The Aesthetics of Post-Broadcast Comedy Television

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Declaration

This thesis contains all my own work. It has not been submitted for a degree at any other university. None of the work within this thesis has been published. Chapter Two contains some reworked materials from my Master’s degree dissertation, ‘The Style and Form of Improvisation in the Films of Judd Apatow’.
Abstract

This study explores issues surrounding authorship, temporality, and style in relation to post-broadcast comedy television, asking whether streaming services like Netflix have achieved what could be recognised as a ‘house style’ in their original comedies or whether there is a persistence of recognisable broadcast comedy forms. Chapter One focuses on instances of revived programming using Netflix’s fourth season of Arrested Development. By comparing this to the broadcast original, one can see the ways in which Netflix adapted the show to better suit a streaming viewing experience. This is evident in terms of its visual, narrative, and comedic style. Chapter Two examines authorship using Netflix’s Love and Prime Video’s One Mississippi. By situating Love against the rest of Judd Apatow’s career in film and television, one can better understand the aesthetic relationship between the auteur’s brand image and that of a company like Netflix. This is then compared to One Mississippi before reflecting on the implications of both shows’ respective cancellations. Chapter Three explores the popular adult animation sub-genre on Netflix, framing BoJack Horseman’s episode, ‘That’s Too Much, Man!’ within a wider discussion regarding the anti-hero figure in ‘quality’ television. Both BoJack Horseman and this chapter’s other case study, F is For Family return to established threads from previous chapters, such as the role of the auteur. Chapter Four focuses on the ways in which Netflix comedy specials play with established tropes of the stand-up sub-genre. This chapter features critical engagement with the content and style of comedy being delivered through an exploration of Hannah Gadsby and Dave Chappelle’s stand-up work. The results of my study demonstrate recurring tropes such as hyper-reflexivity or unconventional narrative structures which are recognisable as features of post-broadcast comedy television. However, the broadcast antecedents of these streamed programmes are not shunned but instead acknowledged and built upon.
Introduction

In March of 2018, the streaming service Netflix released a six-minute comedy video titled ‘Netflix Acquires Seth Rogen’ followed by a tongue-in-cheek press release the following month on April Fools’ Day.\(^1\) In keeping with the comedic and irreverent tone of the short video, the press release introduces Rogen as a ‘World-renowned Canadian person, prolific marijuana-doer, and winner of the 2015 MTV Movie Award for “Best Kiss”’\(^2\) as well as the writer/actor of Sausage Party – ‘one of the first films ever to anthropomorphize various kinds of processed meat products.’\(^3\) The purpose of this media stunt was to promote Rogen’s upcoming comedy special, Seth Rogen’s Hilarity For Charity (Netflix, 2018), designed to raise awareness of the comedian’s charity fundraisers for Alzheimer’s research. The short video also encapsulates a collection of characteristics which this thesis identifies as representative of the original comedy television created by streaming services over the past decade. The video begins with Rogen entering a Netflix corporate office building which features large posters for their successful original television shows such as Dark (Netflix, 2017 – 2020) and Stranger Things (Netflix, 2016 – ) adorning the walls of the foyer and corridors. After being directed to a drab conference room, the comedian is seated opposite a retro computer named Algorithm (‘but you can call me Algo’) who expresses the company’s excitement in starting a new business venture with Rogen. Rogen acts incredulous at the prospect of negotiating a deal with a computer but signs a sizable contract, acknowledging ‘If it worked for Adam Sandler it’ll work for me, I guess’, referring to Sandler’s lucrative and highly-publicised deals with the streaming giant for exclusive films and stand-up specials.\(^4\) Rogen is then subjected to a series of tests to see whether Netflix can coax any

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\(^1\) The video is only available in an edited form on the company’s comedy-specific YouTube channel, ‘Netflix is a Joke’. The full video can now be found by accessing Rogen’s charity special on Netflix and searching under the ‘Trailers & More’ tab.


\(^3\) Ibid.

worthy film or television ideas out of the actor. These amusingly unorthodox tests include taking hair and urine samples from the actor and presenting him with a series of objects from his childhood which they hope he can adapt into a project. One object is an old, comically rigid, used white sock which Rogen picks up and pitches as ‘Jizzy sock – the stoner comedy or some shit’. This idea is then immediately jotted down verbatim by a Netflix employee in a white lab coat. The tests eventually escalate into something approaching a hostage situation where Rogen is locked alone in a room for days on end having been tasked to write screenplay drafts for the streaming company.

The comedy short displays several traits which recur across various subgenres of post-broadcast comedy television and which will be referred to throughout each chapter of this thesis. Firstly, the video revels in extreme levels of self-awareness and self-reflexivity with regards to Rogen as a performer and Netflix as a company. Rogen’s response to the numerous absurd tests and trials performed on him is typical of the down-to-earth stoner attitude he has embodied in much of his fictional film work as well as in magazine interviews and his appearances on talk shows. The viewer is expected to be familiar with this portrayal of Rogen’s character as well as the type of crass adolescent humour often associated with his projects. Therefore, the multiple references to pot smoking and the presentation of the ‘jizzy’ sock are completely fitting and satisfy viewers with the appropriate (pop) cultural capital. The comical press release written to accompany the video features a self-deprecating mock-interview with Rogen where the actor is quoted as saying, “As a general rule, I don’t really ‘read’ anything before I sign it … That’s what Danny is for, he handles that for me, mostly,” gesturing toward an elderly man in a poncho sleeping on the couch behind him … “I really hope he didn’t fuck this up. He’s the reason that Zach and Miri Make a Porno exists.” Even in this press release, Netflix specifically references the actor’s previous work and are expecting those reading to

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be aware of the general perception that *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* (Kevin Smith, View Askew Productions, USA, 2008) is considered one of the weaker entries in Rogen’s filmography.

The presence of high-profile actors, especially those who go on to feature in a number of programmes made by a particular streaming service, is another key characteristic of post-broadcast comedy television. Big names being attached to television projects (people working both in front of and behind the camera) is not specific to post-broadcast comedy programming and has consistently occurred on broadcast television since the 1980s. I will examine this later in the thesis with reference to ‘Netflix stars’ who appear in multiple original comedy projects from the company. Performers include comedians such as Jerry Seinfeld and, as mentioned by Rogen, Adam Sandler. In this short video, a brief uncredited cameo comes in the unmistakably smooth voice of Jeff Goldblum emerging from the computer named Algo. But the video further plays with the idea of a ‘Netflix Star’, in this case Rogen, as someone who is able to generate ideas for the company and is then legally obliged to work for them. Whilst this (hopefully) isn’t how Netflix conduct business with their actors, it acknowledges their reliance on certain performers who will be used over and over if proven successful for the platform. This association between particular stars and streaming services isn’t, of course, confined to Netflix. Apple TV+ include a page on their interface where the user is invited to ‘Meet the Stars of Apple TV+’, such as Jennifer Aniston, Jason Momoa, and M. Night Shayamalan.

The video’s use of self-reflexivity is also evident in the way Netflix publicly present themselves as a company and the effectiveness of the comedy here thus depends to some extent on the viewers’ understanding of their business practices.

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6 The work of John T. Caldwell explores this further in his book, *Televisuality* (1995). This will be engaged with further in my review of literature and in the second chapter concerning the role of the auteur in post-broadcast comedy television.
as well as Netflix’s understanding of how it is perceived by users. The
aforementioned press release includes a brief paragraph at the end titled ‘About
Netflix’ which informs readers that subscribers ‘can allow their precious, limited
time on earth to pass them by while re-watching The Office for the 800th time’. This line is presented as a throwaway joke, acknowledging the company’s aware-
ess that certain shows are consumed repeatedly as a type of comfort viewing for their users. There is also an unnervingly sinister element to this joke, however, in that it also admits the company’s collection of user data in order to help strengthen their algorithm. The presence of a computer as the highest form of authority in the building emphasises the company’s engagement with technology and reinforces their adoption of an online-only streaming model as opposed to the previous option of mailing rental discs to customers’ homes. Also, the decision to name the computer ‘Algorithm’ refers to their frequently discussed practice of collecting user data and utilising it to offer personalised viewing suggestions. Moreover, as mentioned, upon signing his contract in the video, Rogen mentions Adam Sandler’s multi-film deal with Netflix which has been covered widely by a number of trade papers and periodicals. As well as gesturing towards this deal, it also serves as a moment of self-promotion, signalling to viewers, particularly fans of comedy, that they are able to access a large number of Adam Sandler films on Netflix.

Moreover, as mentioned, upon signing his contract in the video, Rogen mentions Adam Sandler’s multi-film deal with Netflix which has been covered widely by a number of trade papers and periodicals. As well as gesturing towards this deal, it also serves as a moment of self-promotion, signalling to viewers, particularly fans of comedy, that they are able to access a large number of Adam Sandler films on Netflix.

This type of self-promotion is evident across a number of different streaming services; for example, all the characters on TV shows made by Apple TV+ exclusively use Apple products and trademarked features such as FaceTime. It is also crucial to note that this isn’t a factor which is exclusive to streamed, post-broadcast television. During the fifth season of HBO’s The Sopranos (HBO, 1999 –

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8 The Netflix algorithm has been written about by numerous online publications and was a recurring subject in the majority of academic writing on streaming television throughout the mid-2010s. Discussion of streaming algorithms can be found in the work of Blake Hallinan and Ted Striphas (2016), Amanda Lotz (2017) and Catherine Johnson (2019), amongst others. Netflix even have a page on their ‘Help Center’ webpage where they explain the process behind their recommendation system - https://help.netflix.com/en/node/100639, accessed 1 October 2020.

9 As of October 1st 2020, there are 19 films starring Adam Sandler on Netflix in the UK, as well as others made by his production company, Happy Madison, with whom they share a contact.
2007), a bald, bespectacled, and dementia-ridden Junior Soprano (Dominic Chianese) glimpses Larry David on *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (HBO, 2000 - ), another extremely popular and contemporaneous programme shown on the cable channel. Gesturing towards his television set, Junior asks ‘Why am I on there?’, mistaking David for himself. This gag works on a narrative level, stressing the severity of his dementia, on a comical level as a consequence of the two characters’ resemblance, and as self-promotion for the other shows broadcast on HBO. Whilst this type of self-reflexivity isn’t new, I will argue that post-broadcast comedy programmes now operate in an excessive, hyper-referential mode which is evident in numerous case studies throughout this thesis. In this Netflix comedy short, both *Stranger Things* and *Dark* are visibly showcased alongside the ad for Rogen’s special, as a fortuitous by-product of the video being set in a Netflix office building. The inclusion of these promotional posters demonstrates the range of original content available on the streaming platform.

This short video also plays with temporality in a significant way, echoing the way time is presented in other Netflix original comedy shows to be discussed throughout this thesis. Initially, the video roughly situates the events as happening in ‘March 2018’ and provides the geographical context of ‘Hollywood, CA’. When this title first appears at the start of the short, the sound of a fast-ticking clock can briefly be heard accompanying the date. Moreover, the year 2018 is presented as a split-flap display, similar to the large departure announcement screens often used at airports, and can be seen rolling over from 2017 to 2018. Time is clearly a concern here – something emphasised immediately afterwards when Rogen asks the receptionist if they can validate his parking but is ignored. His question is instead met by the sound of frantic typing on keyboards and a finger pointing down the corridor. In a polite but slightly passive aggressive manner he responds, ‘Ok, cool, yeah, you’re busy here, you’ve got a lot of shows.’ This cuts to another title card announcing, ‘Acquisition Day 1’, once more accompanied by the sound of a ticking clock and yet again with the split-flap graphic showing the number flipping over from 0 to 1. Despite taking place on the same day as Rogen in the foyer, the
short is now providing a more specific timeframe as well as amusingly foreshadowing that this acquisition may take longer than both Rogen and the viewer were initially anticipating. Following the boardroom meeting with Algo, the split-flap graphic appears again, this time displaying an even more specific passage of time – ‘0 Days, 01 Hours, 15 minutes.’ The inclusion of a ‘days’ counter now confirms the earlier suggestion that Rogen may be trapped in the Netflix offices for longer than he first assumed and also demonstrates the video’s focus on a specific, concentrated period of time. These titles continue throughout the rest of the video, to the point where Rogen has been held in isolation against his will for over three days.

This concern with time recurs across a number of post-broadcast comedy programmes. This thesis will explore the ways in which Love (Netflix, 2016 – 2018) captures the courtship of its central couple by leaving very little unrecorded time between the episodes of its first season, allowing the viewers to see their relationship blossom in a hyper-focused, concentrated time period. I will also explore how this structure is conducive to the binge-watching approach that is so often associated with, and often encouraged, by Netflix. Other semi-original Netflix shows which have transitioned from a broadcast to post-broadcast context such as Arrested Development (Fox, 2003 – 2006/Netflix, 2013 - 2019) or Wet Hot American Summer: First Day of Camp (Netflix, 2015) are also particularly playful in the way they deal with complex timelines relating to the original material and the unavoidable aging of their respective cast members. This foregrounding of time complements the comedy genre for these specific reasons – where the (admittedly graceful) ageing of Bradley Cooper and Amy Poehler would be viewed as a moment of inconsistency or a plot hole in a drama programme, the same issue can be retooled as a comedic moment in the Wet Hot American Summer (David Wain, USA Films, USA, 2001) prequel.
One final moment worth noting comes as Rogen leaves the boardroom meeting with Jeff Goldblum’s algorithmic robot and walks by a room of people who are all staring at pictures of him on their computers. Rogen’s confusion and concern about what precisely is happening in the room is positioned as comedic on a basic level – his repeated confused utterances of ‘woah, woah, woah’ and his apprehensive expression as he tries to figure out why his face is filling every computer screen is a moment of excellent comic delivery. It is also another self-reflexive gesture towards the nature of Netflix’s business model. One might assume that these employees are searching for existing images of the actor to use for promotional purposes in advance of the charity special’s release. But then why has one of the images been photoshopped to include a rather terrifying, uncanny smile on the actor’s face? And why, when Rogen knocks on the glass to get their attention, do they all turn and blankly stare in his direction, like ‘zombiefied’ animals in cages at the zoo? The tone of this section remains consistent with the irreverent nature of the video short but its suggestion about the ways in which this material is created and delivered to us as viewers, as well as its representation of the people working for the company, is shaded with dark comedy. Here, Netflix can be found self-reflexively testing comedic boundaries through their promotional material. A similar approach can be found in the streaming platform’s original stand-up comedy content. The final chapter of this thesis will focus on the ways in which comedians such as Hannah Gadsby and Dave Chappelle have both experimented with different ways of delivering stand-up sets that are predominantly focused on serious topics. Gadsby uses her stand-up performance to deconstruct the ways in which jokes are told and asks the audience to consider the lasting impact of self-deprecating comedy. The extent to which both Gadsby and Chappelle’s stand-up performances deconstruct comedy is interesting because it is also evident in this Rogen short and its accompanying press release.

The work in this thesis emerged from two observations I made in 2017 near the end of my master’s degree. The first was admittedly rather mundane and came about as a consequence of my growing academic interest in comedy film and television: namely that there is a steadily increasing, but proportionally small
amount of academic writing on the comedy genre, particularly in relation to television. The second observation was that television and the ways viewers access and watch it were ostensibly changing at a rapid speed; yet another fairly self-evident observation and one which has been true in one way or another for the past few decades. Throughout the 2010s, online streaming services began creating original content which were available to watch exclusively through their platforms. This marked a shift in the types of material consumers were able to access from these platforms beforehand. Netflix, currently the world’s largest media company and streaming service, began as an online DVD rental service but shifted their focus to producing their own programming for their streaming service in 2012. In her 2018 book, *Netflix and the Re-invention of Television*, Mareike Jenner notes the important distinction between ‘Netflix in-house productions and Netflix Originals.’¹⁰ Jenner states, ‘The misleading use of the term “original” in the label “Netflix Originals” disguises the fact that these texts will not be “original” everywhere and the term only describes exclusivity in some national markets. Netflix’ in-house productions, however, can be accessed wherever Netflix is available.’¹¹ The post-broadcast Netflix originals focused on throughout this thesis will belong to the latter category. Similar to Netflix, Amazon used to offer a DVD rental service in UK in partnership with LoveFilm but have since adopted a streaming-only approach by using their own branding, as ‘Prime Video’. In the years since the establishment of these two major streaming platforms, other companies have followed suit, leading to the creation of Apple TV+, HBO Max, and Disney+. To contextualise the sheer abundance of online streaming services that are now available to consumers, the three aforementioned platforms all debuted in a seven-month window between November 2019 and May 2020.

This thesis will predominantly focus on original comedy television created by Netflix with references to the comedy productions of Amazon Video. Netflix will feature most prominently on account of the wide variety and sheer amount of their

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original comedy titles. When this project began, only Netflix and Amazon Video existed in the UK. Since then, production on original comedy programming for Amazon Video has slowed significantly (to be discussed further in Chapter Three). This has forced me to focus on Netflix as the main streaming service in this thesis. However, due to exponential increase in streaming services over the past half-decade, the issue of platform identity is more important than ever and thus adds even greater importance to the specific platform identity I recognise as unique to Netflix’s comedy work throughout this thesis.\textsuperscript{12} The US-centric focus of the case studies discussed in this thesis is a result of the company’s initial engagement with the comedy genre from an American perspective. Some popular comedy sub-genres, such as the Late-Night talk show, are deliberately excluded in this thesis. The reason for this is the relative absence of such shows on post-broadcast platforms at the time of writing. This isn’t to say that there haven’t been any attempts at creating such shows – the short-lived \textit{Chelsea} (Netflix, 2016 – 2017) being one example – or that there won’t be further attempts in the future. Other factors relating to streaming accessibility, such as my living in the UK, mean that I am not able to access some of the popular US streaming services such as Hulu and HBO Max. Also, as a result of this project being conceived and written over a four-year period, the engagement with newer streaming services, particularly those made available over the last 12 months, has had to be somewhat restricted to allow for a focused and consistent approach. Of the three newer services outlined above, only Apple TV+ has made a significant effort to produce a range of original comedy television, with \textit{Ted Lasso} (Apple TV+, 2020 - ), \textit{Central Park} (Apple TV+, 2020 - ), \textit{Trying} (Apple TV+, 2020 - ), and \textit{Mythic Quest: Raven’s Banquet} (Apple TV+, 2020 - ) all debuting in 2020. The creators of the latter show were even able to write, film, and release an episode during the Covid-19 pandemic where the quarantine and the characters’ isolation from each other figures as a central plot point. This will be explored in relation to its style and its production in the conclusion of the thesis as

\textsuperscript{12} As a result of the predominant focus on Netflix, I will frequently refer to (and have already referred to) their algorithm as a recurring factor linked to their brand identity. The centralisation of an algorithmic logic is foregrounded far more in writing about Netflix than Amazon Video.
a representative example of a potential avenue for the future of post-broadcast comedy television.

The majority of Netflix and Amazon’s programming is only available to watch by subscribing to the streaming service and doesn’t receive a physical release. As might be expected, this original content is also not shown on any broadcast or digital channels, with a few minor exceptions.\(^{13}\) Whilst these original programmes were often written about in trade papers and reviewed, critically and articulately, by a number of online publications\(^{14}\), their analysis within academia was virtually non-existent in the period immediately following their release.\(^{15}\) Part of this may be a result of the amount of time it takes to write and publish an academic article, chapter, or book, delaying the scholarly response to Netflix’s original programming. However, it seems the more significant issue academia had with original streaming content was how to categorise it.

A number of scholars chose to focus on the algorithms and interfaces required for an online streaming experience, rather than looking in detail at new forms of programming. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell have discussed the emergence of television studies as an academic field ‘under the rubric of Anglo-American cultural studies, an approach that emphasizes contexts over texts.’\(^{16}\) For these writers, this has resulted in a methodological approach towards television scholarship that is ‘focused on understanding the industrial, regulatory, and reception contexts of the medium more than critical analyses of specific programs.’\(^{17}\) Whilst this position is challenged by the fact that there has been sustained interest in the analysis of television programming for a number of years, particularly the long-form serial drama, the approach described by Thompson and

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\(^{13}\) In an unprecedented deal, Comedy Central bought the broadcast rights to the Netflix Original, *BoJack Horseman* (Netflix, 2014 – 2020) in 2018.

\(^{14}\) *The AV Club*, *Consequence of Sound*, and *Indiewire* all have excellent television sections on their respective websites.

\(^{15}\) I’m speaking broadly here and, as always, there are important exceptions which I will outline in the Literature Review and return to throughout this project. This lack of academic scholarship has also fortunately changed quite significantly since I began writing.


\(^{17}\) Ibid.
Mittell is evident in the writing on original streaming programmes which, as mentioned, frequently favours the examination of the various algorithms and production methods necessary to create and supply streaming content, as well as the potential repercussions of television’s shift online and gradual movement from domestic spaces.18

It is also worth noting that much of the early writing regarding streaming television focused on programmes which can be placed within the long-form drama category.19 In part, this is most likely due to the types of original programming Netflix produced in the early 2010s. Aside from a single stand-up comedy special by Bill Burr in 2012 and the revival of Arrested Development the following year, the company didn’t begin consistently producing original comedy programmes until 2015. However, this lack does not fully explain the continuing lack of attention to comedy on streaming television. Writing in 2005, television comedy scholar Brett Mills noted, ‘Television is seen to be a low cultural form compared to, say literature and art, and the same holds true for comedy; combine the two and you’re left with one of the most maligned cultural forms’20 - a judgement reflected by the general ‘paucity of work in the field’.21 John Mundy and Glyn White believe that it is comedy’s aim of ‘producing a physical reaction from its audiences [that] puts it in the disreputable company of other genres aiming for a physical response, such as horror … and pornography.’22 When narrowing the area of research on comedy television to focus exclusively on post-broadcast comedy television, there is a notable lack of academic scholarship examining the aesthetics of post-broadcast television programmes, particularly original comedy content. There are some

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18 These discussions can be found in the work of Amanda Lotz (2009), and Anna Cristina Pertierra and Graeme Turner (2013).
19 Journal articles by Mario Klarer (2014) and James R. Keller (2015) focus on the literary qualities of House of Cards (Netflix, 2013 – 2018). This is telling both as a consequence of the show the writers have selected to write about but also in the way they frame the show alongside another longstanding art form.
exceptions to the trend, specifically the work of Mareike Jenner which helpfully outlines some of the tensions at play between ‘high’ and ‘low’ forms in Netflix’s original comedy programming. Jenner writes,

Netflix’ emphasis on comedy is particularly suited to explore the tensions between “quality” television and more “low brow” formulaic sitcoms, largely due to the variance in which cultural capital is bestowed upon the genre. Netflix had been invested in producing “quality” sitcoms that abandoned the three-camera setup, laugh-track or reliance on punchlines usually associated with the genre from its early years as producer of original content.23

It is these formal qualities which I will refer to throughout this thesis when examining the way in which Netflix engages with popular comedy sub-genres such as the sitcom.

This relative absence of scholarship is partly where my research project will intervene, providing a detailed overview of the post-broadcast comedy television landscape with an emphasis on the texts and their aesthetics. I will examine whether a stylistic shift in comedy has taken place through the integration of streaming services into the television landscape, and whether Netflix have now achieved what could be recognised as a ‘house style’ in their original comedy television. This will be achieved by examining and comparing a number of post-broadcast comedy shows from a range of different sub-genres, such as the adult animation, the stand-up special, the comedy-drama, and the sitcom. There has also been a shift in different types of viewing in different physical spaces (now binged on smart phones and laptops, and often alone). One question I will address is whether the implications of this shift can be felt in the aesthetics of comedy television staples such as the sitcom, especially in their approach to temporality and episodic narratives. I am also concerned with the tension between authorial and brand identity, granting particular focus to Judd Apatow’s Love. Similar to a number of

23 Jenner, Netflix and the Re-invention of Television, pp. 144 – 145.
broadcast TV networks, Netflix often collaborate with renowned film directors and producers. By focusing closely on the analysis of programming, I am able to discern whether these projects resemble a continuation of an individual’s work, whether they instead shift to accommodate the company’s modus operandi, or if they fall somewhere in the middle. One final question is whether the continuation of comedy shows such as Arrested Development on streaming services, creates any significant tonal and aesthetic differences from previous genre traditions by comparing visual style and, crucially in relation to this show, changes in narrative style.

Due to the speed at which new programmes are being produced, some of the stylistic traits highlighted in this thesis have already been abandoned, in search of something new. The result of this research provides readers with a snapshot in time, chronicling the stylistic tendencies of the first post-broadcast original comedies, and enabling them to see the ways this television is indebted to the rich history of the genre. Jason Mittell, writing about genre cycles in broadcast television states, ‘[o]ne of the primary ways networks manage the risks inherent in scheduling so many television programmes is relying upon proven formulas, ... capitalising upon popular trends to predict future hits and establish new forms of programming.’

We can see these strategies at work in the way post-broadcast platforms engage with genre history. The presence of the traditional sitcom, which was initially shunned by Netflix as they created increasingly experimental, self-reflexive original programming, still casts a large shadow. The company’s acquisition and promotion of broadcast staples like Seinfeld (NBC, 1989 – 1998) and Friends (NBC, 1994 – 2004) is a testament to continued audience interest in the sub-genre. The various types of innovative and idiosyncratic ‘quality’ sitcoms created for the platform are themselves indebted to broadcast predecessors such as Arrested Development. This programme is a particularly unusual example insofar as it employed a unique visual and comedic style during its broadcast run in the

early 2000s, before attempting a short-lived, but fascinating, experimental approach to sitcom narrative when shifting to Netflix in 2013. ‘Quality’ comedies such as Love owe a debt to similar projects on the cable network, HBO. Moreover, the long-established tradition of the filmed stand-up comedy special is also continued on post-broadcast platforms where it has flourished and developed far beyond the era of the HBO hour-long special. Despite the open dialogue these case studies have with earlier broadcast comedy shows, this research also underlines the ways in which the genre is evolving and diverging from established norms as the number of comedy programmes and streaming services increase at an exponential rate.

My review of literature will focus (in more detail than this introductory statement has done) on the important scholarship that has thus far been produced in relation to post-broadcast comedy television. However, I must firstly justify my methodological approach to the texts which often foregrounds close textual analysis when engaging with the programmes. The decision to examine the case studies in this thesis using close analysis doesn’t mean that they should be placed in a vacuum or that contextual information surrounding their creation is irrelevant. If anything, closely viewing a number of post-broadcast comedy programmes makes it apparent that they are frequently in dialogue with the conventions of broadcast comedy shows from the past half-century. By exploring the ways in which these programmes work to generate moments of comedy and by focusing on a variety of sub-genres, the recurring characteristics of these programmes begin to reveal themselves. Throughout this thesis, I am able to map the ways in which many post-broadcast comedies consistently utilise a number of stylistic traits across their various sub-genres which borrow from or modify aesthetics which long-time comedy viewers will be familiar with. Furthermore, my research will not conduct empirical research into audiences and television viewership but will instead consider how the programmes are constructed for and engage with viewers. This can be understood by examining a programme’s mode of address and tone, as well as how serial narratives are constructed to encourage ‘binge-watching’ or a more regimented viewing pattern. The construction of a programme and its intended
effect on viewers closely relates to debates which may emerge from this thesis regarding certain jokes or might lead to conversations about what is and isn’t funny. Without resorting to assumptions about audiences, I will employ close textual analysis to refer to moments which have clearly been constructed as comedic and hope to suggest various ways in which they might be read as such. Moreover, in the review of literature, I will engage with various scholars’ work in the field of humour theory to better contextualise how certain genres can provoke specific reactions in their audiences.\(^{25}\) In addition to this textual work, I will look at numerous paratextual websites such as *The AV Club* and *Consequence of Sound* which feature wide-ranging and often very detailed discussions of comedy television, as well as platforms such as Twitter, where discussions of television are encouraged and often occur amongst fans of comedy programmes in a less formal but equally enthusiastic fashion. At the beginning of the first chapter, I will briefly employ an autoethnographic approach to better explain the ways in which post-broadcast comedy shows can be accessed and how they are framed for the viewer by different streaming platforms.

It is also important to explain my use of the term post-broadcast in this context and situate it alongside other similar terms which have been used by television critics and academics when referring to streaming content. This will be done in greater detail in the review of literature, but I will provide a brief definition now for clarity’s sake. For the purposes of this research project, the term ‘post-broadcast television’ can be defined as a type of television programming which isn’t (and hasn’t been) broadcast in a live schedule on terrestrial channels. For me, this excludes television programmes that have been broadcast on live television and have since become available on catch-up or on-demand services like the BBC iPlayer or All4. For example, if Netflix owned the rights to stream *Friends* on its platform, watching the show on the service does not then mean that it can be categorised as post-broadcast television, as its original broadcast context must be

\(^{25}\) I don’t expect every reader to agree over the quality of the comedy case studies used in this thesis, or their effectiveness in eliciting laughter. My hope is that they are found to be interesting, at the very least, in illustrating broader arguments I make throughout the thesis.
taken into consideration. The shows I define as post-broadcast television are programmes which are created specifically with the intention of being streamed on a platform different to that of traditional broadcast, scheduled television.

There is a more complex distinction to be made about the influence of Netflix original programming on the wider broadcast ecology of television comedy. However, this issue extends the focus back to the world of broadcast television and consequently sits beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, my conclusion will gesture towards the ways in which societal changes (namely, the Covid-19 pandemic) have affected the content and tone of both broadcast and post-broadcast programmes alike. Moreover, returning to Jenner’s comments about the misleading nature of the term ‘Netflix Original’, one could argue that the existing programmes acquired and subsequently promoted by the company as ‘original’ are similar enough in style and tone to be comfortably aligned with Netflix’s in-house, self-produced output. This is a more complex example of Netflix’s impact on a broader television ecology; rather than directly influencing broadcast programming, the company assimilates broadcast shows which align, tonally, stylistically, or even morally, with their own content to strengthen and reaffirm their post-broadcast identity. As before, a satisfying exploration of this distinction would require the space to provide a thorough analysis of the similarities and differences between in-house productions and faux originals, which falls outside the scope of this particular project.

The primary focus of my first chapter is the first Netflix-produced comedy series, season four of Arrested Development which was described as a ‘semioriginal’ by the company (given that the show’s prior seasons were produced by and broadcast on Fox in the mid-2000s). Not only does the show seem like a fitting way to begin this research project, due to its status as the earliest Netflix comedy series, but also serves as a bridge between traditionally broadcast scheduled television and streaming content. By watching the earlier seasons (also accessible on the streaming platform) and continuing onwards into the Netflix original seasons of the show which, at the time of writing, consist of two seasons, one is able to see the
ways in which Netflix has adapted the show to better suit a streaming viewing experience. This is evident in terms of its visual, narrative, and comedic style, all of which are explored throughout the first chapter.

