter about the criticisms. Indeed, concerning *South Park*’s attacks on *Family Guy*’s cutaway gags, he stated in an

¹¹⁴ Stan Smith is the title character of *American Dad!* (2005-), which is another animated sitcom created by Seth MacFarlane (Anton, 2016: 40).

¹¹⁵ The label ‘Plagiarismo di Plagiarismo’ can be translated as plagiarism of plagiarism to indicate a product (*American Dad!*) that is the unauthorised copy of another illicit copy (*Family Guy*).

interview that, from that moment, whenever he would have needed to insert a non-sequitur sequence in the show, he would have called it a manatee joke (Anton, 2016: 38).¹¹⁶ Whereas, regarding the relationship between his series and *The Simpsons*, Anton (2016: 41) reported that *Family Guy* made several references to Groening's programme in many of its instalments even producing a collaborative crossover episode together. This fact displays how a strategy like intertextuality can serve the useful function of connecting different programmes, their creators and fandoms at a meta-narrative level.

4.3. *Death Has a Shadow*

This Section presents a CDA and visual analysis of the pilot episode of *Family Guy* entitled *Death Has a Shadow* which, as mentioned in the previous Section, originally aired on January 31, 1999, after the Super Bowl XXXIII. For the sake of the present analysis, three thematic cores will be examined using both lines and screenshots taken directly from the instalment. Before the analysis itself, a detailed summary of the episode devised after watching the same will be provided as well.

4.3.1. Summary

After a cold open scene in which the family is reunited while watching TV on the couch, the opening theme begins to play. In the first scene after the theme, Peter tells the family that he is invited to a bachelor party. However, since Lois is worried, he promises her that he would not drink any alcoholic beverage. At the party, Peter inevitably breaks the promise by letting himself be easily persuaded by his friends. The situation worsens when, realising that the pornographic movie that they were watching had been taped over by Chris for a history class project, the group agrees to keep drinking until the Statue of Liberty shown in the taped over documentary becomes attractive. As a result, in the next scene, Peter wakes up completely drunk on the kitchen table of his house while the family is having breakfast.

Still affected by drunkenness, Peter falls asleep at work consequently neglecting his duty, namely preventing dangerous toys to enter the market. Consequently, he loses

¹¹⁶ A manatee is a marine mammal. It was mentioned in *South Park* as an example to explain how MacFarlane chooses his ideas for the cutaways. According to *South Park*, like a manatee, MacFarlane supposedly takes random idea balls from an aquarium and releases them down a tube (Anton, 2016: 38).

the job after a news report communicates that dangerous toys have indeed reached children's hands. In order to avoid being scolded by Lois who had wisely warned him about not drinking at the party, he convinces the rest of the family to lie to her and to not inform her that he had been discharged.

At first, Peter attempts to find new employment but to no avail. Therefore, he decides to go to the welfare office where, over a pretentious physical anomaly, he receives special welfare assistance. However, because of an oversight on part of the government, he eventually obtains a disproportionate amount of money which Peter uses to conduct a luxurious life.

One day, as Lois discovers the truth about the family's newly found wealth, she angrily confronts her husband who, in order to be forgiven, reluctantly chooses to return the money to the taxpayers. Nevertheless, to make the act more grandiose, he goes to the football stadium where the Super Bowl XXXIII is currently held. On the site, he pours cash from a blimp with his anthropomorphic dog Brian for which they are eventually arrested and detained.

Soon after this fact, Peter is set to testify at his trial in court. Because of the seriousness of Peter's crime and his poor justifications, the judge initially sentences him to two years in prison. However, he then changes his mind after noticing that Peter has a baby (Stewie), thus admitting that it would be unjudgmental to keep a toddler away from his father for such a long period. In actuality, it is hinted that the true reason for the judge's reconsideration is due to Stewie pointing a mind-controlling gun-shaped weapon at him which also persuades the judge to grant Peter his job back.

At the end of the episode, the family is once again reunited in the living room in front of the TV. Lois is glad that the trouble has been solved and that Peter has safely returned home. As Meg sighs saying that she will miss being rich, her father begins to practice new claims for other successful welfare frauds.

4.3.2. A Bad Family Example

Despite the fact that *Family Guy* is an animated sitcom mainly aimed at adults, it has received numerous criticisms from associations such as the Parents Television Council (PTC), a group that aims to create a safe environment for families by protecting children from violence, nudity and obscenity present in the media (Ryan, 2015: 7). The

PTC attacked Family Guy because it believed that exposing young audiences to such subversive series could negatively affect their growth (*ibid.*).

Whether the association is acting rightfully to protect children's sensibilities or is attempting to operate some sort of censorship is not relevant in the current discussion. It is instead interesting to observe on what grounds the programme was attacked, namely the fact that Family Guy is not a show for families, or better yet, that it sets a 'bad family example'. This argument is not devoid of reason. In point of fact, *Death Has a Shadow* contains several instances of unhealthy behaviours that either convey a negative example to children in real life (primarily due to Stewie's actions) or even to the fictional ones in the Griffin's household (principally because of Peter's antics).

As discussed in the previous Section, albeit still a baby, Stewie is a diabolical genius, fact that appears evident since the pilot. Indeed, in the first scene after the opening theme he is shown working on a dangerous gun-shaped weapon that he refers to as a "mind-control device". However, the reason why the infant is analysed in this Subsection has little to do with his acumen or precocity, it regards instead his violent disposition which he specifically exhibits towards his mother Lois. Indeed, since the first scenes, Stewie establishes himself as a sort of a movie villain who is obsessed with world domination, revenge and hatred for his mother.

In the scene mentioned above, when Lois says that toys are not allowed at the table and seizes the mind-control device from the baby, Stewie replies with an aggressive tone uttering: "[d]amn you, vile woman! You've impeded my work since the day I escaped from your wretched womb". Lois seems to understand her baby because, despite not scolding him for his offensive words, she makes a comment inherent with Stewie's birth, the same topic that he mentioned in the previous sentence (LOIS: "Oh, don't pout, honey. You know, when you were born the doctor said you were the happiest looking baby he's ever seen").

If Lois can indeed understand what Stewie says, as the episode seems to suggest, her composed reaction to his rude and hostile demeanour is poorly matched. It appears as though she dismissed her child's sentences as baby talk only mildly reproaching the infant when he clearly crosses the line. As a matter of fact, upon another denied request to have his 'toy' returned to him, Stewie threatens his mother by enunciating: "[m]ark

my words: when you least expect it, your uppance will come!”¹¹⁷ to which in this case Lois does not answer.

For taking the device away from him, Stewie tries several times to murder his mother during this episode but to no avail (e.g., breaking one of her chair legs, shooting at her with a laser gun concealed inside a tuna sandwich, throwing arrows, offering her a box full of hand grenades...). Nevertheless, Lois on her part does not reprimand the baby for attempting to assassinate her. Only in the case of the flying arrows she scolds him simply because he was disturbing her while she was busy on the phone (LOIS: “Stewie, why don't you play in the other room?”). As usual Stewie replies aggressively and exclaims: “[w]hy don't you burn in hell?” while holding a crossbow. Only then, his mother admonishes him for using a foul language (LOIS: “Well, no dessert for you, young man”). However, even in this situation, the reproach is weak and inadequate to sanction the seriousness of the threat.

Therefore, supposing that Lois and other adults can de facto understand Stewie and that the examples provided above constitute a systematic response to his aggressive behaviour and not isolated cases, it can be surmised that the relationship between Lois and her child is intentionally crafted in a paradoxical manner for the sake of humour. In fact, the implausibility of these scenarios only holds in the realm of animated comedy since the baby's attitude would otherwise be difficult to believe and/or tolerate. Yet, Stewie's violent demeanour and the absence of real repercussions might alarm parents who may be concerned about their children trying to imitate what they see on TV.

Stewie is a threat not only to his mother Lois, but to whomever interferes with him. In the pilot for instance, he is portrayed while threatening the judge with his mind-control device because, as an infant, he needs his parents for sustenance and cannot therefore have them imprisoned. In this regard, in *Figure 25* and *Figure 26* it is possible to observe a parallelism between two distinct scenes in which, by pointing his weapon, the baby intends to bend adults who embody a certain kind of authority (respectively parenthood and the law) to his will.

¹¹⁷ The word ‘uppance’ by itself does not mean anything. Perhaps, what Stewie meant was ‘comeuppance’, i.e., a just retribution for a wrongdoing (*Collins Dictionary*).



