

Comedy Television: Heading To The Good Place?

An in-depth analysis of the humour techniques used in NBC's
comedy series "The Good Place" in comparison with popular
90s comedy series "Seinfeld"

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Abstract

Everybody loves to laugh. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that people have been enjoying comedy ever since the Ancient Times and are still enjoying it in modern times in form of television comedy series, among others. Television in general also has the ability to educate people and be a catalyst for societal change. In this thesis, the focus lies on change regarding diversity and representation on screen.

This thesis aims to determine whether humour in comedy television has changed in a way that supports positive societal change. Discussing the history of serial storytelling as well as the television series and their qualities offers selection criteria for qualitative representatives for an analysis of two examples.

This analysis is based on three fundamental humour theories as well as a modern analytical tool that allows the examination of humour in sitcoms. Both examples are analysed regarding their use of humour strategies as well as fundamental theories. The results are discussed in context with diversity and representation. The two exemplary series are compared, and their differences are discussed in the final part. The results indicate that there are indeed differences in the selection of humour techniques, and show a tendency towards more situation based, less targeted humour in modern comedy television.

Kurzfassung

Menschen lieben es, zu lachen. Es ist daher kaum überraschend, dass Komik den Menschen schon seit dem antiken Griechenland Freude bereitet. Heutzutage wird Comedy unter anderem in Form von Comedy TV-Serien konsumiert. Humor kann heute viele Formen annehmen. Das Fernsehen hat die Fähigkeit, Menschen weiterzubilden und kann ein Katalysator für gesellschaftliche Veränderung sein. Der Fokus dieser Arbeit liegt auf der gesellschaftlichen Veränderung in Bezug auf Repräsentation und Diversität auf den Fernsehbildschirmen.

Diese Arbeit stellt die Frage, ob sich Humor in Comedy Fernsehserien auf eine Art verändert hat, die positive gesellschaftliche Veränderungen bewirken kann. Die Diskussion der Geschichte der TV-Serie sowie des seriellen Erzählens bietet Kriterien zur Selektion qualitativ repräsentativer Beispiele, die für die am Ende folgende Analyse genutzt werden.

Die Analyse basiert auf den drei fundamentalen Humorthorien sowie auf einer modernen analytischen Methode, welche die Untersuchung von Humor in Sitcoms ermöglicht. Zwei Untersuchungsobjekte werden auf deren jeweilige Nutzung von Humorstrategien und fundamentalen Theorien in Bezug auf deren Opfer untersucht. Die beiden Serien werden miteinander verglichen, die Ergebnisse werden im Kontext mit Repräsentation und Diversität diskutiert und die Unterschiede hervorgehoben. Die Ergebnisse zeigen Differenzen in den angewendeten Humorthorien sowie eine Tendenz zu situationsbasiertem anstatt opferbasiertem Humor in modernem Comedy Fernsehen.

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1 Introduction

*“Humanity takes itself too seriously. It is the world’s original sin.
If the caveman had known how to laugh, history would have
been different.” (Wilde, 2003)*

– Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Humour has a significant impact on everyday life. People simply love to laugh. Laughter is also often described as the best medicine. It has been proven to have many health benefits. It relaxes us, changes our mood for the better, can ease anxiety, and it can even have pain killing properties. (Ayan, 2009)

Laughter gives pleasure even though it does not have a specific purpose. It can lighten one’s mood and can break the ice between people. When people laugh together, they stop being individuals for a while and become part of an audience. (Mercer, 2016, p. 1)

Clearly, there is an appeal in laughing – which is also confirmed by the popularity of television comedy series.

1.1 The Problem

Comedy series are more popular than ever, and comedy television is in high demand. Formats such as *Friends*, *The Office* or *Community* are still very popular today despite having ended several years ago, in case of *Friends* even in 2004.

Long running formats such as *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* show the high demand in comedy television by still being on air after many years and seasons.

In 2018, Netflix’ upcoming series plan was led by comedy, followed by sci-fi and drama. Hulu’s upcoming shows had even more comedy planned, with 36% of the new content belonging to that genre. Apple TV had comedy in the first place as well, and HBO only had more drama series than comedy series. (Molla, 2018)

Emmy season in 2019 was extremely competitive. Series like *Barry*, *Veep*, *The Good Place* and *Fleabag*, winner in the category outstanding comedy series, show

wide variety in comedic content and have drawn in large audiences. (Emmys, 2019)

According to a report on the television and film greenlight process based on an Ampere Commissioning Analytics analysis, comedy, crime, and drama are currently the three most sought after genres that are being commissioned. When looking at all content that has been greenlit globally, comedy is leading the list with 19%. (Bisson, 2018, p. 5)

Comedy has always been a medium that reflected society, and there are ongoing debates regarding political correctness in comedy. In 2014, Jerry Seinfeld made quite a controversial statement questioning *“who even cared about diversity in comedy, as long as it was funny”* on CBS. (Chayka, 2014)

But the fact that, firstly, he felt the need to make such a statement, as well as the response this statement has gathered, shows that comedy is no longer exempt from the discussion about diversity. Comedy, and humour in general are no longer seen as a genre with a free pass. For a long time, people have been excusing offensive humour by claiming it was “just a joke” – but humour and its perception have changed, and what seemed to be funny in the past is not perceived as such anymore.

The main influence on this is a change in the portrayal of marginalised groups such as women, who are still very much a minority in television production, creation and portrayal on screen, as well as people of colour and other minorities. Movements such as #MeToo or #OscarsSoWhite, but also #BlackLivesMatter have brought issues to the attention of the mainstream and therefore fuelled the discussion in the current socio-political climate.

Studies show that one of the main criteria for television to be greenlit nowadays is a strong, powerful female leading character. Embracing diversity is a step that is strongly suggested to be taken by Bisson as well. Unique voices are what is sought after these days and are what will make a new project stand out from the masses as well as appeal to diverse fan bases. But it is not only about “box-ticking in the current zeitgeist, it’s an essential consideration [...]”. (Bisson, 2018, p. 24)

1.2 Aim of the Thesis

This thesis focuses on the use of humour in comedy television series and aims to discover whether the way humour is used in comedy television series has changed. It intends to answer general questions regarding the categorization of humour such as:

- Can fundamental humour theories be identified in comedy television?

- What types of humour techniques can be identified in comedy series?

The hypotheses this thesis is based on are:

- There has been a shift in the use of humour that can be seen in a comparison of the use of humour in different Quality TV comedy series.
- In modern television comedy series, humour techniques have changed. Jokes in state-of-the-art television shows such as NBC's "*The Good Place*" are increasingly aimed inwards or at situations instead of looking down on women or minorities or being based on non-attacking humour techniques.
- These new techniques correlate with better representation of women and minorities, since they can exist in the story without solely being the butt of the jokes.

The main research questions are:

- In which way does a new, state-of-the-art work of quality comedy television (as shown by the example of NBC's *The Good Place*) use humour techniques differently than comparable quality comedy television of the early 2000s?
- What role do the concepts of diversity and representation play in the shift in humour techniques?

To be able to answer these questions and confirm or disprove the hypotheses, the first part will explore the rise of the television series itself. The second part focuses on comedy series and the sitcom specifically, and fundamental theories of humour will be discussed. Furthermore, it offers a closer look at modern typologies of humour that can be used to categorize humour in television content.

The third part focuses on the victims of humour and discusses the relationship between representation and victim-based humour that centres on women and minorities.

The analytical part of this thesis will apply the previously discussed fundamental theories of humour in combination with modern typology to significant examples of past and present television comedy culture. Humorous moments will be analysed and categorised and compared in their frequency of use.

In an additional analysis, these comedic instances will be categorized based on their victims and analysed in reference to representation.

The final chapter of this thesis discusses the results of the analysis and explores what future creators of comedy can draw from these results in reference to their own work.

1 Introduction

The ultimate aim of the paper is to dissect whether the use of comedic strategies has changed towards a lesser aggressive stance and is therefore moving towards a less victim-based type of comedy.

This thesis does not aim to offer a perfect solution to producing “perfect” comedy television, nor does it claim to have universal answers regarding the use of humour strategies in the field of comedy television.

2 Background

Storytelling, as well as serial storytelling, has existed for a very long time and therefore has been researched and documented thoroughly throughout time. The same is true for humour theories – people have been laughing together for hundreds of years, and philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato have been searching for the cause and the meaning of it as well as scientists such as Sigmund Freud. (Stott, 2004, p. 9; Prommer, 2012, p. 112) Many have attempted to define “the one”, all-encompassing humour theory.

Modern humour research, however, tends towards the idea of several concepts of humour coexisting. It shows the coexistence of three fundamental theories of humour that are discussed in this thesis. They have been described both by philosophers and scientists. (Mills, 2005, p. 76)

Research efforts to sort humour into theoretical categories exists as an evolving field of work. The most thorough categorization was created by Berger in 1976. (Juckel et al., 2016, p. 585)

Research towards humour in television comedy is scarce. Comedy, according to Mills, is often seen as lacking complexity to be studied seriously. (Mills, 2005, p. 2)

In 2004, Buijzen and Valkenburg created a newer typology based on Berger’s to be able to analyse Dutch television commercials on their use of humour strategies. Their findings focused on which types of humour were used to target different audiences such as children, adolescents, women, or men. (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004)

In 2016, Juckel, Bellman and Varan used Buijzen and Valkenburg’s typology and amended it to be able to use it on television sitcoms. This is the most recent and extensive typology specifically aimed at sitcoms and is the basis for this thesis’ analytical approach. It is extended further by being combined with the three fundamental humour theories and applied to sitcoms, as described in chapter three.

Sitcoms have been written about quite frequently, as they are the most popular type of comedy television. Mills analysed the sitcom as a genre in general and its audiences and made assumptions about its future in 2009, while Savorelli focused on the genre’s future in “Beyond Sitcom” by analysing four popular series. (Mills, 2009; Savorelli, 2010)

Many institutions, such as the Institute for Diversity and Empowerment at Annenberg (IDEA) at the University of Southern Carolina focus their work on

analysing representation of minorities in the entertainment industry. They analyse diversity both on screen as well as behind the camera. (Choueiti et al., 2016)

Especially the representation of women in television has been researched extensively and due to its everchanging nature, the topic stays very relevant. Furthermore, representation of minorities in fields such as satire, romantic comedies, specific television shows, but also in popular culture in general has been researched. (Davies & Ilott, 2018)

Racial, national, and ethnic stereotypes as well as racial humour are discussed specifically “No Laughing Matter” by Rosenthal et al. Bucaria & Barra discuss Taboo Comedy, and controversial occurrences of such in television. (Bucaria & Barra, 2016)

Finally, Borum Chattoo discussed the impact comedy can have as a catalyst for change in her work for the Center for Media & Social Impact. (Borum Chattoo, o. J.) Social change in general has been discussed more frequently in the past years, in literature as well as in news articles.

Therefore, it can be concluded that while the respective fields of comedy, television and diversity have been researched quite well, combinations of them are rare. Thus, this thesis aims to fill the gaps between these main fields and attempts to connect them through analysis of humour techniques in comedy television and their impact on representation.

3 Method

The first part of the thesis explores the history of television series and serial storytelling to provide background knowledge for the criteria that is used for the selection of the two representative series. They are quality television, classified as a sitcom and defined by their form of serial storytelling. To ensure the understanding of the criteria, their history is discussed. In the analytical part of the thesis, the knowledge from the first part is used to confirm their validity as representative examples for the analysis.

Before discussing the sitcom format specifically, the thesis provides an exploration of humour in general as well as a historical overview. The three main fundamental humour techniques that the analysis is based on are explained, followed by a thorough discussion of modern humour typologies. The most recent one can be used for the analysis of sitcoms. This typology has been combined with the three fundamental humour theories and is applied to the two selected television series as shown in the table below.

Table 1. Combination of fundamental humour theories and humour techniques.

S	I	R	Main Category	Humour Technique	Description
	x		Language	Allusion	Indirect reference
x			Language	Irony	Saying one thing and meaning something else or exactly the opposite of what you are saying
x			Language	Puns	Playing with the meaning of words
x	x		Language	Repartee	Verbal banter, usually in a witty dialogue
x			Language	Ridicule	Making a fool of someone, verbally or nonverbally
	x		Language	Wit*	Ingenious humour
	x	x	Logic	Absurdity	Nonsense, a situation that goes against all logical rules
	x	x	Logic	Coincidence	A coincidental and unexpected occurrence
	x	x	Logic	Conceptual surprise (X)	Misleading the audience by means of a sudden unexpected change of concept
			Logic	Outwitting (X)	Outsmarting someone or the establishment
		x	Logic	Caught out*	Unexpectedly get caught while wrongdoing or saying something reprehensible
		x	Logic	Misunderstanding	Misinterpreting a situation
x			Identity	Parody	Imitating a style or a genre of literature or other media
x			Identity	Rigidity	Someone who thinks along straight lines, who is conservative and inflexible
x			Identity	Malicious pleasure (X)	Taking pleasure in other people's misfortune; victim humour
x			Identity	Condescension*	Displaying arrogance by patronizing those considered inferior
x			Identity	Deceitful behaviour*	Being deliberately misleading, concealing or distorting the truth

3 Method

x			Identity	Self-deprecation*	Expressing something negative about oneself
x			Action	Peculiar face (X)	Making a funny face, grimace
	x	x	Action	Peculiar music (X)	Funny, unusual music (when not as part of program structure)
x			Action	Clumsiness	Lacking dexterity or grace
x			Action	Repulsive behaviour	Offensive, aversive, disgusting behaviour
S = Superiority, I = Incongruity, R = Relief					

The analytical process itself begins with a coding process of each analysed episode. The episode is divided in several topic segments, as defined by Juckel, Bellman & Varan. (Juckel et al., 2016, p. 591) These topic segments each receive a time mark as well as a short narrative description. Subsequently, each topic segment is analysed for appearing humour techniques. This process is repeated for each selected episode. In total, three episodes of each chosen series are analysed.

The results section then discusses the differences between the two formats that result from the analysis. For better readability, graphs and charts have been created that show the distribution of different humour strategies in each episode as well as the entire series in total. Furthermore, the frequency of characters being the butt of the joke, as well as the use of taboo humour and the resulting amount of diversity and representation throughout the series and the impact on social change this has are examined.

4 The Television Series

4.1 A Historical Look on Serial Storytelling

4.1.1 Anthropology

Telling stories is an anthropological constant in human history and can be found in any high culture. Stories of a mythological, spiritual, or historical nature have been told orally long before being written down. This is also known as oral poetry. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 13)

It can be assumed that even those stories regularly were intended to be told continuously – or serially. In the Middle Age, the popular “Quest Structure” (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 14) emerged, in which a protagonist leaves to master several challenges and returns afterwards. According to Schleich & Nesselhauf, research regarding oral poetry indicates that stories of epic nature have been structured in an episodal way in ancient times. Reasons for this are varied, but often come from necessity, as Schleich & Nesselhauf describe: “as long as the bard is being paid, the story continues”. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 14)

The Tales of 1001 Arabian Nights are a popular example for seriality as well as a milestone in literary history and the basis of the cliffhanger. Scheherazade, wife of a barbaric king who has murdered all his previous wives, begins telling stories each evening – and ends them at the most thrilling moment. The king being curious as for the story’s progression, allows Scheherazade to live another day to be able to hear the ending of the story. The woman, however, continues to end the story on “a cliffhanger” every night and ensures her survival. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 14-15)

4.1.2 The Early 20th Century

Literature, especially in the 1900s, can be considered the most important pioneer in serial storytelling and built the foundation for storytelling techniques used in television nowadays. Printed serial stories that were published in newspapers were quite successful, because readers could not only be reached, but also tied to the newspaper, as they had to buy the next issue in order to be able to read the next chapter. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 14)

Schleich & Nesselhauf distinguish between two basic variations of serially told stories (as opposed to linear, closed narration):

4.1.2.1 *Serially Organized Plot*

A serially organized plot is a rather large, linear progressing story that is divided and organised in smaller parts. Stories such as *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens, which readers nowadays consume as a book, used to be told bit by bit, chapters spread throughout the years. This is mostly overlooked by modern readers, but the modern phrase “page-turner” shows the appeal of a story and offers insight into how hard it must have been for readers back then, who had to wait for weeks or months to be able to read the next chapter. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 16)

4.1.2.2 *Serially Independent Plot*

Serially independent plot however describes stories that are self-contained. The narrative draws from the same story universe, but the narration of each story ends with the ending of the part of the series.

A very popular example for these stories are the ones about the detective Sherlock Holmes, written by Arthur Conan Doyle. The characters as well as the basic story outline, which is Holmes being informed about a case and then solving it, stay the same throughout the stories, but each episode that was published in the *Strand Magazine* had its beginning and end. (Sly, 2015)

While not all authors in the 1900s were keen on publishing their stories in a serial manner, the popularity and success of them cannot be ignored. Especially very cheap versions of serial stories, also known as penny dreadfuls, were popular. The name stems from their price – which was a penny in Victorian England. Their American counterpart, dime stories, worked very similarly. Those stories also profited from the legal situation during these times, since it was not illegal to re-tell a story that already existed. Therefore, many publishers employed unknown authors for little money, who reproduced popular stories that were then sold for a small amount of money.

Stories were told for as long as people were interested in buying them, which occasionally led to odd or inconsistent narratives. But it also caused the creation of interesting figures such as Sweeney Todd.

The immense influence of these serial entertainment stories can not only be seen in the amount of sales and subscriptions, but also in the way that those serialized novels were compared to drugs (opium for the people). According to Schleich & Nesselhauf, there have been attempts to make cheap, addictive mass entertainment illegal or at least control it. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 19)

The influence these stories had on people is undeniable. After Dr. John Watson tells the story of his friend Sherlock Holmes dying in the story “The Final Problem”,

over 20,000 readers cancelled their subscriptions, wrote angry letters to the publisher and called for boycott. (Armstrong, 2016)

4.1.3 Filmic Series

Cinema has been telling stories in a serial way since the beginning of the 20th century. In the United States, short films were shown in so-called Nickelodeons, cinemas with an entry fee of about one nickel. Viewers could come and go at any time, and the films were mostly short movies that fit on one reel of film, therefore also called one-reelers.

When longer films became more popular it was necessary to change the reel, which caused interruptions in the showings. However, cinema operators noticed soon that if there was an unresolved dramatic climax before the changing of the reel, viewers did not leave the room. Thereby, the *minicliff* was established – a cliffhanger induced by technical matters.

Based on those observations, the first film series were developed, and Nickelodeons still offered cheaper tickets than movie theatres which showed feature films, which kept them in competition. (Fröhlich, 2015, p. 298) Furthermore, actual cliffhangers were created as well as *re-caps* (short summarizing re-tellings of previous episodes so viewers could join in at any point without having seen preceding parts).

Looking at popular examples from these times, it can be said that they have many common characteristics, such as a limited number of episodes, an ending in a cliffhanger and the inclusion of entertaining elements such as action or suspense.

While serial stories were successful up to the 1950s in Nickelodeons as well as in cinemas, they lost appeal with the rise of television. But even feature films which were shown in cinemas can evolve into a serial format if characters and themes are being revisited in sequels. Schleich & Nesselhauf quote James Bond as the most well-known example for that – not even the changing of the actors for major characters such as Bond, M or Q can stop it from being recognized as a serial product. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 26)

Nowadays, several successful films are being continued, mostly via sequels and prequels, no matter the genre. Still, according to John Fiske, those films are “one-off, completed, closed narratives” (Fiske, 1999, p. 144)

Therefore, they cannot be completely defined as a series, since they usually are not planned as a complete series, but rather a singular product that is serialized due to financial success. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 27)

4.1.4 Radio: Beginning of the Soap Opera

Long before serialised stories were told on television or in cinemas, they had been told on the radio. The influence of the radio as a mass medium can very well be compared to the mass medium television.

Radio quickly based most of its financing on commercials, and with especially housewives listening to the radio, companies selling products such as household supplies and hygiene products were very interested in finding a way to appeal to those housewives in a new and interesting way. They established the use of serial narration to attract listeners' attention towards commercial products. Sponsors wanted to present stories and figures that listeners could identify with, and thus, the soap opera was born. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 28-30)

Soap manufacturer Procter & Gamble sponsored the telling of narrative program "Ma Perkins", which was usually prefaced with commercial information about their newest soap product, and thereby coined the term. These formats were highly successful and by using the suspense climax before the commercial break, they ensured listeners staying throughout it to avoid missing the resolution. (Suess, 2019)

4.1.5 The Television Series in the 20th Century

With television becoming the new main mass medium, the success of radio soap operas dwindled. While in the 1950s, only about fifty percent of households in the United States had television reception, in the early 1960s it was already about ninety percent.

The world economy crisis in the year 1929 and the following Great Depression had a very negative influence on Nickelodeons and other providers of cinematic content. The people simply could not afford to go see a movie anymore. The radio had already been established as a successful mass medium and was still quite successful even during the crisis, therefore it was only logical to think of a similar strategy for moving pictures. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 33-34)

Up until 1945, television faced many struggles and television channels were rising only slowly. During the Second World War, the demand for entertainment was low and the radio was enough to bring information to the masses in the United States. In Germany, mass media was used to spread nationalist propaganda and had no need for a multitude of broadcasting stations. (Barovic, 2015) After the war, however, the tide turned, and television networks rose as well as TVs in American households. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 35-36)

Over the course of time, popular radio formats were adapted for television, such as theatre programs or news programs that were sponsored by a company. The development of the TV commercial, which in the beginning used to be a radio

commercial with added moving pictures, brought further money. With the success of television, radio as well as cinemas began to suffer. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 36-37)

Soap operas transitioned from radio to television as well. Not every format survived the transition, but several did. Changes that have occurred in these formats are:

- duration: series on television had a longer runtime
- cast: more actors were involved, and they were accompanied by an ensemble cast
- the story was not being broadcast live
- television series started to focus more on inner feelings and matters and less on the classic family and everyday situation drama

Especially the change in content and story is notable. In the 1960s, soap operas started to diversify themselves and began to tell stories dealing with societal change – which could also be seen in more diverse choices in casting. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 40)

4.2 The Golden Age(s) of Television

Throughout television history there have been several points in time during which a significantly higher number of quality television series have been produced. They have been named “golden ages” of television, and they do not only describe an era of innovation, but also reflect an era full of situational changes. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 48)

However, it is a difficult claim to classify several series into a Golden Age and compare it to “silly later series” (Thompson, 1997, p. 10) and then suggest that artistic quality is decreasing. (Thompson, 1997, p. 11)

Therefore, it is necessary to look at these Golden Ages with a critical eye while acknowledging the ground-breaking television that was produced during those times.

4.2.1 The First Golden Age (1947 – 1960)

The First Golden Age of Television shows a closeness to literature and theatre. However, according to Schleich & Nesselhauf, it can already be seen that the main focus of the television series is on the United States – the country that influences the television industry just as much as Hollywood controls the film industry. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 49)

The anthology drama is most associated with the First Golden Age, according to Thompson. It is based on New York theatre and brought about a large number of new writers, who wrote scripts that were also sold in book form.

In the following decades, large motion picture studios such as Disney and Warner Brothers gained interest in the television industry, and content slowly changed from being mostly live to pre-filmed.

Television series were cheap to produce, since sets could be reused, and it was easier to work with for both cast and crew. Furthermore, the viewers would know what they could expect, knowing previous episodes and being familiar with a show's concept.

Subsequently, television went to the west coast and relocated itself towards Hollywood. This correlates with television truly becoming a mass medium and being affordable for the majority of the population. This, however, was the same year as the first Golden Age ended according to TV historian Erik Barnouw.