Following this, the second chapter of this thesis deals with authorship in relation to post-broadcast comedy television. Authorship is often written about in relation to long-form serial drama television, particularly shows from cable networks such as HBO or AMC where the figure of the showrunner is viewed in a similar way to the director of a feature film. I will analyse the role of the auteur in relation to Netflix’s Love, co-created and written by Judd Apatow, and Prime Video’s One Mississippi (Prime Video, 2015 – 2017), based on the life of its creator and lead star, Tig Notaro. By contextualising Love against the rest of Apatow’s career in film and television, one will be able to better understand the aesthetic relationship between the auteur’s brand image and the brand image of a streaming services like Netflix. Specific close attention and analysis will also be afforded to its humour and its visual style, before moving on to discuss its tonal shifts between comedy and drama and how its narrative structure can be viewed as significant in a post-broadcast context. This will then be compared to One Mississippi, where I will address the similarities and differences between the two shows and their engagement with the author figure before concluding by reflecting on the implications of their respective cancellations.

Chapter Three discusses the adult animation sub-genre which has become increasingly popular on streaming services. Once again, Netflix led this trend with their critically-successful original show, BoJack Horseman (Netflix, 2014 – 2020). An analysis of this show provides an overview of the way post-broadcast programmes handle a mixture of contrasting tones such as absurd visual comedy and sombre psychological drama. Both BoJack Horseman and this chapter’s other major case study, F is For Family (Netflix, 2015 - ) also pick up on a number of critical threads

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26 This can be seen in the work of Elizabeth Blakey (2017), Mikkel Jensen (2017), and Thompson and Mittell (2013).
which have been established in previous chapters, such as the role of the auteur, ‘Netflix stars’, and their engagement with long-running comedy sub-genres.

My final chapter deals with the stand-up comedy special which appears to have found new life on streaming services; examples of this sub-genre have been released at an exponential rate over the past few years. The focus of this chapter will be on the ways in which the comedy specials play with and reflect on the established tropes of the stand-up sub-genre, as well as a critical engagement with the content and style of comedy being delivered. As suggested at the beginning of this introduction, both Hannah Gadsby and Dave Chapelle have released stand-up material on Netflix which continues the self-reflexivity present in their other original post-broadcast comedy releases. Analysis of Chapelle’s most recent release, filmed during the Covid-19 pandemic, leads towards a concluding consideration of the future of post-broadcast comedy television and the continuing importance of the genre.
Review of Literature

Introduction

As discussed in my introduction, only a handful of scholars explicitly analyse the post-broadcast comedy programme, instead of focusing on its social or industrial context. This isn’t to say that the latter forms of analysis aren’t important to a thoughtful and balanced discussion within the field of television studies; however, they are clearly not the only relevant approaches to the study of post-broadcast television. This review of literature will provide an overview of some of the key texts which take a variety of approaches towards the topic of post-broadcast television comedy. Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz separate television studies into four inter-dependent categories which they believe should share equal consideration when writing about television. These categories are ‘programs’, ‘audiences’, ‘institutions’, and ‘contexts’. As I have previously explained, whilst my method foregrounds textual analysis, I will engage with each of these categories to some extent and combine a number of approaches in my work. Gray and Lotz write, ‘As an approach ... [Television Studies] is and must be disciplinarily ambidextrous.’¹

I am not the only person to note the lack of scholarly analyses of television programming. In a chapter titled, ‘What is Television for?’, Alan McKee states, ‘While film has a recognised canon and a tradition of close textual analysis, in the study of television the programmes themselves have tended to vanish’.² In this thesis, the programmes themselves will remain at the forefront of my discussion of post-broadcast television. Writing in 2007, Lotz stated ‘Predicting the coming death of television seemed to become a new beat for many of the nation’s technology and culture writers in the mid-2000s.’³ Several scholarly titles such as Lynn Spigel and Jann Olsson’s edited collection, Television after TV and the almost identically titled Television Studies after TV edited by Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay refer to the

changing nature of television in the age of convergence.\textsuperscript{4} A 2010 article by Margot Hardenbergh is simply titled ‘The Death of Television’.\textsuperscript{5} Later books such as Kevin McDonald and Daniel Smith-Rowsey’s \textit{The Netflix Effect} and Amanda Lotz’s \textit{Portals} focus on the technology and business models behind streaming platforms, as opposed to the content they create.\textsuperscript{6} However, the lack of attention paid to the television text by these writers results in them failing to take into account what persists of television as we know it, instead choosing to examine the new approaches taken by streaming services concerning the modernisation of television.

Audiences also remain a consistently vital consideration of any analysis in the field of television studies. In his key study of television comedy, \textit{Television Sitcom}, Mills notes that ‘the term “joke” indicates a single construction intended to have a comic effect’.\textsuperscript{7} The medium of comedy is predicated on getting a response, and therefore, one of the main intentions of the creators of comedy television (both the comic actors and the programme’s producers) is to make the viewer laugh, usually repeatedly and consistently throughout the duration of the show. In more complex examples of genre hybridisation such as the comedy drama, or ‘dramedy’, the viewer is less likely to find overt jokes or gags but is invited to read the programme as comedic through its attitude or tone. In its various guises, comedy should always be examined in relation to how it is being, or is intended to be, received by audiences. This notion is more important than ever with regards to the increasingly diverse range of content created for streaming services and the types of viewers it attracts. Relating to audiences, reception, and fandom is the idea of paratexts, explored in Jonathan Gray’s book, \textit{Show Sold Separately}. Gray describes the paratext as something that ‘occurs anytime two or more people


\textsuperscript{7} Mills, \textit{Television Sitcom}, p. 14.
discuss a film or television program, but ... also includes criticism and reviews, fan fiction, fan film and video (vids), “filk” (fan song), fan art, spoilers, fan sites, and many other forms.\textsuperscript{8} He goes on to note that, while audiences ‘commonly lack the capital and infrastructure to circulate their paratexts as widely ... as can Hollywood, their creative and discursive products can and often do become important additions to a text.'\textsuperscript{9} Producers of post-broadcast television encourage fandom through their own industry-created hype and promotion on social media platforms, and it therefore makes sense that audience paratexts are a dominant and important force driving the discussion surrounding these programmes in the same, or parallel, online spheres you can access the shows themselves. Former Twitter CEO, Dick Costolo, has stated ‘it’s become more and more clear to us that the characteristics that make up twitter – public, real-time and conversational – make it a perfect complement to TV.'\textsuperscript{10} Analysing such paratexts will be invaluable in establishing how the programmes under analysis are being received within certain demographics.

Institutions, as mentioned above, have remained one of the key focal points of academic writing on post-broadcast television, dominating the field in aforementioned books such as McDonald and Smith-Rowsey’s edited collection, \textit{The Netflix Effect}, with its focus on the technology behind streaming and Lotz’s \textit{Portals} which examines the subscriber model used by Amazon Video and Netflix, as well as their relationship with major television and film studios. My thesis will acknowledge the effects of the industrial organisation of post-broadcast television and must constantly be aware of Netflix and Amazon Video’s position as alternative outlets for television viewing. However, discussion of post-broadcast television institutions in my research will always serve the purpose of illuminating something about the programmes themselves and their form and style.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{8} Jonathan Gray, \textit{Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts} (New York: New York University Press, 2010), p. 143.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{10} Vanessa Thorpe, ‘Why Facebook and Twitter are eyeing up a big slice of TV’s future’, \textit{The Observer} (13 October 2013), https://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/oct/13/with-so-much-television-will-less-become-more, accessed February 2021.}
The literature informing my research can be split into two relatively broad categories relating to post-broadcast television on the one hand, and television comedy on the other. The first section of this literature review will examine the scholarship on post-broadcast television as the principal focus of my research. I will begin by focusing on scholarship preceding the post-broadcast era, discussing ‘quality television’ and authorship, a lot of which is still pertinent and contains ideas that are frequently applied to discussions of post-broadcast programmes. I will then go on to discuss a strand of scholarship which refutes the idea of change relating to authorship and new standards of quality in post-broadcast programming, instead choosing to argue that broadcast forms have persisted in the post-broadcast era. Following this, I will provide an overview of the industry-focused writing on post-broadcast television which, whilst not employing the same methodological approach as my research, represents the largest amount of scholarship on the topic. Finally, I will investigate work on the relationship between audience and screens, encompassing the concept of binge-watching which is often applied to post-broadcast television.

Following this engagement with the literature on post-broadcast television, I will explore the scholarship on television comedy, beginning with television’s most prominent comedy sub-genre, the sitcom. Similar to post-broadcast television, ideas regarding conservatism and subversion play a large part in scholarship on the sitcom, particularly relating to issues of representation within the sub-genre. Most relevant to my research is the large body of feminist writing on the sitcom. I will conclude the review of literature by examining writing on other forms of television comedy such as stand-up programmes and adult animation, both of which are underdeveloped research areas in the field of television studies and have gone on to play an integral part in post-broadcast programming.

*Post-Broadcast Television*

To begin, I will explain my use of the term ‘post-broadcast television’ and its relation to the work of Amanda D. Lotz. Writing in 2007, Lotz identifies three periods which she uses to situate television circa 2005; these are the ‘network era’,
the era of ‘multi-channel transition’ and finally the ‘post-network era.’

For Lotz, the network era lasts approximately between 1952 and the mid-1980s and was ‘the provenance of three substantial networks – NBC, CBS, and ABC ... [which] spoke to the country en masse and played a significant role in articulating post-war American identity.’

The era of multi-channel transition saw the introduction of new technologies such as the VCR, the remote control, and analog cable systems which ‘increased consumer control [and] also facilitated viewers’ break from the network-era television experience.’ In this period, the emergence of new broadcast networks and increased content choices ‘eroded the dominance of ABC, CBS, and NBC’ triggering a change in the ‘competitive dynamics of the industry and type[s] of programming likely to be produced.’ When outlining the most recent period of the post-network era, Lotz acknowledges that she has in fact used the term previously to describe the something similar to the era of multi-channel transition ‘in which cable channels created additional options for viewers.’ This demonstrates the fluctuating and fluid nature of these terms, which are often being resituated as the television medium changes. Instead, for Lotz (in 2007), the post-network era represents,

a break from the dominant network-era experience in which viewers lacked much control over when and where to view and chose among a limited selection of externally determined linear viewing options – in other words, programs available at a certain time on a certain channel.

A number of the features Lotz identifies as characteristic of the post-network era such as portable viewing devices, user-supported subscriptions, and content

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12 Ibid., p. 9.
13 Ibid., p. 13.
14 Ibid., p. 12.
16 Ibid., p. 15.
17 Ibid.
anywhere at any time are still relevant 14 years later and will be discussed throughout this thesis.

The slight shift in my terminology comes in the change from post-network to post-broadcast. Neither myself nor Lotz are using the term ‘post’ to suggest the end of the network or broadcast era. Netflix may have over 65 million subscribers worldwide and 4.3 million in the UK\textsuperscript{18} but the majority of the country still regularly sits down to watch broadcast television. In 2015, Ofcom reported that 92.4 per cent of the British population still watched broadcast television.\textsuperscript{19} Despite the large amount of online debate and critical writing about popular streaming shows indicating that streaming is now a widespread form of television viewing, it has by no means overtaken scheduled broadcasting in the UK. Lotz writes, ‘The post-network distinction is not meant to suggest the end or irrelevance of networks – just the erosion of their control over how and when viewers watch particular programs.’\textsuperscript{20} It is the ‘how and when’ of it all which leads me to conclude that post-broadcast is a more fitting description of the types of television I am engaging with in this thesis and that viewers are watching in 2021. By this point in time, streaming services such as Netflix and Prime Video have established themselves as contemporary descendants of the traditional television networks outlined by Lotz in her description of the network era. People log into Netflix and watch the content it has to offer in the same way they might have watched a night of HBO programming in multi-channel transition era of the 1990s or NBC from the 1950s onwards. Before being commandeered as a popular sexual innuendo, the phrase ‘Netflix & Chill’ was being used on twitter as a compound noun or verb phrase meaning to relax while watching Netflix.\textsuperscript{21} Moreover, the dominance of these

\textsuperscript{20} Lotz, \textit{The Television Will Be Revolutionized}, p. 15
streaming services in the television landscape and the way they attract certain performers, directors, or showrunners (often repeatedly over several years) is indicative of a further similarity to traditional broadcast television networks. These similarities, among others, are one of the reasons that the break suggested by the term ‘post-network’ does not seem to be the best way to describe the current state of online television.

Additionally, Lotz raises the question of when viewers are able to watch particular programmes, noting the way the post-network era allows viewers to ‘choose among programs produced in any decade … and to watch this programming on demand.’ Terminology such as ‘streamed’ or ‘webcast’ (when discussing live online broadcasts) may be more appropriate to apply to discussions surrounding Netflix original television. ‘Broadcast’ still contains connotations of liveness and maybe more importantly, television sequencing, which one might associate with scheduled, programmed television. The term ‘post-broadcast’ is used in Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay’s 2009 edited collection, *Television Studies After TV: Understanding TV in the Post-Broadcast Era*. Writing before Netflix became an online streaming platform, the editors still emphasise the changes in types of contemporary broadcasts, writing, ‘Content has migrated onto the web through the conventional media’s branded websites, but more significantly through video aggregators like YouTube the circulation of television increasingly occurs through viral, rather than broadcast, networks.’ The notion of viral content in this quote seems to unconsciously anticipate the viral nature of many of Netflix’s original television programmes and the company’s focus on users’ social media engagement with their shows. Other useful terms to describe the current post-broadcast television era from Mareike Jenner and Roberta Pearson will be outlined imminently.

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The discourse surrounding post-broadcast television has its roots in very similar discussions that took place in the US in the late 1990s and early 2000s following the popularity and critical success of the original programming created by premium cable-channel HBO. Therefore, it is first necessary to examine these debates without ignoring the fact that Netflix cannot be reductively viewed as just another subscription-based television channel. I will briefly examine the discussions surrounding HBO, ‘quality TV’, and authorship, before moving on to contextualise them with regards to post-broadcast streaming services and comedy television.

HBO, ‘Quality TV’, and Authorship

Debates surrounding auteur television, and ‘quality TV’ that were linked to televisuality in the mid-1990s by John Caldwell, returned during the rise of popular serial-drama programming by HBO. For example, Janet McCabe and Kim Akass believed that HBO had ‘defined new rules for talking about, and understanding what we mean by quality TV in the post-1996, post-network era’ becoming a company that was ‘synonymous with quality in the contemporary television landscape.’ Sarah Cardwell attempted to define some of the characteristics of quality American television in 2007, believing that these programmes ‘exhibit high production values, naturalistic performance styles, recognised and esteemed actors, [and] a sense of visual style created through careful, even innovative, camerawork and editing’. For Cardwell, in these shows there could be found ‘a high level of synthesis and cohesion between stylistic choices and the programmes’ “meanings”.’ These stylistic choices have become increasingly attributed to a single-person working behind the camera, usually the show’s creator, writer, or executive producer. Roberta Pearson (2007) notes how the recognition of the auteur in post-broadcast television is ‘a significant departure from the industrial

26 Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, ‘It’s not TV, it’s HBO’s original programming: Producing quality TV’ in Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley (ed.), It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), p. 84.
28 Ibid., p. 30.
practices of the network era in which executive producers, even those who were also creators, kept a low public profile in keeping with their relative lack of power.”

HBO’s belief in maintaining artistic integrity by championing auteurs such as David Chase and David Simon, whose respective work on *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* (HBO, 2002 – 2007) received significant acclaim and attention in critical and academic circles, became one of their defining positive characteristics when compared to what is commonly viewed as the more compromised type of television produced for standard broadcast networks. However, for HBO’s original programming to receive the praise that was lauded upon much of it, it had to find a discerning audience. McCabe and Akass note how a ‘Reliance on an authorial vision … finds HBO placing a high premium on the kind of authorship more commonly associated with traditional art forms carrying high cultural kudos’ citing Annie Leibowitz’s photoshoots of *The Sopranos* main cast members as an example of the brand attempting to create a ‘sense of belonging to an exclusive group who are “in the know”’; a group containing an ‘… elite, intellectual niche audience with high expectations’ and most-likely a university education.

Relevant to US television studies, Derek Kompare notes that ‘Although authorship has long been associated with the study of literature and film, it has not been a particular concern of television studies’, citing the crossover between various academic fields such as social sciences and cultural studies in this field as a

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30 There are multiple academic books published on both TV shows, such as *On the Wire* by Linda Williams (2014), *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television* edited by Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall (2009), *The Sopranos* by Dana Polan (2009), and *Reading The Sopranos: Hit TV from HBO* edited by David Lavery (2006), to name a few. *The Sopranos* also won multiple Emmys and Golden Globes throughout its run.
31 McCabe and Akass, ‘It’s not TV, it’s HBO’s original programming: Producing quality TV’ in Leverette, Ott, and Buckley (ed.), *It’s Not TV*, p. 87.
33 McCabe and Akass, ‘It’s not TV, it’s HBO’s original programming: Producing quality TV’ in Leverette, Ott, and Buckley (ed.), *It’s Not TV*, p. 91.
potential reason for this. Figures such as playwright and novelist, Paddy Chayefsky, and filmmaker, Alfred Hitchcock, could be thought of as early examples of the auteur import from the 1950s and 1960s respectively. The figure of the auteur from a television comedy perspective can also be traced back to figures such as Dick van Dyke, Mary Tyler Moore, and Bill Cosby, all of whom were the titular stars of long-running sitcoms. However, there are two distinct types of auteur which have emerged in the literature discussing post-network and post-broadcast television: the showrunners who work almost exclusively in television (such as David Chase and David Simon), that become recognised and often highly sought-after for their distinctive style, and those who work predominantly in cinema and have moved to the televisual medium. The use of established and well-known film directors has been an important and, in many ways, defining strategy for both Netflix and Amazon Video, being one of the factors which has led to the contested and problematic notion of labelling post-broadcast television, and some of the aforementioned cable television which preceded it, as ‘quality’ or ‘cinematic’ television. Regarding the work of film directors in the televisual medium, Caldwell stated back in 1995 that, ‘auteur imports are aesthetic badges and trophies of distinction pure and simple.’ If anything, this practice has increased since Caldwell’s study of the US television industry was published. Both Netflix and Amazon Video create and market original content under the banner of aesthetic distinction. David Fincher’s involvement with one of the earliest Netflix original programmes, House of Cards (Netflix, 2013 – 2018) and more recently with Mindhunter (Netflix, 2017 - 2019) has led to multiple season renewals based on their exceptionally strong critical response and consistent awards success, most likely generated from Fincher’s revered status as a culturally significant film director. Likewise, Amazon Video has had success with their Ridley Scott-produced

35 Chayefsky’s work on 1953’s ‘Marty’ for The Philco Television Playhouse (NBC, 1948 – 1955) and Hitchcock’s creation of Alfred Hitchcock Presents (CBS/NBC, 1955 – 1965) are two early examples of popular auteur figures working in television.
36 Bill Cosby was also the co-creator of The Cosby Show (NBC, 1984 – 1992), demonstrating a further level of authorial control.
37 The label can be found in texts such as Masculinity in Contemporary Quality Television by Michael Mario Albrecht (2015) and is discussed by both Brett Mills (2013) and Deborah L. Jaramillo (2013) in the collection, Television Aesthetics and Style, edited by Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock (2013).
38 Caldwell, Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television, p. 17.
adaptation of Phillip K. Dick’s novel, *The Man in the High Castle*. Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine have noted that ‘By making some television conspicuously authored, the culture of television’s legitimation—from production to reception—aligns some forms of scripted prime time series with cinema, literature, painting, and other forms of serious, highly respected culture.’ The scholarly attention paid to post-broadcast and quality television is heavily focused on drama, with Jane Feuer wryly noting that in ‘academic television studies, “quality” is a descriptive term, that identifies a television genre called quality drama.’ What becomes immediately evident about the aforementioned names and, for that matter, the majority of names involved in producing ‘quality’ television, is that the programmes they are attached to are almost exclusively drama shows. It generally appears that filmmakers who work primarily with dramatic material, such as David Fincher or Ridley Scott, opt to work within the genre they’re familiar with when they’re ‘imported’ to television.

However, auteur television isn’t solely located in the realm of the straight television drama. More recently, Mareike Jenner has used the term ‘quality’ in relation to Netflix original comedy programming. She writes, ‘Netflix had been invested in producing “quality” sitcoms that abandoned the three-camera setup, laugh-track or reliance on punchlines usually associated with the genre from its early years as producer of original content.’ Filmmakers such as Judd Apatow have brought the comedy genres with which they are identified to their work in television. In Apatow’s case, this resulted in *Love* which Jenner believes conforms to ‘the aesthetic and narrative conventions of quality comedies’ by exhibiting characteristics such as ‘complex, ongoing narratives, or aesthetic originality’. This will be explored further in Chapter Two. Brett Mills makes an interesting distinction between the role of a comedy writer in the U.K. and the U.S. He states, ‘In America,

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40 Jane Feuer, ‘HBO and the Concept of Quality TV’ in McCabe and Akass (eds.), *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, p. 148.
42 Ibid., p. 148.
43 Ibid.
producers usually create and control programmes and employ writers to write them, retaining the artistic control which, in Britain, is much more firmly in the hands of the writer.⁴⁴ However, in the context of post-broadcast television, particularly comedy television, the recognition of the television auteur has become a more frequent occurrence with regards to the showrunner and the auteur-imports. The ‘import-auteurs’ such as Apatow are interesting case studies for this research in terms of the aesthetic differences between their cinematic work and their television work. Love was not Apatow’s first foray into television having already had experience with his work as an executive producer and writer on HBO’s Girls (HBO, 2012 – 2017). Being able to distinguish whether the shows of auteur-imports have a defining identity and signature which clearly belongs to these directors, or whether they adhere to a specific style of the platform on which they are made available is a key research question for this study.

Newman and Levine update Caldwell’s description of the import-auteur for the 21st century, describing how they utilise social media platforms in a similar way to post-broadcast streaming companies to reach viewers. They state, ‘Twitter has been an especially significant site in which celebrity showrunners have maintained their visibility and promoted themselves and their works.’⁴⁵ The potential for immediate interaction with the creators of these shows provides a type of authenticity and ‘down-to-earth’ relatability as far as perceptions of the showrunners are concerned whilst they continuously use these platforms to ‘promote the Quality TV programs associated with them and to reassert themselves as the unifying forces behind their narratives.’⁴⁶ Writing in 2005, before the creation of twitter and the rise of post-broadcast television, Mills makes a point about the authorial stamp in U.S. comedy television which now appears to be at odds with present-day perceptions of the showrunner. He states, ’Because any American sitcom uses many writers, some or all of whom may leave the programme to be replaced by new ones, it is virtually impossible for any of them to

⁴⁴ Mills, Television Sitcom, p. 55.
⁴⁶ Ibid.
place their individual stamp upon it. A writer for an American sitcom often functions solely as a gag writer.\textsuperscript{47} However, the showrunner of Arrested Development, Mitchell Hurwitz, has received significant recognition for the style of the show, leading to his name being used prominently to advertise other shows in which he is involved such as Netflix’s Flaked (2016 - 2017) and Lady Dynamite (2016 - 2017). Hurwitz even writes the introduction to an academic edited collection on Arrested Development.\textsuperscript{48} With post-broadcast comedy, writers such as Hurwitz, Tina Fey (involved in Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt [Netflix, 2015 - 2019]), Maria Bamford, Aziz Ansari, and Spike Lee are becoming more integral to how these shows are marketed, delivered, and therefore perceived. From this, it can be understood that post-broadcast comedy television has relied upon the concept of the television auteur in the same way drama programming for HBO did before it, but in doing so, it has complicated existing notions regarding the anonymity of comedy television writers and directors, particularly from a U.S. cultural perspective.

Persistence of Broadcast Forms

Alongside the discourse surrounding ‘quality television’ and its difference from traditional network programming, is the idea that broadcast forms still persist in contemporary television, despite changes in the industry. This doesn’t necessarily mean scheduled television is still being broadcast by satellite into every living room in the UK and watched nightly in homes across the nation at exactly the same time, but instead refers to the continuation of certain types of programming and forms which were dominant during the broadcast era. Frances Bonner and Jason Jacobs (2017) have recently published an article examining the persistence of television using the BBC series The Good Life (BBC, 1975 – 1978) as a case study. Taking an industrial approach, the writers acknowledge that ‘the [current] rhetoric about television as an industry and as a subject of scholarly research is all about change,

\textsuperscript{47} Mills, Television Sitcom, p. 55.

threats and an uncertain future.’ Despite this, their main argument is that the ‘screens themselves may be different and much more diverse than those on which it was first encountered, the quality of the image may be much improved and the terms of the encounter may no longer be entirely determined by a broadcaster, but the content remains very recognisable.’ Their example of The Good Life and its frequent repeat showings, commissioning of related works, and references to the show in the ‘personas of its actors and their subsequent work’ is mostly irrelevant to the post-broadcast content I will be engaging with in this thesis. However, it is worth noting that this article is the first part of a larger forthcoming project where Bonner and Jacobs may identify this persistence in more contemporary shows. The ideas of repetition, familiarity, adaptation, and re-evaluation which they frequently refer to are particularly important with regards to the most popular television comedy sub-genre – the sitcom. I will explore these characteristics of the sitcom, and the idea of persistence, in my section on comedy television below.

There have been variations of this counter-argument about the persistence of broadcast television which once again date back to the early-2000s popularity of cable channels such as HBO. McCabe and Akass noted ‘HBO may set itself apart from network channels, but it is embedded in the very working practices of and business strategies that it sets itself against.’ For HBO’s continued production of high culture ‘quality tv’ to exist, there had to be its symbiotic low culture counterpart of broadcast network television. These writers aren’t necessarily describing a persistence, but rather a necessity for broadcast television, in order for the post-broadcast programme to have something to set itself apart from. McCabe and Akass end their chapter (published in 2008) by concluding that ‘HBO has started to lose ground to other cable companies like FX ... and Showtime ... who, absorbing the lessons ... [have] translated the “quality” formula for the

50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., p. 8.
52 McCabe and Akass, ‘It’s not TV, it’s HBO’s original programming: Producing quality TV’ in Leverette, Ott, and Buckley (ed.), It’s Not TV, p. 86.
mainstream.\textsuperscript{53} Reflecting on HBO and its paying subscriber model in 2014, Dean J. DeFino wrote, ‘the network has found itself in an increasingly competitive video market, with ... an increasing number of “cable-cutters” who prefer to watch television via a la carte services (iTunes, Hulu Plus), and web-based companies venturing into original series of a quality comparable to HBO’.\textsuperscript{54} This echoes McCabe and Akass’ sentiment that ‘It is still HBO, but television has caught up.’\textsuperscript{55}

However, in her 2016 essay, ‘Is this TVIV? On Netflix, TVIII and binge-watching’, Mareike Jenner questions whether the newer, web-based companies can still be considered television. Many of the debates surrounding televisuality in the 1980s and 90s, and then ‘quality TV’ with HBO in the 1990s and 2000s have been carried forward into the streaming era (and many of them will continue to be discussed in relation to comedy programmes in this research). But Jenner questions some academics’ grouping of streaming services with subscription based cable channels such as HBO, stating ‘Netflix (as representative of VOD [video on demand] as producer of original content) signals a significant shift in a new media landscape and problematises known terminologies.’\textsuperscript{56} Roberta Pearson (2011) has discussed the segmentation of US television into three distinct categories; TVI which roughly covers a 30-year period from the 1950s to the early 1980s during which there were three main networks. TVII refers to network expansion and the rise in ‘quality tv’ which took place between the early 1980s and the late 1990s. Finally, TVIII signifies a rise in audience fragmentation resulting from the proliferation of digital television platforms during the 2000s.\textsuperscript{57} In her essay, Jenner, whilst acknowledging the problematic aspects of dividing television history into these categories, goes on to question Pearson’s decision to stop at TVIII. For Jenner, there is ‘a difference between the TVIII of the early 2000s when premium cable channels became more

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\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p. 92.
\textsuperscript{54} DeFino, \textit{The HBO Effect}, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{55} McCabe and Akass, ‘It’s not TV, it’s HBO’s original programming: Producing quality TV’ in Leverette, Ott, and Buckley (ed.), It’s Not TV, p. 92.
\textsuperscript{57} For a more detailed description of these categories, see Roberta Pearson, ‘Cult television as digital television’s cutting edge’ in: Bennett J and Strange N (eds.) Television as Digital Media (Console-ing Passions), pp. 105–131.
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dominant and 2007, incidentally also the year Netflix moved its content online, which can be distinguished by Netflix’s ‘move away from the television set’ resulting in ‘the disruption of distinctions between film, television, DVD and online video platforms such as Vimeo or YouTube’. Jenner argues for a TVIV, an ‘era of matrix media where viewing patterns, branding strategies, industrial structures, the way different media forms interact with each other or the various ways content is made available shift completely away from the television set.’ This is elaborated upon in her 2018 book, where she understands TVIV as a process which ‘brings together discourses of technology, audience behaviour, industry, policy, national media systems.’

Jenner’s classification of Netflix as something which has moved away from the television set is valid with regards to the fact that it can be watched on laptops and mobile phones. However, as discussed in her essay, there was also a shift in 2007 by numerous broadcasting networks in both the UK and the US to digital platforms such as the iPlayer. There has to be a further element which separates the streaming service from traditional broadcast television. Jenner believes this can be found in the lack of certain programmes on streaming services, stating ‘VOD service[s] … [offer] none of the more ‘traditional’ television genres, such as news, game shows, sporting events or other programmes associated with TV’s live aesthetics.’ More recently, Netflix has started including variations on talk-shows with the short-lived Chelsea, hosted by female comedian Chelsea Handler, and more unconventionally, in a monthly show marking the return to screens of late-night talk show host, David Letterman, in My Next Guest Needs No Introduction with David Letterman (Netflix, 2018 - ). Whether this becomes established as a popular format on Netflix and other streaming services such as Prime Video or Hulu will only become clear in time. As far as comedy television is concerned, there have

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59 Ibid., p. 259.
60 Ibid., p. 260.
61 Ibid.
63 It should be acknowledged that many people, myself included, access Netflix on the television via an app as well as through other devices such as mobile phones and laptops.
been attempts (evident in programmes like The Ranch [Netflix, 2016 - 2020]) to revert back to a more traditional style of sitcom. However, based on critical writing and online audience responses, the more successful shows have been those that have followed in the footsteps of a company such as HBO or other recent broadcast sitcoms such as It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia (FX/FXX, 2005 - ) or New Girl (Fox, 2011 – 2018), by exhibiting more reflexive characteristics and bypassing certain sitcom tropes such as the audience laugh track or the ‘three-headed monster’ camera setup. For Jenner, the shift to TVIV is justified based on Netflix’s targeting of ‘increasingly smaller audience segments (from mass medium to niche medium)’.65 This shift will be explored further throughout the thesis, particularly in Chapter 2 when I reflect on the cancellation of a number of post-broadcast comedy original programmes.

