WOMEN, COMEDY AND LIBERATION

AN ANALYSIS OF REPRESENTATIONS OF SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM IN THE AMERICAN SITCOM GENRE, 1970-2000

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which the values of the second feminist wave were reflected in the American sitcom genre over a thirty-year timespan, from the nineteen-seventies to the nineteen-nineties. The sitcoms *Maude* (CBS 1972-1978), *The Golden Girls* (NBC 1985-1992) and *Cybill* (CBS 1995-1998) were selected by means of purposive sampling to represent their respective decades of production; Norman Fairclough's (2010) model of critical discourse analysis is utilised to deconstruct these texts into their distinct discursive components. Three episodes of each sitcom are analysed with varying emphases: the sitcom's relation to a decade's dominant ideological currents, its representation of feminist discourses, and its unique contribution to humorous and wider societal discourses. It emerges that there exists a negative correlation between the sitcoms' representations of humanist-feminist versus patriarchal and conservative discourses: as the former gain prominence, the latter's hegemony proportionally declines. Relatedly, the depiction of male characters changes, from equal partners in the seventies to quasi-redundant, insignificant others in the nineties. These developments are reinforced by the sitcoms' set-ups, in which the nuclear family is replaced by chosen family arrangements and fictive kin relationships. Notably, over the course of the three decades, feminist humorous discourses, as articulated by a sitcom's lead character, change in tone (from primarily confrontational to playful), but not in their vernacular or forthrightness; feminist sitcom protagonists have consistently been active makers of jokes. Moreover, despite the predominance of conservative and postmodern ideologies in the eighties and nineties respectively, the march of progress of nineteen-seventies feminist discourses, as manifested within the sitcom genre, continued. This thesis's original contributions to existing knowledge include identifying the distinct discursive strategies which enabled two of the three sitcoms, *The Golden Girls* and *Cybill*, to overcome and effectively subvert extensive, mainstream ideological resistance.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not exist without Christopher Hitchens' (2007) *Vanity Fair* article, 'Why Women Aren't Funny', and an acknowledgement is thus due to the late, great contrarian. Thank you to those female friends who have invalidated that headline for over four decades, and especially to Bobbi P. for being amazing always, but in particular during the autumn of 2018 (and for excellent last-minute literature advice).

Dr Tamsin Spargo had an intuitive, deep understanding of my ideas and was unfailingly generous with her time and suggestions. Dr Nickiann Moody, who sadly passed away in June 2019, recommended Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis as a methodological tool.

A special thank you to my supervisors, Dr Sharon Lockyer and Dr Simon Weaver – it was a great privilege to benefit from their extraordinary expertise, constructive feedback, their flexibility in accommodating my time constraints, their generosity when giving and lending me books, from their exemplary professionalism and good humour.

The final edits of this thesis, in August 2020, coincided with unprecedentedly eventful weeks in the British sixth form sector. Nonetheless, many of my colleagues at Brampton College found the time to share their vast subject knowledge. Thanks also go to my students, who kept me up-to-date with what feminism is and means, and to all those who scripted, produced and starred in the shows discussed here – they made this a labour of love.

In June 2019, I was awarded Brunel University's Vice Chancellor's Travel Prize as well as additional funding by the Department of Social and Political Sciences to present at the International Society for Humor Studies (ISHS) Conference in Austin, Texas. For this I remain immensely grateful.

I'd moreover like to thank the editors of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* for enabling me to serve as a reviewer, and the editors of the journal *Comedy Studies* for publishing, and the anonymous reviewers for their feedback on, the following articles, based on parts of this thesis:

- (2012), 'One right-on sister: Gender politics in *Maude*', *Comedy Studies,* 3(2), pp 139-149.
- (2017), 'Laughter and ideology: A critical discourse analysis of changing representations of rape in Norman Lear's sitcoms', *Comedy Studies,* 8(1), pp 13-21.
- (2019), 'Sex and Death and St. Olaf: Deconstructing the Magic of *The Golden Girls*', *Comedy Studies,* 10(2), pp 199-212.
- (2021), '#CybillToo?: How a Feminist Sitcom in the Postmodern Nineties (Almost) Exposed Hollywood's Dark Underbelly', *Comedy Studies* (forthcoming).

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Freedom isn't free.
American idiom

When the novelist Margaret Atwood asked women what they feared most from men, they replied, "We're afraid they will kill us." When she asked men the same question about women, they replied, "We're afraid they'll laugh at us."
(Wolf 1991:153)

This thesis is about freedom. It is about the freedom brought about by the women's liberation movement and its convergence with the freedom inherent in humour and laughter. Specifically, this thesis sets out to identify how the values of the second feminist wave of the nineteen-sixties and seventies were reflected within the American sitcom genre over a thirty-year timespan. This bout of feminist activism set in motion 'radical history that changed the world' (Brownmiller 1999:10),[1] by rapidly improving the life chances of millions of women to an unprecedented extent. One of that era's most prominent theorists pinpointed the role of humour in revealing the absurdity of women's then-second-class status and called for, 'the sound of women really laughing […] at the reversal that is patriarchy' (Daly 1990:17). From the nineteen-seventies onwards, Daly's call was, if inadvertently, heeded by Hollywood decision-makers, as the widespread popular support for the women's liberation movement had made it commercially viable for feminist battles to be fought out in primetime situation comedies (Rabinovitz 1999:145).

This thesis will analyse the representations of feminist ideologies in three such sitcoms, namely *Maude* (CBS 1972-1978), *The Golden Girls* (NBC 1985-1992) and *Cybill* (CBS 1995-1998); its scope will thus encompass the last three decades of the twentieth century. The rationale for concentrating on these thirty years rests upon two phenomena: one, the fact

[1] This sweeping statement can appear Euro/Anglo-centric; clearly, not all women have benefitted from the feminist movement. Nonetheless, particularly in a globalised world, the vastly increased life chances of Western women are likely to at least indirectly, or belatedly, affect most women.

that this timespan corresponds to the length of a generation, and two, the significant changes in media production and consumption which would occur in the twenty-first century. Second-wave feminism was one of several social movements first formulated in the nineteen-sixties by an unusually large and prosperous demographic cohort, the baby boomers. In-between the seventies and the nineties, these rebellious ideas matured, from abstract and subcultural principles into concrete, lived realities and widely-agreed-upon values. Simultaneously, the sixties radicals themselves grew into middle age, and into positions of power and influence; by the nineteen-nineties, their own children, Generation X, were young adults, creating new subcultures suited to the transition into a new millennium (Harrison 2010:171-2). The growth in information technology would indeed demarcate a sharp distinction between life before and after the year two-thousand, and the large television networks which had dominated during the twentieth century had to adapt to a fundamentally altered media landscape (Gripsrud 2010:xv, Raab 2018). With the coinciding advent of reality television, the sitcom genre went into sharp decline (Deans 2005). The period from the nineteen-seventies to the nineteen-nineties consequently emerges as highly suited to tracking the progress of the novel feminist discourses within the traditional network sitcom genre.

The nineteen-seventies simultaneously heralded unprecedented changes within that genre: from the onset of that decade, American sitcoms had, famously, become 'relevant' (Gitlin 2000:2003), by reflecting the seismic ideological changes generated by the nineteen-sixties' social movements (*Maude*'s producer, Norman Lear, was at the forefront of this development (ibid.:212)). Sitcoms differ from many other televisual or comedic genres in their customary emphasis on the 'small-time' (Mills 2009:1), trivial occurrences of everyday life. This is closely linked to their set-up, which traditionally focussed upon the nuclear family, and has evolved to include quasi-families, such as workmates or friends. In the seventies, this pre-occupation with the seemingly mundane was combined with the previous decade's rebellious ideas, including feminism, and many sitcoms explicitly integrated political ideologies into conventionally-set storylines (Gitlin

2000:203-220). Even in the less politicised, subsequent decades, the genre remained 'the most appropriate site for […] political and ideological smuggling' (Wells 2006:181; see also Morreale 2003:xix), due to its 'veneer of comic innocence' (Wells 2006:181). Accordingly, the mainstream format has the inherent potential to disseminate feminist (or other critical) ideas to millions of viewers, even in ideologically adverse contexts. The primetime genre furthermore is, first and foremost, profit-led, and as such catering to audience and advertisers' demands (Gitlin 2000:132): those sitcoms which are recommissioned after their first season overwhelmingly resonate with those who consume them. Overall, 'through narratives that assimilate social contradictions into everyday personal experience, the situation comedy has stood as an enduring sociodramatic model that has helped "explain" American society to itself' (Spangler 2003:6), and as such aligns with an analysis of the cultural sway of second-wave feminism.

Research questions

The historical and socio-political developments of the pertinent three decades will provide the backdrop for the analysis of the three sitcoms. The analysis will juxtapose these shows' representations of feminism to the ideologies predominant during their respective moments of production, and address the following research questions:

1) How are competing discourses and ideological struggles represented, and (how) can this be linked to wider societal developments?

2) How are feminist and women's humour, and empowering and self-depreciating joking, balanced?

3) What fictional, diegetic model of gender relations does the sitcom advocate, and how do these gender relations compare with those of contemporaneous shows?

4) How (if at all) is humour utilised within a sitcom as a tool to dismantle patriarchal power relations?

In addressing these research questions, this thesis will primarily contribute to existing scholarship on the relationship between gender and laughter (such as Merrill 1988, Walker 1988, Barreca 1991, Gray 1994, Rowe 1995, Dow 1996, Mellencamp 1996, Rabinovitz 2002, Spangler 2003, Gilbert 2004, White 2018). While several thinkers have explored female-led and feminist sitcoms in great depth, these analyses are predominantly centred upon *I Love Lucy* (CBS1951-1957) (Gray 1994, Rowe 1995, Mellencamp 1996, Landay 2010, Kirschen 2013, White 2018), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS1970-1977) (Gray 1994, Dow 1996, Crozier 2008, Jule 2010, Jordan 2011), *Roseanne* (ABC 1988-1997; 2018) (Rowe 1995, Mellencamp 1996, Reed 1997, Senzani 2010, White 2017) and *Murphy Brown* (CBS 1998-1998; 2018) (Dow 1996, Collins 1997, Rabinovitz 2002, Benoit and Anderson 2009). These shows undoubtedly are milestones in feminist sitcom history; nevertheless, as in an echo chamber, that status is re-affirmed by the amount of research focussed upon them. By contrast, *Maude*, *The Golden Girls* and *Cybill* have attracted comparatively little attention in the relevant literature, despite their numerous, discursively innovative contributions to the sub-genre. This latter statement will of course be corroborated and developed within this thesis's arguments. However, a few initial examples for these contributions include: *Maude* made television history on several counts, as its eponymous star was the first divorced sitcom protagonist (Emery 2013:1188), and the first to undergo an abortion (King 2015); *Cybill* combined feminist with postmodern ideologies in a series which related a fictionalised version of its executive producer and star Cybill Shepherd's experiences of working in the male-dominated, sexist Hollywood production complex; *The Golden Girls*' carefully calibrated content achieved tremendous popularity with its audience (Littlefields 2011). Despite the latter show's great and enduring success, only a relatively small number of academic articles focus solely on *The Golden Girls* (such as Kaler 1990, Harwood and Giles 1992, Cohen 2002, West 2010, Mahal and Nie 2014, Ann 2016); even fewer are exclusively concentrated on *Maude* or *Cybill* (Newcomb 1977, Woodward 1999, Lentz 2000, Linder and Dalton 2016). Similarly, in studies discussing a range of

female-led sitcoms, the three shows are frequently covered only in a cursory manner (see, for example, Dow 1996, White 2018).

This thesis redresses this gap in existing scholarship. All three sitcoms are explored in significant depth; moreover, uniquely, each show's multifaceted, discursive content is analysed in relation to the trajectory of the second feminist wave, as well as framed within wider socio-political and cultural developments. In particular, each sitcom's humour is interconnected with the societal change engendered by the women's movement. The findings of the three distinct analyses are juxtaposed and consolidated in the concluding chapter. These analyses of the three shows utilise Norman Fairclough's (2010) model of critical discourse analysis, a methodology formulated to enable the normative and meticulously contextualised deconstruction of texts. The latter quality necessitates that, within this thesis's argument, a sitcom's discourses can only be fully decoded in reference to a show's external discursive milieu. This encompasses its wider, socio-political context as well as concurrent developments within the sitcom genre. Therefore, although this thesis adopts the above-outlined a-sitcom-a-decade approach, each show's analysis is framed by thorough reference to contemporaneous sitcoms and thus to broader trends within the format. Fairclough's methodology furthermore facilitates the excavation of deeper meanings and concealed narratives; in several of the episodes analysed here, an additional, below-the-surface plotline emerges. The deliberate insertion of such underlying scenarios was confirmed by *Happy Days* (NBC 1974-1984) staff writer Bill Bickley:

> "I had a whole subtext for *Happy Days*. It was a literary approach that if you really look for it, you can find it… I had Vietnam in there […] [S]ome shows that are actually pretty light where we had no intention other than getting the next episode done, can have some stuff there …" […] Can you spot Vietnam in [*Happy Days*]? Probably not. But it's there – and the fact that it's there means something […] (in: Shapiro 2011:116).

In order to discern and appropriately interpret such interplay between an episode's overt and covert discourses, this thesis's textual analysis will thoroughly situate the texts in relation to their contemporaneous political, cultural and sitcom genre contexts. All data on the three sitcoms' audiences

is derived from the secondary literature or trustworthy internet sites; several attempts to obtain the relevant primary data have proved unsuccessful.[2]

Key concepts and terminology

In discussing the selected sitcoms as well as a range of related texts and subject matters, three concepts will be utilised throughout the thesis: *woman-centred*, *humanist feminism and gender relations*. *Woman-centred* will be used to refer to texts which are formulated primarily in relation to women's experience. This concept will be defined in greater depth in the methodology chapter, which precedes the analytical chapters; however, it will be utilised in prior chapters, and broadly refers to texts which relay humanist-feminist ideology to some extent and, with regards to comedic material, predominantly joke with, rather than about women. In this, they differ from female-led sitcoms, that is, shows with one or more female protagonists which do not, in their form or content, convey humanist-feminist values. As will be elaborated in chapter five, the quality of 'woman-centredness' was essential in selecting the sitcoms to be analysed. All three sitcoms clearly meet this criterion as is illustrated by, for example, their implicit positioning of their audience as female in plotlines sympathetically depicting issues such as the menopause (*The Golden Girls, Cybill*), abortion (*Maude*) and sexual harassment (*The Golden Girls, Cybill*).

The concept of *humanist feminism* serves as an umbrella term for radical and liberal feminist thought; that is, the feminism formulated by the activists of the second wave, the progress and maturation of which is tracked within this thesis over the course of a generation. Radical and liberal feminisms have in common their origins in the identity politics of the nineteen-sixties and seventies, which themselves are rooted in liberal-humanist delineations of subjectivity which originated with the Enlightenment (Weedon 2000:172); in this, they differ from subsequent,

[2] This is predominantly due to the Nielsen Media Research firm's data protection measures, as confirmed by email correspondences with Professor Brett Mills (2016), Professor Sue Holmes (2016) and Professor Jason Mittell (2016).

postmodern and poststructuralist, developments within feminist theorising. Humanist feminism will only be referred to when it is in the interest of clarity to not specifically identify the approaches comprised in the concept. The term *gender relations* will be employed throughout the thesis to connote the socially constructed nature of masculine and feminine behaviours (Jeffreys 2014:165), and to suggest that interactions between males and females vary with the extent to which traditional sex roles have been adopted.

Outline of chapters

The origins and breadth of feminist perspectives are explored in depth in the second chapter of this thesis. This chapter explicates the two theoretical frameworks underlying this thesis: feminist and humour theories. Its first part details the developments and conceptualisations of feminist thought, ranging from libertarian feminism in the eighteenth century to poststructuralist feminism in the nineteen-nineties. These varying branches of the ideology are relevant to the eventual textual analysis of the three shows; humanist feminism is moreover utilised in this thesis' overarching, normative analysis. Humour theory, as particularised in the chapter's second part, is applied within the analytical chapters as a tool to identify specific humorous discourses in each show. In addition to defining relevant concepts, such as those of 'joke' and 'comedy', this section introduces the superiority, incongruity, relief and cue theories of humour, as well as Bakhtin's concept of the 'carnivalesque', and existing research on the liberating potential of humour.

The third chapter presents an overview of interdisciplinary scholarship on the wider theme of women and humour. The chapter begins by discussing studies exploring the meanings of female humour in ancient Greece, and scholarly investigations of female writers' uses of humour. Subsequently, the debate concerning feminist humour, and its demarcations from 'mere' women's humour, is relayed; as will be elaborated in the fifth, methodology, chapter, these definitions are highly relevant to this thesis's differentiation between humanist-feminist and female-led sitcoms. Following

on, with a view to the close connection between the American stand-up tradition and the sitcom genre, a concise summary of academic studies of women stand-up performers is related. The chapter concludes by reviewing scholarship specifically focussed upon female-led and woman-centred sitcoms.

The sitcom genre itself is the focus of the fourth chapter, which depicts the format's historical roots in live, theatrical performances and in radio as well as its present-day codes, conventions and stock characters. Additionally, detailed outlines of the genre's televisual history, of its relation to wider societal change, and of sitcoms revolving around female protagonists up to the nineteen-nineties are presented. The nineteen-seventies emerge as a pivotal decade in the politicisation of the genre, a process inextricably linked to Norman Lear, the producer of *Maude*, as well as to MTM Productions, the company behind the creation of the ground-breaking *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

The fifth chapter explicates this thesis's methods and methodology. It begins by situating the chosen methodology in the qualitative paradigm, and by reflecting upon the ensuing strengths and shortfalls of the data generated. Then, an outline of different methodological options for textual and content analyses is provided. Following on, the rationale for selecting Fairclough's (2010) model of critical discourse analysis as an analytical tool is presented, with particular emphasis on its normative qualities, which correspond closely to the feminist values underlying this research. The chapter moreover explains and justifies the thinking underlying the choice of the three sitcoms, and of specific episodes within these shows, to be analysed. As is argued, these decisions were made with particular reference to a particular sitcom's feminist, rather than female-led, qualities; furthermore, as will be demonstrated, the chosen episodes' storylines correspond to the stipulations proposed by Fairclough as an agenda for critical discourse analysis. A central aspect of this agenda is the continuous framing of discourses in relation to alternative ideological currents, and the chapter's concluding section specifies how this will be implemented.

Chapters six, seven and eight explore sitcom representations of humanist feminism over three successive decades from the nineteen-seventies onwards, by analysing *Maude*, *The Golden Girls* and *Cybill* respectively. The three chapters are structured identically: they begin by introducing the relevant sitcom and then, reflecting the emphasis placed by Fairclough (2010) upon external discourses, give an account of concurrent socio-political and cultural events, including developments within feminist thought and activism. Following on, any one decade's trends within both the sitcom genre generally, and within the sub-genre of woman-centred sitcoms specifically, are detailed. The ideological factors identified in these external discourses are subsequently integrated into three consecutive critical discourse analyses (CDAs) of three distinct episodes. The first of these analyses is focussed upon positioning the sitcom in relation to a decade's dominant ideology, that is, the values shared by a majority of the population at a particular historical moment; the second analysis is aimed to identify the sitcom's feminist representations and discourses; the third analysis seeks to pinpoint a sitcom's particular contributions to humorous and wider societal discourses. The three chapters end by applying the preceding analyses' findings to the four research questions identified above.

The concluding, ninth, chapter juxtaposes and interconnects the data gathered in the CDAs of *Maude*, *The Golden Girls* and *Cybill* in relation to the four research questions. The thesis concludes by specifying how these findings contribute to existing knowledge across a range of academic disciplines, and by identifying relevant areas for further research.

This introductory chapter has presented this thesis's research questions and key concepts, and explicated the rationales for concentrating on a particular timespan and on the sitcom genre. In addition, the three sitcoms to be analysed were identified, and the comparative lack of pertinent academic research was pointed out. The chapter moreover mapped out the content of the thesis's remaining eight chapters; as stated, the ensuing, second chapter will detail this thesis's theoretical underpinnings by relaying both feminist and humour theories.

Chapter 2: Theoretical foundations

This chapter will present the two theoretical frameworks, feminist theory and humour theory, used in the analysis of the three sitcoms. Feminist theory has evolved significantly since its inception in the nineteen-sixties, and this is reflected by the predominance of particular branches of feminist thought in each show to be analysed: *Maude*, produced in the nineteen-seventies, features radical and liberal feminism, the eighties sitcom *The Golden Girls* libertarian feminism, and *Cybill*, in the nineties, combines humanist-feminist with postmodern thinking. Such contingency of mainstream ideological representations on their social and historical context is a fundamental tenet of critical discourse analysis, as will be elaborated in chapter five. The following will establish that wider societal framework by presenting an overview of the formation and impact of the second-wave feminist movement, and by situating the distinct theoretical contributions within those historical events. In addition to critically analysing the varying representations of feminism in the three shows, humanist-feminist theory is used in the overarching analysis throughout. This differs from the use of humour theory in the critical discourse analyses, which is as an analytical tool to identify specific types, tones and discourses of humour in each show. The second part of this chapter will introduce the specific contributions to humour theory used in the CDAs: the superiority, incongruity, relief and cue theories of humour, as well as Bakhtin's concept of the 'carnivalesque', and, with a view to the concluding analysis, existing scholarship on the potential of humour as an emancipatory strategy.

Feminist theory

Feminist theory underpins this thesis on two levels: one, the overarching analysis will be conducted from a humanist-feminist perspective, and two, the timespan covered in the analysis, from *Maude*'s first episode in 1972 to *Cybill*'s last episode in 1998, encompasses significant developments

within feminist thought and activism. These in turn brought about considerable societal change and affected mainstream ideological representations, including within the sitcom genre. This section will provide an overview of the history of second-wave feminism, and present the principles underlying those strands of feminist theorising pertinent to the subsequent analyses: radical, liberal, libertarian, postmodern and poststructuralist feminist thought. The humanist-feminist, liberal and radical-feminist, ideological positions are relevant to the analyses of all three sitcoms; libertarian feminism relates predominately to the CDAs of *The Golden Girls*, and postmodern and poststructuralist feminisms were contemporaneous to the production of *Cybill*. The following presents an outline of these theoretical frameworks; where appropriate, they will be elaborated in greater detail in the context of the analysis of particular sitcom episodes.

Historical origins of second-wave feminism

Many second-wave feminists had initially been committed members of the American civil rights, student activist and other New Left groupings of the nineteen-sixties (Zinn 2003:507). However, female New Left protestors were regularly excluded from decision-making positions and assigned routine clerical tasks instead (Bailey 2001:2926). Overall, 'the New Left was pervaded by a machoism typified by [civil rights organiser] Stokely Carmichael's quip that "the only position for women […] is prone"' (Faludi 2013). These ideological inconsistencies between the sixties activists' egalitarian agendas and their internal, gendered hierarchies would launch the second feminist wave. The movement continued a centuries-long struggle for American women's equality, including the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention and the ensuing first feminist wave, the 1910s campaign for women's suffrage (Faludi 1992:69-70).

This bout of activism had concluded when women across America attained the vote with the 19th Amendment of 1920. The Second World War (1941-1945) had required women to work the jobs of men fighting in the war, and millions of women took up employment, including in traditionally male

occupations, as paid tribute to in the iconic 'Rosie the Riveter' representation.[3] These women workers increasingly fought for better working conditions, as well as for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the American Constitution, a campaign that had originated in the 1920s (Faludi 1992:71).[4] After the war, the returning, traumatised veterans needed to re-assimilate into civilian life (see Greengard 2012), and the need for societal stability became paramount. As a consequence, the workplace returned to its heavily segregated pre-war status quo, with the marriage bar, unequal pay and access to unemployment benefits, and widespread dismissals of women reinforcing traditional, male breadwinner, female homemaker, sex roles. Nevertheless, a minor women's movement persisted throughout the nineteen-fifties (Rupp and Taylor 1987), and women's participation in the labour force, if in a quasi-ghettoised range of occupations, continued to grow during that decade (Bailey 2001:2911).

In 1949, the French existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir had published *The Second Sex*, a ground-breaking, critical exploration of the universality of women's oppression. De Beauvoir argued that women's inferiority, their being the 'other', deviating sex throughout history and across institutions, stemmed from a learned femininity, and thus implicitly pioneered the differentiation between sex and gender (Butler 1986:35). A unique text at its time of publication, *The Second Sex* was to become an extensively acknowledged source of the second wave's 'intellectual groundwork' (Brownmiller 1999:257). The American and, subsequently, international women's movements of the sixties and seventies is usually attributed to the impact of Betty Friedan's 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique* (Charvet 1982:42, Spender 1983:366-8), which formulated a comprehensive critique of the narrowly defined gender roles of the nineteen-fifties. Friedan argued in

[3] The comic book character *Wonder Woman* was moreover created during the war years (Faludi 1992:71).
[4] In January 2020, the Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) advised that, '"Congress had the constitutional authority to impose a deadline on the ratification of the ERA and, because that deadline has expired, the ERA Resolution is no longer pending before the States." […] Accordingly, the OLC opinion goes on to state that "the ERA's adoption could not be certified"' (National Archives internet site, 2020).

favour of women making 'life plans geared to their real abilities' (1983:375) by way of levelling women's access to education and the labour market with men's; accordingly, a woman 'must learn to compete, then, not as a woman but as a human being' (ibid.:374).

The societal circumstance into which the book was issued was one in which, for example,

> male-only admission policy or infinitesimal quotas excluded the brightest and most talented female students from the finest [...] schools in the nation; [...] when rape was the woman's fault, when nobody dared talk about the battery that went on behind closed doors (Brownmiller 1999:3).

Liberal feminism

The social movement that formed in response to these circumstances in the mid-sixties was heterogeneous, and would, in years to come, be characterised by internal ideological and interpersonal divisions as much as by a shared sense of purpose (Chesler 2001 pp 436 ff, Brownmiller 1999:41, Faludi 2013). Two distinct, complementary and occasionally overlapping, factions emerged early on: liberal and radical feminism. Liberal, also known as equality or reformist, feminism is inextricably associated with Betty Friedan, who co-founded the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. Friedan served as the organisation's first president, and many of its aims closely reflected the arguments put forward in *The Feminine Mystique*: NOW focused on establishing equality by engaging with specific issues, including equal pay, the ratification of the ERA, the legalisation of abortion, and ensuring that the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which outlawed sex discrimination, was duly enforced (National Organization for Women internet site, n.d.). Postulating that men and women are innately equal but socialised into contrasting masculine and feminine roles, liberal feminists thus distinguished between biological sex and socially constructed gender. Reflecting de Beauvoir and drawing on existing research on parent-child relationships, liberal feminists identified the processes though which a normative gender identity is achieved throughout primary socialisation; these methods range from the different appellations used in interactions with male

and female new-borns to parents guiding their children to sex-typical activities and toys throughout their formative years (Oakley 2016:126).

Radical feminism

The emphasis on collective liberation (from male oppression) rather than on female individuals' equality (with men within existing structures) differentiates radical from liberal feminism.[5] In contrast to NOW's professional, formal structure, radical feminism was 'decentralised and antihierarchical, […] [and] flourished within an amorphous framework of small, ostensibly leaderless, usually short-lived groups' (Brownmiller 1999:7). Where NOW relied on lobbying and other established forms of protest, radical feminists, often former NOW members, 'broke new ground, through theoretical papers, imaginative confrontations, and inventive direct action [and the] explosive creation of the antiviolence issues – rape, battery, incest and child molestation, sexual harassment – and later on, the controversial development of antipornography theory' (ibid.:8). Aspects in which radical feminists differed from the liberal feminist agenda include their focus on the long-oppressed essence of female identity (Daly 1990, Greer 1991), and their critique of the nuclear family as the principal agent of women's subordination (Millett 1991, Firestone 1970). Proposed solutions varied: while rebuking the male-dominated familial context, cultural and eco-radical feminists celebrated biological motherhood as central to women's identity (see Weedon 2000:46-50); in contrast, radical-libertarian feminists argued in favour of abolishing childbearing and gender distinctions through artificial reproduction technologies (Firestone 1970).

Despite the varied nature of radical-feminist thought, principles shared by many adherents were laid out in Kate Millett's (1991) *Sexual Politics,* Shulamith Firestone's (1970) *The Dialectics of Sex*, and in the 1969 'Redstockings Manifesto' (co-authored by Firestone), which states: 'Our

[5] The difference is illustrated by radical feminist Germaine Greer's observation in *The Female Eunuch* that, 'NOW also boycotted Colgate-Palmolive in a protest against job discrimination, although they never levelled any attack of any significance against the whole ludicrous cosmetic industry' (1991:334).

oppression is total, affecting every facet of [all women's] […] lives. […] *All* men have oppressed women' (emphasis in the original). Applying the Marxist dialectic of oppressor and oppressed to the sexes, women are thus conceptualised *as a class* (Charvet 1982:120, emphasis in the original). This systemic subjugation of women is delineated as patriarchy (literally, the rule of the father), 'a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women' (Walby 1990:20, see also Millett 1991). As in Marxist thought, a revolution was advocated as prerequisite for abolishing subjugating societal structures (Millett 1991, Greer 1991). Women's experiences of the all-encompassing formations of those structures were articulated in all-female consciousness-raising groups from the nineteen-sixties onwards. The practice was a powerful tool, functioning to instil an awareness in participants that 'the personal is political', that seemingly individual experiences of gender inequality were in fact widely shared, and structural.

Humanist-feminist campaigns and ideological schisms

From the nineteen-sixties onwards, humanist-feminist ideas manifested themselves in several well-publicised campaigns and coups. Among the earliest was the 1968 Atlantic City Miss America protest, during which radical feminists drew attention to the objectification inherent to beauty pageants by bringing a 'Freedom Trash Can', and filling it with paraphernalia associated with the construction of femininity, such as hairspray and girdles. Around 1969, the words 'sexism' and 'sexist' were coined (Brownmiller 1999:62). In 1970, NOW arranged the 'Women's Strike for Equality' and 50,000 women marched in New York to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of women's voting rights (National Organization for Women internet site, n.d.), and, in a separate, radical-feminist endeavour, 'Ogle-Ins', gender-reversed street harassment, were organised. The woman-centred, taboo-busting and educational international bestseller, *Our Bodies Ourselves* was published by the Boston Women's Health Collective in 1970, as was Robin Morgan's anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful*, Anne Koedt's 'The Myth

of the Vaginal Orgasm', and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*. The media began to take note of the angry, young-ish women: Millett and Greer were featured on the covers of *Time* and *Life* magazines respectively, and Gloria Steinem, a media-savvy political journalist with model looks, made *Newsweek*'s front page (Brownmiller1999:161). In 1971, Steinem founded the influential feminist magazine *Ms.*; other landmark publications of the early seventies include Phyllis Chesler's scathing analysis of the male-dominated nature of the mental health professions, *Women and Madness* (2005, first published in 1972), and Erica Jong's funny and frank novel *Fear of Flying* (1994, first published in 1973), in which the married female protagonist explores sexual liberation. The movement's impact during the nineteen-seventies was exemplified by the outspoken support of Republican First Lady Betty Ford on many feminist issues, such as the Equal Rights Amendment and the legalisation of abortion (Nichols 2011).

From 1969 onwards, radical and liberal feminists united in battle to overturn abortion laws (Brownmiller 1999:pp102ff); in January 1973, with the outcome of the *Roe versus Wade* legal case, a woman's right to terminate an unwanted pregnancy was declared constitutional by the Supreme Court. Rape became a further focal concern. Radical feminists reframed the crime as a political weapon within patriarchal societies and set up the first rape crisis centres. Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* (1993, first published in 1975) would be the milestone text on the issue and by 1979, relevant legal changes had been implemented nationwide, along with sensitised police and hospital response measures (Brownmiller ibid.:253). Taking their lead from Brit Erin Pizzey, who in 1971 had set up the women's refuge in Chiswick, London, domestic violence was identified as another long-concealed, systemic phenomenon. In addition to the founding of shelters for abused women and their children, the psychological dynamics of abusive relationships were being explored for the first time, including battered women's frequent inability to leave their partner (ibid.:275). For the diminishingly small minority of women who would murder their violent partner, the new legal

concept of ‘battered women’s syndrome’ was introduced (ibid.:268). Domestic violence goes to the very core of radical-feminist activism as,

> by tackling spouse abuse, they were challenging male supremacy and patriarchal rule inside the family, where for centuries, aided by tradition and an indifferent legal system, any outside interference had been kept at bay. Once the women’s movement made its voice heard, a man’s home was no longer his castle (ibid.:269).

Manifestations of patriarchy in the public sphere, in the form of sexual harassment in the workplace, emerged as the next ground-breaking campaign. Disproportionate numbers of black women brought the early sexual harassment cases; with the successes of the civil rights movement, they were angered at finding themselves sexually, if not racially, discriminated against (ibid.:286-7). African-American women’s overall association with second-wave feminism was complex. Individual black women had been involved with the mainstream movement from its beginnings (ibid.:8). However, in a dynamic that similarly applies to working-class women allying themselves with their more privileged sisters, professing solidarity with white, often highly educated women seemed, for many black women, incompatible with their historic struggle against oppression. As black women started to organise, the issue of well-meaning white feminists’ latent racism emerged (ibid.:21). The radical-feminist, essentialist supposition, that women’s universal oppression superseded differences between women (Weedon 2000:105) would be further challenged by lesbian feminists, ‘the angriest of the angry’ (Brownmiller 1999:286), who contested the heteronormativity of the movement. ‘Feminism is the theory: lesbianism is the practice’ (Charvet 1982:129), summed up the outlook of the controversial, lesbian-separatist strands of radical feminism.

Libertarian feminism

Differently to these ideological divergences, libertarian feminism is not merely another offshoot of the second feminist wave. Its origins are instead intertwined with the American individualist and libertarian traditions, and can be traced back to the eighteenth century (Presley 2014). Contemporary libertarian contributions to feminist discourses began in 1975,

at the Libertarian Party Convention in New York, with the founding of the National Association of Libertarian Feminists (ibid.). These feminists' belief system converges with the liberal-feminist agenda on the vast majority of issues. However, crucially, they reject relying on the government to improve women's lives for, as 'one of the goals of feminism [is] to achieve a society in which women are free to make their own decisions about their own lives independent of the coercive domination of men, [libertarian feminists] fail to see how a government currently dominated by men is an improvement, let alone feminist' (Presley 2015). This libertarian aversion to perceived governmental interference informed the libertarian-feminist stance on one of the last high-profile crusades of the second feminist wave, the anti-pornography campaign. 'Porn grew as feminism grew' (Brownmiller 1999:296), and in the late seventies and early eighties, radical feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon emerged as spokeswomen against the porn industry's relentless objectification of women. Yet concerns about freedom of speech and individual preference, as advocated by libertarian feminists, would divide the women's movement into 'anti-porn' and 'pro-sex' feminists (Brownmiller 1999:322). Overall, during the eighties, feminist activism diminished in a conservative political climate that would produce an anti-feminist ideological backlash (Faludi 1992). Feminist theory, however, continued to thrive within academia (Fraser and Nicholson 1990:19), in particular postmodern and poststructuralist feminist contributions.

Postmodern and poststructuralist feminism

Over the course of the nineteen-eighties, humanist-feminist, essentialist thinking was superseded by postmodern, fragmented, identity feminism, reflecting the contemporaneous dominance within the arts and humanities disciplines of postmodernism, deconstructionism and poststructuralism (Ehrman 2005:197). From the nineteen-nineties onwards, this ideological shift would further manifest itself in the changing designation

of many feminist-content courses, from 'women's studies' to 'gender studies' (Richardson and Robinson 2007:xviii). Postmodernist feminists adhere to the premise of postmodernism, that stable, coherent philosophical foundations have been substituted by fluid and free-floating, '"ad hoc", contextual and local' bases for analysis (Fraser and Nicholson 1990:21). Accordingly, they argue that gender 'can no longer be treated as a simple, natural fact. […] Gender relations are complex and unstable processes (or temporal totalities in the language of dialectics) constituted through interrelated parts' (Flax 1990:44). This re-categorisation of the concept of gender challenged the humanist-feminist emphasis of a universal female essence. Postmodern feminists instead highlight the complexities of intersecting inequalities:

> working-class women, women of color, and lesbians have finally won a wider hearing for their objections to feminist theories which fail to illuminate their lives and address their problems. They have exposed the earlier quasi-metanarratives, with their assumptions of universal female dependence and confinement to the domestic sphere, as false extrapolations from the experience of white, middle-class, heterosexual women who dominated the beginnings of the second wave (Frasier and Nicholson 1990:33).

Thus, the overarching meta-narratives of the second feminist wave were replaced by subjectivity and hermeneutic truth, as is characteristic of postmodern analysis (Gellner 2002:35).

This lack of epistemological certainty furthermore characterises poststructuralist theory (Weedon 2000:23-24). Building on these contributions, Michel Foucault introduced the concept of discourse (to be explicated in detail in chapter five), and poststructuralist feminist Judith Butler drew upon Foucault in her book, *Gender Trouble* (2008, first published in 1990) which would be among the most influential feminist texts for decades to come (Hanman 2011).[6]

Central to Butler's analysis is the concept of 'performativity', which envisages gender as 'always a doing' (2008:34). Butler critiques the liberal-feminist distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender

[6] Within the psychoanalytic poststructuralist tradition (dominated by Jacques Lacan), Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous had pioneered feminist contributions from the nineteen-seventies onwards (see Weedon 2000).

roles by arguing that this approach is as inflexible as earlier, biologically deterministic theories of sex and gender (ibid.:11). She distinguishes the liberal-feminist 'performance' of femininity and masculinity from 'performativity', which surmises that the actor's sex is as culturally constructed as, and thus equivalent to, their gender. She suggests that the body is neither a blank slate to be socialised into a specific gender role, nor intrinsically linked to an underlying truth in relation to its identity (ibid.:46). In a heteronormative cultural context (ibid.:31), gender performativity is a constantly repeated process that is 'constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results' (ibid.:34). Along with the lack of individual agency and choice, neither does there exist an 'inner truth of gender […] [as] true gender is a fantasy […] inscribed on the surface of bodies' (ibid.:186). This absence of an original is concealed through the on-going re-enactment of gender which creates the perceived reality of gender (ibid.:45). Thus, she argues that gender is but smoke and mirrors; significantly, performativity does not allow for genuine subversion as it takes place in a confined context in which 'there is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very "taking up" is enabled by the tool lying there' (ibid.: 199). This brittle and artificial nature of gender is epitomised by drag performances (ibid.: 200).

Butler's analysis demonstrates the extensive trajectory of feminist thought since the beginning of the second feminist wave. As with postmodern feminist theories, the key epistemological difference from earlier, humanist-feminist and libertarian-feminist theories is the poststructuralist rejection of a universal female essence. These new feminisms have been criticised. Nussbaum argued:

> parodic performance is not so bad when you are a powerful tenured academic in a liberal university. […] But here is where Butler's focus on the symbolic, her proud neglect of the material side of life, becomes a fatal blindness. For women who are hungry, illiterate, disenfranchised, beaten, raped, it is not sexy or liberating to re-enact, however parodically, the conditions of hunger, illiteracy, disenfranchise, beating or rape. Such women prefer food and the integrity of their bodies (1999, cited in Salih 2002:146; see also Stabile 1997).

These developments within twentieth-century feminism impacted its representation within popular culture, as will be substantiated within the

critical discourse analyses of three woman-centred sitcoms in later chapters. These will furthermore draw upon an extensive range of contributions to field of humour theory.

Humour theory

While this thesis's analysis is grounded in humanist-feminist thought throughout, humour theory is used to identify the styles, discourses and tones of humour in each sitcom, and to evaluate the emancipatory potential of humour in the concluding chapter. Types of humour vary both within and between the three sitcoms, and they will be analysed by applying the most relevant contribution to the field of humour theory. This section will begin by defining four concepts used throughout the thesis: laughter, humour, joke and comedy. Following on, an overview of philosophical and theoretical frameworks related to the functions and meanings of humour will be presented.

Laughter

Laughter is a 'cognitive response […] expressed as a bodily one' (Mills 2009:101). It can be incited socially, through situations perceived as humorous, as well as physically, through stimuli such as tickling; the latter does not require a humorous context (Morreall 1987:4). In both cases, laughter entails 'a loss of self-control, […] [a] break between the person and their body' (Plessner, in Critchley 2004:8), and as such is akin to crying (Critchley 2004:8). It is furthermore a cultural universal (Sauter et al. 2010:2411) that typically is the physical expression of the mental state of amusement (Morreall 1987 ii: 212 ff). It encompasses a range of expressions, from chuckling to raucous guffaws, which can sound angelic, demonic or be of any timbre in between. Laughter is a profoundly social activity; it is 'always the laughter of a group' (Bergson 1987:119), and infectious (Hutcheson 1987:36). Laughing with others produces a measurable endorphin rush, which serves to reduce physical pain and to increase well-being (Dunbar et al. 2012). This deeply social dimension of the bodily sensation of laughter

makes it ‘a subtle social lubricant […] and a way to make clear who belongs where in the status hierarchy’ (Tierney 2007).

These dynamics manifest themselves in the private and public spheres. In both contexts, the joker is empowered, but only if their attempt at inducing laughter is successful. Within friendships, laughter signals approval and as such affirms this relationship between equals (Hutcheson 1987:36). In inherently hierarchical occupational settings, laughter presents in more complex ways: people laugh covertly at their superiors (see, for example, Auslander 1997:110) yet overtly at their jokes, and their laughter can thus both maintain and subtly threaten power relations. Moreover, in the workplace, an overly eager disposition to laugh signals feebleness, and the least powerful tend to laugh the most: ‘someone who laughs a lot, and unconditionally […] [will] seldom be a president’ (Provine 2000). This hierarchical dimension to inducing and extending laughter is reflected in heterosexual relationships. Traditional, patriarchal relationships are maintained through women’s unreserved willingness to laugh at their partner’s jokes, a behaviour which signals a stable union (ibid.). These power dynamics have been observed across cultures and continents, and in international studies it has emerged consistently that, ‘women tend to do more of the laughing while men tend to do most of the laugh-getting’ (ibid.).

Arguably, in woman-centred sitcoms, the genre convention of the laugh track levels these gendered power differentials. The function of this device is to intensify the laughter of television audiences at home (Mills 2005:14), and it therefore bolsters and empowers female sitcom stars as much as it does their male counterparts. It additionally serves to create a community among viewers: they appreciate the woman-centred joking in a ‘secret freemasonry, or even complicity with other laughers, real or imaginary’ (Bergson 1987:119). This consensus on what is worthy of laughter is rooted in a shared perception of what is funny, that is, a shared sense of humour.

Humour

Humour, defined as 'that quality which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous**:** a funny or amusing quality' (Merriam Webster 2018), is as complex and social as laughter. The etymology of humour reveals how meaningful a phenomenon it is: the word stems from the Latin *humus* (soil or earth), as do the words human and humility (Macmanaman 2006). The three concepts are closely interconnected as humour, prompting a bodily response, attests to our, human, mortality. Humour moreover can both uplift and humble us, that is, it can enable us to temporarily transcend our physical existence as well as, if required, bring us down to earth (ibid.). Therefore, the very roots of the concept show humour to be nothing less but 'something essential to […] "the humanity of the human"' (Critchley 2004:9). Indeed, humour informed the Hippocratic Corpus, in two of its alternative but related meanings, that of a bodily fluid and that of a temperament (Merriam Webster 2018). This first collection of medical treatments was composed in Greece, predominantly during the fourth and fifth centuries BC. The treatise differentiated between four bodily humours which were each associated with an element and, in excess, with a psychological disposition. The first humour, black bile, was linked to the earth and melancholy, while blood, the second humour, was connected with air and sanguinity; the third, yellow bile, was thought to correspond to fire and a choleric temperament, and the fourth humour, phlegm, to water and a phlegmatic demeanour (Gill 2018).

What unites the varying meanings of the term humour is their multifaceted centrality to life itself. The depth of the concept when referencing 'a funny or amusing quality' (Merriam Webster 2018) is reflected in Mills' dual definition of humour, as both a discourse in its own right and as requiring a contextual discourse to be effective (2005:17). A discourse is a set of relations within a paradigm which is commonly characterised by a shared language (see, for example, Fairclough 2010:3). The first type discourse, that of humour in its own right, is created through the utterance of a sequence of separate units, jokes, which combine to an overarching amusing

tone (Mills 2005:16). The second, contextual discourse refers to the appreciation of humour as a socially constructed consensus which varies across cultures and throughout history (ibid.:16). This discourse is coded by the forms of humour it utilises, which have been summarised as: visual humour (slapstick, exaggeration, repetition and mimicry)[7], simple verbal humour (sarcasm, repetition, reversal and bathos), sophisticated verbal humour (satire, parody, irony and farce), displacement, anachronism, anthropomorphism and gallows humour (Blake 2005:17-29, for a more differentiated listing of humour techniques, see Berger 1995). Humour as a societal custom is near-ubiquitous and found in a wide variety of contexts (Lockyer and Pickering 2009:6).

A specific, dark sense of humour has been correlated with individuals' high intellectual ability and good mental health, as 'subjects who show the highest values with respect to black humour preference and comprehension show the highest values with respect to intelligence, have higher education levels and show the lowest values regarding mood disturbance and aggression' (Willinger et al. 2017:166). More generally, engaging in any kind of humorous discourse requires, 'a certain detachment from the practical aspects of life. […] There is a conceptual flexibility, an imaginative use of unusual perspectives, that characterises both philosophy and humor' (Morreall1987:2). Such critical distancing makes possible the use of humour as a tool against injustice, and existing scholarship on this issue will be presented below.

Joke

This relation between humour and resistance is reflected in Critchley's definition of jokes as, 'anti-rites [which] mock, parody or deride the ritual practices in any given society' (2004:5). Essentially, a joke is 'a single construction intended to have a comic effect' (Mills 2005:14), and usually 'someone else's material' (Berger 1998: 15), that is, a formulation

[7] Note that, depending on context, these four forms of visual or physical humour can also be argued to serve as expressions of verbal humour.

being re-told rather than created by the jester. A joke's success, funniness, is contingent on context and on a process of negotiation and interpretation (Meyer 2000:316, Lockyer and Pickering 2009:11). As part of the playful process of humour creation, wholly new funny material is brought into being, such as joking in the form of wordplay, witticisms and nonsense humour (Berger 1998:164). Both types of joking are relevant to sitcom analysis, as will be elaborated in detail in a discussion of the codes and conventions of the sitcom genre chapter four. On the one hand, US sitcom jokes are crafted by professional teams of writers, in a hothouse setting aimed to maximise funniness and originality, on the other hand, within the genre, there appears to be the occasional retelling of another sitcom's jokes (an example would be *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS 2007-2019), produced, like *Cybill*, by Chuck Lorre and with a number of jokes that echo, sometimes acerbically, the earlier show). More generally, Mills points out how, within sitcom, jokes need to be woven into and balanced with character and narrative development, as opposed to other comedic performances in which the emphasis is on more immediate humorous gratification, solely through effective punchlines (2005:15).

Comedy

This relation between jokes and situation and other types of comedy is interceded by humour: as stated, in sequence, jokes serve as the building blocks of humour (Mills 2005:16). *Comedy* in turn is structured humour, as 'play becomes a game when it is played "for keeps"' (Fry 1968:20). Differently from humour, which can be impromptu and situational, comedic texts are professionally crafted, and adhere to the conventions of the comedic 'mode' (Mills 2005:17). These texts are primarily aimed to amuse (ibid.: 2005:17), and characterised by their form, a humorous tone and a happy ending (Neale and Krutnik 1995:11); any one comedic text's effectiveness is inextricably linked to its particular social and cultural context (Medhurst 2007:11). The potentially galvanising effects of comedic performances can be traced back to its origins in Ancient Greece:

> Comedy tends to be about ordinary people or low life, as opposed to the tragic, which involves the great and remarkable […] whose 'fall' becomes, then, all the more meaningful. [The comic types'] triumphs over adversity and the revelation about the nature of human stupidity and absurdity provide great pleasure. […] The tragic hero, I suggest, provides catharsis; the comic hero provides cathexis, […] a release of pent-up energy, which often has a libidinal aspect to it and is generally life-affirming and celebratory (Berger 1998:11; see also Neale and Krutnik 1995:11).

These workings are reflected in the structure of narrative comedy, which is usually ordered into an exposition at the beginning, followed by a complication and then a resolution (Neale and Krutnik 1995:27). Within these formal structures, 'comedy is a prime site for all manner of unlikely actions – and all manner of unlikely forms of justification for their occurrence' (ibid.:32). Despite this frequent inclusion of irrational and unrealistic elements, comedy nonetheless has educational functions, as it depicts the 'chastising [of] those who do not know or observe the social codes' (Berger 1998:10). Mills points out that comedy frequently is not considered a genre but a 'mode' which can be added on to existing genres, resulting in, for example, comedy dramas and horror comedies (2005:17). As Mills argues, this does not hold for the situation comedy which is readily identifiable as a genre (2005:19), as will be elaborated in chapter four.

All types of comedy can feature a variety of humorous discourses and associated types of joking. The subsequent section will introduce the analytical tools provided within the framework of humour theory to identify and contextualise those variations in humorous expressions. There exists an ongoing debate as to the extent to which it is feasible to encapsulate context-dependent humorous dynamics and interactions within an overarching theoretical framework (see Mills 2009:10-11). Traditionally, most contributions to humour theory have been arranged into one of three widely agreed-upon categories: the superiority, incongruity and relief theories (Morreall 1987, Critchley 2004). The following will provide an overview of these, broad and sometimes overlapping, groupings, and subsequently, of Mills' (2009), and of my own, assessment of the applicability of humour theory to the sitcom genre. The chapter will conclude with a synopsis of the emancipatory potential of humour.

The superiority theory

The superiority theory, as its name suggests, focusses on the unequal nature of humorous exchanges, which are unvaryingly understood to empower the joke-maker and to debilitate those being laughed at. This theory encompasses the earliest reflections on the role of humour, made by some of history's greatest thinkers. In Classical Greece, philosophers Plato and Aristotle emphasised the importance of disparate power relationships in humorous interactions. In Plato's *Philebus*, Socrates explains: 'Those who are weak and unable to retaliate when they are laughed at may rightly be called ridiculous, those who are strong and can defend themselves may be more truly called formidable' (1987:12). Aristotle too characterised comedy as, 'an imitation of people who are worse than the average. […] The ridiculous is a species of the ugly' (ibid.:14). In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he passes similar, normative judgement on joke-makers and their listeners, and addresses the political dimension of humour:

> There is a difference between the joking of a well-bred and a vulgar man […]. […] Can we then define the man who jokes well as the one who says nothing unbecoming a well-bred man, or as one who does not give pain in his jokes, or even as one who gives delight to his listeners? Or is that definition itself undefinable, since different things are hateful or pleasant to different people? The kind of joke he will listen to will be the same, for the kind of jokes a person can put up with are also the kind of joke he seems to make. There are, then, jokes he will not make, for a joke is a kind of abuse. There are some kinds of abuse lawgivers forbid; perhaps they should have forbidden certain kind of jokes (1987:15).

The superiority theory furthermore is reflected in the writings of early rationalist philosopher Rene Descartes and most famously, 17th century empiricist Thomas Hobbes, who in *Leviathan*, encapsulated the essence of the theory: 'Sudden glory, is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter; and it is caused […] by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another' (1987:19). Indeed, Mills suggests that the model 'might be seen as a theory of laughter rather than of humour' (2009:81), as for its proponents, the 'collective, baying nature of group laughter is indicative of the unthinking and uncivilised nature of humour' (ibid.:81). Buckley similarly points out that the 'sudden glory' of the superiority theory, is 'a highly reductionist account

of human action. We are prompted to action by our appetite for pleasure and aversion to pain. Nothing else counts.' The convivial aspects of shared laughter are not accounted for (2008:5-7, see also Morreall 1987:4).

However, despite its conceptualising of humour as inevitably a win-lose interaction, the superiority theory does adequately account for the dynamics of some humorous exchanges, including racist jokes (Weaver 2011:17), and as such remains a relevant analytical tool. The theory continues to be one of the three predominant approaches to humour analysis; it is, however, less prevalent than the more discerning incongruity theory (Morreall 1987:6).

The incongruity theory

The incongruity theory of humour is based on the premise that laughter is produced through the unexpected, through the schism between what can reasonably be predicted and reality, such as the surprising sight of a Prime Minister dancing (badly) during an official engagement (as Theresa May did in August 2018). The first tenets of this theory were formulated by 18th century moral philosopher Francis Hutcheson in 1750 (Hutcheson 1987), and subsequently developed by European philosophers Kant (1892), Schopenhauer (1907) and Kierkegaard (1941). Within this framework, humour is delineated as a cerebral rather than a visceral practice, which furthermore is intrinsically connected with predominant social mores (Mills 2009:83).

Hutcheson discusses these complex social dimensions of laughter, which are passed over by superiority theorists (Buckley 2008:5). Distinguishing between different types of jokers, and different kinds of butts of jokes, Hutcheson argues that: 'Ridicule, like other edged tools, may do good in a wise man's hand, though fools may cut their fingers with it' (1987:39). Handled with care, humour can correct those in need of changing their ways, and consequently, 'the butt himself is as pleased as any in company' (ibid.:38). However: 'Let any of our wits try their mettle in ridiculing […] integrity and honesty, gratitude, generosity, or the love of

one's country […]. All their art will never diminish the admiration we must have for such dispositions' (ibid.:36). According to Hutcheson, the effectiveness of humour is thus not contingent on the might of the joker, as put forward by superiority theorists. Instead, it depends on the virtuousness of the object of the joke. This passing of value judgement is sustained by a wider societal consensus, and these shared beliefs challenge the social Darwinism of the superiority theory. Indeed, the types of laughs in the two scenarios and their associated states of mind differ, as Scruton points out: *schadenfreude*, the delight at somebody else's misfortune, is a distinct sentiment from congenial amusement (1987:165). The last laugh is not necessarily the derisive joker's; according to Hutcheson, it belongs to those who pass moral judgement on that which is being laughed at.

The subconscious cognitive processes suggested by Hutcheson are intrinsic to the incongruity theory (Berger 1998:3); moreover, it can be argued that the approach in fact comprises the superiority theory (ibid.:3). Buckley (2008) elaborated on the normative function of humour proposed by Hutcheson and combined this with the principles of the superiority thesis: 'Whether they recognise or not, those who laugh are moralists, for they uphold a set of comic norms. Our laughter identifies a set of comic vices, and the sting of laughter contains its own sanctions for transgressors' (2008:191). Possibly due to this wide applicability and flexibility, the incongruity thesis has emerged as the most popular approach to humour analysis (Morreall 1987:6, Oring 2003:1), surpassing both the superiority and relief theories.

The relief theory

The relief theory of humour was first formulated by philosopher and early sociologist Herbert Spencer in the 19th century, and elaborated and brought to prominence by Sigmund Freud with the publication of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* in 1905. The theory echoes the above-mentioned notion of humour as a bodily fluid: in '18th-century physiology, […] our nerves were thought to be not electro-chemicals but spirits, that is, fluids' (Morreal 2008:221). When social mores dictate the suppression of our

impulses, laughter serves to relieve the resultant tension through the release of nervous energy. Spencer emphasised biological processes as the causes of such laughter, which he argued to be 'a form of muscular excitement' (1987:104). By contrast, Freud integrated his understanding of humour with his life's work, the development of psychoanalysis. In this framework, humour serves as an outlet for repressed aggression or sexuality, as well as temporary escape to the innocuousness of childhood (1990:77). In addition, as Berger points out, many of the jokes Freud recounts are those of the Viennese Jewish community of the early twentieth century, and serve as case studies of humour as a strategy against marginalisation and hostility (1998:4).

The relief theory has been criticised, for 'failing to capture the essence of laughter or humor' (Morreall 1987:6), which itself remains uncertain (Lintott 2016:355). Moreover, many feminist contributors to the study of humour have compellingly challenged Freud's unvaryingly positioning women as passive targets of men's explicit joking, as will be discussed shortly. Nevertheless, Weaver illustrates how the aggressive dynamics of male joking pinpointed by Freud are reflected in contemporary racist humour (2011:28). Overall, the core assertion of relief theorists, that laughter can provide release, remains valid, on a collective as well as on an interpersonal level, as Jenkins substantiates: 'When humour undermines the forces that stifle the basic human needs for freedom, justice and dignity, laughter is experienced as a wave of liberating release' (1994:2).

Cue theory

This thesis will explore this 'liberating release' within the specific context of the sitcom genre. Prior to discussing existing scholarship on the liberating potential of humour, this section will outline Mills' (2009) reflections on the applicability of humour theory to the sitcom format, before specifying the manner in which this will done in this thesis's analytical chapters. Mills emphasises that the three principal theories of humour were formulated long before the sitcom genre came into existence (2009:92); their explicit function is to dissect distinct humorous incidents (ibid.:93). 'Sitcom,

however, is made up of many comic moments, alongside a whole host of other narrative and aesthetic factors, which means to analyse the joke alone is to ignore the variety of tools the genre employs' (ibid.:92). This seeming discrepancy is resolved through what Mills terms the 'comic impetus', that is, the fact that the sitcom genre is driven, first and foremost, by its intention to be humorous (2009:5-6, 93). He suggests 'cue theory' as a sitcom-specific extension of the dominant humour theories. Within cue theory, the emphasis shifts from the analysis of distinct jokes to the various mechanisms by which the genre is flagged as a humorous domain (ibid.:93), by way of conventions such as the laugh track and catchphrases. Applied in this context, cue theory 'allows for comic failure and offence. Humour theory conventionally […] sidelines texts which are intended to be funny but which fail to raise a laugh' (ibid.:94). Such aberrant readings, resulting from failed cues, do not detract from the fact that within the sitcom genre, humour is embedded within the use of cues (ibid.:97).

Mills' genre-specific contextualising of humour theory within the codes and conventions which result from the humorous impetus of the sitcom format (2009:49) is moreover relevant to this thesis's analysis. As outlined in the research questions, one of this thesis's emphases is the humorous tone of a specific sitcom, and cue theory will be applied where relevant in order to establish this. Within the critical discourse analyses of nine sitcom episodes, which will examine humorous exchanges as situated within extracts of dialogue, the three main humour theories outlined above will predominantly be applied in order to examine the workings of individual jokes. These distinct comic entities will then be argued to create a particular comedic tone; for example, in *Maude* and *Cybill*, the last laugh is usually with the feminist protagonist, whereas in *The Golden Girls*, the one-upmanship of the show's jokes is so evenly distributed among the four female main characters that the overall comic effect amounts to an egalitarian one. Such interplay between women's joking and their liberation is at the centre of this thesis, and Mills has pointed out that the purportedly conservative sitcom genre can function to 'demonstrate the tenuous and artificial nature of social norms, undermining

their […] obviousness' (ibid.:87). The wider societal impact of such subversive humorous strategies will be reflected upon in the next section.

Humour and liberation

As this thesis enquires into the efficacy of humour as a humanist-feminist strategy, it will engage with the premises underlying the statement that, 'freedom produces jokes and jokes produce freedom' (Richter, cited in Freud 1978:41). In concrete terms, this entails exploring both the social context in which humanist-feminist jesting originated, and its ideological impact. This section will present an overview of existing scholarship on the latter, that is, of the potentialities of humour as an emancipatory force. The specific contexts of female jokers, the sitcom genre and a particular sitcom's socio-political backdrop will be explored subsequently. Within this thesis, the term 'liberation' is utilised to refer to the acts of, '[setting] free, as from imprisonment or bondage' (Dictionary.com internet site, n.d.), and '[freeing] (a group or individual) from social or economic constraints or discrimination, especially arising from traditional role expectations or bias' (ibid.).

Evidence for the potential effectiveness of humour has been produced by researchers focussed on disparagement humour (humorous hostility aimed at a social group or their representatives (see, for example, Baumgartner 2015)). Researching the effects of such denigrating mocking of politicians, Mendiburo-Sequel et al. 'observed that a one-off exposure to political disparagement humor affects trust in politicians negatively; however, the effect it attains is short-lived and can be explained through the political content of the item and not only humor' (2017:1). Disparagement humour is frequently used to laugh at oppressed groups but simultaneously can function to undermine biased stereotypes. However, for that effect to occur, 'the audience must understand and appreciate that intention. And there's no guarantee that they will' (Ford 2016).

Writing during the Second World War, George Orwell (1941) found that the mere prospect of ridicule can stave off oppressive regimes: 'Why is the goose-step not used in England? There are, heaven knows, plenty of army

officers who would be only too glad to introduce some such thing. It is not used because the people in the street would laugh.' Yet there was no shortage of humour in fascist, goose-stepping Nazi Germany. By 1941, comedies were that country's most popular form of entertainment (Merziger 2007:281). Moreover, the phenomenon of 'whispered jokes', oppositional jests articulated by Germans in private during the Third Reich (ibid.:176), seems to prove that humour provided citizens with a means of civil disobedience, however small. In reality, 'the Nazis realized that this type of humor helped consolidate their rule. In the claustrophobic confines of Hitler's dictatorship, people needed to let off steam. If the masses vented their frustration by joking instead of taking to the streets, then that was in the political interest of the leadership' (Herzog 2017). Indeed, the 'whispered joke' practice appears to have been less common than would be claimed in post-war Germany (Merziger 2007:288); additionally, it was harnessed by the National Socialists, who, during their early years in power, utilised it to showcase a deceptive benevolence towards dissenters (ibid.:279). Throughout its twelve-year reign, the regime increased its regulation of 'German humour', which overwhelmingly emerges as nothing but a toothless practice of individual distraction (ibid.:289). Similarly, in the Soviet Union, jokes about Communist barbarities worked to normalise them (Herzog 2017); in both cases, humour provided temporary relief, as envisaged by Freud, but not a means of liberation.

These case studies of the most extreme of conditions draw attention to the manifold and contradictory functions of humour, which appear to be universal rather than confined to the terror of daily life under totalitarian regimes. In relation to American society, Berger argues that humour can be a tool of resistance as well as of domination, and correlates its effectiveness with the amount of people concerned: in small groups, he suggests, humour can be normative and control the behaviour of individuals, whereas on a larger scale, it can function to rouse people to resist the powerful. He illustrates the latter point with the *Doonesbury* cartoons, whose creator, Trudeau, became 'a spokesperson for the liberal conscience in America'

(Berger 1998:113). Meyer affirms that humour has the potential to unite people, by bestowing them with 'unity and hope in the face of obstacles' (Meyer 2000:317); however, he adds that simultaneously, humour can be divisive when used to subtly communicate hostility (ibid.:317). This ambiguity is corroborated by Mills, who delineates how offensive humour may be both cathartic or incendiary (Mills 2005:12). Medhurst confirms that comedy can be a weapon of the powerful as well as of the oppressed, and emphasises that, '[m]ost of the time, needless to say, it oscillates between these poles, and its exact position on the spectrum shifts constantly, depending on content, context and the standpoint from which it is viewed' (Medhurst 2007:19).

These complexities are developed by Davies (2007) and Jenkins (1994), whose arguments are particularly relevant to this thesis. Both thinkers' findings indicate that the effectiveness of humanist-feminist is likely to be limited: used in isolation, women's joking is unlikely to undermine patriarchal structures. Yet both concur that these despite limitations, humour remains a powerful and subtle weapon in a (feminist) rebel's arsenal. (As will be elaborated in chapter five, critical discourse analysis as a methodology is highly suited to identifying and contextualising the intricate nuances of humanist-feminist joking within the sitcom format.) Davies, reviewing existing research on the impact of humour as a means of resistance against, or of dominance within, repressive regimes, emphasises the lack of hard data for either case (2007:300). Contextualising humour as but one social practice among many, he argues that, '[i]t is extremely unlikely that, taken in aggregate, jokes have any significant effect one way or the other, particularly when compared with other social forces' (ibid.:300). He thus asserts that humour is neither powerful enough to topple oppressive structures nor to mollify those subjugated by them. Instead, he argues that, 'jokes are a thermometer not a thermostat, they can be used as an indication of what is happening in a society but they do not feed back into the social structures that generated them to any significant extent' (ibid.: 300). Jenkins, who used participant observation to explore the rebellious potential of comedic

performances in several countries, correspondingly found that 'humour can be ugly, cruel and fascistic as well as liberating' (1994:10-11). However, significantly, he concludes that, 'the most liberating function of humour is to free us to hope for the impossible. Our sense of humour is a mirror of our aspirations, reflecting our desire to escape the limitations that circumscribe our lives' (ibid.:10). This 'spiritual survival' (ibid.:10), he suggests, is why comedy is often censored.

Another cause for censorship may lie in the origins of comedy, as a medium of speaking truth to power. The king's fool, who 'far from being a real madman, was licensed to express truth in all its forms. In a *buffoonesque* body, the person who mocks can say the unsayable, going so far as to mock what cannot be mocked' (Lecoq 2009:125-6, emphasis in the original). The fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear* exemplifies this unique access to, and influence over, the powerful (Ghose 2008). Arguably, it is this fundamental connection with truthfulness that ensures that humour will inextricably be associated with hope, as suggested by Jenkins. The medieval roots of contemporary humour, and its relation to power, were furthermore explored by Bakhtin (1984) in an analysis of the 'carnivalesque' in *Rabelais and His World*. The Catholic carnival (Mardi Gras) celebrations in medieval Europe were a temporary 'suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions' (Bakhtin 1984:10). In contrast to official, solemn feast days, the carnival belonged to the people; it was a utopian '"world inside out"' (ibid.:11), dominated by physical pleasure and raucous laughter. That laughter was of a collective, not an individual nature. It was 'gay, triumphant and at the same time, mocking, deriding' (ibid.:11-12) and directed at everyone, by everyone: 'it is the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it' (ibid.:12). In Rabelais' grotesque realism, argues Bakhtin, the material, frail and failing, human body served to humble 'all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract' (ibid.:19). During this early springtime festival of impending renewal and change, unsightly old age was 'pregnant, death is gestation' (ibid.:52-3).

Bakhtin emphasises the ambivalence of the laughter during the carnival, which 'asserts and denies, buries and revives' (ibid.12). It is the laughter of a momentary, controlled anarchy, hedonistic-seeming and yet as integrated into existing structures as were the pseudo-subversive 'whispered jokes' in Nazi Germany. Yet the popular theme of the upside-down world of the carnival has been identified as contributing to the Reformation and the German Peasants' Revolt of 1525 (Little 1983:5). This ambiguity characterises research findings on the effectiveness of humour as a subversive force, which comes to mean that the specific context in which humour takes place needs to be considered all the more carefully.

This chapter has introduced the two theoretical frameworks which underpin this thesis, feminist and humour theories. In the first part, the different branches of feminist thought were introduced and contextualised within the trajectory of second-wave feminist activism. These historical developments will be referred to frequently within the critical discourse analyses of three sitcoms over three decades, as they account for the changing representations of feminist thought within popular culture. The second part defined key concepts and provided an overview of the contributions to humour theory which will be used to identify humorous discourses within the critical discourse analyses of sitcom episodes. It furthermore introduced existing scholarship on the emancipatory potential of humour; there exists extensive agreement within that literature on both the complexity and contingency on additional factors of that issue. Davies (2007) crystallises this point through the thermometer-not-thermostat metaphor quoted above, which corresponds to comedy's function as a civilisational barometer (Gilbert 2004, Medhurst 2007). This conceptualisation is central to this thesis, one of whose aims, as outlined above, is to assess the extent of women's freedom as discernible through their representation in mainstream sitcom.

In order to accurately judge humanist-feminist sitcom humour, the subsequent chapter will review existing literature on women's usage of humour.

Chapter 3: Contextualising women in relation to humour and comedy

This chapter will present an overview of existing research on the subject of women and humour, that is, the body of knowledge this thesis is built upon and aims to contribute to. It will begin by engaging with a range of scholarship on the wider dynamics of women's usage of humour, including analyses of Greek mythology and of female novelists. Subsequently, academic contributions which specifically address and delineate feminist humour will be relayed; these definitions of feminist humour are highly relevant to this thesis's differentiation between humanist-feminist and female-led sitcoms and will be critically reflected upon and developed in the methodology and analysis chapters. This will be followed by presenting academic analyses of female stand-up comedians' uses of humour. As will be elaborated, these studies are particularly relevant to the analysis of humanist-feminist sitcoms for two reasons: the frequent asserting of individual women's lived experience as part of a stand-up routine, and many sitcom stars' roots in that tradition. The chapter will conclude by reviewing the literature addressing the subject matter at the core of this thesis, female-led and woman-centred sitcoms.

Women's humour

Christopher Hitchens (2007) controversially argued in a *Vanity Fair* article that women, unless they were fat, Jewish or lesbian, 'or some combo of the three', were not funny; when it comes to humour, women were '[s]lower to get it, more pleased when they [did], and swift to locate the unfunny' (2007). He was not merely echoing widely-held opinion (Walker 1988, Gray 1994, Dobson 2006, Greer 2009, Coren 2010, Pulver 2013). Instead, his article was based upon a 2005 Stanford University School of Medicine study, in which ten male and ten female respondents underwent MRI scans while being asked to assess the funniness of cartoons they had been provided with (Azim et al. 2005). The scans showed that different parts

of the brain were activated by men and women during the process, findings which 'indicate sex-specific differences in neural response to humor with implications for sex-based disparities in the integration of cognition and emotion' (ibid.: abstract). However, the sample size of twenty is too small to allow for generalisations, and Hitchens' interpretation that naturally, 'women aren't funny' (2006), is hyperbole after all.