Thompson explains this by pointing out how in the beginning mostly the wealthy and well educated could afford watching television and would want to watch classy drama, while towards the era of mass television, television became affordable for the average worker. (Thompson, 1997, pp. 22-23)

4.2.2 The Second Golden Age (1990s)

The Second Golden Age of Television can be described with the term "Quality Television", a new way to determine quality and differentiate it from other content. Specific criteria were created to be able to do so, which will be elaborated on in chapter 5.3.

Mass media had often been heavily criticised intellectually, which is critics wanted to compare television series to literary works, in an attempt of enhancing the television series' status. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 88) It consisted of a lot of serious and literary drama that was writer-based. Quality drama was a fixed part of a network's airing routine.

While the First Golden Age was focusing on "mass-distributed theatre", the Second Golden Age shifted the focus towards the television series. By nature, television could offer never-ending stories in a way no other medium could, as could be seen in soap operas, where viewers could follow characters for an indefinite amount of time.

Especially evening content was self-contained, and it did not matter if viewers had not watched the previous episode, since re-caps, introduction and the consistent style of the episode's narrative could help them understand what was happening.

However, when cliffhangers – which were used in daytime soaps, but less in prime-time television – were introduced to those formats, people changed their viewing habits. Before, people would turn on their TVs to a series because they “enjoyed seeing the characters go through their formulaic motions” (Thompson, 1997, p. 34). But after generous use of cliffhangers, they also tuned in to be able to see how events would unfold. (Thompson, 1997, pp. 33-34)

With that, many shows as well as sitcoms chose similar tactics. What was later considered quality drama had its roots in soap opera.

Nevertheless, the quality drama also often clashed with what was considered commercial TV content. It did not portray a positive and plain universe – on the contrary, shows used complicated story lines to tell dark and thought-provoking stories. As Thompson describes it: “overnight, the rules of prime time had changed dramatically”. (Thompson, 1997, p. 35)

4.2.3 The Third Golden Age – Mature Quality Television (2000s)

The Third Golden Age of Television is also described as a time of “mature quality television” and focuses on formats such as *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*. These series aim to offer a clear alternative to Hollywood by using cinematic techniques. Complex stories and the feeling of experiencing a blockbuster movie in the comfort of one's own home attempt to transform the television experience into an intellectual pastime. The vast abundance of good television content, however, also indicates issues with the classification of television formats.

Furthermore, according to Schleich & Nesselhauf, the overabundance of television series shows on the one hand that the interest in serially told stories is certainly still very high, but on the other hand also emphasises that not all of these series will have a successful future.

They also pose the following question: If this current Golden Age is classified by the aforementioned four big series, what happens after those? By the time of writing this thesis, all of them have finished. Is the Third Golden Age over now? The definition of a Fourth Golden Age does not seem out of reach and will probably encompass formats that are moving from television screens towards the internet. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 49-50)

4.3 Quality Television

As mentioned in Chapter 5.2.2., the term “quality television” was coined in the Second Golden Age of Television, even though exact definitions were hard to come by. Just as there was no clear formula on what made a show “golden” – people just appeared to know what quality television was when they came across it. (Thompson, 1997, pp. 12-13)

4.3.1 Criteria for Quality Television

Robert J. Thompson compiled a list of twelve criteria a show would have to meet in order to be considered quality television. These criteria include:

1. Quality TV can best be described by everything that it is not.

Quality TV is something that breaks rules and does not conform to standards. Possibilities of doing so are taking a genre and breaking its rules, transforming it, or defining new narrative methods by advancing into fields that are yet unexplored by television.

2. Quality TV usually has a quality pedigree.

Artists who have previously created pieces of art such as art films are more likely to create quality television. They are able to insist on independence from networks and are able to deflect their influence.

3. Quality TV is able to draw in an audience with blue chip demographics.

These shows can reach the desired audience of young and urban, well-educated people better than other formats do.

4. Quality TV shows often fight against big corporations/networks/uninterested audiences.

Quality shows often start out slowly and then have to fight for their survival. It is a fight between art and commerce, creatives, and executives. But they usually become a hit after the struggle and occasional odd circumstances.

5. Quality TV series often consist of a large ensemble cast.

Having multiple characters enables a show to offer diverse points of view, as varied storylines play out due to all characters having advancing plots.

6. Quality TV has a memory.

Episodes can and will reference previous episodes as the story progresses. References to a character’s past are made, and details from earlier episodes are built on with the further progress of the narrative.

7. *Quality TV brings new genres into existence by drawing from several old ones.*

According to Thompson, “all quality shows integrate comedy and tragedy in a way Aristotle would never have approved”. (Thompson, 1997, p. 15)

8. *Quality TV is usually literary and writer-based.*

The writing employed in these kinds of stories often has higher complexity than in other formats.

9. *Quality TV is self-conscious.*

References to itself as well as towards general television content are being made. They aim to distinguish the show from others, establishing their superiority.

10. *Themes and topics covered in Quality TV are often controversial.*

Not shying away from topics such as AIDS, abortion or religion is a sign for quality television. Liberal humanism appears to be the consensus in such a strong way that Thompson doubts the existence of a right-wing quality television series.

11. *Quality TV aspires toward realism.*

The intent is often to portray reality rather than fiction.

12. *Series that meet the eleven aforementioned criteria often receive awards and critical acclaim.*

Shows that match these criteria have been consistently successful for most major entertainment awards since the 1980s. Shows such as *Hill Street Blues* have won awards for the best dramatic episode by the Writers' Guild of America, Emmy Awards or Golden Globes, but also receive constant praise from prestigious people in the industry. (Thompson, 1997, p 13ff)

With these criteria, it was easy to spot quality television, as Thompson mentions, oftentimes before “you could tell if it was any good” (Thompson, 1997, p. 16)

Still, it can be compared to the art film, which is able to distinguish itself from blockbusters. These criteria have inspired many new creations and furthered the evolution of the genre in a fascinating way. The genre of quality television entailed serious changes in the industry and is a clear and determining factor for the Second Golden Age of Television.

4.3.2 Modern Quality Television

Ever since *Hill Street Blues*, American television has been known for creating and producing smart television shows of high quality (McCabe & Akass, 2010, p. 11)

Thompsons criteria for quality television have been used ever since they were published and have been successfully applied to formats that were released during the Third Golden Age of Television, but this has also led to controversial results. Furthermore, the criteria of quality television not shying away from portraying critical topics, taboos, sexuality, or violence has led to a rise in the portrayal of such – often less for critical discussion and more just for the sake of showing it. Schleich & Nesselhauf mention the term breasts per minute (bpm) and call it television trying to outdo itself. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 90)

Furthermore, with modern premium cable networks like HBO or Showtime on the rise, several newer versions of Thompsons categories were created, with Robert Blanchet updating the criteria in 2010, Robin Nelson classifying formats as “high end TV dramas” in 2007, or Logan Hill defining the term “Prestige TV” in 2013. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 90-91)

Thomas Elsaesser and Jon Cook consider a show quality television if it is national in a sense that it speaks about the nation and its history or future. Furthermore, they add the variable of success – a fan community, and for how many years it has been on air. They also state that the repeated practice of making television makes quality television, regardless of the genre. (Elsaesser et al., 1994, p. 67)

While these theories differ in nature, Schleich & Nesselhauf describe three essential aspects they all have in common. They describe modern quality television as formats with:

- innovative themes
- experimental aesthetic
- narrative complexity

Thereby, quality formats entail stories about societal issues and uncomfortable topics and are being told in an aesthetic way – both in a cinematic sense, as well as in a drastic and uncensored look at violent themes.

The premise of such complex stories consequently also influences the storytelling and produces intricate narratives and characters, stories that work on a meta level as well as transmediality. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 90-91)

4.3.2.1 *But is Quality TV Good TV?*

Still, even when a format meets all requirements for being considered quality television, it does not automatically make it *good television*. Sarah Cardwell describes it as quality television being perceived as “good for its viewers – morally or educationally edifying” (Cardwell, 2007, p. 21), but also mentions how it could still be perceived as unsatisfying, pretentious, or simply boring.

Good television, however, moves the viewers, provokes them while potentially still being of contemporary nature, it matters to viewers and is something people enjoy. (Cardwell, 2007, p. 21)

Therefore, being able to detect a program's quality signifiers does not mean to judge its value. Still, Cardwell argues that most of the criteria that makes a format "quality television" also makes the format good. Quality programs have a certain integrity in stylistic choices.

Furthermore, these quality programs are not only inviting viewers to think about portrayed issues, but also show the importance of everyday life and offer their audience the possibility to continuously reflect on the material. (Cardwell, 2007, p. 29)

In the end, good television is only perceived as good if it includes one important element: the experience of it must be a positive one. It "requires the subjective experience of an appreciative viewer who feels something towards it". (Cardwell, 2007, p. 31)

Therefore, the following conclusions can be drawn: What is perceived as good television is often also classified as quality television, but not all quality television is good television because it follows subjective and personal experiences. (Cardwell, 2007, p. 31)

Most of the discussions around quality television, however, focused strongly on television drama series. Since this thesis aims to discuss comedy series in particular, chapter 5 will discuss the comedy television series as a separate entity.

4.4 Serial Storytelling in TV Series

Serial storytelling differs from what is known as linear storytelling in many ways. The first important factor is time since it is almost impossible to compare a standard ninety-minute movie to a television show that spans over multiple seasons with dozens of episodes each. Being able to tell a story in more detail, branching out into side stories and characters and adding more depth to the story are some advantages the broader span of time offers.

The following subchapters will explore what makes a television series a unique way of storytelling and will explain important concepts.

4.4.1 Fragmentation and Organisation

Television series are being aired weekly and can therefore be consumed in parts. TV networks airing episodes weekly creates a rhythm for viewers. Furthermore, the story that spans over the entirety of all seasons is broken into pieces that

become episodes, which then also have their own substories. The episode is the micro layer of the season. But even episodes are broken down further and contain cleverly constructed points at which the network could cut into a commercial break. These points are usually prefaced with a dramatic climax – a cliffhanger.

The entire season is what would be considered the macro layer. Adding episodes together to form a season is mostly based on production matters. On the one hand, they sell well in a DVD setting, but on the other hand the continuation of a series can be decided season after season – depending on audience approval. A television series is rarely planned from beginning to end, as this demands the networks unconditional support, but rather develops over the course of time, as long as it is successful. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 113-115)

4.4.2 Forms of Serial Storytelling

4.4.2.1 Status Quo Series

Schleich & Nesselhauf differentiate between different forms of series. Their “status quo” series is the most basic form of serial storytelling. Episodes are full of creative storylines, but towards the end of the episode, they return to their initial state. Therefore, the narrative on the micro level does not have a big impact on the narrative of the macro level. Episodes can be seen as standalone pieces in a bigger context. After adventures that characters experience during an episode, they return to their normal state. A new story can begin. However, this also means that characters cannot learn from their mistakes or grow as a person, and their actions never have impactful consequences that go beyond the episode.

Series using this concept were very popular in the 1980s, where they would sometimes air in a non-chronological order. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 113-115)

4.4.2.2 Serials

Serials are the progressive counterpart to status quo series. They usually have story arcs that continue throughout multiple episodes and seasons. This concept is also employed in soap operas.

These kinds of shows regularly have several subplots next to the story’s main arc and tell more complex stories, in which progressive development of characters is the focus.

The complexity of the stories also demands more attention from viewers, since skipping an episode could lead to them losing their understanding of the overall storyline. By that, a paradox is created: while a single episode cannot be missed

and therefore becomes the most important episode of the evening, every episode becomes equally important to the serial's progression. (Hecken & Kleiner, 2017, p. 164)

4.4.2.3 *The Flexi-Drama*

The flexi-drama combines the status quo series and serials and uses both stagnant and progressive elements. In such programs, there usually is a wide story arc that encompasses the entire show and includes characters with character development and actions with consequences, while single episodes still focus on its own self-contained plot. They allow viewers to occasionally miss an episode, while still being consistently progressing in their narrative. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 132-133)

4.4.2.4 *The Miniseries*

The miniseries is another special type of storytelling. It usually consists of a very limited number of episodes and can be compared to the classic film. It is planned from beginning to end, which promises closure. The episodes usually are interconnected by storylines that are woven throughout the entire season and are more similar to serials than status quo series. It is often used for filmic adaptations of books. (Hecken & Kleiner, 2017, p. 165)

4.4.2.5 *The Anthology*

Anthology series are similar to miniseries in their limited number of episodes. Their defining feature is a continuation of the program under changed circumstances. This could be a change in setting, or a new cast. What holds episodes together is a theme that is woven throughout the entire story and is visible in every single episode. While miniseries often end after one episode, the anthology needs at least a second season to fulfil its definition. (Hecken & Kleiner, 2017, p. 165)

4.4.3 Elements of Serial Narration

As defined before, a series consists of seasons that consist of episodes. As mentioned, every episode is usually just as important as the other – but there typically are a few that stand out.

4.4.3.1 *The Pilot Episode*

The pilot episode is the first episode in a series. It is used to test the new story with an audience, and if it is received well, the rest of the series can go into production. Especially in the age of quality television, the pilot episode became more important. The first episode is often longer and produced very well, many times with a very large budget and a Hollywood director who can ensure a cinema-like visual aesthetic.

The so-called backdoor pilot is a special form of a pilot episode. It is usually the opening episode to a Spin-Off and introduces a new story arc with already known characters. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 151-152)

4.4.3.2 *The Finale*

The finale's importance has been on a steady rise for years. The seasons last episode often stands out by having a longer runtime or being a double episode, in order to combine runtime to be able to tie loose ends and finish a story arc. However, it is not only used to end storylines and show one last spectacular adventure before going into break before the next season starts, but also to bind viewers to the narrative and ensure their interest for the next season. The most commonly used tactic is ending on a cliffhanger, since unfinished stories or unresolved conflicts are what is most likely to draw viewers back in when the story progresses.

The series' finale, however, is built differently. Its main task is to end the story in a way that is satisfying to the viewer and to thank them for their trust. A series' finale is also often longer than the usual episode. Such episodes are known for drawing in a lot of viewers and ensure a high quota to their networks.

Having this much attention also brings a lot of pressure to a series' finale. There have been many final episodes that have not been received well by audiences and critics. A balance between satisfying long-term, loyal fans, and bringing the story to an end in a cohesive, sound way, must be found.

This can usually work well when a storyline has a planned ending, such as *How I Met Your Mother* – but even there, the show's success, which led to it being drawn out for much longer than originally planned, caused the ending to not quite fit the narrative anymore. If a series has to end early due to economic reasons, developing a fitting ending is much harder – especially if the premises' setup has not even been fully developed for the viewer. This process of ending a series early is also known as stoppage. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 155-156)

The continuation of a series is always bound to its success and economic value – therefore, many seasons end with a so-called wrap-up, which could, if necessary, also double as a series finale. In case the series got cancelled after that season, it would still have a functioning ending.

The counterpart to that, a cessation, does the exact opposite. Shows consciously end on a big cliffhanger that demands for continuation and take a risk by doing so – but often force networks to continue the show.

4.4.3.3 *The Bottle Episode*

A bottle episode is another kind of special episode. Large amounts, if not the entire narrative, happen in an already existing setting with only the recurring cast. The term was coined on the set of *Star Trek*, where they used to shoot several episodes that only took place in the spaceship due to budgetary reasons.

A bottle episode is very cost efficient, since it does not need new sets, locations or extra actors. Usually, a larger percentage of a series' budget goes towards a well-produced pilot and a spectacular finale, which can leave the rest of the episodes lacking financial support.

However, the amount of production cost rarely correlates with the quality of an episode. Especially in the case of bottle episodes, the limited settings offer many chances. Writers are able to further character development and show more intricacies of the dynamics in between characters. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 160-162)

4.4.4 Elements of Serial Continuation

Not only the obvious division of a story into several episodes and seasons defines what a series is. There are many elements that are representative for the format and are used to play with the viewers' attention and to cause suspense. Their aim is to create an intercontextuality and connection within the series.

4.4.4.1 *The Cliffhanger*

The cliffhanger is the best-known technique. It signifies the art of disrupting a story at its most suspenseful point and can be found at the end of an episode that does not resolve open questions. It is then either continued at that point or jumps towards a completely different angle. The cliffhanger serves as a means to capture and keep the audience's attention, which makes them wait through a commercial break or until the next episode or season. (Fuxjäger, 2007, p. 39)

4.4.4.2 *Break and Resumption*

To be able to cut to a commercial break, many series have planned breaks that are visualized with fades to black. After the fade, the storyline is either resumed, or the viewer is brought to a different scene, continuing a different storyline. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 167)

4.4.4.3 *Running Gags and Catch Phrases*

A series is always balancing repetition, which supports the seriality of a story, and progression, which drives it forward. Handling repetitive elements is difficult since the viewer needs to be entertained by them and not bored. However, especially

sitcoms have developed complex figures who often have very specific characteristics that are supported by their actions and statements.

A popular characteristic is a running gag – a repeating, funny element that interconnects episodes. A catchphrase is a special form of a running gag, usually a short phrase a character often utters and that is inseparably connected to the character. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 174)

4.4.4.4 Chekhov's Gun

Chekhov's Gun describes objects, which at first glance appear to be unimportant – but are vital for the stories' resolution. By showing these objects to viewers but not drawing any attention to them, they cause suspense and interconnect storylines with each other. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 175)

4.4.4.5 Red Herring

A red herring, also known as the false lead, is the opposite to Chekhov's Gun. It is used to draw the viewers' attention into a misleading direction to be able to surprise them at the end. It often appears in the form of a missing alibi of a suspect, making the audience suspicious towards that person, until the storyline progresses, and a plot twist reveals how the viewer has been wrong and successfully misled. (Fuxjäger, 2007, p. 44)

4.4.4.6 MacGuffin

A MacGuffin usually helps with the progression of a story while not being of substantial importance itself. It was widely spread by Alfred Hitchcock. It does not require an in-depth resolution as it is of no real necessity to the story. A MacGuffin is simply a device that is used to bring the storyline to its next point, without being relevant to the story. (Fuxjäger, 2007, p. 40)

4.4.5 Elements of Serial Framing

Several important parts can be found within the micro layer of every episode. Those parts organize the seriality within one episode, while the aforementioned elements of serial continuation are considered to be relevant for components that ensure seriality throughout seasons. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 181)

The serial frame describes all elements surrounding an episode's storyline. This encompasses direct narrative elements such as an intro or a recap, but also indirect elements such as a DVD cover. Direct elements are necessary for the story's progression and are inseparably connected to it, while indirect elements offer further information to the viewer. Viewers are able to gain further insights into characters or the story, often transmedially, but this is not completely connected to the episode's narrative. While these indirect elements have influence on the

reception of a show and are often used for commercial means, they can also have influence on the viewers expectations towards further episodes or seasons. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 183) However, they do not have direct influence on the narrative, which is why the following examples will be examples of direct serial framing methods.

Creating serial frames in the times of binge-watching and video on demand might be seen as redundant because viewers can simply pause and resume whenever they want. But serial content on streaming platforms is still relying on the renowned methods of framing since the abandonment of serial structures has brought upon more negative than positive examples. Therefore, the following examples of structures are still widely used and necessary. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 183)

4.4.5.1 Episode Titles

Similar to the title of a chapter in a book, every episode usually receives a specific title. The format of those varies widely, but they all serve to interconnect the episodes with each other while making the single episode unique and distinguishable. A consecutively numbered system is easy to follow – as can be seen in *House of Cards* (2013 – 2018) in which each episode is titled “Chapter _”.



Figure 1. Title of an episode of “House of Cards” (IMDb: “House of Cards”, 2020)

Series like *Mr. Robot* (2015 – 2019) use titles that represent the style of the entire series and stand out from other series by using a form of stylistic typography that matches the tone of the series.



Figure 2. Title of an episode of “Mr. Robot” (IMDb: “Mr. Robot”, 2020)

Scrubs (2001 – 2010) uses a system in which the titles are similar and thereby create seriality: each episode’s title starts with the word “my”.



Figure 3. Title of an episode of "Scrubs" (IMDb: "Scrubs", 2020)

Other formats use the title to create interest in the episode's storyline. *Friends* (1994 – 2004) uses this style by titling episodes like "The One With The Monkey" or "The One At The Beach" and emphasising the episodes main event. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 186-187)



Figure 4. Title of an episode of "Friends" (IMDb: "Friends", 2020)

4.4.5.2 The Intro

The so-called intro is the beginning scene of a series and its main identifier. It can take on many different forms, but its main components are a title song as well as a title card with the name of the series, and sometimes it also introduces cast and crew.

The musical score combined with the visual sequence and its colours and typography ensure the recognizability of the show. The intro serves as the corporate design of the show and therefore needs to reflect the tone and style of it. There are vast differences between an intro for a comedy show and one for a drama series. However, they both are often long and well designed. Therefore, it comes as a surprise that they are often meant to be skipped on streaming services, to ensure the viewer's flow in watching. (Zündel, 2019, p. 212)

Status Quo series usually start the episode with the intro, which means it is the first element a viewer sees. However, especially in crime and police shows, the cold open has been established, which is an introductory scene that presents the case of the episode and teases the rest of the episode. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 188-189)

4.4.5.3 *The Epigraph*

An epigraph is a phrase, usually a quote at the beginning of an episode. It is not the title, but another textual statement that displays the tone of the following story. It normally works on a metaphorical layer and invites viewers to broaden their horizons in a field that is connected to the story's narrative. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 193)

4.4.5.4 *Previously On / Next Week On*

Another prominent component, especially of progressives, is the "previously on..." element at the beginning, which is also known as a recap, or the "next week on..." segment, which teases the following episode.

The recap brings scenes of relevance from past episodes back to the viewers' attention, often because those storylines will gain importance in the near future of the story. They are not simply a summary of past events, but more a very specific selection to direct the viewers' attention. Cliffhangers from past episodes have a need for them as well to be able to revisit the high tension from the previous episode's ending and continue from there on.

The preview segment for the following episode is used less frequently. They tease the next episode, create suspense, and show plot holes to draw the viewers in. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 194-196)

4.4.5.5 *The Outro*

The final part of every episode normally is the outro, also known as the end credits. In modern linear television, the end credits seem to lose their importance – because giving credits to cast and crew often gives the viewer the opportunity to switch to another channel or turn off the TV. To avoid that, announcements or trailers for different shows are being played during the outro, or it simply gets shortened. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, p. 200)

But even on streaming services the outro is still a part of the show – thereby viewers have the opportunity to continue binge-watching, but also are aware of an episode ending and are able to discontinue. (Zündel, 2019, p. 213)

4.4.6 **Forms of Serial Reception**

Naturally, formats that are designed in a serial way should also be consumed in a serial way. But linear television has not been the only place where serial shows thrive, which is why in the following, both linear and nonlinear television will be discussed, as well as transmedia.

4.4.6.1 *Linear Television*

The traditional showing of series is a weekly occurrence on linear television. Usually, a day in television is organized starting with morning shows and soap operas, followed by talk shows and reality television in the afternoon, and ending with quality shows during prime time in the evening.

Shows are broadcast daily, weekly or on special occasions. Either way, the slot on which a show airs dictates the viewer to tune in. The strict schedule also requires the existence of breaks, which methods such as a cliffhanger need to bridge.

Linear television is what most people are used to, but it comes with flaws. If a viewer misses one or two episodes, it is often hard to catch up – because linear television waits for no one. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 207-209)

4.4.6.2 *Nonlinear Television*

The main advantage of nonlinear television is its flexible reception for viewers. By having content available at any time, new viewing habits have developed, and binge-watching has become a common pastime. It is mostly associated with video on demand platforms.