Industry and Business Models

The most frequently published scholarship to emerge from and about the post-broadcast era is focused on the industrial and business aspects of these services. Whilst these methodological approaches don’t form the focus of this research project, this scholarship often provides interesting context and frequently intersects with audience viewing patterns such as ‘binge-watching’. Spigel and Olsson’s edited collection, Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition, includes work by Jostein Grisprud which focuses on the differences between internet platforms and broadcast television. As early as 2004, Gripsrud is able to illuminate the different modes in which a viewer operates when using these two different platforms, stating, ‘The Internet is a largely a space for purposeful activity’66 where one will ‘… search for specific sorts of information’.67 He contrasts this with the description of broadcast television, where viewers will tend to ‘flip through two to five favorite mixed channels to look for anything of interest’68,

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67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
resulting in a more passive viewer, allowing themselves to ‘be informed and entertained by broadcast television’. For Gripsrud, these are viewers who cannot be expected to plan their viewing ‘as isolated individuals … constantly talking back to producers and/or distributors.’ He goes on to discuss the amusing utopian image that is perpetuated by ‘alienated’ academics, of viewers enjoying ‘total “freedom” from the powerful programmers of broadcast TV’ as a result of the amount of choice they are afforded by the internet. Writing in 2016, following the rise of online streaming as a popular platform to watch television, Sarah Arnold follows up on some of the ideas discussed by Gripsrud’s piece, examining the ‘myth’ of choice and autonomy offered by online streaming services. Arnold refers to the measurement of broadcast television audiences as speculative, whereas services like Netflix ‘make a special claim to knowledge about the identity and personhood of the individual members of its audience’ using their application of data ‘gleaned from online user interactions as a way of profiling and controlling the behaviour of every individual.’ Arnold accounts for her scepticism of what has also been called the ‘Mathematization of Taste’ by Neta Alexander, by explaining that ‘traditional audience measurement systems formed knowledge of the audience by mapping data onto human activity and sociality … [but] Netflix’s model of knowledge production reduces humans to digital traces or events’ thus allowing the platform to ‘exert power over the user, who becomes less autonomous, the more their interactions are exploited by the service’. Arnold believes this eventually results in a situation where ‘the user does not bring their identity – along with the complexities that inform it – to the platform, rather the platform has

69 Ibid., p. 219.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
determined what these mean.’

This examination of data and algorithms is not what I focus on in my research, but it would be interesting to consider the suggestion that the original content designed to reach to niche audiences and specific demographics is actually aimed at a much broader viewership. This also relates back to the ideas about the persistence of broadcast forms and the desire to reach the widest possible audience.

Another piece of scholarship focused on the business practices of Netflix and the streaming industry is Gina Keating’s 2012 book, *Netflixed*, which charts the history of the company from its early days of mailed DVD-rentals to the move of its catalogue online in 2007. Regarding the growth of the company’s online library, she writes, ‘Its streaming service has grown from one thousand titles at the start of its launch in January 2007 to forty-five thousand that can be streamed on more than seven hundred devices.’

Keating’s book was released just before the company decided to commit to creating original content for the platform, leading her to release a revised edition the following year with an epilogue discussing the recent developments. By this point in time, she notes that Netflix subscribers ‘claim 35 percent of U.S. Internet bandwidth by streaming movies during evening hours – the largest source of internet traffic overall.’

However, these figures only take viewing figures of movies into consideration; following the release of *House of Cards*, Netflix reported ‘higher-than-expected subscriber growth in the United States and new international markets’. In addition to the illuminating statistics in the book, Keating also provides an interesting insight into the company’s strategy and decision making behind the creation of its original content. As a result of their 15-plus years as a postal DVD website, and later as an online streaming service, Keating notes that the company could ‘predict with a great degree of accuracy where the industry was going’, even when ‘algorithmic insights conflicted with

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77 Ibid., p. 56.
79 Ibid., p. 255.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., p. 261.
conventional wisdom about consumer behaviour.'82 One such example of these conflicting ideas surrounding television consumption was the phenomenon of ‘binge watching’, which consists of watching ‘multiple episodes of a TV series in one sitting.’83 Brunsdon explores this term and its various connotations in her 2010 essay, ‘Bingeing on Box-Sets’, where she finds a connection between the term and the discussions surrounding ‘more cinematic ... less televisual’84 types of television where it is usually deployed. For Brunsdon, the term can be related to, and seen as an evolution of the ‘addiction’ which was previously used to describe somewhat contemptuous perceptions of unhealthy television viewing habits. Lisa G. Perks has in fact used the term ‘media-marathon’ to ‘both avoid stigmatized language (e.g., “binge”) and include multiple media.’85 Now that post-network drama programmes carry an air of distinction, the term binging has become increasingly popular; seen as a way of describing ‘bad television watching (‘piggy pleasures’), as opposed to the watching of bad television’86 which, as discussed in the previous section on quality TV, post-broadcast programming is rarely viewed as. Mareike Jenner describes binge-watching as ‘a practice where several episodes of a serialised programme are watched on a medium other than linear television’, believing the practice to have become ‘more than just a mode of viewing’ and instead a ‘publishing model that dictates how content is supposed to be watched on Netflix.’87

Netflix had the knowledge that many subscribers preferred to watch more than just one piece of content in one sitting, so ultimately decided to release all 13 episodes of House of Cards at the same time. This is a practice they would continue to use later that year with their first (semi-original) comedy television programme,

82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
87 Jenner, Netflix and the Re-invention of Television, p. 109.
Arrested Development. Whilst helpfully providing a chronological timeline of Netflix’s business history, the important decisions the company have made, and the reasons behind those decisions, Keating’s book often feels too laudatory, closing the book with ‘Netflix has teed up a roster of original series designed to change, perhaps forever, the way television is made and marketed’\textsuperscript{88}, a statement which may be true, but a bold and unsupported one nonetheless. In addition to this, she opens the book with a dedication to the company itself, for ‘letting me into their story’\textsuperscript{89}, a remark which makes the work seem ‘authorised’ and unable to truly provide critical insight into Netflix’s business and the choices they make.

More insightful academic criticism and more recent statistics regarding the company and the wider streaming industry can be found in the 2016 book, The Netflix Effect, edited by Kevin McDonald and Daniel Smith-Rowsey. In their introduction, the editors acknowledge that ‘much of Netflix’s success is due to advances in technological convergence’\textsuperscript{90} citing the progress in high-speed, wireless internet available on a variety of devices as crucial to the rise in popularity of the company. These technological advancements also shifted the ‘expectations about accessibility and convenience, popularizing presumptions that culture circulates best on an on-demand basis.’\textsuperscript{91} The editors also discuss how the name ‘Netflix’ has a new type of ‘relevance in the midst of a new Golden Age in television. More than just a “net of movies” or “internet flicks,” it now suggests a new kind of television “network”’.\textsuperscript{92} Where my research is interested in the idea of Netflix being synonymous with a certain type or style of television comedy on an aesthetic level, for these scholars, the concern mainly lies with the company’s ‘status as an outsider, upstart, disruptor, underdog, and … “game changer”’\textsuperscript{93} from an industrial perspective.

\textsuperscript{88} Keating, Netflixed: The Epic Battle for America’s Eyeballs, p. 263.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., p. v.
\textsuperscript{90} Kevin McDonald and Daniel Smith-Rowsey, ‘Introduction’ in McDonald and Smith-Rowsey (eds.) The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., p. 4
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid.
Elsewhere in the collection, Casey J. McCormick returns to the idea of binge-viewing, which, as evidenced in the aforementioned Brunsdon essay, was already in use as a term preceding the post-broadcast era as a result of the rise in popularity of DVD boxsets. Whereas Brunsdon’s theoretical approach questions the connotations of using words such as bingeing and addiction in relation to what is perceived as quality television, McCormick also applies a statistical analysis to this subject, stating ‘many analysts define [binge-viewing] as watching three or more episodes in a row.’ Whilst the act of bingeing television programmes has been occurring for a the past few decades in one form or another (from recorded VCR tapes to DVD boxsets), the term use and awareness of the term ‘binge watching’ has seen an exponential increase in every year from 2013 onwards, as evidenced by a graph in McCormick’s essay. More important than the fact that 2013 was the year Netflix began releasing original content, is that 2013 was when they began releasing multiple episodes of their content simultaneously. Using *House of Cards* as a case study, McCormick believes the show ‘invites, even challenges, its viewers to fully immerse themselves in the narrative world’. This ‘challenge’ is something the company themselves seem to encourage in a playful manner on their various social media platforms upon the release of new shows. McCormick notes that the company has ‘fully embraced its reputation as a binge platform in its promotional campaigns’ citing their 2015 PSA videos, released on April Fools day, where various actors from their original shows warned against the dangers of bingeing. McCormick believes the most important thing to emerge from bingeing television shows is that it ‘reasserts the communal elements of viewing that many scholars and critics argue are lost in on-demand culture.’ For example, certain shows may be watched as quickly as possible so its viewers can talk freely about it with those who have also binged.

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95 Ibid.
96 Ibid., p. 103.
97 Ibid., p. 112.
Whilst McCormick’s discussion of bingeing and analysis of statistics is helpful for my research, the use of *House of Cards* as a case study excludes any discussion of television comedy aesthetics and brings into question the relevance of her discussion to my research. McCormick believes the show ‘establishes narrative parameters that mark it as a bingeable text’\(^98\) through the way it is catalogued and titled on the platform, noting, ‘episodes do not have unique titles, but are instead represented as “Chapters” by the Netflix interface.’\(^99\) This is important on a number of levels as ‘the use of a chapter format implicitly marks the text as a “quality” or “good” cultural object – associating *House of Cards* with the prestige of literature’\(^100\) whilst the simultaneous release of its episodes has also led to it being perceived as a ’13-hour movie‘.\(^101\) If we momentarily continue with the literary analogy, as a reader, it is likely that you will read multiple chapters in one sitting, especially if they are neatly segmented into relatively short bursts (or, in the case of drama television, 50-minute episodes). Therefore, with *House of Cards*, the encouragement to binge is built-in to the show and Netflix’s labelling of its episodes. There are no examples of original comedy television programmes being titled in such a way on Netflix, but the company arguably attempts to achieve the same sense of organised unity with the narrativization of its content. For example, the revival of *Wet Hot American Summer: First Day of Camp* was a short and, until recently, one-off comedy miniseries which acted as a prequel to the 2001 cult film of the same name. Its eight 30-minute episodes all take place over a 24-hour period, depicting the first day of an American summer camp. Because of the short time period over which the series is set, and the even shorter amount of time it takes to watch the episodes, it is more likely that the viewer would decide to binge large parts of the show in as few sittings as possible, if not all in one go, than spread it out over weeks. This narrative structure also becomes part of the show’s surreal humour where, as events accumulate over the course of the show, it becomes an

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\(^{98}\) Ibid., p. 105

\(^{99}\) Ibid.

\(^{100}\) Ibid.

increasingly absurd notion that everything that occurs has happened in a 24-hour time period. Another narrative technique identified by McCormick as being designed to encourage binge-watching is the ‘nontraditional presentations of narrative temporality’\textsuperscript{102} where the show’s writers create ‘story gaps that require negotiation through attentive viewing’\textsuperscript{103} This technique has crossed over from original drama content to comedy, most explicitly in the convoluted fourth season of \textit{Arrested Development}, but also occurs in more character-based comedy dramas such as \textit{Love} where the actions of and interactions between characters are subtle and often very important with regards to how the narrative of the show progresses.

Closely related to scholarship surrounding binge-watching and its effects on the narrativization of post-broadcast television is critical writing by Lotz and Mittell. Lotz’s work from 2007 was written in the context of a post-network era, before the existence of online streaming. However, she concludes her book on changing television in the age of convergence with a chapter titled ‘Television Storytelling Possibilities at the Beginning of the Post-Network Era’, acknowledging that none of the shows used as examples ‘could have existed on network-era television’\textsuperscript{104} and provides evidence of how the changes in both the production and distribution process have ‘created opportunities for stories much different from those of the network era.’\textsuperscript{105} With regards to comedy programming, Lotz focuses on \textit{Sex and the City} (HBO, 1998 – 2004), noting how the show’s distribution on a cable network allowed for its ‘explicit sexual content and frank conversations about sex’\textsuperscript{106}, stressing the opportunities cable provides for the dramatization of more mature content. This is certainly the case with the majority of original content produced by Netflix and Amazon Video, as the programmes explore more explicit subject matter than would be allowed on network television. These shows also often blend comedic and dramatic tones without hesitation, having being freed from the constraints of appealing to the widest possible audience. Niche audiences become

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{104} Lotz, \textit{The Television Will Be Revolutionized}, p. 216
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
the focus of Lotz’s second comedy case study of Arrested Development, which, at the time of her writing, had been cancelled indefinitely by the Fox network. Lotz states the show has ‘too niche a tone to succeed on a Big Four network’\(^{107}\) and its fanbase and dedicated cult following wasn’t ‘large enough to support broadcast economics.’\(^{108}\) She then links the programme’s cult following to its post-broadcast life on DVD and other online and cable services, noting that its syndication on HDNet, G4, and MSN online marked ‘the first time a show has been simultaneously syndicated on three platforms’.\(^{109}\) As previously discussed, niche audiences are the ones being targeted by post-broadcast services; the dedicated fanbase of Arrested Development presumably being one of the biggest reasons the show was revived for Netflix when they began to produce original content.

Mittell’s 2015 book, Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling also uses Arrested Development as an example when arguing that ‘over the past two decades, a new model of storytelling has emerged as an alternative to the conventional episodic and serial forms that have typified most American television since its inception’\(^{110}\), a form of television he has labelled ‘narrative complexity’. Television drama is most commonly used when discussing complex narratives in contemporary television but the case study of Arrested Development shows that the shift described by Mittell is also prevalent in comedy programming. He notes how, when watching the show, viewers are encouraged to ‘catch split-second visual gags and to pause the frantic pace to recover from laughter’.\(^{111}\) Whilst this has been possible since the advent of the VCR, this viewing behaviour was ‘fully enabled during the program’s … fourth season, as all viewers had even more control of the screen time than they did on the broadcast original’\(^{112}\), being allowed to create their own narrative running order as each episode of the show occurs at roughly the same time, with each one filling in (and leaving out)

\(^{107}\) Ibid., p. 232.
\(^{108}\) Ibid.
\(^{109}\) Ibid., p. 234
\(^{111}\) Ibid., p. 38.
\(^{112}\) Ibid.
information to be provided in other episodes. Mittell refers to the ‘self-consciousness in this mode of plotting’¹¹³ by noting that the show often has ‘six or more storylines bouncing off one another, resulting in unlikely coincidences, twists, and ironic repercussions, some of which may not become evident until subsequent episodes’¹¹⁴.

The popularity of the show amongst a niche but dedicated fanbase has resulted in a 2015 scholarly collection of critical essays titled, *A State of Arrested Development*. The show’s fourth season is the subject of a chapter by Michael Graves, examining its potential as a bingeable text and the antagonism it created between fans and critics, much of which took place over social media. Graves’ methodology of examining numerous social media posts from fans of the show, the creators, and Netflix is one I will apply to some of my own writing to determine audience responses and readings of texts, and the way it is being positioned, advertised, and sometimes defended by the content’s creators. Graves’ chapter also includes statistics alongside his analysis of the reaction to *Arrested Development*’s fourth season but, as a result of its focus on the show’s consumption, ultimately refrains from producing any close textual analysis or offering examples of how the show works on a narrative and comedic level. I will explore this area further and examine how the show’s increasing narrative complexity works in relation to its comedic style.

While much of the scholarship on post-broadcast television has been useful to my research and will be returned to periodically in each chapter, my hope is to apply it to the post-broadcast comedy programme in a text-oriented way, similar to the aforementioned work on many ‘quality’ and/or post-broadcast serial drama programmes. Ideas surrounding ‘quality’ will be returned to in Chapter Three’s focus on *BoJack Horseman* and scholarship regarding binge-watching and narrative structure will be pertinent to my respective analysis of *Arrested Development* and *Love* in Chapter’s One and Two.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 43
¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 42.
Before discussing scholarship surrounding television comedy, it is valuable to briefly explore work on humour theory, some of which will recur throughout the thesis. Noel Carroll discusses a number of jokes and gags relevant to comedy, such as the sight gag, ‘a form of visual humour in which amusement is generated by the play of alternative interpretations projected by the image.’\footnote{Noël Carroll, \textit{Theorizing the Moving Image} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 146.} With the sight gag, Carroll states that amusement is sometimes ‘provoked by the juxtaposition of incongruous elements.’\footnote{Ibid., p. 147.} This links to a point made by Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik in their book, \textit{Popular Film and Television Comedy}. They write, ‘comedy and the comic have their own – generic – regimes of verisimilitude, their own – generic – decorum, their own – generic – norms, conventions, and rules. In comedy, we expect the unexpected.’\footnote{Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, \textit{Popular Film and Television Comedy} (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 91.} For them, the genre of comedy is a place for ‘the inappropriate, the proper place for indecorum, the field in which the unlikely is likely to occur.’\footnote{Ibid., p. 92.} Another type of comedy outlined by Carroll is the verbal joke. For Carroll, ‘verbal jokes generally culminate in a punchline that at first glance is incongruous by virtue of its appearing to be nonsense. Once the punchline is delivered, however, the audience has to give it an unexpected ... or retrospectively comprehensible, interpretation that makes sense out of the incongruity.’\footnote{Carroll, \textit{Theorizing the Moving Image}, p. 147.} These types of verbal jokes often occur in stand-up comedy and will be referred to in Chapter Four.

The majority of writing on television comedy underlines the ‘immense variety and range of its forms.’\footnote{Neale and Krutnik, \textit{Popular Film and Television Comedy}, p. 10.} Mills briefly outlines these variations in the genre, ranging from ‘sitcom[s], sketch shows, stand-up, advertising and animation, as well as the role of comedy in other genres such as drama, news, chat shows and so on. Furthermore, variations within each of these genres are vast.’\footnote{Mills, ‘Studying Comedy’ in Creeber (ed.), \textit{The Television Genre Book – Third Edition}, p. 89.} Despite this, the
most popular branch of television comedy, with regards to both viewership and scholarship, is the sitcom. Because of this, as well as its origins as one of the earliest forms of television comedy, it makes a fitting point to begin this section in which I establish the critical framework from comedy studies for this thesis. A number of scholars have identified a set of clearly defined characteristics for the sitcom relating to its visual style, narrative structure, and comedic tone, almost all of which comes from a broadcast context, which I will explore and relate to the post-broadcast era which, in some cases, complicates traditional perceptions of sitcom characteristics. I will then examine the large amount of scholarship focused on issues of representation in the sitcom, particularly feminist writing focused on gender representation and the relation this has to the sitcom being viewed as a conservative sub-genre. I will conclude by focusing on the (more limited) scholarship on a range of less popular sub-genres of television comedy such as the adult animation and stand-up comedy.

Sitcom Form and Conventions

Up until recently, one of the most immediately recognisable characteristics of the sitcom has been its non-diegetic laugh track. Regarding this convention, Brett Mills observes, ‘Sitcoms are odd in that they often work for two audiences; the one in the studio laughing “live” and contributing to the laugh track, and the audience at home watching within the complex variables of the domestic space.’\(^{122}\) This has interesting implications for contemporary viewers who access streaming content. The sitcoms being produced by both Amazon Video and Netflix are mostly completely devoid of a laugh-track. One of the exceptions to this rule is \textit{The Ranch} and it is notable that, when surveying critical aggregate websites such as Metacritic, or reading long-form reviews from popular film and television websites, such as \textit{The AV Club}, the critical response to this show has been, at best, mixed, compared to shows such as \textit{BoJack Horseman}, \textit{Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt}, and \textit{Love}. The traditional sitcom, with its laugh track intact, appears to be at odds with post-broadcast television’s method of delivery, on everything from mobile phones and

\(^{122}\) Mills, \textit{Television Sitcom}, p. 15.
tablets, to laptops and games consoles. For Mills, the sitcom ‘binds groups together at the moment of consumption. The laugh track is a device which attempts to remind audiences that they’re not laughing at this stuff alone, and therefore the pleasures of comedy ... are often social.’\textsuperscript{123} However, the way audiences consume post-broadcast television, particularly if it’s on a personal mobile device, implies more isolated viewing practices. Moreover, the vastness of content created by streaming services and Netflix’s controversial refusal to release their ratings, combined with the removal of the laugh-track, means that there are fewer ways to gauge whether you might be the only one laughing at a particular show, fostering a lesser sense of community in the comedy audience.

The fragmentation of audiences through various digital media platforms and the unsynchronised temporalities they offer with regards to whether one chooses to ‘binge’ or pace themselves, may have changed not only the way the shows are understood, but the ways in which they are conceived and written. It is noted by scholars such as Mills and Feuer that one of the reasons for the sitcom’s endurance has been its ability to respond to changing social trends to retain a sense of relevancy. It seems unanimously viewed as a genre which has ‘repeatedly responded to changes within the societies which produce it.’\textsuperscript{124} We might look, for example, at the representation of family in the television sitcom to see how the genre adapts to/for the times in which it is produced. The nuclear families depicted in the early sitcoms of the 1950s and ‘60s were updated with the single-parent family in \textit{Full House} (ABC, 1987 – 1995), and the lineage of the surrogate family portrayed in \textit{Seinfeld} and \textit{Friends} can be seen in many post-broadcast shows, such as \textit{Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt} and \textit{BoJack Horseman}. Discussing the importance of the family in sitcoms, John Hartley writes, ‘Family or domestic sitcoms were perhaps the bedrock of broadcast television.’\textsuperscript{125} However, he also mentions that in these sitcoms, ‘within the sphere of everyday ordinariness, families were fractured

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., p. 142.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., p. 45.
This is evident in sitcoms from before the post-broadcast era, but I’d argue that in one specific instance, the platform of streaming television has allowed for the fragmented family to be depicted in a way that changes the form of the programme itself. Netflix’s fourth season of *Arrested Development* depicts the Bluth family in a way that they hadn’t been presented during the show’s three-year run on the Fox network in the mid-2000s. Instead of the ensemble cast appearing together in numerous scenes, as was the case during its initial broadcast, the Netflix episodes underline the family’s fragmentation by providing each of the characters with their own episode, which, when viewed alongside the rest of the season, coheres to create a connected, albeit slightly convoluted, narrative. There are some examples of experimental narrative forms in broadcast comedy television, such as the final season of *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS, 2005 – 2014), which takes place over the course of a single weekend. However, this divergence from a more traditional narrative approach is an aberration. The *Arrested Development* example is also an isolated case and not indicative of the way Netflix decided to continue with regards to their creative process for original comedy television. However, the company’s attempt to try this formula with the first original comedy programme made under their name should not be understated. This approach foregrounded new possibilities for long-form, increasingly complex comedy television in the mainstream and I will argue in greater detail that its lineage can be traced to more recent experimental efforts during my first chapter. On a wider level, the formal variation of post-broadcast television sitcoms, what Mittell has referred to as its ‘narrative pyrotechnics’\(^\text{127}\), has allowed for more complex and nuanced representations of the fragmented family.

One final recurring aspect of the sitcom that has been central for its scholarship, recognised here by Mills and Neale and Krutnik, are its two dominant types; the sitcom that is set in a domestic environment, and the one that is located in the workplace. John Hartley believes these two types of sitcoms are easily

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\(^{126}\) Ibid.

\(^{127}\) Jason Mittell, ‘Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television’ in *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (Fall, 2006) p. 35.
identifiable through their tonally different and divergent concerns. He calls one ‘the drama of family comportment (often mixed with sibling rivalry) and the [other, the] drama of sexual exploration.’

The focus on family comportment is most obvious in the domestic sitcom and its focus on the relationships between family members, most frequently in their home. Hartley has noted the ability of the sitcom to change its family dynamic in order to reflect the changes taking place in society by referring to its frequently ‘fractured’ families. This underlying sense of fracture which is often at odds with the ordinary, routine, conservatism of the sub-genre means that sitcoms’ attention to ‘some of the grittier issues lurking under suburban consumerism … [makes] them capable of politics.’

On the other hand, workplace sitcoms, in spite of their setting, are ‘generically driven to be about sexual chemistry rather than occupational specificity. They routinely [revert] … to an almost obsessive focus on ‘situations’ that [occur] … in relationships rather than in workplaces as such’. From this, it can be gathered that workplace sitcoms are focused mainly on relationships and that the circumstances of their setting are often used simply as a means of getting to the joke. The notion that the setting of the workplace encourages a more overtly sexual atmosphere and raunchier type of humour has been undermined in other forms of post-broadcast sitcom. In post-broadcast television, sex has entered the domestic, family-oriented space in more explicit ways than it had before in other broadcast television programmes. For example, in the animated Netflix original sitcom, *F is for Family*, the show includes a relatively explicit sequence depicting foreplay between the central character, Frank (voiced by the show’s writer and creator, Bill Burr), and his wife, Sue (Laura Dern). Unbeknownst to them, their teenage son, Kevin (Justin Long), is hiding under their bed, as a result of several extended narrative convolutions. Kevin’s horrified face is framed by the spread legs of his father in the foreground of the shot, with his semi-flaccid, dangling penis entering the shot from the top of the frame. Not only does this depict sexuality in

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129 Ibid.
130 Ibid., p. 98.
the domestic environment, a location which has previously been characterised as wholesome and wholly separated from sex and desire, particularly when a nuclear family is involved, but it also seems self-reflexive about this intrusion, portraying it as a marked moment of shock and, from Kevin’s perspective, grotesque horror. These examples signify the post-broadcast sitcom’s distance from traditional definitions of its form, and the sequence from *F is for Family* gestures towards further debates surrounding gross-out comedy, bad taste, and the limits of what can and can’t be shown on television, particularly in animated shows. I will return to these issues in the adult animated comedy section of this literature review.

**Conservatism and Representation in the Sitcom**

Complicating the notion of the sitcom as a sub-genre which constantly responds to the changing society in which it exists, is the idea that the sitcom is an inherently conservative genre (with regards to both its aesthetics and politics). Mundy and White believe ‘the general conservatism of the television medium has been damaging to its critical credibility, and television’s availability and appeal to the mainstream have further contributed to its low critical status: familiarity breeds contempt.’¹³¹ Traditional sitcoms almost always share similar themes and aesthetic tropes such as a focus on the family unit, the presence of a laugh track, and the ‘three-headed monster’ shooting technique describing how a typical sitcom scene is filmed ‘thrice simultaneously: one covering the whole, one focused on the speaker and one on whoever is reacting to them.’¹³² Stabile and Harrison define what is meant by the invocation of a ‘traditional family’ in the sitcom, stating, ‘the traditional family includes a male dad, a female mom, and, ideally, a son and daughter. They are white, middle class and live in the suburbs rather than the city or country. African-Americans, immigrants of all ethnicities and races, and gay men and lesbians mainly do not exist within this vision.’¹³³ Whilst it is worth noting that their book was written before the rise of post-broadcast television and that their

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¹³² Ibid., pp. 105 – 106.
definition of a conservative sitcom family setup can still be broadly applied to more recent broadcast sitcoms such as *The Middle* (ABC, 2009 - 2018) and the central Dunphy family in *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009 - 2020), there are numerous exceptions to this statement. Whilst it appears easy to broadly denounce all representations of race, gender, and family in the sitcom as ultimately conservative, the sub-genre reveals itself to be more complex to the discerning viewer, as becomes apparent in the following literature by Mundy and White, Feuer, and Janet Lee.

Mundy and White begin to account for the sitcom’s conservatism by explaining that ‘broadcasters do not ultimately know their audiences or their sensibilities’ as a result of a programme’s need to be suitable for repeated syndication at any point in a broadcast schedule. For example, *Friends* was broadcast in a primetime slot during its initial run on US television, but over a decade after its conclusion, the show is still being consistently repeated throughout the day on the Comedy Central channel in the UK as well as being available to stream at any time on Netflix. As a result of this, the comedy content has to appeal to a fairly broad and homogenous demographic. David Marc refers to the routine, standardized nature of the sitcom in his seminal work, *Comic Visions*, describing the sub-genre as ‘the technology of the assembly-line brought to art.’ Marc believes ‘There is not a moment of network television that fails to resonate with dozens of corporately approved decisions about plotting, dialogue, marketing strategy, or any of a thousand matters of creative production.’ Feuer argues that the sitcom has a ‘framework so simple and so easy to recognise that the sitcom is, literally, child’s play.’ For Feuer, this can be identified as ‘a simple and repeatable frame on which to hang all manner of gags, one-liners, warm moments, physical comedy and ideological conflicts.’ Key here, is the idea of repetition, which appears in the

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136 Ibid., p. 164.
138 Ibid., pp. 100 – 101.
sitcom in the form of running gags, but also outside of the text, when programmes are repeated over the years on different television networks and platforms, creating a sense of familiarity with their jokes. Mills writes, ‘the pleasure of comedy [sometimes] comes from exactly the opposite of surprise, the joy coming from the reiteration of the known.’ Mundy and White invoke Paul Attallah’s notion that repetition and ‘conservatism [are] ... just the sitcom’s version of generic plotting’ which is present in numerous other genres ranging from action cinema to procedural crime drama television. From a more political perspective, the writers suggest that whilst most sitcoms ‘deliver nothing subversive ... they may mark areas of social tension by including, albeit without narrative consequence, other discourses.’ This brings up issues of representation which, through my study of *F is for Family* in the third chapter of this thesis, will be particularly important in relation to gender in the sitcom.

