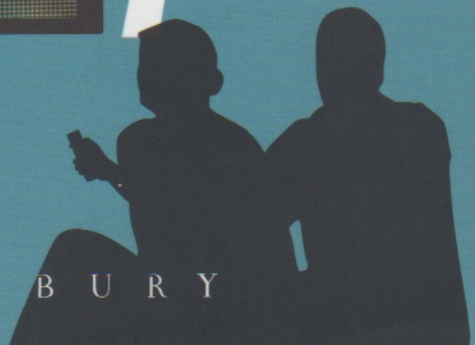


Edited by
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Television Aesthetics and Style



B L O O M S B U R Y

humorous forms without need to strain against the medium's own inclinations. And that's why comedy is at home on television.

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6

Situating comedy: Inhabitation and duration in classical American sitcoms

Sérgio Dias Branco

Consider a moment from an episode of *Will & Grace* (1998–2006), 'Something Borrowed, Someone's Due' (4.18), which is filmed employing a single 40-second shot. Best friends Will (Eric McCormack) and Grace (Debra Messing) have moved into a huge new apartment, and are alone in their bedrooms. Will is upstairs. Grace is downstairs. We cannot see them and they speak loudly to each other so that their voices traverse the rooms of the apartment. The shot is wide enough to include the stairs to Will's room, on the left, and the door to Grace's room, on the right. Here is their exchange of words:

Grace: Will, I'm having a clothing crisis. Will you come down here?

Will: No. You come up here.

Grace: No. You come down here.

Will: No. You come up here.

Grace: No. You come down here.

Will: No. You come up here.

Grace: No. You come down here.

[pause]

Will: No. You come up here.

Grace: Please?

Will: No, and stop bothering me.

[the telephone rings]

Will: Hello? Grace, I'm not coming down there!

Grace: Will, I miss our old apartment.

Will: Me, too. I wanna go home.

Grace: Me, too.

Will: Let's talk about this.

Grace: Yeah, let's. [pause] Will you come down here?

Right after this scene, they decide to return to their old apartment. Their off-screen, disembodied, voices convey the suggestion that they are communicating as if they were in different spaces instead of a shared space. Furthermore, their absence from the shot captured by a stationary camera expresses that this is already an uninhabited place, an empty location – not really a home.

Moments like these stress the significance of inhabitation (of living in a space and finding a place in it) and duration (of experiencing time and valuing it) in sitcoms like *Will & Grace*. This chapter focuses on these two topics to examine the style of classical American sitcoms. Such programmes are filmed scene by scene, instead of shot by shot, in a sound stage and relying on a virtual proscenium that the multiple cameras do not cross, in what may be described as aspects of traditional sitcom aesthetics.¹ The term 'classical' signals that this was the first structure used in the making of sitcoms. Yet, this unified employment and exploration of the means of studio television production, which creates a sense of place and time through the filming of continuous action, is not tied to an era. It is followed by some contemporary sitcoms that may therefore be aptly described as classical.

Jeremy Butler claims that these programmes follow an editing pattern that he perceptively terms *attenuated continuity*, the opposite of the *intensified continuity* identified by David Bordwell.² In the former, techniques of

¹Brett Mills, *The Sitcom* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 6.

²David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 121–89.

visual continuity such as the 180° rule for camera positions or the eyeline matches for shots and reverse-shots are 'reduced to the bare'.³ In the latter, the same techniques are amplified to the point of redundancy. Butler's work has changed the perception that these television programmes have, as he describes, a 'zero-degree style', a styleless style. This is an impression that of course did not extend to single-camera sitcoms such as *Scrubs* (2001–10) because these series do not rely on a fixed system of several cameras and so stylistic choices become *more evident*. My contribution with this text follows from these considerations and ideas, but has a different purpose. This is a piece of television criticism that aims at illuminating the nuanced uses of these techniques calling attention to the way the 'stagy' feel of these series is connected with the closeness of the characters and with their delimited, intimate world. It makes claims about the handling of stage-like settings in classical American sitcoms, namely the bar in *Cheers* and the living room in *Frasier*, whose particular worlds are connected. It therefore scrutinises their exploration of concerns around inhabitation and duration, or dwelling and time, and the connections between the two.

