

Comedy and british identity essay



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One of the most daunting questions posed to graduate students (or any student for that matter) is the one inquiring about their focus. When asked about this project, I have told friends and family that I study the use of Americanness in British comedy as a means to reassert a sense of British identity. This is the easiest and most concise way I have found to answer the question. It is also a sentence constructed in such a way as to impress those unfamiliar with television studies.

For some reason, when people hear “ study television,” their body language and faces indicates that this field is a waste of time and just an excuse to watch television rather than do “ real” work. Most do not understand that studying television changes the way in which I watch television. This dismissal changes, however, when I explain that I work with British television. There is a release in their body language, a type of acceptance, as if British television has been accepted as canonical, far superior to American television, deserving of study, more meaningful, and better quality.

All of a sudden, I am given suggestions as to which program I should work with, which is their favorite and why I should watch it, and how much better they think British television is in comparison to American programs.

Somehow, within this conversation, television studies becomes less useless and more insightful. It is the perceived differences and the way we talk about television, especially that of British and American television, that led me to this study of British television and specifically at the reflection of the dynamic of the British and American relationship within television.

The purpose of this project is to explore how British television works with American television and popular culture in ways that do not interrupt the cultural education television provides. In conversations concerning American television abroad, there arises a conflict between cultures and questions as to whether or not the importation of American values and ideologies within countries without their own strong means of media production affect that domestic culture.

While this debate continues to become more relevant as more nations develop their own programming, I thought it pertinent to look at the dynamic relationship between two media powerhouses like the United States and Great Britain. Each has a unique history with broadcasting and each have become great media exporters. Great Britain has proven to have great media influence within the United States, having had several programs imported or adapted for American television. The impact of British shows within American television schedules is more subtle than that of American television in the Britain. American shows often are shown in Great Britain, un-adapted for British audiences, whereas British shows are usually “translated,” using American writers and actors to adapt shows for the audiences. Besides, channels within the states aimed at niche audiences interested in British television and culture, like BBC America, audiences are not exposed to “British-ness,” unlike British audiences who have become very familiar with representations of “American-ness.”

For those with access to BBC America, this is the channel meant to present the best of British television (BBC America website), which in turn gives viewers essentially a “what they need to know” about British television. For <https://assignbuster.com/comedy-and-british-identity-essay/>

those in Great Britain, however, American television plays a larger role in television. American shows are commonly placed within main channels schedules. The question, then, is how does American television interact with British television and how does British television handle the incorporation of American programming? What happens when these two culturally collide? Is there even a collision? I posit that there is only a minor scuffle. While American television has been watched with a cautious eye, it has not completely overwhelmed British television screens. The following will help show how British television remains “ British” amidst the increase of American programs in television schedules.

The shows chosen, Peep Show (2003-) and Goodness Gracious Me (1998-2001) are two comedies that play such a role in maintaining this sense of Britishness, by deconstructing the notion of identity as well as emphasizing Britishness through the representation of Americanness. Playing with Americanness and American culture in general helps to reassert a sense of British national identity and helps to define or at least clarify what that means. References to American culture are often greatly used in British television. There are references to American film, television programs, politics, and famous figures. These references not only reflect the impact of American culture on British television, but the amount of play and mockery with these references also requires a certain amount of assertion of British identity.

By poking fun at American culture, British culture is prioritized. It is not that comedy programs are purposefully constructed as nationalist propaganda; rather, comedy provides a space to deconstruct and resist a strict definition

what it means to be “ British,” but that comedy also builds and reinforces unity through humor. By inviting audiences in on the joke, writers and performers use familiar cultural elements as benchmarks of understanding, that most if not all viewers can recognize, relate and “ get” the joke.

Television comedy is both exclusive and inclusive and when dealing with identity, and hence this ability becomes even more significant.

The first chapter of this thesis focuses primarily on the interaction between British and American television. It is a short segment of a very long history of the trade between nations, but still expresses the significance each has on the other’s television. With the British Broadcasting Corporation being a governmental agency, British programming at first aimed to provide television shows that helped foster better British citizens. With the advent of more channels in Great Britain, such as ITV and Channel 4, British television has changed and has become more diverse in representation of British-ness, but has also become more reliant on American shows that provide a cheap way to fill television schedules.

This introduction of the relationship between two cultures’ media representation elaborates on the ease with which American television is exported to Great Britain, but the lack of British television aired in the United States. Using Paul Rixon’s *American Television on British Screens* and Jeffrey S. Miller’s *And Now for Something Completely Different: British Television and American Culture*, this chapter further expands on the cultural exchange that occurs through television. Rixon’s argument that this exchange is a dialogue between two cultures and Miller’s assertion that British television has had a greater impact on American television than most recognize, will

help illustrate what I will consider as an intermediate way of looking at globalization and media.