Instead, women' sense of the comical can be traced back to the ancient world. In *Women and Laughter*, an extensive study that will be referred to repeatedly throughout this chapter, Gray relates how in Greek myth, when the goddess Demeter mourns the loss of her daughter Persepolis to Hades, the god of the underworld, the servant maid Baubo liberates her from her depression by making obscene jokes; with this, 'comedy was born' (Gray 1994:1). The theme of the primal force of female bawdiness is explored by Higgins in *Women and Humor in Ancient Greece.* She outlines how female-dominated Greek cults of Demeter, which can be traced back to the Stone Age, were characterised by 'crude and aggressive joking' (2003.:17). The women would mock the gods and each other, using 'shameful speech' (ibid.:17). These humorous exchanges revealed that the women, 'held within them potentially explosive secrets, knowing – as no one else could – the paternity of the children they brought to birth. "Speaking the unspeakable" (*aporreta* or *arrheta*), the repressed or concealed thing, mirrored their ability to unlock the womb and its secrets' (ibid.:33). Even in antiquity, the shamefulness of women's sexuality, and in particular of their promiscuity, in patriarchal societies could be undermined with humour. Those humorous exchanges reflect radical feminist Daly's delineation of women 'really laughing […] at the reversal that is patriarchy' (Daly 1990: 17). They reveal the great power women held over their perhaps cuckolded, oblivious or suspicious, husbands; theirs was the last laugh. Indeed, according to Friedrich Engels (1884, 2010), this inequity between the sexes had been the reason for the establishment of the nuclear family, which enabled men to control women's sexuality and to ascertain the paternity of their offspring.

Such toppling of deeply entrenched norms is similarly a central function of comedy in the oeuvre of female novelists, argues Little in *Comedy and the Woman Writer*. For example, in a discussion of Monique Wittig, she argues that to 'suggest, without the protective context of a courtly revel or a Mardi Gras, that words such as *wife, husband, woman, father* are funny-hilarious deviations from some unstated standard - is to make a real gesture against established values' (1983:8, emphasis in the original). This reclaiming of language and its meanings by women and by the female characters they create, is highly relevant to the ownership of the comic word practised by female comedians. Focussing on the works of Virginia Woolf and Muriel Spark, she furthermore asserts that both authors' use of comedy challenges foundational assumptions, archetypes and deities (ibid.:178): their humorous writing 'celebrates, sometimes, a radically overturned world, a world in which Orlando shrugs off civilisation after civilisation' (ibid.:179). These authors, Little argues, derive humour by laughing at behaviours ingrained in individuals during primary socialisation, and they are thus more radical than more conventional comic writers who mock mannerisms acquired later in life (ibid.:186-7). Little frequently invokes Bakhtinian imageries of an upside-down, carnivalesque world when analysing the comedy created by female writers (ibid.:178-188). Yet in her analysis, women's comedy and laughter are not temporary, festive practices but instead 'violate the usual festive tradition, […] in that they imply no end to the holiday flyting' (ibid.:188). Consequently, they have the potential to be 'revolutionary' (ibid.:8), and to make 'celebration the imagination's prelude to action' (ibid.:188).

The significance of women engaging in the act of writing is pivotal to the argument put forward by poststructuralist feminist Cixous in her 1976 article, 'The Laugh of the Medusa': 'woman must write woman. And man, man' (1976:877). Reflecting the ideas of the second feminist wave of the nineteen-seventies, Cixous urges: 'Let's hurry: […] Almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity' (ibid.:885). Women as authors are no longer defined by 'the discourse of man' (ibid.:887) but are instead claiming male-defined words and using them as tools for their escape

(ibid.:887). She likens patriarchal discourses to a siren song, defining the Medusa, who represents womanhood, as monstrous; once the sirens' spell is broken, the snake-haired Medusa emerges as 'beautiful and […] laughing' (ibid.:885). The relevance and potential of such self-authoring for female humourists has been explicated by Gray, who uses Cixous' concepts to assert that the 'Trickster, the Flyer/ Thief, the Clown is a role that women can, and must, embrace' (Gray 1994:37). In *Women and Laughter*, Gray further explicates the interconnectedness of humour and sexuality. In both arenas, women have traditionally been situated as passive objects (1994:6). In a 'me Tarzan/ you Jane, I laugh/ you don't' (ibid.:7) dichotomy, humour, like sex, is inseparable from relations of power. That power has enabled men both to define humour, and to exclude women from humorous agency (ibid.:8). Mirroring Mulvey's (1975) cinematic male gaze, there exists, she argues, a 'male laugh' which can be countered with 'radical strategies – alternative comedy, alternative laughter' (ibid.:15). Whether in stand-up comedy, sitcoms or in other contexts, women's funniness starts with their laying claim to male-defined language and subsequently assembling new discourses.

Indeed, women's comedic discourses, if they are to authentically reflect the female experience, will necessarily diverge from established, male conventions, as Walker ascertains in *A Very Serious Thing*. She points out that women's humour is comparable to that of ethnic minorities (1988:36), as both groups ostensibly continue pre-existing comedic traditions while simultaneously challenging these conventions' very premises (ibid.:36). She exemplifies her point with the varying ways in which incongruity functions for male and female jokers in an American context, that is, within the ideological framework relevant to the sitcoms analysed in this thesis. Both sexes, she argues, joke about the shortfall between American ideals of freedom and equality, and individuals' lived reality. However, men use humour as a means to redress that shortfall, while women joke about the fact that, 'the world they inhabit is not of their making, and often not much to their liking' (ibid.:36). American women are thus 'outsiders' in their own culture, and while both men and women laugh at gender stereotypes, these

typifications were created by men (ibid.:44). Overall, the American humorous tradition is defined by the 'freedom of the male to enjoy, to criticise, to question' (ibid.:44). Walker thus engages with the interplay between humour, freedom and gender, specifically in the American context at the core of this thesis, and her wide-ranging study is highly relevant to the critical discourse analyses undertaken in later chapters.

Barreca, in *They Used To Call Me Snow White ... But I Drifted, Women's Strategic Use of Humor* affirms many of Walker's findings. She likens the variances between male and female humour to those between a revolt and a revolution (1991:179), with women's humour probing more deeply and challenging fundamental assumptions and structures (ibid.:179). Throughout the book, Barreca illustrates how sex roles affect humorous expression: jokes about men are perceived as neutral, gender-blind, 'applying to "everyone"' (ibid.:23), whereas, she argues, jokes about women only apply to women (ibid.:23). The active making of jokes is a risky, masculine activity (ibid.:5), and women's traditional part in the interaction is a supportive one, supplying with their laughter the 'desired response' (ibid.:5); for women to have a sense of humour means laughing with men, at themselves (ibid.:7). Women at either extreme of the age spectrum are somewhat exempted from those rules. Barreca describes the infectious guffaws particularly prevalent among teenage girls navigating their 'scant sexual knowledge' (ibid.:8), and old women's knowing vulgarity. The latter are able to break gender scripts as they are 'out of the sexual race and can comment safely from the sidelines' (ibid.:51). In general, women's joking differs from men's in that it tends to punch up, not down, laughing at the 'powerful rather than the pitiful' (ibid.:13), and their humour mirrors their sexuality, based as both are on knowledge and power which are 'unnerving to men' (ibid.:62). Like the authors introduced above, Barreca points to the destabilising potential of women's humour; to this, she adds a detailed breakdown of gender roles in relation to active joking which is highly relevant to this thesis's critical discourse analyses.

Gilbert's *Performing Marginality* draws upon both Walker and Barreca, as well as upon the author's experience as a stand-up comic, and her analysis of women as performers will be referred to in the subsequent section. She carefully details the established conventions of American humour, and women's relation to this. Marginality, she argues, is a social construct (2004:6), and a quality that defines both female and feminist humour (ibid.:5). As shared humour creates in-group and out-group alliances (ibid.:14), female humour can be an effective tool of resistance (ibid.:5), drawing upon women's raised awareness of themselves as an oppressed group as a result of second-wave feminism (ibid.:xiv). In the specific context of the American melting pot identity, humour and marginality interact in complex ways. Oppressed groups such as women and ethnic minorities are often laughed at while simultaneously, urban, alienated communities and their experiences of absurdity define humorous discourses (ibid.:18). Jewish humour in particular developed as a means of coping with adversity, and would shape the 'honest and "realistic" spirit of American humour' (ibid.:19). Notably the 'laughter through tears' (ibid.:20) of Jewish humour contains a defiant challenge to oppressors despite its self-depreciation. This paradox is central to women's humour, which, as will be elaborated shortly, frequently laughs at women and femininity (ibid.:21).

Gilbert thus provides vital insight into the formation of women's humour in the American context. In this, the context of the subsequent critical discourse analyses, humorous speech is uniquely grounded in an ideology in which the experience of the immigrant-outsider is the norm, and freedom of expression constitutionally enshrined. She furthermore reinforces the moral nature and justness of the challenge to social norms posed by women's humour, a thread common to all thinkers reviewed here. There furthermore exists a wide consensus among these authors that funny women's use of the virtue of honesty, as stated a defining characteristic of American humour, has the potential to aid the revolutionary change envisioned by feminists. Feminist comedian Roseanne Barr related her experience: 'One day, I read a quote: "If a woman told the truth about her life, the world would split open".

I found a stage where I began to tell the truth about my life – because I couldn't tell the truth off the stage. And very quickly, the world began to blow apart' (Barr 1990:202). The subsequent section will explore the centrality of such truth-telling to feminist humour.

Feminist humour

The line between women's and feminist humour can be difficult to draw. 'Most feminist activity has been centrally concerned with silence, and with its breaking' (Gray 1994:13), and humorous discourses are part of this process. Barreca finds that, 'women's humour is almost by definition feminist […] with the exception of those early, self-deprecating "I am so ugly …" jokes' (1991:82). The self-sabotaging nature that can characterise women's joking is addressed by Goodman (1995), who in 'Gender and Humour' states that humour relies on the assertion of subjectivity. Subjective, first-hand accounts of women's experience can be non-feminist or anti-feminist as they are 'a legacy of the cultural objectification of women' (ibid.:289). However, as she points out, as women's speech has traditionally been dismissed and mocked, the very act of speaking out is a potential threat to patriarchal structures (ibid.:293). Gilbert similarly argues that the subversive functions of humour are not necessarily negated by self-deprecatory joking (1997, 2004:21). This interplay of femaleness, traditional femininity, societal context, definitions and strands of feminism and humorous self-depreciation, as embodied by but far from exclusive to Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller, is a highly intricate process. Rivers, for example, 'simultaneously reinforces and challenges' ageist and sexist assumptions (Lockyer 2011:121; see also Gray 1994, Gilbert 1997). These inherent complexities and ambiguities will be taken into consideration when, as part of this thesis, differentiating between woman-centred and female-led sitcoms. These evaluations will be made on a case-by-case basis, and will be informed by the arguments presented here.

Merrill, in 'Feminist humor: rebellious and self-affirming', pinpoints two criteria which characterise feminist humour: it inherently assumes a female audience (1988:279) and it is empowering to women (ibid.:279).

Comedy, she argues, ‘is both an aggressive and intellectual response to human nature and experience’ (ibid.:278), two qualities which, in historical terms, women have not been able to lay claim to until very recently (ibid.:278). As a consequence, there were few successful female stand-up comedians before the nineteen-seventies. Notable exceptions such as Rivers and Diller, ‘who have achieved mainstream acclaim in this traditionally “unfeminine” genre are so self-depreciating as to make fun of other women, or themselves; thereby reinforcing the status quo’ (ibid.:273). Such performances required their female audience members to be ‘somewhat schizophrenic’ and to ‘devalue [their] own experience’ (ibid.:279). Feminist humour, according to Merrill, differs from this in its addressing women as ‘survivors not victims’ (ibid.:175). Using the humorous publication *Titters* as an example, she outlines how feminist humour is unambiguously directed ‘from woman author to woman reader’ (ibid.:276).

A further attribute of feminist humour is highlighted by Walker, who delineates it as a normative expression of explicit superiority over the dominant culture, formulated by a ‘person who knows herself to be right’ (1988:157). Feminist humour thus does not break society’s rules but denies them entirely (ibid.:156). The use of humour by second-wave feminist activists continued a tradition instigated by the suffragettes, who would gender-reverse the condescending rhetoric directed at them to great comic effect (ibid.:149). Walker cites the concluding lines of Alice Duer Miller’s poem ‘A Consistent Anti to Her Son’, composed in response to the claim that polling stations are unsafe places for women:

> I’ve guarded you always, Willie,
> Body and soul from harm;
> I’ll guard your faith and honor,
> Your innocence and charm
> From the polls and their evil spirits,
> Politics, rum and pelf;
> Do you think I’d send my only son
> Where I would not go myself?

The same humorous strategy was utilised by Gloria Steinem in her 1978 *Ms.* Magazine article, 'If Men Could Menstruate' ('they would brag about how long and how much'), illustrating how feminist humour continued as a tool which 'elucidates and challenges women's subordination' (Walker 1988:152). However, Walker counsels against over-estimating that tool's effectiveness: as of her time of writing, feminist humour remained predominantly associated only with stand-up performances and cartoons (ibid:166). Moreover, using humour as an indicator (or civilisational barometer), she finds that contemporaneous comedy reveals 'that the women's movement has done little to change women's lives' (ibid.:165), with many female humourists addressing the stresses of traditional, domestic duties (ibid.:159). It is worth noting that 1988, the year in which *A Very Serious Thing* was published, was furthermore the year in which the sitcoms *Roseanne* (ABC 1988-1997; 2018) and *Murphy Brown* (CBS 1988-1998; 2018 -) were first broadcast, marking the explicitly feminist Roseanne Barr's transition from stand-up to prime-time television, and the ground-breaking comedic depictions of a powerful woman in a male-dominated workplace respectively. It can be speculated that the shows' great mainstream success might have positively impacted upon Walker's gauging of the impact of feminist humour.

Walker's and Merrill's definitions of feminist humour as empowering, as redefining the pre-existing, male-dominated humorous paradigm, as being formulated by, for and about women, and moreover as laughing with, not at women, are highly pertinent to the subsequent sitcom analysis. As Walker points out, stand-up comedy was crucial in the development of feminist humorous discourses, and the following section will present an overview of that tradition.

Women in stand-up comedy

The booming American stand-up circuit of the nineteen-eighties (Kohen 2012:155) was foundational for the expression of novel and challenging humorous discourses, which in turn would inform subsequent

sitcom representations. In addition to Roseanne Barr, a number of that decade's stand-ups would advance to sitcom stardom, including Jerry Seinfeld (*Seinfeld*, NBC Seinfeld 1989-1998), Tim Allen (*Home Improvement*, ABC 1991-1999), Brett Butler (*Grace Under Fire*, ABC 1993-1998) and Ellen DeGeneres (*Ellen*, ABC 1994-1998). While the atmosphere of the stand-up circuit was that of a male-dominated, aggressive 'boys' club' (ibid.:155), it simultaneously provided a unique niche for the expression and development of female and feminist comic discourses.

As this section will relate, these performances can be traced back to the vaudeville performers of the late nineteenth century. However, the integration of second-wave feminist ideology with the pseudo-autobiographical form of many stand-up comedians' routines, fundamentally changed the nature of these comedic discourses, as women comedians began 'speaking the unspeakable' (Gilbert 1997:319). This claiming of the revelatory comedic word would, as will be elaborated in the subsequent section, impact upon woman-centred sitcoms.

The origins of the contemporary stand-up field are in the variety show, American vaudeville and British music hall traditions (Baker 2006, Banks and Swift 1987, Double 2012). In his tribute to the latter, Baker (2006) documents the remarkable success and cultural impact of music hall stars such as Marie Lloyd and Florrie Forde in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Gray analyses the material covered by such performers and identifies themes of spinsterhood, desire and social class; Marie Lloyd, she argues, 'celebrates female desire, spells out its price, and remains ambivalent as to whether that price is fair. This is a far more complex relationship with an audience than is often suggested' (1994:125). The burlesque tradition was evident in the persona and comedy of seductive Hollywood film star Mae West from the early 1930s onwards (Mizejewski 2014:19). In the nineteen-fifties, Phyllis Diller and Elaine May began appearing in nightclubs, performing jokes and improvisation routines respectively, and with this, 'laid the groundwork for a new kind of female comic' (Kohen 2012:7). In the mid-sixties, Joan Rivers started to perform comedic confessions, 'personal thoughts and stories' in

Greenwich Village (ibid.:28). In 1972, Sammy Shore opened the Comedy Store in Burbank, Los Angeles, and, under the management of his wife Mitzi, the venue became a 'call to go west' for 'droves' of comedians, as it evolved into a springboard to the neighbouring television studios (ibid.:123). It was an almost exclusively male environment. The 'guys were so good' (ibid.:131) that they quasi-monopolised the main stage, and Shore set up the Belly Room for female performers only; this was a small, cramped space and struck performers as a 'sexist and weird' (ibid.:135) arrangement. In the eighties, individual female comedians, including Roseanne Barr, Joy Behar, Rita Rudner, Ellen DeGeneres and Pauls Poundstone, secured television deals and national prominence. Nevertheless, female comedians and 'women's humour' remained marginalised (ibid.:155).

The dynamics that affect such perceptions of women stand-ups and their material, which are often applicable to female sitcom protagonists, have been pinpointed by Gray, who depicts the paradoxes which characterise women's stand-up comedy in patriarchal societies. Like women's sexuality, humorous women's ability to prompt laughter can be perceived by male audiences as threatening. On stage, women stand-ups present a carefully controlled persona, often based on a manipulated version of their autobiography (ibid.:148-9), and this persona is intended to invoke laughter rather than desire (ibid.:138). Their humour, even if self-depreciatory, marks them as aggressive (ibid.:138), and while all stand-ups get heckled, the jeers directed at female performers are often sexual in nature, as well as questioning 'their right to be there at all' (ibid.:146). Yet their power is such that they can manoeuvre the men in the audience, however temporarily, into adopting a female gaze; a feat that was notably accomplished, both as a stand-up and sitcom star, by Roseanne Barr. Crucial to this process is the revealing of exclusively female experiences such as menstruation within a comedy routine. This breaking of patriarchal taboos became common during nineteen-eighties women's stand-up performances (ibid.:155), and, as will be argued below, impacted upon woman-centred sitcoms.

Gilbert, in ‘Performing Marginality: Comedy, Identity and Cultural Critique’ points out that such gendered shifting of perspective exemplifies female comedians’ subversively utilising of the ‘master’s tools’ (1997:224). She emphasises that the established depiction of a laughable other, as posited by the superiority theory, underpins all stand-up performances:

> objectification is at the heart of stand-up comedy. By performing in a public space, the comic is exposed, made vulnerable before the audience. With every action, every utterance, she calls attention to herself – as art, as entertainment, as commodity. Sometimes, she makes herself the butt of her jokes (Diller); at other times, she targets individuals or groups, reducing them to stereotypes (Barr). The audience identifies – sometimes with the comic, sometimes with the target […] (ibid.:323). This reveals the rare power the female stand-up comedian wields: as a performer, she is exposed to criticism, but in response to a routine she has created, and thus controls.

The novel comic discourses generated by stand-up comedians in the nineteen-eighties are likely to have impacted on the dialogue featured in the contemporaneous sitcom to be analysed, *The Golden Girls*, which, as will be illustrated in chapter six, humorously smuggled feminist rhetoric into the ideological mainstream. The nineteen-nineties show, *Cybill*, was one of several woman-centred shows to be created as a direct result of *Roseanne*’s success, and was thus part of a lineage that reaches back to feminist stand-up comedy, as well as to earlier sitcoms, to radio shows, and husband-and-wife vaudeville performances. The following section will detail academic analyses of that lineage.

Women in sitcom

This evolution of female-led sitcoms, and the changing depictions of their protagonists, are analysed by Patricia Mellencamp, in *High Anxiety, Catastrophe, Age and Comedy* (1996). Mellencamp traces the archetypal origins of the genre to the live program *The Goldbergs* (NBC, CBS 1949-1956) (315), and subsequently explores three milestone shows in depth: *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (CBS 1950-1958), *I Love Lucy* (CBS 1951-1957) and *Roseanne*. Wedded couple Burns and Allen drew upon their marriage, and their prior vaudeville and radio performances, in their portrayal

of a wealthy married couple whose comfortable life is regularly disrupted by Allen's zany exploits. Burns is the straight man to his lovably chaotic wife. Her weekly ploys were disorienting to such an extent that she 'unraveled (*sic*) patriarchal laws' (1996:317); however, although the audience is in collusion with her (ibid.:320), and despite the fact that she always succeeds, her status remains that of a child in relation to her husband, who as omniscient narrator guides the audience through the episodes (ibid.:319). As Mellencamp emphasises, this 'contradiction of the program and the double bind of the female spectator and comedian – women as both subject and object of the comedy', are not easily reconciled (ibid.:321). These complexities, evident in the earliest female-led sitcoms, would still define shows produced decades later, as the subsequent critical discourse analyses will demonstrate.

As Mellencamp shows, they were acutely evident in *I Love Lucy*, the fifties sitcom produced by and starring husband-and-wife team Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball. Their production company, Desilu, introduced with the show the defining characteristics of the sitcom format: the 'three camera format, the central living room and women's place within the home, the studio audience, frontal staging, and the laugh track' (ibid.:323). Desilu was larger than rival studios MGM or Fox, and considered the biggest studio overall (ibid.:326). Ball, the successful businesswoman, portrayed the character Lucy Ricardo, a discontented housewife; similarly to *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, the 'series typified the both/and logic and the paradox of women and comedy (and work)' (ibid.:323). The show tread a fine line in its depiction of the frustrations and limitations many women faced in the nineteen-fifties: 'The serious contradictions of women's lives were blatantly there, often spoken, but covered up by laughter and by Lucy's childish antics' (ibid.:323). In the show, Ball groundbreakingly lay claim to the previously male terrain of physical comedy, sent up domestic drudgery, and portrayed a close female friendship, with Lucy's neighbour and co-conspirator Ethel. At the same time, as Mellencamp pinpoints, the character was 'always wrong and apologetic', and the program served as escapist entertainment for real-life housewives (ibid.:333).

Such ideological inconsistencies were notably absent from the next show analysed by Mellencamp. *Roseanne*, she argues, differs from the two earlier sitcoms in its explicit feminism (ibid.:340), its protagonist's intellect and logic (ibid.:343), and its championing of the working class (ibid.:344). The latter quality is reflected in plotlines as well as in the star's overweight physicality (ibid.:344). The fictional Roseanne's close friendship with her sister is 'a postmodern reprise of Ethel and Lucy' (ibid.:350), and she is the more dominant partner in her relationship with her husband (ibid.:350). Most significantly, former stand-up comedian and creator of an eponymous sitcom Barr was an active joke teller (ibid.:335) who weaponised her comedy (ibid.:341). This is in stark contrast to *I Love Lucy's* humour, which worked to submerge anger (ibid.:337): audiences laughed at Lucy but with Roseanne; *Roseanne* is thus, in the terminology of this thesis, a woman-centred rather than female-led show. Barr's significant behind-the-scenes power was, argues Mellencamp, the likely reason for the relentless, negative press coverage of her professional and private life (ibid.:345).

Both Roseanne, the sitcom character, and Barr, the actress and creator, personify the female insubordination outlined by Kathleen Rowe in her study of *The Unruly Woman, Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (1995). The 'unruly woman', a conceptualisation highly relevant to the analysis of all the sitcoms examined in this thesis, is a subject rather than an object, and disruptive to the status quo through possessing one or more of the following characteristics:

(1) The unruly woman creates disorder by dominating, or trying to dominate men. She is unable or unwilling to confine herself to her proper place.

(2) Her body is excessive or fat, suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her physical appetites.

(3) Her speech is excessive, in quantity, content, or tone.

(4) She makes jokes, or laughs herself.

(5) She may be androgynous or hermaphroditic, drawing attention to the social construction of gender.

(6) She may be old or a masculine crone, for old women who refuse to become invisible in our culture are often considered grotesque.

(7) Her behaviour is associated with looseness and occasionally whorishness, but her sexuality is less narrowly and negatively defined than is that of the femme fatale. She may be pregnant.

(8) She is associated with dirt, liminality (thresholds, borders, or margins) and taboo, rendering her above all a figure of ambivalence. (1995:31)

Rowe outlines historical and cultural depictions of the concept, including Socrates's wife Xantippe, the character of Kate in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, the avenging women in the Dutch film *A Question of Silence* (1982), *The Muppet Show*'s Miss Piggy and Roseanne Barr. They all represent female 'rebellion against [women's] proper place' (ibid.:44), through 'the female mouth and its dangerous emanations – laughter and speech' (ibid.:44). Barr's comedy exemplifies those qualities, and Rowe pinpoints the ambivalent nature of contemporaneous tabloid stories about Barr's personal life, which were frequently aimed to contain her professional triumph by portraying her as 'an object, a victim', or as lacking in '"class" or "taste"' (ibid.:59). Barr personifies Bakhtin's conceptualisation of the 'grotesque body' (ibid.:62), and her fatness signifies a transgressiveness that was central to both her success and the hostile media coverage (ibid.:60-61). She subverts pre-conceived notions of femininity, and is one of very few 'funny angry women' (ibid.:68). In both her stand-up routines and in her sitcom, the audience has to adapt a female gaze (ibid.:69, 82) and often, men are expected to 'laugh at their symbols of masculine pride' (ibid.:69). This female gaze is furthermore evident in the show's frank representation of women's experience of their bodies (with one episode focusing on her TV daughter's first period) (ibid.:86), and of the nuclear family. However, the family as an institution is not fundamentally questioned (ibid.:82), and *Roseanne* therefore merges dominant liberal discourses with those of a '"proletarian feminism"'(ibid.:81). The successful integration of such

potential contradictions is emblematic of Barr's career, argues Rowe, for she portrays, 'a fat woman who is sexually "normal", a sloppy housewife who is also a good mother, […], who hates matrimony but loves her husband, and who can mock the ideology of true womanhood yet consider herself a Domestic Goddess' (ibid.:91).

Such conflicting discourses are common in woman-centred shows, as Bonnie Dow (1996) demonstrates in *Prime-time Feminism*, which examines televisual representations of feminism throughout the nineteen-seventies and eighties. Focussing on four sitcoms (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS 1970-1977), *One Day at a Time* (CBS 1975-1984), *Designing Women* (CBS 1986-1993) and *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998)), and one television drama series (*Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (CBS 1993-1998)), Dow outlines how the dominant political ideologies of the latter decade impacted upon feminism, as portrayed within popular culture. The first show to be examined, the highly successful *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* is, she argues, characterised by a 'lifestyle feminism', and therefore reflective of the contemporaneous mass media marketing of the feminist movement, as a way of life chosen by, in particular, single, working women (1996:52). The sitcom's set-up, which reflected that premise, was explicitly informed by the then-contemporary liberal-feminist movement (ibid.:28). However, the protagonist is a token female in a male-dominated workplace, where, in a hegemonic compromise, she assumes the traditionally female role of a passive and empathetic 'office wife/ mother/ daughter' (ibid.:50). Similar ideological compromises are detectable in *One Day at a Time*. This sitcom, as Dow points out, was not the first but the first successful, show to portray a divorced, single mother (ibid:60). It features what Dow dubs a 'therapeutic feminism' (ibid.:68), as the revelatory rhetoric clearly references the feminist practice of consciousness raising (ibid.:74). Common in then-contemporaneous women's groups, consciousness raising sessions would expose individual women's experiences of patriarchal oppression as structurally ingrained inequalities. They were aimed to liberate women from these constraints and similarly, the heroine of *One Day at a Time* sought 'self-actualization, independence and fulfilment' (ibid.:73). However,

according to Dow, the show's 'self-help feminism' (ibid.:78) was emblematic of a wider cultural trend of transforming a collective feminist awareness of structural inequalities into personal challenges to be tackled by individuals, and thus of a 'deradicalisation of feminist issues' (ibid.:78).

The ideological dominance of individualism would steadily increase throughout the nineteen-eighties, and inform the then-emerging postfeminist value system. Postfeminism, as will be elaborated in chapter six, exemplified a hegemonic struggle in which the aims of second-wave feminism activists were co-opted and diminished (ibid.:87-88). Its impact is reflected in the set-up of *Designing Women*, an all-female interior design company, for 'these are not women trying to make it in a man's world […], [and it is] a retreat from the feminist challenge posed by earlier programs' (ibid.:107). Yet simultaneously, this premise made possible a 'woman-centred analysis of sexual politics, the ultimate goal of [the radical-feminist practice of] consciousness-raising' (ibid.:109), and the representation of a differentiated range of female perspectives (ibid.:118). Dow emphasises that the show's unequivocally feminist discourses are paralleled only by *Maude* (ibid.:118-119); nevertheless, the sitcom was overall 'at its best […] inconsistent' (ibid.:126) in its blending of second-wave feminist and postfeminist values. *Murphy Brown*, the second eighties sitcom analysed, is less ambiguous; indeed, its protagonist is, argues Dow, 'post-feminism personified' (ibid.:135). Like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, this show is focussed upon a female journalist. However, the nineteen-eighties sitcom heroine no longer possesses many conventionally feminine qualities, nor a community of female friends (ibid.:143). Instead, Murphy Brown is 'the ultimate rugged individualist' (ibid.:145), a woman succeeding in a male domain by combining model looks with a thoroughly masculine demeanour (ibid.:141), an incongruity from which the show derives its humour (ibid.:142). Dow contrasts Murphy's aggression and competitiveness with an alternate nineteen-eighties postfeminist discourse, as presented in *Dr. Quinn, Medical Woman*. This drama series, set in a nineteenth century frontier town, is both utopian and nostalgic in its portrayal of a female doctor and community leader

(ibid.:195). That main character's motherhood, however, is central to her identity and success, and thus, in line with postfeminist and socially conservative discourses, portrayed as 'timeless, transhistorical and thoroughly naturalised' (ibid.:195). Overall, Dow finds that,

> the 1970s sitcoms, for all their problems, eventually made it clear that women could "make it on their own". In the 1980s, the issue was no longer whether women could succeed but how they would handle the consequences of that success (ibid.:83).

Such tracking of ideological and representational changes in depictions of humanist-feminism, which is at the core of this thesis, is furthermore implicit in Lauren Rabinovitz's (2002) evaluation of, 'Ms.-Representation, The Politics of Feminist Sitcoms'. Rabinovitz emphasises the commercial motivation underlying televisual portrayals of feminism:

> Network programming executives initially became interested in "feminist programming" in the early 1970s because it was good business. […] A more independently minded female generation was coming of age (the baby boomers), and advertising agencies began earmarking greater proportions of their budgets to address the swelling numbers of female consumers under fifty (2002:145).

She concurs with Dow that the resultant representation of feminism was overwhelmingly of the liberal-feminist branch of the movement, and excluded differentiated engagements with the impact of class and race on women's lives; consequently, television does not exploit 'feminism's potential for radical change' (ibid.:145). Again like Dow, she identifies contradictory representations of feminism in *Designing Women*, but specifically pinpoints the sitcom's racism and homophobia as undermining its feminist themes (ibid.:148). The Atlanta-set show features storylines with lesbian characters in a problematic, ambiguous and potentially homophobic manner; in one episode, a lesbian character's 'sexuality remains Other, inexplicable' (ibid.:151). A black character, Anthony, whose representation in several episodes, 'reproduces racist relations by infantilizing the black man through feminine excess administered at the hands of the Southern belle' (ibid.:152). Rabinovitz furthermore engages with the range of female experience articulated in the sitcom, as recognised by Dow. In particular, she identifies 'feminine excess as comic [as] a regular practice in feminist

sitcoms' (ibid.:148); examples of this stock character include Blanche in *The Golden Girls* and in *Designing Women*, Suzanne Sugarbaker, who embodies the polar opposite of her feminist sister (ibid.:149).

In *Murphy Brown*, argues Rabinovitz, the 'feminine excess' is included through the character of Corgy, a junior journalist. However, the sharp contrast between Corgy and the masculine Murphy in the sitcom's early seasons begins to blur and then to disappear altogether, as the characters are depicted with greater psychological complexity (ibid.:156) in later seasons. Significantly, in addition to these representations of feminism and femininity, Rabinovitz highlights the show's 'oscillation between political left and right', which is epitomised by its portrayal of Murphy's pregnancy and parenting (ibid.:158). She points out that ten sitcoms portrayed widowed or divorced single mothers from 1975 to 1985 (ibid.:146); the ultimate 'postfeminist New Woman' (ibid.:160) Murphy diverges from this lineage by freely choosing lone parenthood. In 1992, then-Vice President Dan Quayle derided the sitcom's primetime normalisation of single motherhood, and the fictional Murphy responded to this real-life event in a diegetic news report. This represented an 'aggressive mix of the real and fictitious, the program's feminist statements transcend the realm of fiction and thereby achieve a credibility that makes them dangerous' (ibid.:161). However, Rabinovitz concludes, even *Murphy Brown's* feminism remains contained through an emphasis on individualism, 'the ultimate ideological safety net for the management of social change' (ibid.:163). As the subsequent discursive analysis will demonstrate, similar dynamics are at play in *The Golden Girls*, which was produced contemporaneously to *Murphy Brown*.

Female-led sitcoms are analysed from a novel perspective by Rosie White (2018), who in *Television, Comedy and Femininity, Queering Gender* focusses on the sitcom genre's potentialities as a queer medium. Drawing upon Judith Butler (2008), the study is based on the concept of gender performativity, which is related to but distinct from the performance of gender through the absence of choice (2018:5). Queer theory works to 'address and expose the fiction of heteronormative identities, even gesturing towards

possibilities beyond hegemonic gender roles' (ibid.:15); in relation to comedy, the often untraditional scripting of female characters can extend this process (ibid.:15). This is exemplified by *I Love Lucy*, which depicts a 'liminial, queered femininity' (ibid.:49) through, for example, the protagonist's frequent dressing-up routines, in which she frequently masquerades as male, minority, working-class characters (ibid.:49). White finds that, 'Lucy is equally "curious" in her representation of femininity, even though her disruptions are contained at the end of each episode. […] Comedy offers a commentary on gender here, in that *being* funny can destabilise hegemonic gender identities' (ibid.:49, emphasis in the original). By contrast, *The Golden Girls* is less effective at representing a 'queered community' (ibid.:167) due to both its emphasis on heteronormativity and its commercial success. However, argues White, a British comedy focussed on elderly citizens, *You're Only Young Twice* (ITV 1977-1981) is 'haunted by queer sexualities' (ibid.:170), including hints at lesbian identities and representations that question the female characters' '"natural" mothering abilities' (ibid.:172). This show exemplifies the latent capacity of television comedy to 'represent imagined communities that draw upon an unacknowledged history of socialist, feminist and queer politics' (ibid.:201). However, according to White, successful, primetime American, sitcoms such *The Big Bang Theory* are, despite of their depictions of queered identities, limited in the extent to which they can challenge heteronormative narratives (ibid.:121). This thesis will engage with this finding, and analyse such mainstream sitcoms and their subversive potential, if with a different methodology and emphasis than those adopted by White.

In conclusion, this chapter has examined a range of scholarly explorations of women's relation to humour. The studies on the general subject matter differ in their respective emphases, however, there exists a notable consensus on the latent, subversive potential of women's humour. The related, repeatedly-identified themes of female agency, authorship and transgression will be drawn upon and, where appropriate, extended in the

subsequent analysis of three sitcoms. The stand-up comedy genre has been identified as a springboard for many future sitcom stars. From the nineteen-seventies onwards, it moreover became a crucial arena for the unprecedented public expression of second-wave feminist humour. These female jesters laid claim to a previously masculine domain, and in their performances combined vulnerability with power when positioning their audiences in relation to comic material reflective of a female point of view. Such commanding of the humorous narrative is highly relevant to sitcoms with humanist-feminist protagonists and discourses; indeed, the interrelation and transition between the stand-up and sitcom fields is embodied by Roseanne Barr, whose eponymous sitcom differs from other shows discussed in the literature in its largely uncompromised portrayal of humanist-feminist themes. This, as several studies showed, is in stark contrast to the vast majority of female-led and woman-centred sitcoms, which are characterised by contradictions and ambiguities in their portrayal of feminist discourses. Similar conflicts between humanist-feminist and patriarchal discourses, and their relations of dominance within a particular show, are central to this thesis's analysis of *Maude*, *The Golden Girls* and *Cybill*. Notably, these three shows are not explored extensively within the landmark studies of sitcom women, and, as will be explicated in detail in chapter four, this fact is part of the rationale for focussing upon them. The authors discussed above do, however, impart many highly relevant insights into the ideological functions, history and genealogy of female-led and feminist sitcoms, and a great number of the insights presented above will similarly be referred to and engaged with throughout the critical discourse analyses of the three sitcoms. The next chapter will contextualise these analyses by outlining the origins, conventions and impact of the sitcom genre.

Chapter 4: The sitcom genre

Rose: Dorothy, you're the smart one, and Blanche, you're the sexy one, and Sophia, you're the old one. I'm the nice one. Everybody always likes me.
Sophia: The old one isn't so crazy about you.

The Golden Girls (in: McClanahan 2007:259)

In 2018, two long-cancelled sitcoms reappeared on American television screens. After a twenty-year hiatus, both *Roseanne* and *Murphy Brown* were rekindled to primetime exposure, with their original casts as well as topical storylines, which, among other issues, addressed the presidency of Donald Trump.[8] Both were cancelled after one season; *Murphy Brown* due to low ratings, *Roseanne* due to its star's off-screen deportment. The short-lived re-emergence of these two shows, to reflect and comment on a politically polarised country, indicate the lasting legacy of these two female sitcom icons, as well as their ultimately belonging to a particular historical moment. Women, and their changing societal roles, have been an intrinsic part of the sitcom genre from its beginning, both as stars and audiences. The genre moreover both reflects and shapes the dominant culture (Williamson 2008:34), and can be 'contentious' (ibid.) or represent the 'least objectionable programming' (ibid.:179). In the early nineteen-eighties, it had been declared dead by the entertainment press (Raab 2018), prematurely so, for a few years later, the sitcom format would epitomise 'must-see', appointment TV (Littlefield 2012). This chapter will begin with an overview of twentieth-century sitcom history, and contextualise this in relation to wider societal changes. Subsequently, a genealogy of woman-centred and female-led sitcoms up to the year two-thousand, as is the scope of this thesis's analysis, will be presented. These sections are intended as broad, introductory outlines, as both topics will be explored in significant depth as part of the critical discourse analyses of specific shows in later chapters. This chapter's last

[8] *One Day at a Time* (Netflix 2017 -) was similarly re-released in the 21st century; however the show features a different cast and a significantly altered premise.

section will outline the sitcom genre's principal codes, conventions and characters.

Twentieth century sitcom history

Non-mechanical, commercial television broadcasts had started in the early nineteen-forties but the Second World War halted the development of this 'radio with pictures' (Allen and Thompson, n.d.) until the end of the decade. Over the course of the nineteen-fifties, television sets gradually became an affordable commodity, and the new medium reached its Golden Age, with sophisticated and popular programming; during that decade, television's growth into a mass media force to be reckoned with became evident. However, in its fledgling years, the industry struggled to attract the writers, actors and producers needed to create sufficient amounts of content, as the stars of radio, stage and screen were initially reluctant to risk the transition to the novel medium (ibid.). Indeed, from early on, the novel, domestic medium would pose a challenge to that star status, as, then as now, the 'success of many people who appear on television rests on being "like us"' (Mills 2009:20). Simultaneously, new types of programming were developed, including anthology series, sports broadcasts, Westerns and variety shows (an adaption of vaudeville performance), all of which proved successful with viewers.

Sitcoms differed from these new formats as they had already been in existence as an established radio genre (ibid). The ten-minute-long jocular programme, *Sam 'n' Henry*, launched in 1926 on Chicago's WGN radio station, is widely acknowledged as the very first sitcom (Cox 2007:2). Shortly thereafter, some of the now-familiar sitcom conventions, such as a recurring cast of characters and a family setting, would emerge in *Amos 'n' Andy* (1928) and *The Rise of the Goldbergs* (1929-1945) (ibid.). Both of these shows would in time transfer to the small screen, as *The Amos 'n' Andy Show* (CBS 1951-1953) and *The Goldbergs* (CBS 1946-51, NBC 1952, DuMont 1954, syndication 1956) respectively. Other successful adaptions of radio sitcoms include, *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, *Our Miss Brooks* (CBS

1948-1957), *The Life of Riley* (NBC 1949-1958) and *Father Knows Best* (CBS 1954-1955, 1958-1960, NBC 1955-1958). The radio sitcoms' vaudevillian roots were evident not merely in the biographies of stars, but additionally in many of their conventions: in line with minstrel show traditions, *Amos 'n' Andy* were black characters voiced by white actors (the television sitcom would be cast with black actors). Furthermore, the ongoing custom of titling many sitcoms after their comedian star, originated with established vaudeville names such as Burns and Allen and the sitcom genre was thus characterised by the possibility of a self-reflexive interplay between lived reality and the diegetic realm from its very beginnings: 'these performers were readily acknowledged as "comedians" both on-screen and off, and they were able to incorporate elements of the vaudeville sketch into the sitcom form. These self-reflexive features separated them from their entirely fictional world, character-based counterparts' (Williamson 2008:75). Although there are many sitcoms which are not vehicles for an established star (Mills 2009:38), the 'comedian comedy' (Langford 2005:20) element of the genre would be exemplified by, for example, *I Love Lucy* which portrayed 'a world within the television and one without […]. For someone so desperate to appear on television, Lucy sure was on TV a lot' (Austerlitz 2014:9). Moreover, Roseanne Barr's related utilising of both her stand-up routine and her eponymous sitcom to convey humanist-feminist thought will be highly relevant in the subsequent analysis of humanist-feminist sitcoms.

Not all characteristics of the format's early days would remain equally intact over subsequent decades. Some of the original television sitcoms, such *The Amos 'n' Andy Show*, *The Goldbergs* and *The Life of Riley* (NBC 1949-1958) told the stories of the American melting pot, of African-American, Jewish and financially struggling individuals (Allen and Thompson, n.d.). This representation of a diverse range of ethnic and social experiences would be mostly halted until the nineteen-seventies (ibid.). This was in reaction to the, then immediate, aftermath of the bloodshed and horrors of World War II. The sitcom genre and nineteen-forties television programming overall sought to appeal to returning veterans and their families, as a

> generation forged in the fire of war sought placidity and sameness on the home front: stable nuclear families, a nation of identically constructed Levittowns. […] [The sitcom] would mirror America, not necessarily as it was, but as it should be: peaceable, middle class, eternally unchanging (Austerlitz 2014:8).

This reductive representation of American identity almost affected the most successful sitcom of the nineteen-fifties, *I Love Lucy*: Lucille Ball had to battle network executives to ensure her real-life, Cuban husband would be cast as her co-star, rather than a Caucasian actor. Reflective of then-dominant ideological currents, CBS producers had, wholly erroneously, asserted that Desi Arnaz's Latin American looks and accent would not be 'acceptable to most TV viewers' (Silver 2009).

I Love Lucy's popularity gave rise to a few sitcoms with similar, 'erratic woman' premises, including *My Little Margie* (CBS and NBC, 1952-1955) and *I Married Joan* (NBC 1952-1955) and *Life With Elizabeth* (syndication 1953-1955, starring Betty White). Despite the success of these early unruly sitcom women, the traditional nuclear family depicted in *Father Knows Best* would reflect most closely the contemporaneous need to re-establish collective and individual stability: the 'series became such a symbol of the "typical" American family that the U.S. treasury department commissioned the producers to film a special episode to help promote 1959 U.S. savings Bond Drive' (Brooks and Marsh 2003:400). *Leave it to Beaver (*ABC and CBS 1957-1963) and *The Donna Reed Show* (ABC 1958-1966) similarly portrayed idealised middle-class lives, with kindly parents gently quarrelling with their spirited offspring. *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* in particular have remained in the popular consciousness, as nostalgic metonyms for the tranquil and predictable social context associated with the nineteen-fifties (Spangler 2003:49).

Several nineteen-fifties sitcoms would carry these themes over into the nineteen-sixties, and many of the best-known sitcoms produced in that decade added a rural setting to their portrayal of harmonious, if not always nuclear, families: the bucolic scenery shared by hit shows such as *The Andy Griffith Show* (CBS 1960-1968), *The Beverly Hillbillies* (CBS 1962-1971), *Petticoat Junction* (CBS 1963-1970) and *Green Acres* (CBS 1965-1971) would result in CBS being nicknamed the 'Countryside Broadcasting System'

(Hollis 2008:191). One notable exception was *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (CBS 1961-1966), a Manhattan-set sitcom which revolved around a scriptwriter's joyful work and home life. Yet the genteel idylls portrayed within such nineteen-sixties shows were in stark contrast to that decade's ever-unfolding, volatile reality, as the United States witnessed unprecedented, often violent, divisions as a result of the contemporaneous Civil Rights, anti-Vietnam War, student, women's, and gay liberation movements. The powder keg atmosphere prompted by these social revolutions was epitomised by the assassinations of several high-profile figures, most notably President John F. Kennedy in 1963, and, in 1968, his brother Robert Kennedy as well as Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King. By the end of the sixties, the time was rife for sitcoms to engage with and reflect a polarised country, and thus for them to become relevant to their viewers' lived experience.

'Relevance' and 'quality' were the categories into which the sitcoms of the early-to-mid nineteen-seventies would be grouped. The two labels remain inextricably linked with the work of two iconic television producers, Norman Lear and Grant Tinker (Lentz 2000). Both men benefitted from the 'rural purge', a bold move by CBS executives, which terminated the network's escapist sitcoms; as *Green Acres* star Pat Buttram memorably commented, 1971 'was the year CBS killed everything with a tree in it' (Bianculli 2009:318). While those shows had been highly successful with older viewers, the network decided to target the demographic driving the social revolutions, the urban baby boomers. Tinker and his wife, Mary Tyler Moore (who had starred in *The Dick Van Dyke Show*) owned MTM Enterprises, and created programs including, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS 1970-1977), *The Bob Newhart Show* (CBS 1972-1978), *Rhoda* (CBS 1974-1978) and *Phyllis* (CBS 1975-1977). These sitcoms represented 'quality television' predominantly due to their high production value, although the term furthermore is associated with representations of the then-contemporaneous second-wave feminist movement (Lentz 2000:46). The 'relevant' sitcoms created by Tandem Productions, owned by Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin, were more overtly reflective of the feverish political

atmosphere of the nineteen-sixties. Lear's first sitcom, *All in the Family* (CBS 1971-1979), depicted the conflict between the traditional values held by members of the Greatest Generation, and their rebellious children; due to its, frequently controversial and boundary-breaking, social commentary *All in the Family* remains widely acknowledged as a milestone in sitcom history (Gitlin 2000). Several of Lear's ensuing shows, such as *Stanford and Son* (NBC 1972-1977), *Good Times* (CBS 1974-1979), *The Jeffersons* (CBS 1975-1985) and *Diff'rent Strokes* (NBC and ABC 1978-1986) ended the 'blackout on blackness' on television (Lentz 2000:62), and the term 'relevance' has commonly become shorthand for redressing the under-representation of African-Americans in mainstream shows (Lentz 2000). However, as will be explicated in detail in this thesis's sixth chapter, this is an inexact summary of Lear's multifaceted oeuvre, which furthermore included, among other shows, *Maude*, *One Day at a Time* and *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* (syndication 1976-1977). In the latter half of the nineteen-seventies, the content of sitcoms and other television output became less political, and instead increasingly marked by the contemporaneous relaxation in social and sexual mores. CBS's relevant and quality sitcoms were surpassed in popularity by ABC's lighter, often sexualised, 'jiggle TV' fare, which included the shows *Happy Days* (ABC 1974-1984), *Three's Company* (ABCV 1977-1984) and *Soap* (ABC 1977-1981) (Levine 2007).

The nineteen-eighties would bring a return to more sophisticated mainstream programming, as reflected in sitcoms such as *Cheers* (NBC 1982-1993) and *Seinfeld* (NBC 1989-1998). Moreover, the social conservatism of the Reagan administration was distinguishable in nineteen-eighties shows like *Family Ties* (NBC 1982-1989) and, most notably, *The Cosby Show*[9], which recalled the traditionalism of *Father Knows Best* (Frazer and Frazer 1993). The overwhelming success of *The Cosby Show* would herald a golden

[9] In 2018, Bill Cosby was imprisoned for aggravated indecent sexual assault, after allegations of rape, drug facilitated sexual assault and child sexual abuse made by dozens of women, and dating back over several decades (Weisensee Egan 2019). These facts emerged during the writing of this thesis, and their implications exceed its scope; within this thesis, *The Cosby Show* will be referred to and analysed as a relevant cultural text, without reference to its creator or production context (Barthes 2010).

age for the sitcom format that would extend into the nineteen-nineties (Littlefield 2011). The first show to be created as an immediate result of *The Cosby Show* was *The Golden Girls* (ibid.). As will be elaborated in chapter seven, this woman-centred sitcom's enormous and unusually enduring popular appeal is interconnected with its featuring a complex combination of both conservative and humanist-feminist discourses, the latter reflecting the impact of the women's liberation movement (Kypker 2019). *The Golden Girls* moreover was among the first sitcoms to be based upon an untraditional family set-up, which would become commonplace in nineteen-nineties 'must-see TV' (Lotz 2007:261) sitcoms, such as *Friends* (1994-2004), *Frasier (*1993-2004) and *Will and Grace* (1998-2006), as well as in the comedy drama *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998-2004). These hugely acclaimed shows (Littlefield 2012:6) were the products of the nineteen-nineties, a decade that, in its lack of an existential threat, presents as a historical anomaly. The post-Cold-War and pre-9/11 nineties were relatively carefree to such an extent that they have been characterised as, 'the age of *Seinfeld*, life in miniature' (Krauthammer 1997). As will be explored in detail in chapter eight, the booming sitcom genre captured the nineteen-nineties' irreverent *zeitgeist*, and moreover generated an unusual proliferation of woman-centred shows, including *Roseanne*, *Murphy Brown*, *Cybill*, *Grace under Fire* (ABC 1993-1998), *The Nanny* (CBS 1993-1998), *Ellen* (ABC 1994-1998) and *Caroline in the City* (NBC 1995-1998). *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998) and *Roseanne* (1988-1997) would likewise be on-air for much of the decade. These women-centred sitcoms were themselves rooted in, and extended, a distinct female-led and woman-centred history and lineage within the sitcom format, as will be explicated in the following section.

Twentieth century female-led sitcom history

In one episode of the nineteen-nineties sitcom *Cybill*, the actress protagonist's Los Angeles house is diegetically portrayed as having been built on top of another Hollywood star's home: Roseanne Barr's (season three, episode twelve). The 'standing on the shoulders of giants' symbolism here is

perhaps none-too-subtle: Cybill Shepherd's show owes much to Barr, who in many ways was a pioneer of humanist-feminist sitcom. Shepherd described how she had 'given my name and much of my identity to the show, blurring the line between real life and fiction, much more than is customary on television (*Murphy Brown* was not called *Candice* […])' (2001:6). This utilising of the sitcom format to relate a fictionalised autobiography, as is the norm within live comedy routines, had been initiated by the former stand-up comedian Barr. Further commonalities between the two shows include their explicitly humanist-feminist content, as well as their production teams, as the two sitcoms had been produced by Carsey-Warner Productions (as had *The Cosby Show*) and by Chuck Lorre, with both stars among their shows' executive producers, and thus with considerable decision-making clout. Such connectedness, of ideas and of individuals, is not unusual within the sitcom genre (for example, *The Golden Girls* creator Susan Harris had been among *Maude*'s writing staff). This thesis's three analytical chapters will frame *Maude, The Golden Girls* and *Cybill* within the ideological contexts of their decades of production, and provide accounts of their relatedness to their sitcom contemporaries; this section aims to contextualise this analysis through presenting a wider, historical overview of woman-centred and female-led sitcoms.

The concept of woman-centredness will be explicated in detail in the subsequent chapter, which details the methodology utilised in this thesis. To restate the working definition of the concept provided earlier, 'woman-centred' is used to refer to texts which are formulated primarily in relation to women's experience. These texts relay humanist-feminist ideology to some extent and, with regards to comedic material, predominantly joke with, rather than about women. In this, they differ from female-led sitcoms, that is, shows with one or more female protagonists which do not, in their form or content, convey humanist-feminist values (page 7). The humanist-feminist facet of this definition necessitates that woman-centred sitcoms include at least a critical reflection on, or problematising of, women's traditional roles. It is for this reason that many of the sitcoms up to the nineteen-sixties are defined as

female-led rather than woman-centred: *The Goldbergs, My Little Margie*, *I Married Joan*, *Life With Elizabeth, I Remember Mama* (CBS 1949-1957), *Private Secretary* (CBS 1953-1957), *Our Miss Brooks, The Donna Reed Show, I Dream of Jeannie (NBC 1965-1970)* and *Bewitched (ABC 1964-1972)* all revolve around capable female protagonists, whose agency is however limited by the confines of conventional gender roles (Spangler 2003). *I Love Lucy* can be grouped among these, albeit with the caveat that the show's star is, continuously if ineffectively, challenging those patriarchal structures (Mellencamp 1996, White 2018).

Beulah (ABC 1950-1952) presents as a historic first among these early, female-led shows, in its focus on an African-American woman. The series' portrayal of a white family's Black maid drew contemporaneous and retrospective criticism, for its stereotypical depiction of that character, although the show's representation of African-Americans 'as an integral part of the scene', was lauded by an NACCP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) executive in 1951 (Spangler 2003:42). As Spangler points out, 'it would take fifteen years before another African-American would star in her own situation comedy' (ibid.:42), namely *Julia* (NBC 1968-1971, starring Diahann Carroll), whose title character was widowed mother working as a nurse. Despite the show's success, it was denounced for focussing on a middle-class character, whose relative privilege experience was unrepresentative of the predominant experience of the African-American community, and for featuring a fatherless family (Spangler 2003:91-93). Moreover, the show did not overtly reflect the then-burgeoning feminist movement in its content (ibid.:92). Nevertheless, its premise, of an unmarried, employed woman, which it shared with *That Girl* (ABC 1966-1971, starring Marlo Thomas) marks a significant departure in the sitcom genre's representation of women. Marlo Thomas (daughter of the comedian Danny Thomas and sister of *The Golden Girls* executive producer Tony Thomas) had been inspired by Betty Friedan to suggest to ABC decision-makers a show about a young woman who wants 'a completely different life' (Kohen 2012:59). While *That Girl*'s protagonist was in a committed

relationship throughout the series' run, Marlo Thomas insisted she remain unmarried (ibid.:61).

That Girl would provide the 'prototype single career woman' (Spangler 2003:94). If its protagonist was the 'kooky girl [who] preceded the idea of an independent woman' (Kohen 2012:61), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* would be the cultural juggernaut that brought this idea to fruition. It was

> the first to assert that work was not a prelude to marriage, or a substitute for it, but could form the center of a satisfying life for a woman in the way that it presumably did for men. […] [It] was not just innovative, it was also tremendously successful. It launched three spin-offs […]. [It] is a fitting "baseline" example because of its popularity, longevity and resonance in American cultural memory. *Mary Tyler Moore* created important parameters for future television discourse representing feminism, parameters that include a focus on working women […], the depiction of women's lives without romantic partners, the enactment of a "feminist lifestyle" by young, attractive, white, heterosexual, female characters, and a reliance on tenets of second-wave liberal or equity feminism (Dow 1996: 24-26).

Its immediate spin-offs included the sitcoms *Rhoda* and *Phyllis,* as well as the drama *Lou Grant* (1977-1982). However, as Dow points out, *Murphy Brown*, the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties sitcom portraying a female newsroom journalist, is commonly understood as continuing and completing the narrative begun by *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*: while the latter's star had been an 'emerging woman' show, twenty years on, Murphy 'has made it' (ibid.:136), along with a generation of women. The *Mary Tyler Moore Show* remains the 'baseline for representations of working women' (ibid.:136), and furthermore the first unambiguously woman-centred sitcom. Following its lead, a range of women's experiences would be portrayed within the sitcom genre from the seventies onwards; this reflected both the real-life increase in choices afforded to women by second-wave feminism, and the fact that humanist-feminist values made for commercially successful television (Rabinovitz 2002). Married sitcom mothers could now be shown to be vociferously challenging their social role (*Maude*, *Roseanne, Frannie's Turn* (CBS 1992-1992)), the previously unspeakable challenges faced by divorced women or lone mothers were recounted sympathetically (*Fay* (NBC 1975-1976), *Alice* (CBS 1976-1985), *One Day at a Time*, *The Betty White Show* (CBS 1977-1978), *Grace under Fire* and *Cybill*), matrilocal, alternative

families comprised of female roommates formed the premise of shows including *Laverne and Shirley* (ABC 1976-1983), *The Golden Girls*, *Kate & Allie* (CBS 1984-1989), *My Sister Sam* (CBS 1986-1988) and *Jenny* (NBC 1997-1998), and career-minded women, in sitcom as in society, became a norm (*Murphy Brown*, *Cybill, Caroline in the City*, *Designing Women*, *Ellen, Almost Perfect* (CBS 1995-1996)).

As stated above, in the mid-nineties, an unusually large cluster of woman-centred sitcoms were broadcast simultaneously. Cybill Shepherd recounts how by the end of that decade,

> American television [had] become the Bermuda triangle for females over forty. There was a wide variety of middle-aged women on air in1998, and they were all gone by 1999. […] This chorus of swan songs takes on a deeper significance when we see the replacements: *Felicity, Dharma and Greg, Moesha, Ally McBeal, Sabrina the Teenage Witch, Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* and those very skinny *Friends*. No one over thirty need apply (Shepherd 2001:7, see also Hass 1998).

The ideological changes motivating these changing representations of women (see Levy 2005 and Walter 2010) exceed the scope of this thesis. However, the impact of twentieth-century woman-centred sitcoms remains discernible in the new millennium. Examples for this include: *The Golden Girls'* combination of four distinct female comedic types has been pinpointed as the archetype recognisable in the much raunchier *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998-2004, written and directed by former *Cybill* writer Michael Patrick King) (Griffin and Biolonik 2003); another all-female quartet furthermore underpins the twenty-first century comedy-drama *Desperate Housewives* (ABC 2004-2012, created by former *The Golden Girls* writer Marc Cherry), and the sitcom *Hot in Cleveland* (TV Land 2010-2015, created by *Ellen* writer Suzanne Martin), is based upon a familiar premise of three women living with a much older housemate. That character, whose advanced years turn her middle-aged companions into girls by comparison, is played by Golden Girl Betty White.

As the subsequent section will detail, despite inevitable changes over the decades, the sitcom genre, its codes and stock characters, have largely remained readily identifiable since its inception.

Sitcom codes, conventions and characters

Like all genres, the sitcom format is not a static entity but instead liable to hybrid cross-overs with other forms, such as comedy dramas, as well as to the impact of external developments, including technological, institutional and ideological changes (Williamson 2008:31-37, Mills 2009:142). Notably, the majority of innovative transformations of the form (as exemplified by the animated sitcom *The Simpsons* (Fox 1989 -) and the mock documentary *The Office* (NBC 2005-1013) (Mills 2005:60-66)) are associated with the proliferation of channels in what Williamson dubbed the 'post-network era' (2008:7), that is, the move from the so-called 'big three' networks (ABC, CBS and NBC) to a multiplicity of providers as a result of government deregulation from the late nineteen-eighties onwards. This change from 'broadcasting to narrowcasting' (Mills 2009:46) brought a host of often highly specialised, comedy and other, channels (ibid.:46).

The sitcom format nevertheless mostly remains an 'established and easily recognisable' one (Williamson 2008:8, see also Mills 2009:43), frequently understood as stable and predictable due to its 'conservative nature' (Mills 2005:60). However, as Mills points out, 'while the form of the sitcom has remained unchanged, the content has developed significantly' (ibid.:42). The latter point is highly pertinent to the analysis undertaken within this thesis: overwhelmingly, all three of the sitcoms examined here adhere to the established conventions of the genre, but utilise that structural conformity to 'explore contemporary social concerns' (ibid.:42) in their content. It is due to this relevance to the central analysis that the following delineation of the sitcom genre will focus on its traditional and typical characteristics, several of which recall the format's origins in vaudeville and theatre performances. It should be noted that due to factors such as individual producers' preferences, and changing technologies and societal trends, even traditional sitcoms do not necessarily feature all of the below.

The sitcom genre is driven by the 'comic impetus', that is, 'its humour is always of paramount concern' (Mills 2009:5-6); as a consequence, the

genre represents 'discrete and cordoned-off programming' (ibid.:122). Its codes and conventions include:

- The three-camera set-up, which, as mentioned above, was originated by Desilu Productions and first utilised in *I Love Lucy*. This 'three-headed monster' (Mills 2005:39) is uniquely suited to the genre as it maximises the number of laughs for any one joke: in addition to an interaction between two characters being filmed, a further camera records the joke-maker, and a third captures the second character's reaction shot. Golden Girl Bea Arthur is widely acknowledged as a near-unique talent at this comedic skill, with her non-verbal, facial expressions in response to a punchline exemplifying how 'the joke takes us from normal to crazy, the reaction shot takes us from crazy back to normal' (O'Shannon 2012:9). Since the early two-thousands, the more cinematic single camera set-up has become more frequent in television comedy, reflecting an industry preference for shows with more complex plot structures, as well as for the 'mockumentary' format (Picone 2014). This approach to production, which despite its moniker usually involves several cameras, refers to shows being filmed on a variety of locations rather than in a limited number of studio settings (Miyamoto 2016), and was utilised in series such as *The Comeback* (HBO 2005, 2014) and *Arrested Development* (Fox 2003-2006). However, the traditional three-camera convention simultaneously continued with, for example, T*he Big Bang Theory* (CBS 2007-2019), which was shot in front of a live studio audience (ibid.).
- Episodes are twenty-two minutes in length, and feature an additional eight minutes of commercials. They are usually divided into two acts by an advertising break, and contain a primary and one or more secondary storylines (Grandio and Diego 2010). Some shows include a second advertising break. Notably, these breaks are not a universal convention, and do not feature in publicly funded production contexts, such as the BBC's.
- Sitcoms sets have been compared to a three-sided box, with the fourth side being the fourth wall, that is, the cameras and audience (Butler 2002:95). Episodes are recorded on studio soundstages, with a limited number of sets, and in front of live audiences, mirroring a theatrical experience

(Picone 2014). Acting styles are similarly informed by live performance, with actors pausing for laughs after jokes (ibid., Mills 2005:31). Moreover, many sitcoms stars are stand-up comedians, or actors with established careers in the theatre (Mills 2005:51), as were *The Golden Girls'* Bea Arthur, Rue McClanahan and Estelle Getty.

- Sitcoms utilise a laugh track. This 'canned laughter', which helps to establish a show's comedic rhythm, again signifies the genre's positioning as 'an odd hybrid between the live and the recorded' (Mills 2005:54). The laugh track serves to provide the illusion that sitcom viewers are a textual element, part of the show (Mills 2009:114), and appeals the fundamentally social nature of laughter (see Bergson 1987): compared to theatre audiences and movie goers, television viewers are more likely to be by themselves, and the laugh track connects them with an imaginary, like-minded community when watching a sitcom (Fowles 1992:120). The device furthermore functions to increase the enjoyment of a show: 'If canned laughter is added to a show, a test audience will laugh along more frequently and for longer periods of time […]. Under experimental conditions, when situation comedies are graded on how funny they are felt to be, higher marks go to the version that incorporates fake laughs' (ibid.:120). However, the practice has been reconsidered, and in recent, 'post-network' years, some (but not all) newly produced sitcoms no longer feature a laugh track (Williamson 2008:47). This development has been attributed to changed patterns of audience consumption of sitcoms: in a postmodern era of unparalleled consumer choice and hybridised genres, the audience is unprecedently empowered; accordingly, the interpretation of jokes, or choice in what to find funny, is left to the individual viewer (Williamson 2008:47, Mills 2009:105). Nevertheless, the absence of a laugh track does not necessitate the absence of a preferred reading of a show's comic material (Mills 2009:105).
- Episodes traditionally follow a circular narrative. In this, they illustrate 'the phenomenon of eternal return, promising endless variation without fundamentally altering the world that contained them. […] [Sitcom characters] continue to shuttle forward and scuttle backward, week after

week, in an eternal recurrence of reassuring sameness' (Austerlitz 2014:2). Each episode presents a 'problem of the week' (Feuer 1999:146), which is scripted according to Aristotelean principles of drama (Grandio and Diego 2010), with an exposition, climax and resolution. This narrative arc is predominantly limited to each discrete episode, and has little or no consequence for the subsequent instalment. In many sitcoms, including *The Golden Girls*, each episode in turn resumes this cycle of 'destabilization' and 'restabilization' (Neale and Krutnik 1995:235), taking for granted the audience's willingness to suspend their disbelief (ibid.:235). As Mills points out, this context-free oblivion is due to the genre's prioritising of funniness: 'a sitcom is only as good as its last joke [and] the narrative becomes less a story and more a sequence of comic events' (2005:34). Moreover, jokes by their very nature disrupt the flow of storytelling (ibid.:35).

- However, this formula is not universally adhered to. Although most sitcoms restore their initial equilibrium in each episode, wider, logically consistent dramatic arcs can, sometimes simultaneously, be established (Neale and Krutnik 1995:235, Mills 2005:35), over several episodes or over the course of a series. This is exemplified by, for example, the convoluted unfolding of the romantic relationships between Rachel and Ross, and Monica and Chandler in *Friends* (NBC 1994-2004), as well as by several storylines within *Maude* and *Cybill,* as will be outlined in the analytical chapters.

- The institution of the family is central to the sitcom and provides the stable basis for amusing situations to unfold (Williamson 2008:9). While this frequently meant a domestic setting which curtailed the range of representations of female characters (Mills 2009:22), the types of family represented by the genre vary: they can be a nuclear family (such as in *The Cosby Show,* NBC 1984-1992), a non-traditional or chosen family (as is the case in *The Golden Girls*), or a quasi, workplace family (as exemplified by *The Mary Tylor Moore Show*) (Kutulas 2016). From the nineteen-fifties onwards, the genre emerged as 'entertainment not only *for the family*, but entertainment that upheld the importance *of the family*' (Williamson 2008:9),

emphasis in the original). The many sitcoms produced specifically for family audiences (Grandio and Diego 2010) would frequently impart moral lessons by portraying peaceful, 'talking not fighting' (Williamson 2008:9) parenting styles.

• Sitcoms start with a unique theme tune as their opening credits roll, an auditory convention that can be traced back to the genre's origins in radio and serves to make a show 'instantly recognizable' (Austerlitz 2014:80). Some sitcoms moreover feature initial 'teaser' scenes and concluding, bolted-on 'tag' scenes (Grandio and Diego 2010). Others have catchphrases, recurring expressions articulated by one character for comic effect. These are often signalled through preceding pauses (Mills 2009:96), and in their predictability (such as *Maude*'s eponymous protagonist's riposte to her husband, 'God will get you for this, Walter', whenever words fail her), serve a function similar to that of the laugh track, by establishing an imagined camaraderie and group identity among the audience (Mills 2005:89).

• American sitcoms are written by professional teams of writers in a competitive, hothouse setting aimed to maximise funniness and originality. Writers as well as directors might frequently change; the power behind an American sitcom lies with its producers (Mills 2005:55). These producers in turn answer to network executives, whose decision-making, usually concerning commissioning a sitcom or additional series, is guided by audience figures and real or anticipated advertising revenue (Littlefield 2012).

• This competitive work environment is linked to the fact that successful sitcoms will go into syndication, a highly lucrative process for all involved in the making of a show. In syndication, successful network shows are sold to local stations after a number of seasons (Kubey 2004:122); one of the most successful syndicated sitcoms of all time, *The Golden Girls* has been continuously on-air since 1990 (Hunt 2017).

• Sitcom characters evoke recognisable comic archetypes. This does not mean that they are necessarily one-dimensional, for most characters are portrayed with some depth and subtlety, which often increase as a show progresses over several seasons (Mills 2005:35). For example, *The Golden*

Girls' Rose, an archetypically 'dumb' (Sedita 2006:116) character, is simultaneously portrayed as morally upright, capable and dignified. Moreover, some characters might combine qualities of two or more comic archetypes, either continuously or in the context of a particular scene (ibid.:218). However, usually one type is the predominant, identifying one. The following will present Sedita's overview of eight 'classic characters that have been around since the advent of the sitcom' (2006, preface), which provides classifications relevant for categorising many of the characters discussed in this thesis.[10]

(1) The logical smart one: 'the point of reference [for the audience] […], the voice of reason', examples are Dorothy in *The Golden Girls*, Cybill in *Cybill*, Carol in *Maude*, Ricky in *I Love Lucy*, Clair Huxtable in *The Cosby Show* (ibid.: pp 52 ff).