The sitcom (situation comedy) is generally defined as a type of series in which an established set of characters are involved in recurring comic situations.⁴ This generic definition is not, nor could it be, attentive to the stylistic properties of particular sitcoms. This is especially true of those sitcoms that follow the classical structure of the genre that, as we have seen, are thought to be even more undistinguished. Details of performance and framing, rhythm and flow, characterize how characters inhabit a place throughout time and demonstrate that classical sitcoms may be alternatively described as a form of *situating comedy*. That is, as a way of grounding and inscribing the comic idiosyncrasies and rapport of a small group of characters in a defined and regular spatial and temporal context. *Cheers* (1982–93) and its spin-off *Frasier* (1993–2004) provide examples from three different decades. They also show different modes of being an inhabitant and of experiencing time that will be studied by drawing on philosophers who have meditated on these matters. This may be unusual in television studies, but we shall see that philosophy provides meditations that allow us to understand aspects of human existence and interaction that are at the center of these series. Both the bar in *Cheers* and Frasier's apartment in *Frasier* become homes, even though the bar is a public space and the apartment is a private space. In fact, there is often a fusion between these two kinds of space in classical American sitcoms – the coffee shop in *Friends* (1994–2004) that becomes a third apartment, beyond

³Jeremy G. Butler, *Television Style* (London: Routledge, 2010), 83.

⁴See, e.g.: Brett Mills, *Television Sitcom* (London: BFI, 2005).

the two where the main characters live, is but an example. In *Cheers*, the bar is a place where the characters spend a lot of their time and where they feel content and at home. In *Frasier*, the apartment is Frasier's, but his family and friends occupy and reside in it, sporadically or continuously.

Martin Heidegger calls attention to how inhabitation is tied with being.⁵ We are by inhabiting. Inhabitation in human terms is called *dwelling*, which is the building of *our* world, of a place where we feel at home, physically and spiritually comfortable. According to Heidegger, not all buildings are devised for dwelling, but the bar in *Cheers*, which bears the same festive and warm name as the series, certainly *allows* for dwelling. The cameras were set up for the series in front and across the counter where the costumers sit and drinks are served. This piece of furniture structures the *mise-en-scène* with its central position. It has the centripetal function of, not only aggregating the characters' actions, but also of establishing the camera's positions and angles. Long shots abound so that the presence of the counter remains visually dominant. Yet, because this is an establishment, it is open to the public. *Cheers* presents a limited sphere, but a porous one that let us see what lies behind its limits. It is subterranean, but the fact that it is out of sight for the passer-by does not mean that it is not welcoming. *Cheers'* inhabitants treasure the open door and take pleasure in greeting and taking a stranger in. The narrative of each episode frequently develops from someone, like the Englishman in 'The Spy Who Came in for a Cold One' (1.12), or something, like the fortune-telling machine in 'Fortune and Men's Weight' (2.17), crossing the threshold of the bar. Halfway through 'Let Me Count the Ways' (1.14), a fan of the baseball team Celtics walks in from the street. We see him walking from the street to the stairs that lead to the bar: the camera follows his movement, from a straight-on position to a high-angle position. He enters the bar in the next shot, with the camera already in its habitual place. Much like the regular costumers, the camera adopts positions that become usual. It is the first time that we see such a transition, which shows the journey of a character from outside to inside, revealing the outer world while at the same time emphasising the inner border of the bar. Yet there are many transitions between the bar and the adjacent, secluded spaces that lie beyond its delimited space: Sam's office and the poolroom. The office of the owner, Sam Malone (Ted Danson), is disconnected from the bar by a door, whereas a passageway separates it from the poolroom. To reinforce the centrality of the bar, both of them are repeatedly employed as off-screen spaces, that is, spaces that are linked with the one we see on screen, but that are simultaneously outside the

⁵Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971), 145–61.

limits of the frame and of the room with the counter. In addition, the office door allows whoever uses that space to hide from the eyes of the people in the public area of the bar. They can only know what is going on in the office if they listen in through the door – as they do many times. In contrast, characters communicate between the bar and the billiard room, across the passageway. These differences between spaces and their use within *Cheers* explore the fusion and the degrees between the private and the communal.

