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The Sitcom in Postmodern Television.
Case Study: How I Met Your Mother.

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(Leo Tolstoi)

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Introduction

Postmodernism has become a frequent term in contemporary society, especially in connection with art and popular culture. In the 20th century elitist art forms such as painting as well as architecture started to reject modernism as a guiding principle in favor of the new artistic movement. Television was established at a time when this turn had just commenced leading to the first research interest of this paper, the postmodern turn in television. The question to be answered is whether television should be labeled a postmodern medium on the whole due to its short time of existence or whether there can be observed a similar artistic development as in the elitist art forms over an abridged period of time.

The second and more extensive research question is building on the results of the first one and is concerned with the development towards postmodernism in the situation comedy, which has been a strongly represented genre since the early days of television. As a first step a genre analysis of the traditional sitcom will be presented laying the foundations for an examination of a possible postmodern sitcom as a second step. The method applied will be a case study of the contemporary television sitcom *How I Met Your Mother*, which was chosen due to its initial success and enormous popularity. The survey concentrates on seasons one to six leaving out the seventh and latest season since there is no DVD available yet.

The structure of the paper following from the above reminds of a bridge, whereby the genre analysis of the situation comedy and the outline of the current postmodern television landscape serve as piers. The subsequent case study functions as the bridge deck. Therefore, the first chapter will be concerned with the conventions of the traditional situation comedy as it has been known since the mid 20th century. It will contain an outline of the historical development of the genre until

the beginning of the 21st century including the contentwise development, a detailed description of the genre's constitutional features, an explanation of the methods of creating comedy, and a portrayal of common sitcom character archetypes. Concrete examples from past as well as contemporary situation comedies will support the presented arguments.

The second chapter will be concerned with the changes in today's television landscape. Based on a brief outline of the postmodern turn in art and culture, the according movement in television will be analyzed identifying significant stylistic features of postmodern television. As a final point of this chapter, a change in audience reception as a result of the postmodern turn will be examined. Obviously, the sitcom, although mentioned in several examples, must be sidelined in this chapter due to the focus on the postmodern turn.

The third and final chapter describes a new form of sitcom uniting the traditional format with the postmodern features of television. The focus will lie on the case study of *How I Met Your Mother* on the basis of which the implementation of the announced postmodern features in situation comedy will be shown. The assumption that the series can in fact be classified a postmodern sitcom is suggested and the object of investigation. As a final step the protagonists of the show will be examined for their status of being postmodern characters revisiting the archetypes of chapter one.

A concluding section will summarize the most important results of the study and answer the initial research questions.

1 Literature Review

Since the earliest days of television the situation comedy has been a strongly represented genre of the medium. In the course of time television has become a highly influential popular art form marked by innovation and progress. Constantly, new genres have been added and existing ones redefined. The situation comedy however has always been seen as a rather stable genre providing light humor for a mass audience retaining its inevitable genre conventions. Still, television has experienced an emerging paradigm shift in the last decades, which has started in other forms of art as well as in culture already in the 1950s called the “Postmodern Turn”. Whereas ample research exists on postmodernism as well as on the according shift from modernism to postmodernism in arts and culture in general, very little has been researched on the postmodern turn in television and even less on the sitcom in this context. Therefore the purpose of this paper is to investigate the recent changes in television, detect a similar development in the genre situation comedy, and finally illustrate the findings by analyzing the concrete example *How I Met Your Mother* for its status as a postmodern sitcom.

As a first step the two fundamentals of the study are described, namely the sitcom and postmodernism. Concerning the former, four authors provided the basic secondary literature on the topic, namely Marc, Jones, Sedita and Mills, who follow different approaches. Marc and Jones chose historical approaches focusing on the broadcasting industries and the structural developments of the genre. Sedita applied a more practical strategy due to the intended audience of sitcom actors and writers. Mills provided the most comprehensive study concentrating on genre conventions and sociological aspects. The information retrieved from their studies is completed by material from several other authors in the particular subchapters. In terms of the

contentwise development over time Morreale and Henry provided useful additional material. A large amount of valuable information from Bignell, Attalah, and Hammond is used to define the genre and Stott and Knop provide vital ideas for the comedic intent of the sitcom. In terms of character analysis again Sedita's idea of character archetypes prevailed over other suggestions such as the unavoidability of one-dimensionality (Stott) or the claim to three-dimensionality (Wolff) for sitcom characters.

Examining the latter fundament of this paper, postmodernism, the first conclusion that could be drawn from the available literature is an agreement over the existence of a postmodern turn in art and culture. Still, the attitudes towards this shift are rather varied among researchers. Jameson, for instance, presented a negative view on the postmodern turn in the eighties due to the insecurity it entailed. Best & Kellner, Malpas, and Hoffmann shared this feeling of uncertainty towards the concept, however showed sympathies for it as well in the 1990s and 2000s. Watson on the contrary argues that the term postmodernism has been around long enough to allow a definition of the concept.

Considering all these views on postmodernism, this paper attempts to present a summary of the suggested changes and apply them to the television medium. On the one hand an outline of the postmodern turn in television is given, whereby Kellner, During, and Bignell have been the most valuable sources since those authors did profound research on the same topic. On the other hand it is examined in how far postmodernism can be understood as a stylistic principle. The idea for that was provided by O'Day, who suggested applying postmodern features of other art forms to television. Accepting this call, randomly announced features of postmodernism provided by various authors like Kellner, Bignell, Malpas, Henry,

During, Mittel and others have been collected, summarized, and categorized to formulate seven stylistic features of postmodern television. A precious work of reference in this context was Barker's "Dictionary of Cultural Studies".

Transferring this postmodern point of view to the situation comedy a similar postmodern turn can be recognized in the genre with the emerging abandonment of hitherto essential genre conventions. Henry, Morreale, and Sedita suggested a loss in importance of the portrayal of ideal, nuclear families in favor of dysfunctional families and groups of friends as surrogate families in their research: Feuer argued that the sitcom developed more towards an ongoing serial.

Although there is almost no secondary literature available for the specific topic, postmodern sitcom, several articles and books offer inspiring ideas for examining the postmodern features. Examples for these would be Mills' support of the fragmented identity of the contemporary sitcom genre due to the various forms it can take on. Donaldson suggests *How I Met Your Mother* to be a recycled show combining the best parts of the 1990s sitcoms *Friends* and *Seinfeld*. Mittel applies the term hybridization to television genres and introduces different levels of it. Bell described a feature of proscenium arch theatre applied in many sitcoms nowadays, the break of the fourth wall. Tueth outlined in how far the American family and their lives in the suburbs were idealized in early sitcoms and Mc Nutt wrote about the spatial construction of Canada in *How I Met Your Mother*. Those works influenced the subchapter on hyperreality which attempts to present the idealization of the characters' lives in New York City. Finally there are several forums established by fans of the show which serve as sources for the detection of intertextual references in the show (e.g. beawesomeinstead.com, tv.com/shows/how-i-met-your-mother/forums).

In conclusion, it should have become obvious that research relevant for this paper focuses mostly on either the sitcom or the postmodern turn. Very rarely, however, can be found material on the postmodern turn in situation comedy and especially not research which operates on the textual level. As announced, this should be the purpose of this paper; by means of the concrete example *How I Met Your Mother*.

2 The Sitcom

This first chapter will be concerned with the rise of the situation comedy in the broadcasting industries as well as with its constituting features. The outline of the historical development in the first part is connected to the development of broadcasting in general. The focus lies hereby on the USA and the American television sitcom.

2.1 Milestones of a Genre's History

The sitcom as a genre grew and developed over a not irrelevant amount of time and underwent considerable modifications in the course of its formation. Although it is today very well known as a television program, its roots lie in another medium of broadcasting, namely radio. By the time it invaded television it was already a well established and flourishing genre, whereby general conditions in mass media production and consumption as such determined much of its structure. For that matter it will be necessary to take a closer look at the rise of the sitcom under the circumstances of the rise of broadcasting in general in order to understand the necessity of every typical feature of the television sitcom.

The beginning can be set around 1920, when radio opened its doors for entertainment broadcasting by transmitting Ed Wynn's vaudeville show *The Perfect Fool*. Since vaudeville could be considered one of the sitcom's ancestors, this move could without doubt be called the first milestone in the broadcast of comedy and therefore also for the development of the sitcom. "[V]audeville acts and stand-ups [...] developed classic set up/punchline jokes, slapstick humor and snappy, witty dialogue that touched on a number of topics including love, life and all those miserable things" (Sedita 7).

The reason why it became a necessity to broadcast vaudeville shows was the exploding demand for radios and programming. According to Jones this was, among other reasons, due to the technological innovation of the loudspeaker, which made listening to radio a family experience. The problem station managers had to face was the fact that they did not have enough useful programming to satisfy the new audience. The solution they found was to create their own programming. (8-9)

Still, there were some serious problems which had to be tackled. The audience loved the new direction towards comedy in radio, however stations got into serious financial problems since the vaudeville comedians charged high fees and cheaper, unknown ones would not have attracted a large audience. The only solution seemed to be to sell airtime to sponsors who could then present their products on the air. Commercial radio was born. The result for the shows was that they had to develop a format which could successfully combine the program they presented with the time reserved for commercials. Although modified in the course of time, the then produced format of 30 minute shows with 22 minutes of story and eight minutes of commercials, remained the format of situation comedy in American television until today. The common structure now is "Credits/ Story (Teaser/Cold Open) /

Commercial / Story / Commercial / End of Story / Commercial / Tags / Credits". (Sedita 7-8) The development of this specific format could be called the second milestone in sitcom history.

As soon as the financial problem was solved another one arose: since audience and sponsors had a predilection for regularity in programming comedians would have needed to deliver new content on a daily basis. However, not even the Vaudevillians had enough material for that. The ground-breaking idea for satisfying customer wishes was to create family serials for radio, which were already popular as comic strips in newspapers before 1920. Each day a new mini-episode with an ongoing narrative could be found in a daily paper, telling a funny story about a fictitious family and their everyday life. (Marc 11). The maybe best known example would be Sidney Smith's "The Gumps" (see Fig. 1), which was published in the Chicago Tribune (and later also in other news papers) for forty years. The story centered on the Gumps, an ordinary middle class family whose life got thematized in a humorous way. In 1931 the comic strip was made a family serial on the Chicago Tribune's radio station. (Sporn) Thus, serialization could be identified as the third milestone on the way to situation comedy.



Fig. 1: The Gumps (<http://www.michaelspornanimation.com/splog/wp-content/g/Gumps%2012.jpg>)

Still, to really talk about sitcom, the communicated humor of the family serials was too civilized and not enough mockingly. As mentioned before, there was another

type of comedy which was popular on radio broadcasting, namely Vaudeville. The idea to combine those two forms of comedy can be labeled the fourth milestone in the development process of the sitcom and led to the extremely successful genre of “radio sitcoms”. One of the most popular and longest running of those was *Amos ‘n’ Andy*. The radio family serial was produced by Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, two white men miming two black men from the south who came to Chicago with their families hoping to find a better life. On the one hand the show mostly played with clichés and relied on the imitation of apparently typical “black accents” of the protagonists. On the other hand the characters were created more human and loveable than usual vaudevillian ones. Although the serial had a large afro-American audience, there was a lot of critique and resistance towards it coming from the same community. (Jones 12 and Morreale 3)

When television came into being in the 1940s broadcasting was dominated by no more than two networks: NBC and CBS. Since CBS was still lacking behind NBC to a great extent, the chairman of the time, William Paley, realized that they would need to focus on something that NBC had not offered yet; he decided for television sitcoms, which could be considered the fifth milestone. The reason for this was that “Paley realized that families, even if they did nothing else as a group, would be watching TV together regularly” (Jones 39). The idea to transfer radio sitcoms to television was put into action in 1949 with *The Goldbergs*, which was performed as live TV in a weekly half hour series with self-contained episodes. This show could be considered the first successful television sitcom paving the way for many others about to follow. (Morreale 2)

With technical advances it soon became possible to shoot sitcoms on film instead of broadcasting live performances leading to the sixth and last milestone.

Early sitcom was performed like a play in theatre in front of a live audience, whereby all the cameras were placed on one side of the action, the so called “fourth wall”. “Because of the studio audience, actors in sitcom are required to offer a performance which is appropriate for theatre, ensuring that their lines and gestures can be seen by everyone present.” (Mills 14)

It is agreed with Jones that the one person to make shooting on film a necessity in sitcom production, despite the higher costs, was Lucille Ball with her situation comedy *I love Lucy*, which aired in October 1951 on CBS. Ball was asked by the network to develop a television sitcom based on her radio sitcom *My favorite husband*, which was already relatively successful by the time. Since television still had its centre in New York she would have had to move there from the west coast in order to do her show on a weekly basis. She however denied that and decided to shoot her sitcom on film, together with her husband, in front of a live audience. She was using an innovative shooting style developed by Karl Freund called “the three-headed monster”, which is still used today and will be explained in further detail in the next section. From that time onwards the numbers of television sitcoms rose considerably on both networks and the genre could finally establish itself as relevant for the broadcast industries. (49; 63-67)

2.2 *The Sitcom Puzzle*

The situation comedy depends on several essential characteristics, which define it as a genre. Those characteristics fit together like the pieces in a puzzle leading to the idea to name this subchapter accordingly. The following definition names all those pieces in only one sentence.

A humorous radio or television series featuring the reactions of a regular cast of characters to unusual situations, such as misunderstandings or embarrassing coincidences; a sitcom.
(<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/situation+comedy>)

Although the definition might seem rather general on the first sight, it was chosen, because there is already much information presented which gives rise for further examination. In that sense the definition will be split up in its vital components and reviewed hence in the following paragraphs.

The first and probably most essential piece of the sitcom puzzle is indicated in the definition by the word “humorous”. Attalah suggests that since the sitcom is being labeled a specific subgenre of television comedy its most important purpose must be the comedic entertainment of the audience. (100) Nevertheless the humorous aspect is often sidelined or taken for granted in genre analysis and research. The reason for this might be that it seems obvious that a sitcom is supposed to be funny. It might even be argued that a sitcom which does not manage to meet this expectation of being amusing will either not be very successful or it will be ascribed to an other genre. Considering this aspect it could be said that the comic intent of a sitcom is foregrounding and decisive for the genre whereby all other aspects which are considered characteristic as well are simply modes and ways to fulfill this purpose. (Mills 5) For that matter the defining attributes explained here, will be examined for the roles they play in fulfilling the purpose of making the program funny. Further, the way comedy is created in situation comedies will be the main concern of the subchapter “The –COM”.

The second vital aspect mentioned above is “radio or television”. As commonly known the sitcom has its roots in radio broadcasting, whereby the first sitcoms were transformed from its radio versions to television retaining their original stories as well as their characters. Vital about its early development was that its

comic purpose, as outlined earlier, had to be combined with the huge step of broadcasting. Comedy has been since its early days presented on stage, whereby the connection and immediate contact between the actors or stand-up comedians was essential for it to function. With broadcasting these circumstances were no longer given. Whereas a program designed for one show on stage could be performed several times, with broadcasting it could only be used. (Mills 35) The mentioned communication between actor and audience was lost resulting in difficulties to evaluate people's reaction to the show. For all these reasons the genre needed another feature in order to work, namely a narrative making it possible for the sitcom to rise in television and to become a flourishing industry.

Another inevitable characteristic of the sitcom is based on the just mentioned narrative: the serial format. The narrative created with this format works in two ways. On the one hand there is the long story arc, which can extend over several episodes, a whole season or even over the whole series. It allows deeper characterization of the protagonists and more intense audience involvement in the fictional world, which might hold a core audience. On the other hand there are the plotlines which develop, rise, climax, and come to an end within one episode. These are a distinctive feature of situation comedies, since most or all other serial television formats rely on ongoing narratives and cliffhangers. The advantage of the episode-length stories is that they allow new viewers to access the series relatively easy and find pleasure in it right from the beginning. (Hammond 76)

It goes without saying that there are additional reasons for producing a sitcom as a series. There is for instance an economic point of view. Production costs are lower for serial forms of media than for a movie for example since the duration of filming time per episode is relatively short and single episodes are easier sold to

broadcasters. Moreover, producing sitcoms serially provides more flexibility. There is always the possibility to adapt the plot according to audience feedback, surprising numbers in selling or even to fulfill wishes of producers, actors or TV channels.

The next piece of the sitcom puzzle is “The Reaction Shot”. Sitcom has its roots in theatre whereby all its features had to be adapted gradually to the broadcasting format of television. One of those features was the shooting style introduced first by Karl Freund in *I love Lucy* which remained characteristic for the genre until today. Freund realized the importance of the reaction of a character to a joke or a sidekick of another one and started shooting scenes involving two characters with three cameras. The first one covered a wide shot in order to capture the happenings on stage as a whole, whereas “the other two were each mid-shots of each performer” (Mills 39). This way of shooting allowed quick variations in point of views during comic dialogue and so managed to use the reaction shot as another element of comedy. Seeing the reaction of one character to the behavior of the other one helps the audience to interpret the acting for what it is and to share the conveyed emotion. As a result the viewers might identify with the characters and establish a certain form of relationship. (Mills 39 and Jones 66) The serial nature of sitcom supports this, since the reoccurrence of characters will cement the ties, which will be the main concern of the next point.

Keeping a stable set of protagonists is essential for every serial genre to give the audience a chance to establish a relationship with the characters motivating them to watch the series regularly. However it is even more important for the sitcom, since comedy works best if a certain connection between the comedian and his or her audience exists. As soon as this connection is established comedy can work and the sitcom can be successful. This is aimed at by placing a fixed, reasonably

numbered set of characters in different comic situations every episode, whereby various other characters can join the scene and leave again. Revisiting the puzzle metaphor, the characters could be compared with the surrounding pieces.

However, not only the relationship between the characters and the audience is of vital importance here, but also the relationship between the characters themselves. What is therefore attempted to achieve is to create “joking relationships” between the characters on stage which are defined by Prof. Radcliffe-Brown as “relation[s] between two persons in which one is by custom permitted [...] to make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence.” (Radcliffe-Brown 90) Radcliffe-Brown examined joking-relationships in societies of native tribes and realized that they exist only between people who are considered rather familiar or even related. Interpreting this information in terms of the sitcom context this could mean that the establishment of a clear joking relationship between two or more characters is a prerequisite for the audience to understand the comic purpose behind it. Only if this is given, the viewers can dive into the fictitious world of the sitcom and be part of it.