(2) The lovable loser: 'week after week […] they have hare-brained ideas [and] never learn from their mistakes', examples are Rachel in *Cybill*, Stanley in *The Golden Girls*, Lucy in *I Love Lucy*, Robert in *Everybody loves Raymond,* Chandler in *Friends* (ibid., pp 73 ff).

(3) The neurotic: 'at [their] heart is a deep insecurity that will follow the neurotic from the time they [were] nerdy kids to neurotic adults', examples are Walter in *Maude*, Ira in *Cybill*, Monica and Ross in *Friends*, Frasier and Niles in *Frasier* (ibid., pp 95 ff).

(4) The dumb one: 'genuine, […] sweet and innocent', examples are Rose in *The Golden Girls*, Vivian in *Maude*, Joey in *Friends* (ibid., pp 116 ff).

(5) The bitch/ bastard: 'they are us, the viewers, at our meanest and cleverest', examples are Maude and Florida in *Maude*, Sophia in *The Golden Girls*, Zoey in *Cybill*, Murphy in *Murphy Brown*, Darlene in *Roseanne* (ibid., pp 135 ff).

(6) The womanizer/ manizer: 'these characters are after one thing […] [and] have a one-track mind', examples are Blanche in *The Golden*

[10] Please note that while the comedy types are Sedita's, many of the examples have been provided by me to refer to the sitcoms analysed in this thesis.

Girls, Sue Ann Nivens in the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, Sam in *Cheers* (ibid., pp 161 ff).

(7) The materialistic one: 'extremely pampered individuals who […] really don't have a care in the world', examples are Maryann in *Cybill*, Rachel in *Friends*, Diane in *Cheers*, Suzanne in *Designing Women* (ibid., pp 178 ff).

(8) In their own universe: 'some of the weirdest, edgiest and funniest characters […], mainly because they are allowed to do […] almost anything', examples are Mrs Naugatuck in *Maude*, Maryann in *Cybill*, Phoebe in *Friends* and Jack and Karen in *Will and Grace* (ibid., pp 196 ff).

In combination, the structural and textual sitcom components listed above would amount to 'a peculiarly American art form […], [o]bsessively watched and critically ignored all at once' (Austerlitz 2014:1), due to the genre's instant and perennial popularity, and its frequently being dismissed as low-brow by reviewers. Sitcoms are designed to evoke pleasure, as expressed in laughter, and thus are aimed at the audience's emotions, a phenomenon often met with unease by professional critics (Mills 2009:101). This is encapsulated in Attallah's referring to situation comedy as an 'unworthy discourse' (2003:91): television in general is 'unworthy as a serious intellectual pursuit, unworthy as a source of ideas or of stimulation, unworthy of critical evaluation […]. […] As a rule, one does not talk about situation comedy' (ibid.:92-93). Yet the sitcom genre uniquely makes one central function of comedy accessible to millions of viewers, that of demonstrating, 'the tenuous and artificial nature of social norms, undermining their supposed transparency' (Mills 2009:87). This subversive potential is particularly evident in the sitcom oeuvre of producer Norman Lear, as detailed above.

In conclusion, this chapter has presented an outline of the history of the sitcom genre. The format's origins were tracked back to its origins in radio and theatrical performance, which accounts for many of the genre's enduring

conventions, including the three-camera studio set in front of a live audience, and the laugh track. Throughout the twentieth century, the genre's content has frequently reflected and engaged with the ideological preoccupations of its decades of production; this is arguably most evident in the politicised oeuvre of seventies producer Norman Lear. Strong and sympathetic female characters have existed within sitcom from its very beginning, however, the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* was ground-breaking in its depiction of humanist-feminist thought; that woman-centred show's protagonist was the first of numerous sitcom women depicted in non-traditional roles, such as succeeding in a male-dominated workplace, or as lone mothers.

This chapter furthermore provided an overview of the codes and conventions that demarcate the genre. The format's defining characteristics have been identified; as has been pointed out, these have remained mostly constant throughout the twentieth century. Additionally, archetypal sitcom characters have been shown to apply to and encompass those to be explored in the three analytical chapters. Prior to these analyses, the following chapter will detail the methodological approach utilised within this thesis.

Chapter 5: Methodological reflections

The previous chapter indicated the fact that sitcoms can contain mixed ideological messages. For example, *I Love Lucy*'s protagonist challenges her husband's authority in every episode, yet is simultaneously shown to be 'always wrong and apologetic' (Mellencamp 1996:333), and *That Girl* was based on a premise similar to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*'s, yet its main character came across as too eccentric to resonate with a generation of newly-liberated women, as the latter show did (Kohen 2012). Such textual ambiguities can be framed as competing discourses, which in turn can be isolated and then evaluated in terms of their relative dominance, as suggested by Norman Fairclough (2004, 2010, 2013, Chouliaraki and Fairclough 2010) in his conceptualisation of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a methodological approach. This thesis's analytical chapters will utilise Fairclough's approach to assess sitcom women's uses of humour over the course of three decades; prior to these analyses, this chapter will first detail the rationale for the choice of method, and subsequently the theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of Fairclough's CDA. This will be followed by an explication of the reasons for the choice of particular sitcoms, and of specific episodes within those sitcoms, for analysis, before detailing the structure of the three analytical chapters.

Rationale for choice of research method of data collection and analysis

This thesis seeks to track the sitcom genre's representations of women from the nineteen-seventies to the nineteen-nineties, to situate these portrayals in relation to the values of the second-wave feminist movement of the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies, and to pinpoint the extent to which these shows' protagonists' uses of humour function as a 'barometer' (Gilbert 2004:xviii) of women's increased freedom and equality to men. This continuous march of progress includes women accessing an array of

previously male-associated qualities, including those associated with successful joking (such as competitiveness) (Greer 2009). It thus brings women closer to the non-gendered 'humanity of the human', as Critchley (2004:9) defined humour. As outlined in the preceding chapter, female characters have been an integral part of the sitcom genre from its beginnings, but, until the nineteen-seventies, these had predominantly been depicted as possessing limited agency and life choices. This changing nature of sitcom women, and of the quality and range of their speech, actions and experiences, is at the core of this analysis. Its focus will be on the *meanings* of these characters' words and actions, as is the domain of qualitative, interpretivist research (Marshall 1998:543, Deacon et al. 2010:139). (Accordingly, this textual analysis does not set out to measure, as a quantitative content analysis would, the numerical representation of female characters within the sitcom format.)

Qualitative research methods have traditionally been chosen by feminist researchers (Eichler 1997:11) whose research, 'is guided by feminist theory; may be transdisciplinary; aims to create social change [and] strives to represent human diversity' (ibid.:12). This thesis, as stated in chapter two, does not merely analyse the extent to which humanist-feminist thought is discernible in the sitcom genre, but does so from a humanist-feminist perspective and is thus grounded in feminist theory. Ontologically, a large amount of qualitative research is based on the interpretivist understanding of reality as a social construct, as changeable and subjective (Edirasingha 2012). In their epistemology, feminist qualitative studies have customarily been rooted in the 'four epistemological propositions for feminist research', as summarised by Stanley and Wise:

> All knowledge is socially constructed; the dominant ideology is that of the ruling group; there is no such thing as value-free science and the social sciences so far served and reflected men's interests; and because people's perspective varies systematically with their position in society, the perspectives of men and women differ (1990:38).

As outlined in chapter two, since the nineteen-eighties, academic feminist theorising has developed and diversified significantly, most notably through the contributions of postmodernist and poststructuralist feminist

thinkers. However, there remains an overarching consensus among feminist researchers that knowledge production should be human-centred rather than androcentric, and aimed toward 'producing a transformation which would rupture the unequal gender structures and relations on which a sociology and a society that privileges the male standpoint rely' (Dillon 2014:343). Metaphysically, 'the aim of feminism is, in the most general terms, to end the oppression of women. The goal of feminist theory is, therefore, to theorise how women are oppressed and how we can work towards ending it' (Haslanger 2017).

As such, qualitative feminist research is within the tradition of a sociology committed to values (Gouldner 1968), and to fixing or improving society, as summed up in these questions, posed by Feagin: 'As moral beings, we need to ask insistently: What would alternatives to our self-destructive societies look like? And how do we get there?' (2001:16). Qualitative studies, which generate in-depth, meaningful and valid data, are suited to these ideals, and have frequently served to redress the under-representation of oppressed or voiceless groups (Ragin 1995). They do, however, lack the objectivity, reliability and representativeness that are characteristic of quantitative research and of the positivist ontology of an objective and measurable social reality (Edirasingha 2012). In order to counteract these inherent shortcomings of qualitative research, the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the three sitcoms will be thoroughly substantiated through reference to the relevant text and to the secondary literature. In the rare instances where a plausible but speculative reading of the texts is put forward, this will be clearly signposted as such.

In recent decades, the paradigmatic divide between positivist, quantitative and interpretivist, qualitative research has frequently been bridged through researchers, including feminist scholars, triangulating both approaches (Deacon et al. 2010, Trip and Hughes 2018); such methodological pluralism, as Deacon et al. point out, generally strengthens and enhances research findings (2010:140). This 'mixed methods' approach is not utilised

in this thesis for the reason identified in the above, that is, that the principal concern of this study is not with the quantity of female sitcom characters, but instead focussed upon the extent to which these fictional creations are depicted as expressing humanist-feminist values through their words and actions, and it is thus, explicitly and ultimately, focussed upon the formation and communication of meanings. Pickering (2004) points out that,

> some aspects of texts cannot be counted easily, and when they can, this may tell us little of how they operate within or across texts. Examples of textual features resistant […] to quantification include irony, ambivalence, and allusion, communicative register and mode of address; folkloric motifs, aesthetic codes and generic conventions; rhetorical and stylistic devices, including resonant metaphors and other figures of speech; and the point of view, presuppositions, and values that come implicitly with the message and make certain categories or notions appear natural or absolute in meaning.

The textual characteristics noted by Pickering are, as he states, frequently only detectable through qualitative, in-depth engagement with the text. These characteristics reflect the aims of this thesis, as expressed in its research questions, and include uncovering covert representations of value systems (research question one), the humorous tone of a specific show (research question two), and the effectiveness of that humour in challenging power relations (research question four). These aims can solely be accomplished within the qualitative paradigm. Critical discourse analysis, as a qualitative method of textual analysis, in particular is correspondingly based on the understanding that, 'language is not simply a neutral medium for communicating information […], but a domain in which people's knowledge of the social world is actively shaped. […] [L]anguage can be used to compel certain conclusions, to establish certain claims and deny others' (Seale 2012:406). This is exemplified by, for example, Weaver's (2011) analysis of the rhetoric of racist humour, and Barat's (2007) application of CDA to representations of different feminist discourses within the Hungarian media.

The interpretative process of identifying and relating meanings as part of such analyses is intrinsically liable to be affected by subjectivity and bias, which should, as far as is possible, be revealed and reflected upon (Skeggs 1995, Lockyer 2012). In relation to this humanist-feminist thesis, this entails

acknowledging that as a feminist researcher, my focus will be partial towards distinguishing 'ideologically invested' (Fairclough 2010:60) representations of gender relations. Additionally, my reading of the American texts to be analysed might be affected by my British/ European background, and I might miss, or misinterpret, cultural references. This will however be counterbalanced by my deep knowledge of the shows and episodes analysed; over my years of study, I have taken care to research textual elements with potentially unclear meanings, and to anchor my analysis within the relevant academic literature and debates. My reading will furthermore be impacted by factors of social stratification: as a middle-class, white individual I may, despite my best efforts to the contrary, be complicit in, and consequently fail to identify ideological manifestations of, the 'taken-for-granted "background knowledge"' (ibid.: p.31) of that dominant class and ethnicity. To some extent, this might be mitigated by the facts that my social class is determined by my occupation, not origin, and that as a decades-long London resident, and as an immigrant, I have many personal and professional associations with individuals from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds.

The choice of Norman Fairclough's (2004, 2010, 2013) conceptualisation of critical discourse analysis as this thesis's methodology is interconnected with its value-driven, feminist epistemology. Discourse analysis is one of three predominant modes of textual analysis, along with semiotic analysis and frame analysis (Deacon et al. 2010:138-169). Semiotic analysis, based on the structuralist approach pioneered by Ferdinand de Saussure, predominated during the late nineteen-seventies and early eighties, and while its popularity has faded, it remains influential to the extent that its 'basic concepts have entered into the general currency of analytical language of media and cultural studies' (ibid.:141). Frame analysis, as initially proposed by Goffman (1974), is focussed upon a text's 'frames of reference [as well as] principles of organisation which govern events and our subjective involvement in them' (Deacon et al 2010:160). Predominantly due to a lack of conceptual clarity, it remains the least methodologically rigorous of the three methods, and is most useful in combination with other analytical

approaches (ibid.:165); indeed, Deacon et al. emphasise that there exists a general overlap between these three types of qualitative content analysis (ibid.:141).

Critical discourse analysis originated as a development of Michael Halliday's model of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Fowler 1996, Fairclough 2004:5, Wodak and Busch 2004:108). Halliday used the term 'register' to refer to, 'the configuration of semantic resources that the member of a culture typically associates with a situation type' (1978:111); this differs from the concept of discourse, as elaborated below, in its delineating a 'variety of language [rather than] a system of meaning within the culture' (Fowler 1996:7). There exists overlap between alternative versions of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; van Dijk 1997), such as Van Dijk's (1995) socio-cognitive model and Wodak's (1995) historic, sociolinguistic approach. Within all these schools of CDA, 'language is not powerful on its own - it gains power by the use powerful people make of it' (Wodak and Busch 2004:109), and their 'critical' element originated with the contributions of the Frankfurt School or Juergen Habermas (ibid.:109). The Frankfurt School's neo-Marxist cultural critique was aimed 'to effect radical change' (Cukier et al. 2004:236); reflecting on this intellectual tradition, Habermas particularised the 'emancipatory power of reason' (ibid.:236) in this process.

Fairclough's emphasis lies with identifying and contextualising the meanings of texts in relation to social relations and hegemonic hierarchies (Tonkiss 2012:467-468, Fairclough 2004:3), and his model 'has arguably become the standard framework for studying media texts within European linguistics and discourse studies' (Garrett and Bell 2000:6). For this thesis too, Fairclough's CDA emerged as the most suitable method due to its carefully formulated methodology as well as due to its expressed emphasis on identifying and judging value systems: CDA 'is not just descriptive, it is also normative. It addresses social wrongs in their discursive aspects and possible ways of righting or mitigating them' (Fairclough 2010:11, Gough

and Talbot 1996). This evaluatory component aligns with this thesis's research questions, which, as presented in chapter one, aim to establish how humour can be utilised as liberating tool in the humanist-feminist arsenal, and moreover with the wider epistemological foundations of humanist feminism, as outlined above. The following section will contextualise this normative quality by presenting a definition of the concept of 'discourse', and a detailed outline of the theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of Fairclough's approach.

Defining 'discourse'

The precise meanings and uses of the concept of 'discourse' differ (Wodak and Busch 2004:109)[11], although there exists broad agreement that, at rudimentary level, it encompasses 'language in use in speech and writing' (Fairclough and Wodak 1997:258). This humanist-feminist thesis will employ the term 'discourse' as defined by Fairclough, which encompasses both the reality of structural power differentials between groups, and a politicised objective to challenge and correct these (see also Lazar 2007:4):

> Different discourses are different perspectives on the world, and they are associated with the different relations people have to the world, which in turn depends on their positions in the world, their social and personal identities, and the social identities in which they stand to other people. Discourses not only represent the world as it is (or rather as it is seen to be), they are also projective […], and tied to projects to change the world in particular directions (Fairclough 2004:124).

Thus, in Fairclough's usage, discourses function to create meaning within social life, and constitute 'a complex set of relations including relations between people who talk, write and in other ways communicate with each other', as well as established paradigms such as languages and genres (Fairclough 2010:3). Fairclough's critical approach draws upon and adds to existing definitions of the concept and related theories by Michel Foucault (1971, 1972, 1979, 1984), Antonio Gramsci (2007), Louis Althusser (1971),

[11] Sawyer illustrates this point concisely: '*Post-colonial theory*: discourse is a system of domination. […] *Anthropology*: Discourse is a culture or an ideology. […] *Sociolinguistics*: Discourse is a speech style or register. […] *Psychology*: Discourse is a physical or bodily practice. […] *Feminist theory*: Discourse is a type of subject' (2002:434-435, emphases in the original).

Michel Pêcheux (1982, 1988) and others. Among these thinkers, Fairclough identifies Foucault's contribution as 'decisive' (Fairclough 2004:123), but stresses that he diverges from the French poststructuralist, whose emphasis was predominantly on the rules which underpin verbal and written statements (ibid.:123). Foucault's preoccupation can be traced back to pioneering structuralist de Saussure, who analysed language as containing signifiers (words or images) and signifieds (the signifiers' meanings) (Weedon 2000:23). Deconstructionalist and poststructuralist thinkers, most notably Jacques Derrida, proposed that the meaning of 'the signifier is never fixed once and for all, but is constantly *deferred*' (ibid.:24, emphasis in the original). Foucault's original concept of discourse is inexorably linked with the resultant central poststructuralist tenet, that there is no essential, underlying truth. According to Foucault, discourses are instead a manner of:

> constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects which they seek to govern. […] The most powerful discourses […] have firm institutional bases, in the law, for example […]. Yet these institutional locations are themselves […] under constant challenge (ibid.:105).

This rationale, that discourse is inseparable from relations of power, is exemplified in Foucault's analysis of the psychoanalytic discourse, in which he expounds on a key component of Fairclough's CDA, which will be particularised shortly, namely, the importance of that which remains unsaid:

> [s]ilence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name […] – is less the absolute limit of discourse […]. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorised, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses (Foucault 1990:27).

The 'many silences' identified by Foucault indicate the potentialities inherent in critical readings. The following will detail the manner in which Fairclough's approach makes possible a nuanced understanding of deep-seated ideological assumptions.

Critical Discourse Analysis

According to Fairclough, discourses function to create meaning within social life and social relations, and are characterised by their *relational, dialectical* and *transdisciplinary* qualities (2010:3, 2004:3-6).[12] Their *relational* nature means that they cannot be defined in isolation, instead, they can only be understood in their internal and external relation to '"objects", including objects in the physical world, persons, power relationships and institutions' (Fairclough 2010:3). These 'sets of relations' (ibid.:3), which are critical to defining and analysing any discourse, are *dialectical*, that is, they encompass distinct objects that are however, 'not fully separate in the sense that one excludes the other' (ibid.:4). Fairclough illustrates this with the relationship between power and discourse: although the control of discourses is an important part of the power of the state over its citizens, governments additionally have the authority to utilise physical force by means of the army and the police forces. Therefore, '"power" and "discourse" are different elements in the social process' (ibid.:4), which nonetheless are interrelated and impact upon one another. Identifying these processes is a defining characteristic of CDA, which serves as an

> explanatory critique: it does not simply describe and evaluate existing realities but seeks to explain them, e.g., by showing them to be effects of structures or mechanisms or forces which the analyst postulates and whose reality s/he seeks to test out (Fairclough 2013:178).

This interplay between, and blending of, discourses with external factors necessitates the above-mentioned *transdisciplinary* quality of critical discourse analysis, as no single academic discipline can account for the range of objects, or factors involved (Fairclough 2010:4).

Fairclough draws upon sociological theory when he furthermore characterises CDA as 'critical realist', that is, based on the assumption that there exists a real, social world which is shaped by social actors and/ or

[12] The term 'transdisciplinary', rather than 'interdisciplinary', denotes an emphasis on '"dialogue" between different disciplines and theories in particular research projects as a source of […] development for each of them' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 2010:1217).

discursive formations within existing power structures (ibid:4-5). As such, CDA is a '"moderate" or "contingent" form of social constructivism' (ibid.:5), for it is based upon the premises that the social but not the natural world are socially constructed. Moreover, the effectiveness of discourses in shaping the social world varies, as it is necessarily mitigated by existing power relations (ibid.: 4-5). This idea is reflected in the sociologist Giddens' (1981) notion of the 'duality of structure' which combines macro and micro sociological approaches by postulating that social 'structures are not only presupposed by, and necessary conditions for, action, but also the *products* of action' (Fairclough 2010:38, emphasis in the original). Fairclough's model thus,

> oscillates between a focus on *structures* (especially the more concrete level of structuring of *social practices*) and a focus on *strategies*, on shifts in the structuring of semiotic difference (orders of discourse) and on strategies of social agents that manifest themselves in texts (Fairclough 2013:180, emphasis in the original).

As Deacon et al. succinctly put it in a discussion of CDA: 'there is therefore power in discourse, and power behind discourse' (2010:157). These processes are applied to the discursive construction of gender by Talbot, who, referencing Judith Butler (2008), argues that, 'people are not just acted upon, they are active in their own construction. They are busily involved in the construction of gender identities, especially their own. They *perform* their gender identity' (2012:125, emphasis in the original). Butler illustrates this point with an analogy: 'there is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very "taking up" is enabled by the tool lying there' (2005:199). Individuals' gender identities are thus delineated as an ongoing process or accomplishment, in which individual agency and choice can be exercised within discursively constituted constraints.

With regards to humanist-feminist sitcom analysis, these dynamics come to mean that the genre is both shaped by patriarchal conventions and, in turn, actively serve to strengthen or subvert these dominant structures. Within CDA, such processes are accounted for through the integration of the interrelated concepts of hegemony and ideology, sets of ideas that are reflected in practices (Fairclough 1991, 2010). The latter is a central tenet of

Fairclough's approach, as 'language is invested by ideology' (Fairclough 2010:59), as well as its 'location' (ibid.58). Discourses, through language, thus serve as a vehicle to communicate ideologies, or sets of ideas. Furthermore, ideologies are 'located, then, both in structures which constitute the outcomes of past events and the conditions for current events, and in events themselves as they reproduce and transform their conditioning structures' (Fairclough 1991:119). This is illustrated by Althusser's conception of 'interpellation', which encapsulates the continuous reproduction of existing social structures through language (ibid.:59, Fairclough 1991). These social structures need to be taken into consideration when analysing a text as it is 'not possible to "read off" ideologies from texts [as] […] meanings are produced through interpretation' (ibid.:57), and this process of interpretation itself is influenced by varying social contexts and structures.

Any dominant ideology is at its most effective when it has become, as Gramsci put it, 'common sense', that is, 'naturalised, automatized' (ibid.:67) or, in Althusser's phrasing, by successfully concealing its very nature (ibid.:67). According to Fairclough, it is through questioning the ideological functions of all 'taken-for-granted "background knowledge"' that critical discourse analysis differs markedly from more descriptive approaches (ibid.:31): within the critical methodology, 'ideologies are primarily located in the "unsaid" (ibid.:27). Notably, it is the feasible connection to power relations external to the text that makes its implicit assumptions ideological in nature (Fairclough 2004:59). Such societal power relations are reflected in gendered language use:

> a perennial problem for language and gender researchers is overcoming the sense of ordinariness and obviousness that so much everyday language has […]. With the model of discourse as social practice that is used in critical discourse analyses, we cannot just forget the social nature of all discourse. It helps to counteract the tendencies for the discourse in which we perform our gender identities to be naturalised (Fairclough 2012:123).

Thus, in this thesis's analysis of sitcom episodes, regular reference will made to that which is *not* included or articulated in the shows' dialogue when seeking to pinpoint underlying ideological premises.

Power relations are then conceptualised within CDA as formulated in Gramsci's notion of 'hegemony', that is, as unstable and constantly contested. Fairclough furthermore argues that hegemony functions to determine and limit expression within discourses (2004:41-46, 2010:67), and that discourses mirror the 'ideological complex' (2010:62). This concept refers to the hegemonic struggle for dominance of various, contradictory and/or overlapping, elements in ideological sites. These components of the ideological complex 'come to be structured and restructured, articulated and rearticulated, in processes of ideological struggle' (ibid.:62). The hegemonic ascendency of a particular discourse is unpredictable, and contingent on a variety of factors:

> certain discourses endure longer than others, are taken up and accepted by more people, and thus achieve various measures of dominance over others, and may become hegemonic. Certain discourses – and this is really just one facet of dominance – come to be more extensively recontextualised than others, shifted from one practice or institution […] to others (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 2010:1215-1216).

Contradictory elements within discourses can furthermore make possible a reversal of the intended ideology, as Fairclough notes with reference to Foucault's 'tactical polyvalence of discourses' (2010:66). This conceptualisation demarcates the strategic utilising of discourses in the context of existing power relations in two ways: it describes how opposing discourses can be utilised as part of a specific strategy, and how a particular discourse can be used by both sides of a power struggle (ibid.:66). This process of negotiation for ideological dominance affects the 'orders of discourse' (ibid.:63) within institutions, which are sites of ideological struggle, and consequently subject to change (ibid.:63-66). Moreover, similar vocabularies might be utilised in distinct discourses, and the meaning of particular terms might only become evident by contextualising them (Fairclough 2004:130-131). For example, a text aimed to further a patriarchal ideological agenda might draw upon and appropriate feminist discourses in an attempt to subvert them.

Fairclough outlines the following points as an 'agenda' (2010:19) for critical discourse analysis, which will be applied in the CDAs of sitcom episodes (see pp 99-100):

> • *Emergence of discourses.* Identify the range of discourses that emerge and their link to emerging strategies. […] Show the origins of discourses: for instance, how they are formed through articulating together (features of) existing discourses. […]
>
> • *Relations of dialogue, contestation and dominance between discourses.* Show how different discourses are brought into dialogue and contestation within processes of strategic struggle […]
>
> • *Recontextualisation of discourses.* Show, as part of the analysis of how particular discourses become dominant or hegemonic, their dissemination across structural boundaries […]
>
> • *Operationalisation of discourses.* Show how and subject to what conditions discourses are operationalized as strategies and implemented […] (ibid.:19-20, emphasis and bullet points in the original)

As noted in the above, Fairclough furthermore specifies that critical discourse analysis is inherently normative, and explicitly aimed to identify both social wrongs and potential strategies to redress those; in addition to social class in the context of a capitalist society, these 'social wrongs' or inequalities include, among others, ethnicity, gender and age-based power differentials (2010:26). Fairclough characterises the functions of his approach as linking a 'negative critique to a positive critique' (2013:186), for in its pinpointing of inequities, 'one is identifying […] what needs to be changed, what needs a solution' (ibid.:186). Discussing the suitability of CDA to feminist research projects, Lazar emphasises there exists between method and theory, 'much overlap in social emancipatory goals. […] Indeed, unlike feminist approaches that apply descriptive discourse analytic methods, feminist CDA has the advantage of operating, at the outset, within a politically invested programme of discourse analysis' (2007:4, see also Talbot 2012). Fairclough's CDA is particularly apposite to this humanist-feminist thesis not only due to these corresponding objectives, but also due to its

meticulous agenda for exploring language as a site in which to detect and extricate ideologies. As outlined in the introduction, this thesis aims to pinpoint representations of humanist-feminist thought in relation to contemporaneously dominant ideologies in woman-centred sitcoms, and the impact of humorous discourses on these depictions. In its final analysis, the thesis will draw upon the preceding analysis of three consecutive decades when identifying wider ideological contexts which are particularly conducive to the production of woman-centred sitcoms. Fairclough's approach makes possible a fastidious differentiation between disparate ideological elements, and as such is highly suited to these aims.

In line with the methodology stipulated by Fairclough, this thesis will apply the approach when investigating both the socio-political and cultural contexts, and the spoken dialogue, of nine sitcom episodes. The criteria and rationale for the selection of these particular episodes, and of the three sitcoms, will be explicated in the subsequent section.

Rationale for choice of sitcoms to be analysed

As stated, a central facet of CDA is the proviso that texts cannot be understood in isolation; instead, they are characterised by their relational nature, and consequently an ideological analysis needs to be grounded in a plethora of related contexts, including wider cultural trends and comparable, contemporaneous texts (Fairclough 2010:19-20). This thesis sets out to track depictions of humanist-feminist thought and strategies within the sitcom genre from the politicised nineteen-seventies, via the postfeminist eighties, to the postmodern nineties, by conducting an in-depth analysis of one sitcom produced in each decade. This focussed approach emerged as advantageous as it makes possible both a thorough exploration of the chosen sitcoms, and their detailed contextualising through juxtaposition with comparable shows, and with wider trends within the sitcom genre at the relevant historical moment. For example, the critical discourse analyses of the sitcom *Maude* in the subsequent chapter regularly reference the show's ideological interconnectedness with other sitcoms, such as its origins as a spin-off from

All in the Family, and alternative depictions of humanist-feminist thought in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Thus, although a single show per decade is selected to metonymically represent the impact of humanist-feminist thought on the sitcom genre, this analysis is complemented by a breadth of context, which makes possible a detailed analytical overview of concurrent developments within the sitcom genre.

The three sitcoms were selected through purposive sampling. This sampling technique aims to 'produce a sample that can be logically assumed to be representative of the population. This is often accomplished by applying expert knowledge of the population to select in a nonrandom manner a sample of elements that represents a cross-section of the population' (Lavrakas 2008), in this case, woman-centred sitcoms of a particular decade. As such, they can be likened to the Weberian 'ideal type', which is 'formed by the one-sided *accentuation* of one or more points of view, […] [and] *concrete individual* phenomena … are arranged into a unified analytical construct' (Weber 1949:90, emphasis in the original). The use of the ideal type in comparative research, 'allows the social scientist to take a first step in the analysis of a topic that is little known or explored. […] [T]he use of the ideal type is heuristic, and […] this constitutes the most important reason for using this kind of concept' (Swedberg 2017:184).

The quality of woman-centredness was deemed an essential criterion in the selection of these 'ideal type' sitcoms in order to ensure the shows were based on premises which were at least in part rooted in humanist-feminist values, and thus unequivocally suited to an analysis aimed to gauge sitcom representations of feminist principles over several decades. As related previously, woman-centred sitcoms are defined by their having been formulated primarily in relation to women's experience, by relaying humanist-feminist ideology to some extent and, with regards to comedic material, by predominantly joking with, rather than about women. Their focus will be on one or more women as active makers of jokes which for the most part do not undermine women (Merrill 1988); that is, these women are

portrayed as having transcended elements of the 'conditioning of a sexist culture [which] involves refusing to participate in sexist humor – humor that turns upon unflattering stereotypes of women' (Walker 1988:142). They moreover feature at least a critical reflection on, or problematising of, women's traditional roles; in this, they differ from female-led sitcoms, that is, shows with one or more female protagonists which typically do not, in their set-up or content, convey humanist-feminist values. However, these two concepts, woman-centred and female-led, are on a continuum and ultimately subjective; their potential overlap is reflective of the healthy debate in the literature, on the extent to which series such as *I Love Lucy* (Mellencamp 1996, White 2018) or *Sex in the City* (Arthurs 2003, Gerhard 2005, Brasfield 2006) can be classified as feminist. Indeed, this thesis's definition of woman-centredness mirrors Walker's (1988) and Merrill's (1988) outlining of feminist humour, as unambiguously situating the audience as female (Merrill 1988:278), and as being embedded in a sense of righteousness in its critique of patriarchal culture (Walker 1988:157. Feminist humour consequently is empowering to women (Merrill 1988:279), and has the potential to shift and redefine humorous paradigms by denying rather than breaking long-established rules (Walker 1988:156).

The three chosen sitcoms all clearly align with those criteria. Their implicit assumption of a female audience, and their critique of existing structures, is most self-evidently illustrated by their depiction of a female point of view in plotlines sympathetically depicting issues such as the menopause (*The Golden Girls, Cybill*), abortion (*Maude*) and sexual harassment (*The Golden Girls, Cybill*), as will be substantiated in the subsequent analysis. A further feature common to all shows is that they have received limited attention among academic researchers so far; this, as will be argued, is notable and worth redressing given their relevance to wider debates concerning, for example, media representations of women. As outlined in chapter three, most scholarly analysis tends to focus on *I Love Lucy*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Roseanne* and *Murphy Brown*, with the three shows

analysed here mentioned predominantly in contextual relation to these ground-breaking sitcoms.

The earliest show selected, *Maude*, exerts its protagonist to voice the humanist-feminist debates of its moment of production. It was not the only seventies sitcom to incorporate those influences, but distinguishes itself from its peers in its protagonist's domineering, fearless personality as well as its writers' risk-taking, most famously, although not exclusively, through the show's portrayal of abortion. Susan Harris, the writer of *Maude*'s two abortion episodes, went on to create the internationally successful sitcom, *The Golden Girls* (NBC 1985-1992), the show chosen as the nineteen-eighties case study. Differently to *Maude*, *The Golden Girls* does not overtly revolve around polarising humanist-feminist ideas; instead, it focuses upon the everyday lives of four distinctive personalities from a habitually underrepresented demographic, older women. The show seemingly offered escapist viewing in a decade marked by individualistic, neoliberal government policy. Yet beneath its innocuousness were regular storylines about social inequality and exploitation; furthermore, it was set in a gender-segregated, 'matrilocal' household (Greer 1999:423), a radical-feminist alternative to the nuclear family from which heteronormative pressures are largely absent. The thesis will evaluate the extent to which the show's makers had fashioned four funny old women who, Miss-Marple-like, in their sweetness, outwitted dominant ideologies (comparable to the incongruous, phenomenal success of butch lesbian comedian Ellen DeGeneres in the twenty-first century (Mizejewski 2014:190-219)).

The selected nineteen-nineties sitcom, *Cybill* (CBS 1995-1998), was, as stated above, one of several woman-centred sitcoms broadcast at that time. Compared to its contemporaries, which include *Roseanne* (on which most academic attention has centred), *Ellen, Grace under Fire, Murphy Brown* and *Caroline in the City*, *Cybill*'s baseline scenario stands out. The show's set-up and numerous storylines drew on its star's, Cybill Shepherd's, biography and presented a sardonic commentary on Hollywood's construction of feminine

beauty ideals, with several episodes addressing the sexism inherent in the making of sitcoms. A key reason for the selection of *Cybill* was its discursive tension: while the show's reflexivity was of its ironic, postmodern moment in time, its angry, humanist-feminist values, as persistently articulated by its protagonist, seemed out-of-touch with then-contemporary postfeminist discourses.

Rationale for choice of episodes to be analysed

These significant variations between the three woman-centred shows in their respective emphasises and approaches to conveying humanist-feminist thought, were central when identifying which specific episodes to analyse. All three series ran over multiple seasons and are comprised of dozens of episodes (*Maude*, 141 episodes; *The Golden Girls*, 180 episodes; *Cybill*, 67 episodes). Purposive sampling was again utilised in a decision-making process guided by my in-depth knowledge of the three series (see Lavrakas 2008), and aimed to select episodes which were representative of the following three themes:

(1) Episodes which illustrate particularly well a sitcom's relation to predominant ideological and political currents of its moment of production (*Maude*: 'The Convention', *The Golden Girls*: 'Job Hunting', *Cybill*: 'As the World Turns to Crap'). The focus of this theme will be on the 'emergence', and 'relations of dialogue, contestation and dominance between discourses', as stipulated in Fairclough's agenda for critical discourse analysis (2010:19-20).

(2) Episodes which address feminist issues in their principal storyline (*Maude*: 'The Tax Audit', *The Golden Girls*: 'End of the Curse', Cybill: 'Romancing the Crone'). This theme, which focusses on mainstream representations of formerly marginalised feminist ideologies, predominantly corresponds to the 'recontextualisation of discourses', as per Fairclough's agenda (ibid.:19-20)

(3) Episodes which serve to demonstrate a sitcom's specific contributions to humorous and wider societal discourses (*Maude*: 'The

Christmas Party', *The Golden Girls*: 'Old Boyfriends', *Cybill*: 'In Her Dreams'). This theme engages with the final point in Fairclough's agenda, the 'operationalisation of discourses […] as strategies' (ibid.:19-20), and the analysis will seek to identify a show's specific statement in relation to humorous discourses and to humanist-feminist values.

Structure of analytical chapters

This thematic grouping of episodes, and systematic engagement with the agenda laid out for CDA, facilitates both the analysis of each particular show in relation to this thesis's research questions, and the concluding, comparative analysis of changing representations of humanist-feminist thought over the course of three decades. The structure of the three analytical chapters will similarly reflect Fairclough's tenets for critical discourse analysis, which should, '[s]how the origins of discourses: for instance, how they are formed through articulating together (features of) existing discourses. […] Show how different discourses are brought into dialogue and contestation within processes of strategic struggle' (ibid.:19-20). This will be accomplished by situating the analysis of three episodes of each sitcom in three distinct frameworks, which, following a chapter's introduction, will be successively discussed: the sitcom's political and cultural contexts, the wider context of trends and developments in the sitcom genre in a specific decade, including the more particular context of contemporaneous woman-centred sitcoms. This will then be followed by critical discourse analyses of three episodes, in the thematic order identified above. Each chapter will end by summarising the three CDAs' findings, and by applying them to address the research questions.

In conclusion, this chapter has explicated the research method utilised in this thesis, as well as the reasoning underlying the choice of that method, and of the texts to be analysed. The choice of a qualitative rather than quantitative approach to textual analysis was explained with reference to the overall research aims, which are characterised by seeking to pinpoint the meanings of texts and of representations, and as such intrinsically befitting to

qualitative analysis. The qualitative paradigm is moreover traditionally associated with feminist research, as was pointed out when reflecting upon the epistemological foundations this thesis is based upon. Following on, the case for critical discourse analysis, as formulated by Norman Fairclough, was put forward, and it emerged that this approach is particular well suited to this thesis due to its normative qualities, which correspond closely to the values underlying feminist research. The methodological foundations of CDA were then presented, followed by a detailing of the rationale for selecting *Maude*, *The Golden Girls* and *Cybill* as the sitcoms to be investigated by this method. It was pointed out that these shows' woman-centredness, that is, broadly, their corresponding to humanist-feminist principles, was a pivotal criterion when deciding upon them over contemporaneous texts. Subsequently, the choice of particular episodes of these three shows was justified with particular reference to the stipulations proposed by Fairclough as an agenda for critical discourse analysis. A central aspect of this agenda is the continuous framing of discourses in relation to alternative ideological currents, and this chapter's last explanatory section specified the manner in which those other, competing discourses will be integrated into this thesis's analysis.

The subsequent chapter will be the first of three to put these theoretical and methodological considerations into practice, by conducting critical discourse analyses of three episodes of the sitcom *Maude*.

Chapter 6: Analysis of *Maude*[13]

Lady Godiva was a freedom rider
She didn't care if the whole world looked.
Joan of Arc, with the Lord to guide her
She was a sister who really cooked.

Isadora was the first bra burner
Ain't ya glad she showed up. (Oh yeah)
And when the country was falling apart
Betsy Ross got it all sewed up.

And then there's Maude.
(Repeat x4)
And then there's

That uncompromisin', enterprisin', anything but tranquilizing,
Right-on Maude.

Maude theme song (written by Marilyn and Alan Bergman and Dave Grusin; performed by Donny Hathaway)

Introduction

Maude Findlay made her first television appearance in 1971, as a supporting character in an *All in the Family* episode. That show derived much of its humour from the unreconstructed attitudes of its patriarch, Archie Bunker. When Maude (played by Bea Arthur) comes to visit, this New York-based feminist and supporter of the Democrats and all issues liberal, inevitably clashes with Archie and formidably exposes his inanities. Bea Arthur's imposing physique perfectly matched Maude's no-nonsense personality, and her performance prompted CBS executives to exclaim, 'Who is that girl? Let's give her her own show' (Arthur 2001). From 1971 to 1978,

[13] The following articles are based upon parts of this chapter:
1. Kypker, Nicole S. (2012), 'One right-on sister: Gender politics in *Maude*', *Comedy Studies,* 3(2), pp 139-149.
2. Kypker, Nicole S. (2017), 'Laughter and ideology: a critical discourse analysis of changing representations of rape in Norman Lear's sitcoms', *Comedy Studies,* 8(1), pp 13-21.

that show, *Maude*, would revolve around a 'liberal middle-aged loudmouth'[14] (Gray 1994:43). Its above-cited theme tune placed its protagonist in a lineage of history-making women, and Maude's calibre was such that this was not wholly preposterous; according to Dow, her confidence levels and 'unrepentant feminism' made her the patriarchal 'nightmare' figure that feminism might produce (1996:61-2).

The sitcom was as intrepid as its main character. It was the first TV comedy in which a woman (naturally, Maude) uttered the phrase, 'son of a bitch' (see Kohen 2012:74) and it remains most strongly associated with its depiction of abortion in a highly controversial first season two-parter ('Maude's Dilemma') storyline (King 2015). In those episodes, as throughout the show and as in *All in the Family*, producer Norman Lear sought to portray both sides of a debate that polarised the nation (King 2015). Lear, a sitcom *auteur* and 'self-conscious producer' (Newcomb 1977) had a 'great proclivity for placing tears and laughter side by side because [he] was influenced so much by Chaplin and Preston Sturges in film' (Gitlin 2000:212). This is manifest in the many social issues covered throughout Maude's six-year run, which include alcoholism, race relations, drug legislation, medical malpractice, domestic violence, homosexuality, bankruptcy, depression, nervous breakdowns, attempted suicide, bipolar disorder, sexual harassment, plastic surgery and rape. In his representations of these topics, as will be elaborated, Lear would break taboos, subvert censorship stipulations and unceasingly emphasise that individuals' human connectedness overrides their diverging politics (Newcomb 1977, McClanahan 2007, Schneider 2001, Faye 2009). *Maude* has been referred to as a show which the producer 'owed' his audience, for 'the wife in *All in the Family* was twenty-seven steps backwards' (Marlo Thomas in: Kohen 2012:74). It would be both an unambiguously feminist (Dow 1996:61), and highly nuanced sitcom.

[14] 'That's a compliment!', interjection by Frances Gray during presentation of conference paper (January 2012).

This nuance was due to Lear's 'rather complex view of the nature of bigotry' (Newcomb 1977:119). According to the producer, bigotry was not necessarily an individual's defining characteristic, and thus could exist 'in *good* people"' (ibid.:119, emphasis in the original), as will be elaborated in the subsequent sections. *Maude*'s feminism moreover was not that of young, working women, as was the successful premise of the concurrent *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Dow 1996:61). Instead, initially, forty-seven-year-old Maude was, like most women of her generation, a stay-at-home wife (although she would eventually work as an estate agent and even, in the concluding episodes, successfully run for political office). Maude's husband Walter is portrayed by Bill Macy in a multi-layered performance; he is both highly-strung and steadfast in his loving support for his wife. Walter, who owns a domestic appliance business, is Maude's fourth husband, after two divorces and one bereavement. Carol, Maude's twenty-seven-year-old, divorced daughter (Adrienne Barbeau), and her young son live with the couple. Maude's and Walter's characters are both extended and, diegetically, sustained through Vivian and Arthur, long-standing best friends and neighbours of the Findlays. Portrayed by Conrad Bain, Dr Arthur Harmon represents, in a less excessive manner than *All in the Family's* Archie Bunker, the steadfast, God-fearing Republican principles Maude rails against, and thus makes possible the voicing of alternative political beliefs in the show. Throughout the series, Walter's deep loyalty to Arthur often conflicts with his commitment to Maude. The female pairing is less balanced: Rue McClanahan's Vivian is far from measuring up to Maude's incisive, unforgiving intellect. The girlish Vivian is everything that Maude is not and their unlikely friendship can be read as an 'against-the-odds', complementary matching of opposites, as the chasm between 'old' and 'new' femininities, or as radical-feminist solidarity between women. McClanahan explains the character as 'a foil for Maude. Maude tried to enlighten and educate her (and the audience as well) in a painless-to-watch way' (Campbell 2007:91). While both Vivian and Arthur represent the traditional ways-of-being which Maude denounces, they are written as appealing, plausible characters. Over the

course of the series, Maude moreover has several housekeepers, the first of which, Florida (Esther Rolle), would be the protagonist of *Maude*'s spin-off show, *Good Times* (CBS 1974-1979).

Audience ratings for *Maude*'s first four seasons were strong and within the top ten of the Nielsen ratings (Classic TV Hits internet site, n.d.), but dropped considerably during the penultimate and final seasons (IMDB and Fry, n.d.). The show won two industry awards: one Emmy (Bea Arthur in 1977), and one Golden Globe (Hermione Baddeley in 1976, for her role as Maude's second housekeeper) (IMDB internet site). It is notable that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* which, in terms of ratings, was less popular, went on to win twenty-nine Emmy and three Golden Globe Awards, as well as the 1977 Peabody Award (IMDB internet site). Adrienne Barbeau explains this discrepancy:

> Early on in our first season, the Writer's (*sic*) Guild had a big, black-tie affair honouring Bud [Yorkin] and Norman [Lear]. We were all seated at large round tables in our evening gowns and tuxedos, facing the stage where celebrity after celebrity stood to tell funny, scripted stories about our two bosses. Bill [Macy] downed a bottle of wine and jumped up on the stage to grab the microphone. "Cocksuckers of the world, unite!", he yelled and proceeded to unzip his fly. There was dead silence in the room. Then the entire gathering headed for the doors. Within minutes not a person was left in the room except Conrad [Bain], Bea, Esther [Rolle] and I. The next day CBS held closed-door meetings to decide whether or not Bill had violated his morals clause and should be released. The Television Academy insisted that Norman fire him. Norman refused. The Academy struck back by telling Norman not to expect any awards for the show in the future. In the six years we were on the air, always in the top twenty of the Nielsen ratings and most often in the top five, *Maude* was never nominated for best comedy. It wasn't until 1977, five years later, that Bea won for Best Actress. Bill called it his act of professional suicide (2006:105-6).

Moreover, when it came to syndication agreements, station managers were not interested in the show due to its controversial content (Lear 1986), and *Maude* would not be broadcast again for two decades. However, the sitcom would engender two international remakes: the British *Nobody's Perfect* (ITV 1980-1982), and the French *Maguy* (FR2 1986-1992) (IMDB internet site).

This chapter will conduct critical discourse analyses of three *Maude* episodes, after first detailing the politico-cultural and sitcom genre

developments of its moment of production; as outlined in the previous chapter, these initial contextual discussions provide the foundations for the CDAs. The three episodes analysed will focus upon the three themes introduced earlier: *Maude*'s relation to contemporaneous ideologies, its articulation of feminist values, and the show's overall message, or contribution to societal discourses. Howard Newcomb found that 'we analysed Maude Finchley, and in doing so, we analysed "Maude"' (1977:109), and, in relation to the last theme in particular, this analysis too will pinpoint the significant parallels between a fearless feminist character, and her eponymous sitcom vehicle.

Political and cultural contexts

'Times are changing, maybe too fast for some of us, but take my word for it: history is going to be on her [Maude's] side', yells Walter in the episode 'The New Housekeeper' (season three, episode four). The origins of most manifestations of these changing times, or 'wider social and cultural structural relations and processes' (Fairclough 2010:93), which would be represented in *Maude*, can be traced back to the nineteen-sixties. Somewhat echoing Walter's words, historian Howard Zinn commented on the rate and pace of the social change since the sixties, and on its eventual containment, thus: 'Never in American history had more movements for change been concentrated in so short a span of years. But the system in the course of two centuries had learned a good deal about the control of people. In the mid-seventies, it went to work' (2003:539). The following overview of historical and cultural events of the nineteen-sixties and seventies will outline the 'particular social circumstances' that informed the show's discursive content (see Fairclough 2010:3). Within critical discourse analysis, discourses are inextricably interrelated with 'other objects, elements and moments' (Fairclough 2010:4), and the origins of discourses in particular need to examined with regards to, 'for instance, how [discourses] are formed through articulating together (features) of existing discourses', in order to explicate 'why and how particular strategies and discourses emerge in particular social circumstances' (ibid.:19).

Fairclough furthermore explains how within institutions, 'pluralism is likely to flourish when the non-dominant classes are relatively powerful' (2010:42), occasioning a proliferation of alternative discourses and subsequently, ideological struggle. In wider society, these struggles are expressed within the '"unstable equilibrium"' of hegemonic governance:

> Hegemony is leadership as well as domination across the economic, political, cultural and ideological domains of a society. […] [It] is about constructing alliances, and integrating rather than simply dominating sub-ordinate classes, through concessions or through ideological means, to win their consent (2010:61).

These processes are starkly illustrated by the events of the sixties, a historical moment of a 'happiness explosion' (Wolfe 1968:9) coinciding with a rare 'national passion and collective social examination' (Farber and Bailey 2001:1804) through the activism of, and recurrent social unrest caused by feminist and student activists as well as by the civil rights, anti-Vietnam-war, women's, students', hippie counterculture, gay and sexual liberation, Native American, Latino and prison reform movements. These movements generated significant legal and attitudinal change which, however, in Gramscian terms can be analysed as ruling class concessions which effectually '[persuade] the masses to accept the legitimacy of their own subordination' (Femia 1981:229). Prior to the re-establishing of the hegemonic equilibrium came a social upheaval characterised by a plethora of novel discursive formulations, the origins of which can be traced to both specific historic events and the merging of existing discourses (see Fairclough 2010:19). The following will present an outline of significant historical events of the sixties and seventies; *Maude*'s specific sitcom production context in relation to these events will be addressed in the ensuing section.

The nineteen-sixties

In 1960, the US was a country with a booming economy and an unprecedented number of young people, as the first 'baby boomers' (the demographic born between 1946 and 1964) neared college age (see Farber and Bailey 2001:57 ff). In matters of foreign policy, America's traditional isolationism had ended in 1941, when the country entered into the Second

World War; twenty years on, the Cold War and resultant territorial and nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union had led to an internationalist approach, with hundreds of thousands of American service personnel stationed in Europe and Asia (ibid.:5). The Cold War would dominate the presidency of John F. Kennedy. Domestically, the charismatic Democrat adopted an effective economic approach that would retrospectively be dubbed 'growth liberalism' (ibid.:8). Internationally, the 1962 Cuban missile crisis marked a stand-off between the superpowers that, although eventually resolved, has been characterised as the closest the world has come to nuclear war to date (see ibid.:193). Another territorial conflict with a communist government would intensify during Kennedy's presidency, albeit gradually. The communist north of Vietnam had joined forces with the Viet Cong guerrilla fighters in the south in an attempt to unify the country, and after 16,000 American military advisors had been sent to Vietnam, Kennedy asked an aide for an assessment '"whether or not we should be there"' on November 21, 1963 (ibid.:37); on November 22, he was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson took the presidential oath of office on the same day. Kennedy's 1960 election had revealed emerging schisms within the prosperous country's generally stable post-war consensus:

> While most white Americans in the 1960s probably thought the presidential election was the year's most important political event, many black Americans expressed a very different kind of political perspective. Beginning on February 1, 1960, a sustained mass movement was started among young black men and women in [Greensboro, North Carolina] when four students initiated a "sit-in" at a [whites-only] Woolworth lunch counter to protest against racial discrimination (ibid.:13).

This peaceful civil rights protest[15] foreshadowed the decade's polarising upheavals, which would divide the nation into radical activists and

[15] The movement's origins, however, can be traced back to earlier decades: Zinn points to inflammatory historical occasions such as the 1931 Alabama 'Scottsboro Boys' case, in which nine black teenagers were, on insubstantial evidence, initially sentenced to death for the rape of two white women, and to the 1955 refusal of seamstress Rosa Parks to vacate her seat for a white passenger on a bus in segregated Montgomery, Alabama. Parks was arrested, and in response the increasingly influential Baptist minister Dr Martin Luther King Jr., the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and other organisations of African Americans coordinated a city-wide bus boycott by the black population. In November 1956, segregation on local busses was outlawed by the Supreme Court (ibid.:451).

what Richard Nixon designated the ‘silent majority’ (ibid.:65), or, in Norman Lear’s terms, into ‘liberals’ and ‘bigots’. In August 1963, African-American leaders led approximately 250,000 civil rights supporters in the March on Washington, a historic event which culminated with Martin Luther King’s iconic ‘I have a Dream’ speech. In 1964, the landmark Civil Rights Act was passed through the Senate, and

> changed the United States in fundamental ways. Not only did it attack racial discrimination, but as a result of unexpected, last-minute manoeuvring in Congress, the new law also attacked America’s long-standing tradition of second-class citizenship for women. The act outlawed job discrimination based on race or gender (ibid.:20).

Yet from the mid-sixties onwards, race relations deteriorated further, and peaceful protests were superseded by race riots in both northern and southern states. When Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968, the violence escalated, with riots erupting in over 130 towns and cities. Many Americans’ hopes rested on John F. Kennedy’s younger brother, Robert F. ‘Bobby’ Kennedy, a liberal politician who unambiguously ‘reached out across the racial divide’ (ibid.:45) and, in 1968, had been campaigning for the Democratic presidential nomination. Having won the California primary, he was shot in Los Angeles on June 5, 1968 and died the following day.

Two months later, ‘Americans watched aghast as law and order broke down in Chicago’ (ibid.:45). But this unrest was not due to race riots. Instead, 10,000 demonstrators had gathered outside the Democratic National Convention to protest against the Vietnam War. The strength of anti-war sentiment in the United States was such that, on public appearances, President Lyndon B. Johnson would habitually be greeted with chants of, ‘Hey, hey, LBJ! How many kids did you kill today?’ (ibid.:44). From 1964 to 1968, over half a million American soldiers (ibid.:38), with an average age of nineteen, were sent to South Vietnam on one-year-long tours of duty (ibid.:383). The horrors of that war, during which it was frequently impossible for American troops to distinguish between enemy fighters and South Vietnamese civilians, were revealed to the American and international public in 1969, when details

of the My Lai massacre were published in the press.[16] Even before these atrocities became public knowledge, the American nation's support for the war had declined significantly. Large-scale anti-war demonstrations, which had started in 1965, spread rapidly, predominantly but not exclusively among university students. As young men publicly burned their draft cards and veterans threw away their medals outside the Capitol (ibid.:52), President Richard Nixon, who had assumed office in 1969, began to withdraw soldiers while temporarily extending the conflict to Cambodia and Laos. The Vietnam War ended on January 27, 1973 with a 'peace with honour' agreement negotiated by the American government (ibid.:53).

One organisation that had been instrumental in coordinating opposition to the war was the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society). They were one of numerous societal factions to challenge the status quo in the nineteen-sixties: in addition to the civil and women's rights movements, there were gay rights, prison rebellions, Native American and Latino uprisings (Zinn 2003: pp 514 ff, Farber and Bailey 2001:151). Heterosexual mores too were being overhauled, with new customs such as premarital sex and cohabitation, and unprecedentedly candid portrayals of sexuality in film and literature leading to,

> tensions. Sometimes it was seen as a "generation gap" – the younger generation moving far away from the older one in its way of life. But it seemed after a while to be not so much a matter of age – some young people remained "straight" while some middle-aged people were changing their ways (Zinn 2003:536).

Yet the sixties were simultaneously the decade of the 'Summer of Love', which took place in San Francisco in 1967, and of what author Tom Wolfe termed a 'happiness explosion' (1968:9). The latter phenomenon had an economic foundation: the baby boomers came of age at a time when

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[16] 'On March 16, 1968, US Soldiers entered the village of My Lai […], expecting to find a National Liberation Front stronghold. Instead, they found only women, children and elderly people. The infantry platoon, under the command of Lieutenant William Calley, murdered five hundred civilians that day, including babies. They raped and sodomised women and mutilated corpses. The villagers never fired a shot at the soldiers, and none of the dead appeared to be Viet Cong' (Farber and Bailey 2001:230).

Americans were wealthier than they had ever been, and it was in opposition to this apparent satiation and conspicuous consumption that the hippie counterculture emerged. It was characterised by, for example, the long hair and loose, colourful clothing worn by both men and women, communal living arrangements, the unconcealed use of marijuana and hallucinogenic drugs and resultant psychedelic spirituality, promiscuity and the non-materialistic belief that 'everything should be free, with goods and services bartered, exchanged, or simply given away' (ibid.:59). In 1969, the three-day music festival at Woodstock, New York, was attended by 500,000 people and has been characterised as both the 'cultural touchstone for a generation' (ibid.:257) as well as 'the last counter-cultural hurrah' (Ball 2001:294).

The nineteen-seventies

The nineteen-seventies were dubbed the '"Me" Decade' by Wolfe (1976), due to a marked shift towards an emphasis on individualised self-fulfilment rather than the collective good. Hippie ideals would be 'repackaged' for a new generation who 'had little interest in directly challenging social norms but who wished to partake of the rebellious and hedonistic impulses of the counterculture eagerly consumed [its] lifestyle, buying psychedelic rock albums and "groovy" clothes' (Farber and Bailey 2001:60). The irony of this commodification of anti-capitalist values illustrates Zinn's (2003:539) observation that during the seventies, 'the system' successfully subdued the previous years' alarmingly pervasive popular impetus for social change. Prior to specifying the dynamics of that hegemonic process, the following will detail the societal circumstances in which it was to occur.

Republican President Richard Nixon, elected in 1968 and re-elected in 1972, would govern America in the first part of a decade marked by financial and governmental crises. The post-war economic boom was over and rising unemployment and inflation rates, a budget deficit (Bailey and Farber 2004:3) and powerful unions (Cowie 2004:84) unsettled the country during the 1973 to 1975 recession and its aftermath. In 1973, the Arab oil-producing countries instated an embargo which resulted in a 350 percent rise

in oil prices (Bailey and Farber 2004:3), and the high price and shortages of petrol would impair the country throughout the nineteen-seventies. Overall, 'Americans described their world and their future in a language of loss, limit and failure' (ibid.:3), a disillusionment that did not solely ensue from the decade's bleak economic backdrop. The Nixon administration will, in the collective consciousness, perpetually remain associated with unparalleled political disgrace, encapsulated in the name of a Washington building complex: during the 1972 election campaign, five men were arrested during an attempt to wiretap the Democratic National Committee offices, which were located in the Watergate Hotel and Office Building. 'Nixon and his aides lied again and again as they tried to cover up their involvement' (Zinn 2003:543). Yet simultaneously, more junior members of Nixon's circle began to disclose insider knowledge, as did FBI executive Marc Felt who, under the pseudonym 'Deep Throat', revealed crucial information to the *Washington Post*. Eventually, Nixon's impeachment became inevitable (Stone and Kuznick 2013:389-390), and he resigned in August 1974. Gerald Ford succeeded Nixon to the presidency but lost the 1976 election to Democrat Jimmy Carter, whose 'plain-spoken, honest, even humble approach to the presidency' (Bailey and Farber 2004:19) was welcomed at first but would be perceived as ineffectiveness by the time of the 1980 presidential campaign (ibid.:20).

In retrospect, the seventies are widely understood as a decade of transition. Those years' painful economic deterioration paved the way for the fervently individualistic politics of the eighties (Zinn 2003:573), and marked the transformation of an economy based on manufacturing into a post-industrial model (Willard 2004:181). During a decade in which the government could have lost all moral authority as a consequence of the Watergate scandal, much of the rebellious popular discontent of the sixties, of which the civil rights movement had constituted 'the most frightening challenge' (Zinn 2003:565), was effectually curtailed through, for example, the bicentennial celebrations of 1976, which presented an opportunity to foster consensus and patriotism (ibid.:562). Moreover, in 1976, Harvard

political science professor and White House consultant Samuel Huntington wrote part of a report for the Trilateral Commission. Addressing the loss of governmental authority, he identified 'an excess of democracy' and the need for 'desirable limits to the extension of political democracy' (ibid.:560). President Carter's government would include many appointees with right-wing and/or corporate loyalties, and thus reflected Huntington's recommendation of representing the interests of the country's most powerful, 'key institutions' (ibid.:566).

The hegemonic struggle found further expression within popular habitus and culture. According to Tom Wolfe (1976), the consequences of the nineteen-sixties sexual liberation and women's movements included a proliferation of self-centred practices; in particular, as a result of relaxed sexual norms, the accessibility of the contraceptive pill and the AIDS virus not yet identified, the seventies were a decade of unique sexual freedoms (see Waldrep 2000:3). In popular music, the influence of the sixties were clearly distinguishable in the hits of early-seventies, folk-influenced singer-songwriters such as Carole King, Joan Baez and Carly Simon, while disco music became the dominant soundtrack of the period's latter years (Kutulas 2003: pp 172 ff). Allied with a pleasure-seeking lifestyle that would memorably be depicted in the 1977 hit film *Saturday Night Fever* (1977, director John Badham), disco music's frequently African-American 'diva' stars, including Donna Summer, Gloria Gaynor and Sister Sledge, appeared to embody 'the fullest possible version of the sexual revolution' (ibid.:189). However, they have been alternatively read as a carefully managed cultural reaction to the threat of feminism (ibid.:190): at a point in time when women's emancipation came to mean that women were competing with men for rare employment opportunities, the disco divas epitomised a tolerable version of women's liberation (ibid.:190). The feminist activism that brought about such outcomes, the second feminist wave, differed from other sixties' movements in that, rather than waning, it gathered momentum during the seventies (Brownmiller 1999:227, Faludi 1992:68), as outlined on pages 9 to 18 of this thesis. While the women's liberation movement and other ideological

upheavals of the sixties had a clear impact on the discourses featured in *Maude*, whose content included, for example, storylines addressing race relations and the decriminalisation of soft drugs, in addition to feminism. However, the sitcom is most fully understood when contextualised as but one piece of its producer's expansive oeuvre; Norman Lear's life's work was both impacted by, and dedicated to advancing, many of the above-mentioned sixties social movements, as the following section will detail.

Sitcom genre context

'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'.* (*All in the Family* 1971 premiere disclaimer)

Edith: Let's all sing the 1975 version of Those Were The Days [All In the Family theme tune*] … We'll call it These Are The Days.*
Gloria: Oh goody goody gumdrops and other Family Hour expressions of delight.
All (sing): Television's grown-up now/ No-one needs a marriage vow/ Folks go to the toilet now/ These are the days
Edith: Single girls can take a pill
Archie: Robert can propose to Bill
All: We can all say prune juice and tush and potty out loud
Gloria: We can show my pregnancy
Michael: And John-Boy can have VD
Archie: Plus a quick vasectomy
All: After nine o'clock … yeah/ These are the days.

('*All in the Family* Salutes the Family Viewing Hour', recorded in 1975 and never aired)

This section will move from the wider, societal circumstances of *Maude*'s production to its genre-specific context. These two contextual features are closely interlinked, for the sixties' legacy of an immense challenge to the value consensus is the basis for both the institutional and individual agency which would result in the creation of *Maude*: it motivated both CBS's push for the 'rural purge', the overhaul of its programming in the early seventies, and is reflected in Norman Lear's commitment to progressive values, which remained steadfast throughout his career. Nonetheless, network

and producer regularly clashed over the limits of that which could be said on primetime television, and Lear's often successful negotiations with the network's censorship department would impact on the range of speech featured on all subsequent programming. The following will focus upon these three contextual factors, that is, network decision making, Lear's influence, and nineteen-seventies censorship conventions, and their respective impact upon the discourses featured in *Maude*.

When, in the early nineteen-seventies two of CBS's recently promoted decision makers, Robert Wood (president from 1969 to 1976) and Fred Silverman (vice president/ head of programming from 1970 to 1975), implemented the 'rural purge' (as outlined on page 60), they undertook a calculated risk: as Robert Wood put it, at this point in time, 'advertisers were not altogether influenced by who was number one. "Number one *how*?" became an important question to them' (in: Gitlin 2000:208, emphasis in the original). By 1970, ninety-six percent of American households owned one or more TV sets (Farber and Bailey 2001:1374), and the relatively new medium could no longer ignore recent societal upheavals: 'Coming out of the sixties, the climate was right, the kids were letting it all hang out, the kids didn't want to see Doris Day', commented Lear's co-producer Bud Yorkin (in: Gitlin 2000:211). Fairclough outlines how such historical moments of crisis, 'lead to a proliferation of strategies which may be in complementary as well as competitive relationships, leading to processes of strategic struggle' (2010:18). One such strategy was the above-outlined commodification of the militant and hedonistic proclivities of the nineteen-sixties (Farber and Bailey 2001:1454). As anti-establishment sentiment coincided with business interests, the civil rights movement engendered ground-breaking portrayals of African-Americans throughout the seventies, including three Lear-produced sitcoms focussed upon African Americans (*The Jeffersons* (CBS 1975-1985), *Sanford and Son* (NBC 1972-1977), and *Good Times* (CBS 1974-1979)), and the depiction of the black American experience, in particular slavery, over several generations in the highly successful mini-

series *Roots* (ABC 1977)[17]. The Vietnam War too would be represented televisually, albeit symbolically, in the satirical sitcom hit, *M*A*S*H* (CBS 1972-1983), set during the Korean War. For second-wave feminism, the early seventies were, according to prominent activist Phyllis Chesler, 'an opening in history' (1998:42), during which 'the media covered our every statement. Whatever we said was considered news' (ibid.:42). This is affirmed by *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* writer James L. Brooks, who relates how in the early nineteen-seventies, feminism 'was a cultural revolution […], and we were able to manipulate it for our own profit' (2009, see also Rabinovitz 1999:145).

For feminism and other sixties movements, nineteen-seventies popular culture was thus a significant site of ideological negotiation, as is characteristic of the hegemonic struggle (Femia 1981); within CDA, this process corresponds to the dominant group's recontextualisation and operationalisation of discourses in the contest for dominance at moments of crisis (see Fairclough 2010:20). This redefinition of the ideological equilibrium furthermore potentially allows for a creative remodeling of discursive practice and of power relations (ibid.:130). Norman Lear's sitcoms were at the forefront of this ambitious and ambiguous undertaking. He was a producer with a mission, whose shows have been compared to, 'a secular Sunday school, gently exhorting us to do right' (Wander 1976:40). They differed from standard prime-time fare through a manifest left-wing agenda and their great popular appeal (Newcomb 1977, Gitlin 2000:212 ff). *All in the Family*, his first show, was a remake of the British *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC 1965-1975). It started its eight-year run on CBS in 1971 and would remain at number one in the Nielsen ratings for five years (Campbell 2007:21). Its controversial plotlines, which, among many other topics, covered the Vietnam war, attempted rape, homosexuality, the menopause, impotence, partner swapping, anti-Semitism and women's liberation, made television history.

[17] In film, this increased representation was reflected in the divisive 'blaxploitation' film genre at the beginning of the seventies (see Smith-Shomade 2002:13).

Television censorship regulations are today deliberated with reference to 'before and after' Lear's first show. Prior to *All in the Family*,

> broadcasters structured programming content around the "normal," dominant, values of white, middle-class Americans. Therefore, content centered around the concerns of the nuclear family. Topics such as racism or sexuality which had little direct impact on this domestic setting were excluded from content. Indeed, ethnic minorities were excluded, for the most part […]. Sexuality was a topic allocated to the private, personal sphere rather than the public arena of network broadcasting. For example, the sexual relationship between Rob and Laura Petrie in *The Dick Van Dyke Show* during the mid-1960s could only be implied. When the couple's bedroom was shown, twin beds diffused any explicit connotation that they had a physical relationship. Direct references to non-normative heterosexuality were excluded from programming altogether. In addition, coarse language which described bodily functions and sexual activity or profaned sacred words were excluded from broadcast discourse (Worringham and Buxton,n.d.).

Lear emerged as the foremost agent of change, whose clout and success enabled him to expose network censorship regulations as fluid and negotiable (Faye 2009, McClanahan 2007:194, Schneider 2001:103). When asked in an interview, '[d]id you ever reach a point with your shows that the networks said, "He's Norman Lear, just let him do whatever he wants"?, Norman Lear replied: 'It was much more "[n]obody f**** with success. That's an old American adage. That's the way that worked' (Faye 2009). Similarly, Rue McClanahan describes how, 'Lear and the network [regularly] locked horns together over whether we'd be allowed to put [an] outrageous script on the air. Norman always won' (2007:194, see also Gitlin 2000:213). The producer's power was further evinced by his successful legal challenge to the introduction of the Family Viewing Hour (aka Family Viewing Time) in 1975. In reaction to public concern about depictions of sex and violence, the Federal Communications Commission had ruled that the networks should broadcast unequivocally inoffensive shows in the 8-9 pm (Eastern time) timeslot (Brown, n.d.). While the specifics of the new regulation remained vague, during negotiations, *All in the Family* was utilised as a case study of what was deemed unsuitable, overly-sexualised programming (Schneider 2001:112). Following the implementation of the policy, the show was moved to a later slot (from 8pm on Saturdays to 9pm on Mondays), to diminished audiences. Norman Lear and others successfully brought a lawsuit against the regulation, having argued that, 'it sanitized only an hour or two of TV

programming, leaving the rest of the 24-hour schedule open to "anything goes"'(Brown, n.d.). The policy was ruled unconstitutional in 1976, and networks were left free to enforce, or not, its objectives (Schneider 2003:113).[18] Such 'give-and-take' struggles with the institutional sentinels of language and ideology emulates the hegemonic process, with the censor in a gatekeeping role: 'when new doors are opened, and taboos broken, the censor holds the key to the standards of entry or passage' (Schneider 2001:5); these broken taboos and newly-represented 'ideological processes and ideological struggle' can function to bring about the 'denaturalisation of existing conventions and replacement of them with others' (Fairclough 2010:129). Furthermore, the transgression of previously entrenched censorship norms made possible a questioning of established, naturalised ideologies (ibid.::27).[19] Nevertheless, the lasting impact of the Lear shows of the early seventies on television production is firmly established (Shapiro 2011:80); among its wide-ranging consequences were the widening of the range of topics and speech featured in woman-centred sitcoms.[20]

Notably, Lear's shows did attract contemporaneous reproach from sources other than the network censors. His portrayal of the African-American experience was criticised for being stereotypical (Jhally and Lewis 1992:2, citing Poussaint), and as overly palatable to white audiences

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[18] *All In The Family* and *Maude* never returned to a pre-9pm timeslot during their original run. *Maude*'s ratings dropped to 78th place in the 1977-78 schedule (Campbell 2007:92), a development Bea Arthur attributed to erratic scheduling[18]: 'I don't think interest in *Maude* has lessened. We were just buffeted around by CBS until my own kids didn't know what night the show was on' (1978, cited in Campbell 2007:92).