Figure 25: Pointing the 'Device' at Lois



Figure 26: Pointing the 'Device' at the Judge

Another character who has a rather negative influence on young audiences is Peter, the patriarch of the family. Indeed, he sets a bad example of how a father should behave multiple times in this episode alone.

First, as mentioned in the summary of the episode, he disobeys Lois and drinks with his friends until becoming drunk at the bachelor party. The following morning, the family finds him lying on the kitchen table still completely drunk and unable to move. As Lois reveals, the night before Peter consumed thirty-seven beers which, according to Chris, is a “new family record”. The adolescent praises his father for setting such a high standard (CHRIS: “Way to raise the bar, dad”), hence hinting that the boy himself will one day join that peculiar family competition in the attempt of surpassing the patriarch, which the adolescent admits will be not easy to accomplish. Thus, following Peter’s example, Chris risks becoming an alcoholic like his father.

Second, when Peter loses his job at the toy factory for negligence, he persuades his children and his talking dog Brian to withhold that piece of information from Lois. He allegedly does so in order not to worry her, but in truth he later admits being afraid to be scolded for something which she explicitly recommended not doing (i.e., drinking at the bachelor party). By asking his children to lie to their mother, Peter is compromising the spirit of openness that should always be present among all members of a healthy and functional family. Furthermore, he is abusing his role as a father since he is forcing the children, who are in a subordinate position, to pledge their allegiance to only one parent, hence implicitly discrediting the other.

Third, after becoming rich due to the involuntary welfare fraud that the family benefitted from, Peter seems to encourage the children to believe that money can buy happiness and can fix all problems. In point of fact, he pays for Meg’s long-awaited

lip injections and refurnishes the house with all sorts of luxurious goods. The only person who is dissatisfied is obviously Lois who, as *Figure 27* depicts, folds her arms in indignation because Peter is misusing government funds financed by the American taxpayers and most importantly because he and the rest of the family have lied to her. The picture also shows Peter driving a motorboat in the new moat that surrounds the house. Meg can also be spotted near the bottom-left corner of the picture while swimming in the water enjoying her collagen-injected lips.

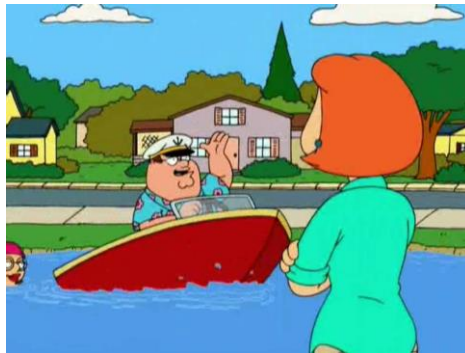


Figure 27: It's All about Money

The whole programme thus sets a ‘bad family example’ because it teaches immoral lessons that contravene social standards of ethics. However, it is curious to notice an apparent contradiction between the lyrics of the opening theme of the show and the conclusion that was just drawn. In fact, the song complains about “violence in movies and sex on TV” and wonders “where those good old-fashioned values [are] ... on which we used to rely”. These lines seem to condemn the moral decay of contemporary society while simultaneously expressing longing for a departed past that was instead characterised by moral rectitude. These concepts should not be new to the reader because, as *Figure 28* illustrates, *Family Guy*’s theme song faithfully imitates that of another TV show analysed in this work, namely *All in the Family*’s. As a matter of fact, Peter and Lois are sitting in front of the piano while happily singing the theme together exactly like Archie and Edith did in the song *Those Were the Days*. Even the direction of the characters’ gazes is similar to the live-action counterpart, as shown in *Figure 28*.



Figure 28: *Those Good Old-Fashioned Values...*

The lyrics of the two series' themes are quite similar too as they discuss moral decline and nostalgia for a greater past. The difference is that if Archie (and partly Edith) lived following “those good old-fashioned values”, the Griffins do not. On the contrary, they conduct in the exact opposite manner.¹¹⁸ Therefore, it can be stated confidently enough that despite what the initial lines of its opening theme are about, *Family Guy* is not a family-friendly programme.

4.3.3. Macho Guy

As a troublesome unintelligent bigot, it should not be surprising that Peter Griffin is also depicted as a sexist male chauvinist. In fact, just in the episode at hand (*Death Has a Shadow*), he displays in multiple occasions to be quite insensitive towards women.

Proceeding chronologically, he first utters: “I am the man of the house. And as the man, I order you to give me permission to go to this party”. This statement expresses Peter’s male chauvinist belief according to which, women are inferior to men and as such, by being the man of the family, Peter can afford to “order” Lois to do his bidding. However, ironically that statement also implies a seemingly opposite conviction, namely the fact that despite husbands are formally in command, they are in truth subjugated by their wives who possess the actual authority in the house. The previous statement hence employs irony to present the clash between the two powers who control the household: Peter’s hegemonic role as the man of the house is set

¹¹⁸ For instance, as discussed in Subsection 4.2.2., concepts like violence and sex are quite recurring themes in the show.

against the authority of the wife. The former orders the latter to grant permission to the former to do something. It is a logical paradox devised for the sake of humour.

A few scenes later, Peter indeed goes to the bachelor party, which is the epitome of macho culture. On the site, he and his friends decide to watch a pornographic movie brought for the occasion by Peter himself which is called *Assablanca*.¹¹⁹ However, the crowd is displeased to discover that that movie must have been taped over by Chris for a history class project, thus becoming a documentary film about the Statue of Liberty instead.

If communally watching a pornographic film at a bachelor party can already be considered the quintessence of machismo, *Family Guy* pushes the boundaries even further by showing our protagonist and his male friends engaging in a drinking game with the sole purpose of reaching a sufficient level of alcohol intoxication so that even an inanimate object can become sexually attractive to them. Indeed, the Statue of Liberty, while de facto possessing feminine attributes, is not a woman and ought not to be sexualised. It is a symbol that represents one of the founding values of the American society (i.e., freedom) (*Statue of Liberty Tour*), a symbol which has been sullied by the carnal desire of a group of sex-starved men.



Figure 29: "We're gonna drink until she's hot"



Figure 30: "Apology accepted"

Figure 29 represents the compulsiveness of the men's drinking activity which is exacerbated by their strong sexual desire. These two elements are indissoluble components of macho culture. The people in the figure look as if hypnotised by television. They are all synchronised in their drinking motions as though they were a

¹¹⁹ The movie is clearly a parody of the renown classic film *Casablanca* (1942) by Michael Curtiz (IMDb).

single person. This element was perhaps intentionally inserted to highlight the communal aspect of the activity which compares the participant to a pack of famished (or in this case thirsty) wolves.

Figure 30 instead shows Peter laying on the kitchen table while the family is having breakfast. Lois scolds him for breaking the promise he had made about not drinking at the bachelor party. However, Peter justifies himself saying that “nothing bad happened” because deciding to take a taxi he managed to return home safely, thus avoiding driving. He also justifies the choice of sleeping on the table as a kind precaution taken in order not to awake her upon his return. As Lois reluctantly accepts his justifications, Peter exclaims: “[a]pology accepted [...] I'm going to work. Somebody's gotta put food on this table”. By saying so, Peter not only feigns innocence but also gains the upper hand by appearing as the rightful party in the argument with his wife. Indeed, it seems as if Lois is the one who needs to apologise because she lacked trust in her husband, after all “nothing bad happened”. In reality, in this situation Peter is to blame because he not only broke the promise with Lois and returned home completely drunk, but due to his drunkenness he will soon lose his job too. Furthermore, when he utters that he is going to work because “[s]omebody's gotta put food on the table”, Peter tries to stress his role as the breadwinner in the house, thus reinforcing his authority. However, it is obvious that in his current state he is highly incapacitated and cannot exercise his role. In fact, Peter is unable to stand and falls stiffly from a fully set table, which sarcastically is adorned with the food that the patriarch is supposed to bring home.

When Peter does lose his job for negligence, he is afraid to confront Lois because he knows that she was right when she told him not to drink at the party. He eventually decides to lie to her following the advice of his evil self which, as

Figure 31 shows, is stereotypically represented as a devil appearing on one of his shoulders.¹²⁰ The devil suggests that Peter should lie to his wife because “[i]t's okay to lie to women. They're not people like us”, thus expressing a sexist consideration that Peter subconsciously agrees with. At first, he is not ready to admit

¹²⁰ A common trope in fiction is to represent the internal conflict of a given character by showing two miniatures of the same (usually an angel and a devil) who stand on each of the character's shoulders and give them good and bad suggestions that either come from the conscience or from temptation (*Definitions*).

it to himself because he asks the devil where “the other guy” (i.e., the angel) is to hear a different opinion on the matter. However, the other party cannot present himself to Peter as he is comically stuck in a traffic congestion. Peter hence sides with the devil and convinces the children to lie to Lois as discussed in the previous Subsection.