The last and probably most vital piece of the puzzle are the unusual situations the characters find themselves in with every new episode. Most vital, because the sitcom draws its humor from everyday situations, which are for the most part not comical. Consequently the portrayed everyday life needs to be disrupted by unforeseen events. (Knop 87) As Lisa Simpson put it in a self-reflexive commentary in the 16th episode of the fifth season of *The Simpsons*:

LISA. It seems like every week something odd happens to the Simpsons. (FOX, March 17th 1994)

In the definition given at the beginning two examples of the “something odd” Lisa mentions, the unusual situations, are “misunderstandings” and “embarrassing

coincidences". These support the view held by several authors (Feuer; Sedita; Wolff) that conflict is the main source for comedy in sitcoms. It is agreed with Sedita that "comedy comes from drama [...] And in any good drama we must have conflict [...]" The same is true for sitcoms, except the conflict is simply written to be humorous" (43). Hence, the core of situation comedy is a problem solution format conditioned by the episodic structure of the genre. In every episode there will occur problems for the characters which they must solve in order to reestablish order by the end of the show. (Feuer 120)

As will be outlined in the subchapter "The –COM" it is common for a situation comedy to have an "established conflict as a continuing element" (Wolff 24) in the show. This dichotomy can serve as a starting point for many upcoming problems which can then be dealt with in a humorous way.

2.3 *The SIT-*

In order to examine the representativeness of situation comedy a closer look will be taken at the way the content of the genre changed over time. It must be noted that what is presented here is the mainstream and major part of TV-sitcoms in US television. This does not mean that there have not been exceptions or different kinds of sitcoms, but that those exceptions are excluded here on purpose in order to find out about how situation comedy might have developed along the lines of the progress in society and where we could identify a postmodern turn in the genre.

In the 1940s, when the genre of the television situation comedy came into being the typical setting was the home of an urban, working class, ethnic family (e.g. *The Goldbergs*). Whereas the parents still tried to hold on to their traditional ways of their own culture, their children had begun to integrate and assimilate to the

American culture. This led to conflicts and unusual situations which served as a source for comedy. (Morreale xiii)

In the 1950s and early 1960s the “situation” had become a completely different one. Working-class families as well as ethnic minorities had been replaced by suburban, middle-class families. These were all white, their name was of Anglo—Saxon origins and they had an affinity to Protestant religion. The father as the head of the family was well situated in a profession like lawyer or doctor, which made all discussions of financial uncertainty obsolete. What was conveyed was the idea of the necessity of a good working nuclear family as the pursuit of happiness and the basis for social as well as economic success. The American family was highly idealized in order to reestablish prewar values. The father was the patriarch of the family; the mother made the domestic space a clean and comfortable home. The main sources for comedy were the children who were confronted with a situation where they faced a sort of moral dilemma in every new episode. They often had difficulties finding the proper solution for their ethical crisis, but their father was always ready to give appropriate and useful advice. Thus, in the situation comedies of the 50s and 60s actual humor created by jokes was always subordinate to the didactic allegory beneath. (Marc 14-15 and Morreale xv)

The 1970s entailed again profound changes to sitcom setups. The decade was the highpoint of working class sitcoms whereby a shift in situation comedy content commonly known as the turn to relevance could be observed. This turn commenced by the end of the 1960s with a certain shift away from conservatism. Sitcom producers started to pay attention to television audience studies and consequently shaped their programs according to the viewing patterns of demographic groups identified as heavy television viewers. Those were urban

audiences between 18 and 49 years who had disposable incomes, thus high consumption patterns and sophisticated viewing preferences. Situation comedy became socially and politically relevant by addressing issues of contemporary interest. (Morreale xvi and Henry 265-266)

Further the texts turned away from the superficial escapism of the 1960s to a more realistic representation of life by presenting also morally ambiguous characters. By the late 1970s however, when political conservatism took hold again there was a shift back to “less complicated sitcoms” which focused on humor rather than social criticism. This led to a sort of dual identity of the genre in the 1970s, which presented not only critical, but also reinforcing visions of American culture and family life. The former was to be found on CBS whereas the latter was more attached to NBC in those days. (Morreale xvi-xvii and Mittel 164)

In the 1980s the quality sitcom returned and added plot twists and character development to situation comedy content. Additionally to that a return to the suburban, middle-class nuclear family could be recognized due to the upcoming politically conservative times of Reagan. Again the family members were confronted with trivial problems which were usually solved and sorted out at the end of each episode. In contrast to the 1950s and 1960s however, ethnic minorities were represented as well; one example of which would be one of the most successful sitcoms of all times, *The Cosby Show*. In that sense the situation comedies of the 1980 showed both conservative as well as progressive features. (Morreale xvii-xviii)

The 1990s brought us back to the working class sitcom, whereby deliberately provocative content as well as irony was added. Sitcoms now presented not only the happy middle class families with trivial problems, but dysfunctional blue-collar families with their real-world problems as well. The most popular examples of this

kind of sitcoms would be *Roseanne* or *The Simpsons*. What was new for this decade was the rise of sitcoms centering on a group of friends serving as family instead of the real nuclear family like in *Seinfeld* or *Friends*. Again the characters did not represent perfect human beings but they were presented as dysfunctional, often unreasonable and more realistic. (Morreale xvii-xix and Henry 266)

2.4 *The -COM*

As stated, the comedy in situation comedy is the genre's defining element. Therefore this aspect will be examined in this chapter on the basis of various common techniques embedded in four humor theories which apply to situation comedy. Three of those four theories were developed before broadcasting, namely the superiority theory, the incongruity theory and the relief theory. The fourth, the cue theory, was added by Brett Mills specifically for the sitcom genre. This means that the former three are generally accepted and frequently applied in humor research, whereas the latter is hardly known so far, but quite valuable in this particular context.

The superiority theory provides an explanation for all sorts of humor which depend on a feeling of superiority like for instance sexist or racist jokes. In other words "human beings are moved to laugh when presented with a person or situation they feel themselves to be intellectually, morally, or physically above." (Stott 131-132)

As a result, the triggered laughter is a rather hostile and mocking one since it is more of a laughing "at" a subject instead of a "with" the subject laughter. In situation comedy it means the laughing at particular social groups portrayed, which requires assumptions about their typical characteristics leading to stereotyping and the acknowledgement of the same. (Mills 77, 79) One example for this would be the

already presented example of the sitcom *Amos 'n' Andy*, whose humor relies on clichés about the urban black minority the USA of the time. (see chapter 2.1)

Since it is often considered inappropriate to laugh about a sexist or racist or similar offensive joke, which might be included in a sitcom, the laugh track fulfills an essential role to overcome this feeling of misplacement. Since the noise of laughter is seen as a kind of agreement, the laugh track represents the agreement of a large mass of people which the television viewer can join in by laughing as well. It has to be noted here that the laugh track can therefore never include negative reactions to a joke. (Bignell 94-95 and Mills 81)

Particular examples where the superiority theory applies in the sitcom would be for instance sarcasm, which is a commonly used tool for the creation of comedy. Sarcastic comments serve the purpose “to ridicule, to mock, to put people in their place or even to make fun of themselves” (Sedita 35). A second example would be the highly popular “Prat Fall” where “characters stumble over a piece of furniture, slip on a banana peel, [...] or fall off a ladder” (Sedita 35). An illustrative example from *How I Met Your Mother* occurs in season 1, episode 4, “Return of the Shirt”. Barney is paying Robin to say and do things on the air he wants her to. When she is about to fulfill her next tasks, an old coachman about whom she covers a report reminds her of the importance of her profession. The moment she launches to deliver a speech about this sudden insight she falls off the carriage:

ROBIN. It's an honor to tell your story Henry. You know, Metro News 1 may not be number one in viewership, but this reporter takes pride in – oooohhh – oh my God, I'm covered in horse crab!

The incongruity theory rejects the notion of the superiority theory that humor always has to be mocking or hostile. According to this theory humor arises out of two related situations. On the one hand it is suggested by Stott that the juxtaposition of

opposites and contrasts creates humor. He states that “[t]he collision or juxtaposition of the great with the low, or the humble adopting the airs of the elite, take their humour from a displacement of order that simultaneously acknowledges order and reveals its absurdity” (137).

This idea is supported by Bignell (92-93) who advocates a “binary opposition” to be the central means for the creation of comedy in sitcoms. According to him two contrasting ideas must be embodied in respective characters who can then engage in a conflict by trying to defend their side of the binary in a humorous way, examples of which would be masculine/feminine or young/old. Sedita takes this idea a step further by claiming that the main source for comedy in a sitcom is a conflict: “for good comedy, you need to have a conflict” (43). This assumption can be supported by numerous examples of sitcoms which already include a binary opposition in their set-up: *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* contrasts rich and poor, *'Til Death* contrasts old and young married couples, *I love Lucy* contrasts male and female role models. *How I Met Your Mother* uses the differences between the USA and Canada as a popular source for comedy. “Duel Citizenship” (season 5, episode 5) opens with:

VOICE-OVER TED. Kids, as you know, Aunt Robin grew up in Canada.

That meant sometimes she dressed à little differently.

ROBIN. Okay, let's do this! (*everyone wearing winter clothes, she wears a skirt and a T-shirt*)

VOICE-OVER TED. Sometimes she talked a little differently.

ROBIN. Ted, this hydro bill is bigger than Louis Cyr's biceps. What, you leave the garburator on all night, eh?

At the "Hoser Hut" (=Canadian bar, Robin is fighting)

VOICE-OVER TED. She hung out at different bars and enjoyed leisure time a little differently.

ROBIN. You want to go? You want to go?! Come on!

At McLaren's

ROBIN. Make fun of the Great White North all you want. It's the best country in the world.

On the other hand the incongruity theory suggests that humor simply arises from a disparity between the expected action and the actually happened action. Important in

this context is the element of surprise and the immediate perception of the joke. (Mills 83, 86 and Bignell 124) One widely used method in situation comedy for which this theory is relevant would be for instance the “Spit Take”, where a character spits out a just taken drink as a result of hearing outrageous news. (Sedita 35) *How I Met Your Mother* makes use of this feature to a great extent and even exaggerates it in situations when Barney takes a sip or even orders a drink simply for being able to spit it out.

BARNEY. The point is, how long has it been?

TED. 57 days.

BARNEY. Is that your water? May I?

TED. Yeah, go ahead.

BARNEY. Much obliged.

Barney spits out the just taken sip of water

BARNEY (*shouting*). 57 Days!?

Another one would be “The Turnaround” where a character says “a line with a strong intention and then ‘turn[s] around’ and say[s] something completely opposite [...] with an equally strong intention.” (Sedita 23) Again Barney does this a lot when trying to convince Ted of his harebrained ideas.

The relief theory abandons the idea of seeing the source for comedy in the text itself and traces back the audience’s feeling of joy when watching a comedy program to a struggle within the self. It follows therefore a more recipient focused approach. According to this theory comedy allows us to express our unconscious thoughts and ideas about taboo topics in a less problematic manner. (Stott 138-139; Knop 57; Mills 88) This assumption ascribes comedy a political function since “changes in comic content [...] indicate social changes in acceptability, with humour on particular topics moving in and out of favour.” (Mills 88)

In the situation comedy this can be observed by the rise of sexual innuendo as a source for comedy. Sexual activity of sitcom characters has become a common

part of their lifestyles, whereby also ambiguities in their statements often allow for interpretations in sexual terms. For the viewers this is of interest because in their real lives they often do not have the possibility to talk about these topics this openly or frequently. The comedic treatment of the topic is therefore a substitute for their own experience. (Knop 63)

In conclusion it can be said that in order to explain the creation of comedy in sitcoms all three of these humor theories come to play a part. They even depend on and support each other whereby drawing clear borderlines between them is often not possible. Interesting to notice might be that although the theories originated in a completely different time, the application to the relatively young genre sitcom is unproblematic. This gives rise for further examination of them later on when analyzing the “postmodern sitcom”.

2.5 Scott Sedita's „*The Eight Characters of Comedy*“

I believe it is the characters in a sitcom that are the most crucial element – if the audience likes these people and the chemistry between them, they'll be hooked. (Wolff 15)

The upper quote emphasizes and supports what was already introduced in chapter 2.2 “The Sitcom Puzzle”: the importance of its characters for the sitcom. According to Wolff the audience can connect with the characters the better the more three-dimensional or in other words realistic they are portrayed. He therefore claims one-dimensionality and stereotyping to be weaknesses in sitcom writing. (23-24)

Stott on the other hand states quite the contrary. He argues that comic characters, whereby sitcom characters are no exceptions, traditionally are one-dimensional and unable to learn or change in order to live up to the episodic

structure of the genre. Therefore they can be differentiated into categories whereby “a single prevalent characteristic” dominates each of those. (41)

Bignell holds a view which is not as straight forward as the first two. He suggests that the character positions in sitcoms need to be essentially simplified in order to establish binary oppositions, which were identified already as one of the main sources for comedy. (94)

All views considered it can be noted that there is no consensus among experts about how to approach comic characterization. Still a compromise must be found since character analysis is an essential component of sitcom research and therefore also for this paper. Stott's point of view must be considered too radical since stereotyping to such a high degree, as he suggests it, would produce too shallow and unrealistic characters. Moreover it can be observed that even in the earliest sitcoms characters cannot be categorized so easily, but there is always a remaining ambiguity.

Further it seems impossible to satisfy the expectations of Wolff in this context, since sitcom characters are after all fictitious, which is why they will never reach complete three-dimensionality. Besides it should be stressed that the characters' status as fictional personalities is what causes their attractiveness. Economou appropriately states “that while [characters are] funny in a sit-com environment, [they] would be so unbelievably terrible in the real world you would most likely want to murder them.”

This is what justifies Bignell's statement of simplified character positions. It is crucial for sitcoms, especially in the first season, when the audience does not know the characters yet, that the characters are significantly distinct from each other. That way conflict can result from different subject positions, which can then be resolved

humorously. For all those reasons the actors and actresses need a manageably numbered set of character traits which they can rely on while performing their role.

(94)

For that purpose Sedita presents the most useful approach for this study in his book “The Eight Characters of Comedy” in which he identifies what he calls “archetypes” of half hour television comedy:

It’s not that these are character stereotypes, but rather character archetypes with specific personality traits that enable the actors playing them to reach their fullest comedic potential. (45)

His view is similar to Bignell’s in that he suggests following certain guidelines when creating and playing characters in television comedy. He therefore forms eight “categories” including character traits for every single archetype and prime examples of which throughout the history of television comedy. These eight characters are summarized in the following and will be referred to in the next chapter when characterizing possible postmodern characters of situation comedy.

The first character archetype “The Logical Smart One” is the most reasonable of all characters and always seems to be aware of the dynamics going on in the group. He or she could therefore be seen as a reflection of the audience since most of the time they know more than the rest of the characters. A side effect of this might be that they are often very sarcastic and play out their intellectual superiority. Often “Logical Smart Ones” are female characters or more precisely, in family sitcoms, the wives like for instance Claire Huxtable (*The Cosby Show*), Jill Taylor (*Home Improvement*) or Carrie Heffernan (*King of Queens*). Nevertheless there are several popular male “Logical Smart Ones” like Malcolm (*Malcolm in the Middle*) or Anthony Nelson (*I dream of Jeannie*). As children these characters were already diligent students, worked hard for their own goods, and learned to take care of themselves.

For that matter they did not make bad decisions as others did when growing up.
(Sedita 51-70)

An often seen partner of the “Logical Smart One” is the second archetype: the “Loveable Loser”. The reason for this is that these characters are often incorporated by the husbands in family sitcoms (e.g. Cliff Huxtable, Tim Taylor, Doug Heffernan). Successful female “Loveable Losers” would be Lucy Ricardo (*I love Lucy*) or Penny (*The Big Bang Theory*). The most prominent characteristic of the “Loveable Loser” is his or her intense want for something and their condemned to failure attempts to reach their goals. Whenever they develop an apparently good plan, it is certain that something will go wrong. Nevertheless they always believe in their own success and never stop trying, which makes them rather childlike characters with hopeful and optimistic attitudes. It happens frequently that characters step into the role of the “Loveable Loser” for only one episode. (Sedita 71-89)

A rather new archetype of television comedy is the “Neurotic”. He or she is the “most theatrical” of all characters meaning that they act “abnormal under normal circumstances” (92) and work with lots of physical comedy. Other characters often ridicule them for this behavior. The “Neurotics” are marked by a profound insecurity resulting from their past, which made them create their own set of rules they follow and are hardly willing to turn away from. For that matter they can be rather inflexible and perfectionist in their fear of losing control over a situation or themselves. Famous sitcom characters belonging to that category would be Alan Harper (*Two and a Half Men*), Sheldon Cooper (*The Big Bang Theory*), or Monica and Ross Geller (*Friends*). (Sedita 91-114)

A popular supporting character is the fourth one, the “Dumb One”. They do not need much dialogue since their mere presence in a scene promises funny

situations through a look, a gesture, or a one-liner. “Dumb Ones” were happy, imaginative, and protected children, who never had to develop common sense. This is why they are still very childlike as adults in that they are well-meaning, enthusiastic, and unselfish people. They always believe in and are true to themselves and address others with the same attitude by never lying or being devious. This behavior often results in offensive commentaries which they do not even recognize as such. Prime examples of “Dumb Ones” in sitcoms are Joey Tribbiani (*Friends*), Kelly Bundy (*Married...with children*), or Jake Harper (*Two and a Half Men*). (Sedita 115-132)

Another highly popular supporting character which is however quite the opposite of the “Dumb One” is the “Bitch/Bastard”. They are rather smart but also intolerant, which is why they have no patience with dumb people. “Bitches/Bastards” are manipulative and self-centered thus they do not care about the people in their surroundings and would stop at nothing to get what they want whereby they never apologize for their ruthless behavior. They are sarcastic people with a dry sense of humor and a sharp tongue, which results mainly from a deep insecurity they want to cover. This insecurity stems from their childhood where they were confronted with difficult issues turning them into pessimistic adults. Admirable sitcom “Bitches/Bastards” would be Berta (*Two and a Half Men*), Perry Cox (*Scrubs*), Niles (*The Nanny*) or Grandma Ida (*Malcolm in the Middle*). (Sedita 133-157)