Rather than focus on whether or not American television is a form of cultural imperialism, I will examine what options are provided by both American and British Television and how British television shows frame British-ness.

Andrew Crisell's book *The History of Broadcasting in Great Britain*, helps to supplement both Rixon's and Miller's work by offering the historical context of British media. His recount of the history helps to map the influence American television has had on British television. Using Crisell has helped to both make sense of the British television industry (which is remarkably different to the American industry), but also as a means of placing both *Peep Show* and *Goodness Gracious Me* in context.

Examining the development of the industry helps to understand the significance of both programs, especially in light of the increasing presence of American television in British schedules. The incorporation of American programs, which in turn reflect American cultural values, acts as a type of interruption to that particular dynamic of television. This history of media importation helps to set up how particular programs play with Americanness in ways that help to reassert a sense of Britishness. As I am more concerned with comedy's political potential, I offer why I think it is important to look at these issues of identity through the lens of comedy.

As stated before, television itself acts as a space for cultural issues to be played out on the screens for viewers, relating experiences specific to that culture. Comedy allows this to go further, because it relies so heavily on

audiences understanding allusions and the nuances of jokes usually related to culture. In terms of television studies, comedy has been underrepresented in terms of television studies, especially in its importance of reflecting particular ideologies. Of course, it is not because comedy is considered unimportant, but it is difficult to talk about comedy because it is so subjective. What is funny to one may not be to another and so it becomes difficult to discuss why certain elements of these shows are funny.

Though I focus on comedy, I do not deconstruct each joke discussed. I am more interested in comedic play and also dread writing about these shows that make them unappealing and worse unfunny to the reader. Taking a page from Andy Medhurst, I am attempting to not be an assassin of enjoyment (5) and instead of strictly analyzing jokes analyze the sense of play programs utilize to make points concerning Americans, American culture, and the relationship between the United States and Great Britain. With this in mind, I further examine the politics and relationships in both Peep Show and Goodness Gracious Me and how they are used in order to reassert a specific conception of identity.

Chapter two examines British identity as displayed in the program Peep Show, which deals with personal identity, but also places in the context of the national . The chapter begins with recounting the history Channel 4 in the 1980s as a means of breaking up the duopoly of broadcasting dominated by the British Broadcasting Corporation and Independent Television Authority. While Channel 4's purpose was to air programming that focused on issues and narratives that would not be found on the other channels, it ultimately resorted to airing American programs due to costs and ease to fill

up schedules. The channel eventually became known for being dominated by American programming and led to the channel expanding into original programming.

This push for more domestic programs reflects a certain need for more shows that represent British life and values over those reflected by American programs. One of Channel 4's programs is Peep Show which began airing in 2003 and has continued to gain more viewers as the series continues its run. Peep Show deals with identity at the personal and individual level, but also through the anxiety of the two characters reveals the social norms that are expected of them. The two characters Mark Corrigan and Jeremy "Jez" Usbourne reflect a certain level of anxiety associated with the expectations of British masculinity and identity.

This level of anxiety is represented as the failure of both to perform certain cultural expectations as men, employees, and socialized people. Their inability to perform these expectations illustrates the anxiety inherent with the expectations of living in a society with strictly defined social roles. With the show's popularity increasing due to the amount of attention paid to the increase of DVD sales, the show acts as a space where anxieties linked to identity are reflected for the audience.

There is something valuable in the show, despite the fact that it is a comedy with seemingly little redeeming value or importance besides providing entertainment. Though I discuss the show in general, most of the focus is on the second series, where an American character is introduced to the series. Nancy, a love interest to Jez comes into the show as a representative of

American culture. Her insertion into the narrative interrupts Jez's relationship with other developed characters, most notably that of his roommate. The stereotyped American character of Nancy is used as both a disruption in the relationship between Jez and Mark, as well as acts as a representation of Americanness. This chapter pays particular attention to the representation of Nancy as "the American." It will be examined how "the American" is represented in Peep Show and how American-ness is reflected in comparison to British-ness.

This chapter also examines her relationship with Jez and how it is used within the series to illustrate a greater concern with the primarily ambivalent relationship between the United States and Great Britain, primarily of the ambivalent relationship. This is especially significant concerning how this relationship has developed in the past decade, with the relationship of George W. Bush and Tony Blair's partnership in relation to the War in Iraq. The criticism surrounding Tony Blair's apparent blind following of Bush's plans for Iraq offered more reasons for this relationship to be more contentious.