Figure 31: Peter's Shoulder Devil

Peter justifies his decision to the children telling them that he does not want their mother to worry unnecessarily. Nevertheless, he also adds that he is concerned about telling her because he does not want to hear: “I told you so” and to admit that “[he] can’t provide for [his] family [and] [t]hat she’s always right”. Peter hence displays his insecurity as another feature of the so-called ‘toxic masculinity’ that was discussed in **Chapter Two**. He does not want to admit to Lois that she is right because doing so would expose the weakness of his fragile masculinity to his wife. Instead, he prefers to deceive her even at the cost of hurting her feelings.

In this regard, when Peter does attempt to confront Lois on the matter, instead of telling her the truth, he finds an excuse for reducing the family’s food budget. Indeed, he tells her that she is “getting kind of fat”. As *Figure 32* illustrates, Lois looks extremely irritated at her husband’s remark as she perceives his statement as outrageous and hypocritical. As a matter of fact, Lois is putting considerable effort in trying to keep fit, as opposed to Peter’s complete disregard for his physical appearance (LOIS: “Peter, I do my Jane Fonda workout tape three times a week. When was the last time you saw your toes?”)



Figure 32: Peter Tells Lois That She Is Getting Fat

Once again Peter exhibits little to no sensitivity concerning his wife's feelings which he undoubtedly hurt with his ridiculous 'fattist' observation. This Subsection seems to indicate that Peter is so insecure that he would blame anyone, including his wife, before admitting his mistakes. This, as already observed, is the typical attitude of a 'macho guy' who is struggling to hide his weakness in order to retain a favourable status quo.

One last example about Peter mistaking how to the properly conduct towards his wife is given soon after the family receive the first welfare check. In fact, Peter exclaims that he can finally treat Lois like a queen as she rightfully deserves. However, instead of beginning to be more considerate and respectful towards his wife, Peter takes the statement literally and reveals having hired a personal jester to entertain Lois.¹²¹ Of course, this is simply a joke that plays on the double entendre behind the meaning of 'treating someone like a king or a queen'. Nonetheless, this scene also confirms Peter's poor social intelligence as he seems unable to understand what makes his wife happy.

4.3.4. Stereotypes and Irreverent Humour

The third and last Subsection in the current analysis regards the various instances in which *Death Has a Shadow* relies on stereotypes and other forms of irreverent humour for the sake of comedy. Most of the examples examined here are cutaway scenes or other short non-sequitur sequences that are completely unrelated to the main plot of

¹²¹ The jester is supposed to be a parodic reference to real life stand-up comedian Jerry Seinfeld (Klosterman Martin, 2005: 47).

the episode, fact which confirms the will of the writers to generate comedy through this specific device, as discussed in Subsection 4.2.3.

In particular, the episode deals with numerous sensitive issues tackled in a humorous manner including racism, ethnic stereotypes, blasphemy, tragic historical events, homosexuality, rape, paedophilia and disability. It should also be noted that, to a certain extent, Peter is involved in practically all these scenarios either participating in or somehow triggering the controversial scene.



Figure 33: One of Jemima's Witnesses

Regarding racism, Peter claims that their neighbourhood is not as “crummy” as that of *The Brady Bunch* which supposedly accommodates “robbers, thugs [and] drug dealers”. Indeed, according to Peter, the worst the Griffins have in their neighbourhood is “Jemima’s Witnesses”, a peculiar fusion between Jehovah’s Witnesses and Aunt Jemima.¹²²

As *Figure 33* illustrates, *Family Guy*’s representation of Jemima’s Witnesses highlights the negative aspects of both the popular brand of pancake mix and syrups and Jehovah’s Witnesses. In fact, the woman in the picture is a clear stereotyped image of a black ‘mammy’ who, similarly to a Jehovah’s Witness, goes from house to house and annoys her neighbours, in this case not trying to convert them to her religion but attempting to sell them pancakes (JEMIMA: “You folks want some pancakes?”).

Another racial stereotype is presented when Peter, around the end of the episode, is thinking about other methods to make a welfare fraud. Among these methods he

¹²² *Aunt Jemima* was the historical name of a famous American brand of pancake mix and syrups recently changed to *Pearl Milling Company* due to complaints related to the company endorsing racist stereotypes (*Women’s Health*, 2021).

proposes asking the government for a “minority scholarship”. As soon as he states his intention, he is seen wearing an afro wig which is supposed to disguise him as a black person. Peter’s action could be considered both racist and highly irresponsible of the African American culture that he unjustly intends to appropriate for himself in order to scam the government.

In *Death Has a Shallow*, *Family Guy* subverts a certain ethnic stereotype concerning Jews for the sake of humour. In fact, if the typical representation of the Jewish man in Hollywood is that of “greedy, cowardly and weak” individual (Dorinson (2010: 647, cit. in Porsgaard, 2019: 35), the pilot of *Family Guy*, as *Figure 34* visually indicates, overturns this depiction by showing a cheerful muscular bodybuilder surrounded by beautiful women. This portrayal however is not meant to be a positive counterstereotype, but it just serves a comic function. Indeed, the scene is a cutaway sequence triggered by Lois telling her daughter Meg that “most of the world’s problems stem from poor self-image” followed by a shot of German gym, ironically named “DAS GYM”, in which Adolf Hitler is seen struggling lifting light weights. Next to him, he sees the aforementioned muscular Jew giggling with a pair of attractive women whom Hitler scornfully stares at.



Figure 34: Muscular Rabbi Angers Hitler

This cutaway is thus supposed to ridicule the Führer and provide a motive for his hatred towards Jews rather than challenging the common clichéd representation of the latter. In fact, this scene plays with the historical fact that Hitler was rejected by the Austro-Hungarian army at the military service call in 1914 for being “too weak” and “unable to bear arms” (*Spartacus Educational*). His physical weakness is a reason for lampooning him and opposing him to his nemesis, a strong good-looking and

successful Jew. Furthermore, as *Figure 34* illustrates, the Jewish man is adorned with unmistakable symbols directly related to his cultural heritage which make him both more recognisable and subject to become a caricature.¹²³

The episode is not exempt from blasphemy either. In fact, Lois triggers a cutscene in which the family is at church and the priest is giving a sermon about the biblical figure of Job who, according to the scriptures, was smitten with festering boils by Satan to test his faith in God (Butlin, 1990). In that cutscene, God is sitting in one of the church pews as He states: “[o]h man, I hate when he tells this story”, hence implying that He feels ashamed for letting a poor man be tested so roughly by the Devil.

However, the core of the scene centres on Peter who, as he drinks the Communion wine from a chalice, coughs and wonders whether it is “really the blood of Christ”. When the priest responds affirmatively, Peter suddenly exclaims: “[m]an, that guy must have been wasted 24 hours a day”, thus suggesting that, by having a blood with properties resembling wine, Jesus may have been in a perennial state of alcoholic intoxication. This remark is highly blasphemous as it mocks the religious notion of transubstantiation which is a founding pillar of the Catholic faith (*Catholic News Herald*, 2020).¹²⁴ In addition, it also ridicules the figure of Jesus who is thus depicted as an incurable alcohol addict.

The episode mocks a tragic historical event as well. Indeed, *Figure 35* is a screenshot of a non-sequitur scene in which Peter is nervously standing beside a protester in Tiananmen Square while battle tanks are approaching. As he realises to be in a seriously dangerous situation, Peter asserts: “[a]w, screw this! I just came over to buy some fireworks!” and flees. The comedy in this scene can be described as black humour because it intends to generate sarcasm centred on a tragedy, namely the Tiananmen Square Massacre therefore resulting insensitive to the victims of the incident.¹²⁵ Moreover, Peter’s remark is irreverent too because associating China with

¹²³ In point of fact, excluding his intentionally exaggerated muscles, elements such as the kippah, the round glasses, the long beard and the Star of David make him appear as a prototypical rabbi.

¹²⁴ In the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox belief, transubstantiation is the term used to define the miraculous change that during Eucharist transforms bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

¹²⁵ The Tiananmen Square Massacre (1989) is infamously remembered as the historical event in which the Chinese government suppressed with unprecedented violence civil protests demanding more

fireworks is a downgrading cliché. The comment is even more inappropriate considering the tragic nature of the context in which it was made.