Since the rise of the sitcom centering on a family of friends and the upcoming theme of “sex” a new character archetype has developed: the “Womanizer/Manizer”. These characters see sex as a prerequisite for living a fulfilled life and therefore make it their primary concern to pursue it. Although “Womanizers/Manizers” can vary in age and appearance, they all have in common keen self-confidence, a narcissistic

self-image and a strong feeling of pride. Hence their way to address potential sex-partners is aggressive and assertive whereby “success” in this field makes them feel powerful. On the whole however these characters are actually rather pitiful since they use sex to fill a great emotional void which makes them shallow and superficial in other areas of their lives. Examples of “Womanizers/Manizers” would be Charlie Harper (*Two and a Half Men*), Todd (*Scrubs*) or Blanche Deveraux (*Golden Girls*). (Sedita 159-176)

The sixth character archetype suggested is the “Materialistic One”. Although this character is mostly female, there are some male ones who would rather be called “metrosexuals” like for instance John Dorian (*Scrubs*), who is obsessed with his hair or Jefferson Darcy (*Married... with Children*) who clearly is a “gold digger” in his relationship with Marcy. This character grew up in an environment where money and material goods were ascribed high values. Money was and usually still is not a problem which they have had to face, which is why they are convinced to deserve just the best. Examples of this kind of “Materialistic Ones” would be Hilary Banks (*The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*) or Cher Horowitz (*Clueless*). If these characters do not come from a wealthy background they mostly just dream about having all they seek but cannot get. This would be the case with Peg Bundy (*Married... with Children*), or Fran Fine (*The Nanny*). However no matter whether they are rich or poor, they all show a rather snobbish behavior in that they are judgmental about others as well as insulting and arrogant towards those who do not share their materialistic world views. (Sedita 177-194)

The last of the “Eight Characters of Comedy” is also one of the funniest supporting characters: the “In their Own Universe”. Characters of this category are for some reason weird and different from all others and often diverge from the norms

of society because of their cultural values, their principals, or their frame of reference. This is why they firmly believe that their opinions and worldviews conform to the accepted truth, since in their universe they do which makes them perceive their environment differently. These characters are not logical and very childlike by being optimistic, fascinated with absurd things, non-judgmental and shameless by expressing whatever concerns them in a particular situation. Fabulous examples of characters who are “in their own universe” are Dewey (*Malcolm in the Middle*), Phoebe Buffay (*Friends*) or Jeannie (*I Dream of Jeannie*). (Sedita 195-214)

3 Postmodern Television

3.1 The Postmodern Turn in Art and Culture

The term “Postmodern Turn” describes a change in thinking, lifestyle and culture between the era of modernity and something else, which we call here “postmodernity”. Etymologically speaking, “modern” is a synonym for contemporary, which would mean the state of the art when the term “modernism” is applied. “Postmodernism” would then be what comes after it, whereby the influence of modernism must not be ignored. (Bignell 166) It is approved of Malpas’ suggestion that a clear distinction must be drawn in the terminology between modernity/postmodernity and modernism/postmodernism. The former terms refer to historical epochs characterized by certain political and economic developments, whereas the latter ones are concerned with cultural as well as artistic ideas and concepts rising in the respective epoch. (9) The word “turn” should receive some attention here as well, because it conveys the message that there was neither a sudden break nor a cut between the concepts, but that it was a relatively slow and fluent change with some sub-concepts in between.

To receive a first impression of the differences between the concepts of modernism and postmodernism, the following list provided by Ihab Hassan (267-268) might be a helpful tool. The original list was slightly adapted by removing several redundant points for the purposes of this paper.

<i>Modernism</i>	<i>Postmodernism</i>
Form	Antiform
Purpose	Play
Hierarchy	Anarchy
Mastery/Logos	Exhaustion/Silence
Distance	Participation
Creation/Totalization	Decreation/Deconstruction
Genre/Boundary	Text/Intertext
Selection	Combination
Determinacy	Indeterminacy

In the course of the following analysis of the postmodern turn the stated characteristics in the list will reappear and will be embedded in the context of the concepts. However, the contrastive juxtaposition makes it clear that before fully diving into the world of postmodernism, it is necessary to examine its ancestor out of which it developed: modernism. Since it is literally impossible to set a fixed period for a cultural epoch, the historical epoch should be used epoch as a starting point. The century of modernity, as commonly agreed on, would be between 1850 and 1950, whereby the cultural and artistic movements during that time showed an innovative drive to develop new artistic styles as well as new techniques to work with. This finally led to a cultural “tradition of the new” in general, which is connected to the spirit of modernism. So, “modernist art breaks with realist modes of representation and the concept of art as mimesis, an imitation of reality, in order to explore alternative visions and to experiment with the aesthetic possibilities of a given artistic medium.” (Best and Kellner 126)

This sudden break with the artistic tradition of the time is called by Malpas an “avant-garde movement” with the aspiration to “rewrite the rules of art” (17). Best &

Kellner on the other hand saw the “avant-garde movement” of modernism as a radical side branch whose artists sought to “revolutionize society, culture, and everyday life by assaulting the institution of art” (128). It could be agreed with both of these opinions since they in fact do not contradict each other. Modernism developed further in the course of time whereby some movements or possibly the whole concept took a more radical direction. Hence, it is true that the modernist movement was avant-garde in its beginnings; however, there were movements within the modern paradigm which could be again labeled avant-garde since they attempted to redefine the concept of modernism.

Additionally to the idea of newness came the tradition of artistic and later on cultural differentiation. The artists of the various forms (painting, writing etc.) tried to perfect their own special fields by excluding elements from others and so purifying them, developing a “culture of expertise”. Habermas, who links modernism to the Enlightenment and the separation of culture in the spheres of science, morality and art, argues that “[e]ach domain of culture could be made to correspond to cultural professions in which problems could be dealt with as the concern of special experts” (9).

The result of this was a new ideological perception about the function of these cultural spheres and their roles in society. In terms of art rather sharp distinctions were redrawn between “high art” of a privileged elite and a “low art” of the masses.

World War II is considered by many cultural theorists including Etzioni a turning point in history, which ended the modern period “with radical transformation of the technologies of communication, knowledge, and energy” (vii). These new modes of communication and information provided fresh breeding grounds for the arts, which would later on lead to or be accompanied by a change in attitude towards

what should be called here postmodernism. This “postmodern turn” in the arts can therefore be set in the postwar-period sometime during the 1950s and 60s. (Foster xiii and Jameson 113)

The reason why the term “postmodernism” is treated with caution here is that many theorist of the field, independently from the decade they wrote in, share the opinion that there does not exist a generally accepted description or time frame yet for the concept. The following quotes illustrate this:

The concept of postmodernism is not widely accepted or even understood today. Some of the resistance to it may come from the unfamiliarity of the works it covers, which can be found in all the arts[.] (Jameson 111)

[T]he term ‘postmodern’ is often a placeholder, or semiotic marker, that indicates that [...] new confusing phenomena are appearing that we cannot adequately categorize or get a grip on. (Kellner 46)

Either postmodern art appears to begin a new cycle after the exhaustion of modernism, or, conversely it can be seen as completing and exhausting aesthetic modernism. Or postmodern art begins something new within the great modern tradition. (Hoffmann 58)

Still, there are numerous authors including the upper quoted, who present descriptions of the phenomenon of postmodernism; however, most of them approach it with care. Nigel Watson in contrast makes a clear contradictive statement, which can absolutely be agreed on to a great extent:

Although, for some, postmodernism remains a confused and vacuous term, it has been in use for long enough to have achieved at least a basic consistency of definition. [...] there is a cluster of features which characterize contemporary culture and which when taken together can be called postmodernism. (54)

Building on this declaration the following pages will be concerned with collecting observations about a change in contemporary culture that has been taking place since the Second World War being here referred to as “postmodern turn”. However the result should not be seen as an absolute definition of postmodernism, but more

as a synopsis of the development and the status quo of the paradigm, which could serve as a working definition for the later analysis of *How I Met Your Mother*.

The most important herald for the start of postmodernism was the breakdown between “high” and “low” art. Commercial culture as well as objects of everyday life were assigned completely new values whereas elitist thoughts of modern culture were repressed more and more. (Best and Kellner 131)

The logical consequence of this development was that the artist lost his/her status as privileged social figure whereby meaning got deconstructed and demystified. Skepticism arose towards great certainties and absolute knowledge defined by religion, science and political theories. According to this, the modern idea of purity had to be abandoned and a dedifferentiating approach came into being. Conventionally defined boundaries, such as between reality and unreality, artist and spectator as well as among artistic media as such became less clear or even collapsed completely. The resulting loss of structure and order was praised and welcomed by postmodern artists who turned away entirely from linear forms of narrative or cause-effect relations in favor of chaos and randomness. (Best and Kellner 135f and Watson 58)

As outlined above modernism was the era of newness and innovation; postmodernism on the other hand gives away a feeling of exhaustion towards these two things. (Malpas 20) Thus the preferred mode of practice became to adapt material and forms from the past to the contemporary condition and make them a new product. Frederic Jameson holds a rather negative view on this developing “culture of pastiche” as he calls it. He fears that “in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak

through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum” (Jameson 115).

The resulting play with genres and structures lives up to the intertextual nature of the paradigm and initiates an “era of recycling”. The according features and style will be presented in chapter 3.3, “Postmodernism as Style”.

3.2 The Postmodern Turn in Television

In the previous subchapter it was outlined how the “Postmodern Turn” took place in the arts in general; however, to receive an insight in a similar process in the artistic medium “television” is again a different story. One might say that since television was established after 1950, it should be considered postmodern as a whole. To a certain degree this is true since television took a great part in breaking down the distinction between “high” culture and culture for a mass audience. (Bignell 173)

An example for how this was realized in practice was “public service television” in Europe and later also in America. That form of television is to be opposed to commercial television whose main purpose is to make profit. Public service television or in general public service broadcasting devotes itself to presenting a diversity of programming including educational and cultural programs whereby any form of advertisement is prohibited. Addressing not only mass, but also minority audiences, public service broadcasting has been promised to “elevate the level of intellectual and aesthetic tastes” (Avery) of the viewers. Since it is free for all audiences to watch those programs, it could be argued that they close the gap between high and low arts by making the consumption of the former available for everyone. Still, during the 1970s and 1980s critique was raised concerning the elitist character of public service broadcasting. The argument was that it still aimed at a

cultural and social elite of educated, liberal professionals. Further, some state-owned broadcasting systems became objects of abuse to the governing powers in the particular countries as media to convey their messages to the people. Due to both of those downsides public service broadcasting had to undergo serious restructuring whereby today its future is unclear, because of the constant struggle between chasing ratings and providing quality programs. (Avery and During 113)

Another argument supporting the assumption of television to be a postmodern medium on the whole is that it is, at least in western cultures, a medium of domestic space rather than the public. Exceptions obviously do exist, like for example the tradition of watching sports events in bars or restaurants. Generally speaking, however, TV is consumed mainly in the own home, sometimes as a family leisure experience, sometimes alone. (During 111) This does not make it fit into the definition of “high culture” of modernism.

Having now identified the postmodern features of television, it could be argued that this is only half of the story. If we keep in mind the outline of modernism at the beginning of the chapter, the medium shows modern features equally to postmodern ones. Television from its beginnings until today has been subject to constant technological innovations which change it profoundly again and again; examples of which would be the invention of color sets, the technique of videotaping, the wireless remote control, digital television, the launching of the home entertainment system and numerous more. (During 109-111)

To sum up, it is not enough to call the medium of television postmodern simply because it did not exist in the “era of modernity”, which was before set until 1950. Instead there must be taken a more differentiated view on the subject matter.

When it comes to programming and its content we are again facing a completely different situation, because even more concepts come to play a part. According to Kellner television content has been predominantly shaped by realism (235). Producers of early television believed that since television was constituted as a domestic medium, what they had to do was to address family values by representing the lifestyle of their target groups in order to be successful. (During 110) The programs were “subordinate to narrative codes, to storytelling, and to the conventions of highly coded genres” (Kellner 235). He further argues that in the course of time a countermovement to realism and genre awoke which, like modernism in the arts in general, rejected representation and narrative. In his view this was already a postmodern movement hence modernism could never take hold in television. (Kellner 235)

This opinion cannot be supported entirely, because as mentioned already, television has repeatedly been reshaped by technological advances and so was from its beginnings committed to novelty. The “tradition of the new” of modernist art can easily be transferred to television in the sense that “content has constantly to be replenished [in order to avoid] content exhaustion” (During 111). This led to the invention of numerous new genres such as reality TV, the music video, sports programs etc. Kellner himself provided an argument for the fact that television is also modern in its nature, which he actually designates a postmodern feature. He argues that television takes a great part in shaping thought, identity and behavior of the viewers, because “people do model their behavior, style, and attitudes on television images; television ads do play a role in managing consumer demand [...and...] television is playing the central role in political elections” (Kellner 237).

Remembering the concepts of modernism in the arts, the idea that art forms can influence reality or even change the way people think and behave is more of an avant-garde modernist view on arts and society. Considering the fact that Douglas Kellner is an expert in the field of postmodernism in cultural studies, it can be realized how insecure the distinctions between the particular concepts are and how unclear the concept of postmodernism is.

Returning now to the postmodern turn, the term postmodernism as such is ascribed two meanings within television studies. On the one hand, it signifies a general shift in television culture as described; on the other hand, it is a way of identifying characteristics of individual programs. (Bignell 106) The focus will now lie on the general shift in television culture, saving the characterization of postmodern programs for the next subchapter (3.3.)

Within the medium of television the postmodern turn can be defined as a reaction against the just outlined forms of realism with its emphasis on narratives and the system of coded genres. (Kellner 235) As for the former, the image is gaining importance causing a de-centering of the narratives in television fiction. As an example Kellner states the 1980s TV series “Miami Vice” produced by Anthony Yerkovich. Here the narratives, which are often flat and unspectacular, are pushed to the background by intense artificial images of south Florida, where the plot is set. The producers emphasize “colors of flamingo pink, lime green, Caribbean blue, subdued pastels and flashing neon” (238) and use popular rock music as background to the action. The result is an ambience which is highly fascinating and seductive and makes the viewers forget about the actual story. (Kellner 235-238)

Concerning coded genres, postmodern television programs turn against static conventions of genres and enjoy mixing them up in a parodic way. Parody in

postmodernism is, however, not meant to criticize the source texts or the ideologies behind them, but it is plainly speaking superficial and pleasure. (Bignell 166) This could lead to the general idea of postmodern television culture to be flat and one-dimensional, not providing any depth in meaning, which Kellner (236) again rejects.

3.3 Postmodernism as Style

In the previous subchapters it was outlined how culture, the arts and finally, more specifically television turned to postmodernism. Now the style and features characteristic for postmodern programs according to various experts of television studies will be examined. Marc O'Day provides a list of formal features of postmodernism which apply explicitly well to television:

many of the postmodern formal features of particular channels or programmes closely resemble those in other arts and media: [...] fragmentation, heterogeneity, hybridization, aestheticization, stylization, intertextuality, recycling, bricolage, self-referentiality, and parody and pastiche. (117)

Before we start exploring postmodern style feature per feature, it is important to notice some general points in advance. First of all the list of characteristics presented by O'Day was augmented with many more mentioned by other authors (Kellner, Bignell, Malpas, Henry, During etc.) and later on combined and conflated to a graspable number of seven predominant stylistic features, which are then subdivided again. Nevertheless the list is neither complete nor absolute. Several more attributes could be added, whereas others could be left out. What is suggested here is simply an attempt to capture the spirit of postmodern television and sum up the bits and pieces provided in literature.

Secondly the criteria must not be seen as separate entities in postmodern television which could easily be traced and labeled, but quite the opposite is the

case. The characteristics are very strongly dependent on each other and occur in one or the other form in almost every postmodern program. As will be illustrated, it is common that one attribute is more prominent or obvious than others which just requires a more attentive eye of the television studies scholar. On the other hand, it is not mandatory as such to have one feature in order to justify another, which leads us to the next point.

Thirdly, the highlighted indicators are not to be seen as strictly distinguishing marks of postmodern television or postmodernism on the whole. One could find most or even all of those in other cultural concepts, such as modernism or realism and they are therefore not bound to the postmodern paradigm. Still, there can be registered an increased frequency of occurrence in postmodern programs compared to earlier ones especially in combination substantiating the conclusion to label them “features of postmodern television”. For that matter the seven features, as announced already, will be presented in the following, accompanied by examples. They are: fragmentation, recycling, hybridization, intertextuality, self-referentiality, hyperreality, and interactivity.

The first feature to scrutinize will be “fragmentation”. Fragmentation is less a characteristic of postmodern programs, but more of today’s television landscape in general, especially in the USA, which will be the focus here. The era of broadcasting when people could chose only between a small number of channels has long been over. We are facing today an incredible variety of sources for television viewers including satellite, cable, digital, and also interactive TV which provide them with huge numbers of channels to choose from. This was mainly caused by the act of deregulation in the 1980s which was completed gradually throughout the decade. It allowed a profound transformation of the network television landscape to a much

more fragmented and heterogeneous television culture. On the one hand, an increasing number of international conglomerates entered the market due to the extended reach of new technologies. On the other hand, large numbers of specialized and local channels focusing on very specific audiences were founded. (O'Day 115 and Buchanan)

The sudden increase in television channels led to a culture of recycling of television programs due to the never-ending rise in demand for programming of all sorts. Kozloff summarizes this development as follows:

Television texts are played again and again: ongoing series repeat themselves each spring and summer season; older series are replayed endlessly in syndication; once "live" programs reappear as "canned"; cable and PBS networks shamelessly play the same program or film over and over in different time slots. (69)

As stated before, many channels offered very specialized programs and could fill their 24 hours accordingly, however, for other television channels this meant that more programs of television's past were and are still shown today than earlier on. This development concerns mostly series and television movies, especially those which were somehow successful at their times (O'Day 119). The reason why this works out so well might be that past television programs change in significance and meaning when watched by different audiences in different times, which will be explained later on. Have the viewers of Star Trek in former times attributed great value to the program for its innovative special effects, viewers of today might enjoy it for its cult status and its almost ridiculously exaggerated dialogues.

Resulting from the feeling of exhaustion towards innovation of modernism, postmodern television programs increasingly make use of hybridization.

At its core, hybridity involves the mixing together of previously discrete cultural elements to create new meanings and identities. Indeed, the notion of hybridity has played a significant part in destabilizing [...]

culture [...] since hybrids destabilize and blur established cultural boundaries [...]. (Barker "The SAGE dictionary of Cultural Studies" 89)

The upper explanation is taken from the SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies, which provides a glossary of terms and concepts relevant for cultural studies in general. Nevertheless, a great amount of useful information can be extracted from it for a television study focusing on postmodernism. which is done here, although the terminology must be appropriated. Thus, we assume "the discrete cultural elements" Barker talks about to be particular television genres (e.g. documentary, soap etc.) or more globally speaking particular forms of art (e.g. comics, opera etc.). In that sense the "established cultural boundaries" should be the genre specific features of each one of those, which make them distinct from one another. Hybridization in television would then be the mixing of different forms of art or genres to create completely new products and meanings.