Lauren Rabinovitz believes that the sitcom ‘has been the television genre most consistently associated with feminist heroines and with advocating a progressive politics of liberal feminism.’ The most famous and most frequently cited example of feminism in the sitcom genre is *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970 – 1977). Bonnie J. Dow notes that the show is acknowledged as ‘the first to assert that work was not just a prelude to marriage ... but could form the center of a satisfying life for a woman in the way that it presumably did for men.’ Despite these assertions, Mundy and White believe ‘Patriarchal culture ... has only gradually been revised ... and its biases still remain in place.’ One of the most problematic biases with regards to comedy television is the way women have been incorporated into the genre and its constant insistence that it ‘specifically pairs its participants

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139 Mills, *Television Sitcom*, p. 15.
141 Ibid.
off with men.' Rabinovitz expands on this using the popular long-running sitcom, *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988 – 1998), as well as numerous other sitcoms such as *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988 – 1997) as examples which illustrate how women also ‘continue to be defined in relationship to reproduction’ in television, citing the pregnancy narratives of these shows as instances of this particular depiction of women. Even Dow notes that, whilst *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* ‘offered a very qualified feminist vision that blended discourses of the “new women”’, this was also contrasted with ‘traditional messages about the need for women to continue fulfilling traditional female roles as caretakers and nurturers’.

Typically, in this genre, the relationship between women and the male characters, or to the act of reproduction, appear to be the defining way in which ‘patriarchal society conceives women to be significant, and outside of this format it seems women are “on their own” and therefore suspect’. A key idea here is the ‘unruly woman’, a term coined by Kathleen Rowe in 1995 referring to ‘an icon of a grotesque female whose excesses break social boundaries. She is characterised by a body that is both ‘excessive’ and “loose”’. The term can be applied to performance in a sitcom, or also to a persona performed by a stand-up comic, amongst other things. With regards to the sitcom, Feuer states, the genre ‘has always drawn on a tradition of physical comedy, and the unruly woman is often a female clown’. In post-broadcast comedy, the unruly woman figure has been manifested in more complex ways; a character such as Kimmy Schmidt certainly acts in a broadly comedic way and becomes increasingly empowered and emancipated as the show progresses, but the power of her subversion as opposed to the programme’s subversive quality is questionable as a result of Ellie Kemper’s

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145 Ibid., p. 187.  
148 Ibid.  
151 Ibid.
portrayal of Kimmy as incredibly naïve. Kemper is also less explicit in her language and discourse than examples such as Roseanne Barr, or more recently, Amy Schumer, who has also been cited as an example of the unruly woman figure.\textsuperscript{152}

Feuer debates the potential transgressive nature of the sitcom for women as a result of its immovable narrative architecture. She believes that ‘the episodic format forces us to return to the familiar status quo with this week’s episode began.’\textsuperscript{153} This idea is discussed by Janet Lee in her essay on Roseanne. Lee asks ‘how progressive Roseanne really can be when she interacts in the conventional format of the family sitcom which reifies many of those very structures we might hope to dismantle.’\textsuperscript{154} She concludes that ‘Television is one site where contradictions about the representation of women abound’\textsuperscript{155} and goes on to suggest that, as viewers, ‘we might start by engaging ourselves creatively with the task of living with and enjoying contradictions, learning from the pluralistic array of representation and experience and keeping always our critical and self-reflexive stance that has been informed by feminist inquiries’.\textsuperscript{156} Dow also acknowledges the positivity of feminist representations in The Mary Tyler Moore Show, concluding that Mary’s ‘niceness and docility within her “family” temper the feminist implications of the sitcom’\textsuperscript{157} but those implications are nevertheless ‘still available for the viewers who want to see them.’\textsuperscript{158} Moreover, Lori Landay has stated her belief that the sitcom ‘in particular is a major forum for reflecting and shaping cultural ideals; it is a testing ground for social formations’\textsuperscript{159}, even if this can sometimes lead to contradictory and inherently problematic representations. These

\textsuperscript{152} Rowe’s work on the unruly woman engages with Barr whilst more recent academic and journalistic articles by Claire Graman (2018) and Doreen St. Félix (2019) respectively position Schumer as a contemporary example.


\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., p. 98.

\textsuperscript{157} Dow, Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement since 1970, p. 45.

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid.

beliefs share similarities with Mundy and White’s notion that the sitcom, whilst traditionally being restricted by its narrative format and generic tone, can gesture towards areas of social tension and therefore, widen and extend these discourses towards the mainstream. Rabinovitz names these sitcoms as examples of pushing the ‘envelope of liberal feminism without ever exploding it.’

More recent feminist scholarship, this time focusing on a 21st century comedy text and on cable television can be found in Jane Arthurs’ essay on *Sex and the City* and consumer culture. Arthurs focuses on the viewers as consumers, noting how the show ‘deploy[s] feminist discourses as a response to the cultural changes in the lives of their potential audience, an audience that is addressed as white, heterosexual, and relatively youthful and affluent.’ Crucial here is the word ‘deploy’, which creates a sense of tactical planning on the part of the television company, as opposed to the more utopian possibility of a natural advancement towards equal and fair representation on television. Rabinovitz’s writing supports this idea with the historical insight that ‘Network programming executives initially became interested in “feminist programming” … because it was a good business.’

Regarding the business advantages of targeting specific audiences, with shows on subscriber-based platforms such as HBO, or more recently, Prime Video and Netflix, the consumer’s affluency is of particular importance as the ‘tastes of the audience-as-market, as … purchasers of the channel, are not as obscured by the normalising processes of the mass market’ but are instead are directly catered to.

**Stand-up Comedy**

Discussing the origins of the sitcom, Neale and Krutnik emphasise the sub-genre’s emergence from radio broadcasts of stand-up comics. They state that television

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had begun to ‘supplant radio as the major home-based medium between 1948 and 1952 in America and after 1955 in Britain’ and go on to explain that ‘radio-comedy stars were particularly in demand because of their long-term familiarity to audiences – the same audience sought for television – and after some resistance these stars began to appear on TV once its future was no longer in doubt.’ In the 21st century, there is still clearly a strong desire to see stand-up comedy stars on television, evidenced by the popularity and abundance of the filmed stand-up special on Netflix. Neale and Krutnik’s point could now be extended to stress how stand-up comics who write and perform specials for the platform are often given their own programmes, evidenced with Aziz Ansari and his Netflix original show, *Master of None* (Netflix, 2015 - ). In this specific case, Ansari had written and performed a number of stand-up specials for Netflix. When given the chance to create and star in a scripted comedy show, much of the observational material from these earlier stand-up specials was transposed into fictional circumstances and formed conversations between the characters. Ian Wilkie has noted that ‘contemporary stand-up comics are still drawn to TV for the successful promotion of their product and that TV still needs what stand-ups can offer.’ However, he appears uncertain how ‘both can work together in future to best mutual maximum advantage within the medium’, a query which a show such as *Master of None* has arguably resolved, based on its tremendous critical success and numerous plaudits alone.

I will further examine the combination of stand-up with scripted television in the second chapter in relation to Tig Notaro and Amazon’s *One Mississippi*; however, Neale and Krutnik’s aforementioned point about the crossover appeal of radio comics to broadcast sitcom signals a gap in the existing scholarship on television comedy: that of critical writing on stand-up comedy shows. Other than a thoughtful but brief discussion of the topic by Wilkie in Glen Creeber’s *The

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165 Ibid., p. 231
167 Ibid.
168 The show won a Golden Globe and three Emmy awards in addition to its inclusion on numerous year-end lists from publications such as *The Guardian* and the *Los Angeles Times*. 

Television Genre Book, this sub-genre is rarely expanded upon despite sharing aesthetic similarities with the sitcom in terms of its relationship with the viewer. Wilkie describes how ‘the concept of the dual audience pervades in televised stand-up. To try to recreate the atmosphere of a live, communal experience there will usually be a studio or theatre audience present during the recording of a stand-up’s routine.’\(^{169}\) Marc is quick to draw a distinction between the sitcom and stand-up performance; for him, it comes down to an issue of didacticism. He writes, ‘Experiments notwithstanding ... producers working in the [sitcom] genre have taken pains to respect the age-old tradition of grafting humour to moral suasion.’\(^{170}\) This reflects the idea of the sitcom as inherently conservative, not just in its visual style and tone but also in its message, whereas, for Marc, stand-up ‘promises the audience nothing other than laughter’\(^{171}\) and therefore ‘retains the right to thumb its nose at didacticism.’\(^{172}\) Marc’s claim will be contested in the fourth chapter through my analysis of several post-broadcast stand-up specials such as the aforementioned work of Hannah Gadsby and Dave Chappelle.

Marc might have been better describing the stand-up comedian’s routine as one which is always focused on laughter; where producing the response of laughter from an audience is always the end game of the comedian’s jokes. However, to say that the show promises nothing other than laughs is discrediting some of the content and topics which the performer covers, as well as the way it is visually incorporated into the stand-up performance, both physically by the comedian and aesthetically by the camerawork and editing. Referring to the early canonical HBO stand-up specials, Haggins and Lotz state ‘At the time of the network’s launch, HBO’s telecasts of stand-up comedy performances first provided some of its most distinctive and important programming’.\(^{173}\) These performances were distinctive because of the lack of restraint required by the performers as a result of HBO’s

\(^{171}\) Ibid.
\(^{172}\) Ibid.
cable status and important for the ways in which the ‘legacy of 60-minute stand-up specials helped to make stand-up comics like rock stars’[^174] and allowing them to ‘enter mainstream American popular consciousness.’[^175] This is arguably still the case in a post-broadcast context where, recently, Netflix acquired the worldwide rights to stream internationally famous comedian Ricky Gervais’ new stand-up show for an undisclosed amount. The amount is reported to be the highest ever paid for a UK stand-up special and the company have already secured the exclusive rights to stream his next show, which is yet to be performed or even written.[^176] In this last instance, the boundaries become blurred between Netflix as a company dealing in the acquisition of content and as opposed to a company dealing in the creation of content. This is something I will return to in my chapter on stand-up when I focus on the various projects produced by the company starring recurring comedians in both scripted fictional shows and stand-up performances.

From a business standpoint, stand-up programmes are seen to ‘represent production costs and values that are, potentially minimal. TV commissions and churns out comedy.’[^177] This may go some way to explain the popularity of original stand-up specials commissioned by Netflix. This also creates relationships between comic performers and the company which allows for future collaborations, as has already been discussed in relation to Aziz Ansari’s *Master of None*, but is also evident with writers and performers such as Maria Bamford and Judd Apatow. When stand-up comedy is streamed as opposed to broadcast, and often intended to reach different types of niche audiences, ‘the parameters of “joking” … [can] explore the limits of “taste” policed by TV legislators.’[^178] Ideas about the potential to refuse a didactic tone, and put forward a moral message, instead using the platform to test comedic boundaries means stand-up comedy can often be viewed alongside the adult animated comedy as a sub-genre to express a transgressive

[^174]: Ibid.
[^175]: Ibid., p. 152.
[^178]: Ibid., 96.
attitude and re-establish pre-existing perceptions of good and bad taste. As mentioned, these ideas will be returned to in my analysis of the post-broadcast stand-up work of Hannah Gadsby and Dave Chappelle in Chapter Four.

**Adult animated comedy**

Paul Wells notes that ‘little attention has been given to animation on television’ and with regards to the animated comedy, Stabile and Harrison discuss its ‘doubly devalued status’. For them, the animated comedy can be viewed as ‘the offspring of a conventionally devalued medium (television) whose cultural products have only recently been considered worthy of scholarly scrutiny, and as the odd recombinant form of two similarly degraded genres – … the sitcom and the cartoon.’ Mundy and White make a point of stressing that ‘Animation is a serious business, bedevilled by popular misconceptions that it is: (1) for children; (2) short; and (3) always funny.’ The shift towards animation being considered acceptable entertainment for adults and in many cases, the era when it specifically began to target adults was the 1980s and ‘90s. Wells discusses the idea of animation being ‘not only for children but also for adults, and [that] … “children” in the 1980s and 1990s were changing.’ This change was reflected in the tone of many of the animated sitcoms from the 1990s such as *Beavis and Butt-Head* (MTV, 1993 – 1997, 2011) and *South Park* (Comedy Central, 1997 - ). Michael V. Teuth reflects that ‘When animation invaded television ... the discourse of television comedy was finally free to pursue a more subversive function.’ On a political level, this subversion relates back to Mundy and White’s aforementioned ideas about the sitcom being able to gesture towards areas of social tension whilst still being

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180 Stabile and Harrison (eds.), *Prime Time Animation: Television animation and American culture*, p. 2.
181 Ibid.
182 Mundy and White, *Laughing Matters: Understanding Film, Television and Radio Comedy*, p. 149.
183 Paul Wells, ‘“Smarter than the average art form”: Animation in the television era’ in Stabile and Harrison (eds.), *Prime Time Animation: Television animation and American culture*, p. 28.
contained within a familiar, generic, and immovable format. Teuth notes that ‘the cartoon aesthetic allows television viewers to have it both ways’\(^{185}\) referring to its rigid narrative structure as an element which reflects the mundanities and routine nature of day-to-day life. However, the cartoon is also capable of including ‘material which might otherwise disturb a viewer’\(^{186}\), subverting what is expected of the sitcom in its self-reflexive breakdown of societal norms. Teuth recognises that the ‘limited range of facial features available in the simpler form of animation chosen by Groening, Judge, Parker, and Stone also tends to present the characters and settings as stereotypical and dangerously close to homogenous.’\(^{187}\) Programmes like *Beavis and Butt-Head* and *South Park* moved towards a more pointed type of representation on television which allows them to critique existing and accepted norms in both society and on broadcast television.

In addition to the politically subversive potential of the adult animated comedy, an unavoidable strand of comedy television which is often conflated with adult animation is the area of gross-out comedy or bad-taste humour. Discussing this type of occasionally offensive or shocking humour, Mundy and White note ‘Comedy works because it engages with boundaries, with treasured perceptions, with rules, conventions and taboos, but there are occasions when the engagement causes offence, even if no offence was intended.’\(^{188}\) With animation, as discussed above, there is already a boundary of child-friendly content which, when crossed, seems to actively subvert perceptions of the sub-genre. One of the reasons animation is able to break these perceived boundaries so easily, and on a level which appears more in keeping with its form than say, the live-action sitcom, is because of the audience’s ‘comfort with animation’s presentation of the grotesque.’\(^{189}\) Teuth describes in detail how ‘Facial features which might seem grotesque are only mildly threatening’\(^{190}\) because of animation’s capacity to

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\(^{185}\) Ibid., p. 146.

\(^{186}\) Ibid., p. 141.

\(^{187}\) Ibid., p. 142.

\(^{188}\) Mundy and White, *Laughing Matters: Understanding Film, Television and Radio Comedy*, p. 207.


\(^{190}\) Ibid.
acceptably convey extreme emotions and impressions without taking the viewer out of its diegesis, which, if placed in a live-action sitcom, would most likely be heavily criticised. These characteristics are showcased in the animation’s ability to have ‘eyes bug out in terror, faces redden and well in anger, bodies shrink in fear, tongues hang out with desire for food, drink, or sexual pleasure.’191

In a post-broadcast context, adult animation has continued to share the same popularity and success as its broadcast predecessors such as *Family Guy* (Fox, 1999 - ) and *South Park*. However, the ease and frequency with which it shifts towards the darker spectrum of social commentary, examining celebrity culture as well as mental health and depression in Netflix’s longest running animation, *BoJack Horseman*, demonstrates the marked difference between what is possible within a broadcast and post-broadcast context. Furthermore, because time constraints aren’t as much of an issue with regards to streaming services, the animated programmes are not only able to construct more complex narrative threads throughout their respective episodes and seasons but can also conclude their shows in alarming and often very irresolute ways, not typical of standard comedy broadcasting. Much has been written about animation’s ability to ‘challenge ideological, social, conceptual and perceptual boundaries, [and] to take us into alternative worlds’192 as viewers. However, perhaps the key difference between traditional broadcast animation and the more recent run of post-broadcast animated comedy programmes, are the types of worlds that are depicted. These range from a somewhat identical representation of our world (as is the case with 1970s suburbia in *F is for Family*) to worlds which are recognisable but skewed somewhat towards the fantastical (see the human/animal hybrids in *BoJack Horseman*’s ‘Hollywoo’ or Ezra Koenig’s anime-inspired realization of New York City in *Neo Yokio* [Netflix, 2017 – 2018]). These examples underline the ‘ability of the animated world to cross over into, to inhabit, comment, subvert, and disrupt the

191 Ibid.
‘real’ world of live action’ which creates space for humour in the gaps between its similarities and divergences.

**Conclusion**

This review of literature has identified key trends in the industry-focused scholarship on post-broadcast television and the more aesthetic-based focus of writing on television comedy, particularly the sitcom. These areas aren’t always mutually exclusive and writing on post-broadcast drama television is a rapidly growing field, emerging from the work on ‘quality tv’ which preceded it from the cable television era. Likewise, a large amount of the work on comedy television is focused politically on issues of representation and the question of conservatism pertaining to the sitcom. However, as discussed, there is a limited discussion of these issues surrounding post-broadcast comedy television.

My research will draw on the scholarship on the characteristics and form of the sitcom to post-broadcast comedy shows, whilst also taking into account the critical literature on representation and issues of conservatism in these interconnected genres of programming. Additionally, debates surrounding authorship and the role of the auteur in the post-broadcast era, usually explored in relation to drama programmes, will be applied to comedy texts and established comedy auteurs such as Judd Apatow in my research. The industry and business focused scholarship, whilst taking a different methodological approach to my research, will helpfully illuminate how these shows are brought to viewers, as well as the types of viewers they attempt to reach. This sits alongside my readings of the formal, textual signs of post-broadcast comedy being created for a binge-watching viewer and a particular kind of fandom.

The rapid speed at which the world of post-broadcast television changes is quickly impacting upon how viewers perceive television. It seems as if the stability of one its most popular genres, the comedy, might change along with this. In defining the aesthetics of contemporary post-broadcast comedy television

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193 Ibid., p. 151.
programming, one might be able to chart the evolution of television comedy and comic style, beginning to both anticipate the changes and chart the continuities that will occur to the aesthetics of both the genre and the medium in the next half-century.
Chapter One

Transformations in Post-Broadcast Revived Programming

One of the first ‘original’ pieces of television created by a post-broadcast streaming service was in fact a continuation of an existing broadcast comedy programme. The show was Arrested Development and it set a precedent for how Netflix would go on to approach their own original comedy content over the next half-decade. In this instance, and in the years that followed, the company have relied on the transformation or adaptation of broadcast forms of television comedy to establish their own success. These shows, which I term ‘revived programming’, feature a number of recurring trends that have been present in a wide variety of Netflix original comedy shows in the years since. This chapter will underline two types of transformations that have taken place in comedy television as a result of the shift towards online streaming. The first transformation is related to existing comedy shows that have been resituated on streaming platforms. The second is of the newer, streaming-only seasons of older broadcast comedy shows such as Arrested Development. The majority of this thesis will focus on the original comedy material created to be viewed exclusively on these platforms, but the existence of full seasons of broadcast shows such as Seinfeld and Friends on these platforms also warrants examination. Anecdotally, when the topic of this project was first described to friends and colleagues, the majority initially assumed I would be focusing on broadcast programmes existing in a post-broadcast context (what is usually termed ‘catch-up tv’). The frequency of these misunderstandings led to the realisation that in order to understand post-broadcast comedy, we must first interrogate what happens to the broadcast comedy text in the context of the digital streaming platform.

Before examining the effects that streaming and contemporary viewing patterns have on certain textual elements of my chosen broadcast comedy case studies, I’ll briefly describe the process of accessing these programmes on the platforms themselves. This aspect of the research is crucial in demonstrating some of the ways that existing broadcast texts are framed within the boundaries of streaming platforms as well as highlighting some of the extra-textual elements that
have presumably been introduced to enhance the viewing experience, ultimately transforming it into something different than what it originally was. This also requires shifting towards a more personal auto-ethnographic approach here, but my focus for the rest of the chapter and my wider thesis will return to the analysis of the programmes themselves. During this discussion of an auto-ethnographic approach, it is also worth noting that within my analysis of the forthcoming case studies, I will occasionally refer to moments which are ‘comedic’ or ‘generate comedy’. In my introduction, I briefly spoke about my employment of textual analysis to understand when a programme is attempting to achieve a moment of comedy. In each instance, these will be moments where I explain how the text works to create something funny for myself as a viewer. This doesn’t mean I can purport to know how these jokes or moments of comedy will be received more generally by other viewers and I will try to avoid prescribing responses. Instead, it might be worth understanding my recognition of these jokes as moments of potential comedy which have worked for me (unless stated otherwise) and therefore, might work for you.

I almost always access streaming platforms through the available apps on a smart tv, which perhaps unconsciously makes me watch post-broadcast shows such as *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* as an extension of broadcast television programming due to their mutual appearance on the same physical object in the same space – the television in the front room. However, these services are also available via websites or apps on computers and laptops. Netflix’s business model as a postal DVD rental service originally existed online before introducing the option to stream select titles on the same website. In the UK, Amazon also partnered with LoveFilm to provide a similar service before transitioning, in the same way as Netflix, into a streaming-only platform.

My first case study will be *Seinfeld* which, at the time of writing, exists in its entirety on Prime Video. This is notable because when the platform became a streaming-only online service in the mid-2010s, many of the existing television programmes they offered were only partially available to stream. This would mean viewers were able to begin watching a television programme as part of their
subscription to Amazon Prime but would then have to pay for the remaining seasons through their Amazon account. More recently, this has changed and the platform now offers television series such as *Parks and Recreation* (NBC, 2009 – 2015), *The Office* (NBC, 2005 – 2013), and *Seinfeld* in their entirety, following Netflix’s pattern of simultaneously releasing whole seasons of new shows or entire ‘digital boxsets’ of existing programmes. Accessing the show on a smart television simply requires opening the Prime Video app. The show is listed under the ‘Recommended TV’ header on my account but this is most likely because the platform’s algorithm has recognised that the show is similar to other content I have accessed (or even potentially bought through my Amazon account) relating to comedy film and television. To access the show on a laptop, the user will have to go to the Amazon homepage where, for me, it already appears as a ‘Continue Watching’ option, evidently linking my Amazon account with the app on the smart tv (Fig. 1). The process of searching for the show through Amazon’s website on a laptop creates a different kind of experience than that of finding it on a smart tv. Alongside the option to stream the show, the user is encouraged to browse the latest fashion sales, shop for electronics and groceries, and listen to the latest Bruce Springsteen record. Navigating the home page is like walking through a type of virtual mall. In *Online TV*, Catherine Johnson argues that the interfaces of streaming services ‘function to downplay the control of the computer that sits behind the surface’.¹ By this, Johnson is referring to the various algorithms which are used to suggest content to the user. However, I believe it can also be understood that the interfaces of these streaming platforms attempt to disguise their resemblance to other websites, such as an online clothing store. Amazon struggles with this because it is primarily known as an online shopping service. Therefore, it is no coincidence that their interface initially seems more difficult to use than Netflix’s, most likely because of the sheer variety of things on offer from Amazon when compared to the singular focus of the Netflix platform. This may also be because of the influence Netflix has in the streaming industry, being the first prominent online

streaming platform and therefore establishing a norm which every other service is viewed in relation to.

(Fig. 1 - Amazon Prime Interface)

Before you begin watching the programme, Amazon features trailers for other content available on the platform, allowing the viewer to skip the ad if they are not interested or add the show to their watchlist by clicking in the bottom right hand corner of the screen (Fig. 2). Interestingly, in the case of this particular episode of Seinfeld, ‘The Ex-Girlfriend’, the ad is completely unrelated to the programme being watched and is instead promoting a forthcoming live sports event that will be available to stream exclusively through Amazon. Live sport is an area where Amazon remain unchallenged in the online streaming industry, which may go some way to explain their need to promote it at every given opportunity.

(Fig. 2 - Trailers on Prime Video)
However, it appears that they are no longer alone with regards to their choice to advertise before or in between programmes. As reported by The Guardian in August 2018, Netflix have also started to trial the use of advertisements on their platform. Alex Hern writes, ‘Viewers trying to binge-watch shows on the streaming service will now find their viewing interrupted by the interstitial commercials, which air after the end of one episode, before the next automatically begins.’ It is clearly a more contentious issue for Netflix who, as the biggest name in the streaming industry, put themselves in a position to receive a bigger backlash. Hern reports that ‘a subsection of users around the world has been shown the adverts and that ... [Netflix] would be monitoring “chatter on social channels” to see how the trial was received’.

He concludes by noting how ‘the company is not the first to experiment with cross-promoting its own shows on the service. Sky’s Now TV service, for example, has long run similar adverts between episodes of other shows.’ However, I believe this comment returns to the idea of a distinction between online platforms and those which are associated with physical television viewing in a home environment. Despite Sky’s efforts to expand their company by including more accessible online platforms, such as their Sky Go service or their partnership with Now TV, the company’s long-standing association with broadcast television and domestic television viewing makes the use of ads before their programmes on Now TV seem like less of an issue. On both smart televisions and laptops, these ads for other Netflix shows appear during the end credits of the episode or movie you’re currently watching. There are also ads built into the interface of the platform itself as the user scrolls down the page to select what they want to watch. For example, before being able to look on the ‘My List’ option, the user must scroll past an advertisement for a Netflix original release (in this case, the most recent Adam Sandler comedy film) (Fig. 3).

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
Once the episode of *Seinfeld* has finally begun, the viewer has the option to pause which will then instantly bring up something called the ‘X-Ray’ feature, which Amazon uses in partnership with IMDb. The ‘X-Ray’ technology is able to identify actors, pieces of music, and the crew who worked on the film at the specific moment the viewer has paused the episode or film. This feature is one of the most dramatic transformations that an existing show faces when it is repackaged on post-broadcast streaming platforms. An example used here from *Seinfeld* tells the viewer the names of the actors on the screen as well as the names of their fictional characters in a column on the left-hand side of the screen (Fig. 4). Here, the show is being repackaged to accommodate different viewing contexts. If one chooses to view these streaming services as a type of easily accessible archive, then this feature is particularly useful for research purposes, providing relevant information to specific moments as and when they occur. On the other hand, this feature also seems to be accounting for the more relaxed home-viewing experience when an actor is recognised and can’t be placed, also allowing the user to click on the actor’s profile, explore their other work, and search for specific scenes within that film or episode which feature that actor.
Season One and Two of *Seinfeld* are confusingly combined on Prime Video and listed as ‘Seasons One and Two’, most likely because of the first season’s relatively small number of episodes (five in total). What’s more confusing is that Amazon have incorrectly labelled some of the episodes, meaning that there is a shift between second and third season episodes at one point.\(^5\) For example, the third season episode ‘The Stranded’ appears in the boxset for ‘Seasons One and Two’. Additionally, some of the second season episodes are out of order, with ‘The Busboy’ being listed as the third episode of the show’s second season when it actually came near the end. These mistakes ultimately create a different flow than you would get if you watched *Seinfeld* weekly on television or even on the DVD boxset. They also make the episodes feel far more like general ‘content’ where the episodes can be watched interchangeably. Interestingly, this is something that would be unable to happen for a contemporary serial drama programme, where the emphasis placed on narrative from week-to-week is too important. The fact that it has occurred for *Seinfeld* on Prime Video and, at the time of writing, has gone unnoticed underlines how narrative is perceived in relation to the comedy genre and reinforces the show’s rigid and traditional sitcom structure where the viewing order of episodes remains relatively unimportant.

\(^5\) The episodes appear to be listed in production order rather than broadcast order.
Aside from the aforementioned extra-diegetic enhancements provided by streaming platforms, watching *Seinfeld* on a streaming service also transforms the overall viewing experience on a textual level, particularly regarding its narrative structure, when compared to its intended reception on broadcast television. The first notable aspect of the show is its adherence to traditional sitcom aesthetics. From a narrative perspective, *Seinfeld* sets itself apart by being a show about nothing. However, it still uses the ‘three-headed monster’ camera setup popularised decades earlier by shows such as *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951 – 1957), *The Honeymooners* (CBS, 1955 – 1956), and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. This is displayed during the first episode, ‘The Seinfeld Chronicles’, during a sequence where Jerry and his friend, George (Jason Alexander), have coffee together in a diner. The conversation topics range from the buttons on George’s shirt, to decaffeinated coffee, to Jerry’s love life, and finally his need to do laundry. This is not representative of the more plot-driven, goal-oriented, and wholesome sitcoms that were broadcast as *Seinfeld’s* contemporaries, such as *Cheers* (NBC, 1982 – 1993) and *The Cosby Show*; however, on a purely visual level the sequence is shot much like *Full House* or any other number of network sitcoms. There is a wide shot presenting the two characters from a distance and situating them within their environment. For dialogue, there are two alternative angles which frame Jerry and George in a medium shot using a shot reverse-shot setup dependent on who is speaking or reacting. The appearance of studio laughter on the soundtrack is another marker which demonstrates both the production methods of the programme as well as its aesthetic conformity to our expectations of the sitcom genre.

A final characteristic which I referred to previously in my discussion of David Marc’s work is the show’s rigid structure and lack of narrative continuation from episode to episode. Each episode in the first season begins with Jerry performing stand-up comedy in front of a small audience at a club. Within the diegesis of the show, audience members are watching the stand-up comedian Jerry Seinfeld performing on stage. But the viewer watching *Seinfeld* on TV is aware that Jerry isn’t merely a fictional character but also a comedian and an actor portraying a less
popular version of himself. For example, in these early episodes, Jerry doesn’t have his own television sitcom whereas the real comedian evidently does. This creates a complex dynamic during these moments of stand-up comedy, not least because Seinfeld has performed some of the material used in the show in his own comedy sets. However, there are a number of visual and auditory markers which indicate the difference between fictional sitcom and stand-up performance to the viewer. Firstly, the show’s idiosyncratic theme music often plays very loudly over Jerry’s stand-up set at the beginning of episodes, creating the impression that the jokes he’s telling are far less important than establishing the idea that he’s a fairly successful club-circuit stand-up comedian. Moreover, the camera occasionally crosses the threshold of the stage during his stand-up routine and shows the audience from Jerry’s perspective. Filming the performer from a close-up perspective is sometimes employed in stand-up comedy specials to create an intimacy between the performer and viewer. A similar shot which recurs throughout stand-up specials is from the back of the stage featuring the comedian with their back to camera looking out at the often very large audience. These types of shots are frequently designed to either emphasise the immense popularity of the performer or to convey to the viewer at home how nerve-wracking the experience of performing comedy in front of a large crowd can be. In *Seinfeld*, the point-of-view shot from the stage is more visually expressive, physically removing Jerry from the shot and instead placing the viewer in his head, underlining the moment as something from a fictional programme rather a than stand-up special. Finally, these stand-up monologues typically occur in front of a black background allowing the viewers (in both the club and at home) to focus solely on Jerry. In almost all stand-up specials, the location itself is shown throughout, is often commented on by the comedian, and sometimes referred to in the title of the special. Here, in a similar way to the theme music being played over Jerry’s jokes, its nondescript nature is used to place all the emphasis on Jerry as performer and to merely signify to the viewer that he is a stand-up comic within the diegesis of the show. These moments of stand-up occur intermittently throughout each episode (but always at the beginning and end) and are often used as a structuring device where topics spoken about by Jerry rhyme with moments occurring in his life off the stage or where
these scenarios inspire his stand-up comedy material within the show. An example from the first episode is Jerry’s monologue regarding laundry and dry cleaning coming after the viewer has just seen him and George talking about and eventually doing laundry. The idea of stand-up material becoming fictional scripted scenarios (or vice-versa) is something I will return to in my final chapter on post-broadcast stand-up comedy specials where I will examine how the same joke is reused three decades later in one of Seinfeld’s Netflix specials.