The concept began with quality television being created with the intent of releasing it on DVD for rewatching purposes. Nowadays, video on demand (VoD) platforms release entire seasons at once so viewers can binge-watch all episodes at once if they want to or create their own personalised viewing habits. Furthermore, these platforms have developed from being distributors to producers of original content. (Zündel, 2019, p. 197)

The auto play mode supports this as well and creates a seamless transition between episodes. Suddenly, it takes more effort to stop watching than to simply keep going.

However, binge-watching takes away the importance of the single episode and viewers tend to reflect less on them. On the other hand, it helps them understand complicated narratives better since they can watch continuously without having to take weeklong breaks. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 209-211)

4.4.6.3 *Transmedia*

On whatever medium viewers consume a show, at some point they will encounter a break due to new episodes not having been released yet, or the season coming to an end. Especially a season ending often gives viewers the feeling of being robbed of their favourite drug – since well told stories have long been said to be opium for the masses (see chapter 5.1.2.2.)

But the abundance of available content viewers can move on to as a distraction makes it hard for shows to keep their viewers interested. They need to be tied to the series so that they will watch the following season as well.

Transmedia offers many possibilities to do so, such as games, websites, or snippets of episodes, that are all cheap to produce with high output, while the more costly production of the next instalment is in progress. Those snippets allow viewers to dive deeper into the universe, learn more backstories and find out details the show did not offer. However, these transmedial extra features never play an important role in the core story – they are additional gimmicks whose only purpose is to entertain viewers and keep them on their toes. They can appear in the form of interactive alternate reality games, websites, videos or other forms of media. Not only do they promote user interaction and engagement with the context, they also encourage community building among fans. (Schluetz, 2015)

Schleich & Nesselhauf distinguish between the mother ship (the core story) and additional content in a different medium, and advise creators to be careful, since in the end, the viewer needs to return to the show on television and not get too distracted by transmedial content. These transmedia features are “selling tools, not telling tools”. (Schleich & Nesselhauf, 2016, pp. 213-215)

Obviously, there are stories that are told through means of transmedia storytelling entirely, but these are a newer, more modern form of storytelling and do not compare well to the classic forms of television this thesis focuses on.

5 The Comedy TV Series

Television, and quality television in particular, is many times praised and the subject of extensive research. However, quality television often focuses specifically on television drama, and overlooks television comedy series. Therefore, this chapter will explore the comedy series on its own, focusing on its most pristine and popular example: the sitcom.

This chapter will attempt to offer a definition of comedy as well as a look into its history, which has developed alongside quality drama series. Afterwards, it will discuss criteria that define a comedy show, and what makes something funny.

The fundamental theories of humour will be analysed, and a typology of humour will be introduced.

5.1 Comedy – A Definition

Trying to answer the question of “what is comedy?” is so complex that it would extend the scope of this thesis. Mills quotes the author E.B. White in saying that “analysing humour is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested, and the frog dies of it”. (Mills, 2011, p. 8)

The Oxford English Dictionary declares the word comedy as “a play, film or TV show that is intended to be funny, usually with a happy ending;” and “plays, films and TV shows of this type”. (The Oxford English Dictionary, 2012, p. 137)

This definition immediately shows the duality of the word and therefore its difficulties. It can refer to a particular piece of work (a comedy) as well as to the genre as a whole (comedy). By this, a program can be comedy while not being a comedy. (Neale & Krutnik, 1990, p. 16)

As mentioned in the definition of the word, comedies usually have cheerful, happy endings. Furthermore, they are defined by their intention of representing day life, as well as their intent of creating comedic effects and causing laughter in the audience. Their main purpose is to amuse. (Neale & Krutnik, 1990, p. 11) Despite that, Mundy and White quote André Bazin in saying that comedy is the most serious of genres in Hollywood. (Mundy & White, 2014, p. 4)

What is most fascinating about comedy is its variability. It ranges from poems to slapstick, and even in cinema and television, it is, according to Neale and Krutnik, “marked by its formal diversity”. (Neale & Krutnik, 1990, p. 10)

No matter how different the genres are, the methods to amuse viewers are consistently similar. To generate laughter, methods such as a funny line, a joke, a wisecrack or a gag are used. While they can all exist on their own as well, they work particularly well in the context of a longer storyline. These tools that are used to cause laughter ensure that other genres can be classified as comedy as well. The comedy genre is very susceptible to hybridizing with other genres. (Neale & Krutnik, 1990, p. 17)

5.2 A Brief History of Comedy

Many philosophers have written about comedy and what causes laughter. The ancient Greeks, as most historians agree, described comedy as something that came from a rather rural environment – as opposed to an urban one – and it was associated with rituals that supported agrarian fertility. It was connected to the god Dionysus, who originally was the god of nature and vegetation. (Stott, 2004, p. 9)

Philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle considered laughing as a lower expression. They equated laughter with maliciousness and glee and described comedy as an inner evil. They considered comedy and tragedy to represent different views of life. While a tragedy represented the divine, comedy showed the absurdity of humanity as well as human error. (Prommer, 2012, p. 112)

Plato described comedy as something that rotted thought. Especially among the ruling class, this viewpoint continued on for a long time. Comedy throughout time represented the working class rather than the rich and wealthy. (Neale & Krutnik, 1990, p. 12)

Aristotle, however, also thought that humour, and therefore also laughter, was what differentiated humans from beasts. He also noted that humans are the only creatures who laugh. (Stott, 2004, p. 11)

Many philosophers, such as Henri Bergson, followed up on that theory and described laughter at what differentiates humans from animals. To be able to laugh about something or someone, a certain emotional coldness is needed. (Prommer, 2012, p. 113)

One of the major definitions for a comedy is, as mentioned before, a happy ending. This requires a comedy to follow a certain narrative form. In the fourth century, a grammarian named Evanthius created a model for a narrative comedy, which implied that a comedy should consist of three main parts:

- a protasis, also known as an exposition to the story
- an epitasis, or complication, later on also expanded with the catastasis, which was a further complication

- and the catastrophe or resolution (Neale & Krutnik, 1990, p. 27)

Comedy is an essential part of culture. It has been portrayed on stages all over the world as well as in palaces and at fairs. Shakespeare wrote many comedies, some even centring on the life of the upper class. But even in those, the story usually revolved around rather private and everyday parts. (Neale & Krutnik, 1990, pp. 12-13)

In all its forms, comedy is first and foremost a social activity, from its creation on it is planned with an audience in mind. (Stott, 2004, p. 11)

5.3 Comedy on Television

While nowadays, silent film comedies are out of fashion and do rarely cause bursts of laughter in viewers anymore, in the earlier days of film, those types of films captured audiences and had them in hysterics.

For the working class and the poor, films needed to make an instant impact. Comedy films could do that, using special effects to cause transformations in time and space, pantomime, or slapstick. American slapstick comedy was associated with mostly physical comedy.

Furthermore, these films being silent made it easy to distribute them internationally. (Mundy & White, 2014, pp. 9-11)

Later on, comedy series could be seen as one of the main foundations of television and broadcast. While film comedies were commonly shown on television, comedies that were made for television were different and could be adapted to the needs and issues of the medium. In addition to this, comedic theatre pieces were adapted for the television screen. (Prommer, 2012, p. 144)

5.4 The Sitcom

Television nowadays is often used for entertainment. It is less seen as a special event, such as going to the cinema – on the contrary, by now, it is a fixed part of many people's everyday life.

5.4.1 Definition

Per definition, a sitcom is a fictional format, usually with a length of 25 to 30 minutes per episode. The narrative is episodic, and the characters are recurring. (Prommer, 2012, p. 143)

The basic story follows the scheme of a three-act play. It starts with an inciting incident, continues to build tension up until it climaxes, and ends with the reestablishment of emotional stasis. It is a form of storytelling that is strongly based on character interaction and interpersonal conflict. (Klika, 2018, p. 7)

The sitcom's main intent is to be funny. Its humorous content is what draws in an audience, and it comes with the expectation of being entertained. (Mills, 2011, p. 5)

Sitcoms do not exist as single episodes. They come in series and are broadcast at peak viewing times. They have a dramatic plot that continues throughout the seasons, while each episode is self-contained. (Wagg, 2004, p. 3) It uses a mixture of continuity and oblivion for the viewer. (Neale & Krutnik, 1990, p. 235)

Episodes are finite and have a self-contained storyline. At the end of the 30 minutes runtime, the conflict is resolved, and the happy end is achieved. The classic sitcom is performed in front of a live audience, who is able to react to it. The laughter is normally be recorded and added to the show as the so-called laugh track, or it is added separately. But not all sitcoms use the laugh track, especially modern ones tend not to. (Mills, 2011, p. 28)

5.4.1.1 *Classic and Modern Sitcoms*

Classic sitcoms are what is considered the beginning of the sitcom. They were usually performed in front of an audience, similarly to a play (thus also having a live laugh track). They were produced in studios, and therefore had a very specific look. The camera angles and the number of used cameras were fixed. Usually they were shot with three camera angles.

Modern sitcoms, however, are shot on location, and therefore seem more realistic than the classic sitcom. There are no fixed camera angles, which allows for a more cinematographic look. Furthermore, the audience laugh track is rarely used. (Mills, 2011, p. 37)

To be able to distinguish a sitcom from other genres, it is necessary to look at what it is not. A sitcom is, as Mills puts it, "not factual, not news and not documentary". (Mills, 2011, p. 26)

The setting of a sitcom is known for being recurring. This can be the workplace or the home of the characters, there are no limits – but the setting plays an important part and is usually where most of the episodes take place. (Mills, 2011, p. 28)

This makes sense, since the first half of the word "sitcom" stems from situation, which can not only be defined as a position, but also as a state of affairs. The situation, or the space in which a story takes place, is of high importance to

sitcoms. *The Office* even named the entire show after its main location. (Savorelli, 2010, p. 26)

The situation in its other sense is of the same importance. Stereotypical characters that clash with each other cause high conflict. The most important part is keeping a distinct situational order that is usually established immediately in the pilot episode. A character has certain characteristics, to which they always come back. With that, however, characters sometimes show a lack of depth. They sometimes do not have fleshed-out lives since they rarely are important for the progression of the story line.

However, they often have strong, recognizable characteristics that make them unique and interesting. Attitude, personal beliefs and other characteristics make them who they are and serve as a cause for conflict when confronted with other characters. In general, the characters are mostly defined by their relationships. Klika defines three categories: family, friends, and workplace relationships.

This ambiguity in definition is almost necessary for the narration in a sitcom since it offers space for the storyline to progress. The characters in *Friends* spend all their time in their coffee shop, characters in workplace comedies spend most of their time at work. The place defines the scene. (Savorelli, 2010, pp. 26-29)

These constants have led to many experts describing a sitcom as a narrative in which characters are stuck. Whatever happens, at the end of the episode they revert back to how they were at the beginning, and no permanent change, or growth, happens, unless the series comes to an ultimate ending. But even on these occasions, there have been series that ended with an episode that did not really end the storyline, on the contrary – it reverted, just like any other episode, leaving the viewer somewhat dissatisfied but also able to imagine further plots.

The sitcom is often called the holy grail of television. It being able to be watched repeatedly makes it very appealing to the market. (Klika, 2018, p. 47) Furthermore, it is easy to tune in at any time, since sitcoms usually have quite a simple premise. While longer story arcs are drawn throughout episodes, the fundamental setup is often easy to grasp and characters are so distinctive that they do not need long introductions. Viewers could turn on their television and watch an episode of the *Simpsons*, and even if it was their first episode ever, they would be able to grasp the concept of the show and enjoy the mostly contained storyline. (Reece, 2019)

5.4.1 Differentiating Sitcoms from other Genres

Defining a certain genre is rarely easy, since they are all related in some way and often connected contextually. According to Mills, genres are very fluid and oftentimes also do not matter. The ordinary viewer does not care whether they are watching a sitcom or a soap opera, as long as they are adequately entertained.

The comedy drama constitutes a similar problem. With modern sitcoms ceasing to use the laugh track and using larger narratives, borders are blurred. The British broadcasting regulator Ofcom distinguishes between sitcom and comedy drama by looking at the length of the format. Comedy drama is usually considered to be longer than the sitcom's 30 minutes. (Mills, 2011, pp. 24-27)

Sitcoms mirror culture and its current themes, while at the same time they provide entertainment. However, this functions well with many other genres and therefore, many hybrid formats exist as well. There are even crossovers with reality television, that cross the lines between fiction and reality, ensuring even more that borders between genres are increasingly blurred. (Mills, 2011, p. 43)

5.4.2 History

Similar to the development of other televised content, the popularity of the sitcom began in the late 1950s. People liked seeing characters that were *one of them* but working on their own account. Characters who served no master and represented freedom became very popular after the Second World War. (Wagg, 2004, p. 15)

The first sitcom not based on a radio show was *I Love Lucy*. That show became the most popular show of the decade and is still known as the most successful television series of that time. It has thoroughly changed television production.

During the 60s, the main theme of sitcoms was escapism. In the 70s, many new sitcoms were brought to television screens and most of them, according to Wagg, dealt with "personal and domestic problems of middle and lower middle class life", showing the search for gratification. (Wagg, 2004, p. 15)

After the classic Western movie's popularity began to dwindle, sitcoms dominated television. While they often got a less than enthusiastic response from television critics, the demand for sitcoms in the 80s was at an all-time high. (Wagg, 2004, p. 17)

During the 1990s, in which the postmodernist era began, sitcoms were still very popular. Most of them were closer to reality rather than fiction. During this time, many sitcom classics, as they are known now, were created. Many of them are still successful to this day, such as *Roseanne*, *Seinfeld*, or *Friends*.

5.5 Popularity of Modern Comedy Series

In the past few years however, the sitcom's golden days seemed to come to an end. Ray Richmond in *The Hollywood Reporter* went as far as to say that sitcoms have died in 2007. (Richmond, 2007) Meanwhile, video on demand services have become increasingly popular and binge-watching has become a household term.

Netflix provides large amounts of comedy and drama series, and often releases all episodes at once and thus further enables the binge-watch. So how can the sitcom be dead?

According to Mills, the sitcom genre was still the most popular one in the United States in 2005. (Mills, 2005, p. 54) The reason for this juxtaposition can most likely be found in the increase of hybrid formats. The sitcom as it was known in the past, with its half hour structure, is being expanded increasingly and often merges into almost hour-long drama comedy.

These modern shows often focus on telling a story first and then adding the comedic elements. Loglines that would rarely have gotten attention in the 90s are being made now, since if a show is considered too risky for television, it can always move to a streaming provider.

Looking at the shows that have been considered for and also won the Emmy for best television, one can also see the strong competition in this field. These very creative shows seem to offer a new kind of comedy television, which is very popular. And still, many of them can be considered a sitcom. Therefore, it can be concluded, the sitcom is not dead – it is evolving.

5.6 Comic Identities

Oftentimes, the humour in comedy series stems from the main characters. Many comedic characters play on our fears of being imperfect by showing failure in self-awareness or by not being able to reflect. Comic characters are often one-dimensional – they cannot learn and change. In modern comedy, character types are usually very strictly defined, which makes their actions predictable. (Stott, 2004, p. 39)

5.6.1 Stereotypes

According to Stott, traditional comedy is strongly driven by plot. He compares characters to machines, continually producing the same emotions and expressions. Many popular comical plays were built on the foundations of similar character tropes, and this continued into modern comedy. A character's identity is their destiny, and therefore they are doomed to "repeat their actions and live forever at the mercy of their undiagnosed flaws". (Stott, 2004, p. 45)

Stereotypical characters often create humour through their comic appearance or behaviour. They are often created as certain types, such as *The Housewife*, or *The Idiot Savant*. (Klika, 2018, p. 19)

5.6.2 Clowns, Fools & Folly

The fool is very popular figure, often also described as the clown or jester. This figure represents contradictions and should not be compared to an idiot – much more to a figure that expresses the ambiguous. Folly, as Stott describes it, is seen as expressing human nature without which social interaction would be unhappy. Furthermore, the truth often reveals itself disguised as folly. (Stott, 2004, pp. 47-49)

5.6.3 Tricksters

As a witty performer of practical jokes, the trickster is a figure similar to the fool. Bound by no limits, this character can cross lines and violate sacred restrictions. A very popular figure is the Norse god Loki. The main goal of this figure is to offer a check on beliefs as well as cause mischief, representing the shadow parts of the self and serving as an agent of chaos. (Stott, 2004, pp. 49-51)

These comic identifiers can be found in many comedies and are easily recognizable in key characters. Those key characters are often the victim of jokes and humiliation. They are trapped in a situation they constantly try to escape from, but fail over and over again. (Klika, 2018, p. 45)

5.7 Fundamental Humour Theories

The way humour is communicated in comedic television varies. Many people have tried to find the one fundamental theory of humour, and many exist by now – but it can be said that there is not the one, overarching theory that can define all of comedy. (Mundy & White, 2014, p. 11)

However, there are three theories of humour that are considered fundamental, which will be discussed in the following.

5.7.1 The Relief Theory

This theory, also known as the release theory or catharsis, deals with the psychological reasons for provoking laughter. From the viewpoint of the theory of relief, people laugh to ease built up tension. Humour shows desires that have been suppressed, often based on sexuality and or aggression, but also death. (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004, p. 163)

According to Stott, laughter is a symptom of struggle with the self. It deals with personal hidden thoughts, which also explains how not everyone has the same

taste in humour. Laughing out loud is the manifestation of the release of nervous energy. (Stott, 2004, p. 131)

The relief one gets from humour is so strong that it is even the base of medical measures. There are therapies that use humour and laughter, and psychologists use it in a hospital situation to release tension in the patient. (Prommer, 2012, p. 115)

5.7.2 The Theory of Incongruity

Immanuel Kant is known as the creator of the theory of incongruity. He describes the source of a comic effect to be inconsistency. Laughter happens if something does not fit or if there is a surprising twist. Situational comedy or puns can be classified as such humour. Other common practices are absurdity, nonsense, or surprise. (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004, p. 148) The recipient laughs because of the unexpected absurdity, but also because they understood the joke. (Prommer, 2012, p. 114)

Intellect is necessary to understand this kind of humour because the listener needs to be able to identify the inconsistency. Humans desire consistency and laugh when it is missing. (Lynch, 2002, p. 248) The use of this type of humour can be dated back to the 18th century, where wit was considered a skill of the cultured. (Stott, 2004, p. 130)

At the very core of incongruity always lie two independent elements that are brought together, which causes surprise. Incongruity theories question what makes humour what it is: a funny experience.

This theory is strongly based on the matter of suddenness. The element of surprise can be compared to a joke's punchline. When it is told repeatedly, or the structure is too familiar and therefore its element of surprise is taken away, the joke stops being funny. This theory has been topic of many studies in philosophy, psychology, anthropology and sociology, as well as literature. (Günther, 2003, p. 9)

5.7.3 The Theory of Superiority

This theory can be traced back to Thomas Hobbes. It is also known as the theory of disparagement, criticism, or hostility. (Korostenskienė & Lieponytė, 2018, p. 58) It poses the idea that humans experience something as funny when they are able to feel superior. At the same time, it is a demonstration of power. Plato and Aristotle might be the origin of this theory since they assumed the weak and powerless laughed about the rich and powerful. Hobbes, however, assumed the opposite.

Either way, one group of people created comedic content by looking down on others. (Prommer, 2012, pp. 113-114)

According to Prommer, the modern theory of disparagement is connected to this as well. Empirical studies have shown that jokes generate more laughter if the victim can be compared to a stereotype, and if the listener can distance themselves from the victim. (Prommer, 2012, p. 114)

The idea of classing victims based on identification shows that humour is based on social and cultural context. These groups can range from ethnicity to identity, and they may exist or not exist to certain people, depending on culture. (Günther, 2003, pp. 12-13) In addition, people laugh because they feel superior, triumphant, or simply more right in comparison to others who are considered wrong or inferior. Typical examples are ridiculing others and laughing about the less fortunate, as well as people who differ from the norm. (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004, p. 148) This can be seen in the way many countries make condescending or patronizing jokes about other ethnic groups in their own countries. Germans laugh about people from East Frisia or Swabians, northern Italians laugh about southern Italians. (Prommer, 2012, p. 114)

Furthermore, tricking someone is a clear example of superiority. (Prommer, 2012, p. 113) Laughter that is not directed at a marginalised or inferior person is still directed at absurd things that stem from that person, according to Stott. Jokes that have their roots in sexism or racism assume a superiority based on ethnicity or gender. (Stott, 2004, pp. 125-128)

Even riddles and puns have their origins in duels and people attempting to assert dominance over each other with words. Creating puns is still a way of defeating an opponent in a conversation. Even innocent jokes appear to hold a foundation of aggression. Many times, the aim is to ridicule someone else.

Humour that is self-deprecating can be explained as laughing and feeling superior about one's past. Every human can laugh about parts of their identity that do not reflect their current mood.

Nowadays, many distinguish between laughing at someone and laughing with someone and denounce all forms of racist or sexist humour. In regard to the superiority theory, however, this cannot be true, since humour without aggression is not defined as humour anymore.

The three main theories that are mentioned above have been well analysed and discussed by many experts. Modern humour research states that while having themes and focuses, no theory alone can explain all variations of humour. On the

contrary, they often complement each other, and many examples of humour can be explained by more than one concept. (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004, p. 148)

5.8 Typology of Humour

5.8.1 Buijzen & Valkenburg

Buijzen & Valkenburg have created a thorough typology to analyse humour. Their typology is based on Berger's, which was created in 1976 and is still considered to be the most precise and detailed. Berger states that humour can be divided into parts and techniques.

He has defined four main parts of humour:

- language (verbal humour)
- logic (ideational humour)
- identity (existential humour)
- action (physical or nonverbal humour)

and 45 subcategories (techniques) that he sorted by those main parts. However, Berger's theory focuses on verbal jokes and adults – humour aimed at children was not included in his typology. Furthermore, Berger analysed jokes – not television specifically. (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004, p. 149)

Therefore, Buijzen & Valkenburg instigated their own large evaluation of humour and focused on television commercials. Their study, which was carried out in 2004, identified 41 humour techniques. Similarities to Berger's typology can be found, however, their categorisation is much more appropriate for the study of television. This was achieved by analysing a large number of humorous commercials and using data reduction tools to be able to cluster them into categories.