[19] As is characteristic of the hegemonic process and of the persistence of the dominant ideology, some of the liberties achieved through Lear's cultural entrepreneurship were by no means secured; instead, 'one-off' expressions of previously unspeakable themes would be succeeded by a renewed silencing. For example, following *Maude*'s featuring of abortion in 1972, 'legions of women on soap operas and nighttime (*sic*) dramas have been spared the moral reckoning that so often comes with unplanned pregnancy, thanks to the convenient plot device of the miscarriage' (Bellafante 2009).

[20] Determinedly political sitcoms became outmoded in the mid to late seventies (Feuer 1999:154, Shapiro 2011:38), and Lear proceeded to create *All That Glitters* (1977), *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* (1977-78) and *Fernwood 2-Night* (1977), genre-spoofing shows that were 'so "hard", violated so many network taboos about subject matter and form and language, they had to be sold directly to local stations' (Gitlin 2000:119); indeed, *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* only got a broadcast deal at all after self-declared '*Maude*'s number one fan', First Lady Betty Ford, agreed to assist with the negotiations (Lear 1986).

(Cashmore 1994:106); in particular, Laura Z. Hobson, author of the 1947 bestseller about anti-Semitism, *Gentleman's Agreement* (made into a film in the same year), condemned the manner in which racism was depicted on *All in the Family* as too coy and sanitised in a September 1971 *New York Times* article. Lear's response to Hobson, published a month later in the *NYT*, affords valuable insights into his motivation and methodology: according to Hobson, writes Lear, the brutal reality of racism should be revealed through, for example, the portrayal of its most base expressions. However, '[t]hen how do we relate to him [the racist]? How do we see a little of ourselves in him? On the other hand most of us have known people who use words like spade … The thing about bigots, and this includes Archie Bunker, is that they do not know they are prejudiced' (Lear 1971).

Thus, according to Lear, prejudice exists on a continuum, and needs to be recognised even in its more subtle expressions. While it is straightforward to identify and shun outright racists or sexists, a more complex, and more common, phenomenon is that otherwise virtuous friends and family members can have questionable values. *All in the Family* presents not just the rows resulting from the liberals' and bigots' opposing value systems, but moreover these individuals' great affection for each other. This differentiated engagement with the then-recent social changes is exemplified by the fact that Lear chose the most conservative of institutions, the nuclear family, as the backdrop for these heated discussions.[21] In Newcomb's words: for Lear, 'it is more important to focus on the relationships than on generalization. […] Such views allow no simplistic distinctions between good guys and bad guys' (1977:119). This model, of deeply connected, flawed but decent people with opposing political opinions, is reflected in *Maude*, in

[21] This is reinforced by Fred Silverman's juxtaposition of *All in the Family* with the gentler, Depression-era family chronicle *The Waltons* (CBS 1972-1981), an unexpected ratings winner. The carefully crafted, small-town-set series was a tremendously popular exemption from the recent 'rural purge' strategy; its appeal alongside the trendier shows could, according to Silverman, be traced back to shared ideological foundations: *The Waltons* 'was a phenomenon […] At face value, [*The Waltons* and *All In The Family*] were very different. But they both talk about the sanctity of the family' (2001).

which the ideological distance between Maude and Arthur is bridged through Walter. The following sections will explore these ideological negotiations, among other aspects, in detailed critical discourse analyses of three episodes of that show.

Critical Discourse Analysis 1: 'The Convention'

This first critical discourse analysis will analyse the dialogue and ideological premises of 'The Convention', the fourteenth episode of *Maude*'s first season, initially broadcast on January 2, 1973. In line with the first of the three themes for each sitcom's critical discourse analyses outlined earlier, its particular focus will be upon the sitcom's affiliation with and representation of contemporaneously predominant ideological currents. In the early to mid-nineteen-seventies, humanist feminism was one such dominant value system (Brownmiller 1999, Chesler 1998); 1970 had been a 'watershed year' (Brownmiller 1999:152), during which several of the movement's most influential books had been published, including Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970, 1991), Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970,1991) and the first edition of The Boston Women's Health Collective's *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1970, 2011). Over the subsequent years, the mainstream media extensively publicised feminist campaigns on issues such as reproductive rights, sexual harassment and rape. Several activists, including Gloria Steinem and Germaine Greer, became nationally known luminaries of the movement (see also page 18). The period was a unique historical juncture (Chesler 1998:41), at which women's and capitalist interests coincided and feminism, at that point in time, was 'good business' (Rabinovitz 2002:145). The women's movement would furthermore be represented in the highest echelons of power from 1974, as First Lady Betty Ford vociferously backed several feminist campaigns (Nichols 2011), and thought herself '*Maude*'s number one fan' (Lear 1986). Another woman deeply influenced by the second feminist wave was the producer's wife, Frances Lear, who is widely believed to have been the inspiration and model for Maude Findlay (Nemy 1996), a character whose very name connotes belligerence ('Maude: Variant of Matilda: Strength in Battle' (Meaning of Names internet site, n.d.)).

These then-prominent feminist discourses are discernible in *Maude*. 'The Convention' differentiates itself through its explicitness, that is, through the degree to which the show's pivotal ideologies are foregrounded and can be traced to their source, as will be substantiated shortly. Its title connotes both the trade conference that provides the episode's concrete backdrop, and the societal mores which its content calls into question. It is thus highly suited to pinpointing the 'emergence' (Fairclough 2010:19) of the sitcom's primary discourses, as well as, through the way in which they are framed and presented, these discourses' 'relations of dialogue, contestation and dominance' with alternative value systems (ibid.:19).

Episode summary

The episode plays out in a shabby hotel room in Massachusetts, where Maude and Walter are staying while she is accompanying him to an appliance dealers' convention. In the first act, Walter is in a hurry to attend the opening dinner. While he is getting ready, Maude starts to complain about her lack of paid employment, and of an identity other than as Walter's wife. The couple start to argue, and eventually leave in a rush. In act two, they re-enter the hotel room, with Walter carrying an award statue. Maude prompts him to repeat the acceptance speech he gave when he was bestowed with the prize; reluctantly, he does so, and reveals that in that speech, he referred to the five-feet-ten-inches-tall Maude as 'the little woman'. Maude and Walter quarrel again over the demands of traditional gender roles, and the argument escalates to the point where Walter is about to hit her; at that very moment, an alarm clock, which Walter had set before the dinner (to remind him of his promise to make love to Maude), goes off, and this defuses the situation. Maude affirms that she loves Walter, and they go to bed. In a tag scene, the hotel's owner insists on taking a picture of the pair as they are leaving, for they are a rare married couple to have stayed in his establishment, The John Smith Hotel.

Analysis

Maude and Walter had suspected that much: in one of the episode's first lines, Walter comments that the hotel 'must have been named after all its customers', and they only frequent it as it was 'the last hotel room in town'[22]. Their run-down room, in which rickety blinds cannot be closed and pictures fall off the wall, provides a striking backdrop for an episode which contests one of society's fundamentals, traditional gender relations. The hotel's dilapidated state appears to function as a warning to viewers, cautioning against the indiscriminate dismantling of elementary institutions, as epitomised by heteronormative marriage. While patriarchal structures are critiqued vigorously in the episode, its *mise-en-scène* suggests that the alternative to the institutionalised union of men and women, casual and uncommitted relations, are as unstable a grounding for society as are the ramshackle structures of the John Smith Hotel. In line with Norman Lear's characteristic approach (as outlined earlier), the polarised political points scored in 'The Convention' are moderated, if not resolved, by deep interpersonal bonds.

This quintessential point for reform, rather than overthrow, of established gender norms mirrors the liberal-feminist argument put forward in Betty Friedan's trailblazing *The Feminine Mystique*, originally published in 1963: 'When enough women make life plans geared to their real abilities, and speak out for maternity leaves […] and the other changes in the rules that may be necessary, they will not have to sacrifice the right to honourable competition and contribution anymore than they will have to sacrifice marriage and motherhood' (1983:375). While there exists some overlap between liberal and radical-feminist thought, the two branches of feminism diverge sharply on the issues of marriage and the nuclear family, as radical feminists called for women 'to seek a revolution in their own circumstances' (Greer 1991:353), which was inextricably linked to their refusal to get

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[22] This refers to the 'Smithical Marriage' trope: 'A couple obtain a hotel room under the name of "Mr. and Mrs. Smith" or some other — usually similarly bland — pseudonym. They may be married... just not to each other' (Tvtropes.org internet site, n.d.).

married (ibid.:358). While the relative societal status of husbands and wives is critiqued, the arguments for the abolition of marriage and the nuclear family remain unspoken in 'The Convention'. Instead, Maude's and Walter's affection for and physical attraction to each other is made obvious throughout: even as they are arguing, they are affectionately referring to each other as 'darling' and 'sweetheart', and frequently touching each other. Their healthy relationship demonstrates the benefits of marriage as an institution, which is thus positioned as 'taken-for-granted "background knowledge"' (Fairclough 2010:31). The episode's alignment with liberal rather than radical-feminist principles is further manifested in the topics Maude raises when arguing with Walter, as explicated below, which appear to unambiguously reference what Friedan memorably termed the 'problem that has no name':

> The problem lay buried, unspoken for many years in the minds of American women. It was [...] a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban housewife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material [...] lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – 'Is this all?' (1983:15).

Friedan went on to discuss the schism in the experience of highly educated housewives who, despite their boredom, were extremely busy with unfulfilling household chores. She moreover examines the social construction of femininity and sexuality, the then-ubiquitous Freudian psychology, which conceptualized women as childlike and dependent on their husbands. Further focal points include the profits made by advertisers through domestic appliances, and the importance of meaningful, paid employment for the self-actualization of men and women alike. These themes are echoed and addressed in 'The Convention'. The overall role and impact of feminism can be detected in act one, when Maude is dawdling, not getting ready for the dinner despite Walter's increasingly frantic urging, as encapsulated in these lines:

1. Maude: Walter, I'm so sick of being a second class citizen simply
2. because I'm a woman.
3. Walter: Oh Maude, darling, all I want to do is get to the banquet on time.

The case can be made that Walter here represents the capitalist, patriarchal order of old, a system that is challenged and temporarily disrupted by the humanist-feminist intervention, which can and will no longer be ignored. This illustrates the show's balanced approach to representing the 'strategic struggle' between competing discourses for dominance (Fairclough 2010:19). As the subsequent analysis of both sides' arguments, and of the contextual functions of humour, will substantiate, these 'relations of contestation' (ibid.:) between humanist-feminist and patriarchal discourses pervade this typical extract of the episode's dialogue: [23]

1. Maude: Who am I, Walter, who am I? (*laughter*)
2. Walter: Right now, Joan Crawford in *I'll Cry Tomorrow*. (*laughter*)
3. Maude: That was Susan Hayward. *(laughter)*
4. Walter: Now Maude!
5. Maude: I'm serious, Walter. You say you respect me for the person I
6. am. Who am I?
7. Walter: I know it's become a dirty word Maude, but you're my wife.
8. Maude: I was also Barney's wife, and Andy's wife and what's-his-
9. name's wife (*laughter*). I wanna be me, Walter. I want my own identity.
10. Walter: You want your own identity? I give you your own identity.
11. Here, your button for the convention. […]
12. Maude: (*reads*:) 'Hello, my name is Mrs Walter Findlay'. Mrs Walter
13. Findlay. Walter! Walter, how come your button doesn't say, 'Hello, I'm
14. Mr. Maude Findlay'? (*muffled laughter*)
15. Walter: Because that's not who I am.
16. Maude: And this, Walter is not who I am either. (*puts button in the bin)*
17. Walter: (loud) Well, now nobody knows who you are!
18. Maude: (shouts) Then it'll be unanimous!

[23] The extract reproduced is longer than those in other episodes analysed. The length of the exchange has been decided upon with a view to the patterns of humour in relation to the political points made. Please note that this differs from most of the other episodes analysed, which contain several shorter extracts, often covering varying subject matters. In 'The Convention', only one central topic, the ideas underlying second-wave feminism, is depicted and thus one extended segment appears apt.

19. Neighbouring guest (invisible, knocks on wall): Hey, will you two guys
20. pipe down! (*laughter*)
21. Walter: Sweetheart, now let's clear the air. I think women are every bit
22. as good as men and I think they should have the same opportunities to
23. be productive. Don't I let you help out at the store every Christmas? (*muffled laughter*)
24. Maude: And I appreciate it, Walter. But what kind of job is that for a
25. college graduate? Standing around, keeping an eye open for shoplifters,
26. wearing a Santa Claus suit? *(laughter*) […] I have a degree in romance
27. languages. Over-educated and underused.
28. Walter: And late. Will you please put on your dress so we can leave. It
29. cost me twenty-five dollars a plate and I can't get my money back!
30. Maude: Did you hear what you just said. […] *My* money.
31. Walter: Well it is my money. I earned it.
32. Maude: Of course it is. That's my point. I'm totally dependent on you, I
33. live off your income and I'm a parasite.
34. Walter: Come on Maude you're not a parasite. You have your work, just
35. as I have mine.
36. Maude: You get paid for what you do. Nobody gives me a dime and
37. that's the barometer, Walter. Money. You know you're being productive
38. when somebody pays you money to do something.
39. Walter: I give you five bucks to put on your dress (*laughter*)
40. Maude: God will get you for that, Walter. (*laughter*) […]
41. Walter: There you go again. You don't have to get up at seven o'clock
42. In the morning. That's one good thing about being a woman.
43. Maude: (mock Irish accent:) 'Oh you're absolutely right there'. After a
44. woman gets up […] and puts on her face so that she will look beautiful
45. to go into the kitchen to make breakfast for her husband, she can then
46. go back to bed and loll around because *Stump the Stars* does not come
47. on until ten o'clock (*laughter*). Walter, if that is your idea of a fulfilled
48. life, then I'm a monkey's uncle and you are a horse's aunt (*laughter*).
49. Walter: Okay you wanna do it my way. You get up at the crack of dawn.

50. Buck traffic, argue with the customers, come home exhausted, wolf
51. down your meal and flop down into bed dead tired. Is that what you
52. want? Oh, and don't forget the other privileges we men have. The right
53. to get fired. To go broke. To get drafted into the army. To have heart
54. attacks and die, ten years before our wives. Is that what you want?
55. Maude: I'll tell you something Walter. It sure beats sitting under a
56. hairdryer reading all about Henry Kissinger's love life (*laughter*) which
57. incidentally I do not believe for a minute (*laughter*). […]
58. Walter: To tell the truth if I were a woman I'd feel the same way.

Humanist-feminist discourses

In the above, and throughout the episode, the feminist points made by Maude are essentially 'textbook' liberal-feminist arguments whose 'emergence' (Fairclough 2010:19) and origins can be traced to Friedan's ground-breaking *The Feminine Mystique*. When Maude's protests her lack of an identity other than as a wife (lines 8-9,12-13), her complaint echoes the argument put forward in the book's third chapter, 'The Crisis in Women's Identity'. Friedan expresses how,

> [t]he feminine mystique permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity. The mystique says they can answer the question "Who am I" by saying "Tom's wife… Mary's mother". […] [A]n American woman no longer has a private image to tell her who she is, or can be, or wants to be (1983:71).

This fundamental contention of the women's liberation movement reflects the confounding contradiction in American women's socialisation, argues Friedan: as children, they experience themselves as equal to their male peers. However, their socialisation is marked by a crisis point after which women adjust their expectations and life plans to conventional gender scripts. The cognitive dissonance resulting from this '"discontinuity" in cultural conditioning' (ibid.:75) was heightened for Friedan's cohort due to unprecedented numbers of women pursuing academic qualifications: '"The Road from Freud to Frigidaire, from Sophocles to Spock, has turned out to be a bumpy one" […]. "Many young women […] find their routine lives out of joint with their training" (ibid:22). This dilemma is reflected in 'The

Convention', when Maude expresses her sense of having wasted her university qualification (lines 25-26).

Such existential disquiet about a diminished life could, according to Friedan, be alleviated through women engaging in productive, paid employment (1983: pp 338 ff). Maude articulates a closely related issue, the perceived lack of value of housework in a capitalist economy, when she refers to herself as a financial 'parasite' due to her lack of an income of her own (lines 32-33). This is reflective of both Friedan's argument and the prominent nineteen-seventies feminist campaign for waged housework, as summed up by Gloria Steinem: 'the real revolution won't come until all productive work is rewarded – including child rearing and all other jobs done in the home' (1983:167). Yet the absence of remuneration is only one aspect of a housewife's experience critiqued by Maude. At least as important is the lack of meaning and fulfilment associated with household chores, as Maude sketches out in lines 55-57. The argument she articulates again closely resembles points made by Friedan, who writes:

> Can the problem that has no name be somehow related to the domestic routine of the housewife? When a woman tries to put the problem into words, she often merely describes the daily life she leads. What is there in this recital of comfortable domestic detail that could possibly cause such a feeling of desperation? […] But the chains that bind her in the trap are […] made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices (1983:30-31).

As Friedan contends, these 'mistaken ideas' include an over-emphasis placed upon sexuality to compensate for housewives' lack of authentic self-expression: 'the problem for women today is not sexual […] – our culture today does not permit women to […] gratify their basic need to grow and fulfil their potentialities as human beings' (ibid.:77). This aspect of Friedan's case too is integrated into 'The Convention''s dialogue, when Maude, early in the episode, refers to herself, both humorously and poignantly, as 'nothing but a 47-year-old sex kitten'. In this instance, she might represent the women of her generation, whose personal and spiritual growth was stunted by lack of meaningful work.

Patriarchal discourses

These feminist discourses espoused by Maude do not go unchallenged. Instead, through Walter's input, they are juxtaposed with traditional beliefs on gender relations and thus are presented in '[r]elations of dialogue, contestation and dominance between [competing] discourses' (Fairclough 2010:19). These discourses' eventual 'recontextualisation' (ibid.:20), in this case, the positioning of humanist-feminist discourses as rational rather than as seditious, is in fact signposted by Walter's job as an appliance dealer. This is of course true for the show as a whole but is foregrounded in this episode which, after all, is partly titled after an appliance dealers' convention. Domestic appliances, Friedan emphasised, freed the American woman of the nineteen-fifties and sixties 'from the drudgery […] of her grandmother' (1983:18); accordingly, Walter is, literally, in the business of facilitating women's liberation, as indeed he states explicitly: 'I'm helping create [emancipated women]. Me! I'm selling appliances so that wives can get out of the kitchen'. However, while towards the end of 'The Convention', Walter concedes the justness of Maude's cause (line 58), this conclusion is reached only after a dialectical argument. In the course of this, Walter movingly conveys the adverse impact of feminist activism on the perception of conjugal roles (line 7), emphasises his support for Maude (lines 21-23) and voices the case for the traditional division of labour (Parsons and Bales 2002) (lines 34-35). He then convincingly disputes the notion that individual men's lives are necessarily privileged in comparison to women's experience (lines 49-54). These conventional, patriarchal contentions counterbalance, but do not override, Maude's assertions; instead, Walter ultimately concedes that, 'if I were a woman I'd feel the same way' (line 58). This profound admission comes as the rational conclusion of a dialectical argument, during which Walter valiantly countered Maude's points. Such validation and recontextualisation of feminist discourses is inextricably connected to the episode's uses of humour.

Humorous discourses

With regards to the extract's uses of humour, the following will employ the concept of a 'humorous discourse' to refer to a process that engenders meaning (Fairclough 2010:3), in particular as regards relations of power (ibid.:4). In the context analysed here, the power lies with traditional patriarchal structures, and a defining feature of the segment's humorous discourse is related to Fairclough's assertion that naturalised 'ideologies are most often contained in the unsaid' (ibid.:27). The 'unsaid' in 'The Convention' includes questioning the institution of marriage itself (as outlined above), as well as childcare as part of women's traditional role. This selective critique, in which the nuclear family and motherhood are axiomatic, is once again reflective of liberal feminist thought, as illustrated by Friedan's call for a 'new life plan – in terms of one's whole life as a woman' (1983:342), that is, for combining marriage and motherhood with a career.

Importantly, 'The Convention' does not laugh at the humanist-feminist values articulated by Maude. As such, the episode takes sides; its 'taken-for-granted "background knowledge"' (ibid.:31) encompasses the valuing of the ideas underpinning women's liberation. Instead of mocking the new, feminist discourses, we laugh predominantly with Maude (lines 3, 9, 14, 40, 47, 48, 56, 57). For example, in line three, she outwits Walter; in line nine, she humorously dismisses her former husbands, and in lines 47 and 56 she sends up the more farcical aspects of a housewife's existence. She is an active and successful maker of jokes, and when we, occasionally, laugh at her, we usually do so only with her acquiescence. In lines one and 26, viewers are prompted to laugh at her histrionics and at the absurdity of Maude's employment respectively, yet she invites and directs this reaction. In comparison, Walter fails to generate amusement: his first joke (line 2) is swiftly topped by Maude's response; only when he, in line 39, responds to Maude's political point incongruously, by pragmatically bribing her, is the audience, as per the laugh track, laughing with him.

Indeed, this laughing with Maude epitomises how in the show, the audience is prompted to adapt her, female, gaze (Rowe 1995). This is resultant from both the sitcom's scripting and from Bea Arthur's performance of the character. Mills noted that the sitcom genre 'foregrounds performance more obviously than other forms' (2005:68), due to the unusually high level of acting skill required for successful comedic delivery. A performance moreover differs from the craft of acting as, rather than merely aiming for approximating reality, it moreover 'relies on forms of excessive display that are centred on the star performer' (ibid.:69-70). Bea Arthur's imposing physique is extraordinarily helpful in portraying a woman setting out to debunk the 'feminine mystique', and to blur polarised assumptions about masculinity and femininity. Arthur, whom *Time* magazine in a 1973 review of the new sitcom found 'not exactly garden-variety glamorous' (in: Kohen 2012:73), embodied the humanist-feminist argument that the polarisation of masculinities and femininities is the outcome of social rather than 'natural' processes (see, for example Friedan 1983, de Beauvoir 1972). In Fairclough's terminology, Arthur's figure is an 'object' that is related to discourses (2010:3), in this specific context, by serving as a metonym for, to paraphrase Butler (2008), the 'gendered troublemaking' at the core of the show. At five feet ten inches, Arthur was an unusually tall woman, and her deep voice would elicit laughs throughout the show (a running gag is Maude being mistaken for 'Mr Findlay' when answering the phone). These biological qualities are matched by her portrayal of Maude as, 'dominating, or trying to dominate men', as Rowe (1995:91) demarcated the 'unruly woman' (see chapter three). Maude further corresponds to Rowe's definition by being

> unable or unwilling to confine herself to her proper place. […] Her speech is excessive, in quantity, content, or tone. […] She makes jokes, or laughs herself. […] She may […] [draw] attention to the social construction of gender. […] She may be old (ibid.:91).

Bea Arthur's 'unruly woman' (ibid.:91) is assuredly in command of her environment, as well as of her audience. This is further illustrated by the studio audience's brief, hesitant laughs in lines 14 and 23: these jokes could

have been at Maude’s expense, but there is a clearly discernible uneasiness to laugh directly at her.

In both these instances, there appears to be in the audience’s subdued laughter an anticipation and a pre-empting of Maude’s reaction; Arthur’s performance is such that there is an inherent incongruity to Maude being demeaned. Indeed, most of the laughter in the above stems from incongruity, from surprising, vivid phrasing (lines 1,2,3,9, 26, 39, 47, 48, 57), as well from one unexpected situation (line 20), and from one use of Maude’s catchphrase, ‘God will get you for that, Walter’ (line 40). Throughout the series, the line is Maude’s go-to response when words fail her, and exemplifies her sense of righteousness, reinforced by that sitcom convention’s function, works as a cue (Mills 2009) to create ‘an imagined camaraderie and group identity among the audience’ (Mills 2005:89). While incongruity provokes the laughter in many of the distinct instances, the overall function of humour in the segment is one of relief. The profound issues addressed make for unlikely comedy fare, and while the political topics discussed are never undermined by laughter, they are lightened and made more palatable, through the even distribution of jokes throughout the extract. This is markedly illustrated in lines 19-20, when a bleak moment of Maude’s and Walter’s argument is offset by a particularly unpredictable occurrence, a cantankerous neighbour in a disreputable hotel. Similarly, later in the episode, when their quarrelling is about to become physical[24], they are saved by the bell, by the sudden ringing of the alarm clock (set by Walter to remind him of his ‘date’ with Maude) comically calling an end to their fighting. This ‘placing [of] tears and laughter side by side’ (Gitlin 2000:212) is characteristic of Norman Lear’s oeuvre, and as such of the producer’s didactive (Wander 1976), as well as discursive, strategy. In the above segment, as in many *Maude* episodes addressing women’s liberation in particular, the humorous discourse reinforces the protagonist’s striving for social justice by laughing with her,

[24] The confrontation only escalates to the point of potential violence as Maude repeatedly goads Walter to hit her: ‘You say, if I were a man you’d punch me in the nose. And you say you’re not prejudiced against women. Walter, punch me in the nose!’.

and at her jokes. It thus works to foster hope for that which might seem impossible, as Jenkins described the liberating, 'spiritual survival' function of humour (1994:10). Lear's vision of a more enlightened world, which would prove attainable, recalls Karl Mannheim's (2015) notion of a utopia, as first formulated in 1929, as 'a conception which, though at the time and from the perspective of the dominant classes appears fantastic, can in principle be realized and in practice often has been' (Kumar 2007:173). Lear's sitcoms bridged the gap between the world as it was and the world as it could be with politically motivated laughter. However, within the series, there were exceptions to these sympathetic and inspiring representations, as will be demonstrated in the subsequent analysis of 'The Tax Audit', which addresses an issue central to the second-wave feminist movement, sexual assault and rape.

Critical Discourse Analysis 2: 'The Tax Audit'

The season two episode, 'The Tax Audit', first broadcast on 12 February 1974, both resembles and differs from 'The Convention' in its discursive treatment of humanist-feminist concerns. Similar to the first episode analysed, 'The Tax Audit' dialectically examines a feminist issue, however, in contrast to 'The Convention', it culminates by championing patriarchal over humanist-feminist value systems. In this, it is an atypical episode, as humanist-feminist causes are habitually portrayed sympathetically within the sitcom; examples for this include depictions of abortion ('Maude's Dilemma', season one, episodes nine and ten), of a hysterectomy ('A Night to Remember', season three, episode eight), of happily unmarried career women ('Maude's Reunion', season one, episode eleven'), of sexual harassment in the workplace ('Carol's Promotion', season four, episode twenty-three), and celebrating women's largely ignored contributions to American history ('Tuckahoe Bicentennial', season four, episode nineteen). Like 'The Convention', these episodes, representing many others, feature second-wave feminist causes and principles. Nevertheless, the sitcom's depiction of another humanist-feminist issue, (attempted) rape, in

two episodes, both co-written by Norman Lear ('Vivian's Problem' (season two, episode nine), and 'The Tax Audit' (season two, episode twenty-one)), is significantly more uncomfortable for twenty-first century and/or feminist-minded viewers (see Perez and Greene 2016, Strain et al. 2016). In line with the themes for analysis outlined earlier, this second CDA will focus upon the sitcom's representations of humanist-feminist ideology, with particular attention paid to changes in discursive practices with regards to a specific feminist issue, and to recontextualizations of that issue over time and in response to external, societal developments (Fairclough 2010:19-20).

Episode summary

In 'The Tax Audit', Walter nervously expects a visit from the Internal Revenue Service. When the tax man arrives, Maude is certain that she knows him but struggles to place him. Eventually, she realises that he attempted to rape her over 30 years ago. When she confronts him, he initially does not remember the occurrence, and then recollects it differently. He explains that he was a young man, about to go to war, and that Maude had been very attractive, and still is. She is flattered by the compliment, and when he apologises for the long-ago attack, which he remembers differently, she forgives him; the episode ends with Maude waving him goodbye ('nice seeing you again'), and the Findlays realising that in his calculations, the auditor did to Walter, 'what he tried to do to Maude thirty-one years ago'.

Analysis

Like most Maude episodes, 'The Tax Audit' juxtaposes detailed renderings of patriarchal ideology with humanist-feminist understandings of a particular issue; unlike most episodes, the last laugh is on, not with, the feminist protagonist. This development is indeed signalled throughout, by the episode's secondary narrative about small-time tax evasion (Walter: 'I haven't done anything that every other taxpayer doesn't do!'): the 'common sense' about this harmless, everyday transgression is analogous to the episode's eventually arrived-at 'common sense' about attempted rape.

Gramsci's 'common sense' (the understanding of the majority), which differs between social groups and is never a fixed entity, is notably distinct from 'good sense' (progressive innovations) in the Italian theorist's writings (see Jones 2006:54-55). That 'good sense', in this case, reformist, humanist-feminist discursive representations of attempted rape, is incorporated in the episode, in Maude's initial description of her experience to Walter:

1. Maude: That monster is responsible for the most terrifying night of
2. my life [...]. Walter, it was ghastly, I don't think I can handle it, help
3. me, Walter [...] You don't know what I went through. [...] The next
4. thing I knew [...] he went crazy. I tried to get away and he grabbed me
5. and tore my favourite angora sweater. [..] I tried to scream for help
6. but the windows were up and the car radio was blasting. [...] I ran and
7. I ran and I ran and I didn't get home till two in the morning. [...]
8. Whether anything happened or not, it was a humiliating, degrading
9. experience [...] Do you know what happened to me when I got home
10. that night? My father was waiting for me at the door. He took one look
11. at my torn sweater and my broken bra strap and [...] called me terrible
12. names, the tramp, fast, common, and those were the nice ones. [...] He
13. blamed me for the incident. He said I broke his heart and I ruined his
14. good name. It was six months before he let me out again.

Her lifelike account of women's experience of sexual assault illustrates what can be named in prime-time comedy by 1974. Previously unspoken, 'taken-for-granted "background knowledge"' (Fairclough 2010:31), such as the patriarchal 'social wrong' (ibid.:11) of families' penalising female victims due to deeply misogynist notions about social repute, is now exposed. Despite being interlaced with physical and verbal comedy and audience laughter, the joke at this stage is not on rape or rape victims; rather, the comedy treads the fine line that *Maude* viewers are accustomed to, of lightening but not undermining a grave issue, as is characteristic of Norman Lear's sitcoms (Gitlin 2000:212; see also page 90 and pp 100-105). The approach was evident in 'The Convention', as well as

in earlier *Maude* episodes, focussed upon topics such as abortion and alcoholism. Examples include:

1. Maude: Walter, that man out there, that self-righteous servant of our
2. federal government, tried to rape me. *(laughter)*
3. Walter: When? The only time I turned my back was when I hung up his
4. hat. *(laughter)* […]
5. Maude: […] You attacked me!
6. Auditor: I what? Mrs Findlay, I am an agent of the United States
7. government. And a respectable family man with a wife and six children.
8. Maude: That figures. *(laughter)*

Maude's verbalising of her experience is reflective of a new and seditious discourse that, by 1974, had materialised in wider society (see Fairclough 2010:19). Rape had emerged as a radical-feminist issue at the beginning of the decade, and ground-breaking Rape Speak-Outs had been held in 1971. Women Against Rape groups were formed in the same year, and the first Rape Crisis Centres were opened in 1972 (Brownmiller 1999: pp 194 ff). Levine documents how televisual representations initially lagged behind the recent real-life changes in thinking and talking about rape: early seventies soap opera depictions of the crime reflected those of the nineteen-sixties in what she dubs the 'old-fashioned rape plot' (2007:213), that is, depicting rape as a result of 'overwhelming sexual passion' (ibid.:217). Notably, although Maude gets to 'speak out', imitating contemporaneous humanist-feminist practice, in 'The Tax Audit', the episode adheres to the misogynistic 'old-fashioned rape plot' formula (as did the earlier episode, 'Vivian's Problem', in which another couple's relationship disturbingly commences with a violent attack).

Maude's voiced contribution to this epidode's content can be framed in terms of power and status (Fairclough 2010:49), and of 'orders of discourses' (ibid.:59). Two men, Walter and the auditor, opine the understandings of established discourses, outnumbering Maude and

ultimately overpowering the nascent humanist-feminist approach. In other episodes, Maude Findlay is frequently depicted as overcoming such opposition by sheer force of personality; in 'The Tax Audit', the endorsed relationship between challenging and dominant discourses is not the one *Maude*'s audience has come to expect. Instead, Maude is put into her, woman's traditional, place, and a duplicitous equilibrium is reached. Walter's contribution initially seems consistent with his role within the series, in which he is positioned as the 'middleman', who at first defies Maude by expressing the male experience vis-a-vis her humanist feminism; in 'The Convention' as in most episodes, when he eventually concedes the justness of her cause, he voices the logical conclusion of a dialectical argument, and the pedagogic element of a particular episode (see, for another example, 'Maude's Revolt' (season 2, episode 18)). In 'The Tax Audit', he listens to Maude's account in a way that is sympathetic, sceptical and affected by the power that the auditor, as a representative of the state (the patriarchal establishment), has over him:

1. Walter: Well that must have been very upsetting to you but at least he
2. didn't ... well, I mean, nothing happened.[...] Maude, it's part of the
3. dating game, it goes on all the time. I mean, a guy takes a girl out in a
4. car and either he gets lucky or he gets his face slapped. […] What do
5. you want me to do? Go out there and beat him up because thirty-one
6. years ago he made a pass at you?

After the conversation with Walter, Maude enters the living room to confront her erstwhile attacker. Outraged, and towering over the considerably shorter man, she dominates the conversation, both physically and psychologically. The auditor's only memory of the night in question is of a baseball match, a lapse in memory which effectively illustrates the boys-will-be-boys common sense about the 'dating game', as spelled out by Walter (see above citation). Maude then proceeds to re-enact the sequence of events: sitting next to the tax man on the sofa, she slides her arm around his shoulder and gropes his leg and chest before lying on top of him. The ideologically ingrained incongruity of the image of a gender-reversing, sexually aggressive

woman is managed carefully; again, the laughter at the writhing auditor's discomfort serves to make Maude's point ('What do you think you are doing?' - 'That's exactly what I said!'). When his recollection is triggered at last, he explains: 'Mrs Findlay, your memory is playing tricks, you panicked. You got hysterical. [...] Alright maybe I did try to take some liberties. But I was a kid going off to war. I wanted to spend my last few hours ashore with a very charming, gorgeous, and if you pardon me, sexy, dish.'

This, the attacker's self-serving and victim-blaming, version of events, could easily have been countered by the fulminating Maude. Instead, in an instant, the episode switches tone. The favourable representations of humanist-feminist discourses, both verbal and visual (Maude's embodying of righteous, fearless vengeance), which thus far seemed predominant, are negated by her response ('What kind of dish?'). When this is responded to with, 'I have to say you haven't changed a bit', Maude, to the amusement of the audience, delights in the compliment, her unfeminine rage instantly transformed into girlish delight, and the confrontation into a flirtatious encounter. The auditor offers a qualified apology, cheered on by 'middleman' Walter, who concludes that, 'it takes a big, big man to apologise'.

This unexpected plot device in the episode's last three minutes, in an incongruity that is both ideologically charged and (as endorsed by the laugh track) funny, reduces Maude to a passive recipient of male judgement, silenced and pacified through flattery. This scripting choice not merely reiterates the 'old-fashioned rape plot' outlined by Levine (2007), which, though sympathetic to the victim, justified rape as the result of uncontrollable male lust. 'The Tax Audit' furthermore utilised radical-feminist discourses in a manner that recalls the self-serving concessions to challenging ideological forces that define the hegemonic process (see Fairclough 2010:63). Maude's surprising volte-face can be linked to a statement she made earlier, to Walter: 'Assaulting a woman is not a molehill, Walter, and nor are her feelings about it. They are her most precious possessions and should be treated with dignity and respect'. This individualistic declaration, which appears to reference

mainstream psychological rather than radical-feminist discourses, which emphasise structural inequalities, justifies the storyline's solution, in which Maude's 'happiness' is restored. The fact that this eventual state of mind is the result of her being objectified once more, and that she, of all women, is, amusingly, shown to be readily manipulated by having her desirability affirmed, seem to suggest that the episode is rooted in patriarchal understandings of women's essentially irrational nature. Maude is (once again) sending mixed signals; the would-be rapist, as summed up by Walter, emerges as the 'big man'.

It is possible to read the episode more favourably. Fairclough argues that the

> diversity of ideological formations is a consequence of, and a condition for, struggles between different forces within institutions: that is, conflict between forces results in ideological barriers between them, and ideological struggle is part of that conflict. These institutional struggles are connected to class struggle, though the relationship is not necessarily a direct or transparent one (2010:42).

That 'class struggle' is, of course, in relation to *Maude*, the then-contemporary women's movement's challenge to the status quo. Hill emphasised how the mainstream media's 'social problem' discursive representations are unequivocally linked to 'the exercise of power [...] through forms of selection, exclusion and domination' (1985: 35), which the fractional utilising of humanist-feminist discourses on rape in 'The Tax Audit' illustrates. Over the course of the nineteen-seventies, these initially marginal discourses gathered both in momentum and in impact. Rape was reconceptualised as systemic, that is, 'rape is to women as lynching was to blacks. It's a conscious process of intimidation that keeps all women in a state of fear' (Brownmiller 1999:204). By 1975, the high-profile publication of Susan Brownmiller's bestseller *Against Our Will* ensured that this understanding of rape as a crime of violence, not desire, entered the mainstream. In the same year,

> thirty states overhauled their rape laws to make them more equitable to victims. Between 1970, when the feminist movement first started talking about rape,

> and 1979, when the militance had receded, every state in the union went through a serious reevaluation of its rape codes and made significant adjustments. Hospital procedures and police attitudes were transformed as well. The revolution in thinking about rape was profound (Brownmiller 1999:253).

As has been demonstrated in this chapter's introduction, Lear's shows, being of a decade of ideological crisis, were designed to carry an emancipatory message (see page 103). Numerous prior *Maude* episodes had drawn on humanist-feminist issues and revealed an endorsing 'producer's point of view [that] was never lost' (Lear 1986) on millions of (if not all) viewers. 'The Tax Audit', in its selective featuring of radical-feminist discourses and reactionary conclusion, is perhaps best understood with reference to both changing mainstream discourses on rape and to other Lear texts on the same issue.

As mentioned above, an earlier season two *Maude* episode portrays an attempted rape in a similar, trivialising manner. In the 1973 *All in the Family* episode, 'Gloria the Victim', Archie Bunker's daughter manages to escape her attacker, and the episode exposes in harrowing detail the demeaning nature of the criminal justice system's dealings with rape victims; in the end, she does not report the attack. Despite the discouraging conclusion, the episode's 'showing up' of sexist, victim-blaming police and court procedures were reflective of then-prevailing radical-feminist debate (Brownmiller 1999: pp 194 ff). When *All in the Family's* Edith is nearly raped in the 1977 'Edith's 50th Birthday' episode (written by Lear himself, with Gail Ababarnel, the founder/director of a rape treatment centre, as a script consultant), the script references the newly mainstream discourses on the matter throughout: rape is no longer about sexiness, and after an initial struggle, the victim eventually reports the crime. The victim-blaming inherent in the two *Maude* episodes and the fatalism of 'Gloria the Victim' have been transformed into a new, radical-feminist-informed common sense, in a representation that is consistent with mid-to-late nineteen-seventies televisual trends of depicting 'rape as a social issue' (Levine 2007:220), that is, 'as a

violent crime, not an act of sexual passion' (ibid.:222). In 2013, 'The Tax Audit''s script consultant, Gail Ababarnel's Rape Foundation:

> honored Norman Lear for being a pioneering male voice advocating for victims of rape. He raised national awareness about rape in 1977 after creating an episode of *All in the Family* that focused on one of the main character's experience being raped. This episode, 'Edith's 50th Birthday', reached 40 million people and forever changed the nation's consciousness about rape (The Rape Foundation internet site, 2013).

Depictions of rape in Lear's sitcoms reflect different moments within the trajectory of the humanist-feminist class struggle to redefine and recontextualise dominant discourses. The self-conscious auteur (see Newcomb 1977) has publicly stated that, 'I wasn't always right' (1986) which, along with changing societal norms, might account for 'The Tax Audit' and for Lear's subsequent, more progressive, representations of an issue central to humanist feminism. As stated above, the great majority of humanist-feminist issues were depicted sympathetically throughout *Maude*'s run, and it is the totality of the show's contribution to both humorous and wider societal discourses that will be explored in the third analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis 3: 'The Christmas Party'

As delineated in chapter five, this final CDA of a *Maude* episode will focus upon the show's particular contribution to wider societal discourses. The third episode to be analysed, 'The Christmas Party' (season four, episode fourteen, first broadcast 22 December 1975) will be argued to epitomise the sitcom's mission in relation to wider society. Written by Norman Lear and Woody Kling, 'The Christmas Party' illustrates Newcomb's (1977) claim, that the findings of an analysis of Maude, the character, are frequently interchangeable with those of an analysis of *Maude*, the show. As will be elaborated, in line with Norman Lear's characteristic approach (ibid.), both the show and its protagonist are aimed to diminish the antagonism between those with opposing political outlooks; they both impart and moderate the humanist-feminist message of their time. These mediating qualities are particularly discernible in 'The Christmas Party', an episode in which Maude Findlay is, for once, not the most feminist character.

Episode summary

Instead, even more resolutely committed to women's liberation than Maude is Stephanie Fisher, an old school friend of hers who has come to visit. Played by Neva Patterson, she somewhat resembles Betty Friedan, and indeed appears to represent that writer in Maude's recounting of the most influential thinkers of the second feminist wave (Stephanie's book 'helped start the whole feminist movement'; 'when you think of women's lib, you think of Gloria Steinem, Germaine Greer and Stephanie Fisher'). She joins a Christmas party the Findlays are throwing for Walter's employees but alienates the other guests with her incessant, overtly critical attitude towards the gendered nature of the evening's proceedings. Eventually, when she chides Maude for wearing a Santa Claus suit, Maude accuses her of ruining the party. First Vivian, and then the assembled guests turn on the writer. At this point, Maude launches into a passionate and persuasive defence of Stephanie and of her life's work, and the episode concludes with everyone gathered around the piano, reconciled and singing carols.

Analysis

Prior to this assuaging ending, 'The Christmas Party' presents its own, diegetic, analysis of the episode, as Stephanie provides a running humanist-feminist commentary. Her assessments are often scathing, and are portrayed as verging on the trivial: Maude's grandson building a snowman is countered with, 'why not snowwomen?'; fellow guests using the terms 'good guy' and 'mankind' are admonished that, 'you see language reflects the way we think. […] When you hear 'mankind', do you think of men and women or do you just get a mental picture of men?' Audrey, a guest happily kissing various men is sharply told: 'Young woman! Don't you realise these men are only using you for your body?' (Audrey, played by Samantha Harper, Bill Macy's real-life wife, replies cheerfully: 'I figured it was something like that.') To host Maude, Stephanie ungraciously sums up the party: 'If you'd planned it that way, you could not have built a better monument to all the indignities

women have to endure'. When the assembled guests eventually remonstrate with Stephanie, this is depicted as an overdue, appropriate reaction within the narrative. Her comments are not merely petty, they are moreover delivered to a diegetic audience unlikely to support the then-novel women's liberation movement, which in the early nineteen-seventies was predominantly associated with college-educated, middle-class women (Brownmiller 1999). In contrast, the party guests are Walter's, working or lower-middle-class, male and female, employees. In the episode's last scenes, Maude manages to bridge the divide between these ordinary people and her intellectual friend through communicating the righteousness of Stephanie's cause more effectively than the writer herself. Within the episode's universe, the hyperbolic humanist-feminist discourse articulated by Stephanie is thus 'operationalised as a strategy' (Fairclough 2010:20), which consequently leads to 'changes in material reality' (ibid.:20). The eventual integration of the zealous Stephanie into the traditional gathering that results from Maude's speech exemplifies the dynamics of Gramscian common sense, which is 'a constant target for restructuring, in ongoing struggles' (ibid.:62).

Significantly, this hegemonic struggle does not play out at an ordinary party. Instead, it takes place during one of the most elementary rituals of the Western world, a Christmas celebration. In contemporary Western societies, humanist-feminist discourses have been significantly recontextualised since their inception, evolving from a marginal ideological current in the nineteen-sixties to representing mainstream belief systems which impact everyday 'practices, institutions and systems' (ibid.:19) fifty years on. This trajectory of second-wave feminism, which at the time of this episode's first transmission in 1975 was but a hoped-for, feasible but far-from-ascertained, future development, is reflected in Stephanie's narrative arc: she evolves from *contra mundum* interloper among good people having a good time, to joining in and singing Christmas carols with the other guests.[25] Indeed, the moniker 'Stephanie Fisher' itself is evocative of Christianity: the forename is the

[25] The role of the sitcom *Maude* in the successful recontextualization of humanist-feminist discourses will be explored in this CDA's conclusion.

female form of Stephen, which derives from ‘Saint Stephen, stoned to death, [and] […] said to be Christianity's first martyr’ (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). The surname brings to mind the New Testament: ‘And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men”. And immediately they left their nets and followed him’ (Mark 1:16–18). Stephanie herself of course is a fisher of humans, proselytising an iconoclastic belief system, as did Jesus’s first followers, and martyring herself for her cause by knowingly risking social ostracism. Indeed, in the following extract from the episode’s dialogue, which exemplifies the episode’s negotiation of the eventually-reached, novel ‘common sense’ (Fairclough 2010:67), Stephanie explicitly references Christianity and its relation to the humanist-feminist project:

1. Walter: It’ll be a thrill for my employees to meet you. You’re famous,
2. Stephanie! […] I’m a liberated man. That’s something I caught from
3. being married to Maude. […]
4. Stephanie: Walter, I know your heart’s in the right place. But some of
5. those jokes […] kinda like make me cringe. […]
6. Walter: Stephanie, you won’t talk about women’s problems at the party,
7. will you?
8. Stephanie: I’ll do my best to bite my tongue.
9. Walter: Thanks. You’re a good guy.
10. Stephanie: A good guy, Walter?
11. Maude: Ah, come on.
12. Walter: It’s just an expression.
13. Stephanie: Of course it’s an expression, perpetuating the male image.
14. Someone who is reasonable and understanding. It’s part of the
15. brainwashing. […].
16. Walter: […] Stephanie, I’m sorry. I respect your opinion. It’s just that I
17. don’t want you talk about all that women’s lib jazz at the party.
18. Stephanie: Jazz? Walter darling, women’s equality is not jazz.
19. Walter (shouting): Tonight’s not a soap box, it’s a Christmas party!

20. Stephanie: Well, what better place. Don't you realise Jesus Christ was the
21. first feminist? He taught the world that love begins with equality.
22. Walter: My employees are coming here to have fun. It's Christmas! And
23. that's no place for a lot of talk about Jesus Christ and love! *(laughter)*

The joke here is on Walter, on his irrationality and loss of control over his emotions. These, stereotypically feminine, attributes are in stark contrast to Stephanie, who argues the humanist-feminist case rationally and thus stereotypically, like a man (Pavco-Giaccia 2019), perhaps like the episode's writer, Norman Lear. Throughout the interaction, Stephanie responds to Walter's preoccupation with concrete practicalities (lines 6, 7, 17) with the unapologetic, logical application of abstract principles (lines 13-15). Her last statement (lines 20-21) is evocative of pastor Martin Luther King Jr.'s appeal to both the Bible and the American Declaration of Independence: 'we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal' (made within the 1963 'I have a dream' speech (2007:10)). Feminist discourses are thus revealed to be a direct extension of the philosophy and values underpinning the United States; as such, they are as powerful and irrefutable as the rationale of the Civil Rights movement which, as argued above, discursively engendered the ideologies of the second feminist wave (Fairclough 2010:19).

Fairclough outlines how social interactions possess an 'orderliness', an expected structure according to which 'things are as they should be' (2010:31). Crucially, that 'orderliness' depends on 'naturalised ideologies' (ibid.:31), 'implicit propositions' (ibid.:33) shared by all participants, which CDA aims to 'denaturalise' (ibid.:30). In the above example, Walter's 'common sense' is not shared by Stephanie, who denaturalises and questions it with a humanist-feminist value system. Stephanie, who herself utilises the term 'brainwashing', a colloquialism for the Marxist concept of indoctrination, exposes the sexist bias that is 'primarily located in the "unsaid"' (ibid.:27) in seemingly neutral expressions like 'good guy'. Notably, this humanist-feminist confronting of patriarchal ideologies is not

with a particularly zealous proponent of the latter; when Walter defines himself as 'liberated' (line 2), it seems likely that long-standing audience members would concur with him, as this self-characterisation is borne out by many of his actions in previous episodes. However, his heated, threatened response serves to reveal the limitations of that liberation. Fairclough stresses that all interpretation and production of meaning is fluid (ibid.:57), and this pre-commercial-break half of the episode could be seen as a fairly neutral presentation of a dialectical argument. However, as in 'The Convention', the scripting, reinforced by the laugh track, directs a crucial last laugh at Walter, revealing behind-the-scenes partialities towards Stephanie's case (line 23).

That case is presented more forcefully in the remainder of the episode. Exasperated by Stephanie's relentless negativity, Maude suggests a game in which the guests have to define a random term picked out of a dictionary. Carol announces that, 'The word is hagiography'.[26] Instantly, one guest jokes, 'that's a biography of my wife', which Arthur tops with, 'If it was a biography of my wife, it would be a nagiography'. In response, Stephanie admonishes Arthur and the other guests, then criticises Maude for dressing up as Father Christmas: 'Don't you see what you're doing? You're perpetuating the male myth'. At this point, Vivian calls Stephanie a 'party poop'. This remark, which is met with cheering and applause, prompts Maude to intervene:

1. Don't you dare applaud, especially you women. Stephanie Fisher has
2. done as much for women in this country as anyone else alive. And she
3. is on our side, even if she is a militant flake. […] Stephanie Fisher is
4. right: language is just the tip of the iceberg. I mean all Stephanie is

[26] Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* was published in 1978. In the book's new introduction, she outlines how she first developed its ideas in 1975 (1990: pp xi ff), and it would thus appear simply a coincidence that this 1975 episode features a term that originated a near-iconic radical-feminist neologism. Daly writes: '*Hagiography* is a term employed by christians, and is defined as "the biography of saints" […] *Hag* is from an Old English word meaning harpy, witch […] also defined as an ugly or evil-looking woman. But this, considering the source, may be considered a compliment. For the beauty of strong, creative women is "ugly" by misogynistic standards of "beauty". […] For women who are on the journey of radical be-ing, the lives of witches, of the great Hags of our hidden history are deeply intertwined with our own process. As we write/live our own story, we are uncovering their history, creating Hag-ography and Hag-ology. Unlike the "saints" of christianity, who must, by definition, be dead, Hags live' (1996:14-5, emphasis in the original).

5. working for is for our dignity and our future as women, which we
6. deserve. And if we put her down who loses? Who? We do. If you don't
7. believe me, wait until tomorrow when we're in the kitchen, cooking and
8. stuffing and washing and wiping while our husbands are off in the living
9. room, watching football and pouring beer down the sides of their faces.

Following on, audience applause, and a shout of 'All right!', are audible, then Maude and Stephanie embrace, and Stephanie concurs to Maude's appeal for a 'nice, quiet Christmas eve'. This second part of 'The Christmas Party' goes beyond the 'humanist feminism versus common sense' discursive juxtaposition of Stephanie's clash with Walter. Now, Stephanie's humanist-feminist truth-telling becomes grating when she exposes the ubiquity of patriarchal ideologies within everyday practices. Fairclough points out how, 'ideology has material effects, discourse contributes to the creation and constant recreation of the relations […] which populate the social world' (2010:59); Stephanie refuses to participate in that process of perpetuating the status quo and instead spells out its unspoken, unjust underlying assumptions. It is a woman, Vivian, Maude's closest friend, who first pokes fun at her and directs the other guests' laughter at her. This reinforces Vivian's role in the sitcom: she embodies the 'feminine excess' (Rabinovitz 2002:148), an acceptable performance of womanhood which, in humanist-feminist thought, stems from internalising 'the prevailing misogynist ideology' (Chesler 2001:2).

Yet the episode's discursive representations of gender relations query and transcend Vivian's mocking when Maude proceeds to cogently argue Stephanie's case. Her speech contains one concession to patriarchal ideology (the 'militant flake' joke) but, in addition to reminding her audience of Stephanie's distinction, it details yet more naturalised, patriarchal practices inherent in religious traditions. The neo-Marxist argument that such power structures are open to transformation (see Fairclough 2010:59) seems to be encapsulated in the camera shot of the two women embracing, in which Walter and several other men, who earlier had applauded Vivian's joke, can be seen in the background, smiling and nodding approval. The episode

concludes with everyone gathered around the piano, singing carols. In many episodes throughout the course of the series, Maude demonstrates her forcefulness by rudely rebuking door salesmen and other uninvited callers. Uniquely, in this episode's last scene, a pesky paperboy is invited in, a Jungian animus[27] perhaps, symbolising humanist feminism's energy.

Indeed, in 'The Christmas Party', Maude, taking the mediator role which usually is Walter's, connects all the disparate, seemingly irreconcilable value systems represented in the episode, ranging from those held by her well-meaning but pragmatic husband and his employees, to those espoused by an uncompromising feminist author as well as by Vivian, her best friend; as detailed above, Vivian's girlish, giddy femininity sharply differentiates her from Maude. In this episode, Maude embodies the social cohesion that results from humanising polarised individuals. As such, she personifies the principles underlying the oeuvre of *Maude*'s producer (and 'The Christmas Party''s writer), Norman Lear, as expressed in his own words: '"I believe we are all connected viscerally" (Newcomb 1977:119). Newcomb explains how this belief comes to mean that the

> presentations are not supposed to be objective descriptions of "those people". They are to be self-reflections of all the viewers. Laughter at [*All in the Family's*] Archie is not laughter at a social problem. Rather, each of us is rather schizophrenically laughing at an unfamiliar, perhaps unwelcome, part of ourselves (1977:120).

The series thus does not deal with social problems by othering or demonising those who articulate them; they might be laughed at (as Walter was in the above exchange with Stephanie), but the audience can simultaneously relate to and even identify with, their reasoning. Rather than caricaturing political opponents, that is, those opposed to the social change engendered by the nineteen-sixties liberation movements, *Maude* and Lear's

[27] The animus, according to early-twentieth-century psychiatrist Carl Jung, is the dynamic masculine of a woman's psyche, which, in Jungian thought, allows her 'extend her consciousness […] through the capacity for objective, independent thought' (Garnermann 1991); this reflects the challenge to narrow gender roles posed by second-wave feminism.

other shows were, ‘a secular Sunday school, gently exhorting us to do right’ (Wander 1976:40).

It is this moderate, didactic discursive tactic that makes ‘The Christmas Party’ such a revelatory episode when arguing that an analysis of Maude, the character, mirrors an analysis of *Maude*, the sitcom (see also Newcomb 1977:109). Newcomb (1977) reached this conclusion after exploring an episode (‘Maude Bares Her Soul’, season four, episode nine) in which Maude explicitly reveals the fragility that underlies her caustic bluster. In ‘The Christmas Party’ too, Maude is portrayed as ‘lacking’, namely, in her commitment to feminism when compared to the strident Stephanie. The discourses voiced by Stephanie bring into sharp relief what *Maude* is not: it is not a sitcom that portrays an uncompromised humanist-feminist lifestyle (as a show centred upon Stephanie would). The normalised ‘ideologies [which] are primarily located in the “unsaid” (Fairclough 2010:27) include the ‘taken-for-granted “background knowledge”’ (ibid.:31) that heteronormative marriage, along with countless aspects of American everyday life (such as those pinpointed by Stephanie), are a common good, despite their patriarchal traits or origins. Just like Maude Findlay integrates her humanist-feminist beliefs into this traditional set-up, *Maude*, the series weaves humanist-feminist discourses into the mainstream sitcom format. This does not mean that change cannot be affected: at the end of ‘The Christmas Party’, the ordinary folk at the party have been swayed by her paraphrasing of the principles of a radical, then-privileged movement. Metaphorically, these party guests represent the sitcom’s millions of viewers: as Maude, measuredly and effectively, intervened at the party, so the show is intended to intervene on a societal level. As will be contended in this chapter’s conclusion, humour, and the sitcom genre, were crucial to this ‘operationalisation of discourses […] as strategies’ (ibid.:19-20).

Conclusion

There is thus a sense of deliberateness, or at least of a carefully calibrated 'recontextualization' and 'operationalisation' (Fairclough 2010: 20) of humanist-feminist and competing discourses, within *Maude*. This man-made, woman-centred sitcom combines affirmative representations of the ideological challenges and upheavals of its decade of production with a recognition of time-honoured social mores. The sitcom format, and its depiction of an efficacious female joker, were crucial in this process. This concluding section will apply the findings of the preceding CDAs to the four research questions outlined in the introduction.

Research question 1: How are competing discourses and ideological struggles represented, and (how) can this be linked to wider societal developments?

The creation of *Maude* cannot be separated from Norman Lear, a producer greatly committed to advancing the values of the nineteen-sixties counter-cultural and liberation movements (Wander 1976:40). With *All in the Family*, he had successfully utilised the sitcom format to question existing mainstream ideological absolutes, and his resultant clout was such that he was afforded rare autonomy and creative freedoms (Gitlin 2000, McClanahan 2007, Faye 2009). At a point in time when *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* had demonstrated that feminist sitcoms could be 'good business' (Rabinovitz 2002:145), this self-conscious auteur (Newcomb 1977) modelled Maude Findlay on his outspoken, feminist wife (Newcomb 1977, Nemy 1996). In a pattern that, to varying degrees, will be repeated in the subsequent sitcoms to be analysed, *Maude*'s on-screen feminist discourses were predominantly authored and produced by men working within the capitalist and patriarchal Hollywood system. Nevertheless, Lear was a male supporter of the feminist movement, and the discourses articulated by Maude Findlay commonly are a precise reflection of the ideas formulated by the contemporaneous liberal-feminist branch of the second feminist wave, as the preceding CDAs demonstrated. The depiction of these discourses closely reflects the blueprint set by Lear in *All in the Family*: opposing sets of values are expressed and

reasoned through in dialectical arguments. Frequently, the humanist-feminist points argued by Maude are eventually depicted as both righteous and superior. Yet there are exceptions to this formula: notably, a common 'unspoken', or uncritiqued issue across the three episodes analysed, is the institution of marriage; as has been argued, this tacit approval of a formal heterosexual union reflects liberal but not radical-feminist thought. Moreover, as evinced by the analysis of 'The Tax Audit', discourses that are not merely patriarchal but, by contemporary standards, misogynist, were at times favoured. However, as emerged within that CDA, those representations closely reflected the trajectory of issues addressed within second wave feminist activism, and Lear self-corrected, and incorporated more enlightened approaches in his shows in line with relevant advances within humanist-feminist scholarship. On the evidence provided by this analysis of 'The Tax Audit', *Maude* can be argued to be following and publicising, but not actively advancing, the humanist-feminist agenda.

Research question 2: How are feminist and women's humour, and empowering and self-depreciating joking, balanced?

Maude's humorous tone is unambiguously humanist-feminist. As has been argued, the star of *Maude* exemplified Rowe's (1995) concept of the 'unruly woman', who is 'unable or unwilling to confine herself to her proper place' (ibid.:91), and challenged gender stereotypes with both her appearance and demeanour. Defying the 'male gaze', her tall, aged physicality did not connote '*to-be-looked-at-ness*' (Mulvey 1975, emphasis in the original); instead, Arthur/ Maude personified individuality and strength, 'to-be-listened-to-ness', as well as, in a comedy setting, 'to-be-laughed-with-ness'. Instead, her physique signalled *Maude*'s multi-layered subversion of traditional gender roles: Maude unapologetically laid claim to previously masculine terrain, including active joke-making. Indeed, her fearless, latently belligerent humour appears to corroborate Freud's account of the connection between aggression and joke-making (1978:147, 260) while negating his gendering of this dynamic (for example, ibid:143, see also Walker 1988:82-

83). In the extracts analysed, Maude is disproportionately more likely to be an active and successful maker rather than a butt of jokes; as such, she is venturing into traditionally masculine terrain, and laying claim to the 'freedom of the male to enjoy, to criticise, to question' (Walker 1988:44) with humour. Her one catchphrase, 'God will get you for that', amusingly indicates her sense of righteousness and, in its function as sitcom cue (Mills 2009), reaffirms her connection to the audience (Mills 2005, 2009). A similar sense of forceful virtuousness underlies her explicitly feminist jesting (see Merrill 1988, Walker 1988). On the rare occasions when Maude makes herself the target of her own jokes (see 'The Convention'), her control over the instances is such that they cannot be characterised as stereotypically feminine, self-depreciating jokes (as outlined by Barreca 1991). As the first and second CDAs in particular detailed, the overall function of humour in the sitcom often emerges as a relieving one, in relation to the serious and dramatic content of storylines. However, within the distinct humorous exchanges, Maude frequently emerges as superior, with a normative, moralistic element to her humanist-feminist humorous missiles (see Hutcheson 1987, Buckley 2008).

Research question 3: What fictional, diegetic model of gender relations does the sitcom advocate, and how do these gender relations compare with those of contemporaneous shows?

In *Maude*'s sitcom universe, Maude Findlay's trangressiveness is anchored in a diegetic backdrop that mirrors the reality of the vast majority of 'ordinary people' (Berger 1998:11), that of the nuclear family. Yet this typical sitcom set-up (Williamson 2008) is complicated in a manner that reflects then-recent social changes: Maude's live-in, grown-up daughter is a divorced single mother, and Maude herself is once-widowed and twice-divorced. As Maude's referencing her former husbands in 'The Convention' illustrates, in this woman-centred household, the former men in her life are portrayed as insignificant and quasi-interchangeable. This dismissiveness can be read as empowering her in relation to Walter who, as the breadwinner

to her homemaker in the show's early seasons (as the show progresses, she works as an estate agent before running for political office in the fourth season) would, within humanist-feminist thought, be the more dominant partner in the relationship. Yet even within this traditional arrangement, based on segregated conjugal roles, the interpersonal power lies with Maude, who, according to Sedita's sitcom types, is a combination of 'the logical smart one' ('the point of reference [for the audience] […], the voice of reason' (2006:52)), and 'the bitch' ('us, the viewers, at our meanest and cleverest' (ibid.: 135)). As the preceding CDAs have shown, Walter too is a reasonable and relatable character who frequently articulates opinions that will resonate with many viewers. However, over the course of the show, he struggles with alcoholism, bankruptcy and a nervous breakdown, and predominantly personifies what Sedita typified as, 'the neurotic' ('at [their] heart is a deep insecurity that will follow the neurotic from the time they [were] nerdy kids to neurotic adults' (Sedita 2006:95)). This results in him being a vulnerable patriarch, which is reflected in the fact that he regularly (see the first and third CDAs) concedes the justness of Maude's point; the 'voice of reason' in the show is Maude's humanist-feminist one.

As highlighted in the analysis of 'The Christmas Party', Maude's markedly feminine best friend Vivian is in many ways her polar opposite; in Sedita's typication, she resembles 'the dumb one: 'genuine, […] sweet and innocent' (ibid.: pp 116 ff). Actress McClanahan explained her character as, 'a foil for Maude. Maude tried to enlighten and educate her (and the audience as well) in a painless-to-watch way' (in: Campbell 2007:91). The close personal bond between Maude and Vivian could moreover be argued to reflect radical-feminist theory, according to which biological femaleness supersedes differences between women (Millett 1991, Greer 1991). Such female solidarity would be the focus of the matrilocal, alternative-family-set-up sitcom *Laverne and Shirley* (ABC 1976-1983), first broadcast four years after *Maude*'s launch. While *Maude* herself was the first eponymous divorced sitcom protagonist (Emery 2013:1188), several later shows would focus on divorced, single mothers (*Fay* (NBC 1975-1976), *Alice* (CBS 1976-1985),

One Day at a Time (CBS 1975-1984) and *The Betty White Show* (CBS 1977-1978). These shows predominantly mirrored the tremendously successful *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in their 'enactment of a "feminist lifestyle" by young, attractive, white, heterosexual, female characters, and a reliance on tenets of second-wave liberal or equity feminism' (Dow 1996:24-26). Nevertheless, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show's* heroine, despite being in paid employment, depended upon the benevolence of her boss in a relationship that reflected traditional patriarchal power relations (Dow 1996:41). By contrast, flawed but supportive Walter enabled Maude to model how humanist-feminist discourses could impact upon and transform the private sphere.

Research question 4: How (if at all) is humour utilised within a sitcom as a tool to dismantle patriarchal power relations?

Maude utilises the sitcom format to consistently merge humorous and humanist-feminist discourses. This is exemplified by lines such as, 'After a woman gets up […] and puts on her face so that she will look beautiful to go into the kitchen to make breakfast for her husband, she can then go back to bed and loll around because *Stump the Stars* does not come on until ten o'clock' ('The Convention'), and interactions such as, in 'The Tax Audit", Maude succinctly letting her would-be attacker know that being 'a respectable family man' is a likely cover for a rapist (as cited above). In these exchanges and many others like them, Maude's humour is a tool used to 'break up the truth with laughter' (Cixous 1976:888). By claiming the funny word for herself and utilising it to call for gender equality, Maude is 'righting an injustice […] and challenging the most formidable structures' (Barreca 1991:179). Her humour is thus empowering to women (Merrill 1988:279) and assumes an audience that although not exclusively female (ibid.:279), is situated as at least being able to sympathise with women's experience. This positioning is made possible by contextualising Maude's jokes as part of an episode's storyline, over the course of which humanist-feminist topics are explored dialectically and in considerable depth, as the three CDAs

demonstrated. The seriousness of many of these issues is lightened and made palatable, by the sitcom genre's 'comic impetus' (Mills 2009:5), that is, its persistent focus on producing audience laughter. Maude's successfully directing these laughs at manifestations of patriarchal norms does not merely demarcate her jesting as superior but moreover reflects the moral and just nature of the humanist-feminist project. The effectiveness of these jokes and of the genre's laugh track, prompting the audience to laugh with Maude, binds the audience in an imagined community, agreed that '"we" find this funny, and here's the aural evidence of this process taking place' (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018:269). The fictive group consequently concurs with the virtues underlying the principles and concrete expressions of humanist feminism (Bergson 1987, Buckley 2008).

Maude concluded in 1978, when its star decided to move on to new creative ventures (Honeycutt 1978). In her last storyline, former housewife Maude Findlay goes to Washington to serve as Congresswoman, demonstrating to millions of viewers Betty Friedan's liberal-feminist vision by turning her discontent with her personal circumstances into political power. In 1985, Bea Arthur and Rue McClanahan would be reunited on the set of *The Golden Girls*, a show produced in an ideological context that was both fundamentally different from, and a reaction to, the preceding decade. The following chapter will explore how these novel ideological currents impacted upon woman-centred sitcom in general, and *The Golden Girls* in particular.

Chapter 7: Analysis of *The Golden Girls*[28]

Thank you for being a friend
Travelled down the road and back again
Your heart is true
You're a pal and a confidant
And if you threw a party
Invited everyone you knew
You would see, the biggest gift would be from me
And the card attached would say
Thank you for being a friend

The Golden Girls theme tune, 'Thank You for Being a Friend', written by Andrew Gold (1975), performed by Cynthia Fee (1985)

Introduction

The Golden Girls' (NBC 1985-1992) opening track lacks the effrontery of 'uncompromisin', enterprisin', anything but tranquilising, right-on' *Maude*'s funky theme tune. Instead, with disarming mellifluousness, 'Thank You for being a Friend' underscores an opening sequence which commences with a plane traversing a sunset sky basked in shades of orange, followed by a bird's-eye view of a sundrenched Miami skyline, before the camera zooms in on four older women inside a bungalow, who, in a succession of clips, are shown arguing, clowning around and embracing one another. In 1985, first-time viewers of the sitcom might have recalled that the theme tune had been a 1975 hit song by Andrew Gold, and continued, 'And when we both get older/ With walking canes and hair of gray/ Have no fear/ Even though it's hard to hear/ I will stand real close and say/ Thank you for being a friend', lines which ostensibly make for a more apt musical introduction to a sitcom with senior citizen protagonists. The selection of the song's first verse, celebrating friendship as a universal, ageless experience, indicates a show in which faded hair pigmentation does not necessarily entail

[28] The following article is based upon parts of this chapter:
Kypker, Nicole S. (2019), 'Sex and Death and St. Olaf: Deconstructing the Magic of *The Golden Girls*', *Comedy Studies,* 10(2), pp 199-212.

zimmer frames. Such subtle flouting of expectations befits a sitcom in which, as will be elaborated, four funny women represent much of humankind and which, at its core, is ‘a love story between four women’ (Richard Frank 2012, president of The Walt Disney Studios [which, via Touchstone Television, co-produced the show] from 1985 to 1994).