One way of how this is carried out in practice is genre-fusion, a technique where one genre is added to another on an equal or subordinate level. The extent of its application does not have limitations. It could affect individual episodes, specific programs or even the creation of new genres (Mittell 155). A current trend which has developed within the last years is to include elements of musicals in television or movie drama. A suitable example in this context is the teenage drama series *Glee* produced by Ian Brennan, which has been aired on FOX since May 2009. Here the genre of drama series is combined with the elements of musicals on a more or less equal level. The singing and dancing parts are always integrated in the story lines and support the atmosphere of the moment or emphasize the characters' feelings towards a subject matter. The plot itself is rather flat, and banal, built on clichés and plain characters. Thus the charm which brought the series the popularity it has now lies in the combination of the two genres, which could be observed as well with the

trilogy of *High School Musical*. The reason why this example was chosen is that *How I Met Your Mother* applied the same technique in one of their episodes which will be treated in chapter 4.2.3.

Another method of hybridization is “bricolage”, which is realized less on the generic level, but more in terms of content. Again the SAGE dictionary of cultural studies provides a useful explanation for the concept, which can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it “refers to the rearrangement and juxtaposition of previously unconnected signifying objects to produce new meanings in fresh contexts” (17). On the other hand, “the term bricolage comes with the juxtaposition of signs in the visual media to form a collage of images from different times and places” (17)

For the analysis of the postmodern sitcom (*How I Met Your Mother*) in the third chapter the second form of bricolage will be the more relevant one, since the sitcom genre makes use of it quite frequently. It can be observed for instance in the mockumentary (sitcom with elements of documentary) *Modern Family*, in which the life of an extended family is presented by splitting up the plot in the stories of its nuclear families. In the course of each episode the three stories start to overlap until in the end they fit together to form one extended story again.

The fourth and probably most prominent feature of postmodern television is “intertextuality”, which is closely linked with the former presented methods of recycling and hybridization. It “involves explicit allusions to particular programs and oblique references to other genre conventions and styles.” (Barker “Dictionary of Cultural Studies” 101) An awareness of these intertextual references is required from the viewers in order to understand the programs meaning and to find the quality in it. Since there are countless ways where intertextuality applies, the concept should be

narrowed down here to two sub-concepts which seem to be the most common ones. We therefore distinguish between “pastiche” and “parody” according to their purpose.

Pastiche is a concept applied only in art and stands for the imitation of a text or a whole genre. It is a deliberate play with conventions of established genres and can often be interpreted as a tribute to the imitated work. This aspect of flattery over mockery is what distinguishes it from parody. (Baldick 162 and Dyer 1-2)

Parody is an allusive imitation of style of work by exaggerated mimicry, whereby it involves the “application of serious styles to ridiculous subjects”. (Baldick 161) This is accompanied by an evaluative and often critical aspect and an attacking mode of operation. Compared to pastiche, parody can not only refer to texts and genres but also to the contemporary world. (Dentith 9-10)

In practice pastiche and parody are not always easily distinguishable and some theorists do not draw a line between them at all. The reason why this is still done here is that the later parts of the paper will apply these two concepts in separation to sitcoms and concretely to “How I Met your Mother”.

The fifth designated characteristic of postmodern television is self-referentiality. In this context the following quote by Winfried Nöth, which opens up the introductory essay to the book “Self-reference in the Media”, is of particular interest.

The mediators have turned to representing representations. Instead of narrating, they narrate how and why they narrate, instead of filming, they film that they film the filming. The news are more and more about what has been reported in the news, television shows are increasingly concerned with television shows, and even advertising is no longer about products and services but about advertising. (3)

The statement shows in an exaggerated way how the concept of self-referentiality applies in contemporary postmodern media. Again this subject matter is rather

diversified, which is why the focus will be laid on self-referentiality in television genres and programs.

The term self-awareness means that a given medial work, like for instance a television show, points to itself in one way or another and therefore shows an awareness of its medial status. (Nöth 304) This might either involve reflections on the process of its production and filming, commentaries about its producers and authors, or a special case called “Breaking the Fourth Wall”, where a character on the screen talks directly to the audience. This feature will be further examined in the next chapter. The result of these self-awareness strategies is a blurring of the boundaries between reality and non-reality and a play with established conventions.

One television genre which strongly makes use of self-reference is reality TV. Here the participants of the show often refer to the show itself, leave and enter the set repeatedly, and are sometimes interviewed on screen. The reporter is often missing creating the impression that the participants talk directly to the audience commenting on their life during the show.

As already mentioned in the previous section and also with self-referentiality, in postmodernism the boundaries between fiction and reality are often not fully established. Sometimes it is even unclear what reality actually is and how we can judge whether something is reality or not. This is also true for postmodern television leading to the sixth attribute: hyperreality. The intensifier “hyper” usually means that something is more than the original concept. So, for “hyperreality” this would mean “more than real”. (Barker “Dictionary of Cultural Studies” 90) Although this might seem confusing and absurd at first glance, it makes sense in the context of television. According to Allen R. “[t]elevision [...] does not simply reflect the world in some direct automatic way. Rather it constructs representations of the world on the

basis of complex sets of conventions” (2). What is meant is that through news and factual programs television presents to its viewers a reality which has been framed and edited in advance. Different channels will present information differently, corresponding to their own political and social agendas and will therefore cause a perception of events among their audience, which is shaped along those lines. Since the viewers often do not have the possibility to experience presented incidents on their own, they have to accept the constructed news report to be reality. According to Bignell this leads to the conclusion that “much of our knowledge of the world comes through television” (177). (Bignell 177 and Allen G. 182-183)

The situation comedy has been affected by this since its early days. As was already outlined, the sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s were set mostly in sub-urban areas. This was not a coincidence, but an attempt to bring back a “generation that had grown up during hard times” (Marc 14) to prewar values by presenting to them “the actual social ideal of the American family” (Tueth 178). Therefore the situation comedy of that time was both a reflection of reality, since many young families actually moved out of the cities to the suburbs, and a shaping of a hyperreality of the life those families might have there. (Marc 14-15; Tueth 178-179) With the postmodern sitcom this phenomenon can be observed as well, however in the complete opposite direction (see chapter 4.2.6).

Another example concerning fictional television could be that actors and actresses of serial television formats such as soaps or sitcoms are often confused with their character roles. Therefore they experience behavior towards them according to the level of sympathy the viewers bring to the characters. (O’Day 113 and Storey 149)

The seventh and last characteristic of postmodern television analyzed here is “interactivity”. Since the distinction between high art and low art is no longer upheld in postmodernism, audience interaction plays an important part in the concept. On this account Bignell (105) gives an informative overview of how this is realized in television practice. Commercials, depending on consumer reactions, sometimes offer puzzles to be resolved, many programs provide telephone numbers, websites, and more recently facebook-profiles to provide further information or possibilities for viewers to place comments. Talk shows and television shopping channels often offer the chance for viewers to phone directly into the show to become a part of it.

Bignell states several more examples; however, he leaves out one genre which incorporates interactivity on television to a high degree, namely the quiz show. Audience interaction could be realized in this enormously popular genre in several ways. In *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*, for instance, there is a live audience in the showroom which is involved in the action by the audience joker and provides a possibility for viewers at home to identify with them. There is the telephone joker enabling one chosen individual per candidate to phone in the show and be part of it. Moreover, the candidates are ordinary people telling their personal stories and again serve as an occasion for identification. *How I Met Your Mother* is exceptionally engaged when it comes to audience interaction as explained in chapter 4.2.7. This is the reason why the feature was included although it seems that hardly any of the described ways of interaction is applicable to the sitcom genre on the first sight.

To sum up, the seven features fragmentation, recycling, hybridization, intertextuality, self-referentiality, hyperreality, and interactivity characterize postmodern style in contemporary television. They will therefore serve as a basis for the analysis of the postmodern sitcom following in the third chapter.

3.4 Postmodern Audiences

Ensuing from the previously outlined features of postmodern television a slight digression into the audience involved in the process will be necessary. The focus will lie on what is required from an audience which is the target of this new, postmodern form of television.

The commercialization of television caused its primary function to become the selling of potential customers, in other words the television audience, to advertisers. "The economic function of a television program is not complete once it has been sold, for in its moment of consumption it changes to become a producer and what it produces is an audience, which is then sold to advertisers." (Fiske "Understanding the Popular" 22) Therefore, just as market research is necessary with other commercial products, thorough audience reception research is required for television.

According to Barker (Global Television. 118) a general shift in audience reception research could be observed since the late 1970s based on the perception of the audience to be more active than passive. This shift should here be called again postmodern turn assuming that the television audience has changed along the lines or even slightly ahead the postmodern turn in television; slightly ahead, because changes in television programming can often be traced back to audience demands or a general shift in society. (Feuer 126)

Early research, as already stated, ascribed to the audience a rather passive role in television viewing. The focus was more placed on the text and the meanings it tried to convey, which were determined by the authors. (Barker. Global Television. 112-113) More recent perceptions of television audience suggest an active viewership. By the late 1970s the idea of the mass audience was abandoned for a

notion of viewers as individuals and an appreciation of television being influential for everyday life.

‘The people’ is not a stable sociological category [...] The people [...] are a shifting set of allegiances that cross all social categories various individuals belong to different popular formations at different times, often moving between them quite fluidly. (Fiske “Understanding Popular Culture” 20)

Programmers began to develop an interest in viewer demographics and the resulting “taste cultures” based on ethnicity, age, education, etc. (During 112, 116-117) They came to the realization that different audiences interpret television programs in different ways, depending on their personal history, their social background, and their media knowledge. (Bignell 176, 279) The text was therefore to be seen as having a polysemic meaning, whereby the audience was responsible for the production of meaning. The text was disempowered of its former function of conveying determined meanings and all that was left for it was the possibility to structure a “preferred meaning” for the audience. (During 115-116 and Barker “Global Television” 115-117)

In the process of transferring a media message via the television screen to the viewer meaning is communicated from the sender of the message in the form of a program serving as a discourse. The receiver of the message, the viewer, then interprets the program and produces his or her own meanings from it. Assuming that this is correct, it becomes vital for producers to have an idea about their intended audiences, because this process of interpretation will be highly influenced by cultural values. If the program manages to address these, the chance for congruence between the “preferred meaning” and the actually perceived meaning rises. As a result of that the more people can identify with a certain program, the bigger the audience will be, and the economic return on the program. (Barker “Global

Television” 117 and Allen R. 88-89) This idea will be revisited in chapter 4.1 when discussing the postmodern turn in the genre.

In the context of audience identification Bignell describes a process which should happen on three levels. First, the viewer must identify with the television medium itself which brings what is strange to the familiar domestic space. Secondly, identification with the characters seen on the screen must be possible. They represent role models which the viewer might wish to conform to in real life, but cannot because of various restrictions. Thirdly, the audience needs to identify with the fictional, but also the non-fictional worlds opened up on television. It needs to be able to become a part of that world like in a daydream or fantasy. These levels of identification, so he further argues, usually apply for watching movies in cinema; however, they are, with restrictions, suitable for television as well. In cinema the viewers sit in a dark space, in front of a large screen and are part of a real audience. The circumstances make it easy for them to get involved with what is going on in the film. Television, on the other hand, offers a relatively small screen, the TV-set is a domestic object among others and viewing is often a single activity. In order to make up for these downsides other strategies are required. These could be to address the viewer directly or to place a live audience inside the program to produce a feeling of membership. The most important strategy however might be point-of-view shots which enable the viewer to slip into the perspective of different characters and therefore take part in the action on the screen. (100-102)

In conclusion, the postmodern audience takes the major part in the construction of meaning of a television text. Therefore a television program should provide a possibility for the viewers to relate the fictional world to their living environment. To quote Fiske once more: “Popular culture has to be, above all else,

relevant to the immediate social situation of the people” (Understanding Popular Culture. 21).

4 The Postmodern Sitcom Using the Example of “How I Met Your Mother”

Very little has been researched and written about this specific topic, “Postmodern Sitcom”. The reason might be that the situation comedy has been understood more as a realist than a modern or postmodern genre. As Joanne Morreale states in the introduction to “Critiquing the Sitcom. A Reader.”:

Sitcoms generate emotions because they are so integrally related to who we are as both individual subjects and members of a cultural community. (xii)

This assumption is not entirely wrong since situation comedy shows the lifestyles of people of various social groups whereby the content has always been adapted to the zeitgeist of the time in which it was set. Therefore as already mentioned in the first chapter it allows us to relate our own lives to what we see on the screen. Nevertheless it can be argued that the sitcom underwent a similar development from realist over modern to postmodern conventions just as the arts and television in general. The earlier developments were already outlined in the first chapter; the further progress to postmodern conventions will be the topic of the next section.

For now it should be analyzed in how far the situation comedy on the whole can be seen as a postmodern genre in terms of its constitutional features. First of all it is generally known that the sitcom incorporates a great amount of features from theatre like the live audience (nowadays mostly substituted by the laugh track), the performance on a stage whereby the viewers observe the happenings always from the fourth wall, and the fact that each episode resembles a short self-contained play.

Considering these points it could be argued that situation comedy is recycling theatre on television which has been identified before as a postmodern feature. More precisely we can identify a close resemblance to the “Comedy of Manners” of 18th century theatre in England (Marc 11-12). Both work a lot with physical humor to support gags and jokes; both represent their target audiences and thereby mock their cultures and lifestyles, but mostly avoid open critique of the same; both center around family or a family-like group of close friends and their relationships, whereby their struggle through unusual situations serves as a source for comedy.

Nevertheless situation comedy should not be seen as a reincarnation of the comedy of manners but only as a recycled product. Therefore we must identify essential differences. The former represents a social elite on stage for a social elite which would be the audience. The latter on the other hand represents mostly ordinary people and addresses a mass audience. So, whereas the comedy of manners clearly belongs to the elitist art form of theatre categorizing the situation comedy is not as simple, especially in a postmodern context. This is because it actually causes a breakdown of this strict boundary between high and low art by uniting theatre and television, which was before noticed as the groundbreaking idea of the postmodern movement in the arts.

Morreale further notes that situation comedies allow very contrary readings in a “multiplicity of discourses” (xii), because they are both progressive and conservative. On the one hand they satirize and parody lifestyles and cultures, on the other hand they support the same and are part of them. So, in other words sitcoms do not convey straight forward meanings, but require the viewer to create his or her own meanings out of the contents they present. This again was already identified as an attribute of postmodern programs. (xii)

4.1 *The Postmodern Turn in the Genre Situation Comedy*

As was examined, there was a recognizable postmodern turn in the television medium as a whole. Now it should be outlined in how far a similar turn could be felt in situation comedy. Contrary to the writing so far the approach will now turn more practical and concrete. The sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* will serve as an example to illustrate the postmodern turn in the following parts of the study and will therefore become object to detailed analysis.

In chapter 2.3 “The SIT-” it was briefly announced that profound changes marked the sitcom in the 1990s, which should here be designated the decade of the postmodern turn in the genre. The reason for this is that a certain feeling exhaustion could be registered towards the traditional family setting which repeatedly sought to redefine itself throughout the centuries. This led to a number of sitcoms adopting the traditional family setting, adding elements of dysfunction and used the established conventions to parody the genre. (Henry 266; Morreale xviii; Sedita 11) Sitcoms like these were *Married...with children*, *The Simpsons* and later *Malcolm in the Middle*. This new wave of showing dysfunctional families instead of idealized, happy family life led to a more realistic portrayal of the American family and opened the way for real life problems in sitcoms:

The Simpsons are more akin to what we are today, more representative of the American family and more attuned to the realities of contemporary life. [...] Their America is our America. They are [...] dedicated to family values [...] but, in such a society, find it hard to live up to them. (Henry 265)

Another innovation in the genre in the 1990s was the increase in sitcoms centering on a group of friends instead of an immediate family (*Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *How I Met Your Mother*). According to Sedita this was a reaction to the changes which took place in American society those days. The people started to put more weight on

finding their identities as independent individuals and thus more and more separated themselves from their immediate families. The group of friends served as a substitute which gave rise for over-thinking the meaning and essential “components” of a real family. (11) Although the traditional family sitcom did not disappear, sitcoms based on the nuclear family became rare and were accompanied by single-parents (*Grace under fire*) extended families (*King of Queens*) and gay relationships (*Will and Grace*). Although not all shows produced during the 1990s and beyond could be labeled postmodern, the sudden increase in variation of settings and the resulting fragmentation of the sitcom content should be recognized as a postmodern development. The same is true for the structure of the genre, which will be treated in greater detail in the next chapter. Still, independently from the represented family constellation, dysfunctional characters have become an indispensable necessity for the sitcom from the 1990s onwards. (Morreale xviii)

An interesting view on the changes in sitcom on a structural level was presented by Feuer already in 1987. She argues that the genre shows a trend away from its episodic structure towards a continuing series. This would mean a considerable break with the conventions of the genre and therefore would be a marker for a possible postmodern turn. Generally the sitcom has been seen more as a stable genre due to the fact that the focus lay on episode length story arcs. Attalah on the contrary holds the view that “It is a narrative necessity of situation comedy that the ‘situation’ remain unchanged [...] the characters and their mode of interaction must not be allowed to evolve.” (107) Observing sitcoms from the past decades Feuer’s position seems more plausible, especially because of her most convincing argument that “sitcoms introduced a limited, but significant concept of character development into the genre” (128). In her opinion this moves the genre to

a continuing serial form since earlier happenings in the shows become more essential for understanding the long story arcs of seasons or even the whole series. The mentioned character development will be treated in the next chapter (see chapter 4.3) when examining the protagonists of *How I Met Your Mother* in greater detail.