The recurrence of these stand-up segments, appearing periodically throughout the episodes, and their content (relating to events the viewer has just seen or will see), creates a sense of unity within each episode and a consistency across multiple episodes when watching more than one at a time. However, despite including a number of recurring jokes and call-backs over its nine seasons, the experience of watching Seinfeld on a streaming platform like Amazon eventually becomes repetitive if you choose to watch at a faster rate than the weekly intervals in which the show was originally broadcast. The restricted nature of the locations within sitcoms create the impression of an isolated and repetitive diegesis when watching the show. Watching it week-to-week, the viewer is able to find a comfort in the domestic surroundings for 20 minutes or so. However, if bingeing in a post-broadcast context, the sense of stasis and the viewer’s familiarity with the locations could turn into a suffocating oppressiveness. The show is set in New York City but other than the character’s accents, the nondescript establishing shots, and the sole reference to Manhattan, this may not be completely evident. When Jerry travels to perform stand-up in Minneapolis during the third episode, ‘The Robbery’, the viewer doesn’t see his trip but is instead restricted to the inside of his apartment. This creates a sense of familiarity and comfort with the locations depicted by the show but also fosters a sense of inertia in terms of location and narrative. Moreover, watching at a quicker rate also allows other aspects of the show, particularly surrounding production, to reveal themselves in a way which may have been unnoticeable if one were tuning in weekly during a broadcast schedule. For example, the design of Jerry’s apartment changes between the first and second episodes once the show was picked up after its pilot. Other examples include
Kramer being initially referred to as Kessler in very early episodes and the quality of the cameras improving over the first season to a point when there is eventually a consistency throughout all of the shots rather than a significant discrepancy between the crisp shot-reverse-shot dialogue angles and the fuzzy, low-fi establishing or wide angle shots. Other unintentional anachronistic effects of viewing the show on a streaming platform can be seen in how it had once accounted for advertisement breaks by cutting to black and using an establishing shot to situate the viewer once the show returned. This technique now serves no purpose and creates jarring breaks within each episode. Being able to recognise these changes as a result of the entire boxset being present on a digital platform suggests that one of their main achievements may be as a type of accessible archive, enabling television researchers and historians to easily track technical or, in my case, aesthetic changes that occur throughout key texts. However, this returns to the problematic issue of Seinfeld’s mislabelled episodes on Amazon, suggesting that the service is actually an unreliable source for these purposes. Furthermore, the show’s existence on this platform, similar to that of Friends on UK Netflix and The Office on US Netflix is only temporary, sentencing these texts to a type of ephemeral existence in the world of digital media. Taking these factors into account, Seinfeld and various other broadcast comedy programmes exist solely to temporarily entertain subscribers but possess a repetitive visual style which isn’t best suited to the viewing habits encouraged by streaming services.

The availability of Friends on UK Netflix produced large amounts of online discussion since its initial premiere on the platform on New Years Day 2018. An Independent article from the same day, ‘Friends is finally on UK Netflix’, informs readers ‘you probably won’t be leaving the couch for most of 2018’. Words such as ‘finally’ and ‘bombshell’ which are used in the article conjure a sense of profound desperation and anticipate excitement from Friends fans at the news. This comes

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6 To underline this point further, Friends has been removed from the UK version of Netflix since this chapter was completed and the US version of The Office is now available, moving from Prime Video.
after the long-running sitcom had been available in the US and Canada from 2014
due to a deal between the streaming company and WarnerMedia. The show is a
massive presence on Netflix, appearing in posts on many of their social media
accounts as well as being frequently featured as a suggestion on the home page of
the platform. This initially appeared to be a result of my own viewing preferences
where the show was being recommended via Netflix’s algorithm based on other
similar comedy shows I’ve engaged with. However, it became clear that many, if
not all, users searching for ‘sitcom’ will find Friends as the first available option,
above a number of other successful and equally long-running shows such as How I
Met Your Mother and The Big Bang Theory (CBS, 2007 – 2019). It also appears
ahead of a number of Netflix original sitcoms such as The Ranch and Unbreakable
Kimmy Schmidt. This is particularly surprising given the increasing prominence of
Netflix’s original content over the past couple of years and their effort to prioritise
these new films and programmes over existing titles in their online library. It might
not be so surprising, however, when it was revealed at the start of 2019 that Netflix
had paid a good deal of money to keep Friends in its library for one more year
before the programme’s copyright reverts exclusively back to WarnerMedia in
anticipation of the studio’s own streaming service, HBO Max. Rick Marshall of
Digital Trends observed that ‘subscriber uproar quickly … [led] to a deal that
reportedly cost the streaming service $100 million to retain the popular show
through 2019. Once again, according to Marshall, it was the adoration of the show
by its fans and their commitment to watching and presumably re-watching which
led to the high cost negotiated for its continued temporary existence on Netflix.

Most interesting is that, despite the $100 million price tag attached to the show,
Netflix don’t even own the exclusive rights to the content in the UK. It is also
currently available to watch on a daily basis for multiple hours at a time on Comedy

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8 I conducted an informal survey asking Netflix users to type ‘sitcom’ into their search bar on the
application and post their findings. This resulted in 23 responses. Each user saw Friends displayed as
the first option despite the various devices used to access Netflix and some particular users
commented that they don’t actually watch any comedy or US television on the platform.
9 Rick Marshall, ‘Netflix paid $100M to keep Friends, but viewers may pay the highest price’, Digital
Trends (9 July 2019), https://www.digitaltrends.com/home-theater/netflix-friends-100-million-
Central. The appeal for the majority of viewers must therefore be in the availability to watch any episode of the show on-demand with no advertisement breaks. In addition to this, if the viewer also watches other programmes on Netflix, it is considerably easier to have everything in one place rather than to switch between various platforms or devices. Moreover, there is an added benefit for Netflix in that it is able to use an existing and much-loved show to draw people to their platform and then keep them there by offering their own similar original content. In many cases, this is how much of their revived programming is able to generate buzz. For example, whilst they don’t yet have the rights to Seinfeld, Jerry Seinfeld himself is a recurring performer in Netflix original content and is able to draw viewers based on his association with the long-standing NBC sitcom. Seinfeld has a stand-up special on the platform, is seen being interviewed for David Letterman’s Netflix show, My Next Guest Needs No Introduction (which itself works as a smaller revival of Letterman’s talk show), and is the host of the Netflix-revived web-series, Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee (Crackle, 2012 – 2017/Netflix, 2018 - ). Many of their efforts at original programming can therefore be seen as manifestations of ‘You like this? Why not try this...’. Since the end of 2018, this is already evident in the appearances of Friends star Jennifer Aniston in the Netflix original films, Dumplin’ (Anne Fletcher, Netflix, USA, 2018) and Murder Mystery (Kyle Newacheck, Netflix, USA, 2019).

Mareike Jenner notes, ‘much like “blocs” on linear television ... [Netflix’s] algorithm assumes that if viewers like one text of a specific genre, they are likely to want to watch others.’ I believe this extends beyond genres and to certain performers also. Rather than risk spending money on projects that may not work, the company is instead able to easily predict the potential success of projects based on the popularity of existing titles they have ‘on loan’ from corporations such as WarnerMedia. Ed Finn’s research supports this, noting that Netflix’s earliest algorithm ‘relied on users rating movies on a single five-star scale... [which] then attempted to predict future movie ratings in a straightforward way based on the

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10 The show will begin streaming worldwide on Netflix from 2021 onwards, further consolidating the connection between Netflix and Jerry Seinfeld in the same way film studios sometimes have contracts with stars.

11 Mareike Jenner, Netflix and the Re-invention of Television (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 119 – 120.
rental and rating histories of other users.' However, by 2013, the algorithm started ‘studying the catalog itself: the sprawling output of the Hollywood and global film industries, licensing agreements, genre expectations, star power, and many other factors.’

The suggestion that Netflix originals are completely risk averse and instead created based on the success of previous work might be explained through Justin Wyatt’s idea of ‘high concept’, outlined in his 1994 book, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*. In the book Wyatt writes, ‘Frequently the term is used as ammunition in an indictment against the contemporary industry, suggesting a bankruptcy of creativity within Hollywood.’ This comes in opposition to the idea of originality in a high concept idea where it is instead viewed as ‘relying heavily upon the replication and combination of previously successful narratives. In the extreme, critics describe high concept films as merely combinations of other films’. Wyatt lists a few examples, such as ‘*RoboCop* was defined as *Terminator* meets *Dirty Harry*’. I believe this is why so many Netflix original programmes can be viewed as ‘high concept comedy’ and either use stars from broadcast shows that have a strong viewership on Netflix (such as Aniston from *Friends*) or names from their own previously successful shows (which explains the proliferation of content featuring Seinfeld or actors like Will Arnett and Jason Bateman). Supporting this idea, in her book, *Netlixed*, Gina Keating explains the inception of Netflix’s first original drama programme, *House of Cards*, which itself was an adaptation of an original British series. Keating discusses the importance of their data collection, writing ‘Data showed that while Netflix subscribers did not often go looking for [Kevin] Spacey’s films, once they discovered the actor they often went on to watch all his work. Fincher’s films ... shared the same attribute.’ As a result of the data

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13 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
that ‘showed a wide potential audience, Netflix committed $100 million for two seasons of the show’. The decision to revive programmes on post-broadcast platforms displays a further lack of originality as the post-broadcast companies lean on previously successful shows in order to attract a greater number of paid subscribers.

Focusing on revived programmes for the rest of the chapter (including Arrested Development, the post-broadcast revivals of Wet Hot American Summer [Netflix, 2015/2017], and Seinfeld’s own Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee), allows us to find a better position to understand the necessary changes that have been made to a previously reliable broadcast formula when updated in a post-broadcast context. These transformations are related to both the comedic content of the programmes as well as their narrative structure and visual style.

Arrested Development

Arrested Development was created by Mitchell Hurwitz and was originally broadcast on the Fox network for three seasons between 2003 and 2006 before being cancelled as a result of poor ratings. The fourth season of Arrested Development was the first set of episodes produced by Netflix that were made available to stream exclusively on their online platform. It premiered on May 26th 2013, roughly seven years after the show had ended its original broadcast run. Hurwitz oversaw writing and production on both the broadcast original and the later post-broadcast Netflix seasons. The narrative of Arrested Development is massively convoluted but one could describe its original premise as being focused on the exploits of the dysfunctional Bluth family who are plagued with financial misfortune and numerous run-ins with the law after the patriarch, George Sr. (Jeffrey Tambor), is revealed to have committed ‘light treason’ through his business deals in the Middle East. It is left to Michael (Jason Bateman), with his young son, George Michael (Michael Cera), in tow, to hold together what remains of the failing Bluth business empire despite their extended family continuing to indulge in the lavish

18 Ibid., p. 263.
lifestyle they’re accustomed to. In the years between its cancellation by Fox and renewal by Netflix, many of the show’s ensemble had become internationally recognised stars, such as Michael Cera (appearing in numerous successful comedies during the late 2000s such as *Superbad* [Greg Mottola, Columbia Pictures, USA, 2007] and *Juno* [Jason Reitman, Fox Searchlight, USA, 2007]) and Jason Bateman (also starring in *Juno* as well as *Horrible Bosses* [Seth Gordon, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA, 2011] and superhero comedy, *Hancock* [Peter Berg, Columbia Pictures, USA, 2008]). The show had also amassed a large cult following, arguably strengthened by its untimely cancellation, which led to speculation regarding a possible feature film revival of the programme before Netflix commissioned a set of 15 new episodes.

*Arrested Development* found its dedicated fanbase through its use of multiple running jokes and catchphrases, moving at such a pace that many of the gags aren’t recognisable as such until they’ve already passed the viewer by. In his 2013 book, *Complex TV*, Jason Mittell recognised that ‘Complex comedies such as *Arrested Development* encourage the rewind and freeze-frame power of DVDs to catch split-second visual gags and to pause the frantic pace to recover from laughter’ acknowledging that ‘this type of viewing was fully enabled during the Netflix-distributed fourth season, as all viewers had even more control of the screen time than they did on the broadcast original.’ Since its revival, Netflix have produced two seasons that have been met with a mixed response in contrast to the praise heaped upon the show’s original three-season run. These episodes of the show are the ones that will be the focus of my argument throughout this chapter, but it is first necessary to establish some of the its original stylistic traits from the broadcast seasons in order to discuss how it has been transformed to better accommodate its new post-broadcast home.

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20 The first season won multiple Emmys for outstanding comedy writing, directing, and series in 2004. In 2007, before the revival, *Arrested Development* was listed as one of the greatest tv shows of all time by TIME Magazine (https://time.com/3100882/arrested-development/#arrested-development). In contrast, the most recent season holds a mixed 55% rating on critical aggregate site, Rotten Tomatoes, compared to the first season’s unanimously positive 100% rating.
The broadcast episodes of the show don’t feature some of the traditional and most common markers of sitcom television such as a laughter track on the soundtrack or the three-camera setup, but instead employ handheld camera work which became increasingly popular in the mid-2000s through its use on shows like *The Office* (BBC, 2001 – 2003). Brett Mills termed this style ‘comedy verite’, in relation to *The Office*, noting how the programme ‘uses the aesthetics of conventions of the docusoap, but for comedic ends.’

In 2007, Ethan Thompson developed Mills’ use of this term for an American context, discussing *Arrested Development* and its visual style. He writes, ‘The televisual style of *Arrested Development*, with its handheld cameras, awkward pacing, and violations of continuity rules, looks a lot more like a documentary than it does a traditional sitcom.’ It could also be argued that it is precisely because of this documentary, verité aesthetic, that it can be considered a programme of particular quality. In her discussion of the HBO comedy drama programme, *Tanner ’88* (HBO, 1988), Joanne Morreale notes how the show’s employment of mockumentary and documentary conventions helped ‘brand HBO as “quality” television.’ For this reason, among many others, the comedy verité style of *Arrested Development* could contribute to its framing as a ‘quality’ show and explain the sustained critical and academic focus it has received (which this thesis is contributing to), when compared to popular contemporaneous comedy programmes such as *Everybody Loves Raymond* (CBS, 1996 – 2005).

Despite its visual style, the show’s focus on family dynamics, its recurring gags, and its use of studio sets means it also loosely fits within the boundaries of the television sitcom as characterised by television scholars such as John Hartley and Mills himself. The show also featured a long-running plot which progressed over the original three seasons (despite its relatively superfluous nature) in the same way other sitcoms from this era started to use multiple seasons to tell a story.

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22 ‘Comedy Verité? The Observational Documentary Meets the Televisual Sitcom’ by Ethan Thompson in *The Velvet Light Trap*, 60, p. 63.
such as the multiple season-spanning romance between Jim (John Krasinski) and Pam (Jenna Fischer) in *The Office* or the mystery at the heart of *How I Met Your Mother*, revealed over the show’s nine seasons. The show was also self-reflexive about its relationship to generic sitcom tropes, often subverting the tradition of a closed narrative, which has always reset and returned to a state of equilibrium by the start of each episode. In its early seasons, it achieved this through a running gag where the narrator (voiced, and eventually played, by Ron Howard) teased the events of next week’s episode. One example of the ‘on the next *Arrested Development*...’ teaser from the episode ‘Bringing Up Buster’ includes aspiring actor Tobias (David Cross) receiving a bad review of his play in the paper before cutting to the character sobbing in the shower and screaming ‘WHY?!’ This joke concludes a sub-plot from this specific episode and reinforces a running gag regarding Tobias’ lack of self-confidence which frequently manifests itself through his extended sobbing sessions in the shower. As Mittell notes, ‘regular viewers soon learn that ... future episodes [will neither] portray these scenes nor will they have actually occurred within the ongoing storyworld’. Here, the show is able to have its cake and eat it. The fact that the events portrayed during the ‘on the next *Arrested Development*’ epilogue are ultimately revealed to have not occurred within the programme’s diegesis allows the show to retain some resemblance to traditional sitcom narratives by reinforcing the sense of closure and reset that occurs by the end of each episode. The format allows the show to tie up minor unresolved narrative threads without having to waste too much time depicting it within the main body of the episode. It also works as a form of wish fulfilment for future narratives that wouldn’t fit within the larger structure of the show but remain too rich in comic potential to leave unrealised. However, the very existence of a segment titled ‘on the next *Arrested Development*’ also serves to clue the viewer into realising that the show is diverging from the norm to some degree and helps to prepare them for its extended overarching narrative regarding the business deals of the Bluth family.

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24 Mittell, Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling, p. 21.
I am discussing the broadcast episodes of the show in these paragraphs but the comedic style of both the broadcast and post-broadcast episodes relies heavily on running gags and demands a high level of attention from its viewers for the jokes to land successfully. This isn’t to say the show can’t be watched and found amusing based on the premise of some of its episodes and the scenarios contained within them. For example, the prospect of Tobias covered head-to-toe in blue paint as he prepares to audition for a part in the Blue Man Group performance company is enough to generate laughter based on absurdity of the image alone (Fig. 5).

(Fig. 5 - Arrested Development: Blue Paint)

However, the frequent appearance of blue paint smudges around various doorknobs and on the walls of the house, often inconspicuously present the background of numerous shots, for the rest of the second season offers one example of the show extending a joke beyond its initial punchline to reward the attentive viewer. One example can be seen during the episode ‘Sad Sack’ when George Michael opens the fridge only to find the residue of blue paint smudged across his fingers (Fig. 6). The joke is also rewarding in terms of how it communicates character details through its frequent recurrence – the image of smudged paint serves as a reminder of Tobias’ general clumsiness, incompetence, and unwelcome presence in the family home without having to articulate such things through dialogue.
Another example of *Arrested Development’s* running gags can be found in the repetition of the line ‘Her?’, used throughout the show’s first three seasons. Unlike Tobias’ blue body paint, which is instantly amusing on a visual level, the repetition of ‘Her?’ and the way the show changes the context with which the line is said requires slightly more attention to recognise it as a moment of recurring comedy. The first use of the line occurs during the second season episode, ‘The One Where They Build A House’ (the title itself referring to long-running sitcom, *Friends*). George Michael asks his father if he can bring his friend, Ann Veal (Mae Whitman) along to a ribbon-cutting ceremony being held by the Bluth family. Michael responds instantly with ‘Who?’, leading George Michael to explain that Michael had in fact met Ann previously, which is amusingly corroborated by the extra diegetic narrator who states, in a matter-of-fact tone, ‘Michael had met Ann.’ A perplexed George Michael then turns around to reveal Ann behind him in the background of the shot, sat eating an egg in the family kitchen. George Michael confides in his father that he wants to buy her a diamond, to which Michael responds, ‘Her?’. In the very next episode, ‘¡Amigos!’ (yet another reference to *Friends*), Michael asks the same question when George Michael announces that he and Ann are dating. Ann appears to be perceived as dull, prudish, and forgettable by every member of the Bluth family except George Michael, a joke which is turned on its head in later seasons when Ann is revealed to have a voracious sexual appetite and lusts after both George Michael and his uncle, G.O.B. (Will Arnett). The extent to which the family don’t engage with Ann is such that when Michael is presented with a photo of her and George Michael, he initially
assumes that she belonged to a different family and was accidentally included in the picture. The joke is reused later in the season when George Michael is pointing Ann out to his fugitive grandfather, who hasn’t yet seen her due to his concealment in the family attic – a plot contrivance far too complicated to explain in this short paragraph. George, echoing the words of his own son, Michael, also asks ‘Her?’, to which George Michael passively responds, ‘She’s really funny’. Michael Cera doesn’t miss a beat with his comic timing in this moment, and the air of resignation added to his voice seems to suggest that the usually oblivious character is somewhat aware of how Ann is perceived by the rest of the family. The joke becomes cleverly transposed in ‘Hand to God’ when Michael confides in his son that he still has feelings for an ex-girlfriend and is hoping to reconnect. By this point, it should be easy to guess George Michael’s response.

The integration of the entire Bluth family into this running joke is another area where the show succeeds in depicting the intricacies of the family unit. The Bluths possess a shared mentality and despite their disagreements and constant attempts to undercut and undermine each other, are presented as extremely alike by the show through their involvement in these gags. When characters such as George Sr. and his wife, Lucille (Jessica Walters) unknowingly take part in the running gags, the viewer potentially won’t respond with incredulity at the unbelievability of the scenario, but might instead understand it as a comedic method of conveying the connection between the Bluths. An example of the Bluths’ shared knowledge comes from the first season when Maeby (Alia Shawkat) tries to get the attention of her endlessly distracted parents, Lindsay (Portia de Rossi) and Tobias, by printing out fake plane tickets to Portugal and leaving them on the kitchen counter in the hope that they might find them and become concerned. Explaining the plan to her cousin, George Michael, Maeby says ‘[if] my parents miss this, I really might go to South America.’ George Michael points out that the plane tickets are actually for Portugal to which Maeby self-assuredly replies, ‘That’s right.’ Later in the episode, Maeby’s uncle G.O.B. stumbles upon the tickets and instantly assumes that they belong to his brother Michael, confidently saying to himself ‘Portugal! Gonna live it up down old South America way, huh Mikey?’ Both Bluths clearly have an appalling geographical
knowledge and, on a wider level, the family appear completely ignorant towards anything non-American. Both Michael and his son can’t grasp the Spanish language, occasionally referring to other family members as ‘fathero’ and ‘brothero’. Likewise, when attempting to pre-empt Cinco de Mayo with her own festival, Lucille decides on the name, ‘Cinco de Cuatro’, which nonsensically translates as ‘Five of Four’. This ongoing ignorance towards other cultures has even led to recent comparisons between the Bluths and the Trump family, with Hadley Freeman likening Don Jr. to G.O.B. in a 2017 article for The Guardian.25

As well as allowing viewers to fast-forward, pause, and rewind with relative ease, perhaps enabling a fuller appreciation of the gags discussed above, the fourth season’s distribution on Netflix also marked a distinct shift in how the show approached narrative structure and its comedy on a whole. Rather than showcase the chemistry of its ensemble cast, the fourth season gave each member of the Bluth family their own episode. Moreover, these post-broadcast episodes most notably contrasted with the original series because of the decision to utilise an increasingly complex and convoluted plot. This is supported by Mareike Jenner who states ‘While seasons 1–3 of Arrested Development already rejected the familiar sitcom formula, relying on complex jokes ... that easily extend beyond one episode or even season, season 4 complicates the matter further by developing an even more complex narrative structure.’26 Outlining his intentions for the season, Hurwitz stated, ‘The goal was that by the end of the season, a unified story of cause and effect would emerge for the viewer – full of surprises about how the Bluths were responsible for most of the misery they had endured.’27 The season encouraged, and in many cases, required binge-watching through its jigsaw-puzzle approach, where the whole of the story was presented out of order and incomplete, only forming a full picture once the viewer had watched all 15

episodes. Jenner states, ‘the individual storylines intersect at varying points, leaving “mini-cliffhangers” in the middle of episodes’\textsuperscript{28} rather than at the end, and notes how ‘the season seems to mostly function as a way to ‘teach’ audiences how to watch Netflix in the long term.’\textsuperscript{29} This ‘teaching’ can be extended to the ways in which the show itself sometimes resembles the platform’s interface during the Netflix-produced seasons. Whenever an episode moves back-and-forth in time, the screen becomes a slideshow of images from throughout the season with a timeline at the bottom displaying ‘then’ and ‘now’. In between the timeline is a little red marker being dragged to wherever necessary for the timeline of that particular episode (Fig. 7). Because the show is frequently moving back-and-forth through time in its final two seasons and is therefore employing this visual technique on a recurring basis, the viewer will become accustomed to this image as one that is associated with rewinding or fast-forwarding. It is certainly no accident that the graphic resembles Netflix’s own interface and, as \textit{Arrested Development} was one of the first Netflix original production available to stream, would help provide new users with a type of unconscious digital training to navigate their way around the platform and its shows.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Arrested Development: Season Four}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 267.
In the fourth season, it appears that the further the viewer progresses through its narrative, the more the show’s disparate elements begin to fit together, forming a whole, and therefore allowing the show to become funnier. The way plot information is provided (and just as importantly withheld and segmented) through the show’s narrative becomes one of its main sources of comedy, much in the same way it has previously used recurring visual gags and one-liners. Therefore, in the move from broadcast to post-broadcast television, *Arrested Development* presents a clear shift from a type of visual and verbal comedy displayed in the aforementioned sequences featuring Tobias covered in paint or through the repetition of ‘Her?’ towards a style of comedy that chooses to emphasise narrative and which Mittell argues is dependent on narrative (to be discussed later). The convoluted nature of the narrative also means that an understanding of the show’s comedy is reliant to a large extent on the act of binge-watching its episodes. One example of this can be found in the way the viewers are shown a meeting between Michael and G.O.B. (Will Arnett) at the abandoned Bluth family home in the fourth season’s opening episode, ‘Flight of the Phoenix’. Jenner singles this episode out by writing, ‘it is particularly the first episode … that seems confusing as it provides a number of scenes that are difficult to de-code without the information provided later on.’\(^{30}\) When the characters first run into each other in the Bluth house, the narrator comments ‘Neither had expected to see each other after some … recent unpleasantness’. This is echoed in the dialogue when G.O.B. tells Michael, ‘I didn’t expect to be seeing you again after the … unpleasantness’, briefly pausing much like the narrator before the final word. At this point, the episode is only four minutes in and the repeated references to the ‘unpleasantness’ between the characters appears completely self-aware, signalling to the viewers that there is clearly more to the story and that the full details will be revealed later. This promise of narrative satisfaction now seems to be a driving force to the comedy in this season, as Michael and G.O.B. run then into each other periodically in subsequent episodes baiting the viewer who is patiently waiting for the pieces of the story to fit together. Later in this sequence, Michael admits to feeling ashamed for something

\(^{30}\) Ibid., p. 266.
he’s done but refuses to tell G.O.B. the specifics. A teasing and inquisitive G.O.B. says, ‘Bad example – if you were ashamed of being in love with a man, suddenly discovered these new feelings, then I might say something like, “Homo much?”’ Out of context, this seems like an oddly specific and nonsensical line, but is recontextualised for viewers who have completed the full season through the revelation that a closeted G.O.B. is romantically involved with rival magician, Tony Wonder (Ben Stiller). Michael goes on to say that he did something he wishes he could forget and that G.O.B. has no idea how he could feel, to which G.O.B. replies, ‘Well if you’re talking about doing something embarrassing with a woman, then no, I don’t’, once more hinting prematurely (for the viewer) at his homosexuality. This leads to the final mystery established during this scene from the first episode, when someone runs down the staircase in the ostensibly empty house during Michael and G.O.B.’s conversation. The viewer is only shown their feet and legs in this first instance (Fig. 8) and has to wait 11 episodes for the reveal of the face belonging to the pair of legs (Fig. 9). Here, bingeing is almost necessary in order to remember the necessary information required to appreciate the show’s ‘narrative pyrotechnics’31, in a term borrowed from Mittell.

31 Mittell, Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling, p. 43.
In Complex TV, Mittell acknowledges a 'degree of self-consciousness in [Arrested Development’s] ... mode of plotting’ where viewers watch ‘in part to see “how will they do it?”’. He then suggests that this type of narrative storytelling (what Mittell refers to as ‘narrative pyrotechnics) is analogous to the intended audience response to moments of spellbinding special effects in Hollywood blockbusters, stating ‘Accounts of cinematic special effects highlight how these moments of awe and amazement pull us out of the diegesis, inviting us to marvel at the technique required to achieve visions of interplanetary travel, realistic dinosaurs, or elaborate fights on treetops.’ However, it is important to note that special effects often serve as narrative distractions during Hollywood cinema and

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
are ‘held in opposition to narration, harking back to the cinema of attractions that predated narrative film’. Instead, Mittell believes that the shows which can be categorised as complex television offer ‘another mode of attractions: the narrative special effect’. The moment Tony Wonder mysteriously emerges in a dressing gown from one of the upstairs bedrooms of the Bluth house is one example of these types of narrative special effects, prompting the viewer to ask ‘how will they do it?’. It also serves to further underline the show’s transformation from relying predominantly on verbal and visual jokes towards a more complex narrative-focused style of comedy. Here, the comedy isn’t necessarily emerging from what is told to the viewer as opposed to how it is told.

In the months preceding the arrival of Arrested Development’s fifth season, Netflix released a statement from Mitchell Hurwitz announcing the imminent release of a long-anticipated ‘remix’ of the show’s fourth season. In the message, Hurwitz commented ‘The original season four of Arrested Development on Netflix, as some of you know, experimented with a Rashomon-style of storytelling – with each episode dedicated to the adventure of one member of the Bluth family.’ He continues by explaining ‘I had time to take that Rashomon-type story and recut it – shuffling the content from 15 individual stories into 22 interwoven stories the length of the original series – as an experiment to find out, well ... I guess “if I could make some money.” I mean, who am I kidding, I want this thing to syndicate eventually.’ Hurwitz’s decision to recut the fourth season had been discussed in the years following the release of the fourth season. The driving factor behind the decision for its release appeared to be the forthcoming fifth season, which was allegedly returning to a narrative style that was similar to that of the show’s earlier seasons, featuring its ensemble cast working together in multiple sequences rather than alone in individual episodes. The ‘remix’ would consequently help to bridge the gap for viewers watching the show on Netflix from seasons one through to five by

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
maintaining a relative consistency in terms of structure. Hurwitz’s acknowledgment of the show’s increased potential for syndication if split into 22 episodes highlights how experimental and different the Netflix season’s ‘Rashomon-style’ structure was upon release. There are two notable factors regarding the release of ‘remixed’ season; the first being the way it was made available on the platform. True to his word, Hurwitz’s newly edited fourth season, titled *Arrested Development: Fateful Consequences*, was released on May 4th 2018 (cinco de quatro – yet another running joke regarding the Bluth’s inability to grasp foreign languages which relates to the example discussed above), and appeared to remove and replace the original fourth season as viewing option on Netflix. When a user clicks onto the season list of the show, the only fourth season option available is the 22-episode remixed version (Fig. 10).