5 The Comedy TV Series

TABLE 1
Humor Techniques

Humor Technique	Short Description
Absurdity ^a	Nonsense, a situation that goes against all logical rules
Anthropomorphism	Objects or animals with human features
Bombast ^a	Talking in a high-flown, grandiloquent, or rhetorical manner
Chase ^a	A pursuit or chase of someone or something
Clownish behavior ^a	Making vigorous arm and leg movements or demonstrating exaggerated irregular physical behavior
Clumsiness	Lacking dexterity or grace
Coincidence ^a	A coincidental and unexpected occurrence
Conceptual surprise	Misleading the audience by means of a sudden unexpected change of concept
Disappointment ^a	A situation that leads to (minor) disappointment
Eccentricity ^a	Someone who deviates from the norms, an odd character
Embarrassment ^a	An awkward situation in which someone gets a sense of discomfort, uneasiness, or shame
Exaggeration ^a	Making an exaggeration or overstatement; reacting in an exaggerated way; exaggerating the qualities of a person or product
Grotesque appearance ^a	Someone who has a bizarre or monstrous appearance with striking features
Ignorance ^a	Someone acts or behaves in a foolish, naive, gullible, or childish manner
Imitation ^a	Mimicking or copying someone's appearance or movements while keeping one's own identity at the same time
Impersonation ^a	Taking on the identity of another person, intentionally or unintentionally
Infantilism ^a	Playing with the sound of words
Irony ^a	Saying one thing and meaning something else or exactly the opposite of what you're saying
Irreverent behavior	Lacking proper respect for authority or the prevailing standards

TABLE 1
Continued

Humor Technique	Short Description
Malicious pleasure	Taking pleasure in other people's misfortune; victim humor
Misunderstanding ^a	Misinterpreting a situation
Outwitting	Outsmarting someone or the establishment by retort, response, or comeback
Parody ^a	Imitating a style or a genre of literature or other media
Peculiar face	Making a funny face, grimace
Peculiar music	Funny, unusual music
Peculiar sound	Funny sound, unexpected sound, as in cartoons
Peculiar voice	Funny, unusual voice
Pun ^a	Playing with the meaning of words
Repartee ^a	Verbal banter, usually in a witty dialogue
Repetition ^a	Repetition or replay of the same situation
Ridicule ^a	Making a fool of someone, verbally or nonverbally
Rigidity ^a	Someone who thinks along straight lines, who is conservative and inflexible
Sarcasm ^a	Biting remark made with a hostile tone; sarcasm is always a verbal put-down
Satire ^a	Making a fool of or poking fun at well-known things, situations, or public figures
Scale ^a	Very large or small sizes of objects that surpass people's logical expectations
Sexual allusion ^a	Making a reference or insinuation to sexual or naughty matters
Slapstick ^a	Physical pie-in-the-face humor often involving degradation of someone's status
Speed ^a	Talking or moving in very fast or slow motion
Stereotype ^a	Stereotyped or generalized way of depicting members of a certain nation, gender, or other group
Transformation ^a	Someone or something takes on another form or undergoes a metamorphosis; before/after
Visual surprise	A sudden unexpected visual/physical change

^aHumor technique adopted from Berger (1976, 1993).

Figure 5. Description of Buijzen & Valkenburg's Humour Techniques.

This list also shows the adjustments they made to Berger's typology. Berger's 45 techniques were reduced to 41. 16 of Berger's original techniques were omitted, while 12 new techniques were added. (Juckel et al., 2016, p. 586)

These 41 techniques could be sorted into eight categories of humour which encompassed them. While not all techniques could be sorted perfectly, since several used not only methods of one technique, they were able to logically group them together and combine them with similar techniques that generated humour in a very similar way.

These categories were:

- Slapstick
- Surprise
- Irony
- Clownish behaviour
- Misunderstanding
- Parody
- Satire
- Miscellaneous

According to Buijzen & Valkenburg, these categories vary in complexity. Clownish humour is considered a rather simple category that uses movements of arms and legs, among others, as well as misunderstandings. Those, however, are often

humour based on victimization and laughing at others. Surprise is more cognitively demanding, while parody is quite complex since it is based on the recipient also knowing the material it parodies. Slapstick humour, satire and irony are rather antagonistic and are often accompanied by malicious delight. (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004, p. 162)

Just as this thesis, Buijzen & Valkenburg's study aimed to detect the cause of humour rather than delve into why something is considered funny. However, they confirm that all their categories as well as their subcategorized humour techniques can be explained by a specific theory or a combination of the three major theories that are known for explaining humour: Superiority, incongruity, and relief.

Incongruity can be found in surprise or clownish behaviour. Superiority can be detected in categories such as irony or satire since it is connected to laughing at others and bringing them down. Relief theory is a potential foundation for slapstick humour and its antagonistic nature and aggression. However, in slapstick one can also find traces of superiority (because there often is malicious intent) and incongruity (because it often uses coincidental events). (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004, pp. 162-164)

Buijzen & Valkenburg's study focused on television commercials. It studied the diversity of humour in different age groups and how those groups as well as gender groups were targeted. Therefore, the results of this study are not of further relevance for this paper. However, the foundations they created with their categorizational system will be of further use.

5.8.2 Juckel, Bellman & Varan

In 2016, Juckel, Bellman & Varan carried out a study that aimed to identify types of humour focusing on sitcoms. This study used the aforementioned study by Buijzen & Valkenburg as well as Berger's foundations as a basis and adapted them for the use of analysing situational comedies in particular, since "we still know surprisingly little about their specific events" (Juckel et al., 2016, p. 583)

Since Berger's top to bottom categorization system with the four identifiers ensured that there was no miscellaneous category, which could lead to ambiguities in the results, this approach was used as a foundation. However, they did not use Berger's subcategories – the humour techniques – but rather analysed the ones Buijzen & Valkenburg had created and adapted them to their specific analytical needs.

In the first phase of their study, they decided on which components of Berger's system to keep. Several subcategories were renamed and some originating from

Buijzen & Valkenburg's creation were added and relocated to Berger's four identifiers. They grouped several categories together and split other categories into their own subcategory.

In the second phase, five further sitcom-specific techniques were created:

- wit
- caught out
- condescension
- deceitful behaviour
- self-deprecation

During the third phase, the new coding system was tested thoroughly by coding a number of example sitcoms. The testers discussed the scenes using their newly developed coding sheet and made necessary amendments. Finally, they carried out a reliability test and separately coded two episodes of four sitcoms respectively. The episodes were split into scenes by topic and those scenes were coded for their humour techniques when they occurred. The absences of technique was also noted. (Juckel et al., 2016, pp. 587-589)

By means of this process, they created a final result which can be seen in figure 6.

Language	Logic	Identity	Action
Allusion	Absurdity	Parody	Peculiar face†
Irony	Coincidence	Rigidity	Peculiar music†
Puns	Conceptual surprise†	Malicious pleasure†	Clumsiness†
Repartee	Outwitting†	Condescension*	Repulsive behavior
Ridicule	Caught out*	Deceitful behavior*	
Wit*	Misunderstanding	Self-deprecation*	

Notes: *New technique created for this study.
† Buijzen & Valkenburg technique.

Figure 6. Juckel, Bellman & Varan's humour techniques separated into four main categories.

This table shows the four main categories Language, Logic, Identity and Action that stem from the four identifiers defined by Berger. The eight main categories Buijzen & Valkenburg used were discarded.

These four identifiers contain 22 subcategories – the humour techniques. In comparison to Berger's 45 techniques and Buijzen's 44 techniques, this is more condensed, while still effective.

Six of the ones Buijzen & Valkenburg created were added to these subcategories. Furthermore, five new, sitcom-specific ones, were created. (Juckel et al., 2016, pp. 584-585)

The following table lists and defines the humour techniques for better understanding.

Table 2. Humour techniques and their respective descriptions.

Humour Technique	Description
Allusion	Indirect reference
Irony	Saying one thing and meaning something else or exactly the opposite of what you are saying
Puns	Playing with the meaning of words
Repartee	Verbal banter, usually in a witty dialogue
Ridicule	Making a fool of someone, verbally or nonverbally
Wit*	Ingenious humour
Absurdity	Nonsense, a situation that goes against all logical rules
Coincidence	A coincidental and unexpected occurrence
Conceptual surprise (X)	Misleading the audience by means of a sudden unexpected change of concept
Outwitting (X)	Outsmarting someone or the establishment
Caught out*	Unexpectedly get caught while wrongdoing or saying something reprehensible
Misunderstanding	Misinterpreting a situation
Parody	Imitating a style or a genre of literature or other media
Rigidity	Someone who thinks along straight lines, who is conservative and inflexible
Malicious pleasure (X)	Taking pleasure in other people's misfortune; victim humour
Condescension*	Displaying arrogance by patronizing those considered inferior
Deceitful behaviour*	Being deliberately misleading, concealing or distorting the truth
Self-Deprecation*	Expressing something negative about oneself
Peculiar face (X)	Making a funny face, grimace
Peculiar music (X)	Funny, unusual music (when not as part of program structure)
Clumsiness	Lacking dexterity or grace
Repulsive behaviour	Offensive, aversive, disgusting behaviour
* = technique added by Juckel, Bellman & Varan (X) = technique from Buijzen & Valkenburg	

Since this typology is the most current as well as the most specific for the analysis of televised comedic content, it is the most sensible choice to be used in the following analysis in this thesis. It will be combined with methods of analysis that determine the butt of the joke, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

6 The Butt of the Joke

While the relief theory and the incongruity theory are largely based on building and releasing tension as well as methods of surprise, jokes built on the superiority theory usually require a subject that is considered “the butt of the joke” – a person, circumstance, a group of people, anything or anyone that serves as the punchline to the joke. Writers of comedy are always confronted with the question whether to kick up, or down. Kicking down, again, correlates with the theory of superiority. Punching up often aims to expose inequalities and attacks the oppressor, not the victim. (Bucaria & Barra, 2016, p. 8)

Questions of representation closely correlate with discussions around the butt of the joke. They mediate the relationship between the teller of a joke, the butt, and the audience that is listening to it. The audience either identifies with or against the butt or the teller of the joke. Since power relations are of such high importance, as the theory of superiority suggests, representation is extremely important especially in comedy. (Davies & Illott, 2018, p. 2)

6.1 Mocking the Weak

Laughter is highly sociable, and therefore also has an antisocial aspect. So called “in jokes” are performed at the expense of “out groups” that are not in on the joke. (Mercer, 2016)

When someone tells a joke about a woman in front of other people, the relationships are easily deduced. The comedian is the joker, making their subject the butt of the joke, and the people watching are the audience. However, identification processes complicate the matter. Parts of the audience may identify with the butt of the joke based on their identical gender or in solidarity, and therefore also take offence – offence that was not intended initially by the teller of the joke. Thereby, they alienate more people than intended. (Davies & Illott, 2018, p. 8)

This was the case from the early days of comedy, in which the culture of club and pub stand-up comedy was dominated by white men. The butts of the joke were usually women and minorities.

Littlewood & Pickering also point out the dilemma of comedy needing to guarantee freedom of expression, while there should be an allowance for censorship of extremely aggressive and offensive comedic content. (Littlewood & Pickering, 2004, p. 292)

The rise of so-called alternative comedy in the early 1980s brought about a new type of comedy that intentionally renounced racist or sexist content. While radio and television comedy used a lot of this, it became more apparent that this sort of humour was problematic and worn-out. The shift from old-fashioned comedy to a new, more politically aware type of comedy happened over long a span of time. Comedians started to focus their comedy more on themselves and everyday life experiences, instead of targeting others. (Littlewood & Pickering, 2004, p. 292)

In present times, there are many discussions about what is appropriate to joke about and who is allowed to do so. Many comedians complain about so called “PC culture”, since it limits their ability to freely express themselves. Political correctness has become a main part in the creation of modern comedy. (Elkins, 2016 p. 139)

6.1.1 It’s Only a Joke: Political Correctness

Political correctness correlates with politics of representation and regularly causes discourse. While its original meaning is widely associated with the liberal left, it has also become a term that is used by conservatives. For them, the term signifies people trying to infringe on their freedom of speech, censor language and a restriction of free expression.

In its essentiality, however, it aims to pay respect to every political identity, culture, and lifestyle. It intends to empower marginalized groups that have not been able to freely express themselves and changes language towards a more inclusive form. (Lehrer, 1995)

The resistance against this can be found in all scenes of comedy. Supporters are often criticised as being humourless, and are accused of ending the freedom of speech, as well as controlling what people are allowed to laugh at. (Littlewood & Pickering, 2004, pp. 300-301)

Legislating comedy in a way that all problematic content will be removed may not be an achievable goal for the nearer future, but creating awareness is. Nowadays, the norms and conventions that come with the words that make up comedic narrative and jokes are being debated more openly and regularly. This has influenced and will continue to influence professional creators of comedy towards sensitivity about stereotyping and the aforementioned relationship between the teller of a joke, the butt of a joke, and the audience. (Littlewood & Pickering, 2004, p. 305)

The main goal of the shift towards the creation of more politically correct comedy content is enabling members of oppressed and marginalised groups to tell their stories and humourize their experiences.

Littlewood and Pickering quote Stuart Hall in saying that the actual trying task is creating change in the world towards the better while “accepting and negotiating difference”. (Littlewood & Pickering, 2004, p. 307)

6.2 Taboo Types of Humour

In order to find a neutral term to describe what would often be called controversial, gallows, sick, politically incorrect or offensive humour, Bucaria & Barra coined the term of taboo humour to ensure neutrality when talking about it. It is often shocking on purpose and encompasses all types of humour that some audiences might consider problematic.

Based on studies by Allan and Burridge, Bucaria & Barra classified six categories of taboo comedy:

Table 3. Taboo humour in six categories.

dark humour	humour about death, sickness and disability
sexual humour	humour relying on explicit sexual references, situations, or practices
racial, ethnic and minority humour	including sexist, homophobic, transphobic humour, and humour directed at the elderly
gross out / sick humour	humour relying on references to faeces (scatological humour) or other bodily fluids, and other traditional Western taboos such as incest and cannibalism
sacrilegious and blasphemous humour	humour targeting established religious beliefs and dogmas, and the ministers of those religions
physical appearance humour	humour involving deformity and other, non-normative traits, such as being overweight, short, or bald

(Bucaria & Barra, 2016, p. 3)

In these categories, only gross out / sick humour and sexual humour do not directly attack groups of people or certain people's looks or identities. The other four categories do so, as can be seen in the category description.

These categories cover a broad spectrum and are able to overlap in all forms, but it is still necessary to be aware that they are not universal. Content that may fall into one or more of them always also needs to be interpreted with cultural or political circumstances in mind, as well as viewers' personal taste in humour. Inappropriateness is often relative, and jokes considered to be inappropriate need to be examined regarding their context and who delivers the joke. (Bucaria & Barra, 2016, p. 7)

However, it is clear that most of these taboo categories are based on the concept of superiority. A teller of a joke bases the concept of the joke on another person's race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, or physical appearance. This also includes humour that is aimed at people with disabilities.

Therefore, what can be drawn from this is that oftentimes humour that is rooted in superiority is perceived as humour that is controversial, if not taboo.

6.3 The Importance of Representation

Sitcoms are known to have a significant impact on how viewers perceive the world around them. When seeing actors on screen living through very relatable, normal experiences, they can connect to them and grow with them. These connections to fictional characters, also known as parasocial relationships, can change mindsets such as prejudices against minority groups. (Singh, 2015)

According to psychologists, negative preconceptions against minority groups can be lessened by just encouraging interaction with these groups. Since people in the real world rarely actively go out intending to diversify their social circles, television is able to do so by introducing viewers to a diverse world with diverse characters. However, the way a character is represented is crucial. Minority characters often are portrayed in demeaning roles. (Singh, 2015)

Since sitcoms are part of what television offers to guide morality and what is considered as normal in viewers, it is problematic if these formats omit representation, and promote a very whitewashed, patriarchal, and heteronormative view of the world. Viewers see that and subconsciously accept it as normal.

Diversity, in general, is still lacking across popular media, as can be seen in a study carried out by the Media, Diversity and Social Change Initiative at the University of Southern Carolina. The study analysed inequality and representation in film, television, and digital series across 31 networks as well as streaming platforms.

11,000 speaking roles in the analysed content were evaluated on their gender, race and ethnicity as well as LGBTQ+ status. The results clearly show that equality has not been reached at all. To ensure diversity on screen, it must exist off screen as well.

In broadcast, only 17% of directors are women, in streaming even less, with only 11%. Only 29% of speaking roles of all 11,306 analysed roles are female.

Of these roles, only 28% are people from underrepresented groups – which is almost 10% lower than the percentage in US population.

52% of all analysed films and series did not portray an Asian or Asian American character at all. Only 2% of all analysed characters were coded as not heterosexual, of which 70% were male. In all 414 analysed formats, only seven transgender characters were shown, of which four appeared in the same format. (Choueiti et al., 2016)

In another study released in 2014, it was discovered that the American television channel HBO, who prides itself on creating a high standard for television, has only aired one drama series created by a woman over the course of forty years. Over the same period of time, HBO has only aired one original drama that had a person of colour as its creative lead. (Ryan, 2014)

Audiences of televised content are smaller these days. Therefore, networks are able to focus their aim on those audiences, instead of having to create content that will appeal to all viewers. Furthermore, as Morris and Poniewozik mention in the New York Times, younger people make up large portions of audiences, and they often want authenticity, which comes with religious, racial, and sexual diversity.

But Poniewozik also compares a show being diverse to a show being specific. And this specificity provides more entertainment, and through that, television avoids becoming boring. (Morris & Poniewozik, 2016)

6.3.1 The Three Stages of Representation

In television especially, there is a model created by Cedric Clark that shows the three stages of representation. Non-recognition completely excludes any minority. Ridicule is often the second stage that follows after minorities pressuring for more representation – they are be shown on screen, but in roles that ridicule them. Only after protests and further pressure, the third stage (regulation) is reached, in which they “begin to appear as people in positions of responsibility” and are in positions viewers are asked to identify with. Clarke also defined a fourth stage – respect – but doubted it could ever be completely reached, as it requires mass media to recognize and respect all ethnic groups as a whole. (Conway, 2016, p. 102)

This model clearly shows how much of an impact the social and political climate has on representation on television. Therefore, it is only natural that large movements, especially in recent years, have had severe impact on representation and changes in tone in comedy.

6.3.2 Impactful Movements

Large movements have brought upon change in many areas in history. While movements such as the Civil Rights Movement have caused historical, radical change, the following movements are very recent ones that have had significant impact.

6.3.2.1 #MeToo and Time’s Up

The #MeToo movement started in 2017 when actress Alyssa Milano shared a tweet, supporting survivors of sexual harassment and abuse. Her tweet went viral and inspired thousands of others to share their own stories. It furthered the

discussion about the relationship between gender and power, and new demands for equal pay were made. The movement served as a turning point, and has caused structural changes in companies and industries, created awareness, and has given survivors a platform as well as empowered them. With it came the downfall of Harvey Weinstein and many other influential personalities. (Botti et al., 2019)

6.3.2.2 *#OscarsSoWhite and #BlackLivesMatter*

The fight for racial justice, especially in the United States, has been going on for decades. However, with the protests the past ten years and the spike of protests in 2020, it has been brought to the surface and into the living rooms again. And with the entire world talking about it, it has led to television shows being cancelled, episodes that show people in blackface or contain racial slurs being removed, and warnings in front of problematic series on streaming platforms.

In 2015, the phrase “OscarsSoWhite” went viral after the Academy had nominated only white actors in all 20 categories for acting for the second year in a row. Through that, important conversations were held, and problems brought to the attention of many.

While no systemic changes have been accomplished yet, awareness has been created and with every award show, diversity – or lack thereof – will not go unnoticed anymore. (Ugwu, 2020)

6.3.2.3 *Influence of These Movements on Popular Media Such as Comedy Television*

The main impact large movements such as the ones mentioned before have is a change in awareness. People in privileged positions often do not realise their privilege and see no need for change. If a writers’ room is only made up by men, women’s issues will not be a priority.

The previously mentioned CARD report by the University of Southern Carolina offers specific solutions for change. These go beyond hiring someone as a diversity hire, and focus on a clear creation of target goals, changes in thinking and behaviour, frequent control and a monitoring of progress. (Choueiti et al., 2016)

“On the whole, inclusivity requires creating an ecosystem in which different perspectives hold value and stories represent the world in which we live.” (Choueiti et al., 2016)

6.4 Victims of Humour

While many people agree that television should not show anything that is offensive to any fraction of their viewers (Mills, 2016, p.216), this does not consistently seem to be the case. Historically, the most popular category of a “victim” of a joke, or humour in general, seem to be women and minorities.

Most of the comic pleasures come from the recognition of certain stereotypes in these groups of people.

6.4.1 Targets

Popular targets of jokes, and humour in general, are often either women or minorities. Should a person identify with more than one of these categories, that makes them more likely to become the target of a joke.

Women make up about half of the world's population and cannot be considered a minority. However, in a patriarchal world as well as industry (both comedy and television), they tend to be victims of humour. Patriarchal society has been under revision, but the main biases are still firmly in place, ensuring that most of society is created in a way that gives men advantages over women. That is the same for their portrayal in television comedy. (Mundy & White, 2014, p. 173) Women are portrayed as they are perceived in society, but often in a stereotypical manner. Even shows such as *I Love Lucy*, or *Roseanne*, which have been praised as progressive for their time, have created women figures that were considered unruly, and therefore absurd. (Mundy & White, 2014, p. 118)

In popular comedy, women as comic objects mostly fall into two main stereotypical categories according to Porter. The first category encompasses women that are sexually appealing and desirable. The second one seems to be the exact opposite: Porter describes it as the typical tyrant in form of a mother in law or similar grotesque version of a woman. (Porter, 1998, p. 83)

Misogyny is often the base for jokes about women. It manifests when jokes are made about women who do not conform to societal norms and standards and are therefore ridiculed. The unease that comes with an unmarried woman has been historically relevant and led to the creation of the so-called spinster. In modern television still, this woman is characterised as unruly and thereby subordinated by the use of techniques such as irony. (Chambers, 2005, p. 178)

Jokes that are based on religion are frequently used as well. Religious minorities, as for example Jewish people, are often stereotyped based on their appearance as well as history. The question whether jokes like these are crossing the line to anti-Semitism has been under debate for many years. Generally, there is no

specific answer to that, it needs to be looked at case by case. (Lockyer & Pickering, 2005, p. 31)

The largest issue in comedy's history concerning Black people is humour that was created through blackface, which is white people wearing black makeup in order to mock Black people. Usually, physical features were exaggerated, and manners overplayed. This led to a dehumanisation of Black people and an increase in violence. In 2020, many television shows removed episodes that contained blackface from their respective streaming sites. This included shows such as *The Office*, *Community* or *Scrubs*. (Marshall, 2020) As British comedian Ava Vidal said in an interview, "blackface is not a joke, it is a tool of oppression". (Vidal, 2020)

People of colour in general are often on the receiving end of victim-based humour. And while jokes about an ethnic minority that are being told by a member of said group can be considered as a possibility to rejoice in their culture, ethnic jokes are rarely able to contribute in a positive manner to our modern, multicultural society. (Mundy & White, 2014, p. 232)

While expressions of outright racism are rare in modern television comedy, references or ambiguities are not, according to Mundy & White. (Mundy & White, 2014, p. 233) Davies and Illott say that it is difficult to create a definition of national humour without using nationalisms. When people identify as members of a certain group and see others as a potential threat and othered through their country of origin, they alienate those who identify with other nationalities. (Davies & Illott, 2018, p. 15)

The same issue occurs when looking at jokes regarding sexuality and identity. Trans women, and especially trans women of colour, are often portrayed as villains. A study found them to be portrayed negatively in 54% of all occurrences in analysed material. (GLAAD, 2012)

Transphobia and misogyny often go hand in hand. The comedic instance of revealing someone to be a trans individual was a popular technique in comedy television in the 90s, similar to having a character kiss another character of the same sex and then having them react with extreme manners such as throwing up. Sexuality as well as identities are often trivialised, dehumanised or invalidated for comic relief.

Physical disabilities as well as mental illnesses are another popular target for superiority-based comedy. A lot of those jokes stem from ableism and have their roots in slapstick comedy. Combined with the use of slurs, however, especially in the field of stand-up comedy, there has been a rise of disabled comedians who practice comedy that includes self-deprecating jokes that correlate with their disability. Scholars therefore distinguish between disabling humour, which belittles, and disability humour, which can empower. (Berger, 2012)

6.4.2 Teller of the Joke

Clearly, the teller of a joke has an impact on whether the joke is going to potentially be perceived as offensive. As mentioned before, laughing together brings people together and they become a group for a while – a group that excludes the person or group of people that have been on the receiving end of the joke. If the butt of the joke is a minority, that only increases their marginalization.