With the discussion of this relationship and the representation of "Americanness" on British television, specifically in Peep Show, the third chapter will examine how comedy can be used to resist a strict sense of national identity, but also builds and reinforces unity through humor. Identity is deconstructed through comedy, but because comedy relies so much on audiences understanding the joke it is vital for there to be a collective understanding of what is being deconstructed and commented on in order for the joke to be effective.

This sort of play and deconstruction is depicted perfectly by the sketches included in *Goodness Gracious Me*, a show that brought the conflict of British Asian culture with White British culture. Aired on BBC2, the program offered a new site for illustrating issues of ethnicity and national identity and the duality of those within Britain who did not and could not conform to the white, Anglo-Saxon norm of British identity. The analysis of *Goodness Gracious Me* focuses on the ways in which the show deconstructs the strict definitions of what it means to be British, which does not often include those of various ethnicities. By playing with representation of minorities, the show is able to criticize derogatory representations while also creating some wiggle room for interpretations of

Britishness. The chapter begins with discussing the issue of representation and the frustration of ethnic minorities toward the lack of minority representation within the British television industry. *Goodness Gracious Me* is a great example of a show with a minority cast and crew that was able to communicate this frustration over representation, while also appealing to a mainstream audience.

Though the conflict being confronted is racism within Great Britain, there are several examples of American popular culture. Sketches like “The Six Million Rupee Man” and “Channa’s Angels” use the framework of the popular American program to make a point concerning representation of Indian culture, which demonstrates the importance of American popular culture within Great Britain, but also adds to the struggle of British Asian cultural representation within Great Britain. The use of Americanness helps to do several things within the short amount of time.

The reference to American shows indicates the importance of American culture to British culture. The way in which representations of British Asianness is parodied deconstructs past representations within media constructed by white British writers or performers. The comedic aspect of these representations challenges strict definitions of national identity and allows for a more inclusive definition. My research consisted of lots of solitary viewing and pausing in order to take copious notes. While television seems like it would be all fun and games, it is by no means an easy task to keep track of cutting shots, dialogue, and action.

This, however, is the price paid for textual analysis when dealing with a moving text. This analysis will be supplemented through DVD commentary where possible, as Peep Show only has commentary for selected episodes and Goodness Gracious Me provided no commentary. While it is incredible to have performers and writers (often the same people) discuss the elements of production the problem that comes with commentary is that they do not necessarily answer all if any of a researcher's questions. It is not

as if they are expecting that someday an American Culture Studies graduate student will write a thesis concerning their work. The commentary for Peep Show is able to provide a bit of context, especially concerning the casting for Nancy and of her placement within the series. In order to not put words in the mouths of those involved in the production of these shows, I have also included interviews from various newspapers where they discuss either their show or personal background that relates to their work.

This is most evident with those in *Goodness Gracious Me*, where actors Sanjeev Baskhar and Meera Syal provide a lot of insight to what it means to be British Asian in Great Britain. In terms of placing these programs within a context, as well as providing a theoretical framework, I use secondary sources from an array of fields. Hartley and Fiske's *Reading Television*, is a staple to television studies. This project relies heavily on John Hartley's and John Fiske's *Reading Television* for this reason. Though a short work, *Reading Television* offers a rich outline for the study of television and how it relates to culture.

By thinking of television as replacing the bard and performing the same functions, the ways in which television and identity work together, where television emerges as not simply and a tool for entertaining audiences, but a cultural educational tool, which both reasserts and helps to develop societal norms. The insertion of another culture's television, which also functions as a domestic bard, alters the ways in which the cultural messages provided by domestic programs are viewed. While some may see this is an interruption, others consider the ways in which these imports are chosen and scheduled in order to minimize disruption. Still, the ways in which American culture is referenced, recognized and played with in programs offers a way in which to clarify what exactly the significance of American television is on British screens. Along with the work of Hartley and Fiske, I rely on Bret Mills's *Television Sitcom* as a backbone of my discussion concerning *Peep Show* and how it functions as a comedic text. Mills outlines various ways in which sitcoms can be studied and elaborates about the conventions of both American and British comedy, including aspects of performance,

representation, and consumption. His explanation of texts' structure, function, and usefulness enhance the value of studying a program like Peep Show and has become fundamental to understanding sitcoms and their importance. Because the thesis is focused on the attempts to illustrate and reassert "British-ness" in television, these texts also help illustrate the importance of television in creating a unifying space for British audiences.

