

Situation comedy: analysis of peep show



Carroll discusses the type of characters which the audience find most attractive in sitcoms:

Much humour is undeniably at the expense of characters who are particularly stupid, vain, greedy, cruel, ruthless, dirty, lubricious, and deficient in other respects (2005, p. 345).

I intend to examine the ways in which Carroll's statement can be supported through the depiction of characters in contemporary sitcom, focusing on the British sitcom Peep Show and American sitcom Community. Peep Show (Clarke, 2003) follows the lives of two friends Mark Corrigan and Jeremy (Jez) Usbourne who live together in a flat based in Croydon, London. Mark has a pessimistic outlook while Jeremy is lazy and childish, with unrealistic goals about his future. American sitcom Community (Harmon, 2009) focuses on the lives of an ensemble cast of characters, Jeff Winger, Britta Perry, Abed Nadir, Shirley Bennett, Annie Edison, Troy Barnes and Pierce Hawthorne, who live in the fictitious town of Greendale, Colorado and attend Greendale Community College.

The purpose of humour is to challenge social norms and morals within society. Humour is a part of daily life, and thus it should be relatable to the audience; humour can be culturally specific, or worldwide, focusing on issues such as gender, family or work life, religion, politics, wealth, class, or race and ethnicity:

A standard definition of sitcom [is] concentrating on the recurring set-up and characters, the happy ending and the fact that individual episodes rarely refer to events in previous ones (Sander, 2012).

The three theories of humour, are superiority, incongruity and release/relief theory. Plato and Aristotle held a negative view towards humour, as Plato perceived humour to be a malicious act while Quintilian, Aristotle and Cicero established that “ it is a form of behaviour from which civilized man should shrink” (Chapman and Foot, 1995 cited in Perks, 2012).

Superiority theory is the idea that humour is found in laughing at those deemed inferior. Theorist Thomas Hobbes talks about the “ sudden glory” felt by viewers when they can identify their superiority over others:

The idea of laughter is self-applause can nevertheless be defended by pointing out that, even though somebody else’s joke occasions my laughter, what I am laughing at, what produces my joy, might be that I can see the point and thus appreciate my superiority (Ewin, 2001).

It can be argued that Robert Webb’s Peep Show character Jeremy triggers this type of response. Jeremy’s immaturity is highlighted throughout the show and is often the reason behind his involvement in regrettable situations. Jeremy lives in a fantasy world, he thinks highly of himself with illusory ideas about his future career in music. The audience are aware of Jeremy’s delusions, and this encourages a humorous element as we laugh at Jeremy’s expense. The viewer takes comfort in the knowledge that Jeremy is an example of who we aim not to be like; furthering the idea of supremacy and therefore, his character is highly entertaining and comical. This contrasts with Mark (David Mitchell) who is a rational and sensible character. It is evident that Mark is trying to succeed, especially in his work life. The audience may feel sympathetic towards Mark and the superiority notion may

not be as dominant in his case, as he has more relatable and reachable goals.

Superiority theory applies to Community. In the ‘ Introduction to Film’ episode, Britta (Gillian Jacobs) persuades Abed (Danny Pudi) to begin studying film. Abed enjoys the class, as he is seen later using a camera to create a documentary. Abed’s father appears at Greendale college furious that Abed is studying film. Abed’s friends defend his choice to take the class, explaining he can make his own decisions. His father states that Abed is no longer his concern and now his friends’ responsibility. Although this incident is comical due to the anger of Abed’s father and the awkwardness of the group’s response, there is an underlying sense of sorrow regarding Abed’s relationship with his father. He is shown as controlling and forceful, and this may explain the reason for Abed’s introverted personality. Abed is often the laughing stock of the group, which is also funny to the viewer. We laugh at Abed due to the ridiculousness of his experiences and how he deals with situations, as his actions are not conventional. However, the audience may or may not realise that Abed has had a difficult upbringing (especially evident with his domineering father) and although this can be interpreted as humorous on one level, it may be deeply distressing to Abed on another. We are laughing at Abed’s problems and the areas in which he is lacking. Due to his father’s selfishness, Britta and Jeff (Joel McHale) are now cast in the roles of Abed’s parents. This is amusing as their struggle of trying to provide for Abed is highlighted, however we are again laughing at the character’s hardships, feeling thankful that we are not part of the situation presented.