It is important to consider the nuances that decide whether the audience laughs with, or at a person. The subject of a joke is not always the target of a joke. It is crucial to analyse a joke in the context of it being told. (Lockyer & Pickering, 2005, p. 32)

As Davies and Ilott propose, the politics of representation, especially in comedy, are of utmost importance. While it mirrors society and its norms, it is also able to mend and reconstruct them. They quote Storey in saying “we make culture and are made by culture”. (Davies & Ilott, 2018, p. 16)

6.4.3 Creating Change

By being able to “make” culture, comedy and television are prescribed a certain responsibility. As can be seen above, humour that is based on superiority and mostly targeted at women and minorities has been very popular for a long time.

However, with respect to the movements that have been actively working towards change and further awareness, television comedy – as an influential source of information – can be a serious medium to create change.

In “How Comedy Works To Change The World”, Borum Chattoo describes five steps in which comedy is able to bring about change and social justice:

Attracting Attention: By using humour, creators are able to stand out from other forms of media. Thereby, it can reach a large number of viewers.

Feeling: Comedy can persuade viewers into taking action and changing their views towards the positive. Comedy is not a genre that delivers factual information, but it can be used as a means to direct interest and attention in the right direction.

Entering complex social issues: By means of the so-called gateway effect, portraying serious topics leads to audiences being more attentive towards the treatment of similar issues in actual news. It offers exposure to complicated problems as well as information that educates viewers.

Breaking down social barriers: Through parasocial relationships viewers experience with their favourite characters, comedy is able to introduce viewers to

a diverse variety of people and new ways of living. By that, connection is created rather than alienation. Comedy can break down barriers on the path to acceptance. This helps especially concerning groups of people a viewer might not have much contact within the real world.

Sharing with others: People enjoy sharing funny content online, and if it includes discussions of serious themes, the willingness to share comedy can help to spread the message further. (Borum Chattoo, n.d.)

With this in mind, the following part of the thesis will now analyse two representative examples of comedy television history on their use of humour and subsequently investigate whether the series is using comedy to create change, or rather is using stereotypical comedic techniques that are rooted in superiority.

7 Analysis

7.1 Analytical Method

Having discussed the three fundamental theories of humour (Superiority, Incongruity, Relief) and furthermore, Juckel, Bellman & Varan's newly developed typology to analyse situational comedy series, these will now be combined to analyse two exemplary comedy television series.

Three episodes each of the chosen representative series will be coded with Juckel, Bellman & Varan's coding sheet. The chosen episodes will be the pilot, a central episode, and the season finale for one series, and the pilot, and two central episodes throughout later seasons for the second one due to its much longer runtime.

Furthermore, each one of their categories has been evaluated and added to one or more fundamental theories to show which humour theory or theories it stems from. This can be seen in the table below. Techniques with an added * signify techniques that have been added by Juckel, Bellman and Varan. Techniques that are marked with an x are ones that stem from Buijzen & Valkenburg's typology.

Since many theories could be associated with more than one fundamental theory, several have been marked with multiple. This will be taken into account when analysing the results.

Table 4. Humour techniques combined with fundamental humour theories.

Superiority	Incongruity	Relief	Main Category	Humor Technique	Explanation
	x		Language	Allusion	Indirect reference
x	x		Language	Irony	Saying one thing and meaning something else or exactly the opposite of what you're saying
x	x		Language	Puns	Playing with the meaning of words
x	x		Language	Repartee	Verbal banter, usually in a witty dialogue
x			Language	Ridicule	Making a fool of someone, verbally or nonverbally
	x		Language	Wit*	Ingenious humor
	x	x	Logic	Absurdity	Nonsense, a situation that goes against all logical rules
	x	x	Logic	Coincidence	A coincidental and unexpected occurrence
	x	x	Logic	Conceptual surprise (X)	Misleading the audience by means of a sudden unexpected change of concept
			Logic	Outwitting (X)	Outsmarting someone or the establishment
		x	Logic	Caught out*	Unexpectedly get caught while wrongdoing or saying something reprehensible
		x	Logic	Misunderstanding	Misinterpreting a situation
x			Identity	Parody	Imitating a style or a genre of literature or other media
x			Identity	Rigidity	Someone who thinks along straight lines, who is conservative and inflexible
x			Identity	Malicious pleasure (X)	Taking pleasure in other people's misfortune; victim humor
x			Identity	Condescension*	Displaying arrogance by patronizing those considered inferior
x			Identity	Deceitful behaviour*	Being deliberately misleading, concealing or distorting the truth
x			Identity	Self-deprecation*	Expressing something negative about oneself
x			Action	Peculiar face (X)	Making a funny face, grimace
	x	x	Action	Peculiar music (X)	Funny, unusual music (when not as part of program structure)
x			Action	Clumsiness	Lacking dexterity or grace
x			Action	Repulsive behavior	Offensive, aversive, disgusting behavior

7.1.1 Coding

To be able to code the episodes, they have been separated into scenes. This decision has been made with consultation of Juckel, Bellman and Varan's research. Coding every single humorous instance would lead to an excessive amount of data, while separating the episodes into equal time slots would be impractical. Coding every beat of an episode has also proven impractical, as Juckel, Bellman and Varan's research shows, since sitcoms particularly often have even more beats than they have comedic moments. According to their research, many beats were less than 10 seconds long. (Juckel et al., 2016, p. 590)

Therefore, the coding procedure will use the tactic of coding in contextually cohesive scenes. This means, the episode will be split into scenes that are revolving around the same topic. Juckel, Bellman and Varan call this "topic segments". This specific term will be used in the context of this thesis. (Juckel et al., 2016, p. 591) These topic segments will be detailed on the coding sheet and described shortly, before they are analysed and coded with a humour technique.

After coding the episodes, the use of each humour technique will be evaluated and visualised. The results will show how many jokes based on the theory of superiority have been used. In comparing this to another series, the results will show whether the use of these techniques has changed.

As a final step, the jokes will be analysed regarding their targets. As discussed in the chapter "The Butt of the Joke", women and minorities are most likely to end up as the butt. This final analysis will show whether and how much each series makes use of jokes targeted at those groups.

7.1.2 Chosen Subjects of the Analysis

For the analysis of used humour techniques, two popular American television comedy shows have been chosen:

- *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989 – 1998)
- *The Good Place* (NBC, 2016 – 2020)

Both have been aired primarily on the American broadcasting network NBC.

Reasons for why those two representative examples have been selected will be discussed at the beginning of their analysis, respectively.

7.2 *Seinfeld*

The first representative subject of analysis is NBC's hit series *Seinfeld*. It was created by Jerry Seinfeld, who was a stand-up comedian for a long time before

creating the show, and comedian Larry David. It is known as being a show “about nothing”, and in its prime was often called a show that crossed over the boundaries of a traditional sitcom. *Seinfeld* ran on NBC from 1989 up to 1998. There are nine seasons, each containing about 22 episodes. An episode is around 20 minutes long. (IMDb: “Seinfeld“, 2020)

The show follows four main characters throughout their everyday life. Especially in the beginning, a lot of the narrative is built around main character Jerry Seinfeld, a stand-up comedian. It explores his life and depicts how he obtains material for his stand-up shows. Jerry Seinfeld being a comedian playing himself as a comedian in a show with his name is an intentional blur of lines between fiction and reality.

Seinfeld has been nominated for 68 Emmy Awards in total and has won 10 Primetime Emmy Awards. It has been nominated for several Golden Globes and won three. With several People’s Choice Awards, British Comedy Awards, as well as Awards from the Screen Actors, Directors and Writers Guilds of America, *Seinfeld* has been nominated for 185 Awards in total and won 74. (IMDb: “Seinfeld“, 2020)

After a slow start on NBC, *Seinfeld* has become a fixed part of popular culture, and is described as one of the most successful sitcoms ever. (Lavery & Dunne, 2010, p. 2)

7.2.1 Synopsis

The show is set in Manhattan, New York, and centres around comedian Jerry Seinfeld and his eccentric friends, Elaine, Kramer and George. It shows moments from the characters’ daily lives, often seemingly disconnected. In the end, the plotlines always come together. *Seinfeld* himself performs his stand-up comedy specials weekly, and he draws his material from random, normal appearing situations and events that happen to him and his friends during the week.

Many episodes revolve around the theme of the four friends not really enjoying the company of other people. Even when they give them the benefit of the doubt and spend time with them, they usually end up back in Jerry Seinfeld’s apartment. (Raeside, 2017)

Seinfeld has often been named to be a show about nothing. This philosophy has been researched thoroughly and has even led to the study “*Seinfeld* and Philosophy: A Book About Everything And Nothing”. (Lavery & Dunne, 2010, p. 3)

“Everything and nothing” seems to be an adept description, since most of the interactions and happenings are small and seem insignificant at first glance but are essential to a person’s life. The New York Times describes *Seinfeld* as a show about nothing that covers a lot. From small details about the characters’ everyday

life, such as managing life in Manhattan, to stories about relationships and friendships, *Seinfeld* seems to have done it all. The show finds humour in small situations, such as learning how to dance, finding a parking spot, or waiting for a table in a restaurant. (Carter, 1997)

7.2.2 Classification as a Sitcom

Seinfeld can be identified as a series, specifically a status quo series due to its characters regular reversion to a certain nature. It uses many of the elements of serial continuation, such as cliffhangers, breaks, and most importantly, catchphrases. Many of the catchphrases used on *Seinfeld* have become part of pop culture and are being referenced by other series or people in their daily lives.

The serial frame is also well organized. Each episode's title starts with "The" to ensure a sense of connection. Similarly, the intro is used for every episode. However, there are no "previously on" or "next week on" elements since the past storylines do not necessarily influence the ones in the future.

Subsequently, *Seinfeld* can also be classified as a sitcom. In fact, many times it has been called a sitcom classic or even the greatest sitcom on television. (Raeside, 2017)

Characterwise, *Seinfeld* relies on a strong group of friends that form the main protagonists. Together with waitress Claire, Jerry the comedian, ex-girlfriend Elaine, neighbour Kramer and George form the main story arcs the series revolves around.

The characters often have their own storylines, but at the end of an episode, they always interconnect. They have inside jokes with each other, and a lot of the story is based on their interactions with either each other or other people. Oftentimes, they find themselves in small locations like an elevator or the booth in their diner where interaction comes naturally.

The diner is one of *Seinfeld*'s main locations, as well as Jerry's apartment. However, *Seinfeld* steers away from traditional sitcom techniques by frequently using different sets and putting the characters out of their comfort zones.

Another factor that sets it apart from other, more traditional sitcoms, is the addition of stand-up comedy segments into the show. Main character Jerry is a comedian and most of the episodes contain a segment at the beginning and the end of an episode, which in some way relates to the rest of the episode's storylines.

The show's creator Jerry Seinfeld admits to never having watched a lot of sitcoms. For the creation of *Seinfeld*, he relied on his own experience in stand-up comedy, instead of following classic formulas for sitcoms. (Collins, 1991)

Seinfeld was shot with three cameras in front of an audience, concurring with traditional sitcom creation. Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David, however, broke rules and pioneered new methods for this format. (Walker, 2011) In later episodes, more and more single camera sequences can be seen.

For the creation of the show and to ensure that his writers followed his vision, head writer Larry David had a clear rule for the development of further storylines: no hugging and no learning. This rule carried on even throughout seasons eight and nine, in which he was not head writer anymore. With the main characters being their offensive, and sometimes problematic selves, the show intends to portray humanity at its worst. (Kosner, 2016)

By enforcing the no-learning-rule, it was ensured that the characters on *Seinfeld* reverted to their main personality traits at the end of every episode, thereby fulfilling another requirement for a sitcom. They did not grow as people throughout the seasons, on the contrary, they stuck to their views and characteristics. They do not learn; they just exist and live their lives. Even in the finale, the four main characters are still their narcissistic selves.

7.2.3 Quality Television

Seinfeld has been chosen as a representative sitcom of its era because of its cultural relevance. Furthermore, it can be classified as quality television. With Elsaesser and Cook's definition in mind, *Seinfeld* can clearly be called quality television, since it has gained a large fan community as well as international success. Furthermore, it has been created by Jerry Seinfeld, who had been working in the field of comedy for a long time.

Correlating to Schleich & Nesselhauf, the descriptors of innovation, experimentality and complexity also can be found in *Seinfeld*.

Furthermore, Thompson's twelve criteria, which have been discussed in chapter 4.3.1 are met, as proven by the following:

1. *Seinfeld* broke rules of traditional sitcom storytelling by adding stand-up comedy segments.
2. It has been created by experienced comedians Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David.
3. The urban setting of the show as well as the progressive themes of the show made it appealing to young and urban audiences. *Seinfeld* himself is known for appealing to this audience especially. (Stein, 2015)
4. *Seinfeld*, being progressive and bold, actively resisted popularity by not following rules of sitcom storytelling in the beginning. (Akker et al., 2017, p. 231) It also regularly conflicted with NBC, the network not liking the way the

story progressed. Several storylines were held back or influenced by the network. (Lavery & Dunne, 2010, p. 8)

5. The cast consists of five main characters and a large number of recurring characters.
6. While the show makes plenty of references to pop culture and similar, its nature of self-contained episodes does not allow for many references to other episodes.
7. The very specific humour that has been brought in through stand-up comedy can be seen as new techniques that have been introduced to sitcoms.
8. While it is described as being a show about nothing, every episode has several complex storylines that intersect at some point, proving creative complex writing.
9. References in *Seinfeld* are plenty, as well as guest appearances by celebrities.
10. *Seinfeld* does not shy away from topics such as religion or sexuality, discussions surrounding masculinity or similar themes that were considered controversial at the time of airing.
11. The main theme of *Seinfeld* is realism – it shows seemingly ordinary people living their lives, mirroring society for the audience.
12. As mentioned before, *Seinfeld* has been critically acclaimed and won numerous awards.

7.2.4 Representation

Seinfeld's main characters are Jerry Seinfeld himself and his three friends.

Jerry Seinfeld:

The character of Jerry Seinfeld is based on his real-life creator. Just as the real Seinfeld, the character is a stand-up comedian. He is germophobic and therefore a big fan of having everything neat and clean, and he loves breakfast cereal. His apartment is one of the most important locations in the series, it being a place for him and his friends to meet up. He is a white, Jewish man. However, he is not depicted practicing many Jewish traditions.

Elaine Benes:

Elaine used to be in a relationship with Jerry. She is a very beautiful, white woman, but also has a loud temper. She clashes with many people and does not conform with the usual female stereotype of being nice and quiet. Jerry and Elaine are good

friends now, as the show frequently mentions. She dates many men throughout the seasons, but it rarely works out well, due to her bad taste in men.

Cosmo Kramer:

Jerry's neighbour is smart, but also naïve at times. He has several conflicting characteristics. Sometimes he is caring and helps his friends, while at times he seems arrogant. He is also played by a white actor.

George Constanza:

The neurotic man is plagued by several psychological issues. He lies a lot and has many unsuccessful relationships. The character is based on the show's co-creator, Larry David. George, like the others, is a white man.

Side Characters:

There are many side characters and recurring characters in *Seinfeld*. Celebrities have made appearances as well. Jerry's nemesis Newman has regular appearances and is portrayed by a white man. George's parents, Frank and Estelle, as well as Jerry's parents, Morty and Helen, are further regularly appearing side characters. They are a white, Jewish couple.

The series showed Jews on television living their life without mocking them in a time when showing Jewish identity on television was needed. It gave insights into Jewish culture and created awareness with viewers, showing them conflicts they had. While Jewish culture was filtered out in the early days of television and representation was low, *Seinfeld* came at a time when visibility was rising. By that, *Seinfeld* changed the perception of Jewish people for many viewers. (Krieger, 2003, p. 387)

However, *Seinfeld* does not offer much diversity in other aspects. Three of the four main characters are heterosexual white men. The only female character, Elaine, was not part of the pilot episode – she was added later, to bring in a female perspective.

There are no other minorities represented in the main characters, and even the side characters are predominantly white, male, and heterosexual. In the episode "The Beard", Elaine tries to convert an openly gay man, insinuating his sexuality was a choice. In "The Handicap Spot", Jerry and his friends take a spot reserved for handicapped parking, causing a woman in a wheelchair to have an accident. "The Café" is one of very few episodes featuring a person of colour. Jerry accidentally causes a Pakistani immigrant to be deported, which is used as comedic relief. In the episode "The Puerto-Rican Day Parade", *Seinfeld* shows a burning Puerto Rican flag and has Kramer stomp on it. NBC has issued a formal apology for Kramer's subsequent comment. (The Associated Press, 1998)

7.2.5 Humour Techniques

7.2.5.1 Episode One, Season One: The Seinfeld Chronicles

The pilot episode of *Seinfeld*'s first season aired in 1989 on NBC. It was written by Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld. The episode starts with Jerry and George sitting in a restaurant, talking. They discuss a woman named Laura that Jerry has met and thinks has a crush on him. The next day, Jerry talks to his neighbour Kessler (in later seasons known as Kramer) about the situation, having changed his mind. The woman calls Jerry and asks him whether she could stay at Jerry's apartment, causing Jerry to change his mind again. Jerry and George keep debating whether there is a romantic intention behind Laura's actions. When she arrives, she asks Jerry if she could stay another night, getting comfortable. Jerry is sure of her intentions by now and arranges for a romantic weekend. However, the episode ends with her getting a call from her fiancé, ruining Jerry's plans, and Jerry doing a stand-up routine about how men "get women". (Wolff, 1989)

7.2.5.1.1 Humour Analysis

The pilot episode of *Seinfeld* was separated into seventeen topic segments. Each of them was identified with a time marker and a short description. Afterwards, each topic segment has been analysed for used humour techniques. The results are displayed in the graph below.

The strategy that was clearly used the most is Repartee with eleven uses. Irony has been applied five times, Rigidity four times.

Three occurrences of Conceptual surprise, Condescension and Repulsive Behaviour, and two occurrences of Ridicule, Absurdity and Peculiar Face leave only singular uses of Puns, Malicious Pleasure and Self-Deprecation.

Ten humour techniques have not been used at all during this episode: Allusion, Wit, Coincidence, Outwitting, Caught Out, Misunderstanding, Parody, Deceitful behaviour, Peculiar Music and Clumsiness.

The total amount of humour techniques used in this episode is 38.

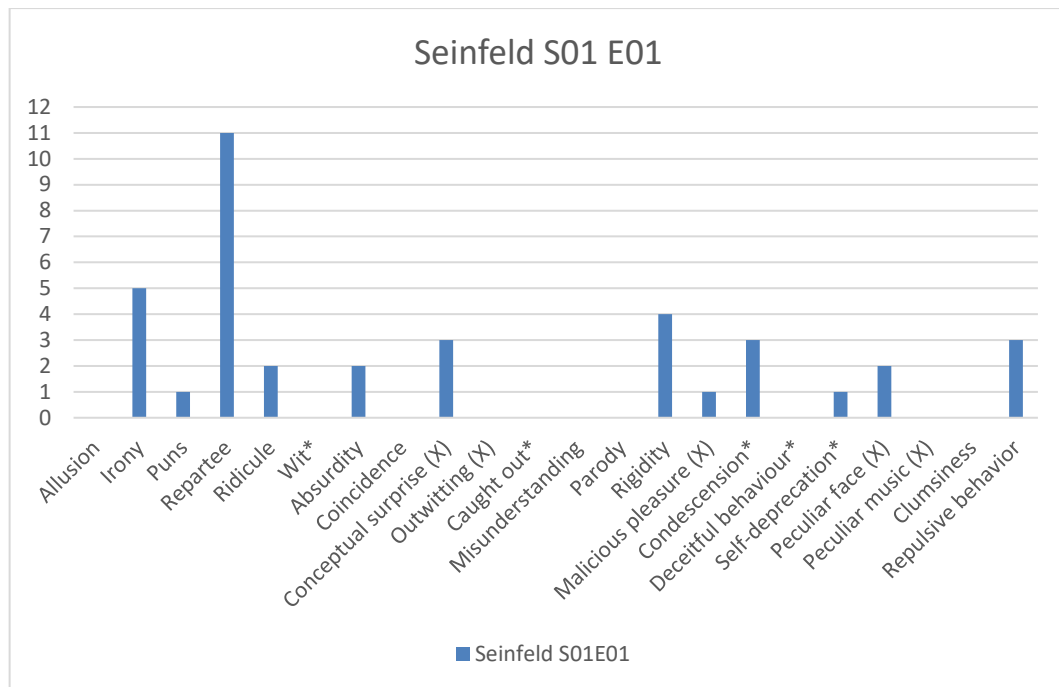


Figure 7. Distribution of humour theories in Seinfeld, S01 E01.

7.2.5.2 Season Five, Episode Ten: The Cigar Store Indian

The tenth episode of season five aired in 1993 on NBC. It was written by Tom Gammill and Max Pross.

Jerry gives Elaine a cigar store Indian as an apology for making her take the subway home, because Jerry had to help George removing a stain. His intentions are to show off in front of Elaine's friend Winona, who is Native American. Jerry then asks her out on a date, but she cancels on him because she thinks he is racist. Elaine gives the figure to Kramer, who tries to sell it. He also tries to get her company to publish a book about coffee tables for him. George gets grounded for losing a TV guide that belonged to his parents, and for having sex in their bed. The TV guide was taken by Elaine, so she would have something to read on the subway. On the subway, she regularly encounters odd personalities. The episode ends with a stand-up sketch by Jerry about a TV guide. (Cherones, 1993)

7.2.5.2.1 Humour Analysis

This episode has been separated into 26 topic segments, which again have received their respective timeframes and description.

As can be seen in the graph below, Repartee has again been the most frequently used humour technique with ten uses. The second and third most used techniques were Absurdity with nine, and Allusion with seven uses.

Wit and Rigidity have both been used four times, and Peculiar Face has been used three times.

Five categories have occurred two times: Puns, Ridicule, Deceitful behaviour, Self-Deprecation, and Repulsive behaviour.

Singular occurrences of Conceptual surprise, Caught Out, Misunderstanding, Condensation and Clumsiness leave six categories unused during this episode: Irony, Coincidence, Outwitting, Parody, Malicious Pleasure and Peculiar Music.

In total, 52 instances of humour were catalogued during this episode.

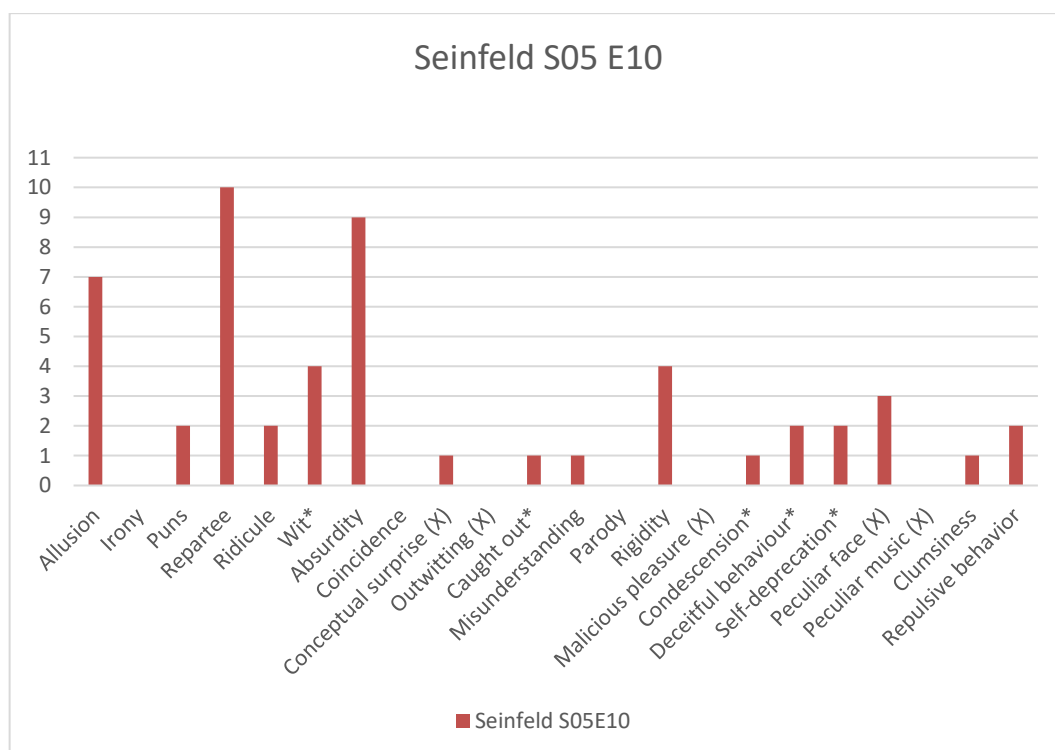


Figure 8. Distribution of humour techniques in Seinfeld S05 E10

7.2.5.3 The Café

This episode is the seventh of the third season and aired in 1991. It was written by Tom Leopold.