Also vital, is the work of Andy Medhurst, whose *A National Joke* plays a major role in this thesis. He concisely and brilliantly outlines the ways in which comedy deals with issues of identity and representation in comedy television. His work deals with identity on both the personal and national level, developing a better understanding toward what can be considered a national sense of humor. His discussion helps to lead to my further analysis of how American texts are used within Great Britain and how British television attempts to reassert a sense of Britishness despite this interruption.

As an American working with British television and culture there is usually an assumption that I think British television is "better" than American programs. I have become the "British television person" within my circle of colleagues, as if I refuse to watch anything else. While I usually do lean more in the "Brits do it better" camp, I more than readily admit to what I consider bad British television and likewise praise many American programs. Though I am not interested in proving which nation produces better programming; rather, I am more intrigued by the ways two leaders in media production and media importation interact with each other.

Because of the mass importation and popularity of American television in Great Britain, the importance of maintaining a sense of national identity amidst American values and standards becomes an important aspect of British television programming. The conclusion of this thesis will offer ways in which representation of national identity can be read in these texts and in comedy in general. Combining my readings of these primary texts with the offerings of secondary sources, this summary of findings will illustrate how comedies can be read for political meaning. Rather than thinking of comedy as a form of pure entertainment or escapism from the real world, the purpose of this thesis will show the importance and relevance of comedy and performance to understanding the functions of television in passing down cultural values, meanings, and identities.

Chapter 1 Importing Identities: National Identity and Television Comedy

There is no doubt that there is a difference between American and British television. One can look at the structure of sitcoms and notice the ways in which commercial breaks placed differently and their duration. Even the nature of comedy in general can be seen as a difference, with American comedy considered more joke-and-gag oriented, and British comedy being more situational. Even the ways in which the industry itself is a fundamental difference to the ways in which television is aired, watched, and discussed. These differences are ones produced by culture. What is produced domestically is both defined by culture as well as part of its production. When television schedules are interrupted by the inclusion of foreign programs, these differences are highlighted, but when foreign programming begins to overwhelm the schedules, cultural imperialism becomes a concern.

The United States, the greatest exporter of media, has been closely examined as a result of the increased interest in globalization and media. Concern has risen over the impact of American imports, especially with television. The focus on television is due to the fact that television programs enter into homes rather than film, which is displayed in areas, set aside for people to congregate and view.

This concern has been mostly associated with those of developing countries and the reflected importance of commercialism in American media and pleasure associated with American products that impact the lifestyles of those living outside of the United States. This fear of American cultural imperialism has mostly been confined to discussing the relationship between the United States and developing countries. But this fear is not confined solely between the American entertainment complex and struggling domestic media industries. Since the rise of television, American media and exportation has been at the center of debate within nations whose own industries have been strong.

The relationship between British and American television presents a unique vantage point at examining how those nations who are conscious of America's media power negotiate between the ease in which it is to import American programs and maintaining their own industry to reflect their own cultural values. The concept of national identity is complex and highly debated. As has been discussed in the works of Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, within one conception of national identity like "British" or "American" a multitude of other identities based on ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual preference emerge presenting a difficulty in establishing a comprehensive

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definition of any national identity. In determining a national identity it is then important to find “ the suture point”, a term used by Hall in “ Who Needs Identity?” to explain the convergence of multiple identities into one (Hall 5).

Television acts as such a point. Though in today’s world of options for cable, satellite, and internet viewership, television acts as a point where multiple identities can come together. Television has increasingly become an important day of everyday living within nations, acting as a place that brings people together literally and ideologically.

Television programs emphasize issues and messages that are important to particular nations and help to define cultural features like family structures, bodily comportment, and gender roles, amongst others. That said, in watching television, it is clear that texts made within a cultural context are better understood by those audiences living within that context. Though Stuart Hall has rightly claimed in “ Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse” that audiences decode the signs and symbols used by the television industry to express various values (6), those in the field of television studies have continued to point to the ways that signs are used by television to express certain aspects of culture. In this instrumental essay Hall explains the relationship between producers and audiences when it comes to the

meanings and relevance of texts. In producing cultural texts, those within the industry are using signs and symbols in order to convey a particular message and it is up to those within the audience to recognize these signs and “ decode” the text in order to form meaning (1). Hall includes that texts

are polysemic and that though there may be an intended meaning, audience members can choose to read either with or against these texts (9).