The last significant break with the genre's conventions which should here be mentioned as a signifier for the postmodern turn is the abandonment of the laugh track. Although less and less sitcoms have been shot in front of a live audience in the last decades, canned laughter is still used as a substitute to preserve this essential characteristic. This is also the technique applied in *How I Met Your Mother*. The laugh track is unique for the genre, supports its jokes, and reminds of its theatrical origins. Reviewing the idea of the active audience as introduced in chapter 3.4, "Postmodern Audiences", we can register for the sitcom that the laugh track has been a powerful instrument for finding a congruence between the preferred meaning and the actually perceived meaning. Laughter of a group about a joke is an unambiguous and universally accepted sign that what was said was meant to be funny. The chance to interpret such a commentary differently (e.g.: as offense, criticism etc.) is extremely low. Here is an example from *How I Met Your Mother* (season one, episode one) to illustrate the point; Marshall has just told Ted that he was about to propose to Lily.

TED: Dude are you kidding?! It's you and Lily! I've been there for all the big moments with you and Lily: the night you met, your first date, other first things...

LAUGHTER

MARSHALL: Yeah, sorry we thought you were asleep.

TED: It's physics Marshall; if the bottom bunk moves, the top bunk moves too.

LAUGHTER

We should pay some attention to the second laughter in this scene. By hearing it the viewer immediately knows that Ted's statement was not meant to be offensive or arrogant, which could be the case as well, but a sarcastic commentary. If the laugh track had been omitted the viewers would have had to detect the comic intent of the situation themselves. As a result they would have been obliged to make their own meaning of the show corresponding to the understanding of the active audience discussed in chapter 3.4.

Therefore, leaving out the laugh track "reflect[s] a growing awareness of a new type of viewer [... who is] aware of [...] conventions" (Morreale xviii). This means that the active audience is trusted to be familiar with the genre conventions and hence with the comic intent of the sitcom even if the laugh track is removed. Successful recent sitcoms working this way are *Scrubs*, *Modern Family*, or *Malcolm in the Middle*.

4.2 *Mirroring Postmodern Features*

The stylistic features of postmodern television as identified in chapter 3.3, "Postmodernism as Style", will serve now as guiding principles for the analysis of the postmodern sitcom.

4.2.1 **Fragmentation**

It was explained for the fragmentation of postmodern television that it characterizes more the television landscape in general rather than the programs; this is also true for the situation comedy. Nowadays the genre must be differentiated in various occurring forms which can occur. Mills brings forward a classification into three categories of contemporary sitcoms. First, there is still the sitcom in the traditional

sense as it was described in chapter 2.2 “The Sitcom Puzzle”, continuing to play an important part in the sitcom landscape. (127) Very successful sitcoms of that type produced after or more during the postmodern turn would be *Two and a Half Men* or *The Big Bang Theory*. *How I Met Your Mother* belongs to this category by using a laugh track and the “three headed monster”, by creating comedy through jokes and slapstick humor as well as by sticking to the episodic format for the major part.

Secondly Mills mentions a type of sitcom incorporating realist or naturalist characteristics by “reject[ing] the theatrical nature of sitcom, abandoning the laugh track and offering a visual style which positions the viewer as an observer of everyday behaviour.” (128). The outcome would be more or less a comedy drama series such as *The Gilmore Girls* or *Sex and the City* which would go hand in hand with Feuer’s assumption outlined in chapter 4.1 “The Postmodern Turn in the Genre Situation Comedy” that the sitcom develops in the direction of the continuing drama series.

How I Met Your Mother also contains several attributes of this second type of sitcom. As was already shown in the previous subchapter (4.1) the long story arc is vital for the episodes since it is repeatedly referred back to earlier happenings. Further there are often recaps at the beginning of episodes explaining briefly what had happened so far. Still there is one feature in the show reminding evidently of a drama series, namely the tragic turns in the storyline. Thinking about other contemporary sitcoms still following the traditional format to a great extent, there are tragic moments as well, but they are usually transformed into sources for comedy or repressed very quickly to open the way for a more comedic story line. *How I Met Your Mother* is unique in that it deliberately includes and expands tragic moments over more than one episode and refers back to them even in the following seasons.

The prime example for such a tragic turn in the show is the death of Marshall's father in season 6, which is prepared throughout the whole 13th episode "Bad News". While watching, the viewer is made believe that the bad news expected would be Marshall not being able to father a child. However the message of his father's death arrives in the final minute of the episode after having received good news. The very special extra in this episode is that it includes a literal countdown from 50 to 1 from the beginning to the end of the show, whereby the numbers are placed on objects to fit the discourse of the particular scene. (see Fig. 2)



Fig. 2: Examples for the countdown in "Bad News" (season 6, episode 13, 1', 3', 7', 19')

The following episodes until the 18th are building on this one and treat Marshall's and his family's process of getting past their loss. As already mentioned the treatment of a tragic situation over a story arc of such a large dimension in a sitcom is rather unusual and can be interpreted as a feature of the drama series embedded in the genre.

It should be added that Mills argues that there was a second type of sitcom belonging to the naturalist/realist category just described, namely the mock-documentary (e.g. *Modern Family*, *The Office*). This assumption is being rejected here for two reasons: On the one hand the combination of sitcom with documentary aesthetics finds too little application in the sitcom landscape to be called a separate type compared to the comedy drama series. On the other hand the mock-documentary is a too specific form of sitcom in comparison to the one incorporating features of the drama series which is rather widespread. Still the mock-documentary is an interesting example for a postmodern type of sitcom since the hybrid structure, the self-referential format as well as the provided multi-perspectivity are important attributes, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next subchapters.

The third form of contemporary situation comedy shares some similarities with the second one in that it does not use a laugh track and applies single-camera shooting. Still there is one big difference, namely the “explicit display of its use of the image, and this foregrounding of the look of such programming” (Mills 129). In other words this type of sitcom applies various techniques to create comedy which support its status as an artificial product. Highly used is voice-over narration as well as incidental music. Examples of sitcom belonging to this group would be *Scrubs* and *My Name is Earl*. (Mills 129-131) *How I Met Your Mother* contains several characteristics of that type, most foregrounding the voice-over narration, which is introduced at the very beginning of the first episode.

TED: Kids, I'm gonna tell you an incredible story; the story of how I met your mother.

SON: Are we being punished for something?

TED: No.

DAUGHTER: Yeah, is this gonna take a while?

TED: Yes! 25 years ago, before I was dad, I had this whole other life.

The fact that Ted tells the story to his future children legitimizes the frequent interruptions, confusions, and deliberate changes in the story line. Further future Ted repeatedly comments on certain situations and contradicts the characters' statements to remind the audience that there is still a story told. The following is an example from season 3 episode 7 "Dowisetrepla", where Marshall and Lily are having a look at the apartment they are later going to buy:

MARSHALL: Ahm, I gotta stop you right there. Don't bother with the hard sale, this place is way out of our price range and besides, we've only just started looking.

TED: Is what Marshall should have said.

MARSHALL: I'm gonna stop you right there. I love it, let's get it!

The presented categorization could be questioned for its usefulness since the entire paradigm of postmodernism rejects distinction. Still, the given examples show that there in fact can be realized a certain fragmentation in the sitcom landscape, which means that it is no longer possible to talk about "the sitcom". Further it was made clear that *How I Met Your Mother* cannot be assigned for one type of sitcom only, but contains features of all three types. This supports the assumption that the show can be identified as a postmodern sitcom. Whether this can be confirmed or not will be seen after having examined further features.

4.2.2 Recycling

When applying the term "recycling" in the context of situation comedy we must draw a distinction between two ways where it can be felt. The first one is meant on a more literal level in the sense of reruns, whereas the second one is to be understood figuratively and refers to content.

As was stated in chapter 3.3, "Postmodernism as Style", recycling in the first sense of the word is a means of filling the 24 hours of airtime. Situation comedies

are affected by this in several ways; one of which is the networks' tradition of presenting reruns of past sitcoms during the summer months between the end of old seasons and the start of new ones in autumn. The networks select the shows for their reruns carefully and sometimes even promote them in advertising campaigns in order to assure their success. NBC, for instance, started a campaign named "New to you" in 1998 whereby its success was not as high as expected.

The idea behind the campaign was that a rerun is only a rerun if someone saw the original airing of the show. It transformed the concept of the rerun from an industrial designation (the second time a show airs on a network) to a question of audience reception (Edwards)

The audience however did not accept the idea that what was presented was a new show and according to John Miller himself who promoted the campaign the viewers could not be held to the screens in the summer of 1998. (Scheider)

There are nowadays even channels specializing entirely on former series or exclusively past sitcoms such as "Nick@Nite". The screenshot (see Fig. 3: Nick@Nite Homepage, Screenshot March 10th 2012 from the front page of the website shows that the programming is limited to sitcom reruns only. The channel is part of the nickelodeon network which specialized on children's and teenagers' programs. It runs from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. and claims to be "Nickelodeon's online destination for families!" (<http://www.nickatnite.com>).



Fig. 3: Nick@Nite Homepage, Screenshot March 10th 2012

So far its focus has lain on sitcom classics such as *I love Lucy* or more generally speaking very early sitcoms. However more recently the channel increasingly presents newer sitcoms and even original ones as well which can be traced back to the change in preferred audience. Referring again to the screenshot, it can be seen that today the programming contains mostly sitcoms which aired in the 1990s or 2000s. (Stelter)

Considering the just outlined information might raise the question whether a sitcom can be called postmodern simply because it is rerun or in other words “recycled”. The answer must obviously be no, since simply the program itself will not gain postmodern characteristics all of a sudden. Still, there is one factor that changes, which was already explained in 3.3, namely the audience’s attitude towards the show. A viewer will approach the weekly episode of a new season of *How I Met Your Mother* with a different motivation than when doing a *How I Met Your Mother* marathon on the first few seasons. This fact is even more significant when doing reruns of much older sitcoms which might already have achieved a certain must-see, cult or nostalgia status. So, not the program as such turns postmodern when being rerun, the process itself is.

The second way “recycling” can be interpreted is contentwise in that the “SIT-“ and the “-COM” of past shows are being reused. Genzlinger thematizes this phenomenon in his highly critical review on the latest sitcom season (2011/2012) “Naked Truth: New Sitcoms Are Reruns”. He argues that “no series introduced this fall is breaking new ground. [...] So it’s not that the new series are going places [he was...] not willing to follow, it’s that they are going places [he has...] already been.”

He criticizes that the new sitcoms are neither innovative nor original in their stories and jokes, which proves for him that “The End of Comedy” has arrived.

If sitcoms are merely rehashing the same five categories of jokes, they're also just shuffling the same handful of situations. Family with precautious kids. Workplace full of kooks. The young and hip being young and hip. [...] And so here at the End of Comedy, there's nothing left to do but embrace a recycling ethic: shuffle the various well-established pieces around and hope someone chuckles.(Genzlinger)

What is obvious here is the rather modernist view on the genre by disapproving of the lack of newness and originality. Assuming that the impression that new sitcoms present what has already been presented is true supports the feeling of exhaustion typical for postmodernism.

In this context *How I Met Your Mother* could be considered a prime example for a recycled "SIT-" agreeing with Donaldson that it "represent[s] a harmony of characteristics from the two titans of '90's sitcoms: *Friends* [...] and *Seinfeld* [...]. *How I Met Your Mother* is one of the first shows to prosper in the wake of these two sitcoms, and to prosper for directly incorporating aspects of both."

There are several obvious elements which are shared by all three shows such as the Manhattan setting, the group of friends, the regular meeting point (bar, café, diner), or that many situations are based on real life experiences of the authors. Attributes borrowed mostly from *Seinfeld* would be uncensored references to taboo topics as weed, alcohol, or sex as well as the strongly forced catchphrases mostly contributed by Barney such as "suit-up", "xxx-five", "Have you met Ted?" etc. From *Friends* on the other hand *How I Met Your Mother* took the creation of loveable characters, which the audience would be ready to care about and empathize with. Moreover the five protagonists have a very intimate relationship to each other and form, just as the "Friends", a surrogate family. (Donaldson)

In conclusion the postmodern feature "recycling" plays an important part in *How I Met Your Mother*. Additionally to the fragmented identity of the show within the

sitcom genre, this is already the second feature clearly applying, which supports the hypothesis of the show being a “postmodern sitcom”.

4.2.3 Hybridization

Hybridization has become a popular technique in contemporary sitcoms and can therefore be seen as a vital signifier for postmodern programs. As was already explained in 3.3 it has to be distinguished between hybridization on the structural and the content level. The former which was named earlier “genre-fusion” can be observed in sitcom subgenres such as the mock-documentary (e.g. *The Office*, *Modern Family*) or the animated sitcom (e.g. *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*). These are genre fusions on an equal level. More frequent however is genre fusion on a subordinate level where one feature is added to the traditional sitcom format such as the stand-up parts in *Seinfeld*. Even more common are influences from other genres in single episodes, which is practiced in the 100th episode of *How I Met Your Mother* with the musical part “Nothing Suits me like a Suit” (Fig. 4). It is Barney’s homage to his passion for exquisite suits whereby he and the other protagonists sing and dance while moving around in New York. It is the same style applied in *Glee*, which was



Fig. 4: Nothing suits me like a suit
(season 5, episode 12, 19')

described in 3.3 as a prime example for genre fusion. The reason why this is stressed is that four months after the episode’s airdates Neil Patrick Harris guest starred on *Glee* performing “Dream on” (Aerosmith) with Matthew

Morrison. It does not necessarily have to be the case that these two events have a direct relation to each other; still it is an interesting finding.

Hybridization on the content level is realized in “bricolage” which is frequently used especially in sitcoms centering on a group of friends since they live lives more independent from one another than a nuclear family. Obviously also *How I Met Your Mother* frequently applies this technique and often explicitly states it. In the following two examples of bricolage will be treated, namely “Three days of snow” (season 4, episode 13) and “Subway Wars” (season 6, episode 4).

In “Three days of snow” (see Fig. 5: Three amazing stories (season 4, episode 13, 20’)) voice-over Ted explains:

TED. Kids, the blizzard of 09 was a monster. It snowed for three days straight, which led to three amazing stories.



Fig. 5: Three amazing stories (season 4, episode 13, 20’)

The first story is about Ted’s and Barney’s attempt to meet two college girls from Arizona and by trying to impress them run McLaren’s bar in Carl’s absence. When Carl is about to return they remove the bar in Ted’s

apartment. The vital attribute is that the two girls stay in New York with their marching band which counts approximately 50 members. The second story is about Marshall’s and Robin’s attempt to reach the airport during the blizzard to pick up Lily who is about to arrive from Seattle. The couple has a tradition of picking each other up with a name tag whereby the other one must bring a six-pack of locally brewed beer as a present which is the third and Lily’s story. This time they had decided not

to do it however change their minds independently from each other. When Marshall and Robin enter the airport they find out that Lily will arrive two days later because of the snowstorm. The essential assemblage happens in the last minutes of the episode when Marshall picks Lily up accompanied by the marching band who plays “Auld Lang Syne” for her.

In season 6 episode 4 “Subway Wars” the stories are even more separated and also set in completely different contexts. Each member of the group tries to reach a restaurant to see Woody Allen as fast as they can using

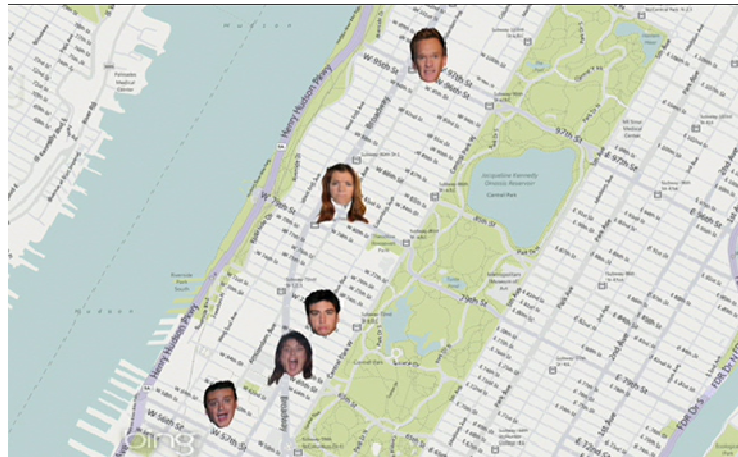


Fig. 6: Subway Wars (season 6, episode 4, 7')

different ways of transport (see Fig. 6). In the end Robin wins the race, because Barney makes Ted stumble in the final end spurt.

They all want to win for different reasons explained separately by Ted in the voiceover. An additional feature of the episode is Robin’s achievement to finally become a real New Yorker by doing the four things every New Yorker must have done according to the group:

MARSHALL. I’m sorry Robin, but you are not a real New Yorker until you have seen Woody Allen.

ROBIN. I am too a real New Yorker!

[...]

TED. I’d say you are not a real New Yorker until you have stolen a cab from someone who needed it more than you do.

LILY. No, you’re not a real New Yorker till you’ve cried on the subway and not given a damn what anyone thinks.

MARSHALL. No, you are not a real New Yorker until you have killed a cockroach with your bare hand.

ROBIN. Those rules are all stupid, okay. I’ve never done any of those things!

VOICE-OVER TED. By the end of this day Robin would have done all of those things.
(season 6, episode 4)

There could be named numerous more examples where bricolage is applied as a narrating technique in *How I Met Your Mother* such as “The naked man” (season 4, episode 9). This frequent occurrence implies that also the third postmodern feature “hybridization” is applicable for the show.

4.2.4 Intertextuality

Although earlier stated that intertextuality should be divided into parody and pastiche an additional third form must here be recognized. What is meant are direct references to other series or movies like for instance repeated mentioning of *Star Wars* as Ted’s favorite movie or Barney’s stories about his first sexual experience which he tries to tell to the group in the style of a certain movie (e.g. *Dirty Dancing* in season 2, episode 12).

The difference between that form of intertextuality and pastiche is that it is direct, whereas the latter is hidden and provides a certain trivia for the viewers. It can be observed on the one hand in short sequences or single features. One example from *How I Met Your Mother* would be Robin taking on the character of Red from the *Shawshank Redemption* from which the following dialogue was adapted:

ANDY. I understand you’re a man who knows how to get things.
RED. I’m known to locate certain things from time to time.

In “Last words” (season 6, episode 14) the wording of this dialogue was slightly changed, but the reference to the movie should be obvious:

MAN AT THE FUNERAL. I hear you’re a woman who can get things.
ROBIN. I have been known to locate certain objects from time to time.

Another example occurs in season 3, episode 14 “The Bracket” when Barney finishes his electronic diary towards the end of the episode. The style in which he writes it as well as the background music refers to *Doogie Houser* (see Fig. 7), which is the series Neil Patrick Harris became famous for.