Figure 35: *Protesting in Tiananmen Square*

Homosexuality is also derided in the scene in which Peter casually throws the broken penis of the Statue of David into the house of his boss (Mr Weed) who immediately takes it in his hands and names it ‘Eduardo’. This short sequence is not meant to make fun of Mr Weed’s sexual orientation per se, but rather of his curious interest in phallic objects, which is however an arguably cheap stereotype of a gay man’s hobby.

Disability is shortly tackled in *Death Has a Shadow* in two separate instances. The first occurs when Peter is interviewed at the welfare office. Indeed, when asked about whether he were suffering from any “disabilities, past injuries, physical anomalies”, he mentions flatulating for the first time at the age of thirty (PETER: “Uh... Oh, I didn't have gas for the first time until I was 30”). Apart from the physical impossibility of this fact, it is even more surprising that the welfare officer believes Peter and enlists him as a beneficiary of the state assistance measure. It is absurd to conceive that a ridiculous condition as the one described by Peter deserves a monetary compensation. It seems like an insult to individuals suffering from serious pathologies.

The second time that the episode deals with disability is when Peter devises new strategies to claim welfare assistance. As a matter of fact, in the last scene of the episode, when the family discards all his former proposals, Peter suggests presenting a “disability claim” after which he hits himself in the face with a baseball bat. By doing

freedom of speech and less censorship. Official estimates of the death toll vary between several hundreds to around 10,000 people. Today the incident is still a taboo subject in mainland China (*BBC News*, 2021).

so, the show ridicules ‘mentally challenged’ people whose brain capacities are compared to those of an imbecile who has just hit himself in the head with a club.

The last three instances of irreverent humour in the episode revolve around the issue of sexual harassment including comedy either based on rape or paedophilia. The first of the three takes place when Peter and Brian are in prison for throwing cash from a blimp at the Super Bowl. When Brian asks Peter how his shower was, Peter tells the dog: “all the rumours about dropping the soap [in jail] are true” then adding: “you can’t hold onto that thing to save your life. It was slipping all over the place. Guys were laughing...”. The programme is playing with the popular belief that in prison men should not drop their soaps during shower because they would expose themselves to possible attempts of rape by other inmates. As a matter of fact, this idea also generated an idiom that states: “don’t drop the soap!” (*The Free Dictionary*). The scene can thus be intended as a sort of rape joke. It is confirmed by two prisoners who laugh at Peter for not managing to keep the soap in his hands while adding that “that was a classic”.

If prison rape is already a rather sensitive issue, *Death Has a Shadow* tackles an even riskier subject when, while standing on the witness box in court, Peter triggers a cutscene in which two children (Arnold and Dudley)¹²⁶ are sexually molested by a bike shop owner. In the scene in question, as *Figure 36* shows, the two children are standing in a bike shop where the owner, a middle-aged man, is bent over with his bottom facing the two boys. He asks them to “scream real loud at [his] ass”, thus instigating them to commit a sexually inappropriate behaviour.



Figure 36: "Scream real loud at my ass"

¹²⁶ Arnold and Dudley, as mentioned in the episode, are two characters from the sitcom entitled *Diff'rent Strokes* (1978-1986).

Indeed, by shaking his behind and asking the children to approach, he is undoubtedly attempting to sexually molest them. This cutscene is therefore a paedophile joke which, as will be discussed in the next Section, is not an isolated case in the series.

The fact that Peter regards this as his favourite episode of *Diff'rent Strokes* is indicative of both his personality and sense of humour. As a matter of fact, when the cutscene ends and the judge asks Peter whether he has learned a lesson, he promptly replies: “[o]h yeah. Stay the hell away from that bike shop”. With this statement, Peter shows to have misunderstood what the judge meant to ask him, namely if he regretted defrauding the government, whereas in actuality he is still thinking about his favourite episode from that TV show. Furthermore, his remark also hints at the possibility that the owner of that bike shop, as a perverted man, could potentially assault other people including Peter himself who does not want to risk that eventuality.

Lastly, the issue of sexual harassment resurfaces again at the end of the episode as one of the different plans that Peter proposes in order to obtain some sort of state compensation. Indeed, as he utters: “sexual harassment suit”, he concurrently dons a blonde wig and strips his shirt to pretend to be the victim of a sexual violence. By acting in this manner, Peter is undervaluing the seriousness of sexual molestation. Moreover, by preparing this plan in advance, he might be suggesting that women may simulate harassment to sue their sexual predators and receive a sum of money from the government in exchange. Fortunately, the rest of the family dismiss his ideas as foolish. Nonetheless, the sole fact of treating such delicate issues so lightly is bound to stir a large number of controversies as will be discussed below in the next Section.

4.4. Challenging PC, Controversies and Reception

The last Section of this Chapter addresses several controversies that the series has spurred over the years due to its irreverent and over the line comedy that has deserved the programme the label of ‘equal opportunity offender’. In this regard, audience reception will be analysed as well to understand to what extent the public reckons *Family Guy*’s humour acceptable and safe for fellow spectators. Lastly, this Section will also tackle the issue of political correctness and its relationship with the animated sitcom examined in the present Chapter, namely *Family Guy*.

4.4.1. A Controversial Cartoon

On the basis of what was discussed in both Subsection 4.2. and 4.3., it should not be surprising that a show like *Family Guy* instigated a great deal of controversy due to its tactless handling of particularly sensitive issues such as race, representation of minorities, terrorism, religion, sexual orientation, paedophilia, disability and so on.

Concerning racism, Jones (2010) examined *Family Guy*'s position regarding the debate about one-drop rule and reparation.¹²⁷ More specifically, the scholar analysed episode fourteen of season three entitled *Peter Griffin: Husband, Father... Brother?* in which Peter discovers to be distantly related to a black slave owned by the Pewterschmidts, i.e., Lois' ancestors from her father's side (*IMDb*). Jones (2010) noticed that in the episode even if Peter can effectively be reckoned African American because of the one-drop rule, his "blackness is disrupted by his visible whiteness and inability to act appropriately in African American cultural spaces". In fact, when Peter receives reparation from Lois' father, he does not return the compensation to the community as Cleveland did, instead he spends it on his own selfish desires.

According to the scholar, Peter's action is not dictated by his race but by a more overarching identity, namely a capitalist and consumerist one that "transcends both his blackness and whiteness" and which unites proponents and adversaries of the reparation debate. In this regard, Jones (2010) argued that *Family Guy* uses the one-drop rule to offer a more nuanced and less racist portrayal of African American people while simultaneously criticising the racist component contained in the rule itself (*ibid.*). By doing so, the programme does not ultimately side with either faction of the dispute but situates itself in an intermediate position.

Apart from the aforementioned discourses on the topic of one-drop rule, *Family Guy* has also received other criticisms regarding its depictions of minorities because the jokes presented in the show are thought to reinforce existing negative stereotypes that might affect social relations in the real world. One of those outgroups is that of Native Americans who, as in *South Park*, are depicted as immoral owners of tribal

¹²⁷ One-drop rule is the concept according to which a single drop of African blood makes an individual black. Therefore, according to this rule, even a seemingly white person with a remote blood connection to an African relative can be considered black. This topic is specifically divisive in the USA because of the related issue of reparation (compensation for descendants of former slaves) whose both supporters and contestants use to "call each other racists" (Jones, 2010).

casinos aiming to gain wealth through deceit (Lacroix, 2011: 17). This negative representation delegitimises Native Americans who are represented as avid imposters, holders of a victimised culture exploited for financial gain (*ibid.*). In fact, according to Lacroix, this racist portrayal only reflects whites' fear of the economic success of Native Americans, an outgroup that should be marginalised and excluded through biased depictions on TV (18-19).

The programme's stereotypical representation of Jews is a topic that has been already mentioned in this Chapter when analysing the cutscene involving Hitler while training at the gym in Subsection 4.3.4. However, in this case the examined stereotype does not involve the German dictator but focuses instead on the negative portrayal of American Jews who speak what Porsgaard (2019: 33) defined a "Jewish English", i.e., a non-standard variety which resembles the New York accent and frequently employs Yiddish loanwords. Indeed, the scholar (43) argued that in both *Family Guy* and *South Park* there is a certain correlation between the use of this vernacular language and a negative perception of the Jewish characters who adopt it. As a matter of fact, Morty Goldman, who speaks the so-called 'Jewish English', perfectly embodies Hollywood's prototype of the American Jew: a greedy, cowardly and weak man (35-36). On the contrary, Max Weinstein, despite being Jewish, by speaking standard American English, is not portrayed negatively (40).