While the audience may not decode in similar ways there are signs used in texts to convey a sense of the nation's culture. Hall stipulates that The domains of ' preferred mappings' have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs the everyday knowledge of social structures of ' how things work for all practical purposes in this culture', the rank order of power and interest, and a structure of legitimations and sanctions. (14) Television texts are packed with these preferred meanings that help to reinforce certain cultural norms and reaffirm certain ways of life that will be familiar to audiences. The familiar use of the family dynamic in sitcom, for example, is based on the cultural conceptions and definitions of families and the determination of what is " normal" and what is " dysfunctional."

Despite the fact that these definitions may be dependent on each individual's personal background, because audience members are bombarded by the same signs and symbols in a variety of media examples, they are aware of how the culture should view the family structure. Without access to or knowledge of these cultural codes embedded into texts, audiences will be more likely to misread the text and possibly be unable to fully understand the program's significance or point. The concept of encoding/decoding becomes vital to understanding the international flow of television and serves as an explanation of the differences between programs imported by another.

Though multiple and at times conflicting identities may coexist within a nation, the values and ideologies are readily recognizable by those within the domestic culture. Not only is the understanding of the cultural text made easier but so is the digestion of ideology filtered through television. While television acts as a convergence point for multiple identities within a nation, it also acts as a form of identity definition, as it is also exclusive. Albert Moran has expressed the importance of domestic programming in relation to globalization and the flow of cultural products, contending that the television system will inevitably have cultural effects by subjecting everyone with a given territory to the same type of service, thereby producing notions of equality and commonality, by instituting the expectation of rhythms of service, subjecting everyone to the same flow of control.

Domestic programs are produced to fit into the culture, as well as help create and reinforce cultural values and expectations. Because television programs are specified for domestic audiences their formats and tone exclude those not made domestically. While, for example, British and American television programs are both made in Western and developed nations, because of their cultural differences there remains clear differences in their television. The differing histories of both British and American television help to explain this disparity, while also able to clarify how both have been able to interact and form somewhat of a symbiotic relationship.

Both nations' television industries have affected the other and have been used in ways that have somehow aided the other. Both have either used each other's programs to fill air time in newly formed schedules or by purchasing shows and formats to help boost a sense of credibility. With this

relationship, comes the issue of how the codes used within programs are approached, changed, or recontextualized in order to make sense of their meanings.

The United States Adapts In importing British television, American broadcasters are more inclined to purchase formats rather than broadcast the originals. This is exemplified by the NBC hit *The Office* (2005 -), an adaptation of a British show of the same name that originally aired on BBC2 in Britain. The original had become both an example of great British television and a worldwide phenomenon. When commissioned by NBC, critics and fans of the original were concerned as to whether or not Americans could do the *The Office* justice and could appreciate the low-key comedy for which the original and English comedy is most known.

The Office, however, became a major success for NBC. Yet, the integration of the format included catering to American audiences. The American adaptation of the show is not so wholly different as both are shot in a documentary style, feature employees of local paper companies in industrial towns (Wernham Hogg in Slough and Dunder Mifflin in Scranton, PA), inadequate middle aged bosses, and often similar plots or plot devices. The negotiation of representation is present in the mixture of elements from the original series and the inclusion of more American cultural points that Americans can better understand. Despite the growing popularity of the show on NBC, initial reactions to the idea of adapting *The Office* were either those of unease or negativity.

According to a report in the Mirror that the “ test audience has given the American version of hit series The Office the worst rating for a sitcom in a television station’s history” (“ The Office Re-Make Flops in US” 11) and the show was in constant threat of cancellation until given the chance to come into its own rather than continue to lean on the original program’s storylines. The eventual success of The Office on NBC is even more remarkable considering it followed the utter failure of one of England’s other imports, Coupling (2003), another sitcom akin to Friends (1994-2004) that was to act as replacement for the latter long running American program.

Unlike the care taken by producers and writers of The Office, to recontextualize the show for American audiences, little to none of that same concern seemed to be put into Coupling, besides the heavy editing of sexual innuendo and conversations, as well as British slang. Granted, the issue of friendship and working environments are inherently different and perhaps the working environment and those within needed a bit more tweaking, but the lack of any sense of adaptation is partially responsible for the failure of the series, which was cancelled after only three weeks. In watching both series, critics readily and rightly pointed out the not just the similarities but almost a mimicry of the original series. In a review for the New York Times, contributor Alessandra Stanley compared the American adaptation to that of the transportation and rebuilding of the London Bridge in 1971 (Stanley 1).