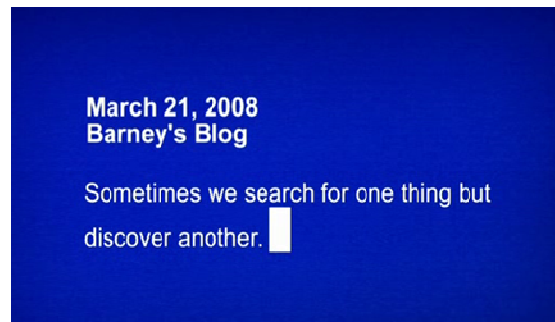


Fig. 7: Doogie Houser theme (season 3, episode 14, 19')

Both of these examples show that the application of pastiche in sitcoms does not follow the purpose of ridiculing or criticizing, but more to honor or pay a tribute to the target text, as explained in 3.3. The same is true when not only short sequences are affected, but whole episodes such as “Oh, Honey” (season 6, episode 15), which is arranged like a game of “Clue”, which Marshall apparently has been playing while staying with his mother in Minnesota. Fig. 8 shows Marshall being on the telephone with Robin who wants to inform him about recent events in New York. The board game “Clue” lying in front of him on the bed as well as his following statement introduce the style for the episode.

MARSHALL. Robin I just want you to know it's either this story you are telling me or another game of “Clue” against myself.



Fig. 8: Marshall introducing “Clue” (season 6, episode 15, 1')

Marshall takes on the role of the detective in the game whereby the other characters become the suspects by wearing clothes of the particular fitting colors throughout the whole episode (see Fig. 9 and Fig. 10) Zoey's

husband, the captain, who does not appear in the episode, takes on the role of Colonel Mustard. The case he is trying to solve is Ted's and Zoey's tense relationship, which turns out to be because of their mutual attraction.



Fig. 9: Clue suspects
(<http://www.josegaspar.net/geocaching/images/ClueSuspects.jpg>)



Fig. 10: Characters as clue suspects
(season 6, episode 15, 1', 2', 6', 8')

The application of pastiche in a sitcom can be considered an ultimately postmodern technique because, as was already stated, it creates a certain trivia for the audience. The reason for this is that including features as this one acknowledges the active audience as described in 3.4 to be the “postmodern” audience. The viewership is being entrusted to have a media knowledge large enough to detect the references and so find pleasure in the program.

Parody on the contrary follows a different purpose, which is to ridicule the target of the reference and by doing so very often to criticize it. Compared to pastiche parodic references are more obvious, because their success in functioning as a source for comedy depends even more so on the audience's understanding.

How I Met Your Mother provides numerous examples for parody throughout the seasons. In “Swarley” (season 2, episode 7) Ted, Barney, and Marshall meet at

a café instead of McLaren's, which clearly a reference to *Friends* and their favorite place "Central Perk". The three men stress how unsatisfied they are with the location during their stay.

TED. So, I guess that decides it.

MARSHALL. Yup.

BARNEY. Hangin' out at a coffee place is not nearly as much fun as hangin' out in a bar.

Another highly popular parodic reference was made to Aleksey Vayner's video resume "Impossible is nothing" (http://www.focus.de/finanzen/karriere/bewerbung/bewerbung-impossible-is-nothing_vid_971.html). "The clip, staged to look like a job interview [...], flooded e-mail inboxes across Wall Street and eventually appeared on the video-sharing site **YouTube**. And the overwhelming reaction was mocking laughter." (de la Merced, <http://dealbook.nytimes.com/2006/10/19/the-resume-mocked-round-the-world-vayner-speaks/>) In *How I Met Your Mother* Barney creates a similar video resume about himself and later about Robin in "The Possimpible" (season 4, episode 14), when she desperately tries to find a job in order not to get deported. The absurd part about it is that in the series it serves its purpose exceptionally well and is not rejected in any kind for its ridiculousness. Barney even succeeds in finding a job for Robin at a news channel, which prevents her from having to leave the country.

A third example for parody can be found in "False, Positive" (season 6, episode 12). Marshall and Lily falsely believe that they will be having a child, which causes a feeling of wasting precious time and energy on unimportant matters among the others. Robin therefore applies for her dream job and Barney decides to give "Barney's favorite things" as presents for other guests at McLaren's (see Fig. 11). The scene clearly refers to the talk show "The Oprah Winfrey Show", which had a holiday special every year named "Oprah's favorite things" in which the talk show

host gave presents (a list of her favorite things) from sponsors to her studio audience (Fig. 12). The gifts apparently were chosen by herself and her team and represented more or less Winfrey's own Christmas wish-list (Dawn).

Barney expects a similar reaction of unrestrained enthusiasm and joyful screaming just as the audience on "The Oprah Winfrey Show". However he has to explain himself first, which is obviously to make sure the television audience understands the reference.

BARNEY. Barney's favorite things! I'm gonna give you all a bunch of free stuff; like Oprah. Just get excited, okay! (season 6, episode 12)



Fig. 11: Barney's favorite things
(season 6, episode 12, 10')



Fig. 12: Oprah's favorite things 2005
(http://static.oprah.com/images/tows/200511/20051121/20051121_2_300x205.jpg)

Also with this feature several more examples could be named, however to illustrate the appearance of intertextual references in the show, the given ones should be sufficient. It can be concluded that all three designated forms of intertextuality abound, which confirms the occurrence of the fourth postmodern feature.

4.2.5 Self-referentiality

As explained in 3.3 "Postmodernism as Style" self-referentiality means that a television program acknowledges that what is presented on screen is not a different reality, but in fact an artificial product. This feature has been used rather rarely in



Fig. 13: Band (season 6, episode 21, 5')

traditional situation comedy; however its occurrence has increased recently. Very popular have become outtakes of scenes after the episode (e.g. *My wife and kids*) or making-ofs (e.g. *Home Improvement* – final

episode).

One example of *How I Met Your Mother* occurs in “Hopeless” (season 6, episode 21), when Barney tells his father among other things that the members of the group form a band. The following scene shows them on stage in Ted’s apartment performing the theme song of the series (“Hey beautiful” by The Solids, see Fig. 13: Band (season 6, episode 21, 5')).

According to Nöth there must be differentiated between several levels of self-reference in the media whereby (intra) textual self-reference, enunciative self-reference and iconic self-reference apply in *How I Met Your Mother*.

The intratextual level includes “comments on the text, its narrative form, its content and its structure, its plot [...] its beginnings and its end” (Nöth 18). *How I Met Your Mother* contains several of those of those features from their early beginnings onwards, starting with the very first episode. In the first dialogue between future Ted and his children he uses the exact title of the series and indicated the long duration of the narrative:

TED. I’m gonna tell you [...] the story of how I met your mother.
 DAUGHTER. Is this gonna take a while?
 TED. Yes.
 (season 1, episode 1)

Another example for this level are Ted's repeated weigh-ins on the situations which was already discussed in 4.2.1 "Fragmentation". To give one more concrete example from "Definitiona" (season 5, episode 1): when Barney and Robin are forced to talk about their relationship whereby future Ted tells his own version of the conversation to his children:

ROBIN. I suck at relationships! Except with Ted; man, he really got it right, I know it's a cliché, but he really ruined me for other men.
VOICE-OVER TED. Of course I wasn't in the room for this conversation, but I have to imagine, Robin said something like that.

This example shows that there is a story told from a certain point of view, which is repeatedly stressed by the voice-over narrator.

Enunciative self-reference occurs when the author, the narrator, the actor, the reader, or the spectator become the topic of the message. Instead of presenting or representing ideas or events in the world from elsewhere, the text [...] has thus its own communicative situation as its topic. (Nöth: 20)

It should be obvious why this applies in *How I Met Your Mother*, since the whole story centers around Ted's search for "The One", the woman he is going to have children with, and the obstacles he has to overcome together with his friends. This is even stated in the first episode by the sentence:

VOICE-OVER TED. 25 years ago, before I was dad, I had this whole other life.

Moreover the communicative situation which is established by positioning Ted and his children opposite from each other is clearly a narrative situation. This is quite unique compared to other sitcoms using voice-over narration (e.g. *My Name is Earl* or *Scrubs*) where such a situation is not established and the narrator appears omniscient.

Iconic self-reference includes the two main concepts of recursion and recurrence. "Recursion [on the one hand means] the circular or loop-like return to an

earlier point in the [...] text, [...] recurrence, [on the other hand follows] the principle of repetition” (Nöth: 21). The first concept, recursion, is realized in *How I Met Your Mother* in the various flashbacks the show provides, either to much earlier points of the characters’ lives such as childhood or college years or to scenes which were actually shown in earlier episodes. The latter might be assigned a more self-referential status since it literally refers to the presented, just as a written text could refer to an earlier chapter.

The second concept, recursion, would include running gags (e.g. eating a sandwich = smoking dope) or pun lines (e.g. Suit up!). The argument that those are self-referential features is not being supported here, because they usually do not arise out of a scene presented on the show, but are mostly given without a special reason.

There is a special case of self-referentiality incorporated in *How I Met Your Mother* which was already announced in chapter 3.3 “Postmodernism as Style”, namely “breaking the fourth wall”. This concept goes back to theatre and the proscenium arch stage which is framed by three literal walls and the fourth, imaginary wall through which the audience observes the action on stage. (Bell 37) If



Fig. 14: Breaking the fourth wall (season 1, episode 1, 1')

the actors do not longer accept the imaginary fourth wall, but show their awareness of the audience’s presence by addressing it directly for instance, they are “breaking the fourth wall”. (Bell 203) In *How I Met Your Mother* the viewers

con experience this technique already in the frame for the plot line. The children sit inside the proscenium arch looking at Ted who is sitting outside of it, so behind the fourth wall, where the audience usually would sit. That way the fourth wall is not existent at all since the viewers are torn into the scene by sharing the narrator's viewpoint.

There are several episodes which include shorter scenes when the fourth wall is broken or which include it as an additional feature. One example of which would be "The Playbook" (season 5, episode 8) in which Barney winks directly at the camera and therefore at the audience whenever he has successfully completed



Fig. 15: Winking at the audience
(season 5, episode 8, 8')

one of his plays (see Fig. 15). The winking is always supported by a short jingling. (The "Playbook" will be treated in the next subchapter.)

Another break of the fourth wall is provided in "The Mermaid Theory" (season 6, episode 11) in which voice-over Ted attempts to tell a story, however cannot



Fig. 16: Waiting for next action (season 6, episode 11, 3')

remember the progress of events correctly. Especially Barney's and Lily's story is getting repeatedly confused leading to a moment when he does not know how to continue. While he is trying to find his

words Lily and Barney, in the scene, are waiting impatiently for their next action. They dart tense and embarrassed glances at the camera – so, the audience – and Barney even consults his watch. (see Fig. 16)

The given examples should be evidence enough to support the conclusion that also self-referentiality as a postmodern feature of television applies in *How I Met Your Mother*.

4.2.6 Hyperreality

In chapter 3.3 “Postmodernism as Style” it was explained how the situation comedy was used as a means to reestablish prewar values by showing functioning, suburban, nuclear families. Compared to those traditional situation comedies, the postmodern sitcom (from around 1990 onwards) offers a different perception of city life, which “mirrored changes in the real world and, perhaps, shaped some of those changes as well” (Tueth 188). These changes refer on the one hand to the urbanization of suburbs marked by an increase in business offices, shopping centers, and ethnic diversity. On the other hand the cities changed due to a decline in crime rates, renovations of downtown areas, and the return of many baby-boomers. (Tueth 184)

Television very quickly reflected the changes in their programs, which directed the sitcom more and more towards the city setting. The rapid changes in New York City are even thematized in *How I Met Your Mother* in “The Best Burger in New York” (season 4, episode 2), whereby the apparent improvements are seen with a certain uneasiness.

VOICE-OVER TED. Kids, when I first moved to New York it was dingy, disgusting, dirty, ugly, flea ridden, stinky, and altogether terrifying. But then, sadly, the whole city started to go uphill. The streets got a little cleaner, the rents got a little higher, and one by one crappy old

places we loved began to disappear. The “Elbow-room”, an old punk-rock club, became a drug store. “Michale’s”, a working class watering hole, became a fast food place. And “Fez”, this awesome lounge in 85th and Broadway, became a bank.

What is achieved by pointing to those matters in the show is a blurring of the boundary between fiction and reality in order to make the audience believe that the characters in fact live and move in New York City instead of a film studio in Los Angeles. The inclusion of real world elements typical for New York helps to build up this atmosphere. Examples of which would be the yellow cabs, the house fronts with the fire escapes, the often shown New York underground, wide shots over the skyline and also McLaren’s bar, which represents McGee’s, the writers’ favorite bar in real Manhattan.

The picture conveyed is mostly positive; life in New York City is portrayed as exciting and fun, whereby the downsides (e.g. expensive life style, rundown boroughs, humid heat in summer, crime rate etc.) are completely left out. This is stressed numerous times throughout the series like in “The Single Stamina” (season 2, episode 10), when Barney’s brother James comes to visit:

JAMES. Guys, you are young attractive people here in the greatest city on earth! There are boys and girls in nobody-cares Wyoming wishing they could be here, but instead they are in someone’s basement drinking bad malt liquor debating whether or not they are gonna spend their Saturday night in the parking lot of the feed store or in some other dude’s basement. You owe it to them to rise up and shimmy your lazy ass into somethin’ hot and you go out there and you live their dream!

The audience is presented a hyper-real New York City, which is better than the real one showing clear parallels to the traditional sitcoms of the 1950s and -60s which meant to establish a similar idealized picture of the suburbs.

In the context of mixing fact and fiction we find another salient feature in *How I Met Your Mother* which supports the establishment of a sitcom hyperreality. What is

meant, is the appearance of guest stars as supporting characters, who in one way or the other reflect their previous roles. Examples of which would be April Bowlby who played Kandi in *Two and a Half Men*, a simple minded young woman, who at first is one of Charlie's affairs and later on becomes Allan's second wife. In *How I Met Your Mother* she mimes Meg, one of Barney's affairs who is equally stupid and gullible and therefore easily falls for his lies. The following quotes from the two series illustrate the outlined similarities:

ALLAN. Uh, well, Kandi, it's like this. Charlie's with another woman.

KANDI. Don't lie to me, Alan.

ALLAN. Okay, uh, he's in Africa working as a scrub nurse for Doctors without Borders.

KANDI. Story of my life!

ALLAN. That's the story of your life?

KANDI. It's not always a scrub nurse, but it's always Africa.

(*Two and a Half Men*, season 3, episode 14)

MEG. Yeah, I thought I was gonna get married to my last boyfriend, but boy, did that guy have commitment issues! That whole relationship, that's three weeks of my life I will never get back!

BARNEY. Oh, I love commitment! I wish I could marry commitment!

(*How I Met Your Mother*, season 3, episode 7)

Further there is a clear similarity between Elliot Reid (*Scrubs*) and Stella Zinman (*How I Met Your Mother*), both played by Sarah Chalke and both doctors. In terms of character traits however they do not resemble each other to a great extent.

As was shown, *How I Met Your Mother* on the one hand constructs a hyperreality of the city the characters live in conveying a positive and praising picture, which the audience who is not familiar with the real New York City has to accept as reality. On the other hand the series appeals to the preexisting sitcom knowledge by keeping up identities of characters known from other series, which builds up a certain sitcom reality in which characters can move between different series. Thus the feature of hyperreality clearly applies in *How I Met Your Mother* and supports its status as a postmodern sitcom.

4.2.7 Interactivity

Compared to other genres of (postmodern) television mentioned in chapter 3.3, “Postmodernism as Style”, the possibilities of interaction in situation comedy have been rather limited. The World Wide Web however provides various new options, being welcomed and made use of in *How I Met Your Mother* to a greater extent than in most other contemporary sitcoms.

First of all there are several homepages mentioned in the series which could then actually be found on the internet. Although there is no concrete interference of the audience possible, the sheer engagement in opening the webpage goes beyond merely watching the series towards interacting with it. Some of those webpages are kept rather simple such as “<http://mysteriousdrx.com/>”, introduced in “The Possimpible” (season 4, episode 14). The group talks about their resumes, whereby they come across Ted’s radio show he ran in college, “The Mysterious Dr. X”. The webpage created accordingly apparently included some of Ted’s alias Dr X’s commentaries on topics which moved him in his college years. Those however were removed after the episode’s airdate (Keller).

Others are designed rather elaborately and provide even more comic moments for viewers who are eager to engage themselves in the universe of *How I Met Your Mother*. In other words spin offs like the ones presented are created for especially devoted fans, which is very appealing if being part of this group. The prime example which needs to be mentioned here is “<http://www.canadiansexacts.org/>”. In “Old King Clancy” (season 4, episode 18), Robin tells the group that she once went home with a Canadian celebrity whereby he wanted to do a certain sexual act with her. At the attempt to guess the “who-and-what” of her story, Barney introduces the webpage.

LILY. I don't even know any Canadian sex acts!

BARNEY. Well, I got your "Sloppy Dog Sled", your "Alberta Fur Trapper", your "Full Mounty" -

LILY. How do you know all these?

BARNEY. "canadiansexacts.org" it's bookmarked on the top right.

When the viewer opens the webpage he or she will encounter first a warning of its sexual content and further a hyperlinked list of apparently sexual acts. However when following the links there is no description of the particular act, but a picture of the Canadian actor and show host Alan Thicke, who also appears in other episodes, with a caption explaining that the site has been shut down (see Fig. 17).



Fig. 17: Allan Thicke on canadiansexacts.org
http://www.canadiansexacts.org/1_old_king_clancy.htm,
http://www.canadiansexacts.org/7_squatting_eskimo.htm)

Secondly there was made a trailer as well as a marketing webpage for the movie "The Wedding Bride" (<http://www.weddingbridemovie.com/>), being treated in season 5, episode 23. In season 4 Ted was left at the altar by Stella for her ex-boyfriend Tony Grafanello, who later made a movie out of Ted's and Stella's love story perverting the truth. According to the series the movie received extremely good ratings and the whole group as well as Ted's date in the episode loved it (see Fig. 19) It might be the case that the writers meant to parody the hype about love movies with constantly recurring themes and predictable endings. An interesting intertextual feature to support this idea is that in the trailer of "The Wedding Bride", parts of the soundtrack of the British Christmas love movie *Love Actually* from 2003 were used.