In this episode, Jerry becomes obsessed with a restaurant he can see from his window. It is called “The Dream Café” and is run by a Pakistani man named Babu. Jerry watches him stand in front of his café, no guests coming in.

Meanwhile, George is supposed to take an IQ test for his new girlfriend to prove his intelligence to her, which he does not want to do in fear of embarrassing himself. Therefore, he asks Elaine to do it for him. He locks himself in a room, and hands her the test through the window. Elaine does the test in Babus restaurant, where Jerry has made her and Kramer go. She gets wildly distracted by Kramer. Meanwhile, Jerry is convinced he is saving the restaurant by telling Babu to restyle

it into a Pakistani restaurant. This does not prove successful and Babu is very mad at Jerry.

After Elaine produces a low score on the test, she takes it again in Jerry's flat. However, she is not able to leave, since Kramer is hiding inside from a man he stole a jacket from. George and Elaine's cheating is discovered. The episode ends with the four friends intending to go out for dinner and discovering that The Dream Café has closed down and a following stand-up routine by Jerry. (Cherones, 1991)

7.2.5.3.1 Humour Analysis

The third analysed episode was separated into 23 topic sequences. Repartee was again the most used technique with ten uses, followed by Absurdity with seven uses.

Ridicule, Contdescension and Clumsiness have each been detected four times. Irony, Wit, Caught Out and Self-Deprecation have been used twice. The singular use of Puns, Outwitting and Parody leaves ten categories unused: Allusion, Coincidence, Conceptual surprise, Misunderstanding, Rigidity, Malicious pleasure, Deceitful behaviour, Peculiar face, Peculiar music and Repulsive behaviour.

40 instances of humour have been catalogued during this episode.

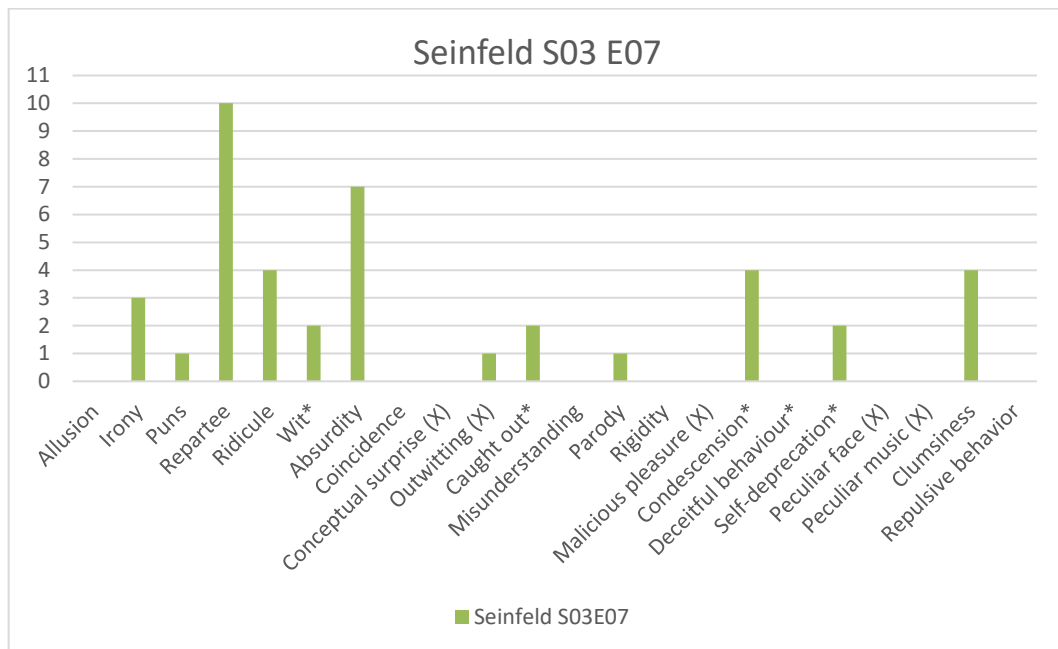


Figure 9. Distribution of humour techniques in Seinfeld S03 E07

7.3 The Good Place

The second subject that has been chosen for this analysis is a comedy series called *The Good Place*. It was created by Michael Schur. It premiered in 2016 on

NBC and ended after four seasons in 2020 with 13 episodes of 20 minutes each in length. It is used as the modern example for current successful comedy television series.

The Good Place has won several awards such as two Critics' Choice Television Awards, three Hugo Awards and a Peabody Award. It has also been nominated for the Golden Globes and the Primetime Emmy Awards in 2018, 2019 and 2020. In total, the series has received 111 award nominations and won 18 awards. (IMDb: "The Good Place", 2020)

It has an 8.2 star rating on IMDB and a 97% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes. (IMDb: "The Good Place", 2020; Rotten Tomatoes, 2020) The Guardian listed it on the 69th place of their 100 best TV shows of the twenty first century in 2019. (Abbott et al., 2019)

7.3.1 Synopsis

After having an accident with a truck, Eleanor Shellstrop wakes up in the afterlife. She is informed about having made it to the Good Place by Michael, the architect of the neighbourhood in which she arrived at. He congratulates her on having made it to this heaven-esque place thanks to all the good she did in her previous life. She meets her soulmate Chidi, a professor of ethics and philosophy, and some other residents. Her beautiful neighbour Tahani and Tahani's soulmate, the Buddhist monk Jianyu, welcome Eleanor with open arms.

Eleanor quickly realizes that something has gone wrong, having been a self-absorbed narcissist in her previous life. She discovers that a mix-up has happened, and she has taken the place of another person with the same name. She clearly does not belong here but intends to stay and therefore tries to keep the mix-up a secret from Michael.

To be able to stay, she needs to disguise her narcissistic personality in order to fit in. She asks her soulmate to help her with the difficult task of improving herself and becoming a better person. But her not belonging there shakes the neighbourhood to its core as it begins to fall apart.

The show deals with numerous ethical topics and shows characters developing themselves towards personal betterment. It questions what it means to be a good person and is built on a strong moral code developed by Michael Schur. The story arcs are driven by character growth and development and use the interpersonal relationships of the residents as a root of tension.

The show uses a lot of plot twists, and so the big reveal at the end of the first season unveils that Eleanor, Chidi, Tahani and Jianyu – who is another imposter not belonging here, and whose real name is Jason – are not actually in the Good

Place. Also, Michael is not an angel/architect – on the contrary, he is a demon and he has placed them in the Bad Place, in this show a synonym for hell, where they are doomed to fight with each other for eternity.

These revelations are drawn out through seasons two to four, in which the residents work together with Michael to escape and make it to the Good Place once and for all.

7.3.2 Classification as a Sitcom

The Good Place clearly is a modern serial. Several side plots come together and throughout the seasons, the storylines become more and more complicated. Character development seems to be the single most important theme in the entire show, so much that it has become the premise of it. Everything revolves around the idea of people becoming better versions of themselves.

The Good Place employs many elements of serial continuation, especially the cliffhanger. Almost every episode ends with a final scene that ensures viewers will turn in again the following week. Being aired on television, it also has breaks and resumptions built into every episode. Running gags are also used regularly, most frequently based on the main characters' quirks.

Its episodes are introduced with title screens calling them chapters, and they are numbered throughout all four seasons. Chekov's Gun can be identified in all the hints planted throughout the first season that lead to the conclusion of the main characters realising – along with the viewers – that they are actually in The Bad Place.

The show is serially framed by episodes that are introduced as numerically sorted chapters. They are introduced with a title screen throughout all four seasons, right after the intro. Furthermore, a "previously on / next week on" element is added occasionally, specifically after big reveals or very complex story resolutions.

While being quite high concept, *The Good Place* can be classified as a modern sitcom. It uses the main and fundamental characteristics of situational comedy: the recurring cast comes together and experiences life in a comedic way, and the situation is a very distinctive setting: in this case, the afterlife.

However, the story is very plot-driven, and it does not completely revert back to zero at the end of an episode. On the contrary, by creating different realities and multiple resets of storylines, new settings are being created constantly.

The characters, however, are very characteristic of a sitcom. They are fleshed out and three-dimensional, and have strongly opposing views of the world, which offers a wide ground for conflict.

The episodes mostly end in momentary happy endings that resolve the episodes' main conflict, but the show also relies heavily on plot twists that are introduced at the end of an episode. This reminds of soap opera strategies to keep viewers interested.

The Good Place is a very complex sitcom, and compared to others, its main storyline is hard to grasp. It is very reliant on plot twists, but still has a simple premise. Demons in hell try to figure out how to torture humans in the best way, and the audience can follow the struggle of four main residents in this hell as well as angel/demon Michael.

7.3.3 Quality Television

Another reason for why this television comedy series has been chosen is its ability to represent the very best of its era. To be able to determine whether something is "good", the criteria for quality television created by Thompson, which have been described in chapter 4.3.1, can be used. Looking at his twelve criteria, *The Good Place* can clearly be defined as quality television:

1. *The Good Place* is breaking out from traditional sitcoms by following new, creative narratives.
2. It has been created by Michael Schur, who has varied experience in sitcom creation such as *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation*.
3. With its themes of philosophy and ethics, it appeals to an audience of young and educated people.
4. However, it has not had to fight for survival, being released on NBC.
5. The main cast consists of four residents, Michael, the assistant Janet and a variety of demons. The cast is large and diverse.
6. There are many references to previous scenes and characters' history throughout the entire series.
7. *The Good Place* has been described as ground-breaking and trailblazing by several reviewers. (Rotten Tomatoes, 2020)
8. The writing in this series is quite complex and encompasses several timelines and universes that regularly intertwine.
9. There are many references to previous storylines that are intertwined with the current one.
10. The main themes are ethics, philosophy, life, and death. As a result, controversial topics are discussed and looked at through a philosophical lens.
11. It does not really portray reality due to its setting in the afterlife, but it does portray human relationships and flaws realistically.
12. The show has received a lot of positive attention and has won numerous awards.

The Good Place is also cohesive with Schleich & Nesselhauf's three concepts for quality television: it deals with innovative themes such as life after death, being a good person and redemption. It has a bright and positive mood that can be seen in the visual depiction of the story. The narration is highly complex and follows the main characters through different timelines and universes.

Finally, it also correlates to what Elsaesser defined as Quality TV. *The Good Place* was created by Michael Schur, an experienced writer and producer who has previously been very successful with shows such as *The Office* or *Parks and Recreation*, which have found fans around the globe as well as *The Good Place*.

7.3.4 Representation

At first glance, the main character of this series seems to be Eleanor, but three more residents as well as the architect Michael and non-human assistant Janet play important parts in the story's progression and can be considered main roles as well.

Eleanor Shellstrop:

The main character is a white woman, who is a rude, inconsiderate, and narcissistic person and does not follow any typical trope of a female stereotype. She has many flaws and is unabashedly herself. She is self-centred and loud, and frequently flirts with both men and women.

Chidi Anagonye:

The professor of ethics is a Black man. Chidi was born in Nigeria and raised in Senegal and is an indecisive man who has studied and taught philosophy all his life. Having a Black man in the position of the professor, the philosopher even, defies stereotypical ideas viewers may have.

Jason Mendoza:

Jason, who is disguising himself as Jianyu the monk, is a Filipino amateur dancer and DJ from Jacksonville, Florida. At the beginning, he is mistaken by Michael for a Tibetan monk who has chosen to follow a code of silence. The way the audience immediately accepts him being a monk, and then the show subverting the fact by revealing his real identity is a great example the show plays with stereotypical characterisations of people and then does not continue as the audience would expect.

Tahani Al-Jamil:

The role of Tahani is, at first glance, a typical glamorous high society woman. Daughter of rich parents, she is a socialite who keeps name dropping celebrities

as her friends. She is played by a British south Asian actress, making her the third person of colour in this cast.

Michael and Janet

Both Michael, the architect, and Janet, the robot assistant, are not human. They are both white, and Janet is dressed similarly to a secretary.

As shown, three of the six main characters are played by people of colour. In addition, three of them are woman, including the person who could be considered the main character.

None of them are stereotypes of their race, nor do they have an accent, except for Tahani, who is British. They counter any expectations viewers might have, being unintentionally biased towards them. The series underlines that interesting characters can have many facets and can be funny without the humour relying on their heritage or using their ethnicity as comic relief through stereotypes.

Side characters

There are several side characters in *The Good Place* that are cast in a nonconventional way. The role of The Judge, who could be seen as a God figure in the universe, is played by actress Maya Rudolph – a woman.

There are gay couples living in the neighbourhood, and people of a large variety of nationalities. Interracial couples are common as well. The entire neighbourhood is made up of people coming from all over the world.

In total, the show consists of 80 male and 76 female characters (and several non-human characters), which is a very balanced number.

It also passes the Bechdel Test easily, with several fleshed-out female characters that have relationships with each other that do not revolve around men.

In the episode “Chidi’s Choice”, or Chapter Ten, both Eleanor and Tahani fall in love with Chidi. But instead of fighting over him, as would be expected in a sitcom, they recognize the silliness of their situation and rather focus on their friendship instead of getting in a fight.

In conclusion, it can be said that *The Good Place* takes its responsibility in portraying diversity and representation very seriously. Having characters that are diverse and multi-faceted makes the show less likely to rely on making jokes about certain social groups, since they are already included in the narrative.

7.3.5 Humour Techniques

7.3.5.1 Chapter One – *Everything Is Fine*

The first analysed episode of *The Good Place* is the pilot episode. It is called “Everything is fine” and is 23 minutes long. The episode was written by creator Michael Schur and aired on NBC in 2016.

This episode introduces viewers to the main character Eleanor, as she wakes up in the afterlife. Architect Michael shows her around the Good Place she is in now and introduces her to her soulmate, an ethics professor. She quickly realises that she should not be here and tries to hide that by attempting to become a better person to deserve her spot in the Good Place and persuades her soulmate Chidi to help her. However, the neighbourhood does not react well to her antics and after insulting her neighbour Tahani, many of her insults become reality and cause chaos in the neighbourhood. The episode ends with a cliffhanger of Michael knocking at Eleanor’s door, asking her and Chidi to attend an emergency meeting. (Goddard, 2016)

7.3.5.1.1 Humour Analysis

First, the episode was split into 21 topic segments. For easier tracing, the time frames have been included in the spreadsheet. A short description has been added to the segments. Then, each segment has been assigned one or more humour techniques that have been detected within the segment.

The results of the analysis can be seen in figure 10. With fifteen occurrences, Absurdity is the most used technique in this episode of *The Good Place*. Conceptual surprise with seven occurrences, and Wit with six, are the second and third most used categories. Peculiar face and Rigidity occurred four and three times, respectively.

While Allusion, Puns and Peculiar Music were detected two times, the resulting sixteen categories were only used once or not at all.

Eight categories have not been used at all: Ridicule, Coincidence, Outwitting, Caught Out, Misunderstanding, Malicious Pleasure, Deceitful Behaviour and Repulsive Behaviour.

In total, 47 instances of humour have been catalogued in this episode.

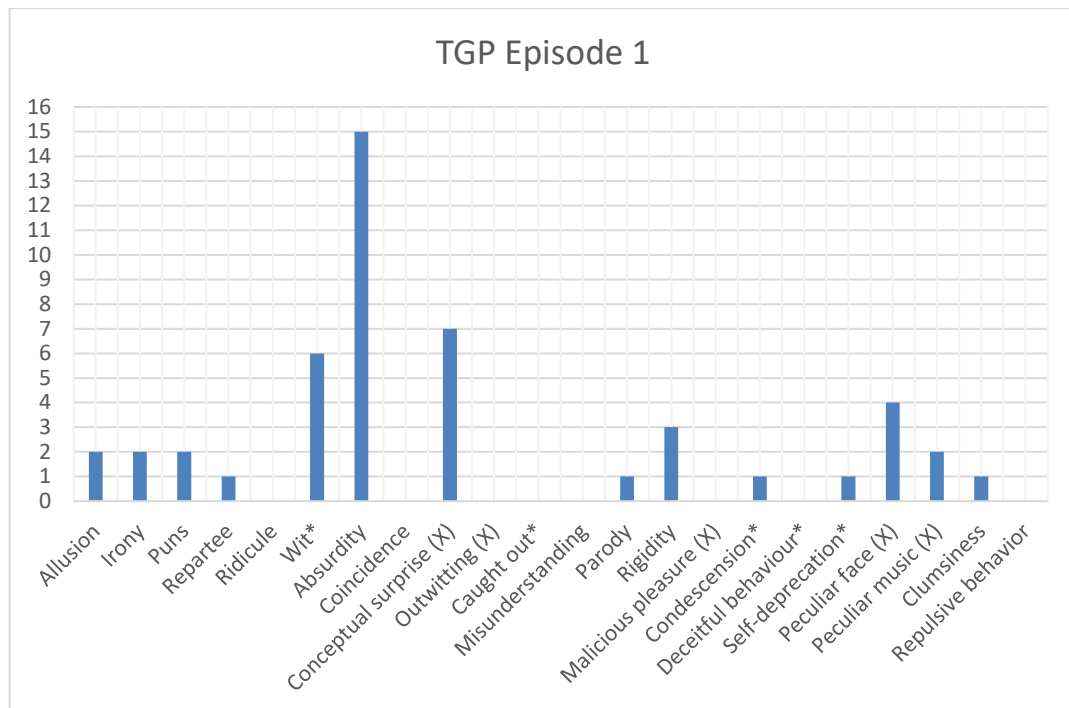


Figure 10. Distribution of humour techniques in *The Good Place*, S01 E01

7.3.5.2 Chapter Eight – Most Improved Player

The eighth episode of season one has been chosen as a random episode throughout the storyline. Written by Michael Schur, the episode aired in 2016.

It begins in the exact same way the pilot did – Eleanor is summoned to Michael's office. However, this time it is because she confessed to not deserving to be here, and Michael must now deal with these revelations. Furthermore, Janet has been killed and Michael needs to find out who did it. He interviews Eleanor, Tahani and Jianyu, attempting to solve the mystery, while dealing with the new, not yet quite functional Janet. Then, the demons from the Bad Place arrive to pick up Eleanor. As she says her goodbyes and boards the train to the Bad Place, Chidi tells Michael he killed Janet. He pleads with him to let Eleanor stay and tells him about their tutoring sessions. The episode ends with Michael stopping the train and taking Eleanor back, until the situation is resolved. The demons release the real Eleanor, who should have been here all along and had been sent to the Bad Place instead of – as they call her – fake Eleanor. (Shapeero, 2016)

7.3.5.2.1 Humour Analysis

The eighth episode of *The Good Place* was separated into sixteen topic segments. The segments have been combined with their respective time frames and a description again. Consequently, each topic segment has been analysed for used humour techniques.

As can be seen in the results table, Absurdity is again the main technique that has been used total of nine times. Allusion and Wit are the second and third most applied techniques.

Conceptual surprise is, similarly to the first episode, again in a high position with four uses. Repartee, Peculiar Face, and Clumsiness have been detected three times. Two uses of Self-Deprecation, Condensation, Malicious Pleasure and Puns and one use of Ridicule, Caught Out, Misunderstanding, Rigidity, Deceitful behaviour, Peculiar music leave only four categories that have not been applied during this episode: Irony, Coincidence, Outwitting and Parody.

In total, 52 instances of humour have been catalogued in this episode.

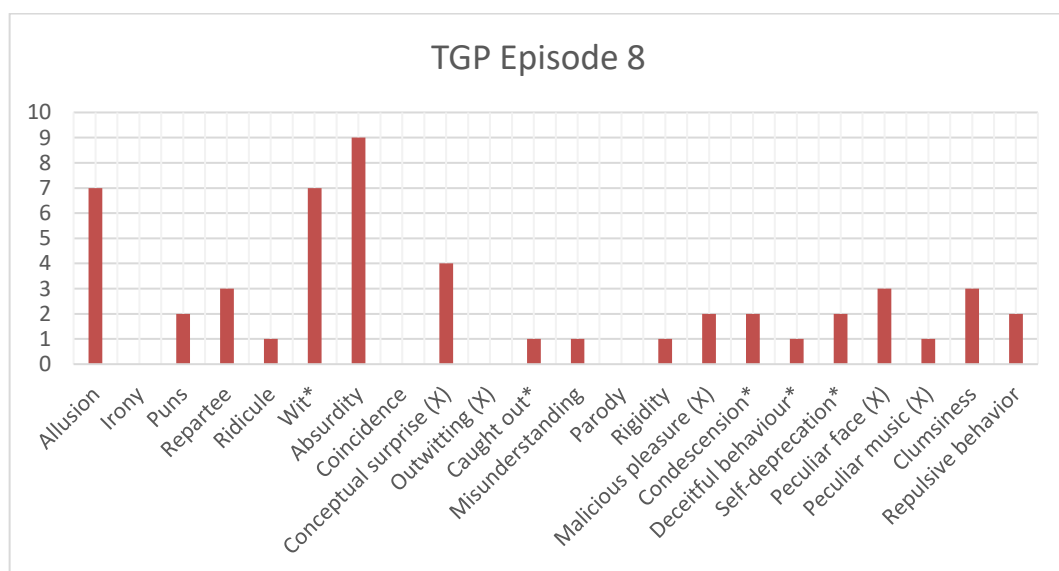


Figure 11.. Distribution of humour techniques in *The Good Place*, S01 E08

7.3.5.3 Chapter Thirteen – Michael's Gambit

The third episode that is part of the analysis is the season finale of the first season. It is called "Michael's Gambit" and was also written by Michael Schur. It aired on NBC in early 2017.

In this episode, Eleanor, Jason, Chidi and Tahani have 30 minutes to decide which two of them will go to the Bad Place and thereby ensure that the others are able to stay in the Good Place. The struggle escalates, but then Eleanor figures out that the Good Place is actually the Bad Place. Even though it is supposed to be paradise, everyone is struggling. Chidi has stomach aches caused by the secrets he is forced to keep, Tahani feels lonely, and Jason and Eleanor struggle with the thought of not deserving to be here.

A flashback shows Michael pitching a concept of a neighbourhood, in which residents torture each other, to his boss Shawn. Before Michael wipes all the residents' memories after Eleanor figuring it out, Eleanor manages to slip a note to Janet, who actually does not work with Michael. Then, the memory wipe progresses, and Michael restarts the neighbourhood. Eleanor wakes up and Michael introduces her to her new soulmate, Chris. The episode ends with Janet handing Eleanor a note that says "find Chidi". (Schur, 2017)

7.3.5.3.1 Humour Analysis

The final episode of *The Good Place* has been categorized into 21 topic segments. Each of them has been assigned the according time frame and given a short description before being analysed for its use of humour strategies.

