Women in american sitcoms of the 1950s and 60s essay sample

Sitcoms – situation comedies – are probably the most " American" of all TV formats. They convey a high degree of viewer identification, as they show scenes of everyday American life. If the viewer identifies with the series, is the series representative to the viewing society? I will try to elaborate on that question by comparing to sitcoms of the 1950s and 60s and the image of women that they carry. Life with Elizabeth was one of the earliest sitcoms in U. S. television. Produced as a low-budget series for first-run syndication, it was shown in several networks throughout the US from 1953 to 55, usually in early evening slots. The half-hour episodes were made up of three ten-minute vignettes that displayed comedic scenes of a newlywed marriage; those vignettes were narratively not connected. The entire series centered around the person of Betty White, who was not only performing the main character (Elizabeth) but was also – 28 year old – creator and producer of the show, because of which she could be considered " one of only two women to have creative control both in front of and behind the camera during the early days of the medium".

This show was regarded as one " that cannot offend the most sensitive viewer, and the word wholesome might have been invented for it." It is entirely filmed in a studio with live audience (there is audible laughter, and the audience is visible at the end of the episode). A commentator leads into every vignette and communicates with the figures. The three vignettes of an episode consist of one scene each with just few different shots; whenever needed, vignettes open with an establishing shot and continue mostly in medium shots. The set has the feel of a theatre stage (maybe due to its low-budget production style), but as the studio situation is obvious, the viewer

should not be disenchanted with the authenticity. The identification with Betty White also surfaces as she personally says goodbye after the show. Everything about the show can be characterized as simple: The stage, setting, montage technique, even the jokes and puns. White herself said: " We were trying to be funny.

We were more two-dimensional cartoon characters than three-dimensional real people." The Lucy Show was a later example of American sitcoms centering around a woman character. Following the successful show I Love Lucy, the series aired nationwide on CBS – a commercial broadcasting network – from 1962 to 68. Again, a show was highly identified with one person, Lucille Ball, who was among the producers and creators the only woman, and also playing the main character. The show was aired in the daytime system, which aimed at a target audience of housewives. At that time, the TV reception was a highly domestic situation. The historical context of the series is the time of the Cold War and highly influenced by a domestic, commercial atmosphere: external problems and frustration were promoted to be overcome by consumption. Just like the first example, also The Lucy Show was filmed on a studio stage with supposedly a live audience (audible, not visible). The 25 minute episodes consist of one plot, realized in few scenes; in " Lucy gets trapped" of 1967, a friend convinces her to go shopping with her and to pretend to be sick to get off at work – which her boss discovers when he sees her picture in the newspaper as a celebrated customer.

There are long shots in the beginning of every scene and in slapstick situations, and medium shots accompany dialogue situations. The external economic atmosphere also reflects in the single episodes; for example, in " Lucy gets trapped", the big adventure of shopping is more important than honesty. This, among the commercialization of the show figures, lead the author Lori Landay to associate Lucy to the term of commodification: Lucy is a matter of consumption, and consumption also helps her overcome frustration and dissatisfaction. Life with Elizabeth and The Lucy Show both shaped the format of the sitcom, although Lucy worked with a little more illusion than Elizabeth. Whether this is because of its upscale production, the advancement of the TV medium or the off-screen representation of the main personae, cannot be elaborated in this context. Both series are also said to represent gender roles of their times.

While Elizabeth is during the fifties considered to embody the ideal housewife, cheery, witty yet harmless, inferior to her husband, girlish and childish, Lucy portrays a more independent woman. She lives alone, she has her own job, and the deeds that she does are slightly more evil and harmful. However, her status in the working society is still very typical, being a secretary in no leading position. This seems to represent the image of women of their time; however, both shows also reveal an ambiguity to that image: the main characters might be the simple, stereotypical women of the U. S. society, but the personae behind them certainly are not. Betty White and Lucille Ball were two of the most important figures of the early American television industry and both carried a lot of independence and responsibility

in their jobs. If it was only for this ambiguity, the series could not act as full and representative evidence in an essay on the position of women in that time, although their widespread success surely reflected, if not shaped the image of the contemporary woman.

References:

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