Fig. 19: “The Wedding Bride” – movie poster (<http://www.beawesomeinstead.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/bride-poster-highrez-lo-thumb.jpg>)

Thirdly the series is strongly represented in social networks such as “facebook” and “twitter”, whereby on the former the characters are clearly marked as fictitious, whereas the latter tries to keep up the illusion of Barney really being the writer behind his twitter-messages (see Fig. 18.). The possibilities for actual audience interaction can here be applied to the fullest since every “tweet”, so every message Barney leaves on the page, can be commented by his followers. Although the other protagonists have accounts on twitter as well, Barney is with over 370 000 users by far

the one with the most followers. Additionally his page is updated more regularly and he posts considerably more tweets than all others.



Fig. 18: Barney’s Twitter Page (<http://twitter.com/#!/broslife>)

Fourthly there is another highly popular internet phenomenon which applies in *How I Met Your Mother*, namely “blogging”. A blog basically is a “web page to which its owner regularly adds new entries, or “posts”, which [...] often contain hyperlinks to other blogs or websites.” (“It’s the links, stupid.” *The Economist*) In other words it is more or less a personal journal, which is not kept secret or private.

The official CBS blog for *How I Met Your Mother* is practically a character blog, written by Matt Kuhn in the name of Barney Stinson in which he posts a comment for each episode. Barney repeatedly refers to his blog in the series and keeps trying to motivate his friends to read it. Statements like “This is totally going in

my blog!” (season 1, episode 1) or “You really never read my blog, do you?” (season 1, episode 5) are common throughout the show.

Since only blog entries from the current season are available on the webpage, a closer look is taken on the blog entry for the latest episode (11) of season 7 which aired in the German-speaking area on PRO 7 (“The Rebound Girl”). During a night of drinking, Ted and Barney decide to adopt a child together since for both there is no other prospect of raising a family at the moment. Barney is commenting on their idea in his blog as follows:

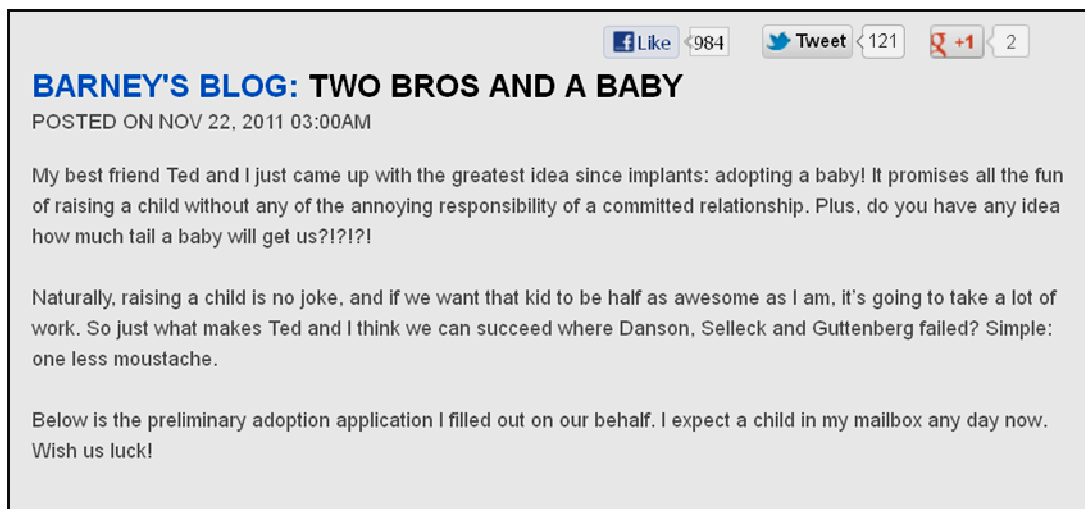


Fig. 20: Blog entry to “The Rebound Girl”
 (http://www.cbs.com/shows/how_i_met_your_mother/barneys_blog/77855/)

The announced adoption application includes personal data on him and Ted as well as some wishes of how the baby child is supposed to be like in the typical “Barney style” including elements like:

AGE OF THE CHILD YOU’RE INTERESTED IN ADOPTING: Old enough to not poop all over the place, but young enough that it doesn’t ask annoying questions all the time. (<http://www.barneystinsonblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/adoption.gif>)

The interactive feature about Barney’s blog is similar to the twitter accounts in that it provides a possibility for fans to comment on the entries via a “facebook social

plugin". The idea behind it is to link up the blog with "facebook" so that the fans can post their comments via their accounts as if commenting on another profile or a site. Still they have the possibility to refuse the publication on their wall and to keep it on the site of the blog entry.



Fig. 21: Comment on blog entry to "The Rebound Girl"
(http://www.cbs.com/shows/how_i_met_your_mother/barneys_blog/77855/)

So far the possible interaction with *How I Met Your Mother* presented, could only take place on a virtual level, however not in the reality away from the World Wide Web. Quite unique for this show however is that the writers even go a step further by publishing actual books apparently written by the fictitious person Barney Stinson. What is meant are the three tie-ins "The Bro Code", "Bro on the Go" and "The Playbook".

The first time the "The Bro Code" was announced was in season 3, episode 17, "The Goat". Barney has just told Marshall that he had slept with Robin and does now feel guilty about it:

BARNEY. We didn't break any state or federal laws, but I think I broke a much, much higher law; the Bro Code.

According to the published book, it was not originally written by Barney, but he only has "recorded the rules of social decorum that Bros have practiced since the dawn of man" ("The Bro Code" ix). In other words, it is a rule book that male friends (bros)

should follow in order to be able to maintain a good friendship. Some examples for these rules would be:

ARTICLE 47: A Bro never wears pink. Not even in Europe. (66)

ARTICLE 77: Bros don't cuddle. (101)

ARTICLE 118: When a Bro is with his Bros, he is not a vegetarian. (152)

The "Bro on the Go" follows a similar principle as "The Bro Code", but treats different topics. In it the reader can find rules on how to behave when being for instance on a date, at the mall or at the gym. One example of which would be:

Good word to say a lot on a first date? "Trustworthy".

Bad word to say a lot on a first date? "Mummy."

("Bro on the Go" 4)

There were not made any references to this book on the series, still it includes several "rules" Barney introduces throughout the series. Also this one was claimed to be written by Barney Stinson with Matt Kuhn as a co-author.

The third mentioned book "The Playbook" is a tie-in of one episode of the same title (season 5, episode 8). It contains Barney's various plays he acts out when trying to seduce women. The book is designed like a mixture of a manual and a research report of an empirical study stating for instance success rates, requirements, or preparation time. It is organized in different levels of difficulty of the

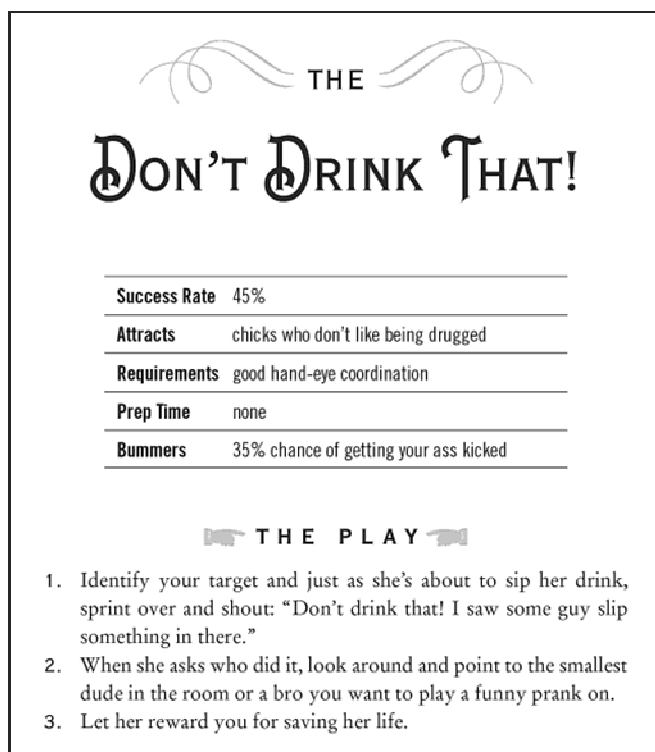


Fig. 22: "The Don't Drink That!" from The Playbook (7)

particular plays and includes a guide for how to use it as well as a historical outline of plays. Fig. 22 shows an example taken from the beginners section.

The question might arise in how far those three books or tie-ins in general could be considered examples for interactivity in television shows. As was explained earlier, the previous examples were limited to virtual realities in which the viewers could choose to act or not act by posting their comments or simply read blog posts for instance. With the books a new level of sensory experience is added, namely haptics. The reason why this is stressed here is that we find a paradox. Although the author of the respective books does not exist in flesh and blood, but only in a fictitious reality, there is a product which can actually be touched. This again blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality and causes the worlds of the character and the audience to overlap. In that sense, the viewer does not only interact with the sitcom, but also vice-versa, the character interacts with the world of the viewers.

Now that this seventh feature of postmodern television has been outlined in the context of the sitcom and more specifically of *How I Met Your Mother* it seems obvious that audience interaction plays an important part for the show.

4.3 *Postmodern Characters*

In order to be able to label sitcom characters postmodern, two prerequisites must be fulfilled. The first one concerns the character archetypes outlined in chapter 2.5 (e.g. “The Logical Smart One”, “The Loveable Loser”, etc.). Since also in the postmodern sitcom the traditional method of creating comedy through binary positions applies, the archetypes ensure that the characters are created distinct enough to follow that purpose. Still the paradigm of postmodernism rejects pigeonholing and welcomes dedifferentiation. For the creation of postmodern

characters this would mean that they cannot be easily categorized or designated one archetype, but that they combine several types and can move between them.

Secondly the postmodern sitcom is marked as different from the traditional sitcom by its inclusion of character development (see chapter 4.1 “The Postmodern Turn in the Genre Situation Comedy”). They are no longer trapped in their initial situation, but they can learn, win and lose character traits, and they can move forward to a next period of their life.

In the following the five protagonists of *How I Met Your Mother* will be examined for their status as postmodern characters by scrutinizing the upper two features for each of them. Additionally to that their personalities should be captured by answering two of the six key questions formulated by Wolff to “define the nature of sitcom characters” (10), namely “1. What does the character want out of life?” (14) and “4. What is the character’s background?” (14). The reason why these two were chosen is that they provide the best opportunities to relate their belonging to a certain archetype to. In other words where they come from and where they want to go are often definitive attributes of particular character archetypes.

4.3.1 Ted Mosby

Ted is the main character of the series; he is the voice-over narrator, who tells his own story to his future children. He originally grew up in Cleveland, Ohio with his parents and his sister. He came to New York for starting an architecture career after graduating at Wesleyan University, Connecticut, where he met Marshall and Lily. His relationship to his parents is not very easy since their educational approach seemed to be a rather escapist one. His mother constantly avoids talking about uncomfortable issues and his father does not seem to find another topic to talk to

him about than baseball. In “Brunch” (season 2 episode 3), Ted finds out that his parents got divorced some time ago, but did not want to burden him with the message. When he asks them how they met, his father only replies: “At a bar.”, which leads Ted to the decision: “When I have kids and I tell them how I met their mother, I’m gonna tell them everything, the whole damn story!”

Ted has two great goals in life. The first one is to marry and have children, whereby the actual search for the right woman begins with the very first episode of the show:

TED. Ever since college it’s been Marshall, Lily, and me. Now it’s gonna be Marshall and Lily, and me. [...] I guess it’s just that your best friend gets engaged, you start thinkin’ about that stuff.”

The second one concerns his career; he dreams of designing a building of the New York City skyline. Although these two objectives seem to be fixed parts of his personality, he shows some development and a clear learning effect in both. His preferred way of starting a family at first was to find the perfect woman to marry, then buy a house, and finally have children. In “Home Wreckers” (season 5, episode 20) he however seems to have had enough of the conservative way leading him to the decision to buy a house as a first step. Throughout the seasons he also starts to be more skeptical about the women he meets, whereas in the earlier seasons he has always been convinced that he might have found “The One” with every girl he was dating.

In terms of his career objective a similar effect can be observed. Although he has seen working as a corporate architect to be the way to achieve his dream in the beginning, he accepts a position as an architecture professor in “The Leap” and claims it to have been “The best job I ever had.” (season 4, episode 24).

To sum up, the character development Ted shows is his abandonment of his firm belief in having to go conservative ways in order to achieve his goals in life and more generally he gains in flexibility. As a next step it will be analyzed which character archetype(s) fit Ted the best.

The upper description of his personal objectives makes it clear that he is without doubt a “Loveable Loser” to a great part. He keeps trying so hard to get what he wants, however nothing ever really functions the way he imagines it. On the one hand his love life keeps disappointing him ruthlessly throughout the seasons. Victoria (season 1) leaves for a training course in Germany, Robin (season 2) has severe commitment issues and does not want to have children, Stella (seasons 3 and 4) is still in love with her ex-boyfriend and leaves him at the altar, and finally Zoey (season 6) interferes with his career and cannot support him in his lifelong dream.

On the other hand his career management is similarly failing. At first he worked in an architecture firm which despite his good ideas could not appreciate him. As a result he quit and decided to start his own business which did not go very well either. When he finally thinks he could fulfill his dream by designing the new GNB headquarter, the project gets cancelled. Nevertheless the audience knows that he will achieve all his goals, because he as future Ted, the voice-over narrator, reveals it in his story.

As a matter of fact Ted must also be a “Logical Smart One”, because he always knows more than the rest of the characters. However apart from that basic set-up he is also a very sensitive person who can interpret people’s feelings well and make reasonable decisions accordingly (e.g. season 4, episode 12; he ends his sexual relationship with Robin after finding out that Barney is secretly in love with her). Furthermore he can guide people’s ways if he has to by telling them

uncomfortable truths or by providing them with good advice or even strict instructions. For instance in “False Positive” (season 6, episode 12), all other four protagonists doubt their decisions to change their lives to do something meaningful whereby Ted leads them back on their paths:

TED to Marshall and Lily. Are you kidding me?! All you ever talk about is having kids, and now you have one little freakout, you want to get a dog instead? No, unacceptable! You’re gonna turn around, you’re gonna go home, get naked, lie together as man and wife until Lily is great with child! Right now! I’m serious, go, go, go!

[...]

to Barney And you! Barney, you look real stupid in that suit. You’re gonna go get your money back and give it to charity!

[...]

to Robin. And you, you did not move to the greatest city on earth to become a coin-flipping bimbo. So, here’s how it’s gonna work: heads, you take the job at Worldwide News, tails, you take the job at Worldwide News. Hey, looks like somebody got a new gig!

Moreover he can take on the father figure if necessary and care about people such as during Marshall’s breakdown after Lily had left him in season 2 or when Robin starts her job at Worldwide News and is harassed by Sandy Rivers in “Bad News” (season 6, episode 13).

Although “The Loveable Loser” and “The Logical Smart One” make up the major parts of Ted’s personalities, he incorporates characteristics from several other archetypes as well. He is neurotic in that he strongly prefers regularity over spontaneity as well as for his know-it-all manner. He can be a womanizer when being with Barney like when they are arguing about who could rather seduce a woman (season 3, episode 4) or in their competition about “the belt”, which concerns their tries for having a threesome (season 3, episode 3). Finally he is materialistic in his obsession with his hair, which always has to be perfect as well as in being exceptionally proud of some of his pieces of clothing such as his red cowboy boots (season 3, episode 19) and his favorite blazer (season 5, episode 15).

As was shown Ted clearly fulfils the two prerequisites defined for a postmodern character and can therefore be labeled one. It needs to be added that Ted seems to be the most realistic one of all protagonists since he does not show a lot of exaggerated behavior and is presented highly three-dimensional in that the audience receives large amounts of information about his family background.

4.3.2 Robin Scherbatsky

Robin joined the group the latest as a love interest of Ted however remained in the group as an independent member. Before she came to New York for becoming a journalist at Metro News 1, she lived in Vancouver, Canada, where she grew up with her father until she was 14 years old. He raised her as a boy due to his disappointment over having a daughter marking her with a deep wish for her father's approval, which she apparently will never receive. After falling in love with one of her teammates of the boys' hockey team she had to play in, she was sent to live with her mother and her younger sister. There she was allowed to develop female attributes (e.g. long hair, girls' clothes etc.) and became a teenage one-hit wonder with her song "Let's Go to the Mall" (season 2, episode 9; see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFAT8_5hPWA). Although she gained in femininity, she shows some behavioral features more related with men like drinking scotch, smoking cigars, being a gun enthusiast, or a lack in being romantically minded. Her Canadian origins contribute an important part to her personality which is why she decides not to give up her Canadian citizenship in "Dual Citizenship" (season 5, episode 5).

Her primary goal in life is to become a successful journalist, which was the leading motive for moving to New York. Starting a family however is not part of her

life planning which is why her relationship with Ted comes to an end. Whereas her career goals remain strong and stable throughout the seasons, she starts having doubts about her attitude towards family life. In “Not-a-Father’s-Day” (season 4, episode 7), when Marshall and Lily consider having a baby for the first time due to their neighbors’ baby Jeremy, Robin shows affinity to a baby sock she has found. When Ted asks her whether she might have changed her mind she answers:

ROBIN. No, I don’t know, maybe, some day, when I’m like 70, science will catch up!

Further she develops in that context in that she puts her relationship to Don over a great career chance in “Doppelgangers” (season 5, episode 24). She however gets disappointed by Don who accepts the job offer she rejected, which ends their relationship.

Already from her background as Canadian on the one hand and her disturbed relationship to her father on the other, two character archetypes can be inferred, namely “The Bitch” and “In Her Own Universe”. Robin perfectly combines several features of both and similar to Ted borrows characteristics from other archetypes.

Her “bitchy” side surfaces in sarcasm, insensitivity, and unsentimentality which makes her never miss a possibility for a sidekick even if it might be hurtful for the target of her attack. One example of which would be the following:

ROBIN. You know, I’ve been thinkin’ about this. I think I wanna have zero kids.

TED. Really? You don’t want kids?

ROBIN. You know Ted, not everyone is as much of a woman as you.
(season 1, episode 21)

Numerous examples like this one make her appear rather selfish from time to time even when the group is dealing with serious matters. In “Intervention” (season 4, episode 4) Ted finds out that his friends wanted to have an intervention for him

because of his marriage with Stella. When it is Robin's turn to present her letter she says: "I didn't write one. I'm your ex-girlfriend, I figured anything I would say on the subject would sound catty. Plus, I'm hotter than her, so, who cares?!"

Still, her innate honesty, although it might be brutal, makes her a good friend others could rely on and consult for advice. Further she very well knows about her own flaws and tries to overcome them. In season 2 she tells Ted that she loves him, a step she has never dared to take with any other man before. In that sense there can be traced some characteristics of the "Logical Smart One", since she takes the right decisions for the major part and can help others with theirs.