This fact, according to Porsgaard (2019: 43), is rather alarming because it endorses a stigmatising attitude that may possibly lead to discriminate people in real life solely based on their language preferences. Furthermore, in order not to be unjustly discriminated in the media, American Jews might choose to abandon their vernacular language, hence causing a significant loss of cultural heritage (*ibid.*).

Latin Americans (also commonly known as "Latinos") are also the object of unfair treatment in the media. Indeed, as Reza Marin (2022: 2-3) contended, they are usually characterised one-dimensionally either as violent thugs or poor immigrants attempting to steal Americans' jobs. In *Family Guy*, the most exemplar illustration of a Latino is the character of Consuela, a Spanish speaking maid who converses in broken English and whose only purpose in the series is to clean the house of her white 'masters' (4). She lacks personality and perhaps even intelligence since her signature line is a long "Noooo" that seems to indicate a difficulty at elaborating complex ideas

or perhaps an unarticulated rejection of forms of cultural hegemony (*Everyday Feminism*, 2013). Anyway, Consuela is nothing more than a degrading caricature.

Another hugely stereotyped group in the programme is *AMESA*,¹²⁸ particularly so after the events of 9/11. Curiously, as Hughey and Muradi (2009: 219) asserted, the show presents both instances of racial and non-racial discourse that either support or challenge the dominant media imagery of *AMESA* people. In fact, if on the one hand *Family Guy* sides with the official narrative by deliberately employing exaggerated stereotypes for the sake of humour, on the other it also conveys messages that challenge that narrative (217). For instance, showing Bin Laden having a lapsus is surely a way of ridiculing him, but it is also a manner of expressing his human side. Indeed, as a human being he can make mistakes and laugh about them with his followers as he does in a scene of the animated sitcom.

By doing so, *Family Guy* refuses to challenge the mainstream representation of the famous terrorist and chooses not to depict him as a monster (Hughey and Muradi, 2009: 217). Furthermore, with this choice the series also criticises America's hysteria about terrorism and the conviction that the exportation of democracy is "a cure-all for the supposed problems of Islam" (222-223). The two scholars (*ibid.*) hence concluded that the animated sitcom is paradoxically endorsing both a racist and antiracist discourse which at times bolsters or defies nationalist viewpoints on *AMESA* people.

Regarding religion, Feltmate (2017: 70) affirmed that, compared to other animated sitcoms like *The Simpsons* or *South Park*, *Family Guy* is the one that takes the most antagonistic stance expressing the irreducible and blatant atheism of its creator Seth MacFarlane. His voice on the matter usually emerges both physically and metaphorically through the character of the family's talking dog Brian (voiced by MacFarlane himself) who is openly atheist (*ibid.*). The programme embraces a vision of atheism that exalts scientific knowledge over blind faith and rejects all forms of institutionalised religion (71). Indeed, according to Feltmate (2017: 79), the atheism expressed in the series is "firmly rooted in the conviction that science provides the best explanation for reality".

Nonetheless, not only does *Family Guy* advocate atheism, but it also attacks deities and religious figures. Indeed, as already mentioned in Subsection 4.2.3.,

¹²⁸ *AMESA* is an acronym for Arab, Middle Eastern and South Asian (Hughey and Muradi, 2009: 206).

characters like God and Jesus make frequent apparitions in the show. However, by being humanised, the programme constantly stresses their vices, thus lampooning them. For example, God is depicted as a violent lustful old man (Feltmate, 2017: 132), whereas Jesus is shown as an impostor whose miracles are nothing more than cheap magic tricks (146).

Family Guy's representation of homosexuality is also potentially problematic because, according to Danowski (2012: 135), relying on the binary opposition between stereotypical portrayals of homosexuality and heterosexuality reinforces hegemonic masculinity. The scholar, through the analysis of episode eight of season seven entitled *Family Gay*,¹²⁹ described the series' approach to this topic. In particular, Danowski (2012: 106) compared "Straight Peter" to "Gay Peter" showing how the latter, by being present in the house and helping Lois with her chores or Chris with his homework constitutes a "threat to hegemonic masculinity" because he involves himself in activities that are not typical of heterosexual men. According to the scholar (107), the progressive message of the episode is that sexual orientation is not a matter of choice but is mainly the product of biological factors. However, the scholar (135) also insisted on the fact that, by underlying stereotypical binary oppositions, MacFarlane's progressive message is eventually eclipsed by its return to the dominant ideology.

Yet in the sexual sphere, the programme has stirred controversy for the creation of a recurring secondary character (John Herbert) who embodies the prototype of the old paedophile neighbour. Indeed, as Martínez Sierra (2020: 96) related, a regular gag in the show is to observe the elderly's failed endeavours to be intimate with Chris Griffin, the adolescent son of the family, for whom the man has a strong fascination. Therefore, a topic that would in normal circumstances be a taboo subject becomes in Family Guy not only acceptable but even the comic centre of a recurring character (97).

In this regard, Martínez Sierra (2020: 104) wondered whether that topic can be used for humorous purposes or if there should be some sort of censorship to prevent similar issues to go on air. Specifically, the scholar's (*ibid.*) inquiry focused on the responsibility of the translator to express a content that in some countries may be regarded with different sensibilities. Although these questions were left unanswered, judging from the tone of the research paper, it seems as if its author would be

¹²⁹ In this episode Peter becomes homosexual after participating in a medical experiment (*IMDb*).

favourable to limit the diffusion of taboo topics altogether in order not to offend public sensibility.

As Garcia-Claro, Vazquez-Aguado and Martinez-Pecino (2022: 231) pointed out, disability has long been abused for the amusement of the masses. Indeed, the spectacularisation of impairments and deformities made the fortune of circuses and freak shows where physical abnormalities were scorned as pitiful aberrations. Nowadays in a politically correct climate, humourism based on disability, albeit generally disparaged, exists nonetheless. In fact, as Pritchard (2021: 49) claimed, although it may seem insensitive to joke about infirmities, in truth comedy should not abstain from touching the topic of disability because it can contribute to raising awareness to the stigma still associated with it. According to the scholar (*ibid.*) this objective can be achieved by simply choosing the most appropriate type of humour. In this regard, Pritchard (2021) differentiated between “disabling” and “disability humour”. While the former ought to be deprecated because it derides the condition and the people affected by it, thus promoting ableism, the latter is empowering as it fights negative stereotypes and allows recipients to laugh with those with disabilities instead of laughing at them (*ibid.*). It is a subtle but fundamental difference.

Family Guy is a sitcom so obsessed with disability that many of its jokes hinge on this specific issue (Pritchard, 2021: 46). As a matter of fact, one of the main secondary characters of the show is Joe Swanson, a paraplegic police officer who (as discussed in Subsection 4.2.2.), despite being forced to a wheelchair, is extremely efficient at his job. Despite his prowess, the series often relies on his disability to generate laughter. Sometimes it employs disabling humour (e.g., the scene showing a group of dwarfs taunting Joe is portrayed as a ‘fight between equals’, a scenario that reinforces negative stereotypes for both categories as it ridicules their impairments (Garcia-Claro, Vazquez-Aguado and Martinez-Pecino 2022: 239)); other times it adopts disability humour (e.g., Joe climbs a lamppost while drunk and jokes about having broken his legs. Since his legs are already broken, he is making self-irony inviting his friends to laugh with him rather than at him (240)).

According to both Garcia-Claro, Vazquez-Aguado and Martinez-Pecino (2022: 242) and Pritchard (2021: 65), cartoons like Family Guy potentially have the faculty to challenge prejudice concerning disability and serve the social function of critically

reflect on this delicate matter. However, the frequent recursion to negative stereotypes and derogatory language (e.g., the term ‘midget’ for people affected by dwarfism) can seriously halt this process and may result counterproductive (Pritchard, 2021: 65). Consequently, if real progress in this sense is to be expected, *Family Guy* should stop relying on disabling humour altogether in favour of a more constructive type of comedy, i.e., disability humour.

Violence and derogatory language are other controversial themes present in the programme. In this regard, Ricke (2012) conducted a study to analyse the use of derogatory speech in *Family Guy* with the aim of understanding the possible effects that cumulative exposure to that type of language could have on audiences. The scholar agreed with Jay (1992, 2000, cit. in Ricke, 2012: 122) stating that repeated exposure to this type of content may lead to desensitisation, hence “making such language appear common and acceptable”, almost as if it bore no consequences. The scholar (122-123) also underlined how this phenomenon might affect younger demographics more significantly than other social groups since these are expected to be more receptive of external stimuli and concurrently less aware of the negative connotations of this sort of speech.