(Fig. 10 - *Arrested Development: Fateful Consequences* Menu)

If they want to find the original edit of the fourth season, which had existed on the platform for five years until this point, they have to click on the ‘Trailers & More’ drop-down option. Even then, the season isn’t evidently available, hidden behind a number of trailers for the most recent fifth season. They are listed as ‘*Arrested Development: S4: E1* (and so forth) Original Cut’ in this category, with the original episode names such as the aforementioned ‘Flight of the Phoenix’ removed. This practice recalls Prime Video’s poor handling of the *Seinfeld* back catalogue on their service, mixing up certain episodes for the viewer by mis-labelling them. However, the implications of Netflix changing and, to an extent, hiding their previous original content is somewhat problematic when the only way to access it is through their
platform. The original fourth season of *Arrested Development* was granted a physical DVD release but the majority of Netflix original shows since then have not been awarded the same privilege. This makes changes such as the removal of a highly controversial suicide sequence from the first season of *13 Reasons Why* (Netflix, 2017 - 2020) increasingly definitive. The BBC reported ‘Netflix said the decision had been made "on the advice of medical experts"’ in relation to the latter show.\(^{38}\) Instead, the current version available for streaming on Netflix skips the brief suicide sequence and cuts directly to the moment the character’s dead body is found. Whilst the inclusion and depiction of a teen suicide sequence in a show targeting a young demographic is arguably irresponsible to begin with, the removal of the sequence can be viewed as a type of course correction by Netflix and an attempt to write over their history. In the absence of any physical copy, the original versions of these sequences exist only in memory.

In some ways, the decision to prioritise the newly edited version of *Arrested Development*’s fourth season on the platform’s interface (in turn, ‘hiding’ the original cut of the season) might ultimately serve to further reinforce the cult aspects of the show. In a similar way to how there are viewers ‘in the know’ regarding the show’s complex in-jokes and repeated references, in time there may be an audience who are unaware of the complex history surrounding the show’s fourth season as a result of Hurwitz’s and Netflix’s course-correction. A fan base has built around the original fourth season which in time could come to be viewed favourably as a cult object. This can be seen on the *Arrested Development* Wiki website where fans meticulously document all of the changes made to the original fourth season amongst other things such as plot synopses and episode trivia.\(^{39}\) Unlike many of the other more recent Netflix original shows, the fourth season of *Arrested Development* was granted a DVD release in the summer of 2014 through a collaboration with Fox (the show’s original broadcast network). As well as being available to buy on its own, the season was also packaged in a ‘complete’ boxset with the original three seasons. In contrast, the fifth

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season is only available through streaming on Netflix and has no planned physical release. Copies of the original fourth season boxset could become highly sought after in time, in a similar way to the much-sought after theatrical version of the original *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 20th Century Fox, USA, 1977) film. George Lucas has re-edited the original *Star Wars* trilogy numerous times and, in each instance, replaces any previous version with the latest iteration as the only available option. The demand for the original theatrical edits of the films became so high that they were released in a limited DVD run in 2006 and have since gone out of print. Netflix’s practice of re-editing their shows, either for linearity in *Arrested Development* or for ethical reasons in the case of *13 Reasons Why* is a surprisingly analogous example to Lucas’ seemingly never-ending work on the *Star Wars* films.

A further effect of the decision to ‘remix’ the fourth season of *Arrested Development* is how the new editing decisions effect the narrative and comedic style of the episodes. In the statement given by Hurwitz in advance of *Fateful Consequences*’ release, he commented, ‘I also pursued it as a comedic experiment to see if new jokes and a new perspective would emerge from a remix that features all the Bluths in every episode, and where the simultaneity of the story plays out chronologically. And I’m really excited about the final result. It’s funny in a whole new way and I believe it creates a really entertaining and hilarious new experience’.40 The biggest issue with Hurwitz’s statement regarding new jokes being present in the show is that, as discussed, the fourth season relied heavily on a type of narrative humour rather than the show’s previous emphasis on physical and verbal recurring gags. It was precisely the unfolding of the season’s convoluted plot which provided comedic pleasure. Moreover, the sense of satisfaction one used to find from the show’s multiple in-jokes and references was replaced by being able to recognise how the show had tricked or manipulated its viewers through its ‘narrative pyrotechnics’. If anything, it appeared that the decision to eschew its original narrative structure would leave what remains of the show in terms of comedic value in very unstable territory. In order to satisfactorily assess this, I will closely examine the same

sequence which takes place in a police station from the original cut and the 2018 cut to better understand the extent of the changes.

The first time the viewer is shown any footage from the police station sequence in the original cut of the season comes during the second episode, ‘Borderline Personalities’. It is supposed to take place immediately after the events of the season three finale and features all the characters dressed in the same clothes (including the now-adult Michael Cera) despite the obvious signs of ageing that have taken place in the seven-year gap. The narrator says, ‘the family met up at the beginning of a fourth season that would never come’ referring to the show’s untimely cancellation and suggesting that the viewer is seeing what was planned to happen in terms of narrative had the show continued. Even here, with the ensemble cast assembled together in one room, the focus of the show remains on the narrative. Tobias, Michael, George Michael, and G.O.B. are seen entering through the door of the building but the episode focuses exclusively on the story between George Sr. and Lucille. During a medium close-up of George Sr., Tobias and George Michael can be seen in soft focus over either side of the character’s shoulders (Fig. 11). Tobias even audibly sings something and twirls in the background of the shot despite the focus of this moment being held on a different conversation that is comparatively mixed much louder in the show’s soundtrack. At the start of the following episode, ‘Indian Takers’, the viewer is once again shown the interior of the police station and the conversation between Lindsay (Portia de Rossi) and her husband, Tobias, that was taking place simultaneously in the background of the aforementioned shot from ‘Borderline Personalities’. After Lindsay says ‘My life is fallacy’, Tobias responds by singing ‘Oh, is that a gal I see? No, it’s just a fallaceeeeee’, holding the final note and twirling on the spot. This is the moment which was seen over George Sr.’s shoulder in the previous episode and the camera even cuts to a wider angle from a similar position during this moment in ‘Indian Takers’ (Fig. 12). The cut signals to the viewer that they have seen this moment before, potentially on an unconscious level, and in
turn serves to emphasise the fact that this jigsaw-like structure is how events will be portrayed throughout the season.

(Fig. 11 - Arrested Development: Fateful Consequences)

(Fig. 12 - Arrested Development: Fateful Consequences)

One final example of how this sequence is segmented comes in the seventh episode of the original fourth season, ‘Colony Collapse’. By this point, the viewer is half-way through the season and is still being provided with new perspectives on the initial police station sequence which was introduced during the second episode. This episode is focused on G.O.B. and shows a conversation between himself and George Michael where he begs for forgiveness as a consequence of stealing his young nephew’s girlfriend, Ann – yes, her. An angry and exasperated George Michael says ‘I don’t know what you wanna hear from me, Uncle G.O.B. – “Yes? We are good?”’ which G.O.B. takes as his nephew’s forgiveness and definitive blessing to continue dating Ann. Excitedly walking across the room shouting ‘I got my “YES!”’, G.O.B.
passes between Tobias and Lindsay in mid-conversation, revisiting their sequence from the ‘Indian Takers’ episode. As G.O.B. is shown comically contemplating his future in a slowly zooming isolated medium close-up, the viewer can still hear (for the third time) Tobias’ nonsensical sing-song line ‘Oh, is that a gal I see? No, it’s just a fallacy’ from offscreen.

The police station sequence is shown almost in its entirety during the first episode of *Fateful Consequences*, titled ‘Re Cap’n Bluth’. Its total length is roughly four and a half minutes which seems surprisingly short considering the amount of times it is returned to from different perspectives throughout the original fourth season. The footage Hurwitz was working with is mostly the same as it was five years previously, meaning shots of the family entering the station are the same as they were in the original. The viewer is shown the conversation between G.O.B. and George Michael, and G.O.B. interrupting Tobias and Lindsay, before the show rewinds and displays a ‘moments earlier …’ subtitle at the bottom of the screen to cut to George Sr. and Lucille’s conversation. However, by including these moments chronologically in the new edit, the sense of narrative excitement and the potential for foreshadowing is considerably smaller. Because this foreshadowing is one of the main ways the original season generated comedy (think of the numerous payoffs as series of delayed punchlines), a large amount of the comedic material built into the narrative structure of the season is undone. What’s more, the way that the new edit keeps rewinding to return to moments from only a few minutes earlier is arguably just as confusing as the original narrative structure of the original fourth season. The story will be told chronologically for the most part but the constant stopping-and-starting effect which results from having to cover everybody’s individual conversations proves to be particularly frustrating.

The attempts to revert the transformed style of *Arrested Development* back to something resembling the original seasons can also be seen in the way the ‘remix’ attempts to include a greater amount of recurring visual gags and one-liners. It should be self-evident that these instances of comedy couldn’t be solely created based on existing season four footage and instead required additional voice-over or sound editing. These alterations, which could be described as ‘post-post-production
changes’, were completed in the years between the original season’s release and the arrival of the remix in 2018. As early as 2014, Ron Howard tweeted an image of multiple pages of new narration accompanied with the caption, ‘New footage, new jokes – Feels like a whole new season’. Surprisingly, all 22 episodes of Fateful Consequences include new narration, audio editing, or unused footage from the original shoot, sometimes combining all three. Howard’s new voiceover work is sometimes used to address some of the narrative discrepancies that weren’t properly addressed in the original season. For example, when George Michael is first shown walking into the police station in ‘Re Cap’n Bluth’, the viewer is supposed to believe that these events are temporally occurring mere moments after the end of the season three finale. The inclusion of footage from the final episode of season three creates a striking juxtaposition between physical appearance of Michael Cera in 2006 as a young child and the adult actor in the present day. Addressing this contrast Howard, with tongue planted firmly in cheek, now says ‘The time at sea had clearly aged the boy’. This logically accounts for the diegetic change of Cera’s appearance on the one hand whilst figuratively winking at the viewer and their knowledge of the extra-diegetic world on the other.

The re-edited season also integrates some of the running jokes from the earlier seasons into the ‘remix’. One of these examples can be found in the second remixed episode, ‘Three Half Men’, when an isolated Buster (Tony Hale) finds himself habitually making a cocktail for his mother before realising she isn’t in the apartment. Buster then performs the ‘sad walk’ (Fig. 13); an act which is repeated frequently throughout Arrested Development by many different family members whenever they become upset. The walk is always accompanied by the Vince Guaraldi Trio track, ‘Christmas Time is Here’, taken from the A Charlie Brown Christmas (CBS, 1965) soundtrack. This has led to these occurrences on the show being referred to as ‘Charlie Brown moments’ in various YouTube compilation videos and on fan sites. In these moments, characters such as George Michael, Tobias, George Sr., Michael, and

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now Buster, all walk slowly with slumped shoulders and solemn expressions, accompanied by the sombre piece of piano music (Figs. 14 – 17).

(Fig. 13 - Arrested Development: Buster’s Sad Walk)

(Figs. 14 – 17 - Arrested Development: Recurring Sad Walk Gag)

The humour emerges from the specificity of the reference (a half-century old Christmas special based on the Peanuts comic strip), the child-like way in which the characters behave, and in its contrast to the rest of the action in the show. Each time the gag recurs, all diegetic sound is muted and the viewer only hears the melancholy piece of music. Like many of the gags on Arrested Development, I’d argue that the
origin of the joke isn’t necessarily important by the later seasons, and the recognition from the viewer that they have seen this before and understand its purpose as a recurring gag is enough to generate laughter. This use of the ‘sad walk’ in the new season lasts for all of 4 seconds but is long enough for the viewers to recognise a continuity between the earlier episodes and the more recent Netflix ones.

If the ‘remix’ of Arrested Development’s fourth season intended to reverse the transformation, returning the series to its place of former glory in the eyes of viewers left disillusioned by its sharp left-turn into narrative-driven comedy, the critical response to Fateful Consequences doesn’t reflect this. A review by Evan Saathoff from Birth. Movies. Death. is titled ‘Much Improved, Still Pretty Bad.’ In the review, Saathoff states ‘Fateful Consequences lays bare the fact that season four just doesn’t work. The experimental structure didn’t help but strip that away and you still have a story that is monumental for its own sake’. Further reference to the season’s focus on narrative over its previous comedic style comes in Saathoff’s comment, ‘For a show that so richly rewarded sharp-eyed audiences with sly callback jokes, Fateful Consequences’ desperate attempts to hold your hand through the storytelling feels unnecessary before growing outright obnoxious’, singling out the 11th episode, ‘Fun Night’, which begins with an exhausting seven minutes of recapitulation before finally rolling the opening credits.44 Beforehand, when the original fourth season’s episodes occasionally bordered on 40 minutes, dedicating this amount of time to repeat information to the viewer wouldn’t seem as excessive. However, now that all the episodes run to a maximum length of 23 minutes, taking up almost one third of that time to jog the (potentially bingeing) viewer’s memory appears nonsensical. In his review for Paste Magazine, Graham Techler also refers to the overbearing narration included in the re-edited fourth season. Techler writes, ‘Within a few minutes of the new first episode, however, Arrested Development treats us a barrage of narration intended to catch us up on the various season three

43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
plot threads that are picked up by the several different characters covered in said
new first episode. It’s total chaos.’45 This highlights the benefit of the original
season’s decision to stagger the introduction of its various characters across 15
episodes rather than all together in the first episode. This way, the amount of
catching up required for the viewer is segmented and broken into easily digestible
chunks of exposition. Techler continues, ‘Not only is the George Lucasi...
the experimentation is now evident in the way post-broadcast comedy shows utilise time within their episodes (to be discussed in relation to *Wet Hot American Summer: First Day of Camp* [Netflix, 2015] later in the chapter) or how they play with audience expectations to effortlessly shift between moments of intense comedy and drama in an animated show like *BoJack Horseman* [to be discussed in Chapter Three]. Still, *Arrested Development* remains an interesting case study for demonstrating the possibilities a streaming platform can bring to an established comedy programme, and the ways in which this experimentation was ultimately rejected for something more closely resembling the broadcast original.

*Subsequent Revivals*

In the years following their revival of *Arrested Development*, Netflix focused on reviving other existing shows alongside the production of their original content. One of these revivals, *Fuller House* (Netflix, 2016 - 2020), can be loosely grouped together with *Arrested Development* under the sitcom banner. However, the majority of the other Netflix comedy revivals appear to be starkly different types of shows such as sketch comedy in *W/ Bob and David* (Netflix, 2015) and *Mystery Science Theatre 3000: The Return* (Netflix, 2017). They have also produced revivals which adapt existing films into television series’, such as *She’s Gotta Have It* (Netflix, 2017 – 2019), based on the Spike Lee film of the same name. One of these film adaptations is *Wet Hot American Summer: First Day of Camp*, the first of two Netflix original revivals based on the cult comedy film *Wet Hot American Summer* (David Wain, USA Films, USA, 2001). The choice of *Wet Hot American Summer* as a project to revive for post-broadcast streaming and the way in which the original project is revived from an aesthetic perspective establishes some of the formal characteristics of Netflix’s approach towards original comedy television and reveals a number of trends that are identifiable in other post-broadcast comedy programmes. I will discuss these trends

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48 *W/ Bob and David* is a reboot or reimagining of Bob Odenkirk and David Cross’ cult sketch series, *Mr. Show with Bob and David* (HBO, 1995 – 1998), featuring the same stars and much of the same writing team.
in greater detail in subsequent chapters, but their presence in Netflix’s post-broadcast revivals allows for a general introduction.

Similar to Arrested Development during its original run, Wain’s Wet Hot American Summer can be categorised as a cult film with a small and passionate following. It was a failure both financially and critically upon release, earning less than $300,000 from a budget of $1.8 million. Its lack of critical support differs from Arrested Development, which was consistently praised during its original three-season run and won multiple television awards. Netflix’s interest in returning to the project, 14 years later, and reviving it as a television series is evidence of their strategy to cater to niche audiences by producing content with in-built viewers.49 Like Arrested Development, Wet Hot American Summer also boasted a cast who had gone on to become massively successful in various other roles since its initial release. Amy Poehler had played Leslie Knope on the acclaimed NBC sitcom, Parks and Recreation, for seven seasons since the release of the film. Paul Rudd had established himself as a popular comedy actor in numerous projects towards the latter-half of the 2000s such as I Love You, Man (John Hamburg, DreamWorks Pictures, USA, 2009) as well as in Wain’s own studio comedies Role Models (David Wain, Universal Pictures, USA, 2008) and Wanderlust (David Wain, Universal Pictures, USA, 2012). Bradley Cooper is arguably the most successful and recognisable star to emerge from the cast of Wet Hot American Summer, appearing in numerous successful comedies such as Wedding Crashers (David Dobkin, New Line Cinema, USA, 2005) and The Hangover (Todd Phillips, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA, 2009) before achieving awards success as a result of his work in dramatic films like The Place Beyond the Pines (Derek Cianfrance, Focus Features, USA, 2012), Silver Linings Playbook (David O. Russell, The Weinstein Company, USA, 2012), and American Sniper (Clint Eastwood, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA, 2014). Even less well-known actors such as Joe Lo Truglio, Elizabeth Banks, and Ken Marino had become recognisable faces in recent years due to their frequent character work in various popular comedy films and television programmes (often collaborating with other Wet Hot American Summer cast members). Many of the cast

49 The film had a number of 10th Anniversary screenings in 2011, including Q&A sessions with the director and midnight showings. It has also been praised by public figures such as actress Kristen Bell, who names it as her favourite film.
members from the film’s television revival had also gone on to star in other Netflix original shows. This allows us to frame the show as another example of high concept comedy, catered not only to fans of the original film but also viewers who had enjoyed other work by these performers on Netflix. Similarly, many of Arrested Development’s cast members, such as Will Arnett and Jason Bateman, appear in multiple shows (across multiple genres) on the streaming service and allows us to introduce the concept of ‘Netflix Stars’ in the same way certain actors and actresses used to be associated with a particular film studio in the classical Hollywood era of filmmaking.

The show is often self-reflexive about the level of fame attached to its stars and chooses to emphasise the incredulity of their return to this project. For example, as a result of Bradley Cooper’s limited shooting schedule, the episode ‘Staff Party’ features his character, Ben, wearing a balaclava for the majority of his scenes. Rather than draw the viewer’s attention away from this fact, the show creates a contrived scenario involving Ben DJ-ing the camp party under the pseudonym, DJ Ski Mask. Despite the fact that the face behind the balaclava clearly doesn’t belong to Cooper, a shot from the beginning of the episode featuring the character holding up the mask to show another character, and the viewer, is enough to provide a sense of cohesion and make narrative sense within the diegesis of the show whilst also casting a knowing glance towards attentive viewers (Fig. 18).

(Fig. 18 - Wet Hot American Summer: First Day of Camp)
Not all critics were supportive of the showrunners’ decision, with Liz Shannon Miller stating ‘there are a few moments where, no matter what [David] Wain and [Michael] Showalter might say, the struggle to unite their insanely famous cast was pretty apparent. DJ Ski Mask? C’mon.’ These struggles recall those experienced during the production of the post-broadcast seasons of Arrested Development which ultimately led to the decision to create a segmented narrative with the ensemble cast only appearing together in a handful of scenes. Following the first revival series, Netflix produced a second season in 2017 titled Wet Hot American Summer: Ten Years Later (Netflix, 2017). For this season, the character of Ben returned but was portrayed by popular comedy actor, Adam Scott, rather than Cooper who was in the midst of production for his adaptation of A Star Is Born (Bradley Cooper, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA, 2018). In the episode, ‘Reunion’, Ben is reunited with childhood friend Susie (Amy Poehler) for the first time in a decade. Despite looking like a completely different person in a shoddy wig, it becomes immediately clear that all of the characters know who Ben is without a moment’s hesitation (Fig. 19).

Recasting techniques are common in lots of popular films and television shows. For example, when Maggie Gyllenhaal replaced Katie Holmes in Christopher Nolan’s The

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51 Despite the pragmatic decision to segment the narrative of Arrested Development’s fourth season, the writers and showrunner eventually leaned into the idea of it being an experimental approach, unique to streaming, through their execution of the show and in promotional appearances.
Dark Knight (Christopher Nolan, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA, 2008), none of the characters within the diegesis mentioned her change in appearance. However, this show once again provides a knowing wink to the viewer by having Ben quietly ask Susie if he looks any different around his face. She replies, ‘Did you fix your deviated septum?’ to which he says ‘I did’ and the scene continues as normal as if it were wholly plausible that minor nose surgery would make Bradley Cooper look like Adam Scott. This type of winking, referential humour is common in cult shows, such as Arrested Development, and goes on to be a major source of comedy in other post-broadcast comedy shows such as Love and BoJack Horseman.

The most interesting aspect of Wet Hot American Summer: First Day of Camp is its use of time. In a similar way to how the original film takes place during the final day of summer camp, this season of television serves as a prequel and is roughly set over a 12-hour period on the first day of camp before many of the characters know each other. The accumulated length of all the season’s episodes is around four hours, meaning that the viewer witnesses a fairly large proportion of the day’s events. Other case studies from this thesis use time in a comparable way, most notably Love, which focuses intensely on the minutiae of the early stages of a relationship. In that programme, there is often little to no unrecorded time between episodes, meaning that a particular episode will begin at the exact moment the previous one ended. In the case of Love, I will argue this is done to establish a relaxed, authentic, and naturalistic tone in the project (a style for which its co-creator, Judd Apatow, is well known). On the other hand, Wet Hot American Summer is clearly not attempting to create an atmosphere of believability and often goes out of its way to impose the complete opposite effect on the viewer. The fact that all of the season’s madcap events including (but not limited to) a rivalry with the opposing camp, a theatre production, a party, a government cover-up, and a murder, take place during one day is even presented as incredulous in the final episode, when Coop (Michael Showalter) recapitulates everything to Kevin (David Bloom) in one long, matter-of-fact sentence. Once more, the show utilises a self-referential style of humour by commenting on the temporal structure of the season itself.
The use of time has another effect in relation to binge-watching on post-broadcast platforms. The act of bingeing appears to be a point-of-pride for Netflix and their streaming figures (whilst still unavailable publicly) are being reported on with increasing frequency as and when the company choose to share them. For example, numerous articles were published in the wake of Netflix’s announcement that 40.7 million households started watching the third season *Stranger Things* in its first weekend and that half of those viewers finished the entire season within the first three days of the show’s availability online. Bingeing creates a greater amount of internet discussion, leading to increased buzz and publicity for a show, ultimately benefitting Netflix. Anecdotally, when I first watched *Wet Hot American Summer: First Day of Camp*, I didn’t begin it with the intention of finishing the entire season in one sitting. However, the show’s unique use of temporality compelled me to watch an episode or two every few hours and led me to finish the season during the day. I could count the amount of times I’ve finished an entire season of television in 24 hours on one hand and it was the show’s use of time (and a free afternoon) that encouraged me to continue watching until the end. It was the first show which highlighted the potential temporal possibilities offered by post-broadcast comedy programmes to myself as a casual viewer. I’ll return to this topic later in the thesis but saw this case study as a perfect opportunity to introduce the recurring trend.

One final post-broadcast revival worth examining is *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*, created by and starring Jerry Seinfeld as its host. Unlike *Arrested Development* and *Wet Hot American Summer*, the show has always been a web-series in one form or another, existing on the digital network Crackle for six years between 2012 and 2018. Writing about the series in 2015 for a *New York Times* profile of Seinfeld, Dave Itzkoff states, ‘Its episodes have been streamed nearly 100 million times since its 2012 debut, and it is now a central part of Sony’s ambitions to make Crackle a more formidable combatant in the arena of online content.’ Crackle


has now been overshadowed by numerous bigger streaming services and their incredibly popular Seinfeld show has since been acquired by Netflix, starting in 2018. Discussing the conception of the show in a conversation with David Letterman, Seinfeld said ‘I was thinking, what would be a good TV show for a phone?’ The act of viewing media on mobile devices such as phones, tablets, and laptops was certainly in practice when the show first began in 2012. However, the following years have seen the introduction of more streaming applications for smart phones (the Prime Video and Now TV apps) as well as the option to download film and television content to the hard drive of a phone in order to watch on long journeys without an internet connection. In 2012, Seinfeld may have not predicted the prominence of watching television on the move in the near-future. However, his desire to create a show perfect for phone viewing means he certainly benefits from the current technological moment. The format is an unscripted conversation (usually culled from half a day’s worth of footage) between Seinfeld and a famous comedian as they drive to get coffee. All of the pre-Netflix episodes are around 20 minutes long and feature comedians from the stand-up circuit, television, and movies. The focus of this case study is on the changes made to the show once Netflix began producing episodes at the start of 2018.

As is the case with Arrested Development and Wet Hot American Summer, there are trends present in the show which serve to support arguments that will be made in greater detail later in this thesis. They are worth noting here first to establish and contextualise their prominence across a wide range of post-broadcast comedy texts. The first of these trends is the increased use of Netflix performers or ‘Netflix Stars’ which began to appear on the show once the episodes started being produced by streaming company. Ricky Gervais, Martin Short, Seth Rogen, Eddie Murphy, Dave Chappelle, Zach Galifianakis, Dana Carvey, John Mulaney, and Ellen DeGeneres all appear on the Netflix episodes whilst also having content produced and distributed by Netflix, making this another clear example of what I have defined as high concept

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comedy. Sometimes the timing of the guest’s appearance on _Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee_ coincides with the release of a stand-up special, movie, or show that a particular comedian has worked on. For example, the Ellen DeGeneres episode was made available at the same time of year when Netflix launched her stand-up special, _Ellen DeGeneres: Relatable_ (Netflix, 2018). Clicking on one of the pieces of media would recommend the other whilst also raising awareness of additional content on the platform. Not long after her stand-up special, Ellen was a special guest on the Netflix’s David Letterman interview show, _My Next Guest Needs No Introduction_. Many of the guests on the Letterman show have other content available on Netflix, most notably (for the purposes of this chapter), Jerry Seinfeld. Over the course of a few years, the platform has created a veritable web or network of associations across its interface which always has further options and recommendations for its viewers as a consequence of utilising certain performers in multiple projects. Whilst Netflix’s strategy of cross-promotion can’t be viewed as wholly unique to post-broadcast television, the way this information is analysed and subsequently utilised via their algorithm is specific to their platform. A more recent example is Eddie Murphy, who appeared in the latest season of _Comedians in Cars_. Murphy’s episode was the first in the season and was double the length of a standard episode at 41 minutes, which already singles out the comedian as a unique figure. His comments during the show are part-conversation and part-promotion as he teases a return to stand-up comedy. This would be the actor’s first foray into long-form stand-up in over 30 years and was highly publicised in the weeks that followed as he doubled-down on the comments he made during the episode of the show. Combined with a lead performance in _Dolemite is My Name_ (Craig Brewer, Netflix, USA, 2019), a Netflix film which generated significant awards buzz for the actor, the appearance on _Comedians in Cars_ worked more as a promotional campaign than entertainment. When Murphy’s inevitable stand-up special does finally arrive, it doesn’t require a stretch of the

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imagination to envision it in the Netflix library alongside their innumerable other stand-up specials (to be discussed in greater detail in chapter four).

Netflix’s acquiring and subsequent cataloguing of Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee recalls an issue raised at the start of the chapter with another Jerry Seinfeld project, Seinfeld, on Amazon Prime. Rather than separate the episodes chronologically into the original season boxsets as they existed on Crackle, Netflix have created their own boxsets and running order for the show’s episodes. The original first season included many guests that could be considered close friends of the host such as Larry David and Michael Richards, whereas Netflix have seemingly front-loaded their first season with bigger names such as Jim Carrey, Jimmy Fallon, Sarah-Jessica Parker, and Chris Rock. It’s worth mentioning that Carrey had a documentary released on Netflix around the time of Comedians in Cars’ arrival, once more demonstrating the company’s intentions to use the names from the show as a promotional tool. Netflix also don’t adhere to a standard season length (usually six episodes per season for the majority of Comedians in Cars). Instead, their boxsets of the show range from nine to twenty episodes with no apparent reason behind the fluctuation. Furthermore, instead of simply naming their self-created seasons numerically like most other shows, they are separated into four categories: First Cup, Light and Sweet, Special Blend, and Late Night Espresso. Apart from their relationship to coffee, there is also no obvious reasoning behind the names of the seasons. For example, none of the Late Night Espresso episodes take place at night and the episodes from First Cup don’t exclusively include guests who Seinfeld hasn’t met. Some of Seinfeld’s guests such as Howard Stern and Barack Obama aren’t even comedians and would potentially fit into the special blend season, but neither of their episodes appear in that boxset.

The act of reordering the seasons and mixing the episodes together is problematic in the same way as Amazon’s error in cataloguing Seinfeld. It partially obstructs television and/or comedy scholars from gaining an accurate understanding of the show’s history and aesthetic progression by creating a new chronology, although it is worth noting that both Netflix and Amazon would most likely not care in the slightest about this inconvenience. Even though many shows, particularly
sitcoms, are produced with syndication in mind, it becomes a larger issue when the only access to certain shows is through streaming platforms as a consequence of licensing deals. This reordering is also reminiscent of Netflix’s recent rewrite of Arrested Development’s history through the act of restricting access to the original fourth season by hiding it in the ‘Trailers and More’ section of the show’s page. More confusing for the viewer is the act of trying to place the interview in the context of the guest’s wider career. If the episodes are becoming increasingly promotional with regards to other film and television projects (such as the Ellen DeGeneres and Eddie Murphy examples), then it is often confusing trying to place the year that many of the earlier episodes took place. If a viewer was a fan of Aziz Ansari’s Netflix show, Master of None, they might be disappointed and confused to find that he doesn’t mention it on his episode of Comedians in Cars, especially since it was added to Netflix two years after his show was released on the platform. There are also episodes starring disgraced comedians such as Louis CK, which was filmed and released on the Crackle platform before the reports of his sexual misconduct became known to the public. Despite CK’s episode being originally released in 2014, it still exists on the Netflix catalogue alongside his other stand-up specials. This could be viewed by Netflix users as a continued endorsement of CK and is an ethically compromising position for the company to take when they use the same programme to promote other content on their platform.