This representational feast owes its conception and realisation to another inspirational NBC sitcom, *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992). This show’s success was critical in revitalizing both the sitcom genre and the struggling network: by the late seventies, the ‘Peacock network’, a moniker inspired by NBC’s logo, fared so poorly in audience ratings that industry insiders joked about it coming fourth in a three-network race (Littlefield 2012:19). Fred Silverman, who had overseen the tremendously profitable introductions of ‘relevant’ sitcoms at CBS in the early seventies and of ‘jiggle TV’[29] at ABC mid-decade, was hired as chairman in 1978. Yet instead of the hoped-for Midas touch, he brought to the network ill-judged decision-making that resulted in even more dramatic audience losses (Cooper, n.d.). After his departure in 1981, Grant Tinker (Mary Tyler Moore’s ex-husband and co-founder of MTM Productions) took over as CEO and chairman; from 1986, when General Electric became the network’s parent company, the chairmanship was held by Robert E. Wright (Anderson, n.d.). Along with *wunderkind* Brandon Tarkitoff as vice president of development, and Warren Littlefield in charge of comedy development, these executives would oversee a transformative decade (Kassel nd, Littlefield 2012).

The turnaround started, albeit very gradually, with *Cheers* (1982-1993). Despite the Boston-based show’s first season ranking a calamitous 71st place in the 1982 Nielsen figures (Bjorklund 1996:15), it was nonetheless renewed for a second season, before eventually attracting extraordinary popular and critical acclaim, and remaining on-air for a total of eleven seasons. Overall, the perceived wisdom of the time was that the sitcom genre

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[29] Shows featuring, ‘[s]exy young women in revealing outfits, often engaged in adventurous pursuits’ (Levine 2007:37), as epitomised by *Charlies Angels* (ABC 1976-1981).

had had its day (Littlefield 2012:45), until, that is, the arrival of NBC's *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992); Littlefield relates how, after the broadcast of the series' pilot episode, he 'would never again be asked about the death of the sitcom' (2012:45), and the show's instantaneous success is widely credited with redefining NBC (Lotz 2007:266). The previously flagging network carved out an identity as the place for sophisticated comedy, and from the mid-eighties onwards, it dominated the ratings (following a brief lapse in the early nineties, this 'must-see TV' success would culminate in the mid to late nineties with strategic, back-to-back scheduling of shows such as *Seinfeld (*1989-1998), *Mad About You* (1992-1999), *Frasier (*1993-2004), *Friends* (1994-2004), *ER* (1994-2009) and *Will and Grace* (1998-2006)(Lotz 2007:266-271)).

The Golden Girls' conception occurred in the immediate aftermath of *The Cosby Show*'s celebrated first season. It started out with several NBC executives noticing a brief sketch at an NBC promotional special event, in which mature actors Doris Roberts and Selma Diamond spoofed another recent NBC hit, the slick police procedural *Miami Vice* (1984-1989) (Littlefield 2011). Littlefield recalls that in a development meeting held soon after, in addition to the humorous potentialities of the 'Miami Nice' idea and the talent of the actors, a key consideration for the new concept was:

> one of those boxes from *USA Today*, which would say, 'here is a snapshot of America, and if you're a fifty-plus woman, you've got one-in-a-billion chances of ever getting married again'. […] Horrific odds against you. We kind of asked ourselves the question, how about a positive look at a tough reality. That kind of *Kate and Allie* [CBS 1984-1989] –like notion, how do you be [*sic*] a single mom in New York, well you do it with your best friend, then it's not so hard. *Golden Girls* started as this internal discussion of, 'it doesn't have to suck to be a fifty-plus woman in America' (2011).

As Kubey suggests, another factor that will have impacted on the realization of a show with no-longer-young stars was the disposable income of an underrepresented older audience bracket (2004:128). The success of the contemporaneous crime series carried by an older female actor*, Murder She Wrote* (CBS 1984-1996, starring Angela Lansbury), might have been a related consideration (Kubey 2004:28). Yet it is notable that the phenomenon of eighties media moral panics about unmarried women has been documented

as a key feature of that decade's backlash against second-wave feminism (Faludi 1992:21-66) and that an essentially humanist-feminist notion, that of female solidarity against unsympathetic representations, was inherent in the sitcom's earliest delineations.

The nascent project was offered to Witt/ Thomas/ Harris Productions (in association with Touchstone and, from 1986, Buena Vista Television, both Walt Disney Company subsidiaries). When Susan Harris was assigned to write a pilot episode, *The Golden Girls* would furthermore be created by a writer renowned for her boldness and humanist-feminist sensibilities, with a track record that included, in addition to the spoof sitcom *Soap* (ABC 1977-1981), *Maude*'s notorious abortion episodes (CBS 1972) and *Fay* (NBC 1975-1976), a short-lived sitcom about a working, divorced single mother (the failure of which Harris attributed to 'suicide slot' scheduling (Kubey 2004:131)). Harris's 'sensational' first script (Littlefield 2011) led to the swift production of *The Golden Girls*' pilot. The set-up of acerbic divorcee Dorothy sharing house with widows Rose and Blanche, implausibly guileless and happily promiscuous respectively, and her octogenarian, excessively candid mother Sophia, clearly was promising. The character of Sophia warranted the show's title: relative to her seniority, her roommates were but girls, to whom, executives speculated, even younger viewers could relate (Disney CEO Michael Eisner, 2006). However, the protagonists' ethnicity was changed, in a move reflective of NBC's then-common 'self-imposed anti-Semitism' (Brook 2003:68): Harris's original set-up had reflected the 'age-old trend of Jews retiring to South Florida' (Gluck 2014) but 'one of the few notes we got back was that it couldn't be four Jewish women in the South, in Miami. […] [Susan Harris] went home and put a vowel on the end of everybody's name and said that they're Italian' (Frank 2012).[30]

Jay Sandrich, veteran director of, among other shows, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Soap* and *The Cosby Show*, was contracted to direct the pilot.

[30] Only Dorothy and Sophia are Italian. In a season six storyline that, as frequently occurs in the series, is never mentioned again, Southern belle Blanche discovers her Jewish, and 'Yankee', ancestry (episode 21, 'Witness').

During actors' casting sessions, 'similar to […] *The Cosby Show*, [executives] were looking at a pool of talent that wasn't being tapped. […] Fifty-plus women were not given jobs in television (see also International Longevity Center 2006:52). They certainly didn't star in feature films. We had our pick' (Littlefield 2011). Estelle Getty (1923-2008), who had delivered a much-lauded performance in the original Broadway run of the Tony Award-winning play *Torch Song Trilogy*, was signed up as Sophia. Betty White (born 1922), a long-established TV personality who memorably had played *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*'s vamp Sue Ann Nivens, was considered for the part of Blanche, and Rue McClanahan (1934-2010), known for portraying Maude Findlay's giddy friend Vivian, seemed suited to play Rose. When, during auditions, Sandrich asked White and McClanahan to switch parts, the resulting performances were such that both actors were cast against type. For the character of Dorothy, Susan Harris had specified a 'Bea Arthur type' (Thomas 2006). Arthur (1922-2009) herself, however, was reluctant. When even Broadway legend Elaine Stritch failed her audition (Stritch 2002), Rue McClanahan, at Harris's behest, placed a consequential phone call:

> 'Bea? Can you tell me why you are not jumping at the best script to come along in twenty years?' 'Because, Rue', Bea replied in her distinctive baritone, 'I don't want to do Maude and Vivien [*sic*] meet Sue Ann Nivens. Boooorrrrring!' 'No, Bea, I'm doing the sexpot, Blanche. Betty is the dimwit.' A pause, then, 'Oh, really? Well, now, *that's* interesting'. […] Within a day or two, NBC had us three, along with Estelle Getty, who'd already been hired as Sophia, come in to read for the big suits. We read cold – no rehearsal – but the chemistry was as plain as preacher's daughter (McClanahan 2007:258-259, emphasis in the original).

Executives too found the cast an 'all-star […] dream team' (Thomas 2006) and the sitcom went into production, with one key modification, implemented after the broadcast of the pilot: a central male character, a cook, would not feature in the remainder of the series (White 2010:252).[31] This initial transmission, on September 14th, 1985, was the most-watched show of

[31] The reasoning underlying this decision appears to have been that the character had become superfluous. Betty Whites relates how, 'no one could foresee how well these women would mesh together, nor how strong Estelle's character, Sophia, would become. Also, with a housekeeper there, the girls wouldn't have as much access to the kitchen, where so many of our close four-way scenes took place. […] As for us, we spent the first year explaining that he had *not* been written out because he was gay' (2010:252, emphasis in the original).

the week (*Times Daily*, 20/09/1985) and the onset of a seven-season, 180-episodes-long run, that is best characterised as triumphant, with a viewership comprised of all ages (Littlefield 2011). The first six *The Golden Girls*' seasons ranked in the top ten of the Nielsen ratings (the final season came in 30th place) (Huryk 2006:5). It would be nominated for over eighty industry awards, with thirty-five wins, including Emmy awards for each of the four stars (IMDB internet site), and was broadcast in more than sixty countries (Hayward 1996). In addition to international remakes, it generated the cross-over show *Empty Nest* (1988-1995) and the follow-on series *The Golden Palace* (CBS 1992-1993), which was developed after Arthur's series-ending decision to quit *The Golden Girls* (McClanahan 2007:298) and featured McClanahan's, White's and Getty's characters managing a Miami hotel.

Thirty-five years on from its premiere, *The Golden Girls* remains a staple in American TV listings (as of 2020, it is being shown on, for example, TVLand, Hallmark channel and logoTV). Dedicated fan websites, podcasts and twitter accounts abound[32] and, in a medium not known for its lack of vitriol, there is a striking absence of online disapproval for *The Golden Girls*. In 2019, *The Golden Girls* action figures were introduced (Thompson 2019), adding to a wide range of existing merchandise, and the only surviving cast member, nonagenarian Betty White, is a much-loved, nigh-ubiquitous presence on American TV (Carpenter 2015).

Asked about the improbable phenomenon of a show about, by mainstream network standards, 'old' women ageing so well, if at all, NBC executive Warren Littlefield points to its being 'brilliantly written, brilliantly cast', and to its 'outrageous humour' (2011) as key ingredients. Yet these attributes surely apply to any number of expertly crafted, slickly produced and, frequently, quickly forgotten US sitcoms (such as *Love, Sidney* (NBC 1981-1983) or *Double Trouble* (NBC 1984-1985)). The following will set the

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[32] Examples include: www.thegoldengirlsfanclub.com, www.goldengirlscentral.com, The Golden Girls Ultimate Fan Club facebook site (en-gb.facebook.com/GoldenGirlsUFC/), *A Golden Girls Podcast: Out on the Lanai, Enough Wicker* podcast, *Thank You for Being a Podcast* and @goldengirlsfans, @GoldenGirls85 and @goldengirlsnews twitter accounts (all accessed 02/09/20).

political context for the subsequent critical examinations of the show's relation to both feminist and further contemporaneous discourses, and explore explanations for *The Golden Girls'* longstanding appeal.

Political and cultural contexts

With the exception of Rue McClanahan[33], *The Golden Girls*' stars belonged to 'the Greatest Generation' (born between 1901 and 1924), a moniker coined in reference to 'the towering achievement and modest demeanour' (Brokaw 1998:11) of those who had lived through the Great Depression and served in World War II. By the mid-eighties, these three Golden Girls were not the only luminaries of their cohort: in 1981, 69-year-old Ronald Reagan assumed the presidency. Announcing his candidacy in 1979, he had cited from Thomas Paine's 'Common Sense': 'We have it in our power to begin the world over again' (2007, originally published in 1776). His presidency would be characterised by such new beginnings. The Republican administrations of Reagan, and, from 1988, George Bush were informed by a categorical break with the ideological upheavals of the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies. As the baby boomers reached mid-life and positions of power and decision-making, the motto of their unruly youth, 'Make love not war', was substituted by one memorable line from a movie: 'Greed is good' (*Wall Street*, Stone 1987). This notable turning of a generation's hearts and minds was the outcome of a concerted ideological effort.

Zinn relates the establishment's reaction to the threat posed by the sixties' social movements thus:

> Never in American history had more movements for change been concentrated in so short a span of years. But the system in the course of two centuries had learned a good deal about the control of people. In the mid-seventies, it went to work' (2003:539).

In 1975, Harvard political science professor and White House consultant Samuel Huntington had co-authored a report to the Trilateral Commission, and found that the 'democratic surge' (in: Crozier et al.

[33] Rue McClanahan was 'the spring chicken on that set' (McClanahan 2007:277).

1975:60) of the sixties had essentially been 'a reassertion of the primacy of equality as a goal in social, economic and political life' (ibid.:62). However, Huntington identified the resultant an "excess of democracy" (ibid.:113) as potentially undermining that very system of governance. Thus, the nineteen-sixties social movements were understood as having the potential to jeopardise the foundations of the society that had produced them. The Trilateral Commission's recommendations (published at a moment in time when most sixties' activism, with the notable exception of feminism, had lost momentum (Brownmiller 1999:227)) would have been heard and heeded in high office: members in Reagan's government included, among others, Vice President George Bush. Reagan's election campaign unequivocally championed a revival of American conservatism, and as such was radical in itself. Following his landslide victory, nineteen-eighties political decision-making would be dominated by 'three elements: antitax; anticommunism; antigovernment' (Johnson 2003:67). Although Reagan's governance was on occasions guided by pragmatism and populism as much as by dogmatic adherence to ideological principles (Ehrmann 2005, pp 6-7), the nineteen-eighties were a decade of fiscal and, to a more qualified extent, moral conservatism. The following will summarise the three successive Republican administrations' three central schools of political thought: economic neoliberalism, neoconservativism and the (New) Christian Right.

Economic neoliberalism[34] is inextricably linked to uncompromised individualism. It is synonymous with *laissez-faire* capitalism, that is, the repudiation of Keynesian economics and the New Deal welfare state model. These counter-cyclical government interventions had been effective throughout the nineteen-sixties, but had failed in the nineteen-seventies, a decade blighted by stagflation, the combination of high inflation and low economic growth (Ehrmann 2005, pp 30-32). Reagan's election in 1980 was predominantly a reaction to this state of affairs (ibid.:47); his resounding re-

[34] Economic neoliberalism is distinct from its political namesake. Political neoliberalism emerged in the United States in the nineteen-eighties as a factional movement within the Democratic Party, and was aimed to reform the failed liberal ideals of the preceding decade (Ehrmann 2005: pp 75 ff).

election four years on, and George Bush's robust victory in 1988, would demonstrate the extent of popular support for the 'Reagan revolution' (ibid.:87), a redefined national consensus subsequent to significant tax cuts for individuals and corporations, as well as reductions of regulations, of government spending, and of inflation (Niskanen, n.d.). These 'Reaganomics' were the political manifestations of theoretical foundations formulated by a range of thinkers. Foremost among these is Milton Friedman, winner of the 1976 Nobel Prize in economics, who had advocated the personal freedoms resulting from unrestrained markets since the sixties (1962, 2002). Supply-side economic theory, which postulates that low taxation increases both investment and individual workers' motivation, was a further tenet of Republican decision-making. Detractors have pointed to the theory's inherent 'trickle-down' component, the questionable assumption that the poor would eventually benefit from the rich's growing wealth (Johnson 2003:110). This representation of supply-side economics as a singularly divisive, quasi-immoral approach under which the ruthless and wealthy thrive while those in greatest need are left with a negligible governmental safety net, is characteristic of critical analyses of the Reagan years. By contrast, supporters of 'Reaganomics' emphasised that free-market capitalism depends on confident, risk-taking entrepreneurs, on 'faith in man, faith in the future, faith in the rising returns of giving, faith in the mutual benefits of trade, faith in the providence of God are all essential to successful capitalism' (Gilder 2012:108). A fiscally conservative policy would accordingly compel a moral conservatism and a reversal of the nineteen-seventies' loosening of social and sexual mores. Nonetheless, as the amorality of markets was exposed in the wake of Wall Street excesses and scandals, even proponents of the theory diagnosed the 'breakdown of the moral codes of civilized society' during the nineteen-eighties instead (Ehrman 2005:181).

A patriotic certainty in the superiority of the American way of life, allied with disquiet about its vulnerabilities to existential threats, informs neoconservatism, a non-partisan school of thought that would impact upon successive administrations from the nineteen-seventies onwards, and was

advocated by a several influential Reagan staffers (Murray 2005:1177). An intellectual movement of mainly formerly left-wing adherents, its aims can broadly be summarized as comprising an interventionist approach to foreign policy and, with regards to social and cultural matters, an anti-relativist assertion of 'natural right' (Strauss 1953). The former became evident in Reagan's departure from the then-prevailing détente with the Soviet Union, through significant investment in the arms race and his signaling a 'new moral clarity' (Murray 2005:1173) in his 1983 'evil empire' speech, directed at the Soviet bloc. The eventual collapse of these, by then economically unstable, communist regimes, heralded by the 1989 fall of the Berlin wall, can at least in part be attributed to the Reagan administration's neoconservative approach to foreign policy (ibid.:1222).

Clear-cut assertions of good and evil, or of right and wrong, were equally central to the neoconservative, anti-relativist stance in the so-called 'culture wars' (Murray 2005:516). The liberation movements of the sixties had, in the neoconservative argument, been successful in their aims and subsequently, the predominance over the intellectual 'ground had been given to people who, having won it, had no idea what they were going to do with it, and who, now in position, were free to wreak their damage' (Murray 2005:679). 'Politically correct' speech codes, introduced on campuses from the late nineteen-eighties onwards, restricted the academic freedom of expression (Ehrman 2005:201); American culture and academia had been seized by a relativism (often termed nihilism by neoconservatives) so disabling that it threatened to destabilize the country (Murray 2005:483). Neoconservative Bloom relates how, 'there is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative' (1987:25). Expediently however, argues Murray, having been driven out of academia, neoconservative intellectuals ended up 'instead having a prominent say in running the country' (2005:924).

The third significant ideological force to leave its mark on the nineteen-eighties was the Moral Majority, a New Right, fundamentalist Christian organization established in the nineteen-seventies in response to the perceived 'moral decay' (Ehrman 2005:173) of that decade. In 1980, the Moral Majority campaigned for Reagan 'almost exclusively on the basis of its opposition to women's rights' (Faludi 1992:267), and their influence on him was most palpable in his opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, and to abortion (ibid.:267). The following year, New Right congressmen tried to introduce the Family Protection Act.[35] While this bill failed, New Right rhetoric against women's hard-fought-for increased self-determination would add neologisms such as 'pro-chastity', 'pro-motherhood', 'pro-family' and, notably, 'pro-choice' to mainstream discourses (ibid.:269). The movement itself dwindled by the late nineteen-eighties, as a result of its being increasingly out of step with most Americans' attitudes; most people were now somewhat 'ideologically inconsistent […] [and practiced] a "live and let live" ethos' (Ehrman 2005:175), overall accepting the permanency of the social change ushered in by the sixties liberation movements.

Feminism in the nineteen-eighties

An ambivalence similarly applies to women as a group throughout the decade: great strides towards equality were accomplished in the face of an anti-feminist ideological backlash (Faludi 1992). Among second-wave feminism's most significant achievements was an unprecedented increase in the number of working women, from 43.3 percent in 1970 to 51.5 percent in 1980 and 57.5 percent in 1990 (Fullerton 1999). While the majority of women were still working in heavily segregated sectors, the pay gap decreased as women became more committed and more highly skilled employees (Blau and Kahn 2001); by the early nineteen-eighties, equal numbers of men and

[35]This piece of legislation which sought to: 'eliminate federal laws supporting [gender] equal education; forbid "intermingling of the sexes in any sport or other school-related activities"; require marriage and motherhood to be taught as the proper career for girls; deny federal funding to any school using textbooks portraying women in non-traditional roles; repeal all federal laws protecting battered wives from their husbands; and ban federally funded legal aid for any woman seeking counselling or a divorce' (ibid.:266-7).

women were awarded college degrees (PBS 2000). When the birth rate reached a twenty-five-year peak in 1988, the majority of the new mothers continued to work (Spangler 2003:146). In the most powerful echelons of society, Sandra Day O'Connor was the first woman appointed to the Supreme Court in 1981, and in 1984, Democratic presidential nominee Walter Mondale chose Geraldine Ferraro as the first female running mate. However, a decisive setback for feminist campaigners was the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the American Constitution which, as in its first section, sought to secure that '[e]quality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex' (*Proposed Amendment to the Constitution of the United States* 1972:1523).[36]

The humanist-feminist movement generated one final, high-profile bout of resistance. The Women against Pornography (WAP) campaign, against an ever-growing and increasingly sadistic industry ('porn grew as feminism grew' (Brownmiller 1999:296)), would result in fundamental divisions between antiporn and 'anti-antiporn', or 'pro-sex', feminist activists. The former, led by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine Mackinnon, argued that the commodification of women in porn was inextricably linked to misogyny and violence against women ('pornography is the theory, rape is the practice' (Robyn Morgan 1980)). The latter accused WAP supporters of a 'subconscious feminist shift towards the conservative cultural tide' (Brownmiller 1999:313), of prudishly policing individual preferences, and the campaign did attract support from the Moral Majority (Watkins et al. 1992:141). When it disintegrated halfway through the decade, 'put simply, feminist theory had gone as far it could go in the twentieth century' (Brownmiller 1999:329). The activism of the second feminist wave had run its course.

[36] It had been introduced by suffragist Alice Paul in 1923, and eventually passed by Congress in 1972. In 1982, as an extended deadline expired, only 35, rather than the necessary 38, states had ratified the amendment. Opposition to the ERA, led by conservative activist Phyllis Schafly, had focussed on issues such as protecting women from military service, and on, particularly working-class, women's right to be financially dependent upon their husbands (The Equal Rights Amendment, Digital History internet site (n.d.)).

Feminist thought, meanwhile, became established within academia (Fraser and Nicholson 1990:19). Over the course of the nineteen-eighties, humanist-feminist, essentialist thinking was superseded by postmodern, fragmented, identity feminism, reflecting the contemporaneous dominance within the arts and humanities disciplines of postmodernism, deconstructionism and poststructuralism critiqued by neoconservative intellectuals (Ehrman 2005:197).[37] Simultaneously, the term 'postfeminism' was suddenly ubiquitous, as noted by Faludi: 'Post-feminism is the backlash. Any movement or philosophy that defines itself as post whatever came before is bound to be reactive. In most cases it is also reactionary' (1992:15). Postfeminist discourses manifested in the decade's popular culture, as perhaps epitomised by Adrian Lyne's 1987 film *Fatal Attraction*, which bluntly pitted the 'good' traditional woman against the 'evil' career woman. At the same time, the movie demonstrated that a new breed of women, liberated through nineteen-seventies feminist activism and empowered through nineteen-eighties individualism, had become a reality. These ideological tensions exemplify 'the struggle between different strategies for transforming society in different directions' (Fairclough 2010:19), which in Gramsci's delineation of hegemony plays out, significantly but not exclusively, in the field of popular culture (Femia 1981:229).

Reflecting on that struggle. Faludi points out that cultural backlashes have been a predictable reaction to feminist gains throughout history, and the nineteen-eighties were no exception (1992, pp 66 ff). Women's sanity and the institution of the nuclear family emerged as sites of ideological battle: in the seventies, in movies such as *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1970), *The Stepford Wives* (1972) and *A Woman under the Influence* (1974,) stay-at-home moms had sought liberation by escaping the maddening restrains of housewifery; a decade on, those confines had become the sole guarantors of women's mental health, in films such as, in addition *to Fatal Attraction, Working Girl* (1988),

[37] From the nineteen-nineties onwards, this ideological shift would further manifest itself in the changing designation of many feminist-content courses, from 'women's studies' to 'gender studies' (Richardson and Robinson 2007:xviii).

Overboard (1987) and *Baby Boom* (1987). These postfeminist movies drew on humanist-feminist discourses in 'a strategy that simultaneously acknowledged women's desire for autonomy and co-opted it' (ibid.:117).[38] *The Accused* (1988), in its depiction of gang rape, was less ambivalent about a humanist-feminist cause but, as Faludi points out, 'by the end of the nineteen-eighties a film that simply opposed the mauling of a young woman could be passed off as a daring feminist statement' (ibid.:170). The nuclear family was simply 'taken-for-granted "background knowledge"'(Fairclough 2010:.31) in most films, including the decade's highest-grossing movie, *ET The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), and an unreconstructed masculinity was celebrated in Silvester Stallone's *Rambo* (1982, 1985, 1988) films, and in Arnold Schwarzenegger's oeuvre.

Representations of conventional gender relations were similarly unavoidable on television. *Thirtysomething* (ABC 1987-1991), a series about, in another eighties neologism, yuppies (young upwardly mobile professionals) stands out: if

> all the nineteen-eighties trend stories were collated about women were collated and fed into a television script machine, the result might be *thirtysomething*. […] In *thirtysomething*, a complete pantheon of backlash women is on display – from blissful homebound mother to neurotic spinster to ball-busting single career woman (Faludi 1992: 194-196).

Moonlighting (ABC 1985-1989), Cybill Shepherd's comeback show, was based on the premise of a single woman, Maddie Hayes, starting a detective agency with a streetwise male employee. Over the course of the series, 'the shaming of Maddie Hayes' (ibid.:192) in storylines paralleled the undermining of the actress during production (Shepherd 2001:199-231).

Other shows ranged from action-laden series with male leads such as *The A-Team* (NBC 1983-1987) and *Magnum P.I.* (CBS 1980-1988), to shows with a more level gender balance, including *Hill Street Blues* (NBC 1981-1987), *Hart to Hart (*ABC 1979-1984) and *Remington Steele* (NBC 1982-

[38] Moreover, as Faludi points out, female independence was now inextricably linked to dire consequences, as expressed in novel additions to mainstream discourses, such as 'the man shortage', 'the infertility epidemic', 'female burn-out', 'toxic day care' (ibid.:8-9) and 'cocooning' (ibid.:107; women quitting their jobs to become full-time homemakers).

1987), and the woman-centred *Cagney and Lacey* (CBS 1982-1988) and *Murder She Wrote* (CBS 1984-1996). *Dallas* (CBS 1978-1991), *Dynasty* (ABC 1981-1989) and their spin-offs revelled in luxurious and fantastical-to-most lifestyles, mirroring that of the 'most successful exemplar of the form, […] important to the eighties because there were so many types like him and others who wanted to be like them' (Johnson 2003:194-5): New York real estate mogul Donald Trump.

Sitcom genre context

The Golden Girls is in close 'relations of dialogue, contestation and dominance' (Fairclough 2010:19) with other nineteen-eighties sitcoms. They are cultural artefacts produced in the context of the ideological shake-up outlined above. The Reagan administration's neoliberal economic approach would impact on the television industry from 1981, when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and Congress first introduced unprecedented deregulatory measures to broadcasting (Williamson 2008:91, Sterling, n.d.)[39]. Throughout the decade, the status of broadcasters fundamentally changed, from 'public trustees', required by law to provide balanced content and to operate in the public interest, to profit-motivated competitors in a free marketplace (Sterling, n.d.). In addition, the 1982 cessation of previously existing content regulations came to mean that programs could feature a greater number of advertisements as well as more daring content and language (Morreale 2003:209).[40] As a consequence of these regulatory changes, the number of cable and satellite channels, and of

[39] As summarised by Sterling (n.d.): 'Specific deregulatory moves-some by Congress, others by the FCC-included (a) extending television licenses to five years from three in 1981; (b) expanding the number of television stations any single entity could own grew from seven in 1981 to 12 in 1985 (a situation under consideration for further change in 1995); (c) abolishing guidelines for minimal amounts of non-entertainment programming in 1985; (d) elimination of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987; (e) dropping, in 1985, FCC license guidelines for how much advertising could be carried; (f) leaving technical standards increasingly in the hands of licensees rather than FCC mandates; and (g) deregulation of television's competition (especially cable which went through several regulatory changes in the decade after 1983)'.

[40] However, the latter was still restricted, predominantly by advertisers' sensibilities (ibid.: 209); for example, when *thirtysomething* featured a gay couple being intimate, ABC lost over a million dollars in sponsorship, and subsequent scripts portraying the relationship were edited by network's internal censor (Schneider 2001:43 – 45).

their subscribers, steadily increased (Williamson 2008:91), with many of the new channels 'narrowcasting' to specific, niche audiences (as exemplified by the 1980 launch of the twenty-four-hour-news channel CNN, and the music video channel MTV, founded in 1981). By mid-decade, nearly 50 percent of American households were cable subscribers (Morreale 2003:209). TV viewers' new status as all-powerful consumers was further bolstered by two, then-novel, technological devices, which afforded audiences a previously unknown flexibility in their viewing habits, VCRs and TV remote controls (ibid.:209).

In this transformed context, the 'big three' networks' share of viewers dropped from 90 percent in 1980 to 60 percent in 1990 (Hindmann and Wiegand 2008:126), with audiences turning to cable channels as well as, from 1986, to the newly launched, Rupert-Murdoch-owned, Fox Broadcasting Company network (Fox) (Williamson 2008:91-93). The established networks strove for a public image based on '"quality programs" […]. [which] emulated the films and high-budget cable programs […]. Fox, in contrast, developed a different marketing strategy by pursuing the audiences abandoned by the networks: young, black, and urban' (Morreale 2003:210). For example, the success of NBC's *The Cosby Show* would inform Fox's programming in so far as the lives of that fictional family were far removed from the reality of many African-Americans, and suggestive of an 'affirmative action' (Williamson 2008:94) approach to representation. The popular Fox sitcom *Married… With Children* (1987-1997) was dubbed the 'Anti-*Cosby-Show'* (ibid.:94) due to its depiction of financial hardship, and, despite its white cast, attracted a significant share of black audiences (ibid.:94).[41] A highly acclaimed comedic milestone was the animated sitcom *The Simpsons* (Fox 1989-), which, like *Married…With Children*, centres on working-class family life, and attracted 'a very disenfranchised audience of […] particularly young men' (Sandy Grushow, former Fox Senior Vice

[41] From the early nineteen-nineties, African-American comedy shows such as *In Living Colour* (Fox 1990-1994) and *Living Single* (Fox 1993-1998) further illustrated Fox's attempt at demarcating a distinct network identity (ibid.:95).

President of Advertising and Promotion, in Shapiro 2011:47). Eventually, the success of both Fox and cable TV would bring about the 1995 cessation of the FCC's Financial Interest and Syndication Rules, which had been put in place in 1970 to restrict the extent to which networks could profit from content they had produced (Shapiro 2011:47-48).

As these deregulatory changes took effect, and as forecasts predicted an even more cutthroat production context in the future, the established networks needed to redefine their corporate identities (Littlefield 2012:57). NBC's strategy consisted of an 'attempt to "win back" the younger, more affluent, highly educated, and high-culture oriented audience' (Hilmes 2003: 218), a demographic which moreover was highly attractive to advertisers. The urbane sitcom *Cheers* (1982-1993), combined with *The Cosby Show's* (1984-1992) instant success, signalled the beginning of a lineage of 'must-see-TV' (Lotz 2007:261): NBC productions which would reign over the televisual landscape for the best part of the next fifteen years (Littlefield 2012:6). Scheduling was central to this new-found success: Thursday night was the most commercially viable night of week[42] and from 1984, NBC used that time slot to air successively from 8pm, *The Cosby Show*, *Family Ties*, *Cheers* and *Night Court* (NBC 1984-1992). *The Cosby Show* increased audiences for the ensuing shows, an effect that *The Golden Girls* would duplicate when listed at 9pm on Saturday night, in line-ups that included, with slight variations over the years, *227* (NBC 1985-1990) and *Amen* (NBC 1986-1991)[43], and *The Golden Girls* spin-off/ cross-over show *Empty Nest* (NBC 1988-1995)[44] (Hilmes 2007:266).

Ideologically, the sitcoms of the nineteen-eighties lacked the explicitly political, left-wing fighting spirit associated with nineteen-

[42] Thursdays were coveted by sponsors to, for example, promote movies due to be released the following day (Crupi 2016); for much of the nineteen-nineties, NBC had 'an ability to induce audiences to watch anything it scheduled on a Thursday night' (Lotz 2007:269).
[43] A Philadelphia-set sitcom about an African-American lawyer and clergyman.
[44] *Empty Nest*, like *The Golden Girls* created by Susan Harris, was initially intended to focus on a couple whose children had left home. After a failed pilot, the set-up was overhauled and now consisted of a widowed doctor and his two grown daughters, Florida neighbours of *The Golden Girls* with occasional guest appearances on either show.

seventies CBS shows produced by Norman Lear and MTM Enterprises. Overall ‘the networks were taking fewer chances now. Like the country as a whole, their motto might have been: When in doubt, shift right’ (Gitlin 2000:219). While many of those seventies’ shows’ creators had remained in the industry[45], for ‘politically motivated writers, the 1980s was like living in exile after the free-and-easy 1970s. […] People were generally happy under Reagan, and television reflected that complacency’ (Shapiro 2011:45-46). The public’s new-found taste for socially conservative values was reflected in NBC’s *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties*. These shows were aimed to attract the same city-based, relatively young and affluent demographic that had been targeted by CBS after the ‘rural purge’ of the early seventies. In *All in the Family* the audience had laughed with the young idealists at their unreconstructed elders; ten years on, in *Family Ties*, the joke was on the liberal baby boomer parents, who struggled to relate to their materialistic offspring. In *The Cosby Show* too, custodians of traditional values would have the last laugh[46], and the most successful sitcom of the eighties appears to have ‘ignored social change’ (Frazer and Frazer 1993:172). This exemplifies how discourses within popular culture reflect ‘emerging strategies’ (Fairclough 2010:19), in this case, the socially conservative values of the decade. The show’s creators, producers Marcy Carsey and Tom Werner were politically left-leaning (Shapiro 2011:47); their extensive future oeuvre would include the woman-centred, humanist-feminist sitcoms *Roseanne* (ABC 1988-1997), *Grace under Fire* (ABC 1993-1998) and *Cybill* (CBS 1995-1998)). Yet

[45] For example, *Cheers* creators James Burrows, Glen Charles and Les Charles all were all former MTM Enterprises employees, and indeed, Grant Tinker, co-founder of MTM Enterprises, was CEO of NBC from 1981 to 1986.

[46] For example: ‘There’s a scene in the demo [pilot, N.K.] where Cliff has to go to Theo’s room and punish him for getting Ds on his report card. […] Theo then passionately tells his dad, “I may not grow up to be doctor like you or a lawyer like Mom, but you should love me for who I am”. I remember the audience, led by the young people, really applauded Theo standing up to his father. They were on his side. Bill waited, and then he said, “Theo, that’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. You’re going to study because I said so. I brought you into this world, and I can take you out.” There was a roar from the entire audience. It was as if they were saying, “God bless you, Bill Cosby, for taking back your role as a parent […]”’ (Littlefield 2012:47-48).

during the eighties, they had to cater to market demand for ‘an authoritative dad with experience and knowledge’ (ibid.:47).

Yet indubitably *The Cosby Show* was more than an evocation and continuation of the ideological certainties of *Father Knows Best* (CBS/ NBC 1954-1960), a sitcom it is regularly compared to (Frazer and Frazer 1993). In a ‘post-activist’ decade, characteristics, or strategies, of that sitcom included: offering ‘new definitions of the black male and the black family’ (Real 2003:229), and utilising a ‘humor mediated by humanity […]. There is a shock recognition as audience members say to themselves, “I’ve been there!”’ (ibid.: 236). As will be detailed in the subsequent analyses, equivalent representational strategies are evident in *The Golden Girls*’ diegetic post-patriarchal realm. Further similarities between the two sitcoms include that while both shows eschew the overtly didactic righteousness of many seventies sitcoms, they nonetheless are a continuation of these earlier shows’ re-ordering of dominant ideological formations (Fairclough 2010:43) of, respectively, race and gender. Both shows would moreover impact upon future discursive representations (Fairclough 2010:19); examples for this include *The Cosby Show*’s ‘historic contribution to recoding *black*’ (Real 2003:24, emphasis in the original), and *The Golden Girls’* prefiguring the ‘found’, chosen friendship families of hit shows such as *Seinfeld* (NBC 1988-1998) and *Friends* (NBC 1994-2004) (VanderWerfft 2011).

Notably, the patrifocal versus alternative family set-ups of *The Cosby Show* and *The Golden Girls* are indicative of a trend reflected in then-concurrent comedy shows: some successful shows, including the comedy drama *The Wonder Years* (ABC 1988 - 1993) and the sitcom *Alf* (NBC 1986-1990), feature nuclear families with male breadwinners and female homemakers. Other sitcoms, however, indicate that a ‘genderquake’ (Wolf 1994), a fundamental challenge to that division, was underway: *Who’s the Boss* (ABC 1984-1992), *Growing Pains* (ABC 1985-1992) and *Charles in Charge* (CBS 1987-1990) all feature working moms and men taking up child-caring roles. Such novel representations of career-oriented mothers and

nurturing men would have been impossible without the previous two decades' humanist-feminist thinking and ideas.[47] Nevertheless, these shows' ideological 'implicit propositions' (Fairclough 2010:27) still include positioning women as mothers. An apparent exception to this was the return of Mary Tylor Moore to an eponymous sitcom, *Mary* (CBS 1985-1986); only in this new show, her childless journalist character was no longer a trailblazer for women's autonomy but instead 'a burned-out scowling divorcee whose career is only an object of derision' (Faludi 1992:191).

According to Faludi, *Mary* typifies the decade's postfeminist backlash and numerically, woman-centred sitcoms were indeed rare. Ideologically, however, several of those shows, emerge as sites of Gramscian negotiation (Femia 1981:31), in which humanist-feminist visions of women's freedom are but 'taken-for-granted "background knowledge"' (Fairclough 2010:31).[48] In addition to *The Golden Girls*, four shows were created by women and featured humanist-feminist themes in their set-ups (of independent women) and/ or their dialogue, and illustrate that in a deregulated industry and postfeminist culture, there was a market for these affirming representations of women's experience. These included *Designing Women* (CBS 1986-1993), *Roseanne* (ABC 1988-1997), *Murphy Brown* (CBS 1988-1998) (as discussed in chapter three) and *Kate and Allie* (CBS 1984 -1989). *Kate and Allie* and *Designing Women* were initially broadcast back-to-back with *Cagney and Lacey* (CBS 1982-1986) on CBS's Monday 'woman's night' (opposite ABC sports broadcasting); when the ground-breaking crime procedural concluded, the new *Murphy Brown* was added to that line-up. *Kate and Allie* is based

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[47] Dow identifies the following postfeminist characteristic common to several eighties, double-earner, nuclear family-set sitcoms: while the fathers are shown at their workplace, the mothers' careers are talked about but never seen (1996:100).

[48] Female-led and/ or woman-centred sitcoms of the eighties included shows carried over from the seventies (*Alice* (1976-1985), *Laverne and Shirley* (ABC 1976-1983), and *The Facts of Life* (NBC 1979-1988)), *Mama's Family* (NBC 1983-1984; syndicated 1986-1990; spun off from *The Carol Burnett Show* (NBC 1974-1978) and focused upon an extended family's matriarch), *Amanda's* (ABC 1983, an Americanised version of *Fawlty Towers* (BBC 1975-1979), starring Bea Arthur) and *My Sister Sam* (CBS 1986-1988, written by *Murphy Brown* creator Diane English). *A Different World* (NBC 1987-1993), spun off from *The Cosby Show*, followed Huxtable daughter Denise to college.

upon the premise of two divorced mothers and their children sharing a house. In this alternative household, the women's emotional closeness made possible 'a positive look at a tough reality', as NBC executive Littlefield (2011) phrased it when pinpointing how *Kate and Allie* influenced the development of *The Golden Girls*. In the latter show, that reality was old age loneliness, in the former, 'the millions of separated or divorced women with children in the early 1980s' (Spangler 2003:151). As Doty points out, *Kate and Allie* and *The Golden Girls* continue a tradition of close female sitcom friendships that began with *I Love Lucy's* Lucy and Ethel. These shows' (heterosexual) protagonists prioritise their relationships with one another over male companionship. As Doty explains, through this 'woman-identified experience', they illustrate Adrienne Rich's concept of a 'lesbian continuum' (Doty 2003:190). The subsequent analysis of three *The Golden Girls* episodes will seek to situate this woman-centredness in relation to the show's representations of dominant ideologies and of humanist feminism, and in relation to its contribution to humorous and societal discourses.

Critical discourse analysis 4: 'Jobhunting'

The Golden Girls' 'love story between four women' (Frank 2012) was therefore created at a historical juncture at which second-wave feminism was both surfacing in mainstream discourses and opposed by an ideological backlash (Faludi 1992). This woman-centred love story was mainly told by men: of the 49 writers credited over the show's total run, ten were female, including Susan Harris, who as the show's creator would be credited throughout the series. Only one woman (Gail Parent, who wrote 14 episodes) was part of the new writing team brought in from 1989 (season four) onwards; this new team furthermore included politically conservative-leaning (Shapiro 2011:52) Marc Cherry, the future creator of *Desperate Housewives* (ABC 2004-2008; 2013-1017) and *Devious Maids* (Lifetime 2013-2016) (both humorous hit shows revolving around four women). Christopher Lloyd, who would become an executive producer on *Frasier* (NBC 1993-2004), and co-create *Modern Family* (ABC 2009 -) had joined *The Golden Girls* as a writer in its first season. Lloyd commented on the phenomenon of (often young)

men composing older women's words: 'Everybody has grandmothers so we used to write about situations that we used to see our moms or grandmothers in. But also, it was a lot about the jokes […] Sophia certainly wasn't a real eighty-year-old women, she was a very sarcastic, funny, odd creation that could have been any age' (2010).

Indeed, only Dorothy is a, mostly, realistically drawn and not overly caricatured character. The balance between the sharply demarcated protagonists has been likened to 'four points on a compass' (Betty White, cited in: Colucci 2016:24). In a Jungian reading, Kaler argues that they each represent a feminine archetype and together function as a 'complete woman' (1990:50): 'the easiest way to categorise them is through the Greco-Roman triad of Dorothy as the Athena/ Minerva figure, Rose as the virginal Kore/ Artemis/ Diana, Blanche as the Aphrodite/ Venus, and Sophia as the dual Sybil/ Hectate figure' (ibid.:52). Divorcee substitute teacher Dorothy, whose name evokes *The Wizard of Oz*'s resourceful female lead, combines wisdom and moral strength with a combative quality (ibid.: 52-53). Blanche, who works in an art gallery, is like her namesake in *A Streetcar Named Desire* a promiscuous Southern belle, and 'in her role of Venus, a disturber of the civil order' (ibid.: 54). Bereavement counsellor Rose's innocence is that of Snow White's heroine, her naivety and virtue the qualities of maiden goddesses (ibid.: 54-55),and pensioner Sophia completes the younger characters' triad by providing the wisdom her name encapsulates, goddess Isis's androgyny, and the weathered hag's fearless insolence (ibid.: 55). Traditionally, 'men are stereotypically seen as being aggressive, competitive, and instrumentally oriented while women are seen as being passive, cooperative, and expressive' (Stets and Burke 2000:3); Sophia and Dorothy are thus more masculine characters vis-à-vis Rose's traditional and Blanche's excessive femininity. Dorothy of course is portrayed by Bea Arthur, whose quasi-masculine physical traits were discussed in the preceding chapter (see pages 131 and 150). The character differs from Maude Findlay in that Dorothy lacks the former's political zeal; however, like Maude, she is sharp and rational, and these qualities inform her uses of humour, as will be illustrated shortly.

Sophia's intrepidly frank, 'unfeminine', joking is facilitated by her age: as an octogenarian she is 'outside the sexual marketplace [and] permitted to make lewd remarks' (Barreca 1991:50). According to Sedita's (2006) typology of sitcom characters, Dorothy is 'the logical, smart one', Rose, 'the dumb one', Sophia, 'the bitch' and Blanche, 'the maneater'.

Writer Lloyd describes how these characters' funny speech was thought up in a writers' room that was, 'a very competitive environment. […] We wrote four different versions of the same scene, and whichever person's scene turns out the best we'll use, or the best joke […]. It created a great deal of stress and competitiveness […]' (2010). *The Golden Girls* was thus created in an environment infused with neoliberal ruthlessness in the pursuit of excellence (see also Adalain 2013). The following first CDA of the *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992) episode 'Job Hunting', will seek to examine how this conservative dominant cultural and political ideology was reflected in the show, and to identify its 'relations of dialogue, contestation and dominance' (Fairclough 2010:10) with alternate discourses, which are 'brought into dialogue and contestation within processes of strategic struggle' (ibid.:10). 'Job Hunting' was the second episode to be recorded and the 22nd (out of a total of 25 season one episodes) to be aired (Culucci 2016:67); it was written by the then head writers, husband-and-wife team Terry Grossman and Kathy Speer, and directed by Paul Bogart (whose credits include the *All in the Family* episode, 'Edith's 50th Birthday', discussed in the second CDA).

Episode summary

In 'Job Hunting', Rose loses her job as a grief counsellor. She nevertheless stays in contact with her previous clients, who ring and visit her at home for unpaid advice. After one such nocturnal emergency phone call, and concerned that Rose is procrastinating rather than looking for paid employment, Dorothy and Blanche decide to challenge her. Rose reveals that she has been looking for work, but has repeatedly encountered ageist attitudes in unsuccessful job interviews. Dorothy responds to Rose's despair by reminding her that she has overcome adversity before, when Rose had to

provide for herself following her husband's death, and then inspects and embellishes Rose's resumé. Unable to go back to sleep, the three women move from Rose's bedroom to the kitchen, where they share an impromptu meal while candidly discussing past lovers. The next day, Dorothy meets up with a high school boyfriend and discovers that he is gay, Rose finds work as a waitress and Blanche arranges a date with Milton, one of Rose's former clients.

Analysis

For the purposes of an ideological reading, the fact that 'Job Hunting' was the second episode to be filmed, but the twenty-second to be broadcast, is central: in this, the first-but-the-pilot, *The Golden Girls* instalment, characters, relationships, central themes and ideological positionings are still being established and potentially open to negotiation. Compared to later episodes, Sophia's character is still marginal in 'Job Hunting' but in all other facets, the episode emerges as polished to such a degree that it encapsulates the series' dynamics, and could readily be broadcast near the end of the first season.[49] As will be shown, 'Job Hunting' is a manifestly political episode, and it appears reasonable to infer that its political discourses became as integral to the sitcom as did its seamless portrayal of the protagonists. Aired months after the pilot, these politics were represented as merely one episode's storyline, rather than expounded explicitly at the beginning of the new show; they had become, in Fairclough's terms, 'ideological-discursive formations' […], with 'the capacity to "naturalise" ideologies, i.e., to win acceptance for them as non-ideological "common sense"' (2010:30).

This chapter's earlier sections have outlined the political ideologies and contemporaneous cultural texts that *The Golden Girls* was in 'relations of dialogues, contestation and dominance' (Fairclough 2010:19) with, and

[49] At the time of writing (January 2020), the reasons for the scheduling decision are not known. 'Reshuffling' the order of episodes was not a unique occurrence: for example, the episode broadcast in 'Job Hunting''s stead as the second instalment, 'Guess Who's Coming to the Wedding?' (which introduces Dorothy's ex-husband Stan, one of the show's few recurring male characters), was the fourth to be filmed (Colucci 2016:64).

which provided the context for the show's 'articulating together (features of) existing discourses' (ibid.:19). When the sitcom was first broadcast in 1985, President Reagan had been resoundingly re-elected the previous year, and the neoliberal, neoconservative and New Right morally conservative philosophical tenets underpinning his administration had unambiguously altered the country's economic progress and social fabric. Vastly popular, in his second term Reagan sought to 'ensure that conservatism would have the political and ideological strength to carry on after he left office' (Ehrman 2005:128). Popular sitcoms such *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties* reflected that conservatism with a renewed focus on the nuclear family, albeit that these depictions now included working moms and nurturing men. *The Golden Girls* differed from that concept, instead continuing a then-meagre lineage of shows with 'untraditional family' set-ups, including *Three's Company* (ABC 1976-1984), *Laverne and Shirley* (ABC 1976-1983) and *Kate and Allie* (CBS 1984-1989). Even within this more socially experimental tradition, *The Golden Girls'* premise of four widowed or divorced, aged female housemates was an unprecedented addition. Created by the woman who scripted *Maude*'s abortion episodes, and incorporating social-justice related plots throughout its seven-year run, *The Golden Girls* might be argued to be one of many American TV shows that have been found to be 'pieces of small-scale, insidiously brilliant leftist propaganda' (Shapiro 2011:102). Yet, according to Gray, *The Golden Girls* is 'careful to maintain a highly conservative position' (1994:77), and 'hermetically sealed in a world which is largely white and middle class' (ibid.:78). Similarly, White acknowledges the show's potential to subvert heteronormativity, but argues that, 'its queered community is undermined by the dominant discourse of 'success' in American network comedy terms' (2018:166). This ideological tension, the 'relations of dialogue, contestation and dominance between discourses' (Fairclough 2010:19), and the processes by which 'particular discourses become dominant or hegemonic' (ibid.:20) are at the forefront of 'Job Hunting'.

Act one begins with Blanche chopping vegetables in the kitchen whilst belting out a spirited rendition of the lullaby 'Kentucky Babe'. Coco

the cook has left, and the depiction of a Golden Girl jubilantly preparing food herself heralds countless others like it throughout the show: these four women can provide for and nourish themselves (moreover, these chores are not done for the benefit of men). As will be elaborated, the departure of a closeted gay character does not mean homosexuality remains unspoken; in this, the continuation of nineteen-seventies progressive sitcom politics, too, the foursome is self-sufficient. Sophia and then Dorothy enter the kitchen. The three women quibble over food preferences when a distressed Rose joins them and relates that her workplace, a grief counselling centre, has been closed down. Dorothy takes over the exchange with Rose thereafter, apart from a sole aside by Blanche ('Thank God I had the foresight to marry money'). In that exchange, the show's primary competing discourses (Fairclough 2010:19) are introduced, and the eventual championing of one over the other (ibid.:19) is augured by the characters who articulate them: Dorothy ('the logical smart one', 'the voice of reason', Sedita 2006:52) and Rose ('the dumb one', trapped in 'perpetual childhood' ibid.:119)) argue over self-interest and a commitment to material facts versus altruism and avoidance of reality:

1. Dorothy: Oh, Rose. You're out of a job.
2. Rose: Well, I can't worry about that now.
3. Dorothy: Well, sure you can, honey. I'll help you: food, clothing, shelter […]
4. Rose: Oh, come on. It's not that serious.
5. Dorothy: Yes it could be. Rose, you and I are in the same boat. If we
6. miss a couple of pay checks we are in big trouble.
7. Rose: Dorothy, my main concern is making sure those miserable people
8. find other sources of help. Then I'll get a job. […]

Dorothy's voicing the economic rationale of the nineteen-eighties, the prizing of financial self-reliance over all other concerns, evokes the values of free-market capitalism advocated by, among others, Ronald Reagan's prominent fiscal advisor, Nobel Prize winner Milton Friedman (as outlined

above). Milton is the name of a stranger Dorothy discovers on the veranda in scene two. He turns out to be one of Rose's former patients ('his partner ran off with his wife and all the money from the business'). Rose sweetly looks after him, then, when he leaves:

1. Rose: He's such a royal pain in the butt. But it's part of my job.
2. Dorothy: You don't have a job, remember?
3. Rose: I haven't forgotten, Dorothy. I've just been too busy to start
4. looking.
5. Dorothy: You haven't even started looking?

Despite Dorothy's quasi-parental authority in these interactions, the character named after one of the founders of the Reaganomics she espouses is a bankrupt 'pain in the butt', or, elsewhere in the episode, 'driftwood', one of Rose's 'crybabies' and 'wimps'. 'Job Hunting' thus simultaneously features a 'face value', spoken dominant discourse and a sabotaging personification of the same. The additional discourse that is accordingly 'formed through articulating together (features of) existing discourses' (Fairclough 2010:19) is a postmodern one. In its playfulness and relativism or nihilism (Bloom 1987, Gellner 2002), this discourse reflects the contemporaneously dominant ideology within academia, as discussed previously.

The episode's case for neoliberalist values culminates in the third and fourth scenes. Following a late-night phone call from Milton, Dorothy and Blanche decide to intervene:

1. Dorothy: We're being selfish. I mean Rose's problem is more important
2. than my date. […] She has to face reality. […] Wait. Rose, sit down. […]
3. We are worried about you. Maybe it's none of our business, but all that
4. time you spend with those pathetic wimps from the centre, you should
5. spend looking for a job.
6. Rose: But those wimps need me. *(laughter)*
7. Blanche: But Rose, honey, you have your own problems.

8. Dorothy: Look, you're fifty-five, unemployed, your husband is dead and
9. you have no training. […]
10. Rose: I have tried. I just haven't told you. I've had dozens of job
11. interviews since the centre closed. No-one wants me. […] I need
12. something to do with my life. I never think of myself as old but everyone
13. else does. Maybe I am old. Old and useless. And terrified. [...]
14. Dorothy: Yeah but the point is, eventually [after Rose's husband's
15. death] you did what you had to do. You took care of yourself.
16. Sweetheart, you're now in exactly the same position.
17. Rose: Not exactly. I'm five years older. And nobody wants me around.
18. Blanche: Oh, honey, we want you around. We just can't afford to pay
19. you. *(laughter)*
20. Dorothy: […] Rose, listen. You are feeling sorry for yourself. Sure,
21. you're five years older. So am I. So is Blanche. *(laughter)* […] Alright,
22. you're a little thicker around the middle. So is Blanche. *(laughter)*
23. Listen, we are not about to stand by and just let you give up. We're going
24. to figure out what it is you're doing wrong in your interviews. Then
25. we're gonna fix it. […]

[Dorothy then doctors Rose's resumé.]

Fairclough points out that, 'a characteristic of a dominant IDF [ideological-discursive formation] is the capacity to "naturalise" ideologies, i.e., to win acceptance for them as non-ideological common sense' (2010:30). Significantly, 'ideologies are primarily located in the "unsaid" (ibid.:.27). The 'unsaid' in the above includes two potential sources of assistance for, suddenly and through no fault of her own, unemployed Rose: her grown-up children and government welfare. The former would be 'common sense' in familial ideologies, the latter according to left-wing political value systems; however, in *The Golden Girls*, positioning a protagonist as needy remains unspoken and by implication unthinkable. Instead, in a situation of crisis and vulnerability, even naïve Rose is 'interpellated', 'hailed', in Althusser's

(1971) terms, as a 'concrete subject', in this instance, as a capable adult who is expected to provide for herself.

As the following juxtaposition shows, the discourse articulated by Dorothy and, to a lesser extent, Blanche echoes the values formulated by right-wing, Objectivist philosopher Ayn Rand, whose economic principles closely resemble those of Milton Friedman[50]: Rand argued that:

- 'one must never attempt to fake reality in any manner' (1964:16, lines 2, 8 and 9 above).
- 'above all [one has to reject] the role a sacrificial animal, […][and] any doctrine that preaches self-immolation as a moral duty' (ibid.:17, lines 6 and 7 above).
- 'as a man is a being of self-made wealth, so he is a being of self-made soul' ibid.:17, lines 14 and 15 above); that 'every human being is an end in himself, not the means to the welfare of others – and therefore, a man must live for his own sake' (ibid.:18, lines 18-19 above).

With regards to personal relationships, Rand stated that, 'the time, money or effort one gives […] should be proportionate to the value of the person in relation to one's own happiness' (ibid.:40). Blanche expresses that Rose cannot expect financial support but both Blanche and Dorothy spontaneously provide their time and counsel. Rand reasoned that selfishness is a virtue (1964) but in the above (line 1), Dorothy uses the term to chide herself for not prioritizing Rose's predicament over her own; in this, manifestly American, individualistic discourse, the protagonists have the economic freedom and subsequent personal liberty to truly appreciate one another.

That sovereignty is evinced by the absence of narratives of victimhood. When Rose relates her disheartening experience of being an older job-seeker (lines 10-13), Dorothy responds with 'tough love',

[50] Rand's philosophy had influenced Milton Friedman (Munger 2015:10); Alan Greenspan, Chairman of the Federal Reserve from 1986 to 2006, was a friend and 'convert' of Ayn Rand's (Greenspan 2007:52).

unflinchingly engaging with, as conceptualised by Rand, the realities of ageing and the labour market (lines 22-23). While several of *The Golden Girls* episodes focus on age-related social issues, as will be addressed in the third CDA, these four 'white, generally physically healthy, social, sexually-active, and maturely attractive women' **(**Berzsenyi 2010), are never represented as helpless. Gender is irrelevant in the Golden Girls' relation to paid work: another unspoken, naturalised assumption is that women, regardless of their age, are as responsible for their finances as are men. The four women consequently embody the fulfilment of the humanist-feminist meta-narrative advocated by liberal feminists (Friedan 1983) and commenced by Mary Wollstonecraft, who in 1790 called for women to be 'restore[d] to their lost dignity' (2008:113).

It is at this point in the episode, once the protagonists' (non-gendered) 'humanity of the human' (as Critchley (2004:9) defines humour) has been established, that *The Golden Girls*' boundary-breaking joke-making gets underway. The scene continues in the kitchen:

1. Dorothy: Ah, Barry was the man that I wanted to be the first.
2. Rose: First where? *(laughter)*
3. Dorothy: On Mars, Rose. *(laughter)* My first lover. […]
4. Rose: I waited for my wedding night. *(laughter)*
5. Blanche: No. […]
6. Rose: And it was a surprise. *(laughter)*
7. Blanche: How is that possible? Another man showed up? *(laughter)*
8. Rose: What I mean is, I had never seen a man before. *(laughter)* […]
9. Blanche: No. […]
10. Rose: The only things I ever saw were the animals on the farm. You
11. know, the bulls, the horses.
12. Blanche: Tough act to follow. *(laughter)* […] Well I certainly didn't
13. wait for my wedding night, honey. I couldn't. I had these urges.
    (laughter) […]
14. Anyhow my first was Billy. Oh I remember so well, just like it was

15. yesterday. That night under the dogwood trees, the air thick with
16. perfume and me with Billy … Or Bobby. *(laughter)*Yeah Bobby. It was
17. Bobby … or was it Ben? *(laughter)* Oh who knows. Anyway, it started
18. with a B. *(laughter)*

With this scene, and many similar ones throughout the series, Freudian assumptions that suggestive humour inevitably is at the expense of women are refuted. The show is 'a 'festival of smut, and often specifically female smut […] [which] positions the audience rather differently from the way Freud envisaged' (Gray 1994:76-7). *The Golden Girls'* humorous discourses and the context in which they were produced (a male-dominated writers' room) will be the focus of the third CDA. At this point, the protagonists' use of humour serves to exemplify how *The Golden Girls* utilises the equality recently afforded by second-wave feminism to portray a *post-patriarchal* universe.[51] With both the legal foundations of patriarchy and the women's husbands confined to the past, they are as free to relate their sexual experiences as they are to engage in the labour market. Through these representations, the series' relation to feminist discourses in wider society is elucidated. It does not engage in a humanist-feminist discourse, nor does it feature the postfeminist, reactionary representations of women critiqued by Faludi (1992) as emblematic of the eighties. Instead, libertarian feminism emerges as an implicit, unspoken discourse in the show (cf. Fairclough 2010:27). This strand of feminism is defined by 'the sovereignty of the individual, self-reliance and self-fulfilment' (Madsen 2000:26) and 'based upon a radical individualism that denies the legitimacy of social intervention in any area of life that would constrain the right of the individual to pure self-determination' (ibid.:24). Libertarian feminism is socially liberal (and thus rejecting the decade's New Right/ Moral Majority social conservatism) and economically conservative, and complements the episode's dominant,

[51] This reframing, or 'recoding' (Real 2003:234) of inequalities is a strategy that indicates *The Golden Girls*' being in 'relations of dialogue' (Fairclough 2010:19) with *The Cosby Show* which similarly offered 'new definitions of the black male and the black family' (Real 2003:229).

neoliberal ideological discourse. The show's laissez-faire attitude to lifestyle preferences is subtly corroborated in the episode's final scene. Dorothy tells Sophia and Blanche that a former flame has outed himself as gay, and the revelation is dealt with in a few lines:

1. Sophia: I knew he was gay. I could tell by the way he used to
2. worship Buster Crabbe. *(laughter)*
3. Blanche: Oh honey, are you just devastated?
4. Dorothy: Oh, hey, what the hell. I mean, if I can't have him, at
5. least no other woman can have him either. *(laughter)*

Homosexuality thus does not remain unspeakable but neither does it merit much commentary. The import of such normalising portrayals in 1985 is pointed out by Colucci, who emphasises that, nine years before *Ellen* (ABC 1994-1998; the character came out in 1997) and thirteen years before *Will and Grace* (NBC 1998-2006), 'networks [didn't] always stand so tall against homophobia' (2016:7). Ideologically, *The Golden Girls'* numerous, unfailingly positive, portrayals of homosexuality would be part of a televisual 'restructuring of orders of discourses [contributing to] […] a more general restructuring of relationships between these domains of life' (Fairclough 2010:147). Additionally, in this last scene, Rose's job hunt is concluded. When she tells her housemates of her new job as a waitress, they express concerns about the arduous nature of that job. Rose responds: 'But it's work. It beats the hell out of feeling sorry for myself. And it'll be a whole lot nicer to fall asleep from being tired than crying.' Rose now surpasses a sceptical Dorothy in voicing the episode's dominant discourse of the primacy of economic self-sufficiency. That discourse's pre-eminence after initial contestation (Fairclough 2010:19) is further reflected in the sudden desirability of Milton: Blanche arranges a date with him, indicating that neoliberalism's imperfections are forgivable.

In subsequent episodes, Rose is again working as a grief counsellor. Similar continuity errors regarding the characters' age, family relations and in other matters abound throughout the series (Huryk 2006: pp 84 ff). These

obvious discrepancies exploit the sitcom convention of the circular narrative, in which the humour-driven genre's characters 'continue to shuttle forward and scuttle backward, week after week, in an eternal recurrence of reassuring sameness' (Austerlitz 2014:2). *The Golden Girls'* prioritising of jokes over veracity (Lloyd 2010) could moreover be argued as serving to encode *The Golden Girls* as a post-modern artefact without logic or foundations other than its protagonists. This is particularly notable as this 'unreal' element could function to undermine the great number of political issues covered by the series, including homelessness, AIDS as well as humanist-feminist causes. The next CDA will engage with one such discursive depiction of a feminist issue.

Critical discourse analysis 5: 'End of the Curse'

In 'End of the Curse' (1986, season two, episode one), Blanche experiences the onset of the menopause. The episode is one of the few *The Golden Girls* instalments that explicitly feature a humanist-feminist, in particular radical-feminist, concern, the de-tabooisation of women's bodies and health (Greer 1991, The Boston Women's Health Collective 1970, Koedt 1970, Greer 1992), and the analysis will focus on pinpointing the series' positioning vis-à-vis humanist-feminist discourses. *The Golden Girls*' kinship, via its creator and this episode's writer, Susan Harris, with Norman Lear's radical oeuvre becomes more evident in this episode than in most others: 'End of the Curse' is only the second sitcom instalment in the genre's history to address the menopause, after *All in the Family's* 'Edith's Problem' (1972). *The Cosby Show* ('Clair's Liberation' (1990)), *Designing Women* ('Screaming Passages' (1992)) and *Cybill* ('When You're Hot You're Hot' (1996) and 'Some like it Hot' (1997)) would be among the sitcoms following suit.

Episode summary

'End of the Curse' begins with Rose and Dorothy setting up cages in the garage for a new mink breeding venture. Sophia and then a visibly upset Blanche join them. In the living room, Blanche tells her housemates that she

is pregnant. In the second scene, Rose and Dorothy discuss their new minks' reluctance to breed. Blanche returns from a visit to the doctor's, distraught and eventually revealing that she has been diagnosed as menopausal rather than pregnant. Scene three is set in a psychiatrist's waiting room, where all four protagonists wait for Blanche's turn to speak to the professional. When she does, he emphasises that the biological changes Blanche faces do not necessarily effect the adverse consequences she envisages. In the first scene of act two, set in the kitchen, Dorothy, Rose and Sophia relate their own past experiences of the menopause to Blanche. An attractive male vet comes by to examine the minks, and Blanche starts flirting with him. In the final scene, Sophia, Dorothy and Rose are in the garage, discussing the minks, which have been diagnosed as too old to breed. A cheery Blanche, returning from a date with the vet, joins them. Rose and Blanche convince Dorothy to keep the barren minks, then two of the animals unexpectedly appear to be 'making a stole', but, as Dorothy points out in the last line, 'don't count your money yet. Those are the two males'.

Analysis

The none-too-subtle, past-breeding-age but not yet doomed for destruction, animal analogy in the show's secondary storyline would eventually be replicated in one of *Cybill*'s (1996) didactically radical-feminist menopause episodes (Cybill saves an old mare). Just as the minks are diagnosed by a male vet, whose mere appearance snaps Blanche out of her depression, so is her own condition analysed by a male authority figure, the psychiatrist. This 'neutral' medical knowledge constitutes one of the episode's discourses, that is, 'spoken or written language use [that is linked to] […] a socially and historically situated mode of action, in a dialectical relationship with other facets of "the social" (its "social context") […] is socially shaped but it is also socially shaping' (Fairclough 2010:92). It is complemented by and in competition for dominance with (Fairclough 2010:19), Blanche's own and her three older housemates' perceptions of the menopause.

While the golden girls' ages cannot be precisely identified, it is plausible that Blanche, portrayed by Rue McClanahan, who was twelve years younger than both Betty White and Bea Arthur, would be the last of the women to undergo the climacteric. Blanche becomes aware of this in a manner which would, in later televisual representations across genres, emerge as a common plot device: 'the misinterpreted pregnancy scare' (Rosewarne 2012:184), prompting a portrayal of 'the integral role of menstruation in identity and femininity [that] is only fully realized when […] [it] ends' (ibid.:186). Blanche's identity is of course defined by her seductive femininity, and Harris's script depicts her as shaken to the core:

1. Blanche: No girl, no boy. I'm not pregnant. It's worse. It's much worse.
2. […] My life is over. […] I'm not dying, Rose, though I might as well be.
3. It's menopause. Well I wish I could die. Because as far as I'm concerned
4. this is the end of my life.

[in psychiatrist's waiting room]

5. Blanche: I don't know why I have to see a psychiatrist.
6. Dorothy: Because you haven't gotten out of bed all week. You don't eat,
7. you don't sleep, all you do is cry. […]

[in psychiatrist's office]

8. Psychiatrist: But why is your life over?
9. Blanche: Because it is. Because I'm old. It means I'm not a real woman
10. any more.
11. Psychiatrist: All it really means is that you're no longer able to bear
12. children.
13. Blanche: It means much more than that. […] I remember my Aunt Lynette
14. going crazy […], and my mother saying […], 'Oh, she's going through
15. the change'. I thought, 'poor old Aunt Lynette, having to go through this
16. change thing'. I knew one thing for certain, it was never going to happen
17. to me. Now here I am. I'm Aunt Lynette.
18. Psychiatrist: No you're not. You're Blanche. And all that's happening is
19. a biological process […] It's hard for you to accept. […]
20. Blanche: But you're a man. You wouldn't understand.

21. Psychiatrist: Why wouldn't I understand?
22. Blanche: You don't get old and lose your appeal the way women do. Look
23. at Mr Cary Grant. He can have any woman he wants and he's in his
24. eighties. You just show me a woman in her fifties who can do that. […]
25. Psychiatrist: […] Growing older represents a loss of attractiveness.
26. Blanche: Yes.
27. Psychiatrist: Is that all there is to you, sex appeal?
28. Blanche: Yes. […] *(laughter)*
29. Psychiatrist: Blanche, you have to change your thinking. You have to find
30. all the other things you are […]. There is a lot more to you than you know.
31. Blanche: You know, sometimes I look in the mirror, and I see my
32. mother's face looking back at me. […] It just scares me to death. I get so
33. depressed, I don't want to get out of bed in the morning. I don't want to
34. get out of bed ever again. (cries)

Blanche acts depressed (lines 6-7) and, directly or by implication, associates menopause with death four times (lines 2-4, 9-10, 32-34). This desolation reflects predominant medical opinion from the early twentieth century onward, as summed up by Germaine Greer: 'when the ovaries die the woman dies with them' (1992:47), for 'what women […] are afraid of losing is not femininity, which can always be faked […], but femaleness' (ibid.:59, lines 9-10 above). This scientific discourse was popularised through the influential writings of Robert Wilson MD in the nineteen-sixties, who promoted the then-novel hormone replacement theory (HRT) by arguing that, 'the unpalatable truth must be faced that all post-menopausal women are castrates' (Wilson and Wilson 1963:347). Such thinking reflects the workings of patriarchal ideology, as critiqued by Kate Millett in her trailblazing humanist-feminist work *Sexual Politics* (first published in 1970):

> Woman is still denied […] the biological control over her body […]. As the history of patriarchal culture and the representations of herself in all levels of its cultural media, past and present, have a devastating effect upon her self image (*sic*), and she is customarily deprived of any but the most trivial sources of dignity or self-respect. […] Their principal result is the interiorization of patriarchal ideology (1991:54).