The viewer may also feel they could perform better in parenting Abed, and thus a feeling of superiority may arise in this way. Plato describes laughter:

Plato believed that the laughter that attends humour is directed at the vice of self-unawareness. That is, we laugh at people who fail to realize the Socrates adage- ‘ Know thyself’ and who instead deceive themselves, imagining that they are wiser than they are (Carroll, 2005 cited in Levinson, 2003).

Incongruity theory relates to the idea of comedy being absurd and irrational/illogical. Shifting away from what is accepted to be normal behaviour and society’s values, often using exaggeration and rebelling against society’s rules of protocol. Philosopher Immanuel Kant talks about incongruity theory:

It is remarkable that in all such cases the jest must contain something that is capable of deceiving for a moment. Hence, when the illusion is dissipated, the mind turns back to try it once again, and thus through a rapidly alternating tension and relaxation it is jerked back and put into a state of oscillation...to this sudden transposition of the mind, now to one now to another standpoint in order to contemplate its object, may correspond an alternating tension and relaxation of the elastic portions of our intestines which communicates itself to the diaphragm (like that which ticklish people feel) (Kant, 1790 cited in Bardon, 2005).

Incongruity theory is evident in Community. Throughout the series, a dreamlike setting is apparent, especially in ‘ Abed’s Uncontrollable Christmas.’ Abed Nadir is eccentric and quirky. It is often hinted at that Abed

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is suffering from a mental illness or personality disorder. During this episode, Abed believes the upcoming Christmas is particularly special as he views his friends as clay stop-motion animations. The group are concerned for Abed's mental health, and encourage him to find the cause for this delusion. The characters who come in and out of Abed's fantasy animated world do so through a curtain, and as the curtain opens, a glimpse of the normal study room is seen. This helps to connect the audience with Abed's friends, and offers a sense of reality. The animation effect is unusual and may surprise or disturb the viewer. This 'world' is an impossibility and is irrational to the audience and to everyone else within the episode, aside from Abed. We are led on the same journey with Abed and his friends, to try and help him return to rational thought. Community consists of non-linear narratives and surrealist themes throughout, which adds to its overall success as a sitcom. The audience are encouraged to find humour in the bizarre happenings. It should be mentioned that the characters make it known that Abed's stop-motion world is peculiar, and the viewer can laugh at Abed regardless that the cause for his hallucination is related to a more personal issue, which relates back to superiority theory.

Peep Show portrays elements of incongruity theory. Mark and Jeremy often rebel against what is classed as 'normal' behaviour. As a cringe-style comedy, Peep Show breaks the fourth wall and this allows for intimacy and immediacy with the audience. Incongruity theory is shown in the episode 'Shrooming', where Jeremy, to impress the girl he loves (Sus), hosts a drug party at the flat. Mark arrives home from work ill with gastric flu. Jeremy is furious that Mark has returned and this may hinder his chances with Sus and

ruin the party. Jez puts sleep medication in Mark's tea before locking his bedroom door. The episode is comical as the viewer can sympathise with Mark – being very ill and not having access to a bathroom. Jeremy will do whatever it takes to fulfil his own selfish desires. In addition, Mark's boss has suspicions over his condition and is unsure if Mark is well enough to attend the upcoming business trip, however Mark insists he is fine. It is evident that Mark is desperate to impress his boss and will risk his own health in doing so. This type of behaviour is somewhat strange and the viewer may question why Mark does not refuse due to his ill health; it's as though he feels he has something to prove.

Once Mark escapes the bedroom, he rushes to the toilet, however the bathroom door has been removed from the hinges. Unfortunately, his boss has come to the flat, but finds him in the bathroom alongside Jez. The two men are appalled and disgusted at Mark, who is extremely embarrassed and uncomfortable. The social awkwardness of the situation is outstanding and the audience experience the humiliation alongside Mark. This behaviour is shocking, as it defies what is deemed socially acceptable, and is an infringement on human privacy. Jeremy and his boss continue to observe Mark instead of realising the bizarreness of the situation and leaving. Feelings of sympathy towards Mark return, and Jeremy is viewed in a negative light as he has the option to allow Mark his privacy but refuses, showing little respect.