Conclusion

When analysing Netflix’s various attempts at reviving comedy programmes, it becomes clear that the company has consistently made efforts to change the form and comedic style of the existing shows in order to better accommodate their streaming service. The most extreme and obvious example of this transformation can be found in Arrested Development which saw experimental changes to both the narrative structure and the comedic style of the show. Arguably the changes made to the show’s narrative between the broadcast and post-broadcast seasons is in fact the primary reason for the change to the show’s comedic style. A foregrounding of narrative complexity throughout the Netflix-produced seasons meant that the
programme’s jokes were now often embedded within the plot of the show, taking the form of surprise twists or foreshadowing which becomes increasingly amusing with repeated viewings. This came in contrast to the recurring visual and verbal gags which the show became known for during its broadcast run in the mid-2000s. The critical failure of the fourth season meant that the show has since reverted back to its original broadcast format of typical sitcom-length episodes featuring its ensemble cast together. Despite this, the complexity of the show’s narrative has remained an integral part of its comedy in the fifth season and appears to demonstrate the company’s desire for its subscribers to binge their shows as quickly as possible. The convoluted nature of Arrested Development’s Netflix-produced seasons mean that many viewers have to watch the show at a quicker rate than they’d be able to on broadcast television simply to keep up with the endlessly fluctuating narrative.

Arrested Development must be acknowledged as something of an outlier when judging revived post-broadcast comedy programmes. The only other sitcom revival on the platform is Fuller House. However, there have been a number of comedy revivals which originate from sketch shows, films, or other web series. These post-broadcast revivals are particularly interesting in the way they emphasise some recurring tropes of Netflix’s post-broadcast comedy shows and gesture towards the company possessing what could be viewed as a distinctive house style. Wet Hot American Summer: First Day of Camp and its sequel, Wet Hot American Summer: Ten Years Later both feature the self-aware juvenile humour of the film on which the show is based, released almost 15 years earlier. But narratively and temporally, First Day of Camp condenses the expected diegetic time of a comedy series into one day, told across eight episodes. Once again, this practice encourages bingeing for the viewer and can also be found in other post-broadcast original comedy programmes on the platform such as Love and Living With Yourself (Netflix, 2019). Another notable revival is Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee. This show has always existed in a digital format as a web series on Crackle, meaning its move to Netflix wouldn’t typically suggest a change in structure. This has been true for the most part, with only a handful of newer Netflix-produced episodes (such as Eddie Murphy’s appearance) running longer than a typical episode. Instead, this show’s revival
emphasises the idea of high concept comedy and the ‘Netflix Star’, featuring recurring performers such as Murphy, John Mulaney, Dave Chappelle, and even the show’s host, Jerry Seinfeld, himself. All these names are featured in other shows or films on the platform and their episodes are sometimes used as a type of promotion for their other work, often being released around a similar time to their Comedians in Cars episode. Innumerable Netflix shows and films also feature the same names and work to generate an association between a particular star and the streaming service. Both Will Arnett and Jason Bateman from Arrested Development feature in range of both comedic and dramatic material on the platform. Netflix have also confusingly reordered the original episodes by separating them into different categories. There is no evidence of logic behind this decision as the categorised episodes don’t bear any obvious thematic or stylistic continuity but the recategorization creates problems for historicising the show, particularly with regards to understanding what year certain guests had appeared. This trend of recategorization and rewriting history is also identifiable across the Netflix platform on a wider scale. For example, the original edit of Arrested Development’s fourth season is currently hidden to some extent in the ‘trailers and more’ section on the programme’s main page.

Having outlined them here, I will be returning to a number of these trends throughout this thesis, all of which present Netflix as a company with a keen interest in generating a unique and recognisable brand image with certain identifiable traits that are associated almost exclusively with the platform. One such trend which was not explicitly foregrounded in this chapter is that of authorship in the post-broadcast comedy. Whilst applicable to Mitch Hurwitz in the case of Arrested Development, it will be explored more closely in relation to Judd Apatow and Tig Notaro in the following chapter.
Chapter Two

Authorship in Post-Broadcast Comedy Television

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the work of established comedy auteurs on post-broadcast television platforms. By focusing on this element of post-broadcast comedy programming, one will be able to better understand the aesthetic relationship between the auteur’s brand image, and the brand image of services such as Netflix and Amazon. For Netflix, my case study is Love, co-created by director/writer/producer, Judd Apatow. I will briefly contextualise Apatow’s career in film and television, focusing particularly on the comic style he has popularised over the last decade. Following this, I will examine the comic aesthetic of Love, in terms of both its humour and its visual style, before moving on to discuss its tonal shifts between comedy and drama and how its narrative structure can be viewed as significant in a post-broadcast context. Having explored authorship in Love, I will then compare the show to an Amazon original, One Mississippi. One Mississippi is based to some extent on the life and experiences of comedian, Tig Notaro, and featured a number of talented writers and directors on its team during its short-lived run on Prime Video. I will compare the aesthetic similarities between the two shows as well as the way they use their author figures for promotional purposes and credibility. The familiarity viewers might have regarding the other work of the programmes’ creators and the way their names are prominently featured in promotion for the respective shows is another example of what I have previously described as high concept comedy. This will also be explored further throughout the chapter. The similarities between the shows will highlight some recurring trends in post-broadcast comedy programmes across two different platforms and their respective cancellations will eventually lead to a reflection on the role of streaming services in delivering a range of diverse comedy programming which caters to niche audiences.

Judd Apatow

Judd Apatow is best known for his work directing critically and commercially successful comedy films such as The 40 Year-Old Virgin (Judd Apatow, Universal
Pictures, USA, 2005), *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow, Universal Pictures, USA, 2007), and *Trainwreck* (Judd Apatow, Universal Pictures, USA, 2015). In addition to this, his role as the writer and producer of similarly successful comedy films and his collaborations with performers and directors such as Seth Rogen, Amy Schumer, Paul Feig, and Nicholas Stoller led *Rolling Stone* magazine to describe him in 2015 as ‘the most prominent comedy-maker of our time’.¹ As a result of these critically and commercially successful collaborations and his much-publicised involvement in numerous film and television projects, Apatow’s name has also become synonymous with a specific comedy aesthetic and style. This is gestured towards in Saul Austerlitz’s description of Apatow as someone who has become ‘more than a writer or director; he has become a CEO, and a brand.’²

Supporting the idea of Apatow being representative of a brand, Jonah Weiner writes, ‘His name evokes not only a particular comedic tone (heartfelt raunch), but also ... particular techniques (endless on-set improv, which he helped pioneer) ... and particular directors’.³ The on-set improvisation to which Weiner refers is widely acknowledged and frequently gestured towards as a defining characteristic of Apatow’s work, one which presumably contributes to the loose and baggy tone of the majority of his directorial efforts. Improvisation in comedy films didn’t begin with Apatow, but the extent to which Apatow allows the actors to go off-script is considerable and seems to change the films’ formal qualities, such as the performance style, its editing patterns, narrative momentum and shooting method, which potentially become noticeable when viewing the completed picture.⁴ This technique and its accompanying aesthetics have since become prevalent in a large amount of contemporary comedy films in which Apatow had no

⁴ Improvisation is heavily present in countless films preceding Apatow’s work, for instance Barry Levinson’s directorial debut, *Diner* (Barry Levinson, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, USA, 1982), and Rob Reiner’s *This Is Spinal Tap* (Rob Reiner, Embassy Pictures, USA, 1984) as well as in the numerous star vehicles of actors such as Robin Williams and Jim Carrey.
involvement, including *Your Highness* (David Gordon Green, Universal Pictures, USA, 2011) and the *Bad Neighbours* (Nicholas Stoller, Universal Pictures, USA, 2014) series, many of which feature actors and directors that are often closely associated with Apatow, such as Seth Rogen and David Gordon Green. In his radio review of the Apatow-produced *The Big Sick* (Michael Showalter, Amazon Studios/Lionsgate, USA, 2017), British film critic Robbie Collin stated ‘When we talk about films having an overall authorial single creative force behind them, nine times out of ten it’s the director, occasionally a writer … and very occasionally a star. Judd Apatow is different though ... all of his films take place in this certain milieu, let’s call it “Apatowpia”’. Collin cites Apatow’s involvement in television shows such as *Girls* as an example of his authorial presence outside of his directing work. He also discusses the tonal similarities between Apatow’s projects, which frequently ‘revolve around relationships and moral choices; weak moral choices turned into strong moral choices made by male characters’ as further evidence of his brand in addition to his much-discussed use of improvisation. However, *Girls* is notably created by Lena Dunham and began to move away from the almost exclusively male-oriented comedy of other Apatow projects.

It is amongst this discussion of authorial and brand identity that John Caldwell’s work on authorship in television can be used to describe Apatow’s recent involvement in the medium. Writing in 1995, Caldwell stated ‘Television has rarely been anonymous, although many people behind the camera used to be’. He is referring to a rise in consciousness which occurred throughout the 1980s and more prominently from the 1990s onwards, surrounding the authorial figure creating television programming. This increase of interest surrounding television authorship occurred in conjunction with the increasing popularity of cable networks and as a result of the directors and showrunners who were advertised as working for them. However, as far as Caldwell is concerned, ‘Producers and authors are conceptual

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6 Ibid.
mythologies manufactured by production entities and broadcast corporations alike.\textsuperscript{8}

Apatow began his career in television as the creator, writer, and producer of the shows \textit{Freaks and Geeks} (1999 – 2000) and \textit{Undeclared} (2001 – 2003). The shows had a cult appeal but attracted a limited viewership leading to them both being prematurely cancelled by their respective broadcast networks, NBC and Fox. Following his later success as a film director and producer, Apatow returned to the medium, but this time partnering with the companies HBO and Netflix, which are known to champion creative talent and produce programming directed towards niche audiences. His return to television allows for a discussion of Apatow’s recent work for Netflix as another example of high concept comedy. Fans of his early television work like \textit{Freaks and Geeks} may be primed to expect a combination of that show with his more popular feature film work. For HBO, Apatow became involved with \textit{Girls}, created by comic actress and writer Lena Dunham, who also stars as the show’s leading character, Hannah Horvath. Apatow served as \textit{Girls’} executive producer over its six-season run and also wrote the teleplays for multiple episodes, most notably the show’s finale. Despite being created by Dunham, the programme shared many characteristics of Apatow’s work such as the tonal shifts between comedy and drama, and the close examination of both romantic relationships and the relationships between friends. He also currently occupies the same position for HBO’s \textit{Crashing} (2017 - 2019), created by Pete Holmes. \textit{Crashing} focuses on the experiences of a recently single, middle-aged stand-up comedian in New York City. Apatow, who began his career as a comedian and joke writer, frequently returns to the topic of stand-up and improvised comedy in his work, most prominently in his 2009 film, \textit{Funny People} (Judd Apatow, Universal Pictures, USA, 2009) and also in \textit{The Big Sick}. Many of these topics addressed by \textit{Girls} and \textit{Crashing} would be further explored in his Netflix original show, \textit{Love}, a show Apatow co-created with its leading star, Paul Rust, and writer/producer Lesley Arfin, upon whom the show’s fictional character of Mickey (Gillian Jacobs) is loosely

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
based. As well as creating *Love*, Apatow wrote numerous episodes and directed the third season episode ‘Arya and Greg’.

The continuity of the themes and the tonal similarities between Apatow’s film and television work demonstrates a more singular and unified vision than the revolving list of often anonymous directors hired to oversee the production of many long-running network sitcoms. Moreover, the studios he works with are keenly aware of this fact, proudly advertising the director’s involvement, occasionally alongside a list of his most successful commercial projects, in their promotional trailers and posters for the programmes, as is the case with Netflix for *Love* (Figs. 20 - 21).

(Fig. 20 - *Love* Promotional Material)

(Fig. 21 - *Love* Promotional Material)
Returning once more to the idea of high concept comedy, Apatow’s name, as a brand, indicates to the viewer that he is a successful, established authorial presence, whilst also suggesting the type of show they will be watching based on the tactical deployment of profitable titles like *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow, Universal Pictures, USA, 2007). When accessing the Netflix app on a laptop or other devices such as a Playstation console, the main page of each show lists the creators underneath the actors names, stressing the company’s focus on an authorial vision and acknowledging the draw these names have for certain viewers (Fig. 22). In his 2010 work, *Show Sold Separately*, Jonathan Gray remarks that the various paratexts created by studios, such as the promotional trailers and posters for *Love*, and the design of this interface, ‘create an author figure, surround the text with aura, and insist on its uniqueness, value, and authenticity in an otherwise standardized media environment, thereby taking a heretofore industrial entity and rendering it a work of art.’[^9] *Love* is therefore imbued with a sense of authenticity which tries to present itself in direct opposition to the fact that all television programmes are ‘first and foremost a product of a studio machine’.[^10] This is in spite of the fact that its authenticity is the very thing Netflix has manufactured. I will return to the topic of *Love*’s claim to authenticity when discussing its tone and visual style later in the chapter, but Gray’s comments also hark back to Caldwell’s argument that the concept of the auteur has been manufactured by television companies in an attempt to create greater profitability. This is clearly one of the aims of a subscriber-based post-broadcast service like Netflix, where the content is declared a ‘Netflix Original’ and is unable to be viewed or purchased anywhere except through the streaming service.

[^10]: Ibid.
Whilst the purpose of this chapter isn’t to simply compare Apatow’s post-broadcast television work to his work in cinema, it will be useful to briefly outline some of the stylistic tendencies he has become known for, both visually and in terms of comedy. From this, one can see whether his style has had to be reconfigured for the television medium, as well as whether there are any changes in Apatow’s aesthetic choices between producing *Girls* for the post-network cable channel HBO, and the more hands-on role of creating, writing, and directing episodes of *Love* for the post-broadcast platform Netflix. Apatow’s humour frequently revolves around relatable insights surrounding the dynamics of heterosexual relationships. This often addresses issues surrounding courtship and sex, but the relationships and camaraderie between groups of friends, which are almost exclusively male, are also given equal importance in his comedy work. The aforementioned *Girls* seems to undermine this statement; however, it should be stressed that *Girls* is more the product of Lena Dunham, who acts as its chief creative force, than Apatow, thus resulting in a heavier emphasis on female relationships.
A large part of his comedy revolves around references to popular culture and celebrities, often from the worlds of film, television, and music. In some instances, the more obscure the reference, the more successful the gag. For example, in *Knocked Up*, the character, Martin (Martin Starr), grows a beard as part of a bet with his housemates. At a later point in the film, he is referred to, amongst numerous other things, as ‘Scorsese on coke’, gesturing towards filmmaker Martin Scorsese’s somewhat dishevelled bearded look in the late 1970s, during the midst of the director’s cocaine addiction. The reference is aimed at what is presumably a cine-literate audience with the sufficient cultural capital to understand the joke, as opposed to those who might more easily appreciate the cameos made by popular contemporary celebrity figures such as Ryan Seacrest and Steve Carell in this same film. The idea of cultural capital can be applied to Apatow’s television involvement with companies such as HBO and Netflix, who produce programming aimed directly at niche, intellectual audiences, with enough disposable income to be able to afford their service.\(^\text{11}\) From this, one could argue that Apatow has found a business partner that correctly fits the audience that many of his jokes are targeted towards.

The work of cultural critic, Pierre Bourdieu, raises interesting questions here with regards to Apatow’s work in television and his status as an auteur in relation to the subjects and themes addressed in his work. Writing on cinema in his 1984 book, *Distinction*, Bourdieu notes that ‘the taste for “ambitious” works that demand a large cultural investment is opposed to the taste for the most spectacular feature films, overtly designed to entertain’.\(^\text{12}\) This dichotomy reflects Bourdieu’s ideas about cultural capital which, in contemporary society, is advertised by subscriber-based post-network and post-broadcast companies as something which can be gained based on economic capital. Put simply, if the viewer subscribes to HBO and Netflix, they will be able to access content which isn’t available on standard broadcast television, often because of its less conventional nature and niche focus. Apatow’s comedy is undoubtedly categorised as populist.

\(^\text{11}\) McCabe and Akass, ‘It’s not TV, it’s HBO’s original programming: Producing quality TV’ in Leverette, Ott, and Buckley (ed.), *It’s Not TV*, p. 91.

and designed to entertain as opposed to being viewed as inaccessibly ambitious and requiring a large amount of cultural capital to understand in the same way as art cinema has done. His work conveys universally relatable topics such as romance and friendship using realistic performances and recognisable locations. However, the frequent references to obscure figures from popular culture and the tonal shifts between comedy and drama that have become characteristic of his work mean that a show like *Love* doesn’t fit as neatly into the audience expectations of a 20-minute comedy programme broadcast on network television in the US. Instead, it can be argued that the director’s work occupies a middle-ground where his tendency to experiment is often reflected in the box-office results of his commercial ‘failures’, such as the sprawling dramedy, *Funny People*, concerning an unlikable comedian who finds out he has cancer. I will explore *Love*’s differences with conventional broadcast television’s visual and comedic style at a later point in this chapter, examining the show’s self-reflexivity and sense of visual authenticity.

In addition to the topics of Apatow’s comedies, it is also important to consider their visual style. The director emerged from a stand-up comedy background and his early involvement doing script-rewrites for performers such as Jim Carrey, known for his sharp ability to improvise, has led to a similarly loose approach being taken in his film comedy work. There are numerous instances in his work where an improvised line is shown to be ad-libbed in raw behind-the-scenes footage on the film’s DVD bonus material before later being edited into the final cut of the film. In the case of *This is 40* (Judd Apatow, Universal Pictures, USA, 2012), the outtakes shown during the film’s end credits provide evidence of this practice. The scene involves the film’s central couple, Pete and Debbie (Paul Rudd and Leslie Mann reprising their roles from Apatow’s *Knocked Up*), attending a meeting in the principal’s office as the result of Debbie verbally intimidating the child of Catherine (Melissa McCarthy), another parent. In the finished film, the shots featuring McCarthy improvising position her towards the right side of the frame, with the back of Debbie’s head visible in soft focus on the far-left hand side. When these

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13 Comedy programmes such as *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation* both include moments of comedy and drama, but still adhere strictly to sitcom conventions, including heightened performance styles and the use of studio sets.
same moments, and others that didn’t make the final cut, are shown in the film’s end credits gag reel, the camera position is reversed and the viewer is instead shown Rudd and Mann in focus from the front, breaking character and laughing in response to McCarthy’s ad-libs, whilst McCarthy is barely visible, in soft focus on the right hand side of the frame. Some of the same takes of McCarthy’s lines which appear in the film such as, ‘I would like to rear up and jack-knife my legs and kick you both in the fucking jaw with my footbone!’ are also in the gag reel, but it becomes evident from the unedited footage that the reaction shots which Apatow used in the finished cut were filmed separate to the original moment of improvisation. In the film, Debbie responds with ‘You’re really scaring me’ whereas the actual response from the take included both Rudd and Mann breaking character, unable to stifle laughter at McCarthy’s tirade. Catherine’s line ‘You corner me, I’ll chew through you!’ is also revealed to be part of a much longer rant where she goes on threaten Debbie by saying, ‘I will chew off your eyelids.’ However, in the finished film, Apatow cuts the rant in half and inserts a shot of the headmistress, Gill (Joanne Baron), responding to Catherine’s comments.

In this sequence and numerous others where improvisation occurs, Apatow frequently hides the actors breaking character and laughing by using a basic shot reverse-shot setup when filming them, often in a medium close-up shot with a static camera and cutting away whenever a performer begins to laugh. Likewise, he will often insert reaction shots and performers quipping amusing one-liners into sequences, even if they didn’t occur that way in the written screenplay or when filmed. As a result, the loose atmosphere which comes from the sense of improvisation in his work is often assimilated into the film in a very regimented, occasionally jarring manner through the editing technique, as the scenes are ‘written’ in post-production depending on the lines and takes he chooses to keep. The emphasis on improvisation in Apatow’s cinema is made visible in a way that relates back to Gray’s comments about the increased access to bonus features on DVDs and the importance they play in establishing preferred modes of viewing from the audience. He states, “‘restored’ scenes, interviews with creative personnel, commentary tracks, production stills, and making-of documentaries,
stamp their texts with authenticity'.

This is pertinent on two levels with regards to Apatow. Firstly, the claim to authenticity is something he strives for in his work and something which will be examined later with regards to Love’s narrative structure and location shooting. Moreover, the authenticity provided by the paratexts which Gray is referring to suggests that the DVDs are ‘regularly regarded as containing the true version of the film.’

Because the improvisatory practices surround the texts through various paratextual materials, they become a lens through which the viewer watches and interprets the work. The notion, or suspicion, that Apatow’s work is pieced together from various improvised outtakes in the editing room is supported by the strange off-rhythm cutting in a lot of his films’ sequences but is ultimately also shown in the multiple cases of paratextual evidence available to watch on the DVD bonus features.

Whilst the tone of his work is often very naturalistic, featuring extended sequences of rambling conversations and comedic exchanges that are more focused on the exploration of character than driving the narrative of the film forward, his accompanying visual style creates a strange ‘cut-and-paste’ aesthetic where it becomes evident that the sequence has been created in post-production from a series of improvised lines and reaction shots. This is explained by Apatow’s claim that he tests ‘two different cuts at the same time in different theatres. Over the course of many screenings I try out all my favourite jokes and different versions of scenes and story structures.’

A problematic element of the improvisation in his feature films is that it almost always takes place between male characters, creating an aimless comedic atmosphere around their dialogue exchanges, whereas female characters are often relegated to scenes which are more closely related to the plot, frequently occupying a more dramatic role within his films. However, in recent years, he has produced a number of female-focused projects such as Bridesmaids (Paul Feig, Universal Pictures, USA, 2011) and the aforementioned Girls, in which this hasn’t been the case. His own 2015 film, Trainwreck, showcased the comic

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14 Gray, Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts, p. 83.
15 Ibid.
persona of popular US comedienne Amy Schumer, but still frequently shifted the comic focus away from her role by placing her amidst an ensemble of scene-stealing male performers such as John Cena, Daniel Radcliffe (playing himself), LeBron James (also playing himself), and Matthew Broderick. The representation of female characters in *Love* will be an important aspect to examine, particularly in relation to the fact that the show is co-created by Lesley Arfin and features the work of several female writers and directors such as Maggie Carey, Lynn Shelton, and Alexandra Rushfield.

*Themes, Comic Style, and Self-Reflexivity in ‘Love’*

The topics and themes addressed by *Love* meet the expectations of a typical Apatow project. All his feature film work is focused to various degrees on romance, courtship, sex, and marriage, and in this case, *Love* is no different. Moreover, because of television’s long-form serial nature, more time is invested in exploring the minutiae of these topics, giving the viewer a sense that the show is providing a more realistic or in-depth representation of romance than one of the director’s two-hour movies might be able to. Despite seasons of *Love* being released once a year for three consecutive years, beginning in 2016, the show only charts the first six months of Mickey and Gus’ (Paul Rust) relationship over an accumulated running time of roughly 17 hours. When this is compared to the nine months of time represented through the pregnancy of Alison (Katherine Heigl) in the two-hour feature *Knocked Up*, *Love* can be viewed as a far more in-depth dissection of a relationship in its infancy. However, it also brings in numerous supporting characters which represent the various other potential stages of love that Mickey and Gus have yet to experience, such as marriage, having children, and divorce. The title can also be viewed as referring to the platonic love shared between friends; the show spends time depicting the dynamics of the relationships between Gus and his circle of friends who routinely gather to write theme songs for films that don’t have one. Mickey, whilst also shown interacting with her friends and her housemate, Bertie (Claudia O’Doherty), ultimately has a more complicated relationship with them, and the show often contrasts the contradicting situations of its two leading protagonists including before they even first meet.
In addition to the show’s thematic similarities to Apatow’s other work in television, *Love* also shares comedic similarities to the director’s other projects in terms of its use of pop cultural references as a springboard for humour. One particular sequence where this prominently occurs is early in the first season episode, ‘One Long Day’. A stoned and hungover Gus has accidentally directed Mickey to his ex-girlfriend, Natalie’s (Milana Vayntrub) house. While they argue on the lawn, Natalie suggests he takes the boxes of his belongings that had been left at her house, mistakenly referring to the Blu-Rays in one of Gus’ boxes as DVDs. This leads Gus to pedantically correct her by saying, ‘When you call them DVDs you just actually end up sounding super stupid’, to which she responds ‘Well, it’s just shit you can watch online.’ This prompts anger from Gus who comically informs Natalie that ‘These blu-rays have, like, exclusive special features, Y’BITCH!’ The geeky behaviour of Gus in this sequence, mixed with the seriousness with which he takes the distinction between DVDs, blu-rays, and online content is where a lot of the humour in the situation emerges. Gus is both endearing in his obsessiveness and annoyingly smug in his inconsequentially minor victory over Natalie; a balance of attitudes which he often shifts one way or the other depending on the show’s preference for comedy, drama, or poignancy in a given scene. Immediately following this argument, on the car journey home, Gus begins to sort through his blu-ray titles, criticising the intent of the films and their creators. Angry at the failed relationship between himself and Natalie, he realises that the ‘lies’ told about relationships are perpetuated by popular media such as the films he’s holding in his box. He suddenly frantically begins throwing the blu-rays out of the moving car window one-by-one; a situation which is comical in and of itself as a result of the extremity of the action but is made more amusing if the viewer understands the references he makes as he does it. The obscurity of lines such as ‘Plesantville?! FUCK. YOU. PLEASANTVILLE. Just fuck off’ placed alongside ‘Toy Story 3? Fuck you Pixar, you can’t keep it up, the pressure’s too high, your movies suck now Pixar!’, swiftly followed by Mickey’s interjection that ‘Cars 2 was a piece of crap!’, shows the various referential bases being touched to cater to both the popular and niche audiences being targeted by the show. Mickey’s decision to join in with Gus’ rant and her identification and subsequent dismissal of *Cars 2* (John Lasseter, Walt
Disney Pictures/Pixar Animation Studios, USA, 2011) demonstrates that she understands Gus on some level and that the two share a set of cultural competences that may bind them together as the show continues.\textsuperscript{17} This moment is also an example of Apatow occupying the middle-ground between what could be perceived as high and low culture, rather than taking a particular side, as suggested in the dichotomy created by Bourdieu in Distinction. The middle-ground is visible here in Apatow’s pop cultural references, which often require a competent knowledge of cinema in order to work on a deeper comedic level to the viewer, placed alongside references to popular Pixar cartoons that are known on a much wider level, creating a sense of simultaneous inclusivity and exclusivity to the comic material.

The frequent references to popular culture are extended from brief dialogue exchanges to the length of a full sequence in the show’s third season episode, ‘You’re My Gran Torino’, the title itself referring to Clint Eastwood’s 2008 film, Gran Torino (Clint Eastwood, Warner Bros., USA, 2008). The premise of this episode is that Gus’ band, Roger and the Eberts, are playing their first ever gig. The band specialise in writing theme songs for films that don’t already have them (often for immediately obvious reasons) and have been depicted playing together in Gus’ apartment at numerous points throughout the show’s three seasons. The name of the group refers to the late popular American film critic, Roger Ebert, and is already an example of the somewhat cine-literate knowledge that is required to understand the jokes in the forthcoming scene. During the gig, the viewer is treated to moments from numerous songs in a montage as the band performs their theme music to Chocolat (Lasse Hallestöm, Miramax Films, USA/UK, 2000) [“I didn’t come to shock a little, I didn’t come to shock a little bit, I didn’t come to shock a little bit more, I came to CHOCOLAT”], Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance) [Alejandro G. Iñárritu, Fox Searchlight Pictures, USA, 2014], and yet another Eastwood movie, Sully: Miracle on the Hudson (Clint Eastwood, Warner Bros., USA, 2017) To take this one step further, it could be argued that Mickey’s interjection regarding Cars 2 is also what separates the characters. Toy Story 3 (Lee Unkrich, Walt Disney Pictures/Pixar Animation Studios, USA, 2010) is a culturally valued film whilst Cars 2 isn’t. One could infer that Mickey’s mention of it here suggests that she doesn’t understand the taste cultures Gus operates in.

\textsuperscript{17} To take this one step further, it could be argued that Mickey’s interjection regarding Cars 2 is also what separates the characters. Toy Story 3 (Lee Unkrich, Walt Disney Pictures/Pixar Animation Studios, USA, 2010) is a culturally valued film whilst Cars 2 isn’t. One could infer that Mickey’s mention of it here suggests that she doesn’t understand the taste cultures Gus operates in.
2016). There is humour to be found in the eccentric fact that the group have composed songs to not one, but two, relatively obscure late-career films directed by Clint Eastwood. This is never explained, let alone mentioned, but for a viewer with the cultural capital to realise this, the scene is imbued with an extra comic layer. A more popular film and musical reference is the band’s theme tune to 
Footloose (Herbert Ross, Paramount Pictures, USA, 1984), where the lyrics read ‘Footloose, this is the theme song for Footloose, this is the ONLY song for Footloose’, knowingly ignoring the famous Kenny Loggins song from the original movie. Rather than inserting these pop cultural references into scenes that are about other issues, this episode makes the references a major part of the narrative, further underlining the idea of Apatow’s comedic brand being heavily focused on popular culture and of the success of his comedic style relying on the cultural capital of the audience.

When the third season of Love premiered on Netflix in the spring of 2018, the company focused on the show’s numerous pop culture references in the promotional material used for social media websites such as Instagram. In the weeks leading up to and immediately following the final season’s release, pictures appeared on the programme’s Instagram page showing numerous characters alongside their quotes from the new set of episodes. Many of these included references to musicians, films, or celebrities, reinforcing the perceived type of comedy Apatow is often associated with (Fig. 23). Moreover, in reference to the episode ‘You’re My Gran Torino’, the page posted a 1-minute faux television advertisement for an album called ‘The Best of Roger and the Eberts’, showing a highlight reel of the group’s performances from across the three seasons as if they were an established band with popular songs (Fig. 24). This specific type of faux-advertisement appears to be a direct reference to a similar fake ‘greatest hits’ album called ‘Heavy Metal Memories’ which was used to promote the film, This is Spinal Tap.¹⁸ This type of marketing helps to foster a deeper sense of fan culture, as the more dedicated viewer will possess the cultural capital to understand the

¹⁸ Incidentally, This is Spinal Tap’s director, Christopher Guest, is another comedy auteur who made the move from film to television, and then specifically to Netflix, with the direction of the 2016 comedy, Mascots (Christopher Guest, Netflix, USA, 2016).
references to Roger and the Eberts, but also stresses the type of referential humour the show is grounded in. The self-reflexivity of the show’s marketing campaign, such as writing false television ads for products or groups seen in the show is a strategy now used for other comedy programmes on Netflix such as the creation of viral memes for *Santa Clarita Diet* (Netflix, 2017 - 2019) (Fig. 25) or the *BoJack Horseman* twitter account that is seemingly run by BoJack himself (Fig. 26).