Blanche's internalisation of that value system, including 'the male construction of the menopause' (Greer 1992:20), is evident in her terror at resembling older female relatives, and thus at the inter-generational transition (lines 13-17, 31-32). This depiction exemplifies the 'sexist stereotypes in menopausal craziness storyline[s] […], that a woman *getting old* is what truly sparks the insanity' (Rosewarne 2012:192, emphasis in the original). Older women's lack of erotic capital (Hakim 2011) and social status in patriarchal societies, acknowledged in Blanche's comparison of the male and female ageing processes (lines 22-24), is validated by Greer: 'Men […] may find their sexual attractiveness actually increases with age; very few women will find this to be case […]. The commonest image of a middle-aged woman is someone who is lumpy, dumpy and frumpy' (1991:336). This loss of power, suggests Greer, underlies menopausal women's suffering (ibid.:77).

The fact that *The Golden Girls*, and in particular the character of Blanche, contributed significantly to challenging this 'commonest image' will be discussed shortly. With regards to the scene above, Blanche's distress, caused by and expressed in a patriarchal discourse about the menopause, is offset by the series' portrayal of a different kind of masculine discourse. When the male psychiatrist calmly reminds Blanche to differentiate between 'a biological process' (line 19) and the arbitrary meanings she ascribes to it, his rationality is that of a benevolent father figure. In stark contrast to adherents of the misogynistic, dominant medical paradigm described above, this psychiatrist evokes the Wise Old Man, a Jungian archetype representing 'knowledge or wisdom, Logos in all its many forms and effects' (Hopke 1999:117; Jacobi 1973:125), and balancing Blanche's preoccupation with the corporeal with an omniscient spirit (lines 29-30).[52] By virtue of this utterly truthful quality, and of the professional authority of the speaker, the

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[52] The fact that this quasi-omniscient healer is male can be interpreted as signifying the ongoing dominance of patriarchal discourses in matters pertaining to women's bodies. However, arguably, within the Jungian paradigm, the archetype of the Wise Old Man taps into the collective unconscious, and the character's maleness facilitates this process. Moreover, the psychiatrist's diagnosis closely resembles the opinions of Blanche's fellow Golden Girls (see pp 193-195); diegetically, it is probable that the hyper-feminine Blanche would accept assurances of her continuing attractiveness more readily if confirmed by a man.

psychiatrist's words constitute the scene's dominant discourse in its order of discourses, that is, 'the totality of [a social domain's] discursive practices, and the relationships […] between them' (Fairclough 2010:93).

This marginalisation of the patriarchal discourse is reinforced when Blanche's experience is juxtaposed with her housemates' over cheesecake in the kitchen in the second act:

1. Blanche: Life, if I can still call it that, has to go on in one form or the
2. other, so here I am. I'll just spend my remaining years in the company of
3. women. *(laughter)* […]
4. Sophia: This is all because you're going through the change?
5. Blanche: God, I hate that expression.
6. Dorothy: What is the big deal? Blanche, it's nothing. Look at it this way:
7. You don't get cramps once a month. You don't go on eating binges once
8. a month, you don't go crazy once a month.
9. Sophia: You just grow a beard. *(laughter)* […] I woke up one morning, I
10. looked like Arafat. *(laughter)*
11. Blanche: Oh my God.
12. Rose: I never grew a beard. *(laughter)* […]
13. Dorothy: I tell you, menopause was wonderful for me. It meant no more
14. PMS.
15. Blanche: I never had PMS. […]
16. Rose: Neither did I. But I had a BMW. […] *(laughter)*
17. Dorothy: PMS! Pre-menstrual syndrome, Rose. You mean you never got
18. crazy once a month? […] I would cry, scream, carry on, put on ten pounds
19. of water, and well, menopause put an end to that. I loved it.
20. Blanche: How could you love it?
21. Dorothy: Because I didn't see it as having anything to do with my
22. sexuality. I'm exactly the same person I was. […]
23. Blanche: Men are so lucky. They never get periods in the first place so
24. they never have to stop getting them so they don't have to go through any
25. of this.

26. Dorothy: They blame us for being crazy when we get them and crazy
27. when we don't. […]
28. Sophia: I got it, nobody told me. I didn't get it, nobody told me. I figured,
29. this is life, and went back to my meatballs. *(laughter)*
30. Rose: And then when it stopped, it just happened. I mean, a few hot
31. flashes, and that was it.
32. Blanche: Oh, I heard about those hot flashes.
33. Rose: They didn't bother me. I live in Florida. Who can tell the
34. difference between a hot flash and a weather front? *(laughter)* […]
35. Dorothy: […] She will cheer up when she realises that it makes no
36. difference whatsoever in her life. That it's just a concept, it's not a reality.

Dorothy, the 'logical smart one' (Sedita 2006:52), echoes the psychiatrist's discourse by separating the 'concept' of menopause from its 'reality' (lines 35-36). From a humanist-feminist perspective, the contributions made by Blanche's three companions constitute a crucial addition to the psychiatrist's rational discourse, as they represent one of the 'basic tenets of feminism […], that women must define their own experience' (Greer 1992:18); they are the empirical data grounding his lofty theory. Rose and Sophia voice interchangeable views on the menopause, dismissing it as an irrelevance (lines 4, 30-34). Dorothy's description corroborates (lines 6, 35-36) and exceeds this: she 'loved' the 'wonderful' transition and the improvement to her quality of life it entailed (6-8, 13-14, 17-19). As in the 'Job Hunting' episode, the women engage in a discourse of libertarian-feminist ideas, evident here in their refusal to present as victims (Madsen 2000:29). As libertarian feminist Hoff Summers points out, the characterisation of menstruation as a positive experience in strands of humanist-feminist thought is not an accurate reflection of most women's estimation (1994:104). By frankly discussing some women's debilitating experience of pre-menstrual syndrome in an 'expert', all-female setting, and by framing the menopause as a liberating non-event, the episode overrides the patriarchal discourse on the topic. Importantly, this discourse is furthermore

outnumbered, with Dorothy, Rose, Sophia and the psychiatrist all defying Blanche's value system.

'End of the Curse' illustrates the series' ability to 'get away with a lot because of who [the characters] were' (executive producer Tony Thomas, 2006), a theme which will be explored in detail in the subsequent analysis. While this episode's dialogue features candid discussions of, and the naming of, women's biology, a decade on, *Cybill's* menopause episodes were subject to severe network-internal censorship. Discussing this, Cybill Shepherd wrongly concluded that when CBS's Standards and Practices department eventually, 'said "Okay, you can say 'period'", […] that wound up being part of women's health history and *Time* magazine: the first time the word "period" was used in that way on network television' (Simon 2008). Yet this taboo had been broken in1986, in 'End of the Curse'. This transgression is likely due, at least part, to the fact that it was scripted by a powerful woman, who utilised her sway to create a fictional universe in which patriarchal discourses are jettisoned and replaced with an empowering way of thinking and speaking. There is a searing honesty in Blanche's account of an attractive woman facing the ageing process, an account which resembles radical-feminist icon Germaine Greer's academic study of *The Change* (1992). This authentic representation of women's experience was penned by Susan Harris, who at the time was the 'most successful female writer-producer in the history of Hollywood' (Kubey 2004:125). As *The Golden Girls* creator, Harris's scripts, uniquely, could not be altered due to her seniority: 'she would have been the one to agree to any changes' (Colucci 2016:97).

The episode's dominant, empowering discourse is characterised as much by that which remains unspoken, as by the words included (Fairclough 2010:27). In advocating an individualist feminist outlook, according to which women are not limited by biological processes, Harris constructs a 'taken-for-granted "background knowledge"'(ibid.:31) in the woman-centred world of *The Golden Girls* that differs considerably from other shows' representations of the menopause, as 'something that *afflicts* women and *inconveniences*

men' (Rosewarne 2012:191, emphases in the original). With the exception of facial hair growth (lines 9-11) and hot flashes (32-35) the symptoms of the menopause are not exploited for comedic purposes. However, most of those symptoms (see, for example, Greer 1992:108-109) are not mentioned at all, resulting in a partial representation. This partiality is further evinced in the episode's not featuring the aggressively marketed pharmaceutical response to the menopause: whereas *All in the Family's* Edith was counselled that HRT was the cure-all for her ferocious mood swings, this option too remains unspoken. In *The Golden Girls*, 'you have to change your thinking', as the psychiatrist urges Blanche (line 29): menopause, and its remedy, is all in the mind's discourses.

Such discursive representations resonated with the sitcom's audiences and contributed to the recontextualisation of ideologies in a wider societal hegemonic struggle (Fairclough 2010:20). Reflecting on the impact of the show, Littlefield observed that,

> we look at it now, we think fifty is nothing … But they were the show that said [fifty] is just the beginning. It's not over. There is so much life, there is so much ice-cream, there is so much love, there is so much cursing, there is so much sex – it's all still in front of them. And that spirit [...] just couldn't be defeated. And audiences of all ages went crazy for that show (2011).

Blanche's readiness to 'entertain a steady stream of gentleman callers' (Colucci 2016:11) remained of course a constant in the series. In 'The End of the Curse', elements of radical-feminist discourses (as brought to prominence by, for example, Germaine Greer), can thus be identified. These discourses are moreover articulated in what is an essentially radical-feminist premise, an all-female 'matrilocal' household (Greer 1999:423), which serves as a 'functional alternative' (Merton 1968) to the nuclear family.[53]

However, the episode simultaneously reflects the show's lack of a radical-feminist discontentment with existing gender relations. Instead, as similarly emerged in the fourth CDA, the protagonists are depicted as autonomous individuals who are fully accountable for their life choices, as is

[53] This 'watershed' representation in 1985 of a chosen rather than biological family is one reason for the show's popularity with the gay community (Colluci 2016:23).

consistent with libertarian-feminist thinking (Nathan 1981). *The Golden Girls* consequently posits a fictional post-patriarchal sitcom universe; in this, it mirrors the discursive approach of its successful contemporary, *The Cosby Show*, which afforded white viewers 'pleasure without culpability' (Jhally and Lewis 1992:91) in its post-racial portrayal of an affluent black family. Such idealised, not-yet-real representations of the status quo of, for example, gender and race relations exemplify the sitcom genre's potential for 'political and ideological "smuggling"' (Wells 2006:181). In *The Golden Girls*, this smuggling of a utopian fictional universe was made possible through a highly distinctive combination of the characters' gender, age and outrageous humour. The following CDA will examine the show's resultant, unique contribution to wider societal discourses.

Critical discourse analysis 6: 'Old Boyfriends'

The preceding two CDAs have situated *The Golden Girls* in relation to political and humanist-feminist discourses respectively; drawing upon these themes and findings, this last analysis of the sitcom will engage with its specific additions to humorous and other societal discourses. It has been contended that *The Golden Girls'* enduring, global appeal arguably defies rational explanation (Littlefield 2011); indeed, this success has been attributed to the show's 'magic' (Thomas 2006). This CDA will seek to somewhat disenchant and deconstruct this continuing resonance, and to identify how the show's discourses of humour, gender and age combine to create a unique and enduring cultural phenomenon (Collucci 2016:348-349). The season seven episode 'Old Boyfriends' (episode 14), written Marc Cherry and Jamie Wooten, is well suited to exemplifying the interplay of these discourses, with a storyline focussed upon old age and illness, and dialogue which exemplifies Gray's characterisation of the sitcom as, a 'festival of […] specifically female smut' (1994:76). This episode moreover demonstrates how *The Golden Girls* bridges ideological divides and incorporates into its storylines philosophical principles which reflect the ideological foundations of the United States (and, to varying extents, of many other countries). As will be argued, this ideological resonance, along with

meticulous humorous scripting and poignant themes, is likely to account for the show's timeless success.

Episode summary

'Old Boyfriends' begins in the kitchen, where Sophia and Blanche peruse the personal ads. Dorothy joins them, and Sophia decides to contact one of the advertisers. Rose enters the kitchen and tells the others that she has been called by a former boyfriend, Thor, from St. Olaf whom she does not remember. In scene two, the four flatmates are in the living room. Thor visits, and Rose does not recall him. Sophia's date, Marvin, arrives with his sister, Sarah, who accompanies them to dinner. In the third scene, set in the kitchen, Rose tells her housemates that she still struggles to place Thor, and Sophia complains that Sarah has come along to every date she has had with Marvin. In the next scene, Rose, Thor and Blanche are having dinner on the veranda. Rose finally remembers Thor as someone she dated only to make her future husband jealous; when she attempts to tell him this, he professes his enduring love for her. In the living room, Marvin inadvertently tells Sophia that Sarah is his wife. Sarah arrives and explains that she is fatally ill and wants to ensure that Marvin has a partner after her death. In act two, the couple leave, and Sophia states she is willing to go ahead with the arrangement. Rose tells Thor that she had never been serious about him, and he kisses her before leaving. The last scene is set in Marvin and Sarah's house. Sophia realises that Marvin will never love her the way he does Sarah, and decides against the relationship. In a tag scene, Sophia and Rose look at the personals in their kitchen, and come across an ad placed by someone sounding a lot like Thor.

Analysis

The episode's content encapsulates the series' paradoxical positioning with regards to its protagonists' age: on the one hand, some aspects of the reality of senior citizens' experience, such as the experience of fatal illness, are confronted within the show's plotlines and dialogue. On the other hand, other facets of that experience are represented as inconsequential, with for

example, in this episode, protagonists in their sixties and eighties seeking romance and rebuffing suitors in a manner associated with much younger people. Indeed, this blurring of age-related boundaries and typifications is heralded by the living arrangement at the core of the show: they are ‘roommates’ not, as is customary, before transitioning into adult roles and responsibilities, but after having concluded that life stage. This ambiguous relation to conventional narratives of, in particular, women’s ageing, was evident in the preceding CDA, in which the menopause was simultaneously addressed and discursively dismissed. In that representation, the physical ageing process was represented as wholly separate from a decline in quality of life. With such portrayals, *The Golden Girls* subverts dominant discourses: as Woodward states, women’s experience of ageing ‘does not have the same counterpart in men and thus the same psychological, social and economic consequences for men. By experiencing ageing, I am referring primarily to the internalization of our culture’s denial of and distaste for ageing’ (1999:xiii). This is reflected in Rowe’s designating old women as ‘unruly’, for if they ‘refuse to become invisible [they] are often considered grotesque’ (1995:31).

The invisibility Rowe references is of course that of post-menopausal women (Greer 1992, Woodward 1999). However, the four Golden Girls’ defiance of that inconspicuousness is neither grotesque nor the source of the show’s humour. Instead, they are depicted as liberated by a life stage in which a woman ‘can at last transcend the body that was what other people principally valued her for ‘(Greer 1992:430), a sentiment famously captured by English poet Jenny Joseph: ‘When I’m old I shall wear purple/ with a red hat which doesn’t go and doesn’t suit me’ (‘Warning’, 1992). This carefree spirit underlies the show’s fundamental humorous incongruity: the mismatch between the Golden Girls’ aged bodies[54] and their undiminished sense of life, which is in stark contrast to dominant psychological and cultural discourses of old age as a phase defined by loss and decline (Mellencamp 1999:317),

[54] Bakhtin’s (1984) contributions on the frail, elderly physique, and its meaning within the context of the carnivalesque, will be discussed shortly.

and as disenfranchised to such an extent as to equate with a ‘second childhood’ (Mangum 1999:71).

Stereotypical expectations engendered by these discourses, of resigned and innocuous senior citizens, would enable *The Golden Girls’* writers to ‘get away with a lot because of who [the characters] were’ (Thomas 2006), as this CDA will demonstrate. The Archive of American Television conducted extensive interviews with several of *The Golden Girls*’ writers, who all point out the priority given in the writers’ room to crafting jokes over developing characters or stories (Lloyd 2010, Hervey 2013). The show thus conforms to Neale and Krutnik’s definition of the sitcom as, ‘an institutionalizing of the pleasures and processes involved in […] joke telling’ (1995:243; see also Mills 2005:33-35). The following, eleven-seconds-long, exchange from ‘Old Boyfriends’’s first scene demonstrates the rapidity and frequency of jokes in parts of the show:

1. Blanche: Okay, here's another good one: ‘recent widower seeks widow. I
2. am handsome, intelligent, and possess great style. I am also incontinent
3. but have learned to laugh about it.’ *(laughter)*
4. Sophia: Well, that's a keeper. *(laughter)*
5. Dorothy: What is going on here?
6. Sophia: I'm looking through the personals to find myself a man.
7. Remember what that is, Dorothy? It's an animal, kind of like a woman,
8. except that it's got a …
9. Dorothy: Ma! *(laughter)* I know what a man is, but I tell you, I would
10. never look for one through the personals. And you know why? Because
11. I have standards. I have intelligence. I have class. And you know what
12. else I have?
13. Sophia: It's not self-awareness, that's for damn sure. *(laughter)*

The genre’s characteristic laugh track accentuates the short section’s four jokes. Blanche and Sophia are the makers of the first two jokes, about the male advertiser; the third laugh follows Dorothy’s reaction to her mother’s teasing, and the fourth joke too is at Dorothy’s expense, and made by Sophia.

Each of these jokes is an unexpected ‘fleeting, momentary unit’ (Mills 2005:1), and, in line with the superiority theory of humour, they all work by granting their tellers the ‘sudden glory’ over their flawed targets (Critchley 2004:69-70); here, an unwell old man and single Dorothy. Neither the advertiser, who himself is jesting about his condition (lines 2-3), nor Dorothy, who confidently retorts to Sophia’s insult (lines 6-8), are passive objects of others’ fun, and the segment’s humorous discourses thus offset the potential for callousness inherent in these expressions. Yet Dorothy’s is not the last laugh, as she is undermined by her mother’s instant response (line 13; in the remainder of the scene, she offers no comeback to Sophia).

In the series, all four Golden Girls are both makers and butts of jokes. Dorothy’s lack of dates, Rose’s lack of astuteness and Blanche’s lack of chastity all make for regular comedy fodder (Gray 1994:76). Sophia’s sharp comments are often effectively countered by Dorothy, who typically reminds her of an alternative old age spent in a retirement home. The characters of both Dorothy and Blanche simultaneously reference and subvert outdated, misogynist comedic discourses, which laughed at women stereotyped as either under or over-sexed (Mills 2005:110). Yet the show’s alternative discursive strategy, which effectively challenges existing orders of discourse (Fairclough 2010:130-131) is that those jokes are made between female friends, that ‘invariably, the backchat is counterpointed with embraces’ (Gray 1994:76), and that the women retain their dignity (Colucci 2016:23). Thus recontextualised, the formerly sexist humour comes to resemble woman-centred, therapeutic truth-telling.

The following exchange from ‘Old Boyfriends’ exemplifies the sitcom’s discursive featuring of sexuality. The critical discourse analysis will focus on the application of humour theory and then proceed to situate the show’s explicit joking in relation to humanist-feminist discourses; the interconnected theme of the characters’ age will be explored in detail in the subsequent section. Like many similar scenes throughout the show, the dialogue takes place with the protagonists (here: Dorothy, Blanche and Rose;

Sophia joins later) assembled around the kitchen table, discussing a quandary faced by one housemate (here: Rose's inability to recall her former suitor).

1. Blanche: Oh, all right, fine, but I still don't understand why you cannot
2. Remember this man. He says you seriously dated. I mean, how many
3. boyfriends could a naïve farmer's daughter possibly have had? *(laughter)*
4. Two? Three? *(laughter)*
5. Rose: Well, it depends. What's your definition of a boyfriend?
6. Blanche: Any man you bring to a fevered pitch of uncontrollable ecstasy. *(laughter)*
7. Rose: Oh. Fifty-six. *(laughter, applause)*
8. Blanche: Excuse me? *(laughter)*
9. Rose: I had about fifty-six boyfriends. Of course, that was before I knew
10. Charlie. I probably would have had more, but I wasn't allowed to start
11. dating until I was a senior. *(laughter)*
12. Blanche: Fifty-six? Fifty-six?
13. Dorothy: Oh God, stand back. She's gonna blow! *(laughter)*
14. Blanche: What do you mean you had fifty-six boyfriends? You told me
15. you were a virgin till you got married.
16. Rose: Hey, you can have a boyfriend without having to go all the way.
17. Blanche: You cannot! *(laughter)* If that were true, Rose, that would mean
18. you were a slut.
19. Dorothy: Oh, come on, Blanche, how can you say that? So the woman
20. had fifty-six boyfriends in one year. She's not a slut.
21. Rose: Thank you, Dorothy.
22. Dorothy: She is *the* slut. *(laughter, applause)* She's the Grand Pooh-Bah
23. Of Slutdom. *(laughter)* She's the easiest woman in this room.
24. Blanche: Dorothy Zbornak, you take that back. *(laughter)*
25. Dorothy: The slut is dead. Long live the slut. *(laughter, applause)*
26. Sophia: Okay, listen up. I've got man trouble, and I need advice from
27. someone with experience.
28. Blanche: I'll be happy to help.
29. Sophia: I hear you're a tramp, Rose. *(laughter)*

30. Rose: Mama was right. Word gets around fast. *(laughter)*

Once again, the overriding structural characteristic of this segment is the extent to which it is joke-driven, eliciting fourteen laughs in under two minutes. *The Golden Girls'* focus on quick-fire humour (Lloyd 2010, Hervey 2013) adheres to the conventions of its genre (Mills 2005:19), as does its containing a revealing and personal 'therapeutic discourse' (Wells 2006:184). In combination, beneath the 'veneer of comic innocence' (ibid.:181), these features make possible 'political and ideological "smuggling"' (ibid.:181). The degree to which sitcoms feature serious content varies (Mills 2005:19), and *The Golden Girls'* specific fusion of humour with ideology will be explored with reference to the dialogue above; following on, the show's treatment of more solemn storylines will be analysed separately.

Deconstructing the above exchange's jokes according to humour theory, the first two quips (lines 3-4) work due to Blanche's assumed superiority over Rose, a short-lived exaltation which, just like in the earlier extract, is promptly sabotaged, denoting equality between the four women. Much of the humour stems from surprise, from incongruities presenting themselves as, in Hazlitt's words, 'the highest degree of the laughable, [as] contrary not only to custom but to sense and reason, […] a voluntary departure from what we have a right to expect' (1987:68). It is in these expectations, and in their humorous subversions, that the show's relation to dominant and subversive ideologies can be traced. As Fairclough contends, these ideologies exist 'in various ways at various levels' (2010:57), and are contained in hierarchical orders of discourse (ibid.:93). A fundamental, naturalised and unspoken, assumption (ibid.:33) underlying the segment above and the show generally, is that there is no absurdity or comic incongruity in these women, aged fifty-plus, bluntly discussing their sex lives; the audience laugh at what they say, not at their saying it, and the Golden Girls' recurrent bawdy discussions are coded as commonplace, as an 'already-said' (ibid.:27), a given.

This diegetic taking-for-granted of women as makers and not objects of risqué jokes is an ideological 'implicit proposition' (ibid.:27) that disassembles deep-rooted expectations about women and humour. In 1905, Sigmund Freud wrote in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* that 'smut' is, 'the intentional bringing into consciousness of sexual facts and relations by speech. […] Smut is thus originally directed towards women […]. A person who laughs at smut that he hears is laughing as though he were the spectator of an act of aggression' (1978:141). Such coarse jesting therefore epitomised patriarchal power relations in society at large, with knowing, 'positively hostile and cruel' (ibid.:142) men laughing at subdued women. Indeed, the 'woman's inflexibility is […] the first condition for the development of smut' (ibid.:142). *The Golden Girls* as an ideological site signifies the extent to which hegemonic gender relations have been renegotiated (Femia 1981:72) since the publication of Freud's book. Sexuality, personified by Blanche, is one of a range of themes integral to show's humour (Kaler 1990, Marriott 1991, Berzsenyi 2010, Collucci 2016); notably, in its explicitness, *The Golden Girls* went further than most sitcoms of the time (Thomas 2006). Gray revealed the extent to which the show ousted Freudian assumptions:

> *The Golden Girls* is a festival of […] specifically female smut. […] Here the "first condition" of smut is not, as with Freud, "the woman's inflexibility"; it is, rather, our knowledge that Blanche is a sexually adventurous woman who likes to boast of the fact; we as viewers construct the situation we are never going to see. Dorothy's [remarks are those] […] of Freud's male joke-teller; she engages us as the second male, the recipient of the joke, in order to embarrass Blanche. But Blanche is, of course, impossible to embarrass. She is proud of her sexuality, and because both Blanche and Dorothy are middle-aged women, the joke cannot be structured around sexual difference. We are, insofar as the joke constructs a specific audience, treated as middle-aged women ourselves […] (1994:76-77).

Such joking by, for and about women joking denotes a quintessentially woman-centred sitcom. The show's explicit repartee evokes the threatening potential of women 'speaking the unspeakable' (Higgins 2003:33) as far back as ancient Greece, when women's raucous laughter discombobulated their husbands, who feared the joke was on them, cuckolded and raising another man's child (ibid.:33). In 1978, seven years prior to *The*

Golden Girls' first broadcast, radical feminist Mary Daly emphasised the centrality of recovering this long-repressed mirth for the humanist-feminist project:

> 'Women must never laugh seriously at Father – only at his jokes. There is nothing like the sound of women really laughing. […] Hags can cackle and roar at themselves, but more and more, one hears them roaring at the reversal that is patriarchy […]' (1990:17).

Exchanges such as the one above re-reverse patriarchal common-sense. Taken-for-granted double standards are casually overturned when Blanche jealously guards the misogynistic insult 'slut' as a credential (line 24). In doing so, she engages in the 'reclamation' of defamatory language, a political discursive strategy which enables dominated groups to reclaim 'authority and ownership over [their] own self-understanding [which] is a way of resisting oppressive structures of domination' (Godrej 2003:13).[55]

Even innocent Rose is shown to have had too many boyfriends to recall their names (lines 1-11). This dismissive attitude to quasi-interchangeable male partners recurs throughout the show, most frequently in scenes showing Blanche confusing past lovers' names, but additionally in storylines regularly showing Dorothy, Rose and Sophia walking away from disappointing relationships or romantic prospects (e.g., Rose and Sophia in 'Old Boyfriends'; Dorothy in series four, episode fourteen, and series five, episode twenty-two; Sophia in series four, episode seven).[56] Despite this, the sitcom regularly features dialogue which emphasises the desirability of stable, heterosexual relationships (for example, Sophia's frequent taunting of single Dorothy, and in storylines such as 'Old Boyfriends'', depicting Sophia looking for a partner). This is a noteworthy ideological development in comparison to the 'orders of discourses' (Fairclough 2010:147) in the previous decade's *Maude*, with its married, outspoken feminist protagonist:

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[55] The longevity of that loaded term, said to have originated in the fourteenth century with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (Jones 2017), and the timeless quality of *The Golden Girls*, are evinced by the SlutWalk protests, organised internationally from 2011 onwards by a new generation of women affected by archaic attitudes.

[56] According to an unconfirmed tally, the four Golden Girls had a combined total of 263 boyfriends (https://www.buzzfeed.com/declancashin/thank-you-for-being-a-friend-wink-wink?utm_term=.opep3jQoax#.enM8bRD9ym).

The Golden Girls ‘pays lip service’ to patriarchal norms, but its central characters practise the freedoms Maude Findley had called for in the seventies. These traditional discourses thus emerge as hegemonic concessions, functioning to further a humanist-feminist agenda within a decade characterised by a ‘backlash’ (Faludi 1992; see pp 166-175) against women’s liberation. (Notably, these limitations are unlikely to have been determined by the sitcom format, which served as a vehicle for significantly less compromised humanist-feminist discourses in the preceding and subsequent decades.)

Similarly, the show is careful to ‘maintain a highly conservative position *vis-à-vis* promiscuity in fact, while celebrating it verbally and in fantasy’ (Gray 1994:77, emphasis in the original; lines 15-20). For example, in the episode ‘Nice and Easy’ (series one, episode. seventeen), the term ‘slut’ is used in its customary meaning (as is Sophia’s labelling Rose a ‘tramp’ in the above (line 29)), and Blanche admits to embellishing her sexual exploits. It is relevant here that all four protagonists’ biographies are traditional ones, adhering to the patriarchal ‘gender deal’ (Carlen 1988) and to the norms and values of female ‘respectability’ (Skeggs 2002). Viewers are continuously reminded of their pasts as faithful (even if their husbands were not) wives and devoted mothers; they are framed as having fulfilled their duty to society. Now in the ensuing life stage, which is commonly associated with suffering and vulnerability (Woodward 1999:xiii-xv), they defy convention through a living arrangement and lifestyle commonly associated with not-yet-married, much younger people. In this portrayal, a complex new discourse originates through the merging of patriarchal and humanist-feminist thought (Fairclough 2010:19), humorously ‘smuggling’ (Wells 2006:181) the notion that women’s respectability and sexual freedom are not mutually exclusive concepts.

Such outrageously explicit ‘sending up’ of structurally ingrained patriarchal oppression can be explored through the concepts proposed by Bakhtin (1984) in his analysis of the ‘carnivalesque’ in *Rabelais and His*

World. Compared to traditional female roles as well as to their discursive representations in contemporaneous hit sitcoms (such as *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties*) and by eighties New Right and Moral Majority ideologues (Fairclough 2010:19), *The Golden Girls* offered a glimpse into an alternative 'second life' (Bakhtin 1984:8), a '"world inside out"' (ibid.:11). The weekly half-hour spectacle of *The Golden Girls*' broadcast then would become a temporary 'suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions' (ibid.:10).[57] Moreover, what in patriarchal society presents as an incongruity, aged women engaging in lewd talk, emerges as a consistent and effective strategy in Bakhtin, for in Rabelais' grotesque realism, the material, frail and failing, human body served to humble 'all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract' (ibid.:19). Unsightly old age 'is pregnant, death is gestation' (ibid.:52-3), and the four women's ageing physiques might thus be best suited to subvert dominant ideologies and to engender new beginnings.

These Bakhtinian themes are ingrained in the next humorous segment to be analysed, which exemplifies how *The Golden Girls* entwines wildly funny discourses with those of the utmost gravity, and how this particular discursive arrangement (Fairclough 2010:19) makes possible a central component of the sitcom's success.[58] As will be illustrated, the segment and its storyline furthermore demonstrate how, consistent with the dominant political ideologies of the nineteen-eighties (Fairclough 2010:67), the sitcom adheres to and advocates the value consensus at the core of American society and identity. The segment takes place in the living room, with Sophia and Marvin on the sofa, and Dorothy entering, carrying drinks:

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[57] However, the 'carnival does not know footlights, […] it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators' (ibid.:7). While it can be argued that mainstream shows like *The Golden Girls* contributed to the hegemonic reformulation of dominant discourses over time (Fairclough 2010:20), simultaneous to this transformation of society at large, the show would lose its carnivalesque qualities.

[58] While not all *The Golden Girls* episodes incorporate such serious matters, many do; examples from other seasons include: 'Transplant' (season one, episode four), 'It's A Miserable Life' (season two, episode four), 'Old Friends' (season three, episode one), 'Brother Can You Spare That Jacket' (season four, episode eight), and 'Ebbtide's Revenge' (season six, episode twelve).

1. Dorothy: I thought the two of you would like some nice, cool lemonade.
2. Sophia: Marvin is married to Sarah.
3. Dorothy: You don't get any lemonade. *(laughter)*
4. Marvin: I didn't mean to just blurt it out, but I can explain, and I know
5. you and your daughter must have a lot of questions.
6. Sophia: You bet we do. And by the way, Dorothy's not my daughter.
7. She's my lesbian lover. *(laughter)*
8. Dorothy: Ma!
9. Sophia: See, Marvin? How do you like it? Not a pretty picture, is it? *(laughter)*
10. Dorothy: Marvin, what the hell is going on here?
11. Sophia: Isn't it obvious? They put an ad in the magazine to lure an
12. unsuspecting cutie like me into their web of sex games. They want me
13. to be their love slave. *(laughter)* (doorbell rings)
14. Sarah: Hi, I've come to pick up my brother.
15. Sophia: Well, if it isn't Mrs. Caligula. *(laughter)* Come on in and pull up
16. a whip. *(laughter)*
17. Dorothy: You two have a lot of explaining to do.
18. Marvin: I'm sorry, Sarah. I told them we're married.
19. Sarah: Oh, dear.
20. Dorothy: Why did you lie to my mother?
21. Marvin: I didn't want to lie. We were going to tell the truth as soon as we
22. were sure that Sophia was the one we wanted.
23. Dorothy: Then it is true! *(laughter)* You wanted my mother for … sex
24. games. *(laughter)* Oh, God, this is so unbelievable. *(laughter)*
25. Sophia: It's not that unbelievable. *(laughter)*
26. Sarah: Sophia, the truth of the matter is I'm dying. My doctors say I have
27. very few months left, and I told Marvin that I won't be able to rest in
28. peace unless I know that he has someone else. That's where you come
29. in, Sophia. I want you to take my place. (slow music, fade-out to commercial break)

(Marvin and Sarah (standing by the front door, leaving):

30. Again, we're sorry for springing this on you. I know it came as quite a
31. shock.
32. Dorothy: Our hearts go out to both of you, and as soon as Ma and I have
33. talked, we'll get back to you.
34. Sarah: So you'll seriously consider this?
35. Dorothy: Well, of course, we will. How could we not? (Marvin and Sarah leave)
36. Dorothy: What a pair of loons! *(laughter)* Ma, this does it. No more of
37. this manhunt nonsense. I'm getting you a plant. *(laughter)* […]
38. Sophia: I'm gonna do it. […] I really care for Marvin. And if we can all
39. be happy together, and not be alone, what's wrong with that?

Excluding the commercial break, this dialogue is 2.5 minutes in length and contains twelve instances of laughter. The succession of jokes, almost all risqué (sexually suggestive) and all based on incongruity and surprise, is thus only slightly less rapid than in the previous segments analysed. However, this scene's stark juxtaposition of comedic and tragic discourses is heightened by the timing of the break, which serves to emphasise Sarah's poignant revelation (lines 26-29). The proximity of outrageously surreal (lines 7, 12-13, 23-24) and deeply serious (lines 26-29) dialogue echoes Bakhtin's (1984) theorising, with the stark reality of human distress and mortality warranting the 'sending-up' of material existence. This lack of contradiction between uncouth humorous exchanges and those depicting Sarah's physical and emotional suffering, is perhaps accentuated by the latter character's name: in the Old Testament, Sarah, half-sister and wife of patriarch Abraham, named her son Isaac (Hebrew for laughter), as incredulous laughter had been her response to being foretold that she would bear a child in old age. The ambiguous, aged husband-and-wife and brother-and-sister, relationships of both the biblical and the episode's Sarah indicate that this storyline references Judeo-Christian thinking, and thus discourses that have shaped moral teachings for millennia. Her husband's name, Marvin, appears to signal the strength of their relationship, as it invokes the singer Marvin Gaye, whose

oeuvre is inextricably associated with seductive love songs. (Thor, Rose's St. Olafian ex-boyfriend's name, aptly conveys the character's zeal and Nordic origins.)[59]

In 'Old Boyfriends', Sarah's perplexing request, that her husband be in a caring relationship after her death[60], is agreed to (lines 38-39), and then, at a later stage, turned down by Sophia. Sophia's own moniker denotes wisdom, a cardinal virtue in another overarching value system, Ancient Greek philosophy (Plato 2017:42). Sophia's decision-making process in both instances serves to illustrate the 'moral compass' of the show as a whole[61], and the characters' constant pursuit of what one of the most revered Hellenic thinkers, Aristotle, termed 'the good'. According to Aristotle, 'the highest good, virtuous activity, is not something that comes to us by chance. […] We ourselves share much of the responsibility for acquiring and exercising the virtues' (Kraut 2014). Sophia is shown to apply such arduous individual responsibility in her decision-making. When she first agrees to Sarah's request (line 38-39), her words imply that she values her relationship with Marvin, and the ideal of exclusive relationships. She changes her mind in the episode's last scene after observing Sarah and Marvin's closeness: 'I can't go through with this. [..] I was doing this because I wanted to help. […] This isn't right. Look, Marvin, I like you but I saw how you looked at Sarah a moment ago. I don't think you could ever look at me that way'. Here, she values being affirmed as an individual as a greater good than heterosexual companionship, and prioritises selfishness over altruism. This inability to 'go through' with what 'isn't right' is reinforced in the show's secondary

[59]These analyses of characters' names are speculative. I unsuccessfully attempted to contact the creators of the show to corroborate this point. However, as stated on page 9, there exists evidence that deliberate subplots are common within the sitcom genre.
[60]On a note aimed to illustrate the perhaps uncanny relationship of the show, and even its more unusual storylines, to reality: on March 3rd, 2017, Amy Krouse Rosenthal published an article in *The New York Times*, entitled, 'You May Want To Marry My Husband'. Rosenthal, who was suffering from ovarian cancer and passed away ten days after the article appeared, hoped that, 'the right person reads this, finds Jason, and another love story begins' (Rosenthal 2017).
[61] In other episodes, one or several of the protagonists faced moral dilemmas regarding euthanasia (season five, episode seven), organ donation (season one, episode four), infidelity (season one, episode fourteen), sexual harassment (season one, episode twenty; season six, episode six), among many other issues.

storyline, in which Rose turns down a thoroughly decent suitor whose affection she does not reciprocate. In these two instances, as in numerous storylines throughout the show[62], heteronormative relationships are surpassed by another ideal at the core of American identity, individual happiness. However, this Aristotelean 'highest good, which is desirable for itself [and] not desirable for the sake of some other good' (Kraut 2014), which in this case corresponds to humanist-feminist discourses, which advocate women's uncompromising self-fulfilment over patriarchal relationships, remains unspoken. It is thus one of the 'implicit propositions' (Fairclough 2010:33) that characterise 'naturalised ideologies' (ibid.:31). An explicitly feminist agenda in the show's spoken words might have resulted in divided and smaller audiences, as was the case with the contemporaneous *Designing Women* as well as the earlier *Maude*, and not have brought about the near-universal appeal of *The Golden Girls*.

This spectacular success might stem from the fact that the resolutions of all of the show's moral dilemmas, that is, not just those related to women's autonomy, appear to invoke 'a law which determines which is right or wrong and which has power or is valid by nature, inherently, hence everywhere and always', as Strauss (1986:137) defined natural law. Formulated by, among others, Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, the tenets of natural law combine divine providence with individual agency, and underpin the American Constitution (Barker 2012). *The Golden Girls'* success might stem from its characters' intuitive sense of, in Sophia's words, what is 'right' and acting accordingly, and in line with an awareness shared not just by first-time American viewers but global audiences for, at the time of writing, over three decades.

While *The Golden Girls* adheres to the circular sitcom episode format of plot destabilisation and restabilisation (Neale and Krutnik 1995:235), the protagonists' age makes possible recurrent existential scenarios which bestow

[62] Blanche's treatment of her dates in most episodes; also, among many others, Dorothy in season one, episode fourteen and season five/ episode twenty-two; Sophia in season four, episode seven.

it with added layers of meaning. In their dealing with issues of suffering and death, such whether to assist in an aged friend's suicide (season five, episode seven), whether to donate a winning lottery ticket to a homeless shelter (season four, episode eight), whether to nurse a pesky, lonely ex-husband after surgery (season two, episode thirteen) or whether to accept a relative's homosexuality (season four, episode nine), to name but a few storylines, the four women are seen to be doing the 'right thing', according to a consensus that reflects the Aristotelian 'good' (Kraut 2014). This consensus is reflective of the ideological foundations of the United States but furthermore draws upon philosophical and theological frameworks that are, in varying degrees, familiar to audiences in many other countries. A further, related factor in the show's indiscriminate appeal is its humour, which transcends gender scripts. The women engage in the free teasing commonly observed only in all-male groups (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006:69). However, as identified above, these four friends' mostly superiority-based joking is not 'normative' (as outlined by Buckley, 2008:xi), aimed to correct one another. Instead, it often revolves around issues characteristic of women's humour, such as 'motherhood [and] waltzes with boors' (Walker 1988:36), and is nurturing in a manner which 'owes much to women's historic social position. […] Women accomplish in the privacy of their friendship what is publicly denied to them. Their friendship may well provide a strength-giving buffer between themselves and the persistent denial of female integrity' (Johnson and Aries 1983:359). This is most likely a universal phenomenon (ibid.:359), and, in *The Golden Girls*, comes to mean that women, amongst themselves, are free to be as funny as men.

Notably, Aristotle theorised extensively about the benefits of friendship, and characterised the bond at the core of *The Golden Girls* as a virtue, for, 'in loving a friend men love what is good for themselves, for the good man in loving a friend becomes a good to his friend' (Aristotle 1999:133). In *The Golden Girls*, the Aristotelian 'good men' are female. By drawing upon quintessentially American ideological discourses, which, at the moment of the show's production, were revitalized through a staunchly

Republican administration, the show accomplishes a difficult feat: underneath a dominant discourse of a relentless barrage of expertly-crafted jokes and thus of 'comic innocence' (Wells 2006:181), it coalesces conservative and humanist-feminist ideologies. The fundamental conflict in those sets of beliefs on the issue of women's role in society is resolved by representing the previous decade's ideological revolt for women's equality as merely a logical extension of the American project. In this, the show's arrived-at 'common sense' (Fairclough 2010:30), a further ideological message is being 'smuggled' (Wells 2006:181), in a notable break with the often misogynist original philosophical formulations (Freeland 1994:145–46): the notion of independent women as rational and moral actors, as well as, indeed, as funny and lovable. This then remains as the legacy of *The Golden Girls*, and as its unique contribution to humorous and wider societal discourses.

This CDA moreover explored the related question of the factors underpinning the show's enduring success, and found that its consolidating of assumed opposites is likely to significantly account for this phenomenon: it blends representations associated with old age with those suggestive of youth, integrates both conservative and humanist feminist discourses, and its humorous tone is simultaneously masculine and teasing, and feminine and egalitarian. But the sitcom's appeal exceeds even those typically conflicting demographics, and includes more marginalised audiences. The show's unconventional family set-up is frequently cited as a reason for its continuing popularity among gay and drag communities (Colucci 2016:351-352). In February 2020, a female-to-male transsexual author wrote about the comfort he derived from the show, in an article entitled, 'Upon Realising *The Golden Girls* Was Coming to an End I Sat Down and Wept' (Ortberg 2020). This innocuously bawdy woman-centred sitcom, which positions its viewers as aged females (Gray 1994:77), has successfully catered to fundamentally differing audiences for generations (Colluci 2016); with this, it has, Miss-Marple-like, outwitted dominant ideologies.

Conclusion

The Golden Girls is thus a complex and multi-layered pop cultural phenomenon. Its relation to humanist feminism in particular is ambiguous and subtle, especially when juxtaposed with the first sitcom analysed, *Maude*. Nevertheless, it emerges as a, if clandestine, humanist-feminist sitcom milestone. The following summary of the preceding CDAs' findings in response to this thesis's research questions will explicate how this is achieved.

Research question 1: How are competing discourses and ideological struggles represented, and (how) can this be linked to wider societal developments?

The Golden Girls' politics are exacting to ascertain. The show exemplifies Fairclough's definition of orders of discourse as, 'the discoursal/ ideological facet of a contradictory and unstable equilibrium' (2010:62); with regards both to feminist and other political discourses, the show does not consistently incorporate in its dialogue the vernacular associated with a specific ideology. Instead, as the three CDAs have shown, the show's ideological positioning frequently is revealed through that which remains 'unsaid (implicit propositions)' (ibid.:27), through common-sensical axioms which underpin plotlines and the four protagonists' actions. Topics such as homosexuality (CDA four), women's sexual autonomy (CDAs four, five and six) and, as mentioned, a great number of further social-justice-related causes, are discursively represented in a manner clearly aligned with the values of the sixties' liberation movements. This is counterbalanced by the sitcom's discursive reinforcing of heteronormativity (CDAs four, five and six one; see also Gray 1994 and White 2018), and of neoliberal economics (CDA four). This ideological incoherence was, however, very much of its moment in time: in a decade defined by President Reagan's *laissez-faire* economics, the corresponding right-wing moral doctrines were less popular: as Ehrmann pointed out, the majority of Americans recognised that the progressive overhaul of social norms was irreversible (2005:175). As such, the show's discursive engagement with dominant political ideologies reflects the sentiments of its viewers as well as a broader trend within the

contemporaneous sitcom genre, where it was common practice for sitcom writers who had been committed to left-wing activism during the previous decade to adjust to the political 'complacency' of the eighties (Shapiro 2011:46).

The Golden Girls' creator Susan Harris was one such writer. In the seventies she had, with *Maude*'s abortion episodes, sympathetically showcased one of the most controversial causes of the second feminist wave. *The Golden Girls'* feminist discourses are less overt and, as argued in the fourth and fifth CDAs, most closely resemble libertarian-feminist thought. There is a noticeable absence of humanist-feminist 'fighting talk' in the show's dialogue which, however, is compensated for by a largely unspoken discourse which lies at the core of the show's premise: that these four women are fully liberated, autonomous actors (CDAs four and five). By extension, the show posits the existence of a post-patriarchal universe (CDA four) in which women's freedom is a given, and consequently no longer needs to be campaigned for. This discursive strategy is both related to and divergent from wider societal discourses, which, as argued in this chapter's introductory sections, were characterised by the gradual fading away of the second wave (Brownmiller 1999), and by a reactionary backlash against the women's movement in popular culture (Faludi 1992). In relation to these societal trends, the Golden Girls' unapologetically living, rather than proselytising, humanist-feminist values, along with representing all political ideologies and none, transpires as an astute and subversive discursive strategy.

Research question 2: How are feminist and women's humour, and empowering and self-depreciating joking, balanced?

The four women's jesting too cannot be allocated any one particular paradigm, and as such is transgressive. In line with the above, the show's humorous discourses are not overtly political, even when an episode revolves around an issue associated with second-wave feminism (CDA five). Yet they nevertheless meet Merrill's two criteria for defining feminist humour: the assumption of a female audience, and the quality of being empowering to

women (1988:279). Although as a primetime sitcom, *The Golden Girls* had not been exclusively written for female viewers, it has been disproportionately popular with women (Colucci 2016:363-365). Its humour is woman-centred, and frequently either bawdy or revolving around topics characteristic of women's joking, such as 'motherhood [and] waltzes with boors' (Walker 1988:36) (CDA six). However, the sheer quality of these sharp and fast humorous exchanges (CDAs four and six; see also Collucci 2016:23) entices all viewers to temporarily identify with, and adopt the perspective of, four aged female protagonists: '[w]e are, insofar as the joke constructs a specific audience, treated as middle-aged women ourselves' (Gray 1994:77). The high-calibre scripting furthermore makes possible a playful and quasi-therapeutic humorous engagement with patriarchal ideology (CDA six): rather than being self-deprecating, the Golden Girls occasionally level misogynistic insults at one another for comic effect, but these are either instantly bettered by the target's response, or neutralised through the nurturing context of an all-female friendship group (CDA six).

As has been argued (CDA six), the four women surpass Rowe's (1995:31) delineation of the unruly, old and hence grotesque, woman. Their humorous disruptiveness instead lies with another of Rowe's definitions: the unruly woman as one who 'makes jokes, or laughs herself' (ibid.:31). It is this quality that makes *The Golden Girls'* humorous discourses empowering and thus feminist (Merrill 1988): the depiction of four active, and highly effective, female makers of jokes.

Research question 3: What fictional, diegetic model of gender relations does the sitcom advocate, and how do these gender relations compare with those of contemporaneous shows?

As identified in the sixth CDA, the Golden Girls' humorous tones are not just feminine and egalitarian, but moreover masculine and teasing. Such discursive annexing of traditionally male terrain is similarly evident in the way Blanche cannot keep track of her numerous male partners' names; in depictions such as these, patriarchal double standards are reversed (CDA six).

Although male and female homosexuality is portrayed empathetically in several episodes (see CDA four), the show's protagonists are heterosexual. Yet their significant male others are (in Sophia's, Blanche's and Rose's case) dead, or laughably ineffective ex-spouses (in Dorothy's case). Despite *The Golden Girls'* lip service to heteronormativity (CDA six), the premise underlying the show's diegetic portrayal of gender roles is therefore the bold notion that men are largely superfluous. This is underscored by the show's premise: an all-female, matrilocal household which, in radical-feminist thought, functions as an alternative to the nuclear family (Greer 1999:423). This radical-feminist set-up constitutes the show's unspoken, naturalised and common sensical (Fairclough 2010:62), underlying discourse, which sustains and contextualises the surface, articulated discourses (discussed above in response to research question one).

This emerges as all the more subversive when juxtaposed to *The Golden Girls'* sitcom contemporaries. Within the eighties' sitcom industry, as detailed previously, the trend was towards promoting conservative values (Gitlin 2000:219), as epitomised by *Family Ties* and *The Cosby Show*. Compared to such sitcoms, *The Golden Girls'* alternative family set-up in particular was both radical and innovative (Colucci 2016:24). This ideological defiance, which potentially alienated large sections of the audience, was tempered by the show's nuanced integration of conservative discourses. The resultant subtlety and inclusivity arguably made for a more effective vehicle of feminist values than *Designing Women.* The latter show, similarly based on an all-female foursome, was more explicitly humanist-feminist in its dialogue (Dow 1996:110), but significantly less successful than *The Golden Girls*. *Designing Women* moreover was workplace, rather than home-based, and as such presented less of a threat to the nuclear family. An unambiguous shift in the sitcom genre's engagement with second-wave feminism is detectable by the end of the nineteen-eighties: *Roseanne* and *Murphy Brown* heralded a wholly new type of explicitly feminist woman-

centred sitcom which would thrive in the nineteen-nineties, as will be elaborated in the next chapter.

Research question 4: How (if at all) is humour utilised within a sitcom as a tool to dismantle patriarchal power relations?

The Golden Girls' humorous discourses do not confront patriarchal inequalities head-on. In this, the sitcom differs starkly from *Maude*, and Lear's overall oeuvre: in *Maude*, the dominant patriarchal discourse is directly, usually humorously, challenged by its humanist-feminist counterpart. In *The Golden Girls*, dominant and reverse discourses work in a manner that reflect the contemporaneous trend towards poststructuralist thought within academia: in a subtle, Foucauldian manner they transcend the 'conventional political logic of domination and resistance' (Spargo 1999:23), as outlined in response to the first research question. However, this more surreptitious approach can be argued to be at least as effective as that taken by more manifestly political shows. *The Golden Girls* combined latent humanist-feminist principles (see research question three), ambiguous political positioning in its dialogue (see research question one) and an alignment with fundamental, American values (CDA three) with highly effective jesting (see research question two). These ingredients made for one of the most successful sitcoms of all time (Colucci 2016:363-355), with generations of fans laughing *with* four liberated women living in a gender-segregated, essentially radical-feminist household (see research question three).

Like *Maude, The Golden Girls* concluded because Bea Arthur, who 'had begun to get restless the season before' (White 2010:268), decided to quit. Its follow-on show, *The Golden Palace* (CBS 1992-1993), was cancelled after one season due to poor ratings; its reuniting only Betty White, Rue McClanahan and Estelle Getty was, in Betty White's words, 'like taking one leg off a table and expecting it to balance' (1995:268). It is worth noting that *The Golden Girls'* discursively ambivalent and enormously successful

woman-centred sitcom universe would not have been conceivable without the redefining of the potentialities of the sitcom genre undertaken by Norman Lear's seventies' shows, and the righteous demands of the activists of the second feminist wave, as articulated in *Maude*. The third sitcom to be analysed here, *Cybill*, revisits these humanist-feminist causes, three decades after they had first been formulated. Like *Maude*, *Cybill* confronts patriarchal inequalities unflinchingly; like *The Golden Girls*, it does so in a societal context shaped by poststructuralist and postmodern thought. Differently from both these shows, *Cybill* is based upon the life story of its star: a feminist baby boomer navigating the postmodern and ironic nineties.

Chapter 8: Analysis of *Cybill*[63]

Loving one who loves you,
And then taking that vow...
Nice work if you can get it,
And if you get it -
Won't you tell me how?

Cybill theme tune, *'Nice Work If You Can Get It'*, written by George Gershwin (1937), performed by Cybill Shepherd (1995)

Introduction

The sitcom *Cybill* (CBS 1995-1998) opens with the camera panning over a sequence of stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame: Carole Lombard, Lana Turner, Kim Novak, Lassie, Jean Harlow and then, drawn in chalk, Cybill, with Cybill Shepherd singing the jazz standard theme tune. Those few seconds of 'famous Hollywood blondes' (Shepherd 2001:244) connote several of this sitcom's main themes: an affiliation with American cultural classics, the fact that differently to *Maude* and *The Golden Girls*, work is central to the show, and that the specific livelihood the sitcom revolves around is that of a striving actress, who shares the name of its star. Sitcoms named after their main performer were a long-established convention by the mid-nineties, with *I Love Lucy*, *The Mary Tylor Moore Show* and *The Betty White Show* but a few examples. *Cybill* differs from this female-led tradition, in which the sitcom character's existence is wholly fictitious, in that it was instead based, if loosely, on Shepherd's real-live experience. In her autobiography, Shepherd describes how, 'the people who created my dialogue essentially translated my voice' (2001:269), and how she,

[63] The following article is based upon parts of this chapter:
Kypker, Nicole S. (2021), '#CybillToo?: How a Feminist Sitcom in the Postmodern Nineties (Almost) Exposed Hollywood's Dark Underbelly', *Comedy Studies* (forthcoming).

‘persuaded the writers to incorporate ideas from my own odyssey of discovery […] art was mirroring life’ (ibid.:5-7).

Much of Shepherd’s life had played out in public. After winning a beauty contest at the age of eighteen in 1968, she launched a modelling career which led to her starring in the highly acclaimed *Last Picture Show* (1971). That film’s director, Peter Bogdanovich, would be her partner throughout much of the nineteen-seventies and, as a film historian, tutored her in classic Hollywood cinema (Shepherd 2001:120-121). Shepherd studied, ‘the screwball comedies directed by Howard Hawks […]. [Their female protagonists] talked fast and acted sexy, smart, and funny’ (ibid.: 199). These films would, as will be elaborated, inspire her own comedic performance. Shepherd’s ensuing career was marked by extremes, and starring in now-cult movies such as *The Heartbreak Kid* (1972, directed by Elaine May) and *Taxi Driver* (1976, directed by Martin Scorsese) alternated with years as *persona non grata*, and being derided by Hollywood decision-makers and the media as lacking in acting talent. The hugely successful comedy-drama series *Moonlighting* (ABC 1985-1989), co-starring Bruce Willis, catapulted her to international stardom, and it was the clout of that show that would bring about the production of *Cybill* (ibid.:242). The eponymous series was created by Chuck Lorre, who had previously been involved in the making of two woman-centred sitcoms: as a writer for *Roseanne* (ABC 1988-1997; 2018), and as the creator of *Grace under Fire* (CBS 1993-1998). Carsey-Werner Productions, the company behind both these shows (as well as, among many others, *The Cosby Show*) was contracted to produce *Cybill*. From the beginning, Shepherd was among the sitcom’s executive producers; with this, an actress who was known for her decades-long commitment to second-wave feminism (Dow 1996:208) wielded significant behind-the-scenes influence.

One central facet Shepherd asserts she contributed during the conception of the show was a ‘grown-up female friendship’ (Shepherd 2001:8). Humanist-feminist influences are furthermore evident in the show’s set-up; as the following juxtaposition with Sedita’s sitcom types shows, *Cybill*’s comedic universe is that of a divorce-extended, postmodern,

matrifocal family (Stacey 1998:84), in which the male characters are but ineffectual and marginal:

- Protagonist, jobbing Hollywood actress and twice-divorced matriarch Cybill Sheridan is 'the logical smart one'. Although the character is on occasion portrayed as somewhat eccentric, in particular with regards to her spiritual beliefs, she is overall, 'the point of reference [for the audience] […], the voice of reason' (Sedita 2006:52).
- Cybill's best friend Maryann, a hard-drinking, wealthy divorcee who regularly pursues vicious schemes against her unfaithful ex-husband, Dr Dick, is 'in their own universe' ('some of the weirdest, edgiest and funniest characters […], mainly because they are allowed to do […] almost anything' (ibid.:196)). While acted truthfully and convincingly by Christine Baranski, Maryann is the show's least credible character, due to the sheer extent of her alcohol consumption, and due to her breaking the law persistently, yet with impunity.
- Zoey, Cybill's late-teenage daughter with Ira, is a sharp-tongued musical prodigy and 'the bitch/bastard' sitcom type: 'us, the viewers, at our meanest and cleverest' (ibid.:135).
- Rachel, Cybill's twenty-something daughter with Jeff is 'the lovable loser'. This character does not conform to Sedita's definition ('week after week […] they have hare-brained ideas [and] never learn from their mistakes' (ibid.:73)), but in comparison with the other women portrayed, agreeable Rachel has the most persistently difficult time. She is funny, intelligent and, as a non-employed wife and mother, the only female character complying with traditional roles. Yet her experiences of marriage and motherhood are for the most part portrayed as a relentless struggle.
- Ira (Cybill's second ex-husband, a writer), Sean (Zoey's boyfriend, a busboy) and Kevin (Rachel's husband, a primary school teacher) all correspond to Sedita's 'the neurotic', at whose 'heart is a deep

insecurity that will follow the neurotic from the time they [were] nerdy kids to neurotic adults' (ibid.: pp 95 ff)

- Jeff, Cybill's stuntman first ex-husband represents the sitcom type of 'the dumb one': 'genuine, […] sweet and innocent' (ibid.:116).

The quasi-emasculation of the central cast's male characters is perhaps most tellingly symbolised by Kevin, an academic who, having been refused tenure, from season three onwards is reduced to working as a primary school teacher (a female-dominated, low-paid occupation), and consequently struggling to provide for his young family. This radical-feminist sitcom set-up underpins *Cybill*'s humanist-feminist plotlines (Linder and Dalton 2016:199) which predominantly revolve around paid employment, motherhood and friendship. This made for

> a relatively popular show. In the first year the show premiered, it averaged a ten Nielsen rating (percentage of households with televisions) and a 16 Nielsen share (percentage of individuals actually watching the television at that time and who are watching the show). In 1996, the rating for the series jumped 26 percent to a 12.6 rating and a 19 share. In terms of adult viewers, *Cybill* fared well. For women between the ages of 25-54, *Cybill* had an 11.1 share in 1996 (Charlesworth 2005:252).

Throughout its eighty-seven-episodes-long run, it was never among the top-ranked shows; its fourth and final season came in fiftieth place of the Nielsen rankings (San Francisco gate internet site, n.d.). It was nominated for twenty-five industry awards, winning eight, three of which, including the 1996 Emmy for Best Supporting Actress, went to Christine Baranski for her portrayal of Maryann; Shepherd won the 1996 Golden Globe (IMDB internet site). *Cybill's* initial timeslot was at 9:30 pm on a Monday (Pierce 1994), following *Murphy Brown*. The show did not go into syndication for decades due to an unusual production arrangement, according to which CBS financed the show through a loan to production company Carsey-Werner. This was only to be repaid once the show went into syndication, and 'the network alleges that […] Carsey-Werner didn't bother to market the Emmy-winning *Cybill* to syndicators in order to escape fulfilling its promise to CBS' (ABC

News (2008); see also Shepherd 2001:271-2). This deal is likely to account for the show's low public profile after its original broadcast.

Over the two decades since the termination of the sitcom, Shepherd has addressed the 'vicious' syndication arrangement in interviews (Siegler 2008). In 2018, she moreover revealed her assessment of the reason for the show's termination, 'claiming that her eponymous sitcom was cancelled by [then-CBS executive] Les Moonves after she rejected his sexual advances' (Spargo 2018). Moonves had resigned from his position shortly before Shepherd gave this interview, after several women alleged that he had sexually harassed them (Farrow 2018). By 2018, the #MeToo movement, which was formed after the 2017 Harvey Weinstein revelations (Farrow 2019) had brought about unprecedented public awareness of the extent of sexual harassment and assault within the Hollywood industry. Shepherd had in fact disclosed Moonves' actions in 2000, when she relayed the relevant incident in her autobiography, anonymising him as 'The Suit' (2001:252-253).

Her show too, twenty-two years ahead of its time, depicted instances of what was then known as the 'casting couch', as will be detailed in the subsequent analysis. This indicates the tremendous, and possibly unique, potential of *Cybill*: it relates the experiences of a Los Angeles actress, operating within a perhaps singularly influential apparatus in the creation of dominant ideologies, including representations of women. This 'belly of the beast' set-up suggests an abundance of possibilities for the woman buffoon, trickster or thief of language (Gray 1994:37) to tell her thus-far censored, inside story, but within a medium and textual format that are themselves significantly controlled by, and instrumental in perpetuating, that very same machinery. Yet this sitcom was produced in a decade of apolitical, postmodern irreverence, as the subsequent sections detailing the societal and sitcom context of the show will explicate, prior to assessing, through three critical discourse analyses, the extent to which *Cybill* fulfils its potential.

Political and cultural contexts

The nineteen-nineties were an exceptional time. In 1997, Krauthammer related how he,

> recently told an assembly at my son's high school that they were living through a time so blessed they would tell their grandchildren about it. They looked at me uncomprehendingly. First, because they have known little else but good times. And second, because it is hard for anyone to apprehend the sheer felicity of one's own time until it is gone. But I suspect there is a third reason: We live in gold--but without glory. We associate golden ages with heroic times like that of Pericles. Our triumphs, in contrast, are of the domestic variety. This is the age of *Seinfeld*, life in miniature.

During this temporarily 'unipolar moment' (Krauthammer 1990), America and her western, capitalist allies stood victorious and without an existentially threatening antagonist. The nineties would be 'framed by the fall of two architectural landmarks – the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the World Trade Centre in 2001' (Harrison 2010:11), with the fearful, 'perfect symmetry' (ibid.:207) of their occurring on the dates of 11/9 and 9/11 respectively. American troops would be deployed during the six-week-long Operation Desert Storm in Iraq in 1991 and during humanitarian interventions in several international conflicts, including in Somalia and the former Yugoslavia. However, with the exception of Operation Desert Storm, prior to the War on Terror, the twentieth century had culminated in a decade so relatively peaceful that Krauthammer's (1997) above-cited, contemporaneous commentary resorted to *Seinfeld*, a sitcom, as a metonym for the status quo of American life. In a golden, irreverent age, the sitcom genre, including woman-centred shows, boomed (Littlefield 2012). *Cybill* is a product of these 'years of sabbatical' (Bush 2005:181) from history, and before critically examining its discourses, the following will provide an overview of the decade's dominant political and cultural developments.

With Democrat William Jefferson (Bill) Clinton's election to the Presidency in 1992, a baby boomer would be the White House. Clinton's (born in 1946) biography resounded with experiences characteristic of his generation (which included Cybill Shepherd, born in 1950): he was the first post-war President not to have served in the military (he stood instead accused

of having ‘dodged’ the draft to serve in the Vietnam War); he was married to a feminist First Lady who would challenge traditional expectations of that position; he had, as he memorably asserted, smoked if not inhaled marijuana; he had had extramarital affairs (Schier 2000:3). His politics, broadly speaking, combined freedom in the boardroom with freedom in the bedroom (confer Singh 2003:18), in line with the New Democrats’ centrist ideology, which continued the Republicans’ neoliberal economic policies but adhered to socially liberal, progressive ideals. This novel direction of the Democratic Party, first devised in the eighties in response to the Republicans’ successes (Hale 1995:207), was evinced in Clinton’s highly successful economic approach, which has been dubbed ‘post-Keynesian’ in its de facto perpetuation of Reaganite trickle-down economics (Tatalovich and Frendreis 2000:58). The centrist ideological stance furthermore impacted administration policies such as the increased accessibility of abortions (see Burrell 2000:40-41), the 1994 ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ legislation on homosexual military personnel in 1994, the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, and deregulations of the financial sector in 1999. Clinton’s re-election in 1996 made him the first Democrat to serve two terms since Franklin D. Roosevelt (Schier 2000:6). Following a scandalous affair with a White House intern, in 1998, he became the second President to be impeached, having been charged with, and eventually acquitted of, perjury and obstruction of justice (Arnold 2000:31).

The impeachment process similarly failed to discredit the President in the American public’s mind. Polls showed his approval ratings to remain stable with occasional increases as the scandal and subsequent impeachment process unfolded, with the majority of Americans accepting both his guilt and that the affair was a personal matter (Harvey 2000:130). Clinton, who had earned the moniker ‘the Comeback Kid’ long before the 1998 scandal due to his unfathomable ability to withstand political adversity (Smith and Siddiqui 2016), was, as Miroff (2000:120) points out, a quintessentially postmodern President. He possessed not one stable but ‘multiple presidential identities’ (ibid.:12), often appeared to be saying yes and no simultaneously (Harvey

2000:129), and consequently appealed in ‘a culture grounded in ambiguity, confusion and irony’ (Schier 2000:1). Notably, Clinton, who was consentient with those defining attributes of the nienties, was married to a woman, Hillary Rodham Clinton, who personified the second-wave feminist movement’s vision of female liberation. Groundbreakingly for a First Lady, she was actively involved in the administration’s decision-making and pursued her own political ambitions by running for the New York Senate in 2000 (Schier 2000:3-4). Such coming-to-fruition of the emancipatory, collective ideals of the sixties and seventies thus occurred in a decade characterised by an absence of a grave, existential threat, as had previously been posed by the Cold War. Simultaneously, rapid technological advances revolutionised communications, from the 1993 declaration of the World Wide Web as a permanently free resource onwards (Harrison 2010:171).

During the nineteen-nineties, ‘colour-blindness’ and ‘postfeminism’ were among the ‘new discourses proclaiming the end of an era’ (ibid.:13). The first of those concepts was contested by several highly publicised events which exposed ongoing racial divisions, including the 1991 Clarence Thomas case, the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the 1994 trial of O.J. Simpson, and the murders of rappers Tupac Shakur in 1996 and Biggie Smalls in 1997 (ibid.:22). The Clarence Thomas controversy would additionally turn out to be a landmark case in relation to the societal impact of humanist feminism, as that ideology progressively transformed into postfeminism throughout the decade.

Feminism in the nineteen-nineties

Anita Hill’s allegations of sexual harassment against Clarence Thomas, nominated for the Supreme Court by President George Bush, occurred at the beginning of a decade in which women’s labour force participation continued to rise. By 1998, 59.9 percent of all women were in employment, compared to 74.9 percent of men, and 57.5 percent of women in 1990. In the most powerful jobs, under Clinton, the number of female judicial appointments rose to 30 percent (from 19 percent in the Bush administration) (Burrell 2000:242). The first female Secretary of State

(Madeline Albright) and Attorney General (Janet Reno) were among six women serving in the Clinton cabinet (ibid.:242). Hill's eight-hour-long, televised testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee against Thomas, her former boss, brought to the forefront of public awareness that the experience of women in the workforce could differ significantly from their male co-workers'. Sexual harassment had been a feminist cause since 1975 (Brownmiller 1999:281), and from the late nineteen-seventies onwards, Title XII of the Civil Rights Act (drawn up to 'authorize the Attorney General to institute suits to protect constitutional rights in public facilities and public education' (US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.) would be invoked in a series of sexual harassment lawsuits (Brownmiller 1999:286). Thomas was eventually appointed to the Supreme Court; in the aftermath of the controversy, the number of sexual harassment legal cases increased considerably, as did companies' investment into sexual harrassment training sessions (ibid.:293).

The case would furthermore launch the third feminist wave. Writing in *Ms*. magazine, Rebecca Walker, daughter of the prominent feminist writer Alice Walker, issued, 'a plea to all women, especially the women of my generation: Let Thomas' confirmation serve to remind you, as it did me, that the fight is far from over' (1992:41). From its beginnings, the third wave was, '[i]n itself diverse and chaotic, […] not one, but many' (Krolokke and Sorenson 2006:17), and did not entail the grass-roots support and campaigning characteristic of the second wave. In an increasingly globalised context, resulting from the fall of communism and the rise in digital communications, its issues included 'areas such as violence against women, trafficking, body surgery, self-mutilation, and the overall "pornofication" of the media' (ibid:17). Third-wave feminists rejected the notion of a universal female essence or experiences shared by all women, and emphasised instead the impact of inequalities intersecting with gender, including race, sexuality, age and class (ibid.:17). In addition to Walker (1995), notable authors associated with the movement include Naomi Wolf (1991), Aliza Sherman (1998) and Eve Ensler (1998). Many third wave thinkers' contributions

closely mirrored developments in academic, postmodern feminist thought, which similarly focussed on intersectionality (Fraser and Nicholson 1990).