In other words, the series establishes the topology of its fictional world, outlining the other spaces against the bar. This main space feels like a stage, a place where people enter and leave sideways (from or to the street, the office, or the billiard room) or upwards (from or to the restaurant above). This staginess is related to the clearly defined limits of the space as well as to its unity that the elements of the setting and the set camera positions enhance. How do the characters live in this unified space? How do they dwell in it? There are noticeable differences between Diane Chambers's (Shelley Long) pensive and elegant gestures and Carla Tortelli's (Rhea Perlman) careless, graceless actions. But what is more striking is their dynamic as a community, the communion of different people. 'Manager Coach' (2.08) opens with Carla singing a lullaby to her baby on the phone. Her colleagues and the bar's customary clients join in, little by little, and the shot widens to accommodate all the impromptu singers. The particular and intimate moments of a character usually have the magnetic power to summon the other characters, turning them into shared moments and moments of sharing. This is a place where 'everybody knows your name' and the 'troubles are all the same', as the lyrics of the theme song say. The bar's inhabitants are clustered around a character or an unfolding event forming a kind of family in which the worries, joys and interests of one of them occupy them jointly. There is a similar interconnection in 'The Heart Is a Lonely Snipe Hunter' (3.14), this time in the form of a chain instead of a gathering, when a costumer starts singing 'On the Sunny Side of the Street' and then one character after another picks up where the other one has left off. They see a possibility to connect to each other as if in a chain of fellowship. When such opportunities of becoming a fellow become plain, time is seen as that which opens up new possibilities of being.⁶ Revealingly, the characters are in tune. They respond to each other, continuing in their own way what the other has started, forming a community which does not erase their individuality and which arises not only from the sharing of space, but also of time. The last one to participate, Coach (Nicholas Colasanto), seems to be at odds with the rest because he begins singing

⁶Heidegger, *Being and Time* [1927], trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2005), 488.

the country song 'Jingle Jangle Jingle'. He does not do this intentionally to stand out. The other characters and the regular viewers know how forgetful (and self-effacing) he is. Then and there, he still lives this moment with them through his forgetfulness.

Besides these recurrent events, another aspect that conveys the characters' bond with and in the bar is the way workers and costumers have found a specific spot for them, which grounds them in this site and to which they repeatedly return. Norman Peterson's (George Wendt) presence is the most eloquent example of this. He seats at the right extremity of the counter and drinks beer after beer. The teaser for 'They Called Me Mayday' (2.09) shows him in pyjamas as Sam walks into Cheers to open it for business. Norman has been residing at the bar. By the end of the ninth season, in 'Uncle Sam Wants You' (9.26), the bartender Woody Boyd (Woody Harrelson) receives the mail and gives every envelope to Norman – not just the ones addressed to 'Mr. Peterson' or 'occupant', but also an item sent to 'Mr. Boyd'. Woody's automatic distribution demonstrates how usual it has become for all the post to be Norman's.

As in the initial example from *Will & Grace* that explores the characters' gradual uneasiness, this sense of belonging arises in *Cheers* from the fluent and continuous unravelling of situations. Shots are sequenced without individuation, framing an uninterrupted performance and weaved to preserve this continuity. This feature is highlighted in *Frasier*, through the titling of scenes. The scenes of classical sitcoms are unusually long when compared to sitcoms that follow the single-camera mode of production. The episode evocatively called 'Space Quest' (1.02) begins with a scene of more than five and a half minutes. Frasier Crane (Kelsey Grammer), is a psychiatrist and radio-show host first seen in *Cheers* as a customer. Recently returned to his hometown Seattle, he has just woken up and walks into the living room with an open robe as if he were alone. The scene is titled 'Dear God, it wasn't a dream'. His father Martin (John Mahoney) has moved into the apartment with his caretaker, Daphne (Jane Leeves), and his dog, a terrier named Eddie (Moose). There are other repeated spaces beyond the apartment, such as the coffee shop, where characters meet, or the radio studio, from where Frasier broadcasts his show. Yet *his* space is the apartment, particularly the living room, and the episode deals with the feeling that they have intruded into it. The series uses a smaller proscenium, but a more extensive set with even a small, salient part that includes the apartment door. The relation between camera and set is more diverse than in *Cheers*, because the compositions in the original series tend to be plain, with the camera in a perpendicular position in relation to the bar counter. In *Frasier*, the two windows of the living room make an edge and the sofa, table, steps, walls, and shelves have