According to the aforementioned study, derogatory speech is both predominantly expressed by and directed to White, middle-aged, heterosexual and abled-bodied people (Ricke, 2012: 126-127). Moreover, it was also found that among the various forms of offensive language present in the series, the most recurring are “generalized hate speech, overtly sexualised speech and sexist speech”. The scholar (132) reckoned that those categories might offer improper perceptions of sexuality and gender roles simultaneously promoting subalternation. In fact, Ricke (2012: 133) concluded affirming that even if the offensive speech used in the programme mainly targets an ingroup, it “still appears to establish systems of subordination through language and one in which it is socially acceptable to demean others”.

4.4.2. Audience Reception and PC

As discussed in Subsection 4.2.1., *Family Guy* is a very successful show which, thanks to its irreverent humour and absurd cutaway sequences, continues to enjoy the support of a strong and dedicated fanbase. Nevertheless, in recent years due to multiple factors

including narrative stagnation, the absence of MacFarlane from the creative process and the abuse of cynicism, the programme is considered to be in deep decline (*Cultured Vultures*, 2022). Indeed, according to the article, a series that once provoked outrage because of its controversial themes and “anarchic satire” has now lost its edge eventually producing a type of comedy based on vitriol and cynicism instead (*ibid.*).

At the peak of its creativity and popularity, *Family Guy* stirred numerous controversies (as discussed in the previous Subsection) leaving both spectators and public opinion divided over whether the animated sitcom could or could not have a harmful effect on the viewers. On this subject, a few studies were realised to understand what the participants thought of the series.

In one of such studies, Danowski (2012: 136-137) observed that participants who had watched the episode *Family Gay*, mentioned in the previous Subsection, recognised that the show’s representation of gay men was more offensive than amusing. However, despite this fact, only two respondents out of eleven affirmed that they would not watch the programme again. Danowski (2012: 137) explained that, although the majority of the participants in the study found the sitcom’s depiction of homosexual individuals offensive, by choosing to continue to watch it, they have expressed not to be influenced by it in their perception of homosexuality.

Another relevant study in this regard is that of Zenor (2014). The scholar (28) collected responses from forty-four participants, both male and female young adults in the age group 18-24 years old, namely the programme’s key demographic. From the study, four main perspectives emerged. The first perspective is sustained by the respondents who are regular fans of the show. They not only believe that the series is unbiased, but they also advance that it fights bigotry by tackling sensitive issues while mocking stereotypes typically associated with them. Moreover, respondents supporting this perspective advocate freedom of speech and oppose political correctness (29).

The second perspective reflects the view of participants who believe that the programme does not follow a socio-political agenda but simply tells foolish crude jokes that young males will most likely enjoy (Zenor, 2014: 30). They reckon that, despite being potentially offensive at times, people can still watch the sitcom without necessarily being bigoted because after all it is just a “silly cartoon” (31). Furthermore,

despite not discarding PC completely, as perspective one does, advocates of perspective two argue that Family Guy should not be analysed so critically through the lenses of PC (*ibid.*).

The third perspective suggests that the cartoon is intentionally outrageous and, as a consequence, should not be taken too seriously. Participants who agree with this perspective know that Family Guy's sense of humour is objectionable and that it may be offensive for some people (Zenor, 2014: 32). They are thus more critical than those supporting the previous perspectives. However, at the same time, they maintain that attention should be dedicated towards more pressing issues rather than directing it to criticising an animated series (33). People endorsing this perspective are divided concerning topics such as PC and freedom of speech (*ibid.*).

The fourth and last perspective is the most critical of Family Guy as it is bolstered by individuals who are not fans of the series. Perspective four takes a diametrically opposite position compared to the first one. In fact, participants supporting this perspective reckon that the writers of the sitcom are following a political agenda that endorses discrimination (Zenor, 2014: 34). Indeed, since several of them belong to outgroups, they feel discriminated and attacked by the programme. Followers of perspective four are hence afraid that viewers might imitate the characters in the show and behave disrespectfully in real life too (*ibid.*). Moreover, according to them, the writing of the show is not funny, it is "just crude and profane" (*ibid.*). Lastly, proponents of this perspective are convinced that some limitations on freedom of speech are necessary, hence openly upholding political correctness (*ibid.*).

This last perspective is particularly thought-provoking because, by being defended by several participants who belong to minority groups, it represents the litmus test of what should be considered socially acceptable. As a matter of fact, as Zenor (2014: 36) argued: "[w]hen characters that you relate to are the butt of the joke, then to you, the joke is usually not that funny. This is especially true if you have been a target of such humor in your own life". This is the moment when PC is supposed to intervene.

Regarding political correctness, Family Guy is an animated sitcom whose comedy, as Scepanski (2016: 126) contended, purposely violates PC conventions. In fact, its success greatly depends on the fact that, since society is so obsessed with the

notion of political correctness, it feels liberating to mock what collective consciences are trained to perceive as ‘wrong’ (Zenor, 2014: 29).¹³⁰ Supporters of *Family Guy* may argue that laughing at this ‘wrongness’ does not imply deriding a specific group of people or acting discriminately because the show simply displays how “everyone has their own downfalls” (*ibid.*) and that “depiction is not endorsement”.¹³¹

Nonetheless, critics reject those arguments maintaining that what is not offensive for some (specifically ingroups) might be so for others (particularly outgroups) and, as a result, PC is necessary to safeguard their image from degrading stereotypes (36). However, detractors of the show often have a hard time attacking it because, unlike live-action programmes, there is no real person behind the face that appears on the screen. Indeed, there is no Peter Griffin in real life. Even criticising MacFarlane directly is not enough since he is not physically involved in the specific dialogue that might have been found offensive (*CinemaBlend*, 2019).

Concerning PC, MacFarlane stated in an interview that he did not believe that people were so outraged with his show, that all the turbulence about political correctness was being inflated by the media and that most people were able to distinguish jokes from insults (*CTV News*, 2015). Nevertheless, according to the famous actor Morgan Freeman, being able to do so is more difficult than it seems. It was only thanks to his own talent that MacFarlane was able to accomplish risqué comedy without incidents (*ibid.*). Moreover, the risks are usually well calculated because in the end people still find the show amusing as the viewers always “come back for more” (*Collider*, 2022).

As mentioned above, the irreverent comedy of *Family Guy* could represent a relief valve for individuals who feel oppressed by the necessity of being constantly politically correct (*Collider*, 2022). In this sense, it constitutes a break from the tension of ordinary life since it allows people to enjoy some twenty minutes of mindless humour. Indeed, as expressed in the same article, “*Family Guy* is an animated comedy that is just trying to be an animated comedy. And we should enjoy [it] for what it is”.

¹³⁰ This fact explains why the show tackles so many controversial issues.

¹³¹ Supporting the argument that the content of *Family Guy* is simply satirical is complicated because, as discussed in Subsection 4.2.3., the line between satire, lampoon, parody or burlesque is very thin in this sitcom.

Nonetheless, the genre itself has undergone noticeable changes over the years. At first, its subversive humour attracted the attention of critics and spectators alike during a time when challenging PC norms was considered “a cutting-edge comic sensibility” (*The Independent*, 2021). In more recent years however, besides the rapid decline that the series has suffered for the reasons listed at the beginning of this Subsection, its daring humour lost its edge too in favour of more diluted jokes (*ibid.*). In fact, the writers of the series realised that several topics that they felt comfortable joking about in the past, were no longer acceptable. For instance, Quagmire’s personality as a sexual predator has been mitigated and the LGBTQ+ community has received a less negative representation (*CinemaBlend*, 2019).

Perhaps this means that PC has won the battle. Or perhaps there was no battle to begin with. As a matter of fact, Family has always been able to convey the most irreverent jokes without any problem whatsoever. The reason why in recent years it has decided to avoid them is not because of the alleged presence of the PC brigade supposedly ready to censor them, but purely because sensibilities have changed both within society and in the minds of the writers of the show who are now persuaded that certain gags would not be well received by their audiences (*The Independent*, 2021). Other than that, the sitcom has essentially remained the same. It is a programme which occupies a specific space in the entertainment industry, namely the space reserved to ‘bad-taste comedy’. It has always found its own worth in “saying the unsayable”, but what this ‘unsayable’ is has eventually matured overtime (*ibid.*).

CONCLUSION

The present dissertation aimed at examining how popular TV shows (in particular sitcoms) entered the intricate realm of the contemporary and highly controversial topic of political correctness (also known as PC). More specifically, this study sought to find answers in connection with the research questions discussed in **Introduction** and in the Data and Methodology Section of this work.