This was reflective of the continuing culture wars waged at universities. One feature of these was the introduction of political correctness which in the nineties, 'sought to restrict speech (specifically hate speech aimed at marginalized groups), but […] also challenged the literary, philosophical, and historical canon, seeking to widen it by including more diverse perspectives' (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015). Another characteristic was the beforementioned teaching of postmodern and poststructuralist thought across a range of arts and humanities disciplines (Gellner 2002:23). The term of postmodernism has been in existence since the late nineteenth century (Storey 2006:385). By the late nineteen-fifties, it predominantly connoted a 'revolt against modernism', that is, a refutation of the hitherto revered, elitist cultural canon (ibid.:385). From the nineteen-seventies onwards, its meaning changed to a more pessimistic appraisal of a 'cultural condition' (ibid.:386). Jean-Francis Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (originally published in 1979) outlined a central attribute of this critique: the rejection of all-encompassing meta-narratives, that is, of closed explanatory systems such as established religions or the scientific paradigm, which are 'always attempting to silence […] other discourses in the name of universal principles' (Storey 2006:386).

One of these all-encompassing tenets critiqued by postmodernists was the notion of an absolute, identifiable truth; this was 'to be replaced by hermeneutic truth [which] respects the subjectivity both of the object of the inquiry and of the inquirer, and even of the reader' (Gellner 2002:35). In *Simulacra and Simulation*, originally published in 1981, Jean Baudrillard conceptualised the resultant ambivalence as stemming from the prevalence of the simulacrum, 'an identical copy without an original' (Storey 2006:386), in advanced capitalist, information-based societies. These media-saturated societies' conflation of the real and the manufactured creates a state of hyperrealism, in which there 'is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real world is no longer

real' (Baudrillard 2006:393). Postmodernism is thus based on the premise that stable, coherent philosophical foundations have been substituted by fluid and free-floating, '"ad hoc", contextual and local' bases for analysis (Fraser and Nicholson 1990:21). This makes for an existential uncertainty, and hallmarks of the postmodern era include pragmatic, situational ethics and relativism, parody, pastiche, irony and self-reflexivity (Hutcheon 2000:35), as well as intertextuality, playfulness, and an 'inevitability […] of tension, confusion, contradiction and ambiguity' (Whisnant 2013:2-8).

Poststructuralism, based on Jacques Derrida's conceptualising the arbitrary relation between what Ferdinand de Saussure's termed the signifier and the signified, similarly abandons epistemological certainties (Weedon 2000:23-24); building on these contributions, poststructuralist Michel Foucault introduced the concept of discourse (ibid.:105) (as discussed on page 78). In turn, Judith Butler would draw upon Foucault in her contribution to poststructuralist feminist thought (see pp 24-25). Her 1990 book, *Gender Trouble*, would be among the most influential feminist texts for decades to come (Hanman 2011). Butler's analysis, and postmodern feminist theories, fundamentally differ from earlier, humanist-feminist theories in their rejection of a female essence or universal identity and in their aim to, 'replace unitary notions of woman and feminine gender identity with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others, attending also to class, race, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation' (Flax 1990:34-35).

The changes in gender relations since the nineteen-seventies did not just impact upon women. According to some theorists (Castells 1997, Connell 1995, Faludi 1999), masculinity was in crisis, and 'masculine qualities [that] were once seen as normal and good […] [were] now seen as politically and morally wrong' (Craib 1987:724). The phenomenon was broadly attributed to three factors: one, the replacement of traditionally male, manual jobs with service sector occupations; two, the reorganisation of family life, in particular the continuous growth in the number of female-headed single-parent households; three, women's increased participation in the public sphere,

including in the most influential positions (Morgan 2006:111-112). As these debates were advanced in academia, in popular culture, postmodern levity emerged a leitmotif during a decade in which a new generation of men and women trialled unprecedented freedoms.

Generation X, the baby boomers' children, born between 1965 and 1984 (Masnick 2012) and named after a 1991 novel by Douglas Coupland, were much fewer in number than their parents' cohort. These young people could take 'for granted many of the real goals of the '60s: civil rights, the antiwar movement, feminism and gay liberation' (Gross and Scott 1990). Compared to their elders, this was a generation of *Slackers* (as Richard Linklater titled his 1990 movie): politically apathetic but passively opposed to the 'crass materialism' of the eighties; they made for a workforce that expected job satisfaction and was 'overly sensitive at best and lazy at worst' (ibid.). As is reflected in *Cybill*'s set-up, this was the first generation to have been impacted by the relaxation of the divorce laws, and they warily postponed marriage and cohabited in unprecedented numbers. Even those from intact families were frequently 'latchkey kids', raised by MTV and socialised by their friends, as both parents worked (ibid.). 'Rootless and noncommittal', they were also 'open-minded samplers of an increasingly diverse cultural buffet', that is, a quintessentially postmodern generation (ibid.).

Much of that generation's soundtrack came out of Seattle, where the 1991 release of Nirvana's *Nevermind* album launched the city's punk-rock-inspired, 'slowed-down, bass-heavy, fuzzed guitar sound' (Harrison 2010:75) grunge movement on a national scale. The Riot Grrrls, female musicians with an explicitly feminist agenda, were a small but impactful part of the grunge scene. Bands such as Hole and Bikini Kill often appeared, 'with words such as BITCH, SLUT and RAPE written onto their bodies, partly to force the issue of sexual abuse into public arena but also as a way of […] making it difficult for men to enjoy the sight of women as an erotic spectacle' (ibid.:79). From the mid-nineties onwards, a less politicised wave of female rock singers was successful in the mainstream. Alanis Morrisette, Sheryl Crow and

Meredith Brooks were among these 'Angry Young Women' who combined rock music with raw, confessional lyrics (ibid.:81). Notably, as Harrison points out, these singers' 'asserting the contradictory nature of […] women's identity' in songs such as Brooks' 1997 'Bitch', was somewhat undermined by their easily marketable, traditional beauty and objectification in their music videos (ibid.:81).

In film, among the most important movies of the decade were *Schindler's List* (1993, director Steven Spielberg), regularly acknowledged as one of the greatest films to have ever been made (AFI 2007), and *Titani*c (1997, director James Cameron), which would remain the world's highest-grossing film for over twenty years (Box Office Mojo 2018). Both films related real-life events through established narrative conventions; however, in many other movies, the above-mentioned merging and subsequent formation of new discourses (Fairclough 2010:19), was evident. Postmodern playfulness was a defining characteristic of the 1994 hit, *Forrest Gump* (director Robert Zemeckis) (Scott 2001). It would moreover add a knowing detachment to big-screen portrayals of gratuitous, masculine violence in the oeuvre of one of the decade's most celebrated directors, *wunderkind* Quentin Tarantino. Among the many postmodern qualities of his 1994 film *Pulp Fiction* is, the 'comic excess of the reflexive hyperplotting [which] renders the horror humorous' (Kinder 2000:84). Tarantino was in the employ of the pseudo-independent (Harrison 2010:214) production company Miramax[64], which created many of the nineties' most noted films, including *Clerks* (1994, director Kevin Smith), *Scream* (1996, director Wes Craven), *Good Will Hunting* (1997, director Gus van Sant) and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998, director John Madden).

In woman-centred movies of the nineties, a variety of female experiences and feminist discourses would be featured, including the multi-layered relationship between a young female FBI agent and a monstrous

[64] Miramax was co-owned by Harvey Weinstein, whose decades-long molestation of actresses brought about the above-mentioned #MeToo movement (McGowan 2018).

shrink in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991, director Jonathan Demme), in a portrayal which effectively deconstructs the male gaze and the patriarchal power of psychiatry (Dubois 2001:297). The highly successful *Thelma and Louise* (1991, director Ridley Scott), remains one of the most explicitly humanist-feminist Hollywood films to date (Lipsitz 2011), and subverts copious patriarchal conventions until its final scene, in which the two protagonists commit suicide and 'escape the conflict; they do not overcome it' (Man 1993:48). Ridley Scott would go on to direct *G.I. Jane* (1997), portraying a female Navy seal. A narrative very similar to that of *Cybill*'s revengeful divorcee Maryann was related in the 1996 comedy *The First Wives Club* (director Hugh Wilson). Female directors were behind the camera of feminist-themed historical films *Orlando* (1992, director Sally Potter) and *The Piano* (1993, director Jane Campion); in the action genre, Kathryn Bigelow would be the first woman to receive the Saturn Award for Best Director for the science fiction thriller *Strange Days* (1995) (IMDB internet site).

On television, depictions of accomplished, professional women working side-by-side with their male colleagues became commonplace in long-running drama series such as *Law and Order* (NBC 1990-2010), *NYPD Blue* (ABC 1993-2005), *The X-Files* (Fox 1993-2002) and *ER* (NBC 1994-2009). High-schoolers of both sexes negotiated the trials of adolescence in the teen dramas *Beverley Hills 90210* (CBS 1990-2000) and *Dawson's Creek* (The WB 1998-2003). In the highly acclaimed *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB and UPN 1997-2003), a young woman fought supernatural evil, and in *Dr Quinn, Medicine Woman* (CBS 1993-1998), an unmarried middle-aged woman faced down the challenges of nineteenth-century frontier life. HBO led the way in cable-produced original drama series (Linder and Dalton 2016:186), with the male-dominated mobster drama *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and the female-led *Sex and the City* (1998-2994). The latter show, alongside *Ally McBeal* (Fox 1997-2002), heralded novel depictions of post-feminist heroines in their 'dramatisation of the tensions and contradictions experienced by many young working women' (Moseley and Read 2002:277,

Moore 2011). Analysing *Sex and the City*, Arthurs found that the 'fragmentation of the television market has allowed a sexually explicit and critical feminist discourse into television comedy, albeit within the parameters of a consumer culture and the limitations this imposes' (2003:95). The feminist discourses represented in these series differ from the humanist-feminist ones analysed in this thesis, and are outside its scope. These new representations of feminist thought (see Levy 2005, Walter 2010) emerged on the cusp of a new millennium, as the world-changing movements the baby boomers had launched in their youth had run their course. The sitcom genre too would reflect these developments.

Sitcom genre context

Shepherd herself commented on the synchronicity between the late-nineties introduction of these new types of female-led programming, and the termination of shows centred upon more seasoned and self-assured women (2000:7). The self-same phenomenon was observed by Nancy Hass in *The New York Times*:

> Was it only a season or two ago that the pace seemed to be set by women of a certain age - *Murphy Brown, Cybill, Roseanne, Grace Under Fire* - who raged with self-confidence and irony? Those shows weren't Shakespeare or Chekhov, but at least the characters knew who they were. […] [H]ere is the chillingly clear picture […] of the human female at the dawn of the new millennium. She is young, perennially confused, perpetually underemployed and adorably confounded by men. In her teens and early 20s, she is smart and spunky, but approaching 30 she is mysteriously stricken with an unnamed disease that renders her increasingly incompetent. Miraculously, her cuteness is left intact (1998).

Prior to this ideological shift, the early to mid-nineties had emerged as a rare historical juncture for shows starring women in their thirties and forties, and reflecting humanist-feminist thought to varying degrees. When Shepherd won the 1996 Golden Globe award for 'Best actress in a television series, musical or comedy', her fellow nominees were Fran Drescher (born 1957, *The Nanny*, CBS 1993-1999), Candice Bergen (born 1946, *Murphy Brown*, CBS 1988-1998), Helen Hunt (born 1963, *Mad About You*, NBC 1992-1999) and Ellen DeGeneres (born 1958, *Ellen*, ABC 1994-1998). As

mentioned by Hass in the above citation, *Roseanne* (ABC 1988-1997; 2018; Barr was born in 1952) and *Grace under Fire* (ABC 1993-1998; its star Brett Butler was born in 1958) share these qualities, as does *Caroline in the City* (NBC 1995-1999; its star Lea Thompson was born in 1961). Speculatively, one reason for these shows' ostensibly co-ordinated termination might be that by the late nineteen-nineties, their female baby boomer stars were considered too old for primetime television; this assessment corresponds to the findings of contemporaneous research of American televisual representations of age and sex (Harwood and Anderson 2002:88).

Moreover, as Feuer commented, 'the development of the sitcom would seem to be cyclical rather than linear, dependent on cultural and industrial changes' (1999:155). The boom in politicised sitcoms in the nineteen-seventies (see pp 113-119) exemplified how, at a particular moment in time, humanist feminism, as well as other social movements, could be 'good business' (Rabinovitz 1999:145), and the period between 1988 and 1998 emerges as another such opening in television history. These woman-centred shows were of course in 'relations of dialogue' (Fairclough 2010:19) with other sitcoms which were produced contemporaneously. By the mid-nineties, the sitcom genre soared, with shows such as *Friends* (NBC 1994-2004), *Frasier* (NBC 1993-2004), *Will and Grace* (NBC 1998-2006), *The King of Queens* (CBS 1998-2007), *That 70s Show* (Fox 1998-2006), *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (NBC 1990-1996), *Living Single* (Fox 1993-1998), *Everybody Loves Raymond* (CBS 1996-2005) and *Dharma and Greg* (ABC 1997-2002). Several of these sitcoms were highly, both popularly and critically, acclaimed. NBC's Thursday night line-up featured, from 8.30 pm, with some scheduling changes and additions over the years, *Friends, Frasier*, *ER*, *Seinfeld* (NBC 1989-1998) and *Will and Grace*. This 'must-see-TV' made history: 'NBC's dominance on Thursday reached an unprecedented level […] [and] shows such as *Friends*, *Seinfeld* and *ER* were so phenomenally powerful that viewers remained tuned in to NBC regardless of what aired between them' (Lotz 2007:269). This one weeknight would attract, 'a staggering seventy-five million viewers and generated more revenue for

NBC than the other six nights […] combined (Littlefield 2012:6). As Harrison pointed out, many of these sitcoms were urban-set, sophisticated and, 'featured the lives of aimless, childless, white middle-class professionals in flight from the normative family unit' (2010:123).

With this, they largely corresponded to the experience of Generation X, as outlined above. It is moreover perhaps not coincidental that the sitcom genre boomed at a moment in history characterised by the existential levity that results from the absence of grave, external, geo-political threats; as stated, in the nineties, even violence made for laughs, in, for example, Quentin Tarantino's films. Yet such postmodern and ironic dominant representations can both provide the space for, and effectively neutralise, overtly challenging discourses (Bloom 1987, Gellner 2002), such as those posed by feminist critiques. The subsequent critical discourse analyses of three *Cybill* episodes explore how the sitcom negotiated representations of humanist-feminism with a postmodern cultural context; they will do so by focussing on, 'relations of dialogue, contestation and dominance between discourses', 'recontextualisation of discourses' and 'operationalisation of discourses […] as strategies' (Fairclough 2010:19-20) respectively.

Critical discourse analysis 7: 'As the World Turns to Crap'

Along with many other *Cybill* episodes, the title of the first instalment of the sitcom to be analysed, 'As the World Turns to Crap' (season one, episode three, written by Elaine Aronson), is a play on the name of a well-known cultural text. In this instance, the text referenced is the long-running soap opera, *As the World Turns* (CBS 1956-2010). Depicting, in one storyline, Cybill Sheridan's experience within the soap opera genre, this episode is one of many to represent Hollywood TV production processes. However, in a second, eventually converging storyline, this early episode additionally situates *Cybill* vis-à-vis contemporaneously predominant political and cultural discourses. As such, in parallel with the first CDAs of *Maude* and *The Golden Girls*, the episode is well suited to examining the

extent to which, and how, the sitcom engages in 'relations of dialogue, contestation and dominance' (Fairclough 2010:19) with the ideological currents of its decade of production.

Episode content

The episode begins with a 'cold' (pre-credits) opening, in which Cybill Sheridan and another actress, Andrea, are in a car crash, which is revealed to be part of the taping of a soap opera scene. After filming, the show's writer-producer tells them that only one of their two characters will survive the crash, and he has yet to decide who this will be. Over the subsequent scenes, Cybill, worried about Andrea ingratiating herself with the producer to secure her character's continuation, asks him to dinner at her house. Meanwhile, her older, pregnant daughter Rachel's in-laws visit from Boston. As they are an aloof couple wary of Hollywood lifestyles, Cybill and her ex-husband Jeff are keen to persuade them that they too, despite their careers in show business, lead respectable lives. The visit is interrupted by first the producer, then Andrea, popping by and creating mayhem; Cybill eventually shoves Andrea over her house's balustrade and into a canyon. Following on, she discovers that the producer expects her to sleep with him to keep working on the soap; she shows him the door. Then an earthquake hits, confirming yet another of the Boston couple's worst fears about Los Angeles. In a tag scene, Cybill and Marianne watch an episode of the soap opera and discover that Andrea's character has died in the crash, while Cybill's part is being played by another actress.

Analysis

Cybill is not the first sitcom to be set behind the scenes of the entertainment industry. The nineteen-sixties' *The Dick van Dyke Show* (CBS 1961-1966) was based on its creator Carl Reiner's experiences as a television writer (Berman 2019). The stark contrast between the two shows' premises reflects the societal change that took place over the three decades that separate them: *The Dick van Dyke Show's* protagonist is a happily married husband and father, while Cybill Sheridan is twice-divorced, with two daughters from

different fathers. The Hollywood studio system, which *Cybill* critiques from a humanist-feminist perspective as well as perpetuates, was instrumental in bringing about this relaxation of social norms (Shapiro 2011), and these multi-layered, conceptual intricacies will be explored over the course this chapter. At this point, however, in order to trace the origins and emergence (Fairclough 2019:19) of the discourses featured in *Cybill*, it is worth noting two further sitcoms, both first broadcast in 1988, seven years prior to Shepherd's show: *Roseanne* and *Seinfeld*. As outlined previously, *Cybill* was made possible by *Roseanne* in multiple ways, including Barr's executive producer status, and the fact that she actively laughed at patriarchal power relations, as she had in her preceding stand-up career (Mellencamp 1996:335-350). Yet the degree to which the character Barr portrayed was based on her own life is disputed (Stransky 2008). In this respect, *Cybill* resembles *Seinfeld*'s depiction of its stand-up comedian star's experience more closely: 'what Jerry Seinfeld brought to [that] show was first and foremost himself' (Levine 2010), and Cybill Sheridan's story too, 'was closely drawn from [Shepherd's] own checkered career and private belly flops' (2000:244).

In 'As the World Turns to Crap', this is illustrated with Morgan Fairchild playing the character of Andrea, Cybill's rival for a role in a soap opera. To viewers familiar with Shepherd's life story, there is a knowing wink in the casting of this part. When she was chosen for *The Last Picture Show*, the actress previously considered for her character was called Patsy McClenny, 'until she started working in soap operas and reinvented herself as Morgan Fairchild' (Shepherd 2001:88). In the episode's final scene, Cybill's former character in the fictional soap opera is played by, in Maryann's words, 'Laura from *General Hospital*'. And indeed, actress Genie Francis, famous for portraying Laura in that show, awakes from a coma in Sheridan's stead. *Cybill* abounds with examples of such playful blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction, including: Peter Bogdanovich cameoing as a director who refuses to give the fictional Sheridan a job (season one, episode seven), Sheridan trying to convince her appalled sitcom daughter to name her unborn baby Clementine (season four, episode five), Shepherd's

real-life daughter, Clementine Ford, appearing in an episode which comments on nepotism on studio sets (season four, episode twenty-four), Sheridan constantly being mistaken for Candice Bergen (the star of rival sitcom *Murphy Brown*, originally broadcast in the timeslot prior to *Cybill*) and for other actresses. The 'ambiguity, confusion and irony' (Schier 2000:1) created by such self-reflexivity are hallmarks of the show's contemporaneous, postmodern cultural context, and furthermore correspond to Baudrillard's concept of 'the hyperreal' within postmodernity, that is, it

> is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real world is no longer real [….] in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real. […] Los Angeles […] [is] a town whose mystery is precisely that it is nothing more than a network of endless, unreal circulation […] (2006:393-4).

The city of Los Angeles, argues Baudrillard, epitomises the quintessentially counterfeit nature of the information age, that is, 'the simulacra of simulation, founded on information, the model, the cybernetic game – total operationality, hyperreality, [with the] aim of total control' (2010:267). Style and appearance over substance and reality similarly characterised the then-President, according to Miroff:

> Bill Clinton thrived […] because he is a postmodern character attuned to a post-modern moment in American cultural history. By postmodern character, I mean a political actor who lacks a stable identity associated with ideological and partisan values […]. […] No-one would take Bill Clinton seriously as an exemplar of American virtues. Indeed, most observers would have a difficulty getting a clear fix on Clinton's political convictions. Where Reagan was identified as a man of principles […], Clinton has been a shape-shifter on many major public policy issues during his presidency (2000: 106-111).

The values of the centre-left Clinton administration corresponded to a television and sitcom production context in which political issues were tackled 'obliquely and softly' (Shapiro 2011:144). Marta Kauffman, who had worked for Norman Lear before co-creating *Friends* in 1994, found that by the nineteen-nineties, 'a broader movement towards acceptance of liberal values [reflected a] "difference in (national) temperament'' (ibid.:145). Such change in the 'orders of discourses' (Fairclough 2010:63), both within the sitcom genre and in wider society, is related to the culture wars between traditional and postmodern thinking and values (as outlined on pages 146-147

and pages 205-206). The analysis of the following extract from the episode's dialogue will pinpoint the sitcom's positioning in relation to those debates. The section starts in the kitchen, where Cybill and Rachel are preparing food for a dinner with Rachel's in-laws, Ed and Betty.

1. Cybill: I understand, I just don't understand why you're ashamed of your
2. family.
3. Rachel: I'm not ashamed, just embarrassed.
4. Cybill: Hey, we're every bit as respectable as your Boston in-laws.
5. Rachel: I am sorry, that wasn't fair. I appreciate everything you're doing,
6. mom.
7. Rachel (on the phone to Kevin): I don't understand why you're not
8. making more of an effort to be here.
9. Zoey: Maybe he thinks his parents are as boring as we do. […]
10. Jeff: I want to propose a toast.
11. Maryann: Cheers! *(laughter)*
12. Cybill: Maryann, he hasn't made a toast yet.
13. Maryann: I trust him. *(laughter)*
14. Jeff: To Ed and Betty. Welcome to LA! And here's hoping you'll visit a
15. lot more often once Rachel has had the baby.
16. Ed: And we certainly hope if the kids do decide to move to Boston you
17. come and stay with us.
18. Betty: Visit us. *(laughter)*
19. Cybill: Excuse me?
20. Betty: Well, we don't have a lot of room.
21. Cybill: No, I mean the move to Boston part.
22. Ed: Didn't Rachel mention it?
23. Cybill: No, Rachel didn't.
24. Rachel: I didn't want to upset you guys, not until Kevin and I made our
25. final decision.
26. Cybill: What would you want to move to Boston for? I mean, not that it's
27. not a lovely city.
28. Ed: Cybill, you have to admit that LA is not the best place in the world to

29. raise a family.
30. Cybill: Oh come on, Ed. LA is a great place. I raised my family here.
31. Betty (sardonically): Yes, we know. *(laughter)*
32. Cybill: There's lots of great things about this city. There's …
33. Jeff: Disneyland! We have Disneyland.
34. Cybill: Yes. Where's our grandchild going to go for fun in Boston?
35. Betty: Harvard. *(laughter)* […] Cybill, I think what we all want for a
36. grandchild is an environment that promotes healthy values.
37. Ed: And we all know about Hollywood and show business.
38. Cybill: I think I see the problem here. Yes, I'm an actress, yes, Jeff's a
39. stuntman.
40. Jeff: But we're no different from anyone else.
41. Cybill: We work hard.
42. Jeff: We love our children. […]
43. Cybill: This sleazy image you have of people in showbusiness is just
44. something you see on TV and in the movies.
45. Producer (enters the room, jittery and smoking a cigarette): Sorry I'm late.
46. Damn Cocaine Anonymous meetings go on forever. *(laughter)*

Changing notions of respectability (line 4) are at the heart of this exchange. The preceding analyses have shown how in the seventies show *Maude*, in line with liberal-feminist thought, heterosexual marriage remained the inviolable foundation for a critique of gender roles (CDA one); ten years on, *The Golden Girls* consistently, and subversively, paid homage to that institution in word but not in deed (CDA nine). Like *Cybill*, both of these shows had featured divorced protagonists (Maude and Dorothy respectively), however, *Cybill* differs from both shows in its quintessential postmodern premise: that of a divorce-extended family (Stacey 1998:84). This varies from other post-divorce lifestyles such as singlehood or blended families, in that the nuclear family is no longer the ideal (Noble 1995:129) which is being pursued or emulated. A household such as Cybill Sheridan's, with daughters from two ex-husbands who regularly visit, could provide 'rampant opportunities […] for hostility, jealousy and competition between former

spouses, their subsequent mates and their assorted […] progeny' (Stacey 1998:84). Instead, in *Cybill*, the arrangement is revealed to hold 'gratifying possibilities […] to expand the social and material resources of all the members', as Stacey defined the divorce-extended family (ibid.:84-85). The assumption that this postmodern household is a happy one, and benefitting its members as much as a traditional nuclear family would, remains unspoken, 'taken-for-granted "background knowledge"' (Fairclough 2010:31) throughout *Cybill*'s run. Yet this accordingly 'hegemonic or dominant' discourse (ibid.:19) is contested in the segment above. It is worth noting that this 'strategic struggle' (ibid.:19), in which the traditional ideologies underlying the nuclear family emerge as 'marginalised' (ibid.:19), takes place in an early episode, and thus serves to introduce and establish the show's principal ideological positioning. As this analysis will show, family structure is only one, if symbolic, site of this ideological struggle, or one battle in contemporaneously waged culture wars, between modern and postmodern belief systems.

The episode signals a first critique of the idealised nuclear family through an absence: Kevin is held up at work, leaving Rachel unsupported when trying to mediate between their respective relatives, and thus falling short of meeting customary obligations in his social role as a husband. The sheer distance between the two families is evoked by the fact his parents hail from Boston, a location diametrically opposed to Los Angeles, both geographically and culturally. The New England city is of course steeped in American history, and as near-synonymous with Harvard University as Los Angeles is with the movie industry. Ed and Betty's disapproval of Cybill's lifestyle is both subtle and unmistakeable (lines 18, 20, 28-29, 31, 35-37), and epitomised in Betty's plea for her grandchild to grow up in 'an environment that promotes healthy values' (line 36), a phrasing loaded with political overtones. It recalls the linguistic register of the Moral Majority, the nineteen-eighties New Right, anti-feminist movement (see pp 163-164), as encapsulated in President Reagan 1986 'Radio Address to the Nation on Family Values':

> [T]he philosopher-historians Will and Ariel Durant called the family "the nucleus of civilization." They understood that all those aspects of civilized life that we most deeply cherish—freedom, the rule of law, economic prosperity and opportunity—that all these depend upon the strength and integrity of the family. If you think about it, you'll see that it's in the family that we must all learn the fundamental lesson of life—right and wrong, respect for others, self-discipline […] (Reagan 1986).

'Healthy', as used by Bostonian Betty, draws on such establishment, socially conservative discourses on societal mores. Cybill is aware that her lifestyle does not measure up to this delineation (lines 1, 38-39), but, with Jeff, counters it by reframing the term, as connoting hard work and love for one's children (lines 41-42). This redefining illustrates Fairclough's assertion that it 'is inherent to the notion of discourse […] that language is a material form of ideology, and language is invested by ideology. […] [D]iscourse is formed by structures, but also contributes to […] reproducing and transforming them' (2010:59). Jeff and Cybill's usage of 'healthy values' evokes, 'the famous answer by Sigmund Freud about what a normal adult should be able to do well: […] to love and to work' (Cicchetti and Cohen 2006:702). Compared to the traditionalists' hard-earned, 'fundamental lesson of life' (Reagan 1986), this is a reduced, simplified interpretation of parenting, albeit one that is congruent with the values and discourses of the sixties, the decade in which the hippy slogan 'make love not war' served as a panacea. With this discursive repositioning, the culture wars of the eighties and nineties are playing out in Cybill Sheridan's living room. From a conservative perspective, 'the cultural battle had been lost in the sixties' (Murray 2005:672). This defeat led to the 'easy giving-up of cherished principles [and] the genuflecting […] [to] infantilism' (ibid.:673). The sitcom's own positioning within this discursive struggle is established early on in the above extract: when Zoey, claiming to speak for all members of her family, dismisses, childishly perhaps, Ed and Betty as 'boring' (line 9), and when Rachel apologises to her mother (lines 5-6) after admitting that she feels embarrassed by her family. Both of Cybill Sheridan's sitcom daughters thus affirm her appraisal, that this postmodern family is, as she puts it, 'every bit as respectable as [Rachel's] Boston in-laws' (line 4).

However, additional layers of postmodern ambiguity are added to this depiction. One of these is invoked by the prospect that Rachel might yet decide to move her family to Boston, and thus switch allegiances in the culture wars (lines 24-25). Speculatively, the sitcom's disparaging stance in relation to Rachel's life choices might be encoded in the character's name: in Hebrew, Rachel means 'ewe', or the 'innocence of a lamb' (thenamemeaning internet site). This aligns with, as outlined earlier, downtrodden, good-natured Rachel being portrayed as lacking her sister's Zoey's (from the Greek, meaning 'life' (nameberry internet site)) incisive sarcasm and intellect. Whereas Ira, Zoey's intellectual father, is a lawyer and writer, Rachel's father Jeff is an unsophisticated, 'sweetly Neanderthal' (Shepherd 2001:245), stuntman; she might be more susceptible to being conned into a traditional lifestyle. A further element of pastiche and intertextuality stems from the fact that viewers of the episode's first, 1995, broadcast are likely to have recognised Betty: the character was played by Christina Pickles, the actress by then known for portraying Ross and Monica Geller's mother in *Friends*. In that show,

> the central social transformation […] was replacement of family with friends. […] Of course, this is what *liberals* do. And they used to restrict this sort of thing to Greenwich Village, where they were aware that they were leading a rebellious lifestyle. They knew that to shock the bourgeois, they couldn't *be* bourgeois. But for [*Friends* creator] Kauffman and company, Greenwich Village was everyone's village (Shapiro 2011:145, emphases in the original).

Thus, one of the two (out of six in total) characters voicing a conservative discourse in this scene, is likely to be somewhat undercut by her association with a hugely successful, liberal, contemporaneous show. Yet the above segment's greatest apparent irony is with its final line, and last laugh (line 46), as the sudden entrance of the sordid producer wholly undermines Cybill's prior reassuring the Boston couple that, 'this sleazy image you have of people in showbusiness is just something you see on TV […]' (lines 43-43). With self-reflexively mischievous lines such as this,[65] the sitcom comes

[65] Another example, facilitated by *Cybill*'s 'actress playing an actress' set-up, is the following line, from the seventh episode of the fourth season: 'Let's just hope that millions of people across America have such pathetic lives they watch me every week'.

close to breaking the 'fourth wall'. Such knowing playfulness, originally directed at a nineteen-nineties, postmodernism-literate and complicit audience (see Henry (2003), Morreale (2003)), of course contributes much of the sitcom's humour.

The producer proceeds to 'shock the bourgeois' (Shapiro 2011:125) Tom and Betty: 'So I'm in the shower this morning, trying to come up with an idea, when I drop the soap. And it hits me: why not do an all-gay soap opera. It's brilliant. Think of it: beautiful men, beautiful women, great taste in clothes. Tell me the truth: you'd watch it in Boston, wouldn't you? *Gays of our Lives*.' (*laughter*). The depiction of the figure of the producer is highly ambivalent: while he unequivocally embodies the dark side of Hollywood, the laugh track chuckles with him at the appalled Bostonians. Of course, their scepticism about the morality of Los Angeles was validated by his very appearance. In this latter instance (line 46), the joke was ostensibly on Cybill; in both situations, the humour arose out of incongruity and surprise (Berger 1998:3, Morreall 1987:6), at his sudden entrance and outrageous utterances respectively. However, Mills' (2009) cue theory makes possible an additional understanding, of how such laughing with an unsympathetic character reveals the sitcom's 'ideological-discursive formations' (IDFs) (Fairclough 2010:30). Fairclough defines these as, 'a sort of "speech community" with its own discourse norms but also, embedded within and symbolised by the latter, its own "ideological norms". […] A characteristic of a dominant IDF is the capacity to "naturalise" ideologies, i.e., to win acceptance for them as non-ideological "common sense"' (ibid.:30). According to Mills' cue theory of sitcom humour, 'an obvious, unambiguous, deliberately noticeable metacue has to be supplied with every moment that is intended as humour' (2009:95). In the case of the producer's successful jesting, the metacue prompting the audience is the laugh track. The IDF which consequently is reinforced as dominant, naturalised and common-sensical is one which 'is not in principle governed by pre-established rules', as Lyotard (2010:279) delineated a postmodern text (see page 226).

This postmodern lack of rules contradicts the fact that successful incongruity-based joking relies on an audience sharing an '[understanding of] the way things are "meant to be"' (Mills 2009:83). Similarly, Buckley points out that laughter more generally, 'assumes a code of comic virtue from which the butt has deviated' (2008:41). By laughing at Ed and Betty, *Cybill*'s viewers are drawn into a consensus which mocks conventional social rules and virtues, such as 'integrity and honesty', as cautioned against by Hutcheson (1987:36). The show's laughter here instead 'signals [a] sense of superiority' (Buckley 2008:15) over traditional mores and lifestyles; the resultant Hobbesian 'sudden glory' (Hobbes 1987:19) further degrades the, in Zoey's words, 'boring' couple. The sitcom steers its audience towards this potentially ethically abstruse positioning not merely through its laugh track. Subsequent to the producer's detailing his plans for a gay soap opera, the following exchange takes place between Rachel and Cybill in the kitchen:

1. Rachel: Mother, he's just awful, how could you invite him?
2. Cybill: Rachel, I'm trying to save my job.
3. Rachel: Oh my God. You're not planning on … (points to producer)
4. Cybill: No, no. Eurgh. No! *(laughter)* Honey, this is no different than
5. when Kevin has the dean of the university over for dinner and you
6. entertain.
7. Rachel: But the dean doesn't discuss sadomasochism over cocktails.
8. Cybill: I don't know about you, but I learned a lot. *(laughter)*

The above extract serves to clarify the somewhat unorthodox 'way things are "meant to be"' (Mills 2009:83) within *Cybill's* sitcom universe. Sheridan asserts that dealing with the seedy underbelly of Hollywood is part of her occupation's reality (lines 2, 4-6), and with this legitimises its ideological-discursive integration. As noted above, in *Friends*, viewers were positioned as single, bohemian New Yorkers (Shapiro 2011:145). In *Cybill*, audiences are situated in a context that is even less conventional than *Friends'* Greenwich Village, and thus bound to 'shock the bourgeois' (ibid.:145) even more: the lived experience of a Los Angeles actress. Cybill Sheridan's

diegetic sanctioning of the less seemly aspects of the entertainment industry is, notably, only partial: she is prepared to laugh off vulgar conversation (line 8), but not to sleep with the producer (line 4). In these lines of dialogue, the sitcom's 'orders of discourses' (Fairclough 2010:27) are demarcated and, through humour, a dominant IDF is established: *Cybill* laughs both at the producer, and at those offended by him; cued by the laugh track, so do its viewers, primed to join a 'complicity with other laughers, real or imaginary' (Bergson 1987:119). Canned laughter moreover serves to rank the episode's two further discourses, Kevin's parents' social conservatism and the producer's decadence. As shown in the above, we laugh with him, at them, thereby marginalising the previous decade's dominant IDF.

The sitcom's 'dominant or hegemonic' (Fairclough 2010:20) discourse, as articulated by its protagonist, thus emerges as a mediatory position between two ideological extremes. A similar discursive strategy was utilised in the nineteen-seventies sitcom *Maude*, in which the character of Maude's husband Walter frequently reconciled patriarchal and humanist belief systems (see CDAs one and three). In that show, the conflicting discourses were political in nature; in *Cybill*, they are instead related to moral and cultural norms, as represented by the producer's transgressiveness and Kevin's parents' probity.[66] This change in discursive priorities is reflective of the fact over the course of two decades, great progress had been made towards the goals of the nineteen-seventies activist movements (Ehrman 2005:175). Moreover, the resultant, widespread public acceptance of more relaxed social mores led to modifications in television censorship practices, for in order to 'compete for the viewing audience […] the broadcast networks [had] loosened restrictions on programming content, enabling them to include partial nudity, somewhat more graphic violence and the use of coarse

[66] Cybill Sheridan's negotiating the values of the Boston couple and of the producer furthermore appears to evoke Freud's tripartite model of the human psyche, according to which, 'the id is the primitive and instinctual part of the mind that contains sexual and aggressive drives and hidden memories, the super-ego operates as a moral conscience, and the ego is the realistic part that mediates between the desires of the id and the super-ego' (McLeod 2019).

language' (Worringham and Buxton, n.d.). From the eighties onwards, '"Lighten up!" and "Family Values" [had been] the conflicting [cultural] mottos' (Brownmiller 1999:313); simultaneously, '"the postmodern turn" with its ironic focus on parody, ambiguity and absurdity' (Collinson 2002:270) manifested itself. This led to a relativism which was 'hostile to the idea of unique, exclusive […] truth' (Gellner 2002:24). Both postmodernism and humour serve to 'explore, often in playful ways […], the blurred boundaries between what is real and artificial' (Collinson 2002:270). This postmodern levity characterises this early *Cybill* episode, through, for example, references to its star's real life, including her experiences of working in the movie industry. These experiences include unsavory characters which, as represented by the producer, are mildly mocked, but not to same extent as social conservatism, as personified by the Boston couple. This postmodern, moral ambiguity makes for a context in which humorous incongruity is potentially severed from the prevailing social consensus; however, as argued in the analysis of the second segment, the episode legitimises its humorous tone by emphasising its actress protagonist's need to succeed within the entertainment business.

Moreover, Cybill Sheridan's moral bargaining has clear limits. When the producer makes clear that he expects her to sleep to with him, she handles the situation nonchalantly, and self-assuredly ousts him from her house. She responds to his parting words, 'You're throwing me out? Interesting career move', with an animated, 'Barry, if you want the best actress, give me a call. If you don't, don't. Either way, I'll not compromise my integrity!', followed by, *sotto voce*, 'But, if your gay soap opera goes, I'd make a terrific lesbian'.[67] The producer answers, 'Oh, I get it', and thumps her on the shoulder. Linder and Dalton found that in this scene, '[t]his punchline gets her out of a jam […]—getting a laugh while making (and mitigating) a point. Women are expected to sleep with the boss to get or keep a job' (2016:203). Yet in the

[67] Shepherd would eventually star, alongside her daughter Clementine Ford, in *The L Word* (Showtime 2004-2009), a drama series focussed on the LGBT community.

context of this analysis, the scene garners additional layers of meaning through the 2017 revelations about the systemic sexual molestation of actresses in Hollywood, which was particularly prevalent during the nineteen-nineties (McGowan 2018, Farrow 2019, Weisensee Egan 2019). While the subject matter is covered in a cursory manner, *Cybill* nonetheless broke the silence on the topic twenty-two years before it made mainstream media headlines. These eventual revelations might in part have been due to the change in cultural sensibilities over the intervening decades: the 'casting couch' had not only been in existence since the very earliest Hollywood productions, but in fact predated the movie industry, as Broadway producers used to seek sexual favours from aspiring actresses during the early decades of the twentieth century (Zimmer 2017). This suggests that widespread, resigned acceptance and wilful blindness on this matter predominated throughout Hollywood history. It remains to *Cybill*'s credit that the sitcom called out the practice as one of many sexist industry customs, and thus as a 'social wrong' (Fairclough 2010:11), in an unreceptive societal context.[68]

The sitcom's integration of the above-discussed ambiguous, sordid-Hollywood-reality discourse is thus vindicated, and can be recontextualised in the tradition of humanist-feminist humorous discourses. These discourses and ensuing campaigns on issues related to women's sexual self-determination would frequently be in unlikely alliances with social conservatism (Brownmiller 1999:313). Such ideological complexities were, within humanist-feminist thought, resolved through the frank expressing and supportive valuing of women's lived experiences, as related by Roseanne Barr: 'I found a stage where I began to tell the truth about my life – […] very quickly, the world began to blow apart' (1990:202). As the subsequent CDA will detail, in a postmodern sitcom and societal context, in which arguably,

[68] As related on page 211, Shepherd herself had been expected to exchange sexual favours to ensure the continuation of her show. In a, at the time of writing, recent development, a second #MeToo occurrence related to *Cybill* has been revealed: in June 2020, actor Danny Masterson, who portrayed Maryann's son, was charged with three counts of rape. The offences are alleged to have occurred between 2001 and 2003 (Gonzales 2020), that is, after the production of *Cybill* had concluded.

‘comic irony has no target and descends into nihilism, attacking everything left standing with equal fervor’ (Shapiro 2011:87), Cybill Shepherd nevertheless would utilise her eponymous sitcom vehicle to relate her humanist-feminist truth.

Critical discourse analysis 8: ‘Romancing the Crone’

By the time *Cybill* was produced, Shepherd had been a feminist for twenty-five years. In her autobiography, she relates how, during the filming of *The Last Picture Show*, she ‘had so much time on [my] hands that I read voraciously Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. These three feminist books revolutionised my thinking […]. I was born again a radical feminist’ (2001:91). This CDA of the eighteenth episode of *Cybill*’s second season, ‘Romancing the Crone’[69] (written by Bruce Eric Kaplan and Maria A. Brown) will analyse the representations of humanist-feminist value systems within the sitcom. Its focus will be upon the ‘recontextualization’ (Fairclough 2010:20) of humanist-feminist discourses through humour, and upon their ‘operationalisation’ (ibid.:20) in the diegetic context of Hollywood production processes.

Episode Summary

The episode starts with Cybill Sheridan on a movie set, portraying a firefighter in a burning building who rescues an elderly woman. With Sheridan’s support, Loretta, the Golden Age of Hollywood star portraying the woman, persuades the director that she can perform her own stunt; she then leaps out of the window and injures herself. Feeling guilty, Sheridan invites her to convalesce at her house. On Loretta’s birthday, Cybill takes her and three of her friends to a restaurant; the four elderly women party so hard that Cybill evicts Loretta from her house. Meanwhile, Zoey finds out that Kevin has been flirting in online chatrooms and, following Loretta’s advice,

[69] Like the previously analysed instalment, this episode’s title references a popular text, in this case, the movie *Romancing the Stone* (Zemeckis 1984). There does not seem to be any connection in content between the film and the episode.

convinces him to confess to Rachel. Loretta surprises Cybill and Maryann by showing up with a stolen cement truck, and taking them to Maryann's unfaithful ex-husband's house to pave over his swimming pool. In the tag scene, Rachel and Kevin message one another in an internet chatroom.

Analysis

Cybill introduces Loretta to Zoey by telling her daughter: 'This is a rare opportunity. Loretta is a crone'. Zoey explains to a confused friend of hers: 'Mom means crone as a compliment. A crone is an older woman, bla bla bla. Experienced, yadee yada. Great source of wisdom, something something. And by then I'm floating above the room, looking down on mom's head'. These few lines of dialogue reveal a number of underlying, unspoken assumptions (see Fairclough 2010:27) which are central to this analysis. The first, and most evident, of these is the episode's demarcation of two predominant discourses: Cybill Sheridan's earnest humanist feminism is to be challenged by Zoe's contemporaneous, postmodern, detached and all-knowing, cynicism. The second instance of 'taken-for-granted "background knowledge"' (ibid.:31) is the expectation that *Cybill*'s viewers, like Zoey, are at this stage of the sitcom's run familiar with the protagonist's feminist beliefs. The show had introduced the idea of 'a reverence for three symbolic states of a woman life: maiden, mother, and crone' (Shepherd 2001:6) in its pilot episode. The above-cited lines' third 'implicit proposition' (Fairclough 2010:27) follows from the second; it is the understanding that Cybill Sheridan is committed to feminism to such an extent that she is deeply familiar with, and integrates into her everyday life, even the more obscure facets of humanist-feminist theory. In this case, the tripartite categorisation of women's lifespan is a key tenet of a Goddess-centred, pagan belief system, in which 'strands of myths weave and interweave […]. Originally, it seems there was one Great Mother Goddess […]. Many mythologies have a creatix myth that seems to have gradually diversified into many [goddesses]' (Moorey 2000:7). Following de Beauvoir's (1972, first published in 1949) ground-breaking analysis of the misogynistic structures of the Catholic Church,

prominent radical feminist Mary Daly (1986 and 1990; both books were originally published in the nineteen-seventies) critiqued Christian and other religious doctrines. The Christian trinity, she maintains, is one of many modifications of earlier, Goddess-centred spiritual practices and traditions which preserve traces of women's identity prior to the patriarchal 'colonisation' (1996:1) of their minds and lives. Sheridan practices related rituals, always in exclusively female company, such as drumming (season three, episode twelve), meditation (season two, episode one) and moon-howling sessions (season three, episode twelve), as well as past life regression therapy (season four, episode one).

The episode's discursive engagement with such advanced feminist theorising cannot be fully understood in isolation (Fairclough 2010:5). 'Romancing the Crone' is only one instalment of a show that has,

> similarities with other sitcoms about strong women, but one significant difference sets it apart: the overtness of its political content. […] It is a prime example of a program that satisfies the conventional criteria of the sitcom format as it manages to reflect […] a sophisticated […] discourse of liberal feminism (Linder and Dalton 2016: 200-201).

Linder and Dalton (ibid.:202-213) substantiate this last statement with reference to the many manifestations of liberal-feminist thought in the show. However, the sitcom's repeated depiction of the above-mentioned goddess-centred spirituality is clearly rooted in radical feminism; as will be advanced throughout the course of this CDA, this is but one of several representations of radical-feminist discourses in *Cybill*. Linder and Dalton acknowledge both that there exists 'overlap' (ibid:200) between the different branches of feminist thought, and the extent to which liberal and radical feminism, in their ultimate consequences, diverge (ibid.:200). They find that, as a liberal feminist, 'Cybill Sheridan would rather become part of the existing infrastructure than demolish the dominant system' (ibid.:200). This CDA will detail how 'Romancing the Crone' instead illustrates how the sitcom depicts its protagonist as committed to both radical and liberal feminist values. The episode furthermore exemplifies how the show resolves the apparent contradictions, between the above-cited liberal feminists' becoming part of, and radical feminists' demolishing of, existing structures (ibid.:200). Prior to

specifying how this is accomplished, the following will contextualise the episode ‘in relation with other elements’ (Fairclough 2010:5), that is, with reference to the series’ wider feminist themes and discourses.

Cybill Sheridan consistently articulates liberal-feminist thought, aimed to ensure women’s equality and success within capitalist structures. It thus continues a tradition, instigated by *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, of female-led sitcoms which incorporate elements of this discourse (Dow 1996:28). The liberal-feminist premise, that participation in the public sphere through paid employment and the resulting financial independence are fundamental to women’s autonomy, persistently reverberates in *Cybill*. The central character’s many undignified acting jobs are explained as providing vital income, and include her depicting murder victims (season one, episode one; season one, episode seven, among others), a talking vegetable in an commercial for a soup that ‘clears your colon’ (season two, episode sixteen), among numerous similar advertisements (including season two, episode three; season two, episode ten, season two, episode twenty-three). Moreover, Sheridan frequently challenges the sexist practices she encounters in the course of employment. For example, on the set of a coarse advertisement for alcohol, she contends: ‘That implies that this beer makes women sexually available’ (series two, episode one; see also season three, episodes seven, eight and nine). However, when confronted with her directors’ inevitable ‘take it or leave it’ response, financial pragmatism always prevails over liberal-feminist principle (see, for example, season one, episode two; season two, episode one; season three, episode seven). Another integral theme in the show is the idea that ‘if men can do this, so can we’, reflecting the liberal-feminist conception of socially constructed formations of masculinity and femininity (Oakley 2016). This is exemplified by, for example, scenes such as Zoey planning to move into an unsafe neighbourhood and Cybill only relenting once Ira states that this would be acceptable for a male (season three, episode two); Cybill taking a younger lover (‘when a woman does it, everybody’s threatened’ (season three, episode fourteen)), and her

traditionally masculine attitude to casual sex ('with any luck, I'm gonna nail the boom operator' (season two, episode twenty-four)).

Radical-feminist discourses differ from liberal feminism in their emphasis on women's essential, biological femaleness (see pp 17-19). They are discernible within *Cybill* through, for example, 'a fairly straightforward bit of naming' (Gray 1994:152) of bodily processes, a strategy which had been utilised by feminist stand-up comedians since the eighties (see page 51). Two episodes include detailed accounts of peri-menopausal symptoms and their possible treatments (season two, episode twenty-one and season four, episode four). They are quasi-educational in their content (see Charlesworth 2005), in their depiction of, for example, Cybill Sheridan advocating herbal over hormonal remedies (season two, episode twenty-one). The season three episode, 'Valentine's Day' (episode sixteen) incorporates the radical feminist conjecture that the symbol of the love heart is, in fact, modelled not on the corresponding body organ but on female genitalia (see Steinem in Ensler, 1998:xviii). As related by Shepherd, the episode was permitted to air due to the banned word 'vagina' being replaced by 'labia' (2001:261). These representations acquire an additional political dimension through their production context. According to Shepherd, 'it was always interesting to decipher the peculiar logic of Standards and Practices at CBS. […] We were […] forbidden to say uterus, cervix, ovaries, menstruation, period or flow' (2001:261). Radical feminists argued that the ignorance which results from such institutionalised negating of women's anatomy has grave consequences: 'too many women die of illnesses in organs they have virtually ignored all their lives' (Greer 1991:53). This is echoed by Shepherd:

> Knowing the proper names for body parts, as well as slang names, is one way for women to protect themselves from sexual abuse, as well as opening themselves up for sexual pleasure. […] Like menopause, the issue of a woman's identity in regard to her genitals was still taboo in the media at the time we were dealing with it and reaching a huge prime-time audience (2001:262).

The issues of women's ageing, and of 'the lack of worthwhile roles for women [Shepherd's] age' (Charlesworth 2005:250), are similarly integral to the show's premise. The fictional Cybill regularly makes statements such

as: ‘In Europe they appreciate an empowered woman past the age of forty-five […], in this town, if you’re a woman and you get old, you’re in trouble. Of course, me? I’m not afraid to say I’m forty-eight years old and proud of it!’ (season four, episode twenty-four). These utterances draw upon both liberal and radical-feminist discourses. They highlight the social wrong of the culminative impact of ageism and sexism and thus evoke fundamental principles of equality. In so doing, they ‘promote liberal feminism by […] modelling ways for [women] to become part of the dominant system’ (Linder and Dalton 2016:207). Yet simultaneously, this articulating of women’s experience of the ageing process draws upon radical-feminist discourses, as originated by, among others, Germaine Greer, who argued that for all women, ‘there are abusive stereotypes’ (1991:302), and that as a woman ‘gets older the imagery becomes more repellent […] and male mockery dates from the moment in which she […] begins to run her household’ (ibid.:302-303).

In ‘Romancing the Crone’, these misogynistic and ageist discourses are contested and marginalised (Fairclough 2010:19). Older women are instead celebrated as crones, as defined by Daly: ‘Crones are the long-lasting ones. They are the survivors of the perpetual witchcraze of patriarchy […]. In living/ writing, feminists are recording and creating the history of Crones’ (1990:16). The influence of Daly and other radical feminist theorists is palpable in the episode, as the following segment illustrates:

1. Cybill: The woman is an artist and a survivor. She has an indomitable
2. spirit. Think of her as a guide to the next phase of our lives.
3. Maryann: You mean the phase where we don’t care what we look like?
4. I’m skipping that one. *(Laughter)*
5. Cybill: Please tell you’re not going to be one of those women who has so
6. many facelifts that she can’t stop looking surprised. *(Laughter)*
7. Maryann: I suppose a couple of nips and tucks are beneath you and the
8. great Loretta?
9. Cybill: Maryann, a woman’s skin is supposed to age. Like a favourite pair
10. of jeans.

11. Maryann: All I'm saying is put a patch on it now and then because there
12. are some things that nobody wants to look at. *(Laughter)*
13. Cybill: Why are we friends again? *(Laughter)*

Cybill here echoes Daly both verbatim, through the use of the term 'survivor' (line 1), and more generally, by advocating for the revering of female elders (line 2), and for the embracing of the natural ageing process (lines 5-6, 9-10). The two women's exchange illustrates how, 'different discourses are brought into dialogue and contestation within processes of strategic struggle' (Fairclough 2010:19) when Cybill is challenged by, and overrides (line 13) Maryann's patriarchal and individualistic values (lines 7-8, 11-12). Oscar-winning actress Shirley Knight, who plays Loretta, was aged sixty when the episode first aired in 1996. She does not appear to have undergone plastic surgery, and moreover embodies a plausible 'guide to the next phase of our lives' (line 2) due to her younger self greatly resembling Cybill Shepherd. Yet this episode's discursive engagement with radical-feminist ideas is not limited to its dialogue. Instead, in a postmodern twist which illustrates how, 'discourse is shaped by structures but also contributes to […] reshaping them' (Fairclough 2010:59), these principles are moreover put into practice on an extra-diegetic level, in the behind-the-scenes selection of the actresses portraying Loretta's carousing female friends. They are two former sitcom stars and one legendary comedian, all cameoing as themselves: Alice Ghostley (who was aged 73 in 1996 and had starred in *Bewitched* (ABC 1964-1972) and *Designing Women* (CBS 1986-1993), Isabel Sanford (aged 79 in 1996 and a lead character in *The Jeffersons* (CBS 1975-1985), and the ground-breaking Phyllis Diller (aged 79 in 1996). Both Cybill Sheridan and the real-life actress portraying her continue the lineage of those three funny women, and of Shirley Knight, who, like Cybill Shepherd, had embodied the Hollywood beauty ideal. Along with its protagonist, *Cybill*, the sitcom, is in this instance 'invested by [radical-feminist, N.K.] ideology' (Fairclough 2010:59) in its paying homage to these ageing stars by, 'recording and creating the history of Crones' (Daly 1990:16).

Contrary to dominant discourses on old age (see page197), the four elderly revellers are shown to have such outrageous fun in *Cybill*'s diegetic universe that, in Maryann's words, 'it's like Fellini directed an episode of *The Golden Girls*'. Furthermore, Sheridan's declaring early on in the episode that, 'we could all learn something from Loretta. Every word out of her mouth is worth its weight in gold', is borne out over the course of the narrative. Loretta counsels Zoey to talk to Kevin, rather than Rachel, when she discovers his extra-marital, online flirting. Writer Ira, who is attempting to create a fictional binman character, is advised to work in that occupation for the sake of his art. Both Zoey and Ira initially dismiss Loretta's suggestions, then put them into practice nonetheless, and eventually acknowledge that she was right. Notably, however, Cybill Sheridan's above-cited 'worth its weight in gold' line is immediately followed by Loretta enquiring, 'Do you have any of the puffy Cheetos?'. Such simultaneous endorsing and humorous undermining of humanist-feminist discourses reflects Shepherd's strategy for representing her feminist convictions in the sitcom: 'some people on the show resented that we explored these [feminist] themes, protesting what they considered a soapbox' (2001:254). This was resolved through humour: 'it was a way to poke fun at my own beliefs. […] If the audience laughs, it's not a soapbox' (ibid.:254). The show's humorous cues (Mills 2009:93) and discourses were thus deliberately utilised to make its potentially contentious, political content more palatable. Fairclough outlined that, 'if content is to enter the realm of practice, it must do so in formal clothing' (2010:60), and the following paragraphs will explore the degree to which, despite or because of this compromising, *Cybill* utilised the sitcom format to 'smuggle' (Wells 2006:181) humanist-feminist values.

Cybill Sheridan 'makes jokes, or laughs herself', and thus meets one of the criteria identified by Rowe (1995:31) as defining the 'unruly woman'. Her humour can be characterised as feminist, for the self-assured Sheridan jokes from a position in which she 'knows herself to be right' (Walker 1988:157) (see, for example lines 5-6 in the extract above). Furthermore, she frequently jests in a manner that is empowering to women (Merrill 1988:279),

with her jokes being aimed at a predominantly female audience (ibid.:279), as can be gleaned from lines 5-6 and 13 in the extract. Additional examples include Cybill laughing at men's impotence (season one, episode one), at motherhood's occasionally scant rewards (season four, episode three) generally and, echoing *Roseanne* (see Mellencamp 1996:341), her children specifically (season four, episode twenty-two). In 'Romancing the Crone', distinctly liberal-feminist thought, as outlined above, is conveyed humorously in the following exchange:

1. Director: Take a break, Miss Bennett, we're bringing in your stunt
2. double.
3. Loretta: Oh listen junior, I do my own stunts.
4. Director: Not on this movie, not at your age.
5. Cybill: Wait a minute. What if someone said to you, you're too
6. young to direct this movie?
7. Director: I've been there. I didn't get my break till I was twenty-two. (*laughter*)
8. Cybill: And you're going to discriminate against her because of her
9. age? After all you've been through? (*laughter*)

In this instance, the boyish director is persuaded by Sheridan, who is belatedly proven wrong when Loretta injures herself. As mentioned earlier, similar jocular battles for women's equality frequently result in her instantly conceding her point when faced with her directors' power to fire her (see for example, series two, episode one). On such occasions, Sheridan's and the show's 'use of humor […] effectively diminishes any radical threat to the dominant culture' […]. In many cases, the punchline seems to return things to the status quo […]' (Linder and Dalton 2016:204-6). This was observable in the preceding CDA, when Sheridan's amusing pretence at being a lesbian enabled her to diplomatically ward off the producer's advances. In these workplace-related confrontations, the show's humorous and liberal-feminist discourses are thus in an ambivalent relationship, with the former having the potential to neuter the latter. This polysemy could be analysed as characteristic of the then-predominant, postmodern culture. However,

Fairclough points out that, the 'interests of the dominant class at the level of the social formation require the maintenance in dominance in each social institution […]. But this is never a given – it […] is constantly at risk through a shift in relations of power' (2010:43). The Enlightenment meta-narrative of humanist feminism remained a threat to patriarchal values in the postmodern nineties. The structural manifestation of these patriarchal values in *Cybill*, the Hollywood establishment, is the very institution that brought the sitcom into existence; just like Cybill Sheridan needs to appease her directors, so *Cybill*, the sitcom, needs to appease Los Angeles decision makers.

This complex ideological bargaining is furthermore evident in Cybill Shepherd's traditionally beautiful appearance. Her looks enabled her to access, and eventually to humorously critique, Hollywood production processes. Yet that critique is hegemonically contained by the character's complicity with the 'existing orders of discourse' (Fairclough 2010:131): in contrast to *Maude*'s and *The Golden Girls*' protagonists, in *Cybill*, Shepherd still largely embodies the very beauty standards her character challenges through humanist-feminist discourses (see, for example, season three, episode twenty-one). There are, at least, two viable readings of *Cybill*'s depiction of a highly attractive female joker. The first is that, as in *Murphy Brown*, the protagonist's status as an active joker, who is encroaching upon traditionally male terrain (see Barrecca 1991:5), is contained by her simultaneously remaining a traditionally feminine object for the male gaze (Mulvey 1975). Her beauty thus emerges as a hegemonic concession in the 'negotiation of power relations […] and ideological struggle' (Fairclough 2010:129), with, in this case, Hollywood decision makers. However, an alternative interpretation would be that Shepherd's/ Sheridan's appearance exposes the false dichotomy often confronted by female comedians, as summarised by Barreca: '"She's got a terrific sense of humor" has become […] shorthand for "physically unattractive"' (1991:28). Additionally, Gray outlined how, '[s]ubjecting herself to the male gaze and the male laugh, the woman comedian offers her wit *instead* of her body, thus shifting relations with her audience […] to the slightly more equal plane of tradeswomen and customer'

(1994:116, emphasis in the original). *Cybill* demands that its audience transcends such reductive assumptions about, in particular, funny feminists, by presenting a joker whose humanist-feminist jesting evidently does not stem from falling short of meeting prevailing beauty standards. In this latter reading, the protagonist's looks signify a 'recontextualisation' (Fairclough 2010:20) of predominant humorous conventions.

Such discursive tension is notably absent in *Cybill*'s depiction of its protagonist's home life. In the private sphere, matriarch Sheridan personifies yet another kind of Rowe's 'unruly woman': the one who 'creates disorder by dominating, or trying to dominate men' (1995:31). She presides over a household in which the male characters are unequivocally marginalised. 'Romancing the Crone' exemplifies how humanist-feminist and humorous discourses are operationalised in that setting: when Ira follows Loretta's advice and finds employment as a bin man, he becomes the butt of the women's superior laughter; his degradation temporarily mirrors that of Kevin, the academic eventually reduced to working as a primary school teacher. Meanwhile, Kevin's online flirting is detected by Zoey, who, following Loretta's advice, confronts and shames him ('I'm cyber filth!'). He then is further humiliated when he confesses his activities to Rachel, his wife. In this scenario, the triumvirate of crone Loretta, mother Rachel and virgin Zoey join forces against a transgressing male. This set-up is largely repeated in one of the episode's closing scenes, when Cybill, Maryann and Loretta set out to pour cement into her ex-husband's swimming pool. In all these instances, humanist-feminist thought and cued laughter combine into a 'dominant or hegemonic' (Fairclough 2010:20) discourse, in which individual men, sometimes justifiably (Kevin and Maryann's ex-husband), sometimes not (Ira), are ridiculed.

This is in marked contrast to the approach taken in *Maude*, the first sitcom analysed. In that show, Maude and Walter Findlay articulated opposing, feminist and patriarchal, value systems in dialectical arguments which played out against the backdrop of a secure, loving and mutually

respectful, marital relationship. Where *Maude* 'punched up' at oppressive structures, *Cybill* 'punches down' at individual, often 'right-on' and progressive, men.[70] In the latter, nineteen-nineties show, traditional and patriarchal values as pertaining to the private sphere are no longer represented; they are instead silenced and unspoken, not because they are naturalised and common-sensical (Fairclough 2010:67), but due to their ostensible irrelevance.[71] In private, Sheridan has reversed previously existing power relations, and Linder and Dalton's above-cited point, that 'Cybill Sheridan would rather become part of the existing infrastructure than demolish the dominant system' (2016:200) holds true only for her professional life.

Cybill thus falls somewhat short of meeting the standard set by Mary Daly, that 'there is nothing like the sound of women really laughing […] at the reversal that is patriarchy' (Daly 1990:17). As pointed out above, in the show, the Hollywood studio system most closely resembles patriarchal power structures. The sitcom explicitly denounces aspects of that system through liberal-feminist discourses, but that critique is weakened through its humorous discourses. Radical-feminist discourses predominate in the depiction of her personal life. These too are, at times, interspersed with laughter which might distort their meaning; at other times, they are reinforced by, sometimes uneasy, laughter directed at the men in Sheridan's life. These competing and inconsistent discursive representations are perhaps best understood in relation to the sitcom's production context (see Fairclough 2010:19): the show was first broadcast in the nineteen-nineties, a decade characterised by postmodern ambiguity (see CDA seven), as well as shortly before a wide range of woman-centred sitcoms were terminated in 1998 (see page 231). At this precise moment in history, *Cybill* might have taken the expression of explicitly humanist-feminist values in the sitcom format, in

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[70] This point will be further developed in chapter 9, the thesis's conclusion.

[71] Such comparisons between the sitcoms analysed, and the respective impact of the contemporaneously dominant ideologies, will be expanded and developed in the concluding chapter.

particular in its resultant challenge to the very industry that created it, as far as was possible.

The show was, however, uncompromising and distinguished in its portrayal of what Mary Daly called 'the fire of female friendship' (1990:354), as will be explored in the subsequent CDA.

Critical discourse analysis 9: 'In Her Dreams'

At the core of *Cybill* is a friendship between two quick-witted middle-aged women. In its depiction of the comedic double-act of Sheridan and Maryann, the sitcom differs not only from its woman-centred contemporaries, but moreover from the vast majority of woman-centred or female-led sitcoms. The artistic origins of the funny twosome are disputed: both *Cybill*'s creator, Chuck Lorre (Lorre 2012) and Shepherd (Shepherd 2001:8) have claimed credit for the initial idea (one aspect of its conception that appears undisputed is that it was not inspired by the British sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC 1992-1996) (Shepherd 2001:242-245, Shulman 2006)). This CDA of 'In Her Dreams', the fifteenth episode of *Cybill*'s third season (first broadcast on February 3, 1997 and written by Bob Myer, Marilyn Suzanne Miller and Maria A. Brown), will focus on the comic duo. The preceding two CDAs have shown that the show's 'belly-of-the-beast' revelations about Hollywood and its humanist-feminist discourses were innovative but at times curtailed. The following will explore how Sheridan and Maryann's relationship relates to *Cybill*'s 'operationalisation of discourses […] as strategies' (Fairclough 2010:20) when arguing that the show's representation of that friendship emerges as its legacy, or enduring contribution to humorous, feminist and wider societal discourses.

Episode content

The episode starts with Sheridan asleep, and dreaming of being honoured at a bizarre awards ceremony. Maryann and numerous Hollywood grandees, including Humphrey Bogart and Marilyn Monroe, are in the audience. Then, talking to Maryann in her living room, she analyses her

dream as an unconscious reaction to having recently lost a high-profile acting job. She proceeds to remind the reluctant Maryann to schedule an overdue mammogram screening appointment. Meanwhile, Ira is being audited. While sorting through his financial papers, he and Sheridan reminisce about her auditioning for a movie twenty years earlier. The next scene, set in a restaurant, begins with Sheridan daydreaming about winning a movie award, and subsequently shows her falling out with Maryann over Sheridan's insistence that she attend her medical check-up. Next, the episode flashes back to the day of the movie audition, where a youthful Sheridan and Maryann (who is working as a secretary) meet for the first time. Following on, in a present-day doctor's waiting room, Cybill assures the frightened Maryann of her unconditional support, and Maryann is then called in for her appointment. The episode concludes with Maryann and Ira appearing in another dream sequence of Sheridan's. She tells him that her mammogram showed her to be cancer-free, and he tells her that he owes $8000 to the IRS.

Analysis

As in the fifth CDA, the subplot in 'In Her Dreams' is a tax audit. In both episodes, that secondary narrative about governmental probing mirrors a principal storyline about women's physical boundaries being invaded: in the *Maude* episode, through sexual assault and here, through a medical exam. (There is a quintessentially American quality to this analogy, which suggests that the government's meddling in its citizens' private and financial affairs is as severe a violation as unwanted, intimate touching.) The magnitude of Maryann's impending test results is symbolised by Cybill Sheridan's surreal dream sequences, which reveal aspirations she will only ever realise in her dreams, as per the episode's title. Moreover, as happens twice in the episode, her reveries come to sudden, ill-timed endings: they are as fleeting and fragile as life itself. This is reinforced by the fact that many of the movie legends applauding her have passed on. Cybill's family members only appear in one of the three dreams; in contrast, Maryann features in all of them, demonstrating the depth of that relationship. The grandiose triumphs chased

by the dreaming Sheridan may ultimately prove futile; by contrast, the dietetically real relationship between the two women proffers the meaning and reciprocity lacking from such hankered-for recognition from high-status strangers.

Maryann thus emerges as, *de facto*, Sheridan's significant other. They are 'voluntary' or 'fictive' kin, that is, in '"family-like" relations with people to whom they are not "formally" related' (Nelson 2013:260). These chosen ties correspond to postmodern discourses on the family, according to which the 'variety and volatility of contemporary family relationships [have only] loose connections to anything that might be designated as a social institution' (Cheal 1993:11). *Cybill*'s depiction of Sheridan and Maryann's relationship illustrates how, 'discourse is shaped by structures, but also contributes to shaping and reshaping them' (Fairclough 2010:58). The 'structures' thus perpetuated and remodelled are pre-existing sitcom representations of close friendships, as epitomised by the concurrent *Friends*. That show itself continued a thin lineage of shows revolving around deeply bonded protagonists, such as *Three's Company* (ABS 1977-1884), as well as several sitcoms with extraordinarily strong female friendships at their centre. These include *I Love Lucy*, Mary and Rhoda in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Laverne and Shirley*, *The Golden Girls*, *Kate and Ally* and *Designing Women*. *Cybill* therefore extends a genealogy which began with Lucy and Ethel's bond in *I Love Lucy*. Analysing the societal import of such friendships, Oakley finds that, '[a]ll relationships between women pose something of a threat to a culture like ours […]. […] The tradition of heterosexuality incites women to form their main alliances with men' (1997:vii). Inherent in all these sitcom depictions of non-kin, 'main alliances' attachments between heterosexual women is thus a potential undermining of heteronormative dominant discourses (see Fairclough 2010:19). Indeed, Doty argues that these portrayals are on a 'lesbian continuum' (2003:190), as 'with the surfaces of their characters […] insistently straight-coded, these sitcoms are allowed to present a wide range of intense women-bonding' (ibid.:192). A related point is made by White, who holds that, in shows such as *I Love Lucy*,

representations of a ‘liminal, queered femininity’ (2018:49) align with the conventions of the genre: ‘Comedy offers a commentary on gender […], in that *being* funny can destabilise hegemonic gender identities’ (ibid.:49, emphasis in the original). This doubly subversive synergy between comedy and female friendship will be explored shortly.