Furthermore she also has weak and sweet moments making her a loveable character the audience wants to feel with. This especially applies when she steps into "her own universe" and shows her Canadian roots. She often does not understand certain issues being logical to the others and vice versa including weather, language, and national holidays. An example of which occurs in "Old King Clancy" (season 4, episode 18) when she lets the group guess about her experience with a Canadian celebrity. She challenges them to find out who it was, what he collected, and which sex act he wanted to do with her. When she finally reveals the three elements to be The Frosty Snow Shoe, Harvey's Trays, and the Old King Clancy she is disappointed that they do not know any of those.

Although she is often ridiculed for her Canadian origins in moments as the one described, she is proud of them and willing to defend her country if necessary. In "Little Minnesota" (season 4, episode 11) Marshall takes her to his favorite Minnesota themed sports bar, the "Walleye Saloon" to distract her from her homesickness. There she is not allowed to tell any other guest that she is Canadian,

because they do not like them. When they finally find out about her secret, she is asked to leave the bar leading her to give a short spontaneous speech:

ROBIN. I'm proud to be Canadian. We may not have a fancy NFL team, or Prince, but we invented Trivial Pursuit—you're welcome, Earth. [...] In Canada, people don't care where you are from as long as you are friendly and maybe loan them a smoke or hand over a doughnut. I'm proud to be from the Great White North and I wish I was there right now!
(season 4, episode 11)

One more archetype she occasionally slips into is the “Manizer”. She enjoys meeting men, being ensnared, and cannot handle rejection very well. She does not necessarily bring serious feelings to her dating partners even if they have already been intimate. She often simply enjoys the attention she receives as well as the mutual attraction.

All matters considered there is also an obvious character development recognizable with Robin, although it is not as strong as with Ted. Further she also incorporates several character archetypes however it is more fluent than with him. In other words Robin combines attributes from the types rather than erratically moving between them. In terms of three-dimensionality she is lacking behind Ted a well, especially because the audience is given less information about the rest of her family (mother, grand parents etc.). Still she can be, without doubt, be labeled a postmodern character since both designated prerequisites are fulfilled.

4.3.3 Lily Aldrin

Lily was born and raised in New York and considers the city to be a part of her, since also her parents, grandparents, and other relatives live in the Greater New York City area. Thus she does not plan to leave the city not even when having children. In her own childhood she was confronted with serious problems caused by her father who

invested his entire energy and money in developing board games which have never been successful. Her mother therefore had to provide for the family by working in two jobs leaving not much time for Lily, who had to learn very early to care for herself and to handle disappointment.

Lily's lifelong dream has been to become a world class painter, however due to a lack of talent has not been able to achieve this goal. In "Everything Must Go" (season 3, episode 19) she gets closer to it when she finds her niche as a painter for veterinarians due to the fact that her paintings apparently have a relaxing effect on dogs. For her private life she wants to start a family with Marshall with whom she has been in a relationship since their first year in college. Moreover she wants Ted and his future wife to live close to them so that they could all sit together on a porch every day when being retired.

As an obvious conclusion from the characterization above Lily incorporates the archetype of the "Logical Smart One". Being used to taking care of herself she can take care of others accordingly, also rooting from her profession as a kindergarten teacher. Hence, she can be compared with the typical wife and mother in a traditional family sitcom. She makes pancakes on Sundays, bakes cookies and decorates the apartment on Christmas (season 2, episode 11), and prepares Thanksgiving dinners for the group (season 3, episode 9; season 5, episode 9). Furthermore she is a highly sensitive and empathic person interpreting people's feelings accurately and supporting them when they need help. She always seems to know the right decision in a particular situation and is not sparing with advice, which she as well as the audience knows to be the proper one. In "Benefits" (season 4, episode 12) she even makes a self-reflexive commentary on her status as the

“Logical Smart One”: “I tried to warn you [...] but no one listened. Story of my life, my cuteness interferes with people hearing my message!”

Towards the end of season 1 she shows some development away from the reasonable character she has been when she starts having doubts about being ready for marriage. When she realizes that she has not fulfilled any of her career goals as a painter she decides to leave Marshall for an art fellowship in San Francisco for several months. When she returns she would like to get back together with Marshall who initially however rejects her. Apart from that she does not show similar behavior which results in her going the usual and expected way in life (marriage, move in an own apartment with Marshall, get pregnant). Although she sporadically shows unreasonable behavior when being upset or disappointed, she generally does not leave her role as the “Logical Smart One”.

However, no matter how certainly she fits that archetype, she clearly combines it with being a “Materialistic One” as revealed in “Dowisetripla” (season 3, episode 7):

LILY. Hi, my name is Lily and I’m a shopaholic. [...] I buy designer clothes and accessories that I can’t afford. I have 15 credit cards and they are all maxed out and no one outside of this room, not even my husband knows.

This behavior might result from her childhood as well, because she was never able to waste any money on goods she liked. She probably tries to compensate as an adult what she was missing when she was younger. The joining of these two archetypes is a very interesting and rare one, since a perfectly reasonable character meets a profoundly unreasonable behavior. Moreover she does not seem to be able to shed or critically reflect her shopaholism as shown in “Everything must go” (season 3, episode 19). She gets highly upset when Marshall suggests her to sell her designer goods in order to be able to pay for the repair works in their apartment,

which again does not correspond to logical and smart behavior. After those episodes however Lily's status as "Materialistic One" is not thematized anymore which leaves her simply with the former archetype.

Compared to Ted and Robin, Lily clearly is the least postmodern character if she could even be labeled one at all. Her role as "wife and mother" of the group as well as her lack in personal development resembles traditional sitcom characters. Further does her sweetness and undeniable lovability contribute to her lack in three-dimensionality.

4.3.4 Marshall Eriksen

Marshall was born and raised in St. Cloud, Minnesota where he lived with his parents and his two older brothers whereby the gender roles were kept rather traditional. The family has always been very close which is why they try to retain traditions such as the "Sunday Eriksen dinner" (season 5, episode 8). The long distance is thereby overcome by a webcam uniting Marshall with the rest of his family on the dinner table. The other protagonists mostly do not understand and in some cases do not accept this closeness; especially for Lily it is difficult to process leading to statements such as "You come from the most ridiculously close family in the world!" (season 5, episode 9) or about Marshall's father "The man is too involved in our lives!" (season 6, episode 1).

Marshall grew up to become a prime example of the "Loveable Loser" who never seems to be able to achieve his goals in life. On the one hand there are his career plans not coming to fulfillment. He dreams of being an environmental lawyer in order to save the planet from its destruction by mankind. Unfortunately he is not able to find a paid position in an environmental organization forcing him to accept a

job as a corporate lawyer, the exact opposite of what he wanted to be. On the other hand he wants to marry Lily, start a family, and grow old with her. Also in this part of his life he has to face several setbacks such as Lily leaving him in the last episode of season 1 and their unsuccessful attempts to have a baby (see season 6). Moreover his failures are not limited to his great goals in life but affect short-time projects as well. One example of which would be his decision to run the New York City marathon (season 2, episode 15) for which he engages in intensive work out just to break his leg shortly before the event making his entire hard work redundant. Another example occurs in the first episodes of season 2, when he tries to overcome the breakup with Lily by starting to lead a single life attempting to find a new girl friend, which again fails.

The second archetype incorporated by Marshall is “The Dumb One”. Although he is an extraordinarily intelligent person he is gullible and naïve which probably roots from his protected childhood. Lily illustrates this by telling Robin about a recent happening:

LILY. Marshall wanted to stop and help some guys load their moving van [...] and when the moving van drove away, who should show up but the owner of the apartment we had just helped some guys rob. [...] He actually lent the burglars gas money [...] They said that they would send us a check so Marshall gave them our address.

Additionally he is good-hearted and well-meaning expecting the same behavior from others. Consequently he often does not understand sarcastic comments, but takes them literally such as in “Pilot” (season 1, episode 1) when the group talks about whether there was a signal one partner would give the other if they wanted to be kissed. Barney means to demonstrate in a funny way that there is no signal by unexpectedly kissing Marshall.

BARNEY. Did Marshall give me the signal?

MARSHALL *to Lily*. No, I didn't, I swear!

One further “dumb” characteristic about him is his superstitiousness and his belief in ghosts, monsters, and other supernatural phenomena. Thus his favorite animal is Nessy, the Loch Ness Monster, which is why he and Lily decide to go to Scotland for their honey moon.

The hybrid of the “Logical Smart One” and the “Dumb One” presents Marshall as an absolutely nice and unselfish character removing every unpleasant trait from his personality. Even in “Spoiler Alert” (season 3, episode 8) when the group reveals their bad habits to each other, the worst they could find for Marshall was that he was singing about everything he does. Although this makes him the most lovable of all protagonists it also turns him into the least three-dimensional one, since a real person without negative character traits does not exist.

The question whether Marshall could be called a postmodern character must receive a negative answer. First of all he does not show any profound developments in the course of the series long story arc and he does not gain or lose essential character traits. Secondly his personality is more or less limited to the two described archetypes, except that he sporadically borrows characteristics from the “Logical Smart One” in that he holds a realistic attitude towards financial questions.

4.3.5 Barney Stinson

Although Barney is not the main character of the series he can be seen as its flagship due to the fact that he delivers the major part of the show's comic moments. He appears to be shallow and superficial in the beginning, however reveals more and more sides of him the further the series progresses turning him into the most complex of all protagonists.

Barney grew up in Staten Island with his mother and his older brother James. His mother kept telling him stories about his father whom he does not know or meet until season 6, when they start trying to establish a relationship to each other. The brothers had, despite not knowing their fathers, a happy childhood.

Barney's goals in life are limited to his private life since he apparently has achieved his professional objectives already with a high paid position at GNB, whereby noone seems to know what he does. His lifelong dream is to have sex with at least one woman from every country in the world (see season 5, episode 24). Marriage and having children is not part of his life plan, he even claims it to be the worst that could happen to any man in the world. Unconsciously however he is not averse to it, but simply is too afraid to admit it to himself. The first evidence for it is delivered in season 2, when he flies to San Francisco to convince Lily to return to New York and reunite with Marshall.

BARNEY *talking to Lily in San Francisco*. Lily, you have to come home. You and Marshall belong together. [...] I bought you a ticket home. Marshall is one of the best people I know and it won't be long until someone else realizes that and you will lose him forever. I can't stand the thought of that happening and I cannot keep stealing chicks from him forever. (season 2, episode 19)

Still, Barney is without doubt a prime example for a "Womanizer". He invests most of his time and energy in finding potential sex-partners (see "The Playbook"). He sees seducing women as a game and a challenge for himself being extremely particular and approaching the task absolutely ruthlessly (lying, deception etc.). He gains his entire self-esteem out of this hunt for women and the success in it and uses it to overcome problems as seen in "The perfect week" (season 5, episode 14). This behavior roots from a deep disappointment caused by his first girlfriend Sharon. The two wanted to get married and join the piece choir after college. She however cheated on him with a man who resembled future Barney leaving him with a broken

heart. Since then his trust in and respect for women has been extremely low. Moreover he even reduces relationships to other people to the sexual level like seeing Ted as his wing man before seeing him as a friend.

Additionally to his role as the “Womanizer” there are several characteristics from other archetypes very prominent in Barney. He is being a classic “Neurotic One” in that he acts extremely abnormal in certain situations and shows a large amount of slapstick humor in his behavior. One example of which would be his reaction to Lily’s announcement in “False Positive” (season 6, episode 12):

LILY. I’m pregnant.

BARNEY. I have never seen that woman before in my life! Sorry, force of habit. Congratulations!

Further he has his own set of rules to live after. On the one hand this is the Brocode whose rules he respects as others respect the Holy Bible. On the other hand he states numerous other rules he invented himself always introducing them with the words “I only have one rule...”. A collection of all these rules is presented in his blog entry of February 28th 2011 where he claims those rules to be essential for his decision making process. Some examples for his rules would be “Never date a girl with a hook for a hand.” or “Never pet a chicken.” (http://www.cbs.com/primetime/how_i_met_your_mother/community/barney_blog/index.php).

As typical for neurotic characters he feels safe following his rules and planning situations in advance. Consequently it is difficult for him to handle a situation he has not planned, especially when they involve feelings he cannot control such as falling in love with Robin and also Nora.

A third archetype coming to play a part with Barney is the “Bastard”. He is a manipulative, self-centered person who always puts his own interests above those of

others. Moreover he is extremely intolerant especially with women's outward appearances (e.g. rejection of over-weight, women over 30 etc.). According to this attitude he does not show any respect to the women he sleeps with and never apologizes for the bad things he does to them.

Finally Barney is very materialistic in that he always wears expensive clothes and shoes (especially suits) and that he does not make a secret about the fact that he earns more money than all others. This is illustrated by comments like "Ted, I'll pay you double for your finest suit, here's thirty bucks" (season 4, episode 19) or "Robin, I will pay you to be The Blitz! 100 dollars, no, 10,000 dollars, no, 60 bucks. What's a lot of money for someone like you?" (season 6, episode 10).

The question might now arise whether it is in any ways possible to find loveable character traits in a materialistic, neurotic, womanizing bastard as Barney has been defined. The answer must be a clear "Yes", because despite his negative sides, the audience can recognize his insecurity to show his true feelings and the resulting try to protect himself with this behavior. Further he has very weak moments especially when romantic feelings are involved or when meeting his father in season 6 which truly hurt him: "If you were going to be some lame, suburban dad, why couldn't you have been that for me?!" (season 6, episode 19). Presenting all these sides of him turns him into a highly three-dimensional character, who is further extremely funny and a cult figure in the series' fan community.

In terms of character development his greatest achievement might have been his relationship with Robin. It made him abandon his status as womanizer in several ways including respectful behavior towards women. Even after their break up his feelings for her remained strong leading him to give up on a sure sexual experience

with a woman in order not to hurt Robin. Later in the series he falls in love with Nora for whom he is willing to fight after rejecting her due to his deep insecurity.

All facts considered Barney can be without doubt identified as a postmodern character because he shows clear character development, combines several archetypes and is presented highly three-dimensional.

5 Conclusion

The present paper analyzed in how far a turn towards postmodernism in television as an artistic medium could be felt focusing further on the according movement in the genre situation comedy. In this context several features have been identified as signifiers for the changes accompanying the paradigm shift whose occurrence in the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* constitutes the major part of the analysis. In the following the conclusions drawn out of the study will be presented.

As generally accepted, a postmodern turn in the arts as well as in society has been recognized in the last decades resulting in television as a popular, artistic medium to reflect these changes. Still, the postmodern turn in television differs in that it transpired over a shorter period of time compared to other forms of art since it was established at a time when those had already initiated their turn. Nevertheless television programs have not been originally postmodern, but gained in postmodern features in the course of time.

A similar development can be recognized in the genre situation comedy which accompanied the television medium from its early days until today. Since it has been considered a realist genre portraying the life in particular contemporary societies the genre has always reacted to transformations in the same, like political changes, economic progress, or artistic movements such as the most recent development, the postmodern turn. The consequence for the sitcom genre today is that it has lost its

straight forwardness caused by the corset of conventions having been expected to be fulfilled. Today essential characteristics (e.g. laugh track, multi-camera shooting etc.) can be abandoned without losing the status as legitimate situation comedy leading to more variation within the genre on a structural level. On the content level a general development away from the inherent didactic allegory towards mere entertainment as a purpose is identifiable.

Finally there can be noticed a postmodern turn in individual programs, whereby the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* was chosen for this analysis. Generally speaking the series preserves several characteristics from traditional sitcoms such as the laugh track, the episodic structure, or the applied slapstick humor. On the other hand various postmodern characteristics such as the importance of the long story arc for the story of single episodes, the occurrence of all designated postmodern features (see 3.3 “Postmodernism as Style” and 4.2 “Mirroring Postmodern Features”) as well as tragic turns in the plot can be identified. As for the postmodern turn in the course of the seasons, the series shows a higher frequency of postmodern features in the later seasons than in the earlier ones, the storyline becomes more dramatic, and the character development more immanent. Therefore the initial research question whether *How I Met Your Mother* could be labeled a postmodern sitcom receives positive and negative response at equal parts.

It might seem disappointing that despite detailed analysis no clear answer to this apparently simple question could be found. However, it must not be forgotten that when engaging in work with the concept of postmodernism straight-forwardness and certainty cannot be expected since the paradigm shift has not been completed yet. This insight represents the final and perhaps most vital conclusion of this analysis.

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7 Appendix

7.1 German Abstract

Die vorliegende Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit dem Einzug der künstlerischen Strömung "Postmodernismus" in das Medium Fernsehen. Es wurde hermeneutisch untersucht welche Veränderungen sich durch die Hinwendung zum Postmodernismus in der Fernsehlandschaft sowie ihren Programminhalten bemerkbar machen. Diese erste Untersuchung ergab, dass die postmoderne Wende, welche sich in anderen Kunstformen wie Malerei oder Literatur, längst etabliert hat, sich in den letzten Jahrzehnten auch verstärkt im Fernsehen verankert, wobei ähnliche Charakteristika erkannt werden können.

Aus den gewonnenen Erkenntnissen ließen sich sieben charakteristische Merkmale für postmodernes Fernsehen ausweisen, welche in weiterer Folge als Analysegrundlage für das Fernsehgenre „Situationskomödie“ dienten. Die Serie *How I Met Your Mother* wurde dabei als Beispiel heran gezogen. Die Fragestellung lautete inwiefern sich eine ähnliche postmoderne Wende in diesem speziellen Genre erkennen ließe und eine postmoderne Situationskomödie beschrieben werden könnte.

Obwohl die Analyse ergab, dass entsprechende Veränderungen im Genre passieren, kann die Annahme, dass *How I Met Your Mother* in die Kategorie postmoderne Situationskomödie passen könnte, nur zum Teil bestätigt werden. Einerseits finden alle sieben ausgewiesenen Charakteristika Anwendung in der Serie und es erweisen sich einige Protagonisten als postmoderne Charaktere. Andererseits zeigen sich noch sehr typische Merkmale der traditionellen Situationskomödie und es kommen auch einige stereotype Charaktere vor.

7.2 Curriculum Vitae

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Juli-September 2008:	Gasthof zur Post, St. Peter in der Au, Service
Juli-August 2006:	HS Wolfsbach, Mithilfe bei der jährlichen Generalreinigung
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