Once again, Absurdity has been used the most with ten occurrences. Puns, Rigidity and Conceptual surprise and Allusion are the second to fifth most frequently used, with six, four, three and three uses, respectively.

Wit, Misunderstanding, Parody and Peculiar Music have been used twice. Contescension and Repulsive Behaviour have been used once, which leaves ten categories unused: Irony, Repartee, Ridicule, Coincidence, Outwitting, Caught Out, Malicious Pleasure, Deceitful Behaviour, Self-Deprecation, and Clumsiness.

In total, 37 instances of humour have been detected in this episode.

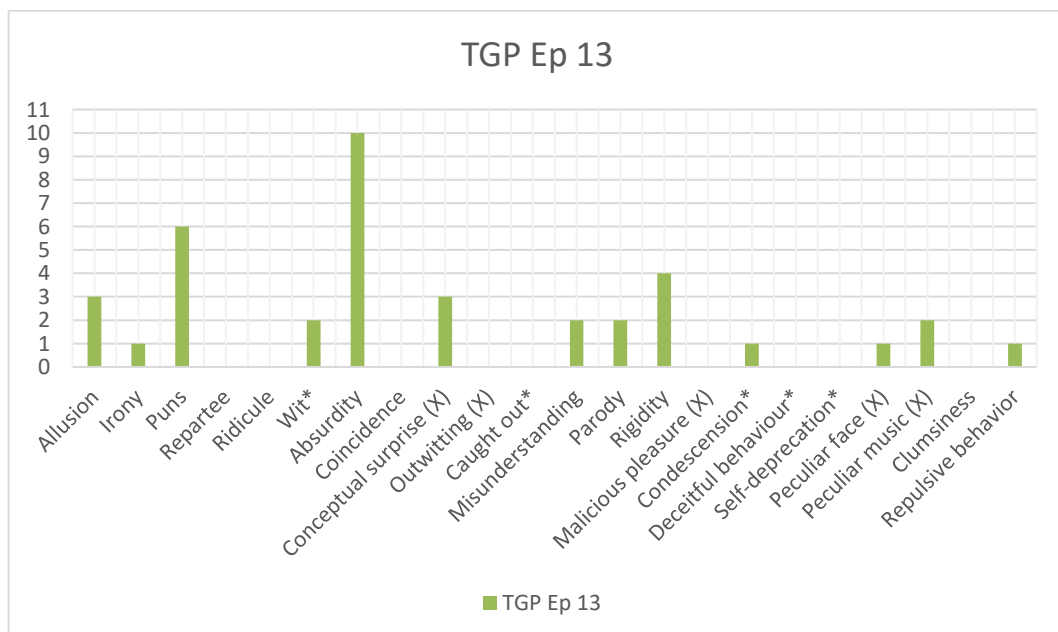


Figure 12.. Distribution of humour techniques in *The Good Place*, S01 E13

8 Results

The results of the two analysed series will be reviewed in the following. In the first part the results of each television series will be discussed separately, while in the second part the final results will be compared.

8.1 *Seinfeld*

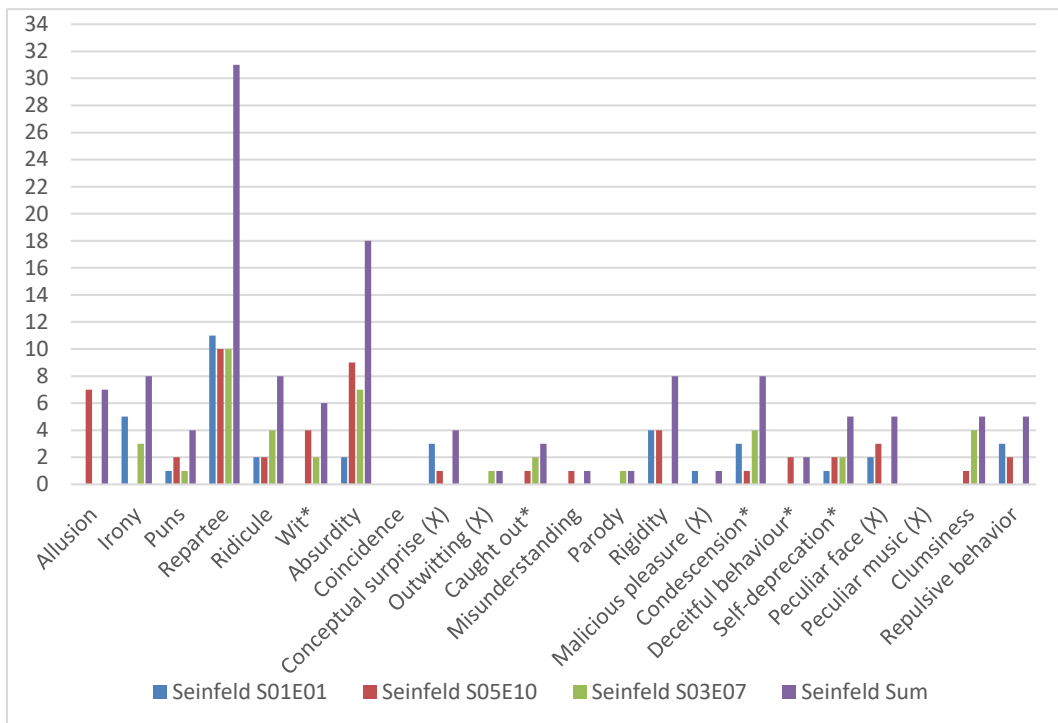


Figure 13. Distribution of humour in all *Seinfeld* episodes

In the three episodes of *Seinfeld*, the most used humour technique is Repartee with 31 occurrences. The second most used technique is Absurdity, with 18 occurrences. Both Ridicule and Rigidity have been detected eight times, followed by Allusion and Irony with seven occurrences, and Wit with six.

Five uses of Self-Deprecation, Peculiar Face, Clumsiness and Repulsive behaviour are followed by four uses of Conceptual Surprise and Puns.

Caught Out is the only technique that has been applied three times, and Deceitful Behaviour has been used twice.

The categories Outwitting, Misunderstanding, Malicious Pleasure and Parody have only been included once. Only Coincidence and Peculiar Music have not been used at all.

In total, 131 uses of humour techniques have been catalogued.

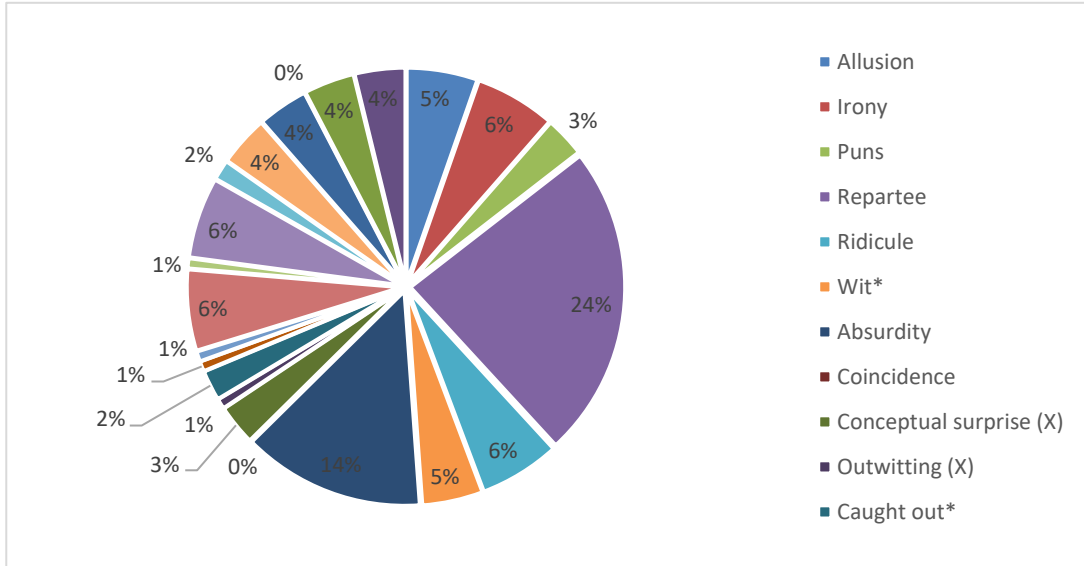


Figure 14. Percental distribution of humor techniques in Seinfeld

When compared to the four main humour categories Language, Logic, Identity and Action, the category most used by far is the Language category:

- Language: 63 uses
- Logic: 27 uses
- Identity: 25 uses
- Action: 15 uses

8.1.1 Superiority, Incongruity and Relief

The top four used humour techniques are Repartee, Absurdity, Ridicule and Ridity. Repartee can be seen as stemming from both Superiority and Incongruity. Absurdity is categorized as a Logic humour technique. It can be associated with the incongruity theory, due to its abrupt and surprising nature.

Ridicule and Ridity, however, are both mostly associated with superiority, since viewers are clearly laughing about a character's rigid manners or are ridiculing specific behaviour of theirs.

The Identity category is the one that is most associated with the theory of superiority. With eight uses of Ridity and Condescension, these two are used frequently throughout the three analysed episodes. Especially Condescension is humour that is specifically aimed at another, inferior person.

Meanwhile, humour based on the theory of relief is used seldomly. Only one of the four mainly used techniques (Absurdity) can be traced back to the relief theory. Furthermore, self-deprecation, humour a person uses on themselves, is used only five times, making outward humour more prevalent.

Therefore, it can be concluded that in the analysed representative episodes of *Seinfeld*, humour that is based on superiority is the most common.

8.1.2 Butts of the Jokes

The next step was to look at the person an instance of humour was aimed at if it was possible to determine. Regarding the four main characters, Jerry, Kramer, George and Elaine, it can be said that they are quite evenly spread. However, in the second and third analysed episode it is very clear that most of the humour (in both cases in 8 instances) is directed at people supporting characters.

Table 5. Butts of jokes in all analysed Seinfeld episodes.

	SF 1	SF 2	SF 3
Jerry:	3	2	2
Kramer:	3	3	2
George:	4	4	4
Elaine:	-	3	1
Others:	3	8	8
SUM	13	20	17

In the second analysed episode of *Seinfeld*, “The Cigar Store Indian”, a large amount of the humour is directed at several other people, such as a man who Elaine meets in the subway, George’s parents, men in general, and several times at Native Americans.

The episode “The Café” directs its humour mostly at Pakistani restaurant owner Babu, who, as a side character, belongs to the category of others. Furthermore, there are occurrences of humour directed at women in general, as well as humour directed at other side characters.

In the three analysed episodes, a certain butt of a joke could be detected more often than it was absent. In the first episode, only in seven out of 17 instances it was not possible to identify a butt. The second episode as well as the third episode had eight instances in which the humour was not aimed at a specific person or group.

In conclusion, *Seinfeld*’s humour can be identified as rather outward than inward. As analysed in chapter 8.1.1., self-deprecation is not used a lot, which means that characters make fun of others more often than of themselves.

8.1.3 Taboo Humour

The humour used in this *Seinfeld* episode cannot be described as taboo humour with the exception of the instances in which jokes target Native Americans. The way Babu is portrayed could also be seen as racial humour. While both of these instances are not outstandingly offensive, and the offended character always reacts in a way that makes it clear to the viewer that the joke was inappropriate, it is possible that there are more severe uses of these types of humour in further episodes.

8.1.4 Representation

The amount of representation in this series is rather low. As argued before, the main characters are all white, heterosexual and with the exemption of Elaine, male. Minorities such as people of colour do, however, appear regularly in the form of side characters. Throughout the analysed series, there are two people that stand out: Winona, a strong Native American woman, and Babu, a Pakistani man who gets ridiculed by Jerry. Having no minorities and only one woman in the main cast can lead to these groups being stereotyped and becoming the butt of jokes.

8.1.5 Creating Change

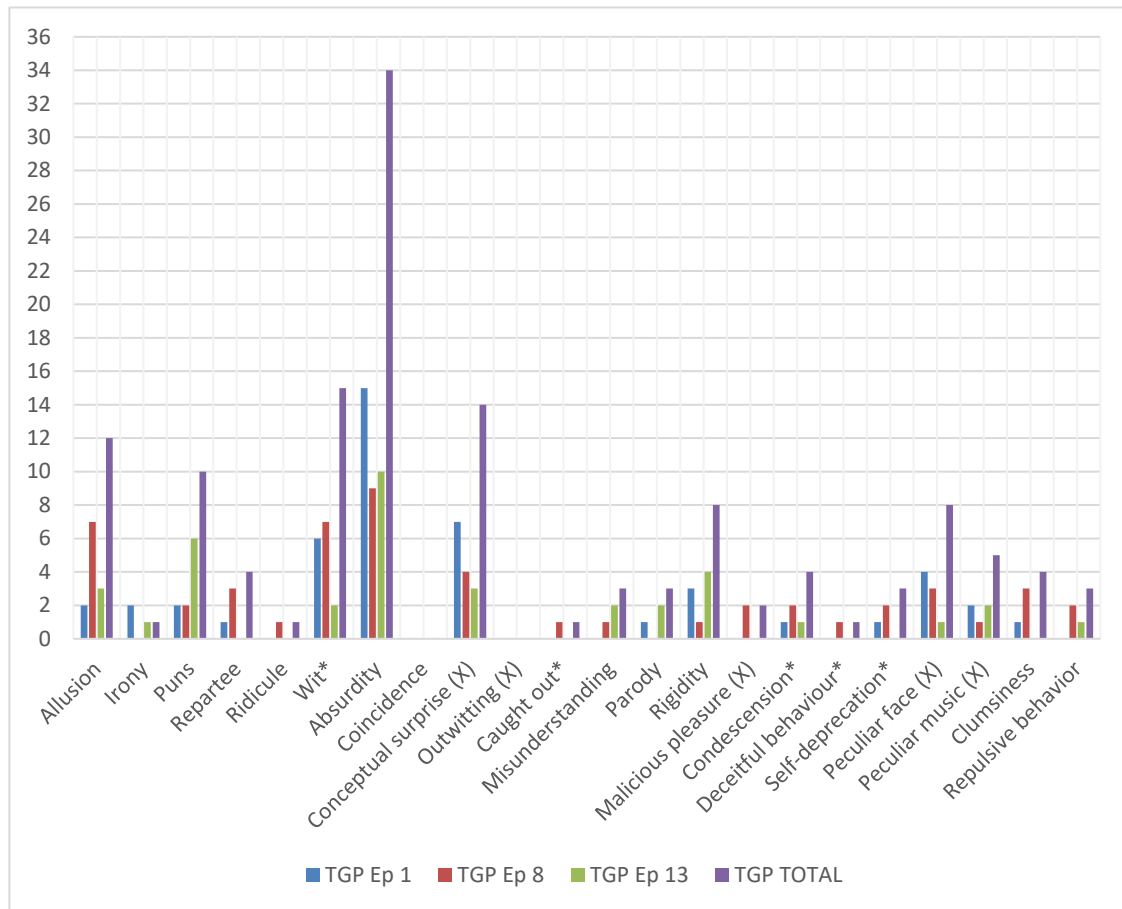
There is no real attempt to create active social change by means of humour in *Seinfeld*. On the one hand, that is because the humour does not convey a need for change. On the other hand, this can also be based on the fact that the characters themselves are barely able to evolve and develop as people. That is due to the show's nature of being a status quo series. The characters revert to their personal standard at the end of each episode.

8.2 *The Good Place*

The most regularly used humour technique in all analysed episodes of *The Good Place* is Absurdity with 34 occurrences. There have been 15 occasions where Wit was used, and 14 uses of Conceptual surprise. Allusion has been detected twelve times, and the category Puns occurred ten times.

Throughout all three episodes, there has not been any use of Coincidence or Outwitting. Furthermore, categories such as Irony, Ridicule, Coincidence, Deceitful Behaviour and Caught Out have only been used once.

Figure 15. Distribution of humour techniques in all analysed episodes of *The Good Place*



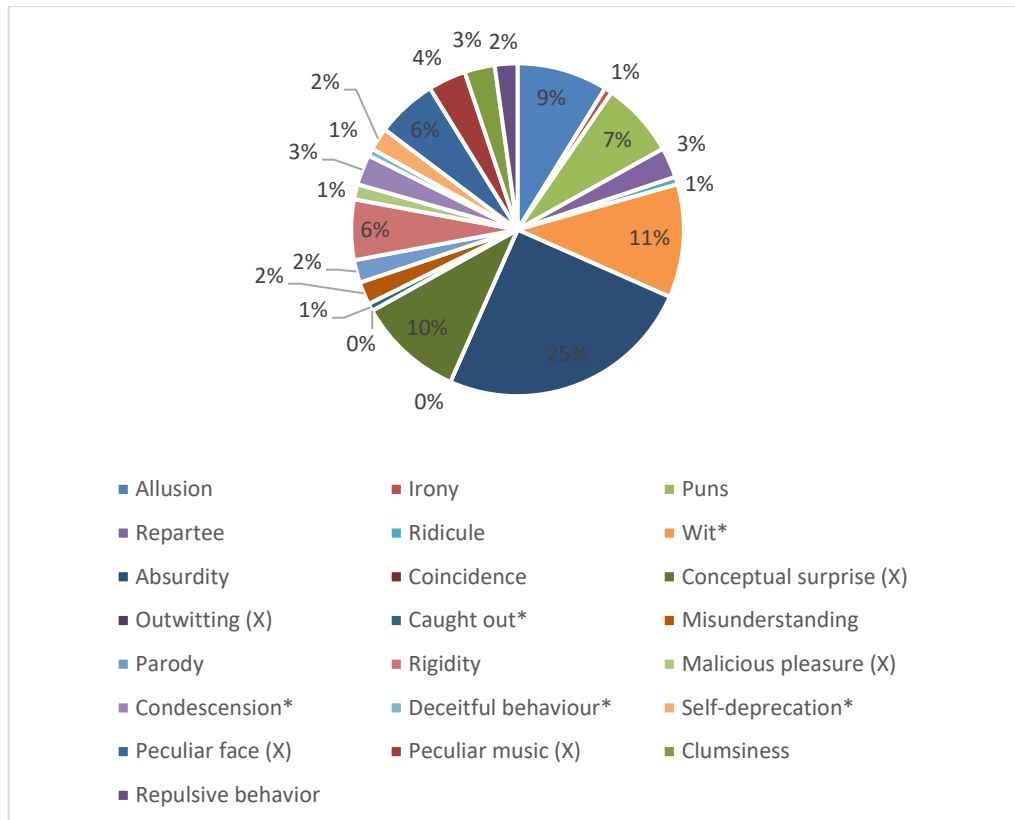


Figure 16. Percental distribution of humour techniques in *The Good Place*.

In total, 136 uses of techniques have been detected.

Looking at the four main categories, Language, Logic, Identity and Action, the most use of humour techniques can be found in the Logic category, followed by the Language category.

- Logic: 52 uses
- Language: 43 uses
- Identity: 21 uses
- Action: 20 uses

8.2.1 Superiority, Incongruity and Relief

The four humour techniques that have been used the most in the analysed episodes of *The Good Place* are Absurdity, Wit, Conceptual Surprise and Allusion.

All four of these theories can be traced back to the concept of incongruity. Most of the jokes in *The Good Place* play with the idea of luring viewers towards an idea, and then surprising them with another. It creates tension and releases it with random allusions or wit. Since the release of tension is clearly intentional, most of the humour techniques can also be connected to the theory of relief.

All four main techniques stem from either the logic or the language category. None of them stem from the action category, which is a category that often uses humour techniques associated with the theory of superiority. In fact, most techniques from the identity category as well are associated with superiority. These techniques have barely been used in the three analysed episodes of *The Good Place*.

Therefore, most of the humour was not aimed at a certain person or a group of people, as can also be seen in the results regarding the butt of the joke.

Superiority is not very common, most of the used humour is coming from incongruity in the storyline. It can be concluded that *The Good Place* draws most of its humour from the idea of releasing tension with the unexpected – a mix of incongruity and relief.

8.2.2 Butts of the Jokes

In *The Good Place*, little humour that was aimed at specific people could be detected. In the first episode, in ten of the 21 segments, one or several specific butts were found. In the second episode, there were ten in 16 segments. The third episode had only five in 21.

The characters often make fun of themselves or each other. However, most humour used during the series is humour that is aimed at the situation or stems from absurdity.

Table 6. Butts of jokes in *The Good Place*

	TGP 1	TGP 2	TGP 3
Eleanor:	7	1	0
Tahani:	2	1	0
Chidi:	4	0	3
Jason/Jianyu:	0	3	3
Michael:	0	1	1
Janet	0	3	0
Others:	1	3	0
SUM	14	12	7

If jokes are aimed at people, for example jokes about Chidi, they often concern their endearing qualities – such as Chidi's inability to make decisions.

Most of the jokes that are directed at people specifically come from Eleanor, the main character. The fact that they become less and less throughout the series is compatible with the series' idea of Eleanor slowly becoming a better person throughout the season. Her path to personal improvement includes her ceasing to look down on others and making fun of them.

8.2.1 Taboo Humour

There are no instances of any kind of taboo humour in the analysed episodes of *The Good Place*. It can be assumed that, due to the tone of the show, it is unlikely that these types of humour occur in other episodes. The humour used is rarely malicious in any sort of way. The only people using superiority and looking down at other people are a certain type of characters: the demons from the Bad Place. They are portrayed in such an exaggerating manner that it barely counts as actual malicious intent.

8.2.2 Representation

There is a lot of diversity in the cast of *The Good Place*. People of colour are included in the main characters, making up 50% of them. Therefore, it is much harder to make generalizing jokes about a certain group of people, as they are included in the cast already. Women and minorities can exist in the story as characters that are not defined by their gender, sexuality, race, or ethnicity.

8.2.3 Creating Change

By showing how humour can be created in a way that does not mostly rely on superiority, *The Good Place* is a positive example for future comedy series creation. Furthermore, it depicts humour based on superiority only carried out by the demons as well as Eleanor, who is on her path to personal betterment. Thereby, it subtly tells viewers to consider their own use of these strategies and rethink them.

8.3 Comparison

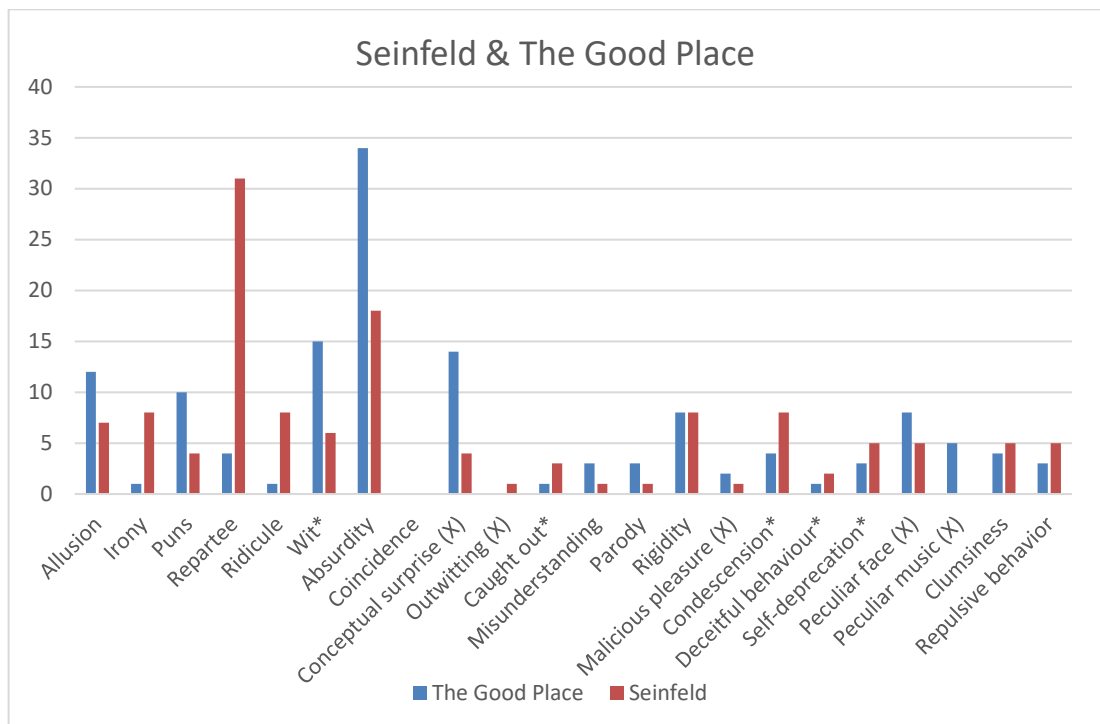


Figure 17. Comparison of *Seinfeld* and *The Good Place*

As can be seen, both analysed television shows use humour theories in a different manner. While *The Good Place* shows the highest use in the category Absurdity, which stems from the Logic category and plays with a situation and the reality around a character, *Seinfeld* has its highest use in Repartee. This humour technique stems from the Language category and is usually directed at a person, rather than the situation as a whole.