Herbert Spencer talks about relief/release theory, and its psychological effects:

That laughter is a form of muscular excitement, and so illustrates the general law that feeling passing a certain pitch habitually vents itself into [...] action, scarcely needs pointing out. It perhaps needs pointing out, however, that strong feeling of almost any kind produces this result. It is not a sense of the ludicrous, only, which does it; nor are the various forms of joyous emotion the sole additional causes (Herbert, 1987 cited in Olson, 2007).

Through the observation of an event or situation an initial build-up of tension is caused, and pleasure is found in the release of this energy. Austrian philosopher/psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud expands on Spencer's theory. Freud talks about the relief that comes with laughing or finding humour in the critique of society and its expectations of us. Freud goes on to explain that our sexual impulses are like our malicious ones, stating that these elements of humour are highly appealing and offer relief, as we are forced to repress these thoughts/feelings by society:

The prevention of invective or of insulting rejoinders by external circumstances is such a common case that tendentious jokes are especially favoured to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure. The charm of caricatures lies in this same factor: we laugh at them even if they are unsuccessful simply because we count rebellion against authority as a merit (Freud, 1960).

This illustrates that we will indulge in such thoughts, only if safe to do so; if there is no threat such as our reputation being judged. Relief theory can refer to humour and laughter at cruelty, obscenity, inappropriateness and nonsense. It can be argued that relief and release theory apply more so to a stand-up comedy routine where jokes are continuously told allowing for the sense of anticipation, rather than a sitcom television programme.

Relief theory may apply to an episode in *Community: Curriculum Unavailable*. During this episode, the group have been expelled from Greendale, and notice Abed's behaviour becoming particularly erratic. Due to this, the group attend therapy alongside Abed. During the sessions, the group are informed that Greendale is in fact a mental health institution where the group were attending as patients due to nervous breakdowns, and they created the delusion that they were part of a community college. This revelation builds up tension and anticipation as the viewer begins questioning the entire series and setup of *Community*. Once Jeff insists this is not be true and the group discover the psychiatrist is a fraud, faith is restored in the narrative. Relief is experienced through this discovery, and we laugh at the ridiculousness of the joke. Nervous excitement is released through laughter at the realisation the counsellor is lying to the group. Also in this episode, it appears Pierce is addicted to pain medication. He experiences hallucinations of a small man, referred to as 'Tiny Man'. Pierce is shown to enjoy his 'high' from the drugs and no one has yet mentioned his addiction, even though it was witnessed earlier in the study room. This may glamorise the idea of taking drugs and we laugh at Pierce's pleasurable experience. Drug addictions are viewed as extremely negative within

society, and hinting at the idea that taking drugs is an enjoyable or fun experience is a prejudicial notion, thus allowing suppressed feelings to arise in the viewer and laughter to occur.

A Peep Show episode ‘ Seasonal Beatings,’ where Mark is hosting a Christmas family dinner shows relief theory. Mark describes his father as having a critical personality and he fears this. It becomes evident that Mark does not have a healthy relationship with his parents and feels nervous about their arrival. Mark’s girlfriend, Dobby, also attends the dinner however Mark insists she does not inform his parents about their relationship. This sets up anticipation, the audience begin to feel the tension of the situation. There is a build-up of anxiety concerning the arrival of Mark’s parents as well as ensuring his relationship with Dobby is kept secret. Once his parents arrive, Dobby begins speaking negatively about her boyfriend- this continues the accumulation of anticipation (we want his parents to discover this horrible boyfriend is Mark). Finally, Mark becomes frustrated and it is revealed to his parents that he is Dobby’s boyfriend. The relief is found in the reveal that Mark is the disappointing boyfriend and his father’s reaction – we laugh at this, and understand that Mark is the butt of the joke.

To conclude, Carroll’s account continues to be manifested through characters and storylines within the contemporary situation comedy. Both Peep Show and Community are examples of these types of sitcoms, with characters such as Mark, who we often feel sympathy towards or Jeremy, who comes across as rather selfish and egotistical. Community portrays a variety of characters who differ from one another, such as Abed who is unsure of himself and eccentric or Pierce, often depicted as being sexist

through making crude or sexual jokes regarding women. Humour is found in these types of personalities and the way the characters interact with one another. The audience enjoy characters who are willing to push the boundaries and test or challenge social norms.

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