different orientations. The bar in *Cheers* is larger and more densely occupied, which creates the noted chances for interaction, participation, and transformation. As we have seen and will see, the apartment in *Frasier* provides opportunities for integration, reinvention and realisation on the part of the characters. Later, in 'Space Quest', he arrives at the apartment and (still with his coat on) calls for the three new occupants. He says 'Eddie' with a loose mouth, disparaging the dog, because up to this point the most uncomfortable moments had been those when Eddie followed or stared at him. Frasier's movements are slow and cautious at first, but when he is certain that no one is home, he grins and takes off the coat with ample and energetic gestures. He uses a back cushion of the sofa as pillow on top of which he places a book and then prepares a glass of wine, humming the Toreador song from Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen*: 'Toreador,/Don't spit on the floor,/Use the cuspidor-a/What do you think it's for-a?' The emphasis on the appended '-a' is a sign of his relaxed state, which is confirmed when he sits on the couch, drink in hand and eyes on the book. Frasier's now companion residents barge in right after he finally concentrates on the book. Andrew Klevan says of the relation between performer and place that they 'find each other, so that the discovery of location is inseparable from the investigation of psychology: the performers look to their environment to realize their characters'.⁷ The performer Kelsey Grammer also looks to Frasier's apartment and its contents to realize the character. He reorganizes the sofa and improvises an operatic aria with spontaneity, but with a formal, almost ceremonial, attitude. He bubbles over with an enthusiasm that is restrained. Developing Klevan's idea, we may say that it is the ways in which a performer occupies a place and manages time that realize a character, moment by moment.

Afterward, the tension has not vanished and Frasier convinces his father to have a three-minute conversation. He uses an egg timer to count the time, which he carefully places in front of them on the dining table, where they are seated. Martin shouts about the stupidity of the situation after the first second – 'One second? That's our personal best?', asks Frasier. They argue and forget about the timer. Already up, they agree that it will take years not minutes to forge a bond – Martin believes it will go by before they know it, whereas Frasier hypothesizes 'it will seem like eternity'. Augustine writes about time as a distension of the soul. Time gains meaning subjectively and continually through our attention. In this sense, it may only be measured spiritually. He notes how the vanishing of the present is continuous, opening the way to what we expect and what we remember: 'So the future, which

⁷Andrew Klevan, *Film Performance: From Achievement to Appreciation* (London: Wallflower, 2005), 71.

does not exist, is not a long period of time. A long future is a long expectation of the future. And the past, which has no existence, is not a long period of time. A long past is a long memory of the past.⁸ This measuring is therefore qualitative and not quantitative. Behind this idea is a focus on time as experienced, related with the dynamic view of time of philosophers like Aristotle.⁹ This is an understanding of time as heterogeneous, *felt*, which cannot be separated into static instants. The timer that Frasier uses, like a clock, is a device that quantifies and indicates time as homogenous. It may show that three minutes have lapsed, but that may be lived as a flash or an era. Experienced time, which is always the experience of the freedom of choice, is what Henri Bergson calls *duration* in which moments 'are not external to one another'.¹⁰ Frasier and Martin's friction endures, but it is smoothed with understated moments of rapport that glide. In 'Look Before You Leap' (3.16), they split the newspaper in a casual manner. Frasier sits on the sofa and Martin lies back on his recliner. Frasier is now somewhat used to his dad, just like he had to adapt to Martin's old recliner that changed the arrangement of the room. The series does not stress the moment, cutting to Daphne when Martin picks up a part of the paper.