The minor translation of British slang into American and the editing of jokes to be less sexually explicit were not enough to fully contextualize the show into the American schedule. The show remained British, but was in the midst of an American backdrop. In pondering the possible success of The Office,

critics focused and compared the adaptation of the series to the current failure of *Coupling*, ignoring or perhaps unaware that many shows had transitioned into American programming from English television seamlessly and successfully. After the importation of *Coupling* and *The Office*, the media was quick to call the increase of British formats another British invasion.

The usage of British formats on American screens, however, is nothing new to American broadcasting. Ironically, many of what have been considered the cornerstones of American television, and sitcoms especially, have been originally English. As Jeffrey Miller has documented in his book *And Now for Something Completely Different*, British popular culture has always had an impact on American culture and has always played a role in American television. In discussing the impact of British entertainment on American popular culture and television in particular, Miller comments on the popularity of British theater, and more specifically, the comedy of *Beyond the Fringe* (1960). The production, which opened in New York in 1962, provided the opening for comedy programs in the United States (Miller 114). Miller cites comedian Peter Cook as having “ suggested that the cultural differences presented in [*Beyond the Fringe*] provided a sort of “ snob merit” for well educated and well-off American audiences (114-5).

The point made concerning access to both education of cultural practices, as well as access to comedy continues with BBC America’s approach to programming. Because BBC America is the channel for those interested in British television, the expectations for the programming would be those that were stereotypically “ British,” marked in ways that are vastly different than what can be found on American television. Those looking for humor will be

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looking for the low-key means of humor, rather than what marks American comedy. In recounting the cultural exchange between American and British television, Miller not only addresses the importation of British shows onto network television, but also the usage of British sitcoms as models for classic “ American” sitcoms like *Sanford and Son* (1972-77) and *All in the Family* (1971-79).

While Miller’s analysis of the importation and usage of British programs aired in the United States provides a useful approach to considering the impact and contextualization of Britishness on American television, his strict focus on the decades of the 1960s and 1970s ignores the advent of cable and the explosion of new channels for niche audiences. What little he does with cable is to explain the use of British programs to promote the image of newly formed networks. A&E, for example, used British shows as a means to define themselves as a “ quality network” as British programs had the cultural collateral to lure viewers (Miller 171). No longer were British shows confined to the major three networks and PBS; rather, more channels offered more opportunities to air British programs, which not only satisfied certain sections of audiences, but also filled air time. British programs have since been seen on Oxygen, MTV, Comedy Central, each specializing in an appeal to their chief demographics.

When, for example, Oxygen began to air *Nighty Night* (2004-5) in 2004, a show that focused on the murderous, deceitful and morally reprehensible Jill Tyrell, it made sense that a channel aimed toward women would air a program that centered on a female character, especially a channel that continually attempts to present itself as a channel for independent women.

The same can be said for *The Young Ones* (1982-84), which aired on MTV, and a variety of British comedies that have aired on Comedy Central, like *The League of Gentlemen* (1999-2002) and *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992-96, 2001-05). Besides the smattering of programs that could or can be seen on various cable channels, there is also BBC America, which promotes as presenting the best of what is “ Across the Pond.” Yet, this is somewhat a misnomer.

Because BBC America is owned by the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), what is aired for American viewership consists primarily of BBC programs and for the most part neglects popular programs aired on other networks. Though the shows listed above, be them aired via BBC America or on other channels are mostly affiliated with the BBC. Though perhaps the greatest source of British entertainment, the BBC also aims to provide a service to citizens, having had a history of being a cultural educator, a space to teach citizens how to be citizens. In airing shows produced or with this type of service expectation, BBC America is not only entertaining audiences with the “ otherness” of British television, but acting as a type of educational tool to teach American audiences the ways of British. Even if these depictions are not wholly accurate, the expectation is that these programs are representative of British culture.

It is because sitcoms depend on cultural literacy for their jokes to work, that they, according to Miller, require to be reconfigured once imported if they are to appeal to mass audiences. This is the reason why *The Office*, though working relationships within an office setting can be readily recognizable to those in the United States, still required a bit of reworking. Negotiation of

representation then becomes instrumental to the ways in which imports function into the schedules of American programs.

Despite the borrowing of content (both shows, for example, featured ethnic/race sensitivity training) the producers and writers changed characters and plotlines that were clearly decisions made to appeal to a mass American audience. Ricky Gervais, co-creator of *The Office*, even commented that the original had found a small American audience “ Because as much as it seems that it seems parochial and quintessentially English, the themes are universal, and Americans invented that in sitcoms” (Muther N7) and that the adaptation would be successful because it would reach a wider American audience who were unfamiliar with the original. One of the more significant changes is of the recharacterization of the boss figure. In the original, David Brent is egotistical, mean spirited and evokes minimal sympathy, despite his pathos.