However, the two series have similarities in many of the other categories, which is why it can be assumed that these have been proven to be well working techniques. Rigidity is popular in both and appears in a similar way: a character (Chidi in *The Good Place*, George in *Seinfeld*) has very strict morals and rules they need to follow, and their inability to do so as well as their reaction to that creates humour.

Looking at the techniques Irony and Puns, differences can be noticed. While both are based on the Language category, Irony is mainly used as a malicious response to a person or occurrence. Puns, however, are not directed at people. They creatively use a specific word to create humour in a situation by reforming it. *The Good Place* uses Puns repeatedly, while *Seinfeld* has used more instances of Irony.

Similarities can also be detected with the category Condescension. In *Seinfeld*, characters use condescension regularly towards their friends, which is based on

arrogance and used to knock someone else down. Ridicule has strong ties to superiority as well and can be detected more frequently in *Seinfeld* than in *The Good Place*.

Therefore, it can be concluded that *Seinfeld* includes more directed and targeted humour as well as more humour that is based on superiority and makes characters feel superior to others. This is applied widely – the characters use it at each other as well as other people they encounter in their day to day lives. *The Good Place*, however, rarely utilizes humour that is based on superiority. Most of it is drawn from absurd moments, unexpected surprises, and language jokes such as wit and puns.

8.3.1 Butts of the Joke

In total, *Seinfeld* had 50 instances in which humour was aimed directly at somebody, and a butt could be detected. In direct comparison with *The Good Place*, which showed 33 instances, it can clearly be concluded that *Seinfeld* uses more humour that is targeted at specific people or groups of people. This is consistent with the results mentioned above, showing *Seinfeld* incorporating more humour based on superiority.

The targets throughout both shows vary from the main characters to side characters, but *Seinfeld* exhibits larger amounts of humour strategies directed at side characters. In combination with their use of diverse characters in mostly side character roles, this leads to many of the jokes ending up targeting minorities or women.

Seinfeld was identified as a status quo series, while *The Good Place* clearly is a serial. Serials live from characters constantly evolving and changing, and therefore make it easy to repeatedly make the main characters the butt, since they are constantly growing and making mistakes. *Seinfeld*, on the other hand, has been running for many years and seasons without the characters evolving, which makes it hard to repeatedly joke about the main characters. While it is still funny in season nine to laugh about George living with his parents, because the situation offers new possibilities to explore, the dynamics between the main characters become very well-known after a while. Therefore, *Seinfeld* introduces many side characters that create funny situations or are funny themselves. While that is a good opportunity to bring in diverse, interesting characters, they often only stay for a few episodes. Therefore, these characters might be presented in a stereotypical way to create fast and easy laughter.

It can be concluded that serials in general offer more humorous freedom because they delve deeper into the characters' personalities and pasts. It allows viewers to learn about backstories, which makes it easier to draw the humour from personality

traits rather than stereotypes. Therefore, while serials such as *The Good Place* also introduce side characters, they often stay for longer episodes and have significant impact on the longer story arcs the main characters go through. This ensures them having more complex backstories as well, and thus reduces stereotyped humour.

8.3.2 Taboo Humour

Neither of the analysed show uses taboo humour to shock audiences and create controversy. *Seinfeld* does have instances that could be interpreted as racial humour, while none could be detected in *The Good Place*. In general, though, neither show uses these types of humour in particular.

However, as discussed in chapter 6.2., it can be said that humour based on superiority often leads to taboo humour strategies. Therefore, *Seinfeld* can be identified as leaning closer towards taboo humour, which could lead to an offensive and demeaning context.

8.3.3 Representation

While *Seinfeld*'s main cast consists of a very homogenous group of people, the main characters of *The Good Place* are very diverse. Thereby, the show appeals to a large variety of people who can see themselves in the characters. They joke about each other but are equals in the show. Meanwhile, *Seinfeld* introducing minorities only via side roles can lead to the main characters feeling superior to them and engaging in humour techniques that stem from superiority, leading to minorities ending up as the people who are laughed at.

8.3.4 Creating Change

While neither of the analysed shows are about any certain political issue, *The Good Place* has a main theme in personal betterment, while *Seinfeld* is simply a funny show for the sake of being funny. Nevertheless, the themes of the respective series do not influence their funniness.

However, as previously discussed, the parasocial connections viewers can form with fictional characters can have an impact on how they perceive minorities in real life.

After movements such as #MeToo or #BlackLivesMatter have reached a mainstream audience and creators as well as audiences are often more aware of the issues these movements focus on respectively, there is a greater demand in society for more diverse content. *Seinfeld*, which aired in a time before many of these movements were able to reach large groups of people, had experienced less societal pressure. Looking back at Clark's model of representation as mentioned

in chapter 6.3.1., the stage *Seinfeld* appears to be in is the one of ridicule. *Seinfeld* was seen as a progressive show for including a variety of side characters that identified as LGBTQ+ or were people of colour. However, most of these characters did not stay in the show for long and ended up as the respective episode's comic relief. Therefore, one can speculate whether *Seinfeld* would still be as successful today as it was back then. Having looked at the mentioned societal changes, doubts about that seem justified.

About 15 years later, *The Good Place* has learned from the changes that have happened over time and can be placed in the third stage – regulation. A diverse cast is presented to the audience, and they are able to identify with each of them, regardless of their ethnicity, sexuality or identity. *The Good Place* subverts stereotypes and uses them to mislead the audience.

And while comedy television has not yet reached the infamous fourth stage of all-encompassing respect, the results this thesis offers can be interpreted as it being on the right path.

As Michael Schur concluded a speech at Notre Dame with the words:

"If television can't make us better people, then nothing can."
(Schur as cited in Berman, 2020)

9 Conclusion

The beginning of this thesis discussed Jerry Seinfeld's argument that nobody cared about diversity in comedy, as long as it was funny.

Having thoroughly analysed modern humour strategies, the analysis proved that, using two representative examples, this statement is not entirely true. By looking at humour techniques in two representative comedy series, a distinct change towards the use of less humour that is based on superiority could be detected. Obviously, two major series do not represent an entire genre, and this thesis does not claim to generalize the entire genre of television, it rather represents two highly popular examples from specific timeframes.

The noticed change can be ascribed to several large socio-political movements that were discussed in detail. Especially by examining "*The Good Place*" as a good practice example, it can be said that a modern successful state-of-the-art comedy series has embraced the demands that have been communicated through those movements, while the compared 90s hit series *Seinfeld* mainly used a homogenous, predominantly male and white cast with little regard to diversity. Therefore, it can be concluded that a modern state-of-the-art comedy show that was created after several large socio-political movements is not based on the same formula of humour as a popular show from the 1990s.

With a diverse cast and large amounts of situation-based, absurd, or language-oriented humour, *The Good Place* creates harmless but still highly entertaining comedy. While it explores what it means to be a good person, it also explores what it means to create good, diverse, and inoffensive television that can make people laugh and bring them together. And it did so successfully, at least according to the Rolling Stone who called it the "smartest and funniest sitcom on TV". (Scherer, 2018)

Diversity on screen can, however, only be created successfully by also ensuring diversity behind the screen. Civil rights movements calling for more spaces for minorities in these jobs ensure that this shift does happen naturally, and by that, also ensure the natural rise in representation on screen again. People want to tell stories of their people, and by being able to find jobs in these fields, they are able to do so.

Further research in these specific areas could analyse the diversity in the team working behind the scenes of the two chosen series of this thesis as well as more general in the entire industry of comedy television. Similarly, as this thesis has only analysed two comedy shows, it would be a starting point for further research to

9 Conclusion

apply the same typology to more television comedy series over the course of a wider study.

In conclusion, it can be said that comedy has not in its entirety arrived “in the good place” - but it is on a good path toward it.

As comedian Hannah Gadsby said:

“Diversity is strength. Difference is a teacher. Fear difference and you learn nothing.” (Gadsby, Olb & Parry, 2018)

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Attachments

A. Analysis file of *Seinfeld*, S01 E01

Seinfeld		Season 1 Episode 1		Topic Segment Time Frame		Description		Language		Logic		Identity		Action		Could a butt be detected? (Y/N)	Who was it									
1	0:00 - 01:00	Jerry Seinfeld standup performance.														N	-									
2	01:00 - 02:08	Jerry and George sit in a restaurant.				X										Y	George									
3	02:08 - 03:30	Jerry and George talk about Laura.						X					X			Y	George, Jerry									
4	03:30 - 04:32	They ask the waitress about Laura.				X							X			Y	George									
5	04:32 - 06:46	At the drycleaner				X	X									Y	a black man, George									
6	06:46 - 08:10	Stand-up Jerry						X								N	-									
7	08:10 - 10:10	Jerry takes a phonecall							X				X			Y	Jerry, Kramer									
8	10:10 - 11:12	Jerry and Kramer sit on the couch														Y	Kramer									
9	11:12 - 12:05	Laura calls														Y	Kramer									
10	12:05 - 13:25	Jerry brings a mattress in with George, talks														N	-									
11	13:25 - 14:20	Kramer joins the conversation				X					X					Y	Jerry									
12	14:20 - 14:40	Kramer and George talk						X								Y	-									
13	14:40 - 16:20	Jerry Standup about dating						X	X							Y	Women									
14	16:20 - 17:46	Jerry picks up Laura						X								N	-									
15	17:46 - 19:30	Laura is in Jerry's Apartment							X							Y	-									
16	19:30 - 20:40	Laura's fiancé calls				X					X					N	-									
17	20:40 - 22:00	Standup about women						X	X						X	Y	Women									
		SUM	0	5	1	11	2	0	2	0	3	0	0	0	0	4	1	3	0	1	2	0	3	38	7N, 10Y	
																	SUM									

B. Analysis file of *Seinfeld*, S05 E10

Topic Segment		Time Frame	Description	Language				Logic				Identity				Action				Could a butt be detected? (Y/N)	Who was it?							
				Allusion	Irony	Puns	Repartee	Ridicule	Wit	Absurdity	Coincidence	Conceptual surprise (X)	Outwitting (X)	Caught out	Misunderstanding	Parody	Rigidity	Malicious pleasure (X)	Condescension	Deceitful behaviour	Self-deprecation	Peculiar face (X)	Peculiar music (X)	Clumsiness	Repetitive behavior			
1	00:00 - 00:40	Standup	Jerry talking about fathers.																							Y	Fathers, Men	
2	00:40 - 02:45	Jerry talks to Elaine about smell, they ruin the table		X			X		X								X									Y	George	
3	02:45 - 03:25	Elaine takes the subway					X			X																Y	Kramer	
4	03:25 - 04:13	Kramer gets a Gyros while Elaine talks to a stranger					X																			Y	Stranger on the subway, Kramer	
5	04:13 - 04:49	George and Jerry get the table fixed, Jerry buys a gift					X																			Y	George	
6	04:49 - 05:30	Elaine is on the subway					X														X					Y	Stranger on the subway	
7	05:30 - 06:24	Jerry and George in the shop							X																	N	-	
8	06:24 - 07:30	Girls playing a game, Jerry brings a gift					X																			N	-	
9	07:30 - 08:04	Jerry reads the card				X																X				Y	Native Americans	
10	08:04 - 09:15	George takes a woman home					X		X												X					Y	George	
11	09:15 - 10:50	Jerry visits Winona, Kramer visits Elaine, Kramer takes the figure					X								X					X						Y	George, the chinese mailman, Jerry	
12	10:50 - 13:45	Jerry and George talk, Georges parents return, G gets grounded															X				X					Y	the parents	
13	13:45 - 14:45	Jerry prepares to go on a date with Winona		X		X																				Y	Jerry	
14	14:45 - 15:13	Tv guide plans to be returned		X				X																		N	-	
15	15:13 - 15:18	Man from the subway arrives with a gift for Elaine																								N	-	
16	15:18 - 16:05	Kramer asks about the book deal					X																			N	-	
17	16:05 - 16:58	Mr Constanza receives his guide back in pieces by stranger							X			X					X									Y	Mr Costanza, Stranger	
18	16:58 - 17:15	Elaine is on the subway , gets a gyros		X																						Y	Elaine	
19	17:15 - 18:05	Jerry talks to Winona		X						X										X						N	-	
20	18:05 - 18:20	Elaine drips Gyros on the TV guide																								Y	Elaine	
21	18:20 - 19:14	Elaine brings the TV guide, meets the guy from the subway								X							X									Y	Stranger from the subway	
22	19:14 - 19:45	Kramer sells the indian		X																						N	-	
23	19:45 - 20:45	Kramer is in the publishing house pitching his idea					X												X							Y	Elaine	
24	20:45 - 21:05	Georges mum goes to the table repair shop											X													Y	George	
25	21:05 - 22:00	Jerry and Elaine are in the subway		X						X																Y	Kramer	
26	22:00 - 22:30	Jerry Standup about tv guides					X		X																	N	-	
		SUM	7	0	2	10	2	4	9	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	4	0	1	2	2	3	0	1	2	52	8N, 18Y	
			SUM																									

C. Analysis file of *Seinfeld*, S03 E07

Topic Segment		Time Frame	Description	Language			Logic			Identity			Action			Could a butt be detected ? (Y/N)	Who was it										
				Allusion	Irony	Puns	Repetee	Ridicule	Wit	Absurdity	Coincidence	Conceptual surprise (X)	Outwitting (X)	Caught out	Misunderstanding			Parody	Malicious pleasure (X)	Condescension	Deceitful behaviour	Self-deprecation	Peculiar face (X)	Peculiar music (X)	Clumsiness	Repulsive behavior	
1		00:00 - 00:40	Jerry Standup about special stores				X												X						N	-	
2		00:40 - 02:14	Jerry and George talking, standing in front of a restaurant																						Y	George	
3		02:14 - 03:20	Jerry watches the restaurant				X	X																	Y	Babu	
4		03:20 - 05:51	George arrives and wants Elaine to take his IQ Test		X		X	X								X						X			Y	Babu, George	
5		05:51 - 06:55	Jerry goes to the Dream Cafe	X					X										X						Y	Babu, Jerry	
6		06:55 - 07:47	George takes the IQ test				X					X													Y	Monica	
7		07:47 - 08:30	Jerry in the restaurant, Elaine comes with the test					X																	Y	Babu	
8		08:30 - 10:30	Kramer comes, annoys Elaine			X	X		X												X				Y	Kramer	
9		10:30 - 10:50	George not doing the test	X																					N	-	
10		10:50 - 11:30	Babu singing , spills something						X												X				Y	Babu	
11		11:30 - 12:50	Babu and Jerry talk						X									X							Y	Babu	
12		12:50 - 14:20	George explaining the test				X												X						N	-	
13		14:20 - 16:38	Jerry is watching the restaurant, Kramer and George come					X	X																Y	Women, George	
14		16:38 - 17:20	Jerry goes back to the restaurant						X																Y	Jerry	
15		17:20 - 17:35	Elaine does the test again																						N	-	
16		17:35 - 17:50	Jerry Standup about IQ test				X																		N	-	
17		17:50 - 18:40	Kramer comes				X		X																Y	Kramer	
18		18:40 - 19:05	George talks to his girlfriend							X				X											Y	George	
19		19:05 - 20:10	Jerry eats							X															N	-	
20		20:10 - 20:55	Elaine comes by George												X			X							Y	Elaine	
21		20:55 - 21:20	Babu had to close, Kramer lost the jacket				X																		N	-	
22		21:20 - 21:45	Deciding for food						X																Y	Babu	
23		21:45 - 22:30	Standup about being good				X																		N	-	
SUM				0	2	1	10	4	2	7	0	0	1	2	0	1	0	0	4	0	2	0	0	4	0	40	8N, 15Y
															SUM												

D. Analysis file of *The Good Place*, S01 E01

Topic Segment		Time Frame	Description	Language				Logic				Identity				Action				Could a butt be detected? (Y/N)	Who was it?					
				Allusion	Irony	Puns	Repartee	Ridicule	Wit*	Absurdity	Coincidence	Conceptual surprise (X)	Outwitting (X)	Caught out*	Misunderstanding	Parody	Malicious pleasure (X)	Condescension*	Deceitful behaviour*	Self-deprecation*	Peculiar face (X)	Peculiar music (X)	Clumsiness	Reputative behavior		
1	00:00 - 01:00	Eleanor arrives. Michael explains how she died and where she is.					X														X			N	-	
2	01:00 - 01:50	Michael reminds Eleanor how she died							X															Y	Eleanor	
3	01:50 - 03:20	Michael talks about Doug Forcett							X															N	-	
4	03:20 - 04:14	Michael gives Eleanor a tour of the Good Place, showing many Frozen Yogurt Places							X															N	-	
5	04:14 - 06:20	Orientation film about The Good Place							X		X													Y	several famous people	
6	06:20 - 06:40	Michael walks with Eleanor	X						X															N	-	
7	06:40 - 07:45	Michael shows Eleanor the house		X					X															N	-	
8	07:45 - 09:05	Eleanor gets to know her soulmate Chidi							X	X														N	-	
9	09:05 - 09:50	Eleanor confesses																			X			Y	Eleanor	
10	09:50 - 10:30	Eleanor explains, curses			X																			N	-	
11	10:30 - 11:00	Eleanor remembers her old job								X														N	-	
12	11:00 - 11:12	Eleanor and Chidi get frozen Yogurt		X																				Y	Eleanor	
13	11:12 - 12:30	Janet							X	X		X												N	-	
14	12:30 - 14:00	Eleanor and Chidi meet Tahani and Jianyu								X	X	X				X								Y	Chidi, Eleanor, Tahani	
15	14:00 - 15:40	The residents attend Tahani's party						X	X	X	X	X												Y	Eleanor	
16	15:40 - 17:09	Michael and Tahani's speeches							X	X	X							X		X	X			N	Tahani, Eleanor	
17	17:09 - 19:00	Chidi takes drunk Eleanor home				X			X	X											X					
18	19:00 - 19:10	Chidi closes the clown door and leaves							X		X	X									X			Y	Eleanor, Chidi	
19	19:10 - 20:30	Eleanor wakes up to the neighborhood going crazy							X	X		X									X			N	-	
20	20:30 - 22:40	Chidi and Eleanor talk about it, Eleanor asks Chidi to teach	X						X															Y	Chidi	
21	22:40 - 22:50	Michael knocks at the door							X								X							Y	Chidi	
		SUM	2	1	2	1	0	6	15	0	7	0	0	0	1	3	0	1	0	1	4	2	1	0	47	11N, 10Y
																									Sum	

E. Analysis file of *The Good Place*, S01 E08

[illegible]

F. Analysis file of *The Good Place*, S01 E13

[illegible]

G. Analysis file of *Seinfeld* and *The Good Place* in general

SEINFELD		language			logic			identity			action			SUM									
Seinfeld1	0	5	1	11	2	0	2	0	0	0	4	1	3	0	1	2	0	0	3	38			
Allusion	Irony/Puns	Repetee	Ridicule	Wit	Aburdity	Coincidence	Conceptual surprises	Dwilling	Caught out	Misunderstanding	Parody	Rigidity	Malicious pleasure	Condescension	Self-deprecation	Peculiar face	Peculiar music	Duminess	Repulsive behavior				
Seinfeld2	7	0	2	10	2	4	9	0	1	0	4	0	1	2	2	3	0	1	2	52			
Allusion	Irony/Puns	Repetee	Ridicule	Wit	Aburdity	Coincidence	Conceptual surprises	Dwilling	Caught out	Misunderstanding	Parody	Rigidity	Malicious pleasure	Condescension	Self-deprecation	Peculiar face	Peculiar music	Duminess	Repulsive behavior				
Seinfeld3	0	3	1	10	4	2	7	0	1	2	0	0	0	4	2	0	0	4	0	41			
Allusion	Irony/Puns	Repetee	Ridicule	Wit	Aburdity	Coincidence	Conceptual surprises	Dwilling	Caught out	Misunderstanding	Parody	Rigidity	Malicious pleasure	Condescension	Self-deprecation	Peculiar face	Peculiar music	Duminess	Repulsive behavior				
UM Seinfeld	7	8	4	31	8	6	18	0	4	1	3	1	8	1	8	2	5	5	5	131			
Allusion	Irony/Puns	Repetee	Ridicule	Wit	Aburdity	Coincidence	Conceptual surprises	Dwilling	Caught out	Misunderstanding	Parody	Rigidity	Malicious pleasure	Condescension	Self-deprecation	Peculiar face	Peculiar music	Duminess	Repulsive behavior				
Sum Language		64			Sum Logic			27			Sum Identity			25			Sum Action			15			

THE GOOD PLACE																					
language				logic				Identity				action				SUM					
TGP 1	2	2	2	1	0	6	15	0	7	0	0	0	1	3	0	1	4	2	1	0	
Allusion	Irony	Puns	Repetee	Ridicule	Wit	Aburdity	Coincidence	Conceptual surprise	Dwilling	Caught our	Misunderstanding	Parody	Rigidity	Malicious pleasure	Condescension	Self-deprecation	Peculiar face	Peculiar music	Duminess	Repulsive behavior	
TGP 2	7	0	2	3	1	7	9	0	4	0	1	1	0	1	2	2	3	1	3	2	
Allusion	Irony	Puns	Repetee	Ridicule	Wit	Aburdity	Coincidence	Conceptual surprise	Dwilling	Caught our	Misunderstanding	Parody	Rigidity	Malicious pleasure	Condescension	Self-deprecation	Peculiar face	Peculiar music	Duminess	Repulsive behavior	
TGP 3	3	1	6	0	0	2	10	0	3	0	0	2	2	4	0	1	0	1	2	0	
Allusion	Irony	Puns	Repetee	Ridicule	Wit	Aburdity	Coincidence	Conceptual surprise	Dwilling	Caught our	Misunderstanding	Parody	Rigidity	Malicious pleasure	Condescension	Self-deprecation	Peculiar face	Peculiar music	Duminess	Repulsive behavior	
SUM	12	1	10	4	1	15	34	0	14	0	1	3	3	8	2	4	1	3	5	4	
Allusion	Irony	Puns	Repetee	Ridicule	Wit	Aburdity	Coincidence	Conceptual surprise	Dwilling	Caught our	Misunderstanding	Parody	Rigidity	Malicious pleasure	Condescension	Self-deprecation	Peculiar face	Peculiar music	Duminess	Repulsive behavior	
Sum Language	43			Sum Logic			52			Sum Identity			21			Sum Action			20		