However, prior to this, it is worth charting how *Cybill*’s double-act emerges as a new and different discourse, in part created through the combination of ‘existing discourses’ (Fairclough 2010:19). As *Cybill*’s executive producer, Shepherd had wanted her character to have a relationship with a ‘side-kick rich in outrageous comic potential [as] perhaps last tapped when Lucy Ricardo got Ethel Mertz to work in the candy factory’ (Shepherd 2001:8). Cybill and Maryann simultaneously extend and diverge from this particular double-act as well as from the above-mentioned, wider tradition of female sitcom friendships. Their relationship resembles the ‘exclusive best friendships’ of teenage girls (Hey 1997:136) which offer ‘the reflection of a self – confirmed as “normal”’ (ibid.:136). Radical feminists argued that extending such levels of commitment into adulthood heralded women’s liberation, as ‘[f]emale friendship has at its core the affirmation of freedom […]. [It] is deeply self-affirming’ (Daly 1990:369). In patriarchal discourses, once ‘joined to a man [a woman] is safe’ (Oakley 1997:vii), and intense emotional intimacy between female friends is commonly tolerated only as a precursor to marriage. These traditional discourses inform the single-women friendships featured in the nineteen-seventies shows, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Laverne and Shirley*. In the nineteen-eighties, *Kate and Ally* and *The Golden Girls* initially banded together out of convenience and economic need, and after their marriages had ended (Stephens 2013: 889). Like the latter show, *Designing Women* was focussed on four women, rather than on an ‘exclusive’ twosome. Unlike these shows’ protagonists, Cybill and Maryann are not brought together by shared experiences of singlehood or lack of funds. Instead, the ‘redesign of discourse techniques’ (Fairclough 2010:139), or novel discursive facet added by *Cybill* to existing sitcom portrayals of female alliances, is that Sheridan and Maryann have been each other’s primary

relationship by choice, and for decades. In 'In Her Dreams', this is established through the flashback scene, and affirmed by Sheridan's assuring Maryann in the doctor's waiting room: 'You know who's gonna be here, no matter what? […] Me. I've had two husbands and I don't know how many boyfriends come and go. I have seen my children grow up and move out, and move back in again. You've been there for me. Since the first day we met.'

Juxtaposing Cybill and Maryann with earlier female sitcom double-acts, Mellencamp moreover points out that they, 'have money of their own and are not economically subservient to men. […] Sex, a frequent topic and behaviour, matters more than marriage. […] Most important [is] female friendship […], along with fun' (1999:318-319). Whereas Sheridan works for her financial independence, the source of Maryann's income, her ex-husband's enormous wealth, is, from a humanist-feminist perspective, more ambiguous. Indeed, complexities abound in the character of Maryann Thorpe, who, as performed by Christine Baranski, was for some viewers 'the reason to watch the show' (Shulman 2006). Hard-drinking divorcee Maryann was conceived as 'an uptight glamour queen, […] cynical [and] hilariously vindictive' (Shepherd 2001:245). Her back story is representative of generations of 'wronged women': she started married life working odd jobs to support her husband through medical school, and became a wife and mother humiliated by her spouse's compulsive cheating. Yet in *Cybill*, this victimisation is subject to discursive 'recontextualisation' (Fairclough 2010:20) and subversion, as it is transformed into righteous vigilantism, in the form of Maryann's carefully plotted, bizarre and vicious, attacks on her ex-husband, 'Dr Dick' (with Sheridan frequently her literal partner in crime). On the one hand, Maryann consequently is in breach of what Carlen (1988) termed the 'gender deal', whereby violent and criminal behaviour is far less acceptable if committed by women. On the other hand, her very femaleness mitigates her illicit activities. Her character's humorous success stems from the combination of 'a socially licensed, dominant frame that is consistent with conventional norms [Maryann's femininity, N.K.] and a "subversive" frame that questions or negates key features of the socially approved frame [her

criminality, N.K.]' (Ritchie 2005:290). An equivalent male, conventionally masculine character might present as too threatening and sinister for comedy comfort.

Maryann represents the discursive change which occurs as a result of, 'forms of transgressions, crossing boundaries, such as putting together existing codes or elements in new combination' (Fairclough 2010:64). Her transgressiveness lies in her refusal to be defeated by having been left in mid-life by her husband. She moreover embodies novel discursive combinations, by implicitly conveying humanist-feminist values when avenging a patriarchal 'social wrong' (ibid.:11) through her righteous anger. Spangler pointed out that seeing 'realistic, well-rounded friends like Cagney and Lacey and Kate and Allie can […] make mature women feel good about themselves' (2000:22). However, for real-life 'first wives'[72] watching the show, the less-than-realistic Maryann's rejection of victimhood is equally likely to provide cathartic functions. Obsessively seeking to inflict harm upon her ex-husband, she is a pioneering sitcom divorcee; as Dow pointed out, some of her sitcom predecessors, such as the recently divorced protagonist of *One Day At A Time* (1975-1984), had utilised a 'therapeutic feminism' (1996: pp 68 ff) to cope with their circumstances. In contrast, Maryann's therapist, in her own words, is her credit card (season two, episode one). Her positioning with regards to feminist theory is less obvious and literal than Sheridan's: she does not turn to that body of knowledge to assuage her experiences but externalises her anger instead, breaking gender norms as well as the law *en route*. In fact, she seems to be above the law as a result of her grotesque, liberating wealth. The series at no point questions that she is deserving of her ex-husband's vast alimony payments, and instead particularizes the status his money bestows upon her. Indeed, within *Cybill*, Maryann's wealth works to 'masculinise' this 'wronged woman' as much as her penchant for violence, enabling her to

[72] The highly successful 1996 film *The First Wives Club*, based on the 1992 novel by Olivia Goldsmith, is a rare cinematic representation of middle-aged women's justified anger. The 'sisterhood' with Maryann is not just in spirit: the mother of Diane Keaton's character is portrayed by Eileen Heckart who, in *Cybill*, plays Maryann's mother.

bolster Sheridan's humanist-feminist joking, as illustrated by the following extract from 'In Her Dreams':

1. Maryann: Darling, you need to pamper yourself. A nice steam bath, a
2. facial, and then a rub-down from some glistening Swede with no body
3. hair. (*laughter*)
4. Hey, we do it today! (*laughter*)
5. Cybill: What about your appointment?
6. Maryann: What appointment?
7. Cybill: Oh no, you are not putting off your mammography again. You
8. already missed your late-thirties baseline …
9. Maryann: […] I am dating a doctor. And he doesn't suggest
10. mammograms for any of his patients. (*muffled laughter*)
11. Cybill: He's a vet. His patients are poodles. (*laughter*)
12. Maryann: That's right. And they have way more breasts than we do. (*laughter*)

The segment illustrates how, as a twosome, Sheridan and Maryann

> don't invert power relations, claiming total mastery for themselves, but instead subtly displace such relations. […] They do this by laughter generated by mockery. This playfulness of their gaze invites […] us to join in the fun. […] *The female gaze* can literally throw itself in the frame and outside it to whoever is clever enough to catch it. […] [They] are not simply passive objects, they speak female desire. *They look back* (Gamman 1988:16, emphasis in the original).

Gamman's analysis of another female double-act, pioneering TV detectives *Cagney and Lacey* (CBS 1982-1988), elucidates the subversive potentialities of humour in a text focussed on two women (see White 2018:49). The character of Maryann Thorpe tactically facilitates Cybill Sheridan's making her own, female gaze and humour the audience's. Due to Maryann's amplifying 'reflection of [Sheridan's] self' (Hey 1997:136) a multi-faceted, woman-centred humorous discourse becomes, within *Cybill*, 'dominant or hegemonic' (Fairclough 2010:20). That discourse's humanist-feminist qualities are evident in the above: the first three lines draw on liberal-

feminist thought in their implicit premise that dominant and subservient social roles are not contingent on biological sex. Their humorous tone is simultaneously incongruous and superior: the laughter is primarily invoked through 'the experience of the unexpected' (Weaver 2001:18), that is, the mental image conjured up by Maryann, which reverses misogynistic tropes about sexualised, foreign and servile, massage therapists. But there is moreover a sense of 'finding [a] person inferior in some way' (Morreall 1987:14), namely the imaginary, objectified masseur, in a reversal of patriarchal power relations made possible by Maryann's wealth. Notably, the idea of a male in a traditionally feminine occupation is once again the source of *Cybill*'s joking (see CDA eight). The exchange clearly aligns with Merrill's definition of feminist humour, which, she argues,

> addresses itself to women and to the multiplicity of experiences and values women may embody. This may be evidenced in a shorthand of […] references related to women's experience, or in a style of performance which does not reinforce a male power perspective as normal (Merrill 1988:278-279).

Moreover, throughout the series, Sheridan and Maryann never mock their own, or other women's appearances; consequently, they 'refuse to see the "humor" in [their] own victimisation as the […] "object" of ridicule' (ibid.:279). This circumnavigating of self-deprecatory joking further corroborates that *Cybill*'s unspoken, 'naturalised ideologies' (Fairclough 2010:31) reflect humanist-feminist value systems.

This shift in perspective to a 'female gaze' (Gamman 1988:16) becomes even more pronounced as the women's conversation segues into radical-feminist discursive terrain. The humour inherent in the incongruous, absurd and wildly funny, conceptual surprise (line 12) and the lines building up to it (lines 6-11), are unequivocally (spoken) by, for and about women (see Merrill 1988:279). Dietetically, Maryann's flippancy serves to deflect from her reluctance to attend her mammogram appointment (lines 5-12). By featuring breast cancer prevention in its main storyline, 'In Her Dreams' corresponds to other *Cybill* episodes with themes related to women's anatomy (see CDA eight). Like many of these, the specific issue of women's disquiet about attending mammograms is 'ideologically invested' (Fairclough

2010:69), as its 'origins' (ibid.:19) can unambiguously be situated in radical-feminist thought. In 1970, the radical-feminist Boston Women's Health Collective wrote in the ground-breaking *Our Bodies, Ourselves*:

> We as women are made to feel uncomfortable of going to the doctor in the first place. […] [T]o go for preventative reasons will be all the more difficult. Thus while the medical profession has come out in favour of massive screening of women for cancer of breast and the cervix […] their practice […] works in the opposite direction (1970:8).

Furthermore, prior to the second feminist wave, prevailing social codes of propriety had cost women's lives, as related by radical feminist Greer: 'the trouble is caused by late diagnosis of illnesses begun in a trivial treatable way, which stems from the obscurantism falsely dignified by the name "modesty"' (1991:53). *Cybill* broke new discursive ground, and strategically enabled the women's issue of breast cancer to 'gain prominence' (Fairclough 2010:19) by showcasing it in a primetime sitcom; *Murphy Brown* followed suit shortly after, when it depicted its protagonist suffering from the disease (Rosenberg 1997). In both shows, '[n]o one will miss the potential life-saving message here to women who are putting off getting mammograms: Don't wait. Get one now!' (ibid.).

In 'In Her Dreams', it is Sheridan who relentlessly communicates just this to Maryann. She performs a significant other's 'emotion work' (Hochschild 1979) when she, despite Maryann's evasive and eventually hostile responses, insists that her friend attend her preventative screening. The episode explains Cybill's undaunted perseverance by accentuating the robustness of the women's friendship. This is achieved with the depiction of their first, accidental encounter two decades earlier, which concludes as follows:

1. Maryann: Good luck with the acting thing.
2. Cybill: You too, with the Dr Dick thing. […]
3. Cybill: Hey Maryann, why don't you let me take you out to lunch? You
4. haven't even finished your sandwich.
5. Maryann: Yeah okay. […]
6. Cybill: Come on, we'll get a burger and a beer.

7. Maryann: Oh no, I'm not much of a drinker. (*laughter*)

Dietetically, this interaction, which transforms a brief encounter into a long-term relationship, is of momentous significance; like the episode's above-mentioned allegorical dream sequences, it encapsulates the preciousness of life itself. Sheridan here seizes the moment and pursues a friendship by offering to pay for Maryann's lunch, that is, in a manner typically associated with a romantic, male suitor. It is worth noting that the sitcom does not include an equivalent, first-time-they-met scene for either of Sheridan's ex-husbands. This omission again, as in the preceding CDA, reflects how in *Cybill*, patriarchal and heteronormative conventions are deemed irrelevant. For this reason, they remain, tactically and subversively, left 'unsaid' (Fairclough 2010:27). With this clear-cut prioritising of female friendship over heterosexual relationships, as advocated in radical-feminist discourses (Daly 1990:369), *Cybill* depicts 'intense women-bonding' (Doty 2003:192) which serves to 'destabilise hegemonic gender identities' (White 2018:49).

In a similar vein, Sheridan's proactivity (lines 3-4) could be interpreted as denoting covert 'lesbian elements of narrative construction' (Doty 2003:199): her initiative-taking is 'linked to codes of masculinity and/or (stereo)typical codes of lesbian butchness' (ibid.:201). However, in an alternative reading, Sheridan's atypical performance of heterosexual femininity can be traced back to discursive presentations which originated with the screwball comedies of classical Hollywood. In particular, Shepherd's character retains 'commonalities' (Fairclough 2010:19) with the female protagonists of director Howard Hawks, who preferred to 'let the girl do the chasing around' (in: McBride 1996:117)[73] (much as Sheridan chased Maryann) in movies such as *Bringing Up Baby* (1939), *His Girl Friday* (1940) and *I Was A Male War Bride* (1949). These representations arguably

[73] Hawks' comment in full: 'I've been accused of promoting Women's Lib, and I've denied it, empathically. It just happens that kind of woman is attractive to me. I am merely doing somebody that I like. And I've seen so many pictures where the hero gets in the moonlight and says silly things to a girl, I'd reverse it and let the girl do the chasing around, you know, and it works out pretty well' (in: McBride 1996:117).

set the ‘gold standard’ (Shepherd 2001:202) for fast-talking, sexual and funny leading ladies. Hawks’ male and female leads’ teasing repartee, which has been referred to as ‘cross-talk foreplay’ (Thomson 2011), had explicitly been emulated in *Moonlighting* (ABC 1985-1989), the nineteen-eighties comedy-drama starring Shepherd and Bruce Willis (Shepherd 2001:200-202). In several *Cybill* episodes, Sheridan similarly conjures up a Hawksian chemistry with the various men she is dating (see, for example, season three, episode fourteen; season four, episode two). Yet the centrality of Sheridan and Maryann’s friendship comes to mean that in *Cybill*, men are no longer essential for the expression of women’s sharp wit. It is through this quality that *Cybill* validates White’s insight that, ‘[c]omedy offers a commentary on gender […], in that *being* funny can destabilise hegemonic gender identities’ (ibid.:49, emphasis in the original). This is borne out by the following exchange from ‘In Her Dreams’, which is typical for the show overall:

1. Cybill: So, did you and the distinguished doctor play hide the weenie last
2. night? (*laughter*)
3. Maryann: It didn’t happen. He had to assist in the delivery of a baby
4. elephant at the zoo.
5. Cybill: Oh, how charming. In a *Daktary* sort of way.
6. Maryann: I’m ashamed to say that due to the fact that the former Dr Dick
7. (*laughter*) used similar excuses to break his promise to me and God, I
8. followed him.
9. Cybill: Maryann, you stalked the good Dick? (*laughter*)
10. Maryann: I’m not proud of it. But when I saw his arms and shoulders
11. disappear in the back of that elephant (*laughter*), I wanted him right there. (*laughter*)
12. Cybill: For future reference, next time you tell that story, just say, we had
13. a date, he had to go to the zoo. (*laughter*)

The extract illustrates how the comic duo’s humour is generated through the ‘articulating together of (features of) existing discourses’

(Fairclough 2010:19).[74] Sheridan and Maryann display the verbal sparring and humorous 'one-up-man-ship' associated with Hawk's protagonists. While the two straight women's interactions lack the flirtatiousness characteristic of that director's oeuvre, sexual allusions (lines 1-2) and innuendo (line 9) feature heavily in their exchanges. With this, the sitcom mirrors contemporaneously dominant trends within its genre: in the nineteen-nineties, televisual sex was 'most often found in dramas, followed closely by situation comedies' (Signorielli 2000:70). The two jesting baby boomers discursively reap the freedoms generated by the sexual and women's liberation movements of their youth. Barreca highlights the parallels between women's sexual and humorous agency when she points out that, 'making a joke is like making a pass' (1991:19), that is, both joking and initiating a relationship are precarious, macho endeavours: a female joker is 'willing to take the risk of being funny because she has the confidence she'll get the desired response' (ibid.:5). Cybill and Maryann feminise these formerly masculine territories by taking full ownership of their bodies (lines 1-2,11) and of the funny word (lines 2, 7, 11, 13). They are consequently 'speaking the unspeakable' (Higgins 2003:33) in all-female company in a manner which situates *Cybill* in additional 'relations of dialogue' (Fairclough 2010:19) with the previous decade's *The Golden Girls*. Significantly, in both shows, the razor-sharp, competitive and thus traditionally masculine, teasing (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006:69) takes place in the context of a customarily feminine, nurturing relationship (see Johnson and Aries 1983:359).

As will be elaborated in the concluding chapter, the sexual knowingness of *Cybill's* middle-aged double-act emerges as more transgressive, and as a more significant threat to patriarchal norms, than the *The Golden Girls'* older protagonists' bawdiness. The ensuing section will reflect on the three discursive analyses of *Cybill*, and evaluate the extent to which the show, and its humorous strategies, can be classified as humanist-feminist. This CDA has shown how the show, in its representation of a female

[74] British viewers might furthermore detect a discursive referencing of the television series *All Creatures Great and Small* (BBC 1978-1990) in lines 10-11.

comedic double-act, combined and added to existing discourses in a manner which, within the sitcom genre, brought about 'changes in material reality' (Fairclough 2010:20). The resultant 'social transformation'(ibid.:20) presented as an unprecedented sitcom relationship which personified the Enlightenment, early feminist thinker Mary Wollstonecraft's assertion that, the 'most holy band of society is friendship' (2008:96).

Conclusion

Despite the manifold, clear-cut manifestations of humanist-feminist thought in 'In Her Dreams', the preceding two CDAs identified instances in which *Cybill*'s association with that ideology is more ambiguous. This concluding section will evaluate the manner in which the sitcom 'contributes in varying degrees to the reproduction or transformation of the existing order of discourse, and through that of existing social and power relations' (Fairclough 2010:62). Within *Cybill*, the structural differentials to be redressed are those engendered by a patriarchal society; in the words of its executive producer and star, the sitcom had been intended to challenge '- always with humor - […] the injustice of a culture that pretends women over forty are invisible' (Shepherd 2001:6), among other humanist-feminist issues (ibid.:6-7). The following seeks to evaluate the extent to which this was accomplished.

Research question 1: How are competing discourses and ideological struggles represented, and (how) can this be linked to wider societal developments?

As argued in the seventh CDA, *Cybill*'s dominant discourse is the mediatory tone set by Sheridan, whose ideological positioning reflects the sitcom's 'orders of discourses' (Fairclough 2010:63). These orders can be delineated as follows: at the lowest rung are patriarchal discourses pertaining to the private arena (CDA eight), along with conservative discourses (CDA seven). The latter, which were among the prior decade's foremost ideologies, are not featured extensively; when they are represented, they are dismissed through mockery (CDA seven). This depiction of conservative values as a quasi-redundant ideological-discursive formation (see Fairclough 2010:43)

within *Cybill* can be explained, 'in terms of both its "internal" and "external" relations' (ibid.:3). Internally, *Cybill*'s premise of portraying the life of a Los Angeles actress warrants the depiction of a bohemian lifestyle (CDA seven). This is amplified by external ideological currents, both within the contemporaneous sitcom genre and within the political realm. The centre-left Clinton administration was characterised by a *laissez-faire* approach to moral, as well as economic, affairs. These hegemonic political discourses were reflected in popular culture, including within the sitcom format, which in the nineteen-nineties featured more sexual content than all-but-one television genres (CDAs seven and nine). The comparative irrelevance of traditional values within *Cybill*'s discursive hierarchy can thus largely be attributed to contextual ideological developments.

Nevertheless, one specific subset of social conservativism, patriarchal ideology, is regularly represented in the show's storylines. As illustrated in the eighth CDA, representations of patriarchy differ dependent on whether a storyline plays out in the public or private spheres. Sheridan's employment takes place on the Hollywood studios sets which are instrumental in manufacturing global archetypes of female beauty; in scenes depicting this workplace, *Cybill* regularly incorporates issues politicised by liberal feminists, such as ageism or the objectification of women. These practices are confronted by Sheridan with the equality-centred vernacular of liberal-feminist discourses (CDA eight). However, while *Cybill* thus succeeds in exposing sexist 'social wrongs' (ibid.:11), its star is shown as incapable of affecting meaningful change (CDA eight). As has been argued, this may be due to the fact that the target of *Cybill'*s critique was the very Los Angeles production complex which brought the sitcom into existence (CDA seven). This hegemonic containment of *Cybill*'s subversive potential is epitomised by its incidental exposé of sexual harassment within the movie industry, which pre-empted mainstream media discourses by two decades (CDA seven). Patriarchal discourses thus do not constitute unspoken, 'taken-for-granted "background knowledge"' (ibid.:31) within *Cybill*. Instead, they are explicitly problematised, but shown to prevail over liberal-feminist ideology

in depictions of Sheridan's employment. This in stark difference to representations of her home life, in which radical-feminist principles have been transformed into a lived reality. Examples for this include: the marginality of male characters, her economic and sexual freedoms, her woman-centred spirituality and her decades-long, quasi-familial commitment to a female friend (CDAs seven, eight, nine).

While these radical-feminist values are firmly endorsed within the text, they are, on balance, outranked by contemporaneously predominant postmodern discourses. These underpin several of the show's fundamental tenets, including the playfully imprecise, autobiographical referencing of Cybill Shepherd's lived experience (CDA seven) and *Cybill*'s central family set-up (CDA seven), and can moreover be detected in ambiguous humorous cues (CDA eight). Indeed, this intricate range of ideological-discursive formations within *Cybill* is itself suggestive of the anti-universalism advocated by postmodern theorists. The sitcom's resultant hegemonic, 'unstable [discursive] equilibrium' (Fairclough 2010:62) is reflected in the words spoken by Sheridan, the show's 'voice of reason' (Sedita 2006:52).

Research question 2: How are feminist and women's humour, and empowering and self-deprecating joking, balanced?

Cybill's humour is unambiguously feminist. Sheridan meets Rowe's criteria of an 'unruly woman' not merely by being an active joker; she moreover 'creates disorder by dominating, or trying to dominate men' (1995:31). In *Cybill*, humour is articulated by women, regularly covers themes closely or exclusively associated with women's experience, and consequently situates its audience as female (CDAs eight and nine). These humorous exchanges recurrently mirror and endorse ideas first articulated within the discourses of the second feminist wave, and as such are empowering to women (CDAs seven, eight and nine). Most frequently the humour is generated by the show's central, female duo; other active female jokers include Sheridan's daughters and guest stars (CDA six, seven and eight). While this woman-centred joking is neither self-deprecating nor

directed at women as a group (CDA eight), at times, humanist-feminist ideas are mocked (CDA eight). Shepherd has stated that in these instances, humour was used deliberately to assuage the politicised content (2001:254). Yet the polysemy inherent in all texts (Fairclough 2010:57) here makes feasible an alternative reading: that a feminist message is simultaneously advanced and undermined by laughter. This would add a further, postmodern and ambivalent, layer to the show, and could signal a hegemonic containment of the show's bold ideological positioning. However, the sheer quantity and pervasiveness of humanist-feminist joking within *Cybill* counteracts the effectiveness of such a strategy.

Research question 3: What fictional, diegetic model of gender relations does the sitcom advocate, and how do these gender relations compare with those of contemporaneous shows?

Cybill's protagonist's living arrangement reflects both radical-feminist and postmodern discourses: as a twice-divorced mother of two daughters, she is the matriarch of a divorce-extended family (CDA seven). She is financially independent, and while she dates several men throughout the series, her long-term commitment is to a female friend (CDA nine). This non-traditional set-up is in line with dominant trends within the nineteen-nineties sitcom genre. In many shows, the traditional family was replaced with alternatives, such as adults sharing accommodation with friends or relatives (*Friends*, *Frasier*), single mother households (*Grace under Fire*), living alone (*Murphy Brown*, *Caroline in the City*, *Seinfeld*), or lodging with an employer (*The Nanny*). The traditional nuclear family too was represented in some highly successful shows (*Roseanne*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*); however, by the postmodern nineties, its male-breadwinner, female-homemaker model of gender relations had become merely one of many lifestyle options propagated by the sitcom genre.

In *Cybill*, men (usually directors) are depicted as powerful in the public sphere (CDAs seven and eight), but are side-lined to the extent of being regularly laughed at in Sheridan's private life (CDA eight). This merging of

humorous and radical-feminist discourses results in the reversal of patriarchal structures, and *Cybill*'s domestic domain is characterised by a new kind of inequality between men and women. While women have traditionally been nurturers and consequently leaders in the private sphere (Parsons and Bales 2002), this power differential was balanced by their financial dependence on men (as depicted in the nineteen-seventies show, *Maude*). As Sheridan provides both emotionally and financially for her family, she exemplifies a fully-fledged, autonomous matriarch.

Research question 4: How (if at all) is humour utilised within a sitcom as a tool to dismantle patriarchal power relations?

Diegetically, with regards to the domestic arena, *Cybill* transcends the scenario laid out in the question; patriarchal inequities have been disassembled, and humour is employed instead to maintain this new status quo (CDA eight). As pointed out in response to the second research question, in depictions of the public sphere, humorous discourses are used to reveal rather than effectively overturn social injustice.

On an extra-diegetic level, the sitcom used humorous 'discourses as strategies [which might effect] changes in material reality' (Fairclough 2010:20). These 'social transformations' (ibid.:20) take time, and 'are always subject to conditions which are partly extra-discursive' (ibid.:20); however, a prime-time sitcom's contribution to societal, hegemonic 'orders of discourse' (ibid.:63) is significant. *Cybill* made several humanist-feminist additions to sitcom discourses, including a divorcee who substitutes victimhood with righteous vengeance, a comic double-act consisting of two liberated women, a household which has transcended patriarchal norms as well as an exposé of sexual harassment and other systemic sexism in the movie industry (CDAs seven, eight, nine). Its impact as a paradigm-extending feminist sitcom might be greater than the sum of its parts.

Cybill thus emerges as a political sitcom in an apolitical decade. It was produced at a specific moment in television history, in which postmodern

multiplicity generated the space for a number of sitcoms which reflected the experiences of confident, mid-life, female baby boomers. From 1998 onwards, they would be replaced with a new, ‘young [and] perennially confused’ (Hass 1998) type of heroine; a development which validated *Cybill*’s critique of the entertainment industry as much as the 2017 public outcry over the systemic abuse of actresses. Nevertheless, in-between 1972 and 1998, that is, in-between *Maude*’s first and *Cybill*’s last episode, a constant march of progress towards gender equality occurred. This increased level of women’s freedom was reflected in woman-centred sitcoms, as will be discussed in the subsequent, concluding chapter, which will juxtapose and combine the three sitcoms’ analyses in response to the research questions.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

They will see that where they have no social freedom, Comedy is absent: where they are household drudges, the form of Comedy is primitive: where they are tolerably independent, but uncultivated, exciting melodrama takes its own place and a sentimental version of them. […] but where women are on the road to an equal footing with men, in attainments and liberty – in what they have won for themselves, and what has been granted to them by a fair civilisation – there, and only waiting to be transplanted from life to the stage, or the novel, or the poem, pure Comedy flourishes, and is, as it would help them to be, the sweetest of diversions, the wisest of delightful companions.
George Meredith (1877)

The above quotation from Meredith's 'An Essay on the Idea of Comedy and of the Uses of the Comic Spirit' elegantly captures the connection between women's civil and comic liberties. This thesis has tracked both types of emancipation from the onset of the second feminist wave; its trajectory, comprising the last three decades of the twentieth century, corresponds to the lifespan of a generation. Over this period, a cohort of subcultural radicals reached midlife and positions of power and influence; simultaneously, many of their rebellious ideas matured into material realities, and changed the course of history by redefining the life chances of millions of women, through legal and social changes which cleared the 'road to an equal footing with men' (Meredith 1877). This thesis maps the manifestations of these ideas in the sitcom genre, which was singularly pertinent throughout this thirty-year timespan: the format became politicised in the seventies, initially flagged in the eighties, only to recover to the extent of becoming one of the defining genres of the nineties. In the decades which followed, network sitcoms, along with the wider media and entertainment industries, would face unprecedented competition from rapidly growing digital technologies (Harrison 2010:171-2), which transformed media consumption habits and left the future of the legacy media uncertain at best (Gripsrud 2010:xv, Raab 2018).

Yet prior to these twenty-first century developments, prime-time, network content was estimated to be 'influential in constructing and shaping

sociopolitical opinions' (Holbert et al. 2003:47). The preceding chapters' analyses of nine episodes of three woman-centred sitcoms provide rich, detailed snapshots of a particular era in social and cultural history; they metonymically reflect the many ideological influences of 'the complex relations which constitute social life' (Fairclough 2010:3) in any one specific context. Thus far, this thesis has documented these ideological representations for each discrete show. In this final chapter, an additional level of analysis will be added by juxtaposing and interconnecting the data gathered in the CDAs of *Maude*, *The Golden Girls* and *Cybill*. This will firstly be done in relation to the four research questions previously explored at the end of these analytical chapters. Following on, the thesis will conclude by specifying how these findings contribute to existing knowledge across a range of academic disciplines, and by identifying relevant areas for further research.

Research questions

Research question 1: How are competing discourses and ideological struggles represented, and (how) can this be linked to wider societal developments?

Juxtaposing the prior chapters' findings in response to this question throws into sharp relief that, 'social and cultural changes *are* largely changes in discursive practices' (Fairclough 2010:131, emphasis in the original). In *Maude*, the dialectical depiction of the two opposing value systems reveals the show's 'relationship to existing orders of discourse' (ibid.:130): in the seventies, humanist feminism was a novel, insurgent set of ideas. Although these ideas were portrayed sympathetically by the show's creator, Norman Lear, his 'relevant' sitcoms were discursively grounded in realistic representations of the contemporaneous societal context. As demonstrated in the second CDA, these representations included then-dominant, misogynistic, discourses on the issue of rape. Moreover, the character of Walter, Maude Findlay's husband does not merely serve to articulate patriarchal discourses, but furthermore to paternally sanction the justness of her arguments (CDA one).

In stark contrast to *Maude*'s confrontational quasi-realism, the next decade's *The Golden Girls* would depict an idealistically post-patriarchal universe (CDA four). This emerges as a subversive 'strateg[y] for overcoming the crisis' (ibid.:5), namely the nineteen-eighties' dominant conservative ideologies, which included an anti-feminist backlash. In this ideological context, *The Golden Girls* advances humanist-feminist discourses in a more subtle and complex fashion: in that show's all-female diegetical universe, the struggle for women's rights remains 'unsaid' (ibid:27), and gender equality is instead, over-optimistically, posited as a given. Equally surreptitiously, the show integrates reverse discourses by transcending the 'conventional political logic of domination and resistance' (Spargo 1999:23): although largely characterised by an absence of patriarchal discourses (and of male protagonists), *The Golden Girls* nonetheless pays 'lip service' to heteronormative values. This means that the four protagonists promote traditional lifestyles in word but subvert them in deed, as they remain single throughout the show (Dorothy's wedding marks the end of the sitcom). The show moreover discursively endorses the Reagan administration's fiscal conservatism (CDA four), whilst simultaneously regularly featuring storylines highlighting social inequalities. These ideological tensions illustrate how the 'hegemonic struggle takes place to a significant extent in discourse, where the "stakes" include the structuring of orders of discourse' (ibid.:131). In a wider societal context less hospitable to humanist feminism than the preceding two decades had been, *The Golden Girls'* dominant discourse is concealed in its 'taken-for-granted "background knowledge"' (ibid.:31), which postulates that women are fully autonomous, liberated individuals.

Despite this ideological adversity, humanist-feminist principles remained on an irreversible march of progress throughout the nineteen-eighties. By the time *Cybill* was broadcast in the postmodern nineteen-nineties, many formerly countercultural discourses had, under the centre-left Clinton administration, entered the ideological mainstream. *Cybill* more overtly continues *The Golden Girls'* tactic of marginalising male characters

in its portrayals of the private sphere, where radical-feminist discourses predominate in a matriarchal set-up. However, patriarchy prevails in that show's depiction of its lead character's workplace, where it is challenged through liberal-feminist discourses. The seismic, wider societal change in gender relations which occurred in-between the nineteen-seventies and the nineteen-nineties is reflected in the respective tones of the three sitcoms' humanist-feminist discourses: these evolved from being antagonistic in *Maude*, to stealthy in *The Golden Girls*, and playfully buoyant in *Cybill*. This gradual hegemonic recontextualization (see Fairclough 2010:29) of humanist-feminist discourses is moreover allegorically imparted through the three shows' living arrangements: where Maude Findlay is in a traditional marriage, the four Golden Girls eschew societal and patriarchal norms by sharing accommodation, as typically associated with much younger people; in *Cybill*'s fictional universe, gender inequalities have, in the private domain at least, been toppled, and the protagonist presides over a matrifocal, divorce-extended household. Overall, over the course of three decades, a negative correlation transpires between the sitcoms' representations of humanist-feminist versus patriarchal and conservative discourses: as the former 'gain prominence' (ibid.:19), the latter's hegemony proportionally declined.

Research question 2: How are feminist and women's humour, and empowering and self-depreciating joking, balanced?

All three sitcoms' protagonists meet at least one of the criteria defining an 'unruly woman' (Rowe 1995:31) and all three shows' humour can clearly be characterised as feminist. Self-depreciatory humour is used rarely, and in a manner which evades the harsh, self-objectifying '"I am so ugly …" jokes' (Barrecca 1991:82) usually associated with the practice. In *Maude*, in the rare instances where the forceful protagonist laughs at herself, she is too evidently in control over the relevant situation to be diminished by doing so. In *The Golden Girls*, the sexist put-downs which sporadically are part of the four women's repartee are instantly neutered by either a quickfire rejoinder, or by the supportive dynamic of their friendship. In *Cybill*, the joke

is occasionally on Sheridan's feminist beliefs, but never on any individual woman's appearance. Given the widespread agreement in the academic literature that self-depreciatory joking can potentially be classified as feminist, its exclusion from the sitcoms' humorous discourses suggests that unambiguously feminist discourses were deliberately 'operationalised as strategies' (Fairclough 2010:20) in all three shows.

These spoken discourses are in 'relations of dialogue' (ibid.:20) with the shows' extra-diegetic casting processes, and consequently with the physiques of the actresses selected to voice them. In *Maude*, Bea Arthur's appearance reinforced her character's vociferous crusade against narrowly defined gender roles. As embodied by Arthur, the tall, deep-voiced and physically domineering Maude Findlay furthermore complemented the feminist discourses of the highly successful, contemporaneous *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. The latter show told the story of a generation of young women embracing unprecedented employment opportunities (Dow 1966:61); the significantly older character of Maude Findlay ensured that the women of the Greatest Generation were discursively included in prime-time representations of humanist-feminist thought. Like Maude, *The Golden Girls'* protagonists undermined the 'male gaze' (Mulvey 1975) by not conforming to youthful beauty ideals and consequently could be argued to confirm widely held beliefs that funny women often are not conventionally pretty (Barreca 1991:28), Gray 1994:116). In the nineteen-nineties, such assumptions would be challenged by sitcoms such as *Murphy Brown* and *Cybill*, which starred former models of iconic beauty; both these shows moreover invalidated sexist tropes about feminists lacking a sense of humour (Finney 1994:4).

In both *Cybill* and *The Golden Girls*, such effective feminist joking regularly involves 'female smut' (Gray 1994:76), that is, razor-sharp, woman-centred bawdiness. In the nineteen-eighties, *The Golden Girls'* writers had gotten 'away with [this] because of who they [the characters] were' (Thomas 2006); deeply entrenched prejudice about elderly women's being 'out of the sexual race and [able to] comment safely from the sidelines' (Barreca 1991:51), enabled a show which challenged these precise stereotypes, to be

ahead of its time. By the nineteen-nineties, such caveats were no longer required, as relaxed television censorship regulations had normalised sexually explicit humour within the sitcom genre (see CDAs seven and nine). Despite this liberal production context, *Cybill'*s protagonist engaging in these discourses emerges as an altogether more threatening and unruly endeavour than the Golden Girls' lewd jesting. Cybill Sheridan's humorous agency already extends her 'power over the man beyond the transitory sexual encounter inspired her beauty' (Gray 1994:116). An additional patriarchy-defying discourse is added to this by Sheridan's rejecting her status as a passive object of male desire, and flaunting her sexual knowingness instead. The character thus uncompromisingly combines, and promotes, women's cerebral and corporeal empowerment and liberation, as envisaged in the discourses of second-wave feminism.

Research question 3: What fictional, diegetic model of gender relations does the sitcom advocate, and how do these gender relations compare with those of contemporaneous shows?

As stated in response to research question one, the three sitcoms' household set-ups correspond to three types of fundamentally different relations between men and women. Yet despite these clear-cut differences, there are nevertheless several significant 'commonalites' (Fairclough 2010:19) in the three shows' discursive depictions of gender relations. Even *Maude*, the only show to substantively integrate the patriarchal model of gender relations, discursively hints at potentially existential frailties within this arrangement. These include her husband Walter's flaws: he is an alcoholic who, over the course of the show, suffers a nervous breakdown and attempts suicide; he, like the patriarchal discourses he articulates, is vulnerable. Furthermore, Maude's live-in, grown-up daughter is a divorced single mother, and Maude herself is twice-divorced and once-widowed. When Maude talks about these former husbands, she does so with humorous flippancy, frequently not recalling their names and relating to them in a quasi-interchangeable manner. This dismissiveness is echoed in *The Golden Girls*,

in which the names of the leads' past boyfriends are often confused or not remembered. Moreover, three of that show's protagonists' husbands are dead, and one (Dorothy) has a laughably ineffective ex-spouse.

This treatment of men as quasi-redundant, or as insignificant others, culminates in *Cybill*, where Sheridan's two ex-husbands and her son-on-law are regularly at the receiving end of the sitcom's joking (see CDA eight). In contrast to the two earlier sitcoms which (with the exception of a minor character, Dorothy's ex-husband Stanley) laughed at absent men, or past relationships, in *Cybill*, the male targets of laughter, although Sheridan's ex-husbands, are present-day, recurring characters. This laughing-in-men's-faces is discursively reinforced by *Cybill*'s disparaging depiction of Kevin and Rachel's heteronormative, patriarchal nuclear family (see CDA seven). Representations of female friendship similarly intensify over the three decades. In the nineteen-seventies, Maude's friendship with Vivian complemented her marital relationship, and was mirrored by Walter's closeness with Vivian's husband Arthur. Ten years on, the four Golden Girls were a self-sufficient chosen family. In the nineteen-nineties, even this level of commitment to one another was surpassed by Sheridan and Maryann's friendship, an exclusive twosome which served as a 'functional alternative' (Merton 1968) to a couple's emotional intimacy (see CDA nine).

In relation to their sitcom contemporaries, all three shows were innovative and added new discursive facets to the genre's portrayal of gender relations. *Maude* was the first sitcom to feature a divorced protagonist, and to cover the subject matter of abortion. Moreover, Maude Findlay was an older, married feminist in a nineteen-seventies sitcom context which overwhelmingly was characterised by the, 'enactment of a "feminist lifestyle" by young, attractive, white, heterosexual, female characters, and a reliance on tenets of second-wave liberal or equity feminism' (Dow 1996: 24-26). *The Golden Girls* were the first all-female sitcom quartet, and as such would serve as an archetypal model for subsequent shows such as *Designing Women*, *Sex and the City, Desperate Housewives*, *Girlfriends* (UPN/ The CW 2000-2008) and *Hot in Cleveland* (TV Land 2010-2015). That show's 'alternative family'

living arrangement furthermore notably diverged from concurrent ideological and sitcom trends, which endorsed the traditional nuclear family. A decade on, when *Cybill* similarly depicted a non-traditional family set-up, various types of fictive kin had become a sitcom norm. Nonetheless, *Cybill*'s specific depiction of a divorce-extended matriarchal household remains a novel contribution to gender relations within sitcom discourses, as does its above-mentioned representation of a close female friendship and comedic double act.

Research question 4: How (if at all) is humour utilised within a sitcom as a tool to dismantle patriarchal power relations?

All three sitcoms integrate humanist-feminist discourses into the sitcom format, if in different ways. *Maude* represented a wide range of humanist-feminist issues, frequently in considerable depth, and consistently used humour to, 'break up the truth with laughter' (Cixous 1976:888); Maude Findlay's jesting thus is a way of, 'righting an injustice […] and challenging the most formidable structures' (Barreca 1991:179). The seriousness of many of these issues is lightened and made palatable through the sitcom genre's 'comic impetus' (Mills 2009:5); *Maude* accordingly employs humour to challenge deep-seated manifestations of patriarchal norms, and to display the quintessentially moral nature of the humanist-feminist project. In *The Golden Girls*, a more surreptitious and intricate strategy underpins its 'ideological "smuggling"' (Wells 2006:181) of humanist-feminist discourses, as elaborated in response to the first research question. The protagonists are depicted as autonomous individuals who are fully accountable for their life choices, as is consistent with libertarian-feminist thinking (Nathan 1981; see CDA four) and with fundamental American principles. *The Golden Girls*' close alignment with the latter and its highly successful humour are probable causes for its enormous success (CDA six). This very success made it possible for the sitcom to indirectly promote the humanist-feminist postulation that women are equal to men, in their being rational, moral, loveable and funny social actors.

While *Cybill* too is characterised by discursive complexities (see research question one), differently to *The Golden Girls*, it explicitly utilises humour to advocate for humanist-feminist causes (CDAs eight and nine). However, while its discourses thus closely resemble those of *Maude*, the two shows diverge in the manner in which their jesting is utilised. In the nineteen-seventies, Maude Findlay used humour to call attention to her systemic status as a second-class citizen (see CDA one), and thus 'punched up' at contemporaneously real, oppressive structures. Over two decades later, Cybill Sheridan would likewise laugh at persistent, overarching gender inequalities at her workplace, but would moreover 'punch down', by mocking the men in her private life (see research question three and CDA eight). The latter practice denotes a conceptual conflation of patriarchal inequalities on a macro, societal level with micro, personal relationships between individual men and women. These varying uses of humour are closely linked to the two shows' respective household structures: Maude is in a traditional, loving marriage with an equal partner, whereas Cybill presides over a postmodern, matriarchal household, in which affable men are marginalised. This makes for an uneasy ethical dimension in this usage of humanist-feminist laughter, as '[h]umor is not an unconditional virtue; its moral character depends on its object. To laugh at the contemptible, is a virtue; to laugh at the good, is a hideous vice' (Rand 1975:133). *Cybill* laughs both at the contemptible 'reversal that is patriarchy' (Daly 1990:17), and at good individual men. In contrast to the moral moorings of *Maude* and *The Golden Girls*, this results in an ethical disorientation reflective of the wider postmodern uncertainty predominant in the nineteen-nineties (see CDA seven). Nonetheless, overall, Cybill's convoluted array of discourses, or 'particular range of strategies' (Fairclough 2010:19), made possible an unambiguously humanist-feminist sitcom in an apolitical, postfeminist (Dow 1996:135-202) ideological context.

Contextualising discussion of research findings

Reflecting on the activism of the second feminist wave, the prominent radical feminist Susan Brownmiller asks her readers to, '[i]magine a time […]

when a husband was required to countersign a wife's application for a credit card, a bank loan, or automobile insurance, […] when rape was the woman's fault, when nobody dared talk about the battery that went on behind closed doors, or filed a complaint about sexual harassment' (1999:3). This describes the context in which *Maude* was created. In the nineteen-seventies, 'sisterhood [was] powerful [and] mountains [were] moved' (ibid.:330), and over little more than two decades, western women's life chances were revolutionised in a historically unprecedented manner. The resultant transformative crisis of patriarchal hegemony imprinted itself upon, and was partially 'fought out' (Fairclough 2010:20) within, the sitcom genre. This chapter's introductory paragraph characterises the analyses of *Maude*, *The Golden Girls* and *Cybill* as detailed, revealing snapshots of a particular historical moment. As indicated by the four research questions' findings, in combination, these discrete snapshots form a movie-like narrative, and distinct themes begin to emerge, which will be developed and analysed here.

Most notable among these themes is the sheer extent of the social change which manifested over a relatively short time span, as reflected in the sitcoms analysed. Bonnie Dow highlighted how *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*'s nineteen-seventies 'emerging woman' journalist had become *Murphy Brown* and 'made it' (1996:136) by the nineteen-nineties, that is, had matured into a powerful player in a formerly male-dominated field. An equivalent development can be pinpointed for the protagonists of *Maude* and *Cybill*. Where Maude Findlay used humour to communicate the 'absolute rightness of the feminist vision' (Brownmiller 1999:328), by the time Cybill Sheridan vocalised the same discourses, that vision had to a significant degree been transformed into a lived reality. As pointed out in response to the second research question, Sheridan's fully autonomous character embodied the coming-to-fruition of many of the causes Findlay had fought for.

The reasons for this transformation are multifactorial. Legal changes, including the 1963 Equal Pay Act, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1972 Education Amendments, the 1973 legalisation of abortion and the 1978 Pregnancy Discrimination Act, enshrined gender equality in the law. The

impact of the societal revolts of the nineteen-sixties resulted in a complementing change in social mores. The issue of divorce exemplifies this convergence of legal and social adjustments: from 1969 onwards, no-fault divorce legislation was implemented in nearly all US states, resulting in the divorce rate more than doubling in-between 1960 and 1980 (Wilcox 2009). The aftermath of divorce necessitates, at least temporarily, new family structures, such as single-parent or reconstituted households. This was replicated in several woman-centred sitcoms from the nineteen-seventies onwards, including, as noted above, all three sitcoms analysed here. Significantly, by the time *Cybill* was produced in 1995, that protagonist's postmodern, matriarchal household set-up was but one of many alternatives to the nuclear family propagated by the contemporaneous sitcom genre (see research question three). These fictional depictions corresponded to real-life trends: in the US, nuclear families constituted 40 percent of households in 1970; by 2013, this had shrunk to 19 percent (Babay 2013). This change, along with women's empowerment, largely eliminated the need for male providers, and a 'crisis in masculinity' (Morgan 2006:109; see page 228) ensued, a development most clearly reflected in *Cybill* (see research question three).

These representations of these societal trends were analysed here within the specific context of the sitcom genre. Genres are conceptualised by Fairclough as 'enduring complex discursive objects' (2010:3), that is, stable structures within which discourses contribute 'meaning, and making meaning' (ibid.:3). Sitcoms' meaning-making is intrinsically ambivalent; their discursive content is enveloped in conventions which signal the genre's tangential relation to reality, most notably their circular narrative (see pp 64-67; see also Mills 2009:27). Nonetheless, the genre appeals to millions and 'has stood as an enduring sociodramatic model that has helped "explain" American society to itself' (Spangler 2003:6). The format's 'emotional realism' (as conceptualised by Ang (1985:45) in relation to soap operas; see Mills (2009:101)) partly explains how its manifestly artificial content can function to make sense of (novel) societal realities, such as women's steadily

increasing liberation. Moreover, unlike any other genre, via the laugh track, sitcoms situate their viewers as part of the text (Mills 2009:104). The pleasurable experience of laughter can make audiences more susceptible to ideological messages (Wells 1998:181); however, simultaneously, the laugh track 'at least makes explicit the audience position being offered' (Mills 2009:104). This analysis has shown how both these interpretations hold true: in *Maude* and *Cybill*, the humorous and political discourses were merged, and viewers thus could resist the preferred reading signposted by their episodes' recorded laughter (ibid.:104); in *The Golden Girls*, the show's humanist-feminist politics did not manifest in the show's humour but were more subtly integrated into its underlying discourses.

Within the sitcom genre and beyond, jokes are 'an indication of what is happening in a society but they do not feed back into the social structures that generated them to any significant extent' (Davies 2007:300; see also Gilbert 2004:xvii, Dow 1996:xxii). I cannot at this stage assert just how effective the patriarchy-defying joking engaged in by Maude Findlay, the Golden Girls and Cybill Sheridan was. As shown by research focussed upon disparagement humour (see page 36), the effectiveness of jokes aimed at social groups is contingent upon factors such as audiences' amount of exposure to such joking (Mendiburo-Sequel 2017), and their ability or willingness to appreciate the jests (Ford 2016).

Still, the preceding analyses have demonstrated that, from 1972 onwards, woman-centred sitcom humour has been incisive and defiant. Other than an increase in sexual explicitness and a change in humorous tone from belligerent to playfully buoyant (see above) over the two decades, there is no significant difference in the quality or frankness of *Maude*'s and *Cybill*'s humanist-feminist joking. Both sitcoms drew on the ideas and vernacular of humanist-feminist discourses in a readily recognisable manner (CDAs one, three, eight, nine). This corroborates Meredith's above-cited observation that a 'fair civilisation' (1877) is required for women's equality to manifest. The 'fair' ideological principles underlying American democracy enabled women, along with other oppressed groups, to cogently argue for an overhaul

of their societal standing during the nineteen-sixties social uprisings. Correspondingly, the basic rights of American citizens, including the freedom of speech, as protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, made it possible for Maude Findlay to use humour to speak truth to power, to 'mock what cannot be mocked' (Lecoq 2009:126) and to envision ways to 'escape the limitations that circumscribe our lives' (Jenkins 1994:10).

Two decades on, the long-term effectiveness of these humanist-feminist discourses was encapsulated in *Cybill*, whose protagonist lives in a female-dominated universe, in which patriarchal discourses have been overcome in the private sphere but continue to be righteously challenged in the workplace. The great progress nonetheless made in the latter domain is epitomised by the extra-diegetical fact that by the nineteen-nineties, the woman-centred sitcom's star was also its executive producer.

Original contribution to knowledge

This thesis has utilised critical discourse analysis, as formulated by Norman Fairclough, to conduct a feminist exploration and historical comparison of popular culture in a manner which is unprecedented. The methodology proved highly effective in disassembling cultural artefacts, in this case, sitcom episodes, into their discursive components. The original data and findings generated contribute primarily to the fields of gender studies, television studies and humour studies; they are moreover relevant to the disciplines of sociology and media, communication and cultural studies, in particular cultural history. These original contributions to knowledge are:

1. Over the three decades following the launch of the second feminist wave, its continuously expanding societal impact manifested itself in the woman-centred sitcoms analysed here in increased representations of non-nuclear household structures, of women's choice and agency, as well as of their economic independence and sexual self-determination. Broadly similar findings have been advanced in the existing literature on feminist sitcom (see, for example Gray 1994, Dow 1996, Spangler 2003), although this thesis

explores these developments in uncommon depth. Fairclough's methodology moreover enabled me to contribute to existing scholarship that:

(i) there exists a negative correlation between the three sitcoms' representations of humanist-feminist versus patriarchal and conservative discourses: as the former 'gain prominence' (Fairclough 2010:19), the latter's hegemony proportionally declines. Correspondingly, the status of male characters decreases, from breadwinners and equal partners in the nineteen-seventies to marginalised objects of laughter in the nineteen-nineties; at the same time, heteronormative relationships are increasingly replaced by close friendships between adult women.

(ii) in-between the nineteen-seventies and the nineteen-nineties, explicitly humanist-feminist humorous discourses, as articulated by a sitcom's protagonist, changed in tone (from predominantly confrontational to playful), but not in their vernacular or forthrightness; humanist-feminist sitcom protagonists have consistently been active makers of jokes. Over the decades, sexualised joking increased, a development which, in the eighties show *The Golden Girls* was made possible by network decision makers' expectations that the show's protagonists' advanced age curtailed their jocular transgressions. By the time *Cybill* was broadcast, its amount of sexualised content was in line with wider televisual practice prevalent in the nineteen-nineties. In all sitcoms analysed, self-depreciatory joking is hardly ever engaged in.

2. A further contribution to existing knowledge is the finding that, and the ascertaining of how, in ideologically adverse socio-political contexts, humanist-feminist discourses were nonetheless effectively integrated into the sitcom genre. As stipulated by Fairclough (2010:3-5), this thesis's CDAs were grounded in any one specific discourse's relational, dialectical and transdisciplinary qualities. Accordingly, each sitcom analysed was thoroughly situated in its specific historical and ideological context. This allowed for the careful tracing and hegemonic ranking of particular ideological formations within each show. In particular, this thesis adhered to Fairclough's 'agenda' (ibid.:19) for critical discourse analysis, and identified

each sitcom's 'emergence' of discourses, their relations of 'dialogue, contestation and dominance', their 'recontextualisation' and 'operationalisation' (ibid.:19). This made it possible to uncover what sitcom writer Bill Hickley referred to as episodes', 'whole subtext […] if you really look for it, you can find it' (in: Shapiro 2011:216); in other words, some episodes' poignant, below-the-surface narratives and meanings. The application of Fairclough's methodology revealed how, despite an unhospitable wider societal context, humanist-feminist discourses were tactically advanced in two of the three sitcoms analysed: in the nineteen-eighties, *The Golden Girls* included contemporaneously dominant conservative discourses in its content, yet overrode that representation in its discursive ordering, by concealing humanist-feminist discourses in its underlying, unspoken and common-sensical, hegemonic discourse. In the postmodern, apolitical and postfeminist, nineteen-nineties, *Cybill* adopted a different strategy. In line with its decade of production, it encompassed a complex, non-universalist multiplicity of discourses, and disconnected radical from liberal-feminist discourses in its discursive ordering. Radical-feminist and postmodern discourses emerged as the dominant ideological currents in that show. The nineteen-seventies show, *Maude*, was broadly aligned with the dominant ideologies of its decade of production, and thus did not need to discursively shield its humanist-feminist agenda.

These findings empirically confirm Fairclough's argument that the inherently fluid process of hegemony formation offers the space for the dissemination of resistant counter-discourses; however, these need to both formulated and tactically situated in relation to the relevant predominant discourse (2010:56-68).

3. This thesis furthermore contributes to the academic literature on woman-centred sitcoms by focussing on three sitcoms which predominantly have been left out of the relevant debate. The great majority of scholarship on feminist sitcoms is centred upon and affirms *I Love Lucy*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Roseanne* and *Murphy Brown* as emancipatory landmarks of the format; *Maude*, *The Golden Girls* and *Cybill* are covered in a cursory

manner, if at all, in a wider reviews of the sub-genre (Gray 1994, Rowe 1995, Mellencamp 1996, Dow 1996, Rabinovitz 2002, Spangler 2003, White 2018). This thesis redressed this imbalance by exploring in depth three under-researched, humanist-feminist shows and pinpointed their significant contributions to humorous and wider cultural discourses. These include *Maude*'s humorously demonstrating the relevance of humanist feminism to older women, *The Golden Girls*' exemplifying the righteousness of humanist-feminist values through a fictitious post-patriarchal universe, and *Cybill*'s critiquing corrupt Hollywood practices decades before they were publicly derided.

4. Moreover, in the eighth CDA, I engaged critically with Linder and Dalton's (2016) chapter on *Cybill*; in the course of this, I provided new and alternative insights which countered their claim that *Cybill* can be classified as an exclusively liberal-feminist show (ibid.:200-201), by demonstrating its recurrent representations of radical-feminist thought.

Recommendations for further research

This thesis was designed to explore the sitcom format's representation of an ideology over a timespan corresponding to the length of a generation; specifically, it tracked representations of humanist feminism in three woman-centred sitcoms from the nineteen-seventies to the nineteen-nineties. This research design necessitates the strengths and weaknesses characteristic of all qualitative research: its findings are high in validity, of considerable depth and allow insight into meanings and motivations, yet lack in reliability and representativeness. One way in which further research might engage with, and complement, these findings would be through a quantitative content analysis, which could be utilised to categorise sitcom representations of humanist-feminism over the course of the three decades. This approach would furthermore allow for a larger, more representative sample than has been used here (but equally would not provide the depth and validity of this study).

Quantitative or qualitative studies could be utilised to explore humanist-feminist sitcoms' impact upon their viewers' attitudes (as

mentioned above) that is, whether the format merely mirrors or in fact accelerates social change towards gender equality in wider society. Holbert et al. suggested that televisual 'portrayals have the potential to substantially shape individual-level opinion' (2003:57); Shapiro conjectured that sitcoms reflect 'the liberal realities of New York […] and Los Angeles, and they transformed everyone else. […] Familiarity [with such lifestyles] breeds acceptance' (2011:84). It would be of great interest to operationalise the premise underlying Shapiro's statement (that is, that America's liberal East and West Coast cities successfully indoctrinated the nation into adapting their political values), and subsequently to explore whether the twentieth-century sitcom genre significantly affected public opinion on, in particular, humanist-feminist issues. If so, the specific role of the format's humorous discourses in this mindset-changing process could be explored in depth.

This study could furthermore be expanded vertically or horizontally, that is, its scope could be broadened within a particular decade, or beyond the timespan scrutinised here. Concretely, this could mean comparing several woman-centred sitcoms within a specific ten-year period, or examining shows prior (such as *That Girl* (ABC 1966-1971) or *Julia* (NBC 1968-1971)) or subsequent (such as *Girlfriends* (UPN/ The CW 2000-2008) or *Hot in Cleveland* (TV Land 2010-2015)) to the ones analysed here, for comparative purposes. Relatedly, extending the research into the twenty-first century could yield valuable insight into whether humanist-feminist ideology continued to be represented in mainstream discourses; if it was not, the analysis could seek to pinpoint how, when and why discursive change occurred. The impact of internet-based entertainment provision on the sitcom genre generally, and on woman-centred, comedic shows such as *Grace and Frankie* (Netflix 2015-) specifically, would be a related factor to investigate. Moreover, as stated in chapter eight, the sitcom *Cybill* depicted instances of sexual assault within Hollywood two decades before the phenomenon provoked international outrage. It would be highly interesting to explore whether the practice had been 'leaked' prior to 2017 in other sitcoms or within popular culture more generally. There now exists ample evidence that sexual

blackmail of, in particular, young Hollywood actresses was endemic throughout the nineteen-nineties and thereafter, allowed to continue by many bystanders' sense of helplessness (McGowan 2018, Farrow 2018, 2019). However, these witnesses often worked themselves in the movie industry and might have clandestinely channelled their experiences into their creative output. Such a study could additionally seek to identify the discursive developments in wider society which eventually generated an ideological tipping point, after which the exposure of women's institutionalised abuse occasioned public condemnation.

In addition, the findings presented here could be developed thematically by making male characters in woman-centred sitcoms the focus of analysis. While there exists a good amount of research on representations of masculinity within the sitcom format (see, for example, Hanke 2009, Miller 2006, Hatfield 2010, Miller 2011), it appears that a narrower emphasis, on men's depiction within the sub-genre, has not yet been adapted.

In *Cybill*, as argued above, women's liberation came at the expense of its male characters. In the sitcom genre generally, the representations of just causes need not be such zero-sum games, at least according to one of its masters:

> People also talked about the anger in the shows, and of course there was anger in them. It was social – I was angry at the lunacy I saw in the world. But for me there was always infinitively more love. I think the shows loved people, and that's why they tried to deal so deeply with the human condition – with all of its suffering, hysteria, foolishness and sublimity (Lear 2015:267).

The 'sublimity' is of course Norman Lear's. In the nineteen-seventies, he utilised the sitcom genre to represent and comment on the ideological battles then dividing American society. He made *Maude*'s uncompromisingly feminist protagonist lovable, and those disagreeing with her, relatable. As this thesis aimed to show, over the remaining decades of the twentieth century, *The Golden Girls* and *Cybill*, in differing ways, continued Lear's legacy, by intertwining the civil liberties called for by the activists of the second feminist wave with women's personal freedom to joke, and to laugh.

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Ally McBeal (1997-2002), Los Angeles: Fox.

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Amen (1986-1991), Los Angeles: NBC.

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As the World Turns (1956-2010), Los Angeles: CBS.

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Beverley Hills 90210 (1990-2000), Los Angeles: CBS.

Bewitched (1964-1972), Los Angeles: ABC.

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Cagney and Lacey (1982-1988), Los Angeles: CBS.

Charles in Charge (1987-1990), Los Angeles: CBS.

Charlie's Angels (1976-1981), Los Angeles: ABC.

Clerks (1994), dir. Kevin Smith, US.

Cybill (1995–1998), Los Angeles: CBS.

Dallas (1978-1991), Los Angeles: CBS.

Dawson's Creek (1998-2003), Los Angeles: The WB.

Desperate Housewives (2004-2008, 2013-2017), Los Angeles: ABC.

Devious Maids (2013-2016), Los Angeles: Lifetime.

Dharma and Greg (1997-2002), Los Angeles: ABC.

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Diary Of A Mad Housewife (1970), dir. Frank Perry, US.

Diff'rent Strokes (1978-1986), Los Angeles: NBC and ABC.

Double Trouble (1984-1985), Los Angeles: NBC.

Dynasty (1981-1989), Los Angeles: ABC.

Ellen (1994–1998), Los Angeles: ABC.

Empty Nest (1988-1995), Los Angeles: NBC.

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Everybody Loves Raymond (1996-2005), Los Angeles: CBS.

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Fantasy Island (1977-1984), Los Angeles: ABC.

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First Blood (1982), dir. Ted Kotcheff, US.

Frannie's Turn (1992-1992), Los Angeles: CBS.

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G.I. Jane (1997), dir. Ridley Scott, US.

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*Good Times (*1974-1979), Los Angeles: CBS.

Good Will Hunting (1997), dir. Gus van Sant, US.

Grace and Frankie (2015-), Los Gatos: Netflix.

Grace under Fire (1993–1998), Los Angeles: ABC.

Green Acres (1965-1971), Los Angeles: CBS.

Growing Pains (1985-1992), Los Angeles: ABC.

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I Married Joan (NBC 1952-1955), Los Angeles: NBC.

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I Was A Male War Bride (1949), dir. Howard Hawks, US.

In Living Colour (1990-1994), Los Angeles: Fox.

Jenny (1997-1998), Los Angeles: NBC.

Julia (1968-1971), Los Angeles: NBC.

Kate and Allie (1984-1989), Los Angeles: CBS.

L.A. Law (1986-1994), Los Angeles: NBC.

Law and Order (1990-2010), Los Angeles: NBC.

Leave it to Beaver (1957-1963), Los Angeles: ABC and CBS.

Laverne and Shirley (1976-1983), Los Angeles: ABC.

Life With Elizabeth (1953-1955), Los Angeles: syndication.

Living Single (1993-1998), Los Angeles: Fox.

Lou Grant (1977-1982), Los Angeles: CBS.

Love, Sidney (1981-1983), Los Angeles: NBC.

*M*A*S*H* (1972-1983), Los Angeles: CBS.

MacGyver (1985-1992), Los Angeles: ABC.

Magnum P.I. (1980-1988), Los Angeles: CBS.

Maguy (1986-1992), Paris: FR2.

Maude (1972– 1978), Los Angeles: CBS.

Married… With Children (1987-1989), Los Angeles: Fox.

Mary (1985-1986), Los Angeles : CBS.

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Miami Vice (1984-1989), Los Angeles: NBC.

Modern Family (2009 -), Los Angeles: ABC.

Moonlighting (1985–1989), Los Angeles: ABC.

Murder She Wrote (1984-1996), Los Angeles: CBS.

Murphy Brown (1988–1998; 2018), Los Angeles: CBS.

My Little Margie (1952-1955), Los Angeles: CBS and NBC.

My Sister Sam (1986-1988), Los Angeles: CBS.

Night Court (1984-1992), Los Angeles: NBC.

Nobody's Perfect (1980-1982), London: ITV.

NYDP Blue (1993-2005), Los Angeles: ABC.

One Day At A Time (1975-1984), Los Angeles: CBS

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Orlando (1992), dir. Sally Potter, UK.

Our Miss Brooks (1948-1957), Los Angeles: CBS.

Overboard (1987), dir. Garry Marshall, US.

Petticoat Junction (1963-1970), Los Angeles, CBS.

Phyllis (1975-1977), Los Angeles: CBS

Private Secretary (1953-1957), Los Angeles: CBS.

Pulp Fiction (1994), dir. Quentin Tarantino, US.

Rambo: First Blood Part II (1985), dir. George P. Cosmatos, US.

Rambo III (1988), dir. Peter MacDonald, US.

Roots (1977), Los Angeles, ABC.

Roseanne (1988–1997; 2018), Los Angeles: ABC.

Remington Steele (1982-1987), Los Angeles: NBC.

Rhoda (1974-1978), Los Angeles: CBS.

Romancing the Stone, dir. Robert Zemeckis, US.

Room 222 (1969-1974), Los Angeles: ABC.

Sanford and Son (1972-1977), Los Angeles: NBC.

Saturday Night Fever (1977), dir. John Badham, US.

Schindler's List (1993), dir. Steven Spielberg, US.

Scream (1996), dir. Wes Craven, US.

Seinfeld (1989 – 1998), Los Angeles: NBC.

Sex and the City (1998-2004), New York: HBO.

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Slackers (1990), dir. Richard Linklater, US.

*Soap (*1977-1981), Los Angeles: ABC.

Taxi Driver (1976), dir. Martin Scorsese, US.

That 70s Show (1998-2006), Los Angeles: Fox.

That Girl (1966-1971), Los Angeles: ABC.

The A-Team (1983-1987), Los Angeles: NBC.

The Accused (1988), dir. Jonathan Kaplan, US.

The Addams Family (1964-1966), Los Angeles: ABC.

The Amos'n'Andy Show (1951-1953), Los Angeles: CBS.

The Andy Griffith Show (1960-1968), Los Angeles: CBS.

The Betty White Show (1977-1978), Los Angeles: CBS.

The Beverley Hillbillies (1962-1971), Los Angeles: CBS.

The Big Bang Theory (2007 - 2019), Los Angeles: CBS.

The Bionic Woman (1976-1978), Los Angeles: ABC.

The Bob Newhart Show (1972-1878), Los Angeles: CBS.

The Comeback (2005, 2014), Los Angeles: HBO.

The Cosby Show (1984-1992), Los Angeles: NBC.

The Dick Van Dyke Show (1961-1966), Los Angeles: CBS.

The Donna Reed Show (1958-1966), Los Angeles: ABC.

The Doris Day Show (1968-1973), Los Angeles: CBS.

The Dukes of Hazzard (1979-1985), Los Angeles: CBS.

The Ellen Show (2001-2002), Los Angeles: CBS.

The Facts of Life (1979-1988), Los Angeles: NBC.

The First Wives Club (1996), dir. Hugh Wilson, US.

The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air (1990-1996), Los Angeles: NBC.

The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show (1950-1958), Los Angeles: CBS.

The Goldbergs (1949-1956), Los Angeles: CBS, NBC, DuMont and Syndication.

The Golden Girls (1985 –1992), Los Angeles: NBC.

The Golden Palace (1992-1993), Los Angeles: CBS.

The Heartbreak Kid (1972), dir. Elaine May, US.

The Jeffersons (1975-1985), Los Angeles: CBS.

The King of Queens (1998-2007), Los Angeles: CBS.

The Last Picture Show (1971), dir. Peter Bogdanovich, US.

The Life of Riley (1949-1958), Los Angeles: NBC.

The L Word (2004-2009), Los Angeles: Showtime.

The Love Boat (1977-1986), Los Angeles: ABC.

The Mary Tyler Moore Show (1970–1977), Los Angeles: CBS.

The Office (2005-1013), Los Angeles: NBC.

The Oprah Winfrey Show (1986-2011), Los Angeles: ABC.

The Piano (1993), dir. Jane Campion.

The Simpsons (1989 -), Los Angeles: Fox.

The Sopranos (1999-2007), New York: HBO.

The Stepford Wives (1975), dir. Bryan Forbes, US.

The Waltons (1972-1981), Los Angeles: CBS.

The Wonder Years (ABC 1988 - 1993), Los Angeles: ABC.

The X-Files (1993-2002), Los Angeles: Fox.

Thirtysomething (1987-1991), Los Angeles: ABC.

Three's Company (1977-1984), Los Angeles: ABC.

Till Death Us Do Part (1965-1975), London: BBC.

Titanic (1997), dir. James Cameron, US.

Wall Street (1987), Oliver Stone, US.

Who's the Boss (1984-1992), Los Angeles: ABC.

Will and Grace (1998-2006), Los Angeles: NBC.

Wonder Woman (1976/ 1977–1979), Los Angeles: ABC/ CBS.

Working Girl (1988), dir. Mike Nichols, US.

You're Only Young Twice (1977-1981), London: ITV.