Michael Scott, his American counterpart, is incompetent, lonely, yet there many points throughout the series where the audience is led to sympathize with Scott. Scott’s fruitless attempts to find true love and Steve Carrell’s performance of heartbreaks, epitomizes one of the fundamental differences between British and American comedy, what Bret Mills claims is that “ the American sitcom often invites us to laugh with its characters Britcom instead offers pleasure in laughing at them” (42)

The British version of *The Office* does not necessarily bring the pleasure that NBC’s Thursday night prime time schedule, is affiliated with having been the home of *Friends*, *Seinfeld* (1989-98), and *Will and Grace* (1998-2006). In

attempting to define the comedic style of the Britcom, Bret Mills has suggested that “ the preponderance of black humor and the repeated intermingling of serious and comic subjects without clear distinctions between the two can be seen as representative of a particular British way of responding to events” (9-10). Black comedy, however, while somewhat seen in film, is not a common occurrence on American television.

By including a show like *The Office* into the schedule, would more than likely result in mass confusion, since ambiguity between comedy and drama is not a code that American audiences decode often. In order to fit into the schedule, it was necessary to recode the show in order to market it for mass audiences familiar with the rhythm of American comedy, which also includes making the jokes clearer and overall lighter. While to appeal to mass audiences, American television must adapt British programs for mass consumption, the same is not necessarily true for British television.

British Television, Negotiation, and Assimilation Unlike American broadcasters, British broadcasters have used and aired American television programs in full, bypassing the energy and financial strain in creating a new show within a borrowed format to air an already purchased product. Though America media dominates the global market, the relationship between the United States and Britain provides an alternate perspective to the issue of cultural imperialism.

On one hand, the fact that it is easier and more cost effective to purchase shows and air them in their original format, demonstrates the type of fear associated with cultural imperialism when there is a lack in economic

options. On the other, Britain is the second largest exporter of media in the world, so the British television industry is not one that can be consumed by American television and culture. The relationship between American and British television in Britain becomes more complex than that of their relationship within the United States. Britain has always been aware of the possibility of American television's impact. Since radio, the British Broadcasting

Corporation has maintained its position as an agency that provides a cultural service. Scheduling was based on what the board members thought the needs of the nation were and how the medium could be used in ways that both appealed to audience, but also educated them to be members of the nation (Crisell 14). Unlike the United States, which had always approached mass media as a commercial venture rather than an educational tool, the BBC avoided consistent scheduling, opting instead to fluctuate programming. Where a consistent schedule would be an advantage to the commercial system because of its ability to build an audience, which in turn would give advertisers a greater opportunity to sell their products, for Britain, the fluctuated schedule had its own advantages.

According to Crisell The high-minded intention was continually to renew the listener's alertness to the medium, not only to make her listen instead of merely hear but to surprise her into an interest in a subject she had previously not known about or disliked and at all times to give her ' something a little better than she thought she wanted'. (23) When the BBC launched its own television station in 1936, the agency remained funded by

licence fees and through the government, rather than be funded through commercial advertising like the American system.

Though the BBC did air a few programs like *I Love Lucy* (1951-60), the imposition of American television was still distrusted. Not only would people be listening, but paired with audio would be the visual signs and symbols of an American way of life that could possibly threaten the values of British culture. The issue became whether or not the BBC could maintain their stance as a cultural educator while the British public were swayed by American culture. The public had become tired of being patronized by television schedules that were aimed at culturally educating them. The BBC was accused of being a monopoly and though it had good intentions in providing a service, the public wanted more agency and to have a more active role in their television watching (Crisell 27). Ideas to commercialize the industry emerged.

Though despite the desire for more options that could appeal to a variety of people, rather than to a blind mass audience, commercialization was still a concept that had to be negotiated with both the elite and the public. The BBC, in order to maintain their hold on the television industry, used the post-War anti-American sentiment and linked commercialization to Americanization (79). Broadcasting in Britain, was therefore operated based on the desire to maintain their own sense of identity through television, by positioning themselves against the United States.

The BBC's attempt at convincing the public and the government that commercialization would do nothing but help erode British culture failed and

ITV was launched in 1955 (84). Because the BBC is a governmental agency, it has always been responsible for the education of British citizens, which also meant providing and reinforcing a sense of identity through music and programs. The same sense of responsibility for the British public has been expected of by later channels that emerged in the desire for more options and commercialization. This beginning of broadcasting as a maintainer of cultural identity marks a fundamental difference between British and American television, and also provides partial answers to why American television has been cautiously approached by the British broadcasters. In doing so, British broadcasters have spent energy in choosing programs that can not only entertain their audiences, but can also fit seamlessly within a schedule of domestic programs.