First, it should be noted that the three TV series examined in this work, namely *All in the Family* (1971-1979), *The Office* (US) (2005-2013) and *Family Guy* (1999-), despite belonging to the same genre,¹³² are in actuality rather different from each other in several respects. Indeed, as discussed in their respective Chapters, each show represents a specific model of sitcom. *All in the Family* clearly embodies the most traditional archetype of situation comedy: it features the comforting environment of the household, it adopts laugh tracks, and its humour often relies on well-established punchlines uttered by stereotyped characters.

The Office belongs instead to a different category of situation comedies which, as mentioned in **Chapter Three**, is usually referred to with the term ‘mockumentary’. These types of programmes are filmed in such a way that it appears as if a real documentary crew were following the characters around and having mock interviews with them to display the characters’ most inner thoughts about the particular scene at hand. *The Office* is an excellent representation of this modern sitcom format. As a matter of fact, as the title suggests, it is set inside an office therefore abandoning the domestic environment typical of most traditional sitcoms. It discards laugh tracks preferring body language and facial close-ups as laughter signals. Moreover, despite at times employing punchlines, its humour mostly derives from a sense of awkwardness pervading the series that grants it the label of ‘cringe humour’.

Family Guy is completely different yet because, despite relying on the well-known domestic formula of classic productions, it can hardly be compared to such traditional shows. As a matter of fact, by being an animated product, *Family Guy* firmly distances itself from live actions programmes such as those mentioned above.

¹³² The shows at hand, as amply discussed in the previous chapters, all belong to the situation comedy genre, which is also known as ‘sitcom’.

Indeed, one of the comic staples of the series (i.e., the cutaway scenes), due to the absurdity of their content and the frequency of their occurrence, would surely be rather complicated to replicate if the programme were to be realised in a different medium other than animation.¹³³

Nonetheless, apart from those distinctions based on the categorisation of different sorts of situation comedies, another crucial aspect to take into account is certainly connected to the chronological domain, more specifically so to the distinct historic periods in which the three shows were both created and set. In fact, among the examined series there is an evident temporal dissonance because both the societies represented therein, and the jokes conveyed through them respond to separate sensibilities that are far from alike. As a matter of fact, while it seems that not much time passed from the 1970s of *All in the Family* to the 2000s of *The Office*, in truth, as discussed in the previous Chapters, so many crucial happenings occurred in the world during those decades which undoubtedly had an impact on the programmes in question. Indeed, profound changes in the geopolitical, cultural and technological dimensions, like those witnessed during such timeframe, proved to be highly influential with respect to works of fiction as well.

The case of *Family Guy* is the most peculiar in this sense because, despite starting to air at the end of the Nineties (1999), it might be considered a contemporary programme owing to the fact that it continues to be broadcast to this day. However, it may be argued that its popularity and quality peak coincided with the 2000s, exactly like *The Office*. Anyway, the aspect that most likely distinguishes this series from the other two is ‘modality’ rather than historical period. Indeed, as anticipated above, *Family Guy* belongs to the animated medium and not the live action one as, on the contrary, *All in the Family* and *The Office* do.

On this subject, the present study has found a correlation that seemingly links variations in timeframe or modality occurring across the analysed sitcoms with the way in which those shows interact with the notion of political correctness.

In the Seventies, the concept of PC had not entered the full throttle of the heated debate that would characterise the following decades yet. For this reason, Lear, the

¹³³ As explained in **Chapter Four**, cutaway scenes are non-sequitur sequences presented in the form of flashbacks or other sorts of narrative digressions which aim to generate laughter through the abrupt insertion of elements coming from popular culture (Marx, 2013: 178).

creator of *All in the Family*, did not preoccupy himself with the need of remaining politically correct. On the contrary, his programme may be considered the opposite of PC. This judgment is in line with that of scholars such as Pomeroy (1996: 69) and Buonomo (2012: 32) who argued that the series was politically incorrect and that if it had been aired nowadays perhaps several scenes would not have been realised in the same fashion. Such consideration is significant because it confirms a complete lack of awareness on part of the creators of the sitcom regarding the ethical implications of PC.

At the end of the Nineties and in the 2000s when both *Family Guy* and *The Office* were produced, there was a totally different climate regarding the issue of political correctness. As a matter of fact, the writers of these two programmes not only were aware of the existence of PC, but they even voluntarily challenged it for the sake of comedy. In point of fact, this argument is also supported by scholars like Kocela (2009: 164) and Crepaldi (2020: 281) who claimed that *The Office* is imbued with anti-PC humour that purposefully derides America's fixation with that concept. A similar consideration was shared by some respondents in Zenor's (2014: 29) study who also stressed the fact the *Family Guy* is amusing because it violates a code that society lately is obsessed with, that is PC.

Concerning controversial comedy in *Family Guy*, according to its creator Seth MacFarlane, the show has an edge over live action series because in animation there is no real person saying or acting disrespectfully (*CinemaBlend*, 2019). As a result, since none of the characters really exists in real life, people cannot find a concrete person to blame for the offensive or inappropriate behaviours displayed in the cartoon and the programme can thus afford to be more daring and pungent than other live action productions. This point is worth mentioning because it explains how modality directly influences the show's disregard for PC and how the audience is simultaneously more inclined to tolerate such inattention.

Nonetheless, nowadays sensibilities have changed and programmes like *The Office* and *Family Guy* need to be more careful about handling matters connected to political correctness. Stephen Merchant, co-creator of the *Office* (UK), and Alec Sulkin, executive producer in *Family Guy*, confirmed this position in relatively recent

interviews in which they addressed the topic of PC.¹³⁴ The two writers agreed that, in today's climate, certain jokes that used to be considered acceptable fifteen years ago are no longer tolerated because people have become more easily offended, hence making satire more difficult to achieve. This aspect is crucial in the understanding of the evolution of PC since it re-evokes the dichotomy between political correctness and comedy, a point that is going to be tackled in a later portion of this Section.

What may be surmised from the way in which the examined shows interacted with PC across distinct decades and modalities is the fact that society has become more and more invested in the notion of political correctness which has consequently affected the creative process of fictional works like the very sitcoms analysed in this study. Indeed, if *All in the Family* did not receive the slightest influence from PC as it was produced in the 1970s when this issue was not being debated intensively yet; *The Office* and *Family Guy* were created instead in a context in which PC was part of the dominant ideology and the creators actively attempted to defy it. Nevertheless, despite its bolder modality which, as mentioned above, has always granted the programme a higher level of expressive freedom compared to other sitcoms, *Family Guy* has gradually had to moderate the tone of its content to accommodate contemporary sensibilities. Indeed, despite still remaining a popular source of subversive gags, the show has in recent years become milder by abandoning the most shocking jokes which made its fortune during its prime time.

Judging by what has been discussed so far, it may easily be affirmed that the sitcoms analysed in this study do not abide by PC standards. On the contrary, they can be reckoned as deeply 'politically incorrect'. As a matter of fact, each one of them has spurred numerous controversies since the moment they were originally released. The most controversial aspect about *All in the Family* is the fact that the main character, the patriarch Archie Bunker, is depicted as a lovable bigot. The series may ridicule his ignorance and lack of tact whenever a delicate social matter is addressed, but in truth part of the spectators agree with him and enjoy his crass sense of humour. Similarly, *The Office* is often reckoned problematic for the fact that the vulgar and childish manager of the office, Michael Scott, is almost always able to escape punishment for

¹³⁴ The two interviews in question were respectively from *The Daily Beast* (2022) and *The Independent* (2021).

his insensitive behaviour towards his colleagues. Family Guy is perhaps the most contentious of the three because as *Collider* (2022) has been correctly labelled it, the show is an “equal opportunity offender”, a sitcom capable of mocking any ethnic group, creed, institution, political system and sexual orientation.

On this subject, as discussed in detail in the previous Chapters, a great body of literature has extensively tackled the controversies surrounding these programmes. Some of those studies conducted audience reception inquiries in order to assess the possible negative influence that these sitcoms may have on the viewers (e.g., Vidmar and Rokeach (1974), Zenor (2014)). Other research focused instead on specific sensitive issues that the shows in question were accused of trivialising or abusing to perpetrate offensive stereotypes (e.g., Birthisel and Martin (2013), Porsgaard (2019), Martínez Sierra (2020), Pritchard (2021)).

Having established that the series at hand openly defy the notion of PC, a question arises spontaneously about whether controversial comedy (like the one present in the examined shows) is compatible with PC, or if, on the contrary, the two concepts automatically exclude one another. Furthermore, providing the latter is true, it ought to be established to which of the two elements it should be given priority when producing a sitcom. This query is rather complicated as it involves ethical and philosophical considerations which will likely fail to satisfy the whole readership since the answers provided are far from universal. Nonetheless, this issue is still worth reflecting on because, as anticipated in **Chapter One**, an essential part of the debate about PC hinges precisely on this matter.