This last-mentioned particular editing choice does not stress the flow of action, but underlines the relaxed nature of a gesture. *Frasier* is, however, mainly interested in the notion of *timing*, in the control of action and the awareness of inhabitation that this notion includes. Frasier tries to act elegantly and to be sophisticated – and this is something that he has in common with his brother Niles (David Hyde Pierce). 'Fathers and Sons' (10.22) explores the similarities between Frasier and Leland Barton (David Ogden Stiers), his mother's former research assistant, which raises suspicions about Leland being Frasier's biological father. They are both psychiatrists. They both appreciate fine art and drink sherry. They also have many of the same mannerisms. At one point, they seat on opposite ends of the sofa, graciously holding a glass of the fortified wine with the top of their fingers, cross their legs, sip, and then sigh with pleasure, simultaneously. The suspicion comes from the way gesture and posture *incarnate* identity throughout the ten seasons of the show. Such a feeling is connected with the way Frasier had been seen elegantly occupying and using his apartment and savouring the passage of time in it in previous episodes.

⁸Augustine, *Confessions* [398], trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 243.

⁹Aristotle, *Physics, Or Natural Hearing* [350 BC], trans. and ed. Glen Coughlin (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2005), book IV, chap. 11.

¹⁰Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* [1889], trans. F. L. Pogson (New York: Dover Publications, 2001), 226.

The multiple-camera proscenium schema that these classical sitcoms follow underlines the flow of time as inscribed in space, situating the comedic action. This is why it is so fitting to use the word 'moment', which has the same origin as 'movement' (*movere*), instead of 'instant' or 'point', to discuss them. This chapter has held on to moments in particular classical sitcoms, attending to their details in order to understand the handling of time¹¹ and space in these programmes. Such details show particular uses of the unbroken action that the several cameras can track and of the theatrical feel that a studio production is able to create. The scene from *Will & Grace* dislocates the protagonists to a new environment that they do not know how to inhabit and presents the continuous unravelling of their sense of discomfort and disconnection. *Frasier* and *Cheers* locate comedy in specific places, an apartment and a bar, investigating communal and private inhabitation and duration, and opening up possibilities for the emergence of significant moments. Both series give similar importance to the finding of a place where the characters can settle in and enjoy their time, but they do it differently. Frasier desperately seeks a home from the first episode and ends up leaving the apartment to his family in the last episode, 'Goodnight Seattle' (11.23–4). His apartment vanishes from *Frasier* as he begins the search for a new home in a new city, Chicago. In contrast, *Cheers* ends with Sam realizing that the bar is the love of his life, as Norman suggests earlier in the closing scene of the series. He touches the counter with the palm of his hand and knocks on its wood and then tells a potential costumer, who stays outside, isolated by the closed door, that the bar is closed. Sam decides to be alone to better contemplate and appreciate Cheers before it is filled again with people – hence his contact with its objects, which asserts his personal attachment to them. He adjusts a picture frame on the wall, tidying up as a host does in preparation for a party, and then disappears into the darkness of the poolroom instead of leaving. This is where he lives.

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¹¹Cf. Steven Peacock, 'Holding onto Moments in *The Age of Innocence*', *Film Studies: An International Review* 9 (2006), ed. Sarah Cardwell: 49.

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7

Arrested developments: Towards an aesthetic of the contemporary US sitcom

*Timotheus Vermeulen and James
Whitfield*

Television – as a piece of technology, as a medium, as an art form – has undergone dramatic changes over the past few years. There have been significant shifts in the ways in which programmes are produced, distributed and consumed. As scholars like Kim Akass and Janet McCabe, Robin Nelson and Jason Mittell have demonstrated, television also looks markedly different today.¹ Much has been written in recent years about contemporary US television drama with the phrase 'Quality Television' often used as a rather problematic descriptor.² In contrast, relatively little attention has been devoted to the concurrent changes that have taken place in contemporary US television comedy.³ This chapter seeks to help redress this critical lacuna.

¹ Compare: Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, (eds) *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007); Jason Mittell, 'Narrative Complexity in American Contemporary Television', *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (Fall 2006): 29–40.

² Compare: Sarah Cardwell, 'Is Quality Television Any Good? Generic Distinctions, Evaluations and the Troubling Matter of Critical Judgement', in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, (eds) Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007); Charlotte Brunson, 'Problems with Quality', *Screen* 31:1 (Spring 1990): 67–90.

³ Specific examples include Greg M. Smith, *Beautiful TV: The Art and Argument of Ally McBeal* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007) and David Lavery and Sara Lewis Dunne, (eds) *Seinfeld, Master of its Domain: Revisiting Television's Greatest Sitcom* (New York: Continuum, 2006).