This has been maintained after decades of being concerned with Americanization. Since the beginning of the television in Great Britain, those within the television industry and government have been concerned with overly broadcasting American programs for fear of American culture's repercussions on British culture. If radio, and later television, were to be used for educational purposes, than the use of American programs which were more commercial oriented, would act as an interruption to the BBC's agenda. The BBC broadcast only a few American imports, like I Love Lucy in the 1950s, but in doing so made sure that the remainder of their schedules were mostly domestic and maintaining a sense of Britishness (Crisell 96). Though television channels have expanded, with the BBC growing into four channels, ITV emerging in 1955, Channel 4 in 1982, and the rise in satellite, the desire to maintain a majority of domestic products has continued. Like

the explosion of cable in the United States, with the advent of new channels came more air time that needed to be filled and the easiest way to do so was to purchase and air American programs.

When Channel 4 launched, a majority of its programming was American and their usage acted as a means for the network to attract viewers and establish themselves, while developing its own programs in order to build its own domestic schedule. While in the United States, the use of British programs was an option used to prove the quality of new channels, the use of American programs on new British channels was more of an economic necessity than a way to lure viewers.

Despite the cultural impact of the United States on the world it is the concern over being culturally colonized that has led to the emphasis of domestic production not only in Britain, but in the rest of the world. This why, according to Albert Moran, international trade in television programs while impressive in terms of its value, is, nevertheless, dwarfed by the overall volume of television programs that only receive domestic circulation. The fact is that most of the world's television programs are produced and broadcast in national television systems and do not receive international distribution. (5) The perceived threat of the United States's media possibly interrupting the flow of international airwaves has caused broadcasters worldwide to become extra wary of American programs.

In terms of Great Britain's relationship with American media, this is even truer. Having an already well-established industry, themselves, Britain has had to negotiate their own schedules in order to remain a cultural tool, both

relying on and distancing themselves from American television. While British television broadcasting attempted to become a dominant form of media within its own national boundaries, broadcasters also had to depend on American imports in order to fill time slots while developing their own shows which would highlight their own sense of identity. In using the American programs, broadcasters had to be more alert to the needs and desires of their audiences, choosing programs that would both fill slots while also providing the public service which television was thought and purported to provide. Despite the concern of having too many American programs, the channels have attempted to prioritize domestic productions.

Though the ratio of American television shows to British is small, there remains a large presence of American programs on British televisions. Paul Rixon has claimed that careful consideration on behalf of the broadcasters has made the American presence on British screens less worrisome (Rixon 6). The time given to American television is not enough to have created a great impact and that care is placed into choosing these shows so that they fit into the rest of the schedule dominated by domestic programming. Giving programmers the opportunity to explain their choices of American programs for the British public, Rixon documents the ways in which American programs are introduced to a British audience and how they are fit into schedules so that they are not disruptive to the flow of domestic television.

With the British public being more inclined to watch domestic programs rather than American and less of a need by broadcasters to import to fill schedules, American cultural imperialism is no longer an actual threat to the British way of life. Though American programs may appear on British

television screens, they are chosen and aired in ways so as they assimilate into scheduling, that “ they do not impose on a British culture but become part of it, and that they should therefore be judge on their merits” (Rixon 97). While Rixon suggests that American culture has been less of an imposition than was once conceived, this does not stop the fear of cultural imperialism. As Americans question the use of the British formats and imports in their own television schedules and consider the 2% of these imports (Steemers 104) as threatening the range of American creativity and identity in the United States, the same wariness of American imports operates within the discourse of British television.

The interaction, adaptation, and borrowing between American and British television is a competitive relationship of cultural identities. There is an awareness of differences and a desire to maintain a sense of cultural stability through television. While each has proven itself as a force of media and power throughout the globe, their relationship through television reflects a greater focus on television as a source of cultural identity. With the United States adapting and manipulating British imports in order to appeal to a mass audience who will potentially buy more products, and the British still making caveats for their shows to both entertain the public as well as act as a cultural education tool, both approaches to television reveal the values important to each culture.

Television has been approached as an important aspect of culture, transmitting programs that reflect and reinforce our ways of life through signs and symbols. The addition of global markets, the increase of technology and the ease in which television can travel both through airwaves

and internet connections, this battle over television and representation becomes even more complex.