PC and controversial humour are apparently opposite concepts since the former typically censors all verbal and non-verbal attitudes which could be perceived offensive by specific portions of society. Therefore, controversial comedy, by bypassing the control of PC and relying on the subversion of sensitive matters for comic purposes, immediately contravenes political correctness. However, providing that PC is not interpreted so strictly, it can be found that in some cases controversial humour actually sustains political correctness rather than opposing it. In fact, sitcoms like *All in the Family* and *The Office*, despite presenting highly contentious issues, can indirectly reaffirm PC culture by presenting parodies of problematic realities that are depicted in satirical terms. Such indirect support could be a compromise to

accommodate both notions. Nonetheless, applying the same reasoning to Family Guy would be more difficult because, as discussed in **Chapter Four**, that animated sitcom seems to employ comedic strategies such as lampoon and burlesque more frequently than satire. Indeed, by using these strategies Family Guy seems less concerned with moral teachings as it is with producing a certain shock value in the viewers, thus nullifying any possible attempt to co-exist with political correctness.

Interpreting PC more loosely to allow for plainly ‘politically incorrect’ depictions that carry a satirical message is a disputable strategy because it might be argued that accepting this compromise would invalidate the very essence of political correctness. Unfortunately, no other solutions were detected to reconcile PC and controversial comedy. These two conflicting elements are perhaps too antagonistic for a common ground to be found between them.

At this point, it thus remains to be decided which of the two philosophies writers and broadcasters are supposed to follow when producing a TV programme. As examined in **Chapter One**, the existing literature has covered this topic plentifully offering viewpoints either in favour or against political correctness (e.g., Littlewood and Pickering (1998), Cohen (2016, cit. in Krefting, 2019), Samant (2020), Black (2021)). In the end, no universal answer has been found because, as a *BBC* study contained in Mills (2016: 214) concluded, “opinions on ‘offensiveness’ are after all inherently subjective. In addition, since TV programmes have their own separate regulations on the matter, finding an absolute all-embracing procedure might de facto be impossible.

The implausibility to find such universal procedure should not be regarded as a failure because it may prompt the TV industry to reconsider its approach regarding PC and hopefully seek ad hoc regulations that take into account the idiosyncrasies of each individual series. This solution might prove difficult to realise for the disproportionate amount of attention and consideration to contextual information that this very strategy demands of both creatives and broadcasters. However, if successfully implemented, it could finally solve the circular dilemma in which advocates of each one of the two antagonistic and equally uncompromising sides are currently stuck.¹³⁵

¹³⁵ Such opposing sides being supporters of either PC or controversial comedy on TV.

Another significant finding of this study has concerned the fact that the analysed pilots have provided immensely useful information about the role of PC in their respective shows. *Meet the Bunkers*, the first episode of *All in the Family*, is an extraordinary example of the potential that a pilot possesses regarding its ability to introduce the whole series. Indeed, that instalment is so crucial because, in just about twenty-six minutes, presents a plethora of controversial topics that astonish the spectators concurrently setting a high bar for the subsequent episodes. *Meet the Bunkers* is hence not afraid to deal with sensitive topics such as sex, racial prejudice, atheism, affirmative action, just to name a few.

Regarding *The Office*, *Pilot* and *Diversity Day* are equally important episodes which could both be considered pilots of their own accord because they embody the spirit of the series in two distinct ways. The former is a faithful adaptation of the original British pilot translated into the American version with little to no change from its counterpart. The latter is instead the first original instalment realised for the US version. It is quite emblematic as it deals with a deeply sensitive issue in American society, namely racial/ethnic stereotypes.

Death Has a Shadow, that is *Family Guy*'s pilot, is also quite symbolic since, through its simple plot and frequent cutaway scenes, introduces the audience to a cartoon that is extremely controversial, one which does not refrain from tackling all sorts of sensitive issues since its debut. In fact, not even risqué jokes on taboo matters like paedophilia, rape, disabilities or tragic events are banned from this instalment which by the way originally aired in occasion of the Super Bowl XXXIII.

Deciding to analyse the pilots has proved successful because these episodes, as first instalments, perfectly embody the heart and soul of their respective shows. Indeed, as mentioned above, they contain several topics (including PC) that would later be developed throughout the course of these sitcoms. In fact, specifically concerning political correctness, the analysis has shown that the instalments in question are dense with scenes that either ignore PC conventions altogether or reflect on this subject only to offer blatant satirical representations of its culture. Either way, political correctness is eventually disregarded, hence confirming the intention of the creators of those programmes to produce humourism at the expense of perceived forms of ideological orthodoxy like PC. Those pilots thus function as 'declarations of intents' with which

the artists both announce and revendicate their creative and expressive freedom in the face of arguably restrictive regulatory practices such as political correctness.

On the one hand selecting the pilots has been very helpful for the reasons discussed above, but on the other it has constituted one of the biggest limitations of the present research. As a matter of fact, even if the general trajectory of the examined sitcoms may be predicted, it is preposterous to believe that single episodes can epitomise entire shows. Furthermore, if a true diachronic study on the subject had to be proposed, it would necessitate more than a couple of distinct decades, perhaps even inspecting a wider amount of TV series. Moreover, another major limitation of this study is the fact that it has only focused on the English language because the sitcoms at hand were exclusively picked from North American productions.¹³⁶

The limitations listed above should be mainly attributed to practical reasons such as time constraints and scope of the present dissertation. Nonetheless, despite these constraints, the study seems to have proved particularly insightful because, as anticipated in **Introduction**, the existing literature presents a noticeable gap regarding the examination of political correctness in relation to situation comedies. This subject should not be dismissed as unimportant since critical social revolutions not only occur in real life but are often conveyed through the mainstream media as well. Indeed, products of popular culture like sitcoms have the power to reflect and/or anticipate the changes pervading society, an aspect that has been most surely visible in the programmes examined in this work. Consequently, the current study not only occupies the niche in its dedicated research field. It also aims to encourage further reflection on a topic that is extremely relevant nowadays given its pervasiveness in contemporary society (namely PC), especially so in connection with the apparently frivolous genre of sitcom.

In addition, the methodology adopted for the analysis of the pilots, i.e., Fairclough's (2010) critical discourse analysis (CDA) and visual analysis, have permitted to inspect those episodes meticulously, hence allowing the author of this work to notice verbal and non-verbal cues that were connected to PC culture. For this reason, were a similar study to be conducted on the model of the present one, it is recommended that the methodology is replicated as well. Otherwise, it may perhaps

¹³⁶ Even more specifically so, the study concentrated on programmes created in the USA.

be even enriched by taking into consideration other multimedia variables like sound and movement which were only partially considered in the visual analysis employed in this work.

To conclude, given the limitations of this work as mentioned above, a few recommendations for future research are now going to be provided. As already established, the pilot is a crucial episode because it is usually the most representative instalment of a particular show. However, concentrating exclusively on it can restrict the scope of the research. In this regard, it could be interesting to replicate this study while expanding the number of episodes analysed in order to assess whether quantity is effectively capable of affecting the intricate relationship between PC and sitcoms.

Secondly, examining multiple TV shows per decade would probably offer a more reliable insight into the culture of that particular period and its perception about PC. Similarly, increasing the number of examined decades might help to have a better understanding of the chronological evolution of political correctness in sitcoms, especially if this selection also includes series set in present-day and not solely in the past. On this subject, apart from temporal factors, modality ought to be considered too. Due to the practical constraints mentioned earlier, this study only analysed one animated sitcom, that is Family Guy. In this regard, further research might decide to take into exam other animated shows as well.

Lastly, as anticipated above, only American sitcoms were examined in this study. Further investigation may expand the limits of this collection and include series realised in other/multiple countries. A connected suggestion regards the choice of language. Indeed, if this work focused solely on English owing to the fact that the programmes were created in the US for an English-speaking audience, other scholars interested in this topic might want to explore different language options. In this case, another possibility could be to study this subject following a cross-linguistic or cross-cultural perspective that may also include translation practices.

In the existing literature there are studies that have inspected sitcoms by following the recommendations listed above (e.g., Sander (2014), Greene (2020), Martínez Sierra (2020), Evershed (2021)). Nevertheless, to the author's knowledge, none have done so in connection with the topic of political correctness. Therefore,

owing to the prominence of the subject at hand, it may be relevant to advance research in this field.

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