(Fig. 23 – Love on Instagram)

(Fig. 24 - Love Faux Advertisement)

(Fig. 25 - Santa Clarita Diet Meme)

(Fig. 26 - BoJack Horseman’s Twitter Account)
Underlying the comic elements of moments in *Love*, which share much in common with Apatow’s other work in both film and television, is a newfound sense of self-reflexivity. *Funny People* is the director’s most reflexive work; set in the world of a comedy actor and featuring cameo appearances from famous celebrities, it would have been difficult to *not* be reflexive about the film industry and its leading star, Adam Sandler. However, *Love* is a show primarily concerned with ordinary people navigating their personal relationships, so it shouldn’t be automatically assumed that it would possess a similar self-reflexive quality. Despite this, by choosing to give Gus and Mickey jobs as an on-set tutor and assistant at a radio station respectively, the characters are either positioned within or on the outskirts of the media industry, allowing the show to once again be able to occupy a middle-ground. Collin notes that Apatow’s projects often take place ‘somewhere on the edge of showbusiness’19 and in turn, the professions of Gus and Mickey allow for comic insights into these areas of the media industry, which are made self-reflexive through the characters’ position as outsiders looking in. This self-reflexivity bleeds into the dialogue of the show; for example, throughout the aforementioned sequence featuring Gus and Natalie arguing on the lawn, there are repeated insults and defences directed towards online viewing, relevant because of *Love*’s status as a show which can be exclusively viewed on a post-broadcast streaming platform. The first reference to this method of viewing comes in Natalie’s comments about the outdated physical form of Gus’ blu-ray collection. Gus’ preference for ‘exclusive’ special features which aren’t available online is amusing but is also presented as somewhat archaic through the obsessively geeky way he defends them and the contrasting indifference of Natalie and most likely, Mickey, towards the topic. Later, the abandonment and destruction of physical formats is actualised by Gus as he throws his blu-ray collection out of Mickey’s car and mocks the unnecessary insights provided by the films’ audio commentaries for weighing him down, emotionally and literally. In addition to this, there is also the suggestion in this sequence that popular media is misrepresenting romantic relationships. The fact that this discussion arises in a show called *Love*, in which one might expect to

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find a similar depiction of courtship to that shown in other film and television
romantic comedies, appears to suggest that here the viewer is being offered
something more authentic and closer to reality in its representation of
relationships. I will explore below how this sense of truthfulness and realism is
apparent through the show’s narrative structure and visual style when compared to
Apatow’s other work and similar television shows in the same genre.

One of the key ways to understanding Love’s self-reflexive position in
relation to other comedy work from both film and television can be found in a
moment from the show’s second season, during the episode ‘Friends Night Out’.
Gus is sitting in a bar with a group of his friends discussing what he believes to be a
frustrating continuity error in the network sitcom, Friends. He complains that in an
episode of Friends, the male characters exhibit a great fondness for the film Die
Hard (John McTiernan, 20th Century Fox, USA, 1988), yet, when that film’s leading
actor, Bruce Willis, appears in the sitcom as the father of Ross’ current girlfriend,
neither he, Joey, nor Chandler mention (let alone, realise) that this person looks
exactly like the lead actor from Die Hard. In this episode’s first scene, Gus recounts
to Mickey a dream he just had involving the hit 1990s comedy, Home Alone (Chris
Columbus, 20th Century Fox, USA, 1990). The reference to this continuity error in
Friends becomes particularly significant later in this season when Daniel Stern, best
known for playing Marv the crook in Home Alone and its sequel, appears in a guest
role, similarly to Willis, as Mickey’s father. Naturally, Gus doesn’t exclaim in shock
when seeing Stern. This isn’t surprising because, regardless of the show’s frequent
self-reflexivity, Apatow’s projects almost always conform very strictly to the tropes
and hallmarks of the comedy genre. Beneath the somewhat subversive nature of
the comedy, either in the way it is filmed (evidenced in the visual style
accompanying improvisation in his work) or in the content itself, there is a strict
adherence to the narrative tropes of a romantic comedy and a conservatism with
regards to the types of stories being told. However, the inclusion of an actor like
Stern, following the earlier mention of Home Alone and Gus’ discussion about the
continuity error in Friends, is no mistake. Instead, it acts as evidence of the show’s
desire to be ambitiously self-reflexive about its genre and the platform it’s being
delivered on, whilst at the same time engaging with the generic conventions it has emerged from.

**Visual Style and Narrative in ‘Love’**

As stated earlier, Apatow’s rambling dialogue lends an organic quality and sense of naturalism to his work. This is arguably negated by an accompanying visual style which often appears to be cutting-and-pasting the improvised comic moments together in a jarring, regimented fashion. However, in *Love*, there are very few instances of this editing style being employed. In an amusing parodic bonus feature on the *Knocked Up* DVD called ‘Directing the Director’, Bennett Miller, director of critically acclaimed *Capote* (Bennett Miller, United Artists/Sony Pictures Classics, USA/Canada, 2005) half-jokingly confronts Apatow about his visual style (or lack thereof), with Apatow explaining, ‘I can’t edit properly if I move the camera because I like to let the actors improvise.’ The static camera and tight shots which frame his performers in medium close-up are far scarcer in *Love*, breaking from Glen Creeber’s notion that ‘the small screen aesthetics of television ... [tend] to mirror its home-based viewer with a reassuring “talking head”, an image that he believes has remained “central to television aesthetics”. I believe this is partly a result of the show’s preference for scripted comedy over improvised dialogue, where a large amount of the characterisation is revealed by the characters determined words and actions rather than through the ad-libbing of the show’s performers. One example of this can be found in the first season episode, ‘Magic’, in which Gus attempts to surprise Mickey by taking her to the Magic Castle in Los Angeles but is ultimately disappointed by her lack of enthusiasm and disrespectful attitude towards the magicians. The central conceit of this episode is Gus’ confession that he likes to believe in the illusion of magic because it allows him to return, however briefly, to a childlike state of wonder whereas Mickey is always searching for the cracks or flaws that reveal the truth behind the trick. The episode

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ends with the couple having sex whilst Mickey also uses a vibrator, much to Gus’ dismay. In this instance, Mickey is perfectly happy to enjoy the pleasure provided by the device but Gus appears unable to ignore the fact that it may be creating an illusion that he is responsible for Mickey’s orgasm when, in actual fact, it is brought about by the vibrator. This scenario highlights the complexities and inconsistencies of the show’s central couple in a way which is slowly revealed as the episode progresses through their various actions and responses to situations that couldn’t be conveyed in brief improvised comedic exchanges. When verbal comedy is employed, it is often serving the metaphor of the episode, as opposed to existing for its own sake, such as when Mickey reluctantly gives a song request to a haunted self-playing piano. Because of this, the camera setups don’t need to remain as rigidly fixed on the performers as they are during moments of improvisation, because the sequences have been given a tightly scripted arc and sense of flow beforehand as opposed to being created from various takes in the editing room during post-production.

The focus on scripted comedy and scenarios in Love doesn’t necessarily mean the show has to move away from the close-ups and tightly framed shots that are associated with broadcast comedy television. Indeed, hardly any comedy television features improvised comedy to the extent that Apatow utilises it in his film projects, yet the camera almost always employs the ‘three-headed monster’ shooting technique (particularly in network sitcoms). Instead, one of the other main reasons I believe Love diverts from the tightly-framed shots that are present in numerous comedy programmes is the show’s use of location shooting and its focus on Los Angeles as an integral location in relation to its characters, their personalities, and professions. Other comedy programmes have associations with certain cities, such as Friends with New York City or Frasier (NBC, 1993 – 2004) with Seattle. However, these network comedies are almost exclusively filmed on studio sets and only briefly use insert shots of the NYC skyline or the Seattle Space Needle to provide a sense of place. In contrast, many post-broadcast comedy programmes are filmed in and utilise the locations where they are set, providing a greater sense of authenticity to the environment they are attempting to create. Will Arnett’s
*Flaked* is shot mainly on exterior locations surrounding the Venice Beach area of
the West Coast, for example. *Love* also uses Venice Beach as a location, alongside
Palm Springs, Catalina, and various other parts of Los Angeles County. The central
couple are often filmed in relation to their Los Angeles environment and during
conversations, the camera shoots from a variety of angles, which provides a greater
sense of dynamism to the scenes whilst also including more of the real-life locations
amidst the *mise-en-scène* of various shots. This attempt at authenticity can be
directly linked to the tone the show intends to put across through its observational
humour and depiction of relationships.

*Love’s* use of real locations and its varied shooting style is evident in the
final moments of the programme’s final season, in the episode ‘Catalina’. The
episode depicts the spontaneous marriage of the show’s couple on the island of
Santa Catalina in California. A montage featuring Gus, Mickey, Bertie, and her new
boyfriend Chris (Chris Witaske) riding on a boat in Catalina includes numerous shots
of the bay and the island from the boat filmed in a travelogue style. One particular
moment shows Gus jokingly clinging onto the rail of the boat, as if hanging on for
his life as a result of the strong winds, preceded by a shot of the other characters
laughing and responding to his gag. This moment has a sense of spontaneity due to
Rust almost falling out of frame onto the floor and laughing as the camera quickly
attempts to follow his movements. The moving camera and performance from Rust
further reinforces the naturalistic, authentic tone which Apatow is known for.
Moreover, because the viewer is shown Bertie and Chris’ reaction to the joke
before the actual joke, the gag appears closer to how one may come across these
moments in real life, and indicates that there are always things happening
offscreen within the diegesis which the viewer isn’t always privy to, creating the
sense of a wider world existing beyond the edges of the frame. The sequence
continues with shots of the wedding party getting ice cream, which begins by
showing the large hanging sign outside of the ice cream parlour and therefore
situates the action in a real location before panning down to show the characters
emerging from inside the store. The long shots employed in many of these
moments stress the importance of location to the show whilst also emphasising its
move away from a traditional broadcast visual style of tightly framed and well-composed close-ups or medium shots.

One of the most obvious contrasts which the show offers to its sense of visual ‘authenticity’ are the brief sequences within the diegesis of ‘Witchita’. ‘Witchita’ is a fictional TV show filmed at the similarly fictional Mar Vista studios, where Gus is employed as an on-set tutor for the show’s child actors. It is viewed by Gus and many other supporting characters as a comically poor show and creates a distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ television, where programmes such as *Love* are imaginably being positioned on the higher end of the quality spectrum when compared to network shows such as ‘Witchita’. In complete opposition to the location shooting that is evident throughout the majority of *Love*, ‘Witchita’ is very clearly filmed on a studio set, with many comedic scenes surrounding its production being set on and around the studio lot. Apatow’s daughter, Iris, continuing a trend of starring in her father’s projects following *Knocked Up*, *Funny People*, and *This is 40*, appears as the fictional show’s lead actress, Arya. Iris’ performance as Arya is nuanced in the way she plays the role of the bratty, hormonal teen off-camera, but significantly tones down that aspect of her character when acting out her scenes in ‘Witchita’. In these instances, Apatow knowingly over-performs, widening her eyes and speaking more clearly (although still maintaining the sense of this being a child performer reciting lines, adding a further level of comic detail to these moments). When this is coupled with the high-key studio lighting and intensely dramatic music underscoring the sequences that the viewer is shown from the programme, *Love* appears to be steeped in a reality that is far-removed from studio shows such as ‘Witchita’. In the season 2 episode, ‘Forced Hiatus’, the show opens with a scene from ‘Witchita’, which familiar viewers will instantly recognise from its aesthetic qualities, without the need for any explanation as to why the show might have unexpectedly morphed into a teen horror programme. This ‘cold open’ eventually shifts from the diegesis of ‘Witchita’ to the ‘real world’ of Mar Vista Studios and *Love* returns to its more authentic visual style. As well as underlining the different aesthetic approaches employed by the show to imbue the locations, characters, and situations with a sense of authenticity which contrasts with the majority of
comedy programmes on network television, this example of the decontextualised ‘cold open’ allows for a discussion surrounding *Love*’s approach to narrative.

In addition to breaking from the recognised visual conventions of broadcast comedy television, as well as with the aesthetics of Apatow’s earlier, more heavily improvisational works, *Love* also takes a different approach towards its narrative structure than many other comedy television shows; an approach which arguably better suits the online platform the show is delivered on. An important concept to introduce here in relation to the difference between broadcast and post-broadcast programming is Christine Geraghty’s discussion of unrecorded existence, which she relates to serial programming and the soap opera.\(^{21}\) Geraghty states, ‘The characters in a serial, when abandoned at the end of an episode, pursue an “unrecorded existence” until the next one begins.’\(^{22}\) Despite the fact that the existence of these characters is unrecorded when the show isn’t on air, for Geraghty, this doesn’t mean that the viewer is unable to imagine what they might be doing in their daily lives. On the contrary, she believes that as viewers ‘we are aware that day-to-day life has continued in our absence’.\(^{23}\) This narrative fact of unrecorded existence isn’t strictly limited to the soap opera and can be applied to numerous television programmes across various genres. The awareness of an existence outside of what is recorded and broadcast can often be related to the familiarity viewers feel regarding characters in serial programmes. Soaps are often broadcast every evening, with the 30-minute running time filling in the events of the day that has just taken place. In some cases, Geraghty notes how ‘significant days in the outside world such as bank holidays or special anniversaries are referred to and celebrated on the right day’\(^{24}\), which creates a further sense of familiarity and identification with the characters represented onscreen. However, this temporal storytelling device has become increasingly difficult to maintain in the move towards streaming as there is no specified broadcast slot for programmes

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\(^{22}\) Ibid., p. 10.  
\(^{23}\) Ibid.  
\(^{24}\) Ibid.
and viewers are free to choose the speed at which they watch the episodes. Programmes such as Sense8 (Netflix, 2015 – 2017) and BoJack Horseman have produced Christmas specials, but whether these episodes were watched on the day of release, or even during the winter season, is questionable due to their ongoing presence and constant availability on streaming platforms when compared to the immediacy of scheduled programming from the broadcast era.

Love’s approach to narrative differs to a large extent from these practices by leaving almost no unrecorded time between its episodes. In many cases, an episode will end at night and the next episode will begin the following morning. In the first season alone, this is evident between episode 1 which flows into episode 2. Episode 3 continues the trend by beginning the morning after episode 2, and episode 5 also runs straight into episode 6. At the end of episode 4, Gus arranges a date with Bertie, which then forms the entirety of the following episode. Specifics regarding the preceding episode are rarely referred to explicitly or in great detail in the same way that we seldom incessantly provide each other with recaps of events that have just taken place in real life. Because of this, I believe that the show is encouraging the viewer to watch its episodes much quicker than they would if they were broadcast in a weekly slot on network television. Over a three-week period on broadcast television, the viewer would only cover a few days in the diegesis of Love. The viewer is alerted to this fact during the second season episode, ‘Shrooms’ (the 14th overall episode), where Gus mentions that he first met Bertie three weeks earlier when helping to move furniture into Mickey’s house. However, in real time it had been just over a year since the first season was released on Netflix. In some cases, there is even an overlap of time in the show which further links and closes the gap of time between episodes. The end of the show’s first episode, ‘It Begins’ concludes with Mickey arguing with a shop clerk before Gus steps in to help out. At the start of the next episode, we are shown Gus shopping in the store and overhearing the argument between Mickey and the shop clerk; a short sequence which eventually leads into the footage the viewer has already seen before continuing further with the story. This technique creates a sense of the show providing a detailed examination of both the characters from their individual
perspectives as well as accurately documenting many of the throwaway moments which lead to their meeting. These important moments in their relationship such as the first meeting, first kiss, etc. are often lingered on, forming the end of one episode and the beginning of another. This is also the case at the end of the episode ‘The Date’ where Mickey first kisses Gus in his car, and then the start of the following episode, ‘Andy’, which begins with Gus sat in his car after the kiss and goes so far as allowing him to repeat the same line from the end of the previous episode.

In her discussion of unrecorded existence, Geraghty comments that whilst the viewer is aware that day-to-day life occurs between episodes, ‘the problem we left at the end of the previous episode has still to be resolved.’

Love also sidesteps this narrative convention of serial programming as far as important events and their consequences are concerned. For example, if an episode is about a road trip, a date, or a gig, the event will always be fully depicted in the episode with no cliffhangers provided to entice the viewer to keep watching. In broadcast programmes, this often isn’t the case, such as the desert ambush spread across multiple episodes in the final season of Breaking Bad (AMC, 2008 – 2013) or, in the comedy genre, the mystery of who shot Mr. Burns which formed the final two episodes of The Simpsons’ (Fox, 1989 - ) sixth season. Many episodes of Love set up the events that will take place over the rest of the episode in the pre-credits sequence. Also, the titles themselves often accurately describe either the focus or the time scale of particular episodes. Examples include ‘Party in the Hills’, in which Gus is invited to a party in the pre-credits sequence and the rest of the episode being completely focused on the events of the party. Likewise, the episode, ‘A Day’, accurately defines the amount of time that will be covered by the episode. Despite this, Geraghty’s comments about unresolved problems still apply to Love in terms of the long-term emotional struggles which the characters have to overcome. Mickey’s sex and love addiction, as well as her problems with drugs and alcohol, are covered throughout each season of the show, and Gus’ irrational outbursts of anger and struggle to reconcile moments from his past with his current situation are

25 Ibid.
hinted towards in the first two seasons, but only properly explored in the show’s final set of episodes. Whilst the show’s time frame seems to encourage a quicker viewing process, the emotional beats provided by the show offer an opportunity to move through the narrative at a slower pace, covering a large amount of emotional territory in its total of 17 hours. Both options further validate the idea of an authentic programme; one which appears to dissect every possible moment of courtship in a way that allows for binge-viewing, whilst simultaneously providing enough emotional weight to consistently satisfy viewers who choose to watch at a slower pace.

To conclude this section on *Love*, I can summarise that, with regards to Apatow’s previous cinematic work and television projects, the show displays elements of continuity with regards to the subject matter and the topics covered by the comedy material. Returning to Caldwell’s term of the ‘auteur import’, this confirms my belief that directors who move into television are more likely to stay in the genre and operate in the same mode which they are primarily known for. Returning to the idea of high concept comedy, this will often likely encourage viewers to watch the programmes as they have a previous point of reference for the auteur and may expect a similar type of work. In addition to the previous examples of drama directors such as Ridley Scott and David Fincher following this trend, Apatow can be added to the list as far as comedy directors are concerned. A further example of a comedy auteur import on Netflix is Joe Swanberg, most frequently associated with the mumblecore film comedy movement, who has an anthology show, *Easy* (Netflix, 2016 - ), which shares many stylistic similarities, on both a comedic and visual level, with his feature film efforts. On Prime Video, Nicole Holofcener’s work as a director for *One Mississippi* shows a continuation of the dramedy style she is known for in her theatrical releases. However, the post-broadcast programme differs from Apatow’s other work, as well as other broadcast comedy television in general, in two ways. Firstly, the narrative structure of the programme is unique with regards to the relatively small amount of unrecorded existence between episodes. In many cases throughout the show’s first season,

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26 Incidentally, Swanberg also directed ‘Andy’, a first-season episode of *Love.*
there is little to no evidence of any time passing between episodes. Rather than being employed as a unique selling point or gimmick for the show (as it was for the Fox network during the broadcast of 24 [Fox, 2001 – 2010]), this utilisation of narrative time is normalised and links to the claim of authenticity in representations of romance which is integral to Apatow’s brand image and humour. This is also an important factor with regards to the show’s platform of delivery on Netflix, where the practice of binge-watching multiple episodes at a time is seemingly encouraged by both the platform and the programme itself. A second distinction which I believe characterises post-broadcast comedy television is the self-reflexive nature of the comedy. Self-reflexivity in comedy television isn’t a new phenomenon but the topics covered by Love’s comedic scenes often engage with ideas about high and low television, physical or digital viewing, and the authentic and unique versus the generic and formulaic. These characteristics are distinctive to this example of post-broadcast comedy television and have been made clearer by examining the show through the lens of the film auteur working in a different medium. I will now explore Amazon’s One Mississippi in relation to the personal life and stand-up comedy material of its creator, Tig Notaro, in an attempt to understand whether the idea of authorship is similarly relied upon by an alternative streaming service and whether the prominence of the auteur figure is indicative of a wider trend across post-broadcast comedy television.

One Mississippi

Much like Love on Netflix, One Mississippi was not Amazon’s first foray into producing original comedy television. A number of shows such as Transparent (Prime Video, 2014 – 2019), Mozart in the Jungle (Prime Video, 2014 – 2018), and Red Oaks (Prime Video, 2014 – 2017) were released in the years preceding One Mississippi and all fit within the comedy-drama sub-genre. The show was well received by critics but only ran for two seasons, ultimately being cancelled by

27 HBO’s sitcom, The Larry Sanders Show (HBO, 1992 – 1998), was a deconstruction of the late-night talk show genre, utilising both videotape and film to create the distinction between what is being ‘broadcast’ and what is behind-the-scenes. Its self-reflexivity regarding the fictional show’s guest’s celebrity personas was continued by Larry David’s Curb Your Enthusiasm, also on HBO. Curb Your Enthusiasm often featured celebrity guests playing versions of themselves which were the complete opposite of their public personas.
Amazon in January 2018 because of the company’s intentions to move ‘towards bigger, wider-audience series.’ 28 I will return to this decision and its implications for certain types of comedy television at the end of the chapter but will first discuss the creative team behind One Mississippi, before noting its similarities and differences to Netflix’s Love.

Despite acknowledging the input of numerous figures in the writing, filming, and post-production processes of creating a television show, in the same way Judd Apatow could be viewed as one of the leading creative personnel working on Love, the equivalent figure for One Mississippi is undoubtedly Tig Notaro. Notaro is predominantly a stand-up comic known for her deeply personal deadpan style of comedy. Following the success of some early live albums and stand-up specials, Notaro has more recently starred in a wider variety of film and television, including family-comedy Instant Family (Sean Anders, Paramount Pictures, USA, 2018) and sci-fi programme Star Trek: Discovery (CBS All Access, 2017 – 2021) for CBS’ streaming service. Four days after being diagnosed with breast cancer in 2012, Notaro addressed her health issues as well as the recent death of her mother during a performance at the Largo in Los Angeles, which was eventually released as the stand-up album, Live. The recording was ultimately nominated for a Grammy award and led to Notaro’s increased success in subsequent years. Netflix produced a 2015 documentary film called Tig (Kristina Goolsby and Ashley York, Netflix, USA, 2015) which chronicles Notaro’s attempts to become pregnant in the years following her cancer diagnosis. Three years after the release of this documentary, Netflix also released Tig Notaro: Happy To Be Here (Netflix, 2018), an original stand-up special.

The comedian was also already involved with Amazon’s original programming to some extent, starring in a small, recurring role as Barb in Prime Video’s Transparent. One Mississippi is the first time there has been a scripted comedy programme which features Notaro at the centre, both in terms of her

creative role as a writer, star, and executive producer, and in terms of the show’s subject matter. In the show, Notaro stars as Tig Bavaro, a radio DJ and breast cancer patient, who travels back home to Mississippi to say goodbye to her mother, Caroline (Rya Kihlstedt), who is being taken off life support. It almost goes without saying that the premise of the programme bears a strong resemblance to Notaro’s personal life, which by this point had been the subject of her stand-up work and the Netflix documentary. Where *Love* might be identifiable as a show created and produced by Judd Apatow as a result of its highly reflexive and referential style, as well as its setting in the entertainment industry, *One Mississippi* is obviously specifically a show about Notaro, based on its premise and subject matter. A viewer wouldn’t confuse *Love*’s Gus, the on-set tutor and amateur musician, for Apatow, whereas there is a very fine line between Tig in *One Mississippi* and Tig in the real world, not least because of their shared name.

*One Mississippi* also includes a wide range of established talent, some of whom have worked elsewhere in television and others who have enjoyed success in film. The first three episodes of the show’s first season are directed by Nicole Holofcener, acclaimed writer and director of small-budget films such as *Friends with Money* (Nicole Holofcener, Sony Pictures Classics, USA, 2006), *Enough Said* (Nicole Holofcener, Fox Searchlight Pictures, USA, 2013), and more recently *The Land of Steady Habits* (Nicole Holofcener, Netflix, USA, 2018). Holofcener also holds several television credits from the past two decades, having directed multiple episodes of comedy programmes such as *Sex and the City*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. This considerable body of work moves between theatrically released films, cable television, and more recently post-broadcast comedy television and is evidence of Holofcener’s name as a signifier of merit as well as her ability to fit into a previously established style without disrupting the continuity of long-running programmes. The pilot of *One Mississippi* is also written by Notaro and Oscar-nominated screenwriter, Diablo Cody. Cody is best known for writing *Juno* and having a long-running collaborative career with director, Jason Reitman, writing two further films for the director – *Young Adult* (Jason Reitman, Paramount Pictures, USA, 2011) and *Tully* (Jason Reitman, Focus Features, USA,
Neither of these names stayed working on the show past its first season but are examples of the types of imports which are increasingly common in television.

Aside from Notaro, the only other name prominently featured in Amazon’s advertisements for *One Mississippi* was its executive producer, Louis C.K. At this point, C.K., was a successful stand-up comedian and actor who also had just finished starring in his own cable show, *Louie* (FX, 2010 – 2015). C.K. was one of the comedians who initially encouraged Notaro to release an audio recording of her 2012 stand-up set from the Largo nightclub, even making the recording available to purchase on his own website for a limited amount of time. An incident in the second season episode, ‘Can’t Fight This Feeling’, released in September 2017, bears a striking resemblance to Louis C.K.’s acts of sexual misconduct towards several women comics which had been rumoured for a number of years but were confirmed in November of that same year. In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, conducted weeks before the accusations against C.K. were made public, Notaro expressed confusion at C.K.’s name still being attached to the show, stating ‘I have not spoken to Louis in probably going on two years now. I will never hear from Louis C.K. again.’ From this, one understands that C.K.’s role in the show was in name only and that he contributed nothing to the creative process. Amazon’s prominent advertising of his name in the trailer for the show’s first season demonstrates the significance that is often granted to established names in a number of these post-broadcast comedy television programmes, no matter how misplaced that sense of importance might be.

In keeping with the show’s similarities to Notaro’s personal life, *One Mississippi* establishes a confessional and intimate tone from the very beginning, as Tig tells an extended story from her childhood to the listeners of her KCRW radio show. This links with the authenticity which is exhibited at moments throughout *Love* but made all the more personal as a result of the small gap between Notaro

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30 In the previous chapter, I note how Netflix still have not removed Louis C.K.’s existing work from their platform, the most recent of which was released the same year that reports of his sexual misconduct were made public.
and the character she is playing on screen. It is worth reiterating that the character of Mickey in *Love*, and her experiences with addiction are based on the real struggles of that show’s co-creator, and Paul Rust’s real-life partner, Lesley Arfin. However, in that show, the struggles are conveyed through the performance of Gillian Jacobs whereas any viewers familiar with Notaro’s comedy and personal struggles will be able to explicitly map these issues onto the character of Tig in *One Mississippi*. The show also mixes comedy and drama in a similar way to *Love*; where that show dealt with amusing insights regarding the pressures of romantic relationships and addictions, *One Mississippi* deals with death, grief, and trauma in equally amusing ways. One such instance is in the pilot episode when Tig’s mother takes her final breath in hospital. The moment is played in silence as Tig wipes away a tear and the nurse checks Caroline’s pulse to confirm her passing. Tig, alone and clearly uncomfortable in this environment, asks ‘What happens now, do I just leave?’ which is met by immediate laughter and incredulity from the nurse. The camera initially stays on a medium shot of Tig as we try to gauge her response to the nurse’s poor bedside manner before we cut to a reaction shot of the nurse who explodes with aggressively loud and inappropriate laughter. Tig also begins to smile in the reverse-shot and both women start intensely laughing with each other. The absurdity of the situation is underlined by a cut to a wider shot of both women positioned at opposite ends of the frame, standing over the pale, still corpse of Tig’s mother. The nurse tells Tig, ‘You can’t just leave your mother! That’d be straight-up nuts’ to which Tig replies ‘I didn’t know, I’m realising that now.’ This is swiftly followed by a comical shot of Tig wheeling her dead mother’s body through the ward of the hospital in her bed as doctors wave goodbye to Tig and Caroline in a matter-of-fact way. Passers-by shout remarks such as ‘Be good!’, ‘Bye Caroline!’ and even ‘Love you!’ as Tig nods and continues to wheel the bed down the hallway. This absurd and surreal comic moment is immediately undercut by the episode cutting back to the silence of the mother’s hospital room as it becomes apparent that this was all the product of Tig’s imagination and a reflection of her deadpan humour.
Other similarities to *Love* can be found in the show’s visual style and its use of location shooting. Whilst there are still a lot of medium shots or medium-close-ups, the camera moves in this show more than traditional network comedy subgenres such as the sitcom and instead follows characters around in longer, single shots as they move between rooms or through locations. This gestures towards a greater focus on character and presents actions in a more naturalistic manner. Moreover, the fictional town of Bay St. Lucille, Mississippi, in which the majority of the show is set, acts as a stand-in for Notaro’s own hometown much in the same way that her character’s surname is slightly changed from her own and her career as comedian is altered to a radio DJ. This allows the show to retain a personal dimension whilst removing the risk of being seen as a directly autobiographical adaptation of Notaro’s life. The actual filming location of Texas City, TX, features prominently in a number of sequences, forming much of the imagery from the show’s opening credit sequence, as well as being used in moments such as the drive to Caroline’s funeral. The sequence begins showing several houses and a long river surrounded on either side by trees in a moving camera shot, as if from the perspective of a character gazing out of a car window. The character is revealed to be Tig, who is then shown in medium close-up staring contemplatively at her hometown in the backseat of a car en route to the cemetery. This brief interlude lasts all of 30 seconds and is used simply to bridge the gap between one dialogue sequence and another, much in the same way that sitcoms will often use (and re-use) a number of establishing shots to create a sense of space or time for the viewer during the move from one scene to another.

However, in contrast to the static establishing shots used in numerous sitcoms, this moment from *One Mississippi* is important in the way the shots are attached to a character’s perspective and clearly create an emotional resonance for Tig. Additionally, it is a showcase for the show’s location shooting which suggests a higher budget than many network sitcoms and aligns the show more closely to something like *Love*, which features numerous shots of Los Angeles and frequently frames its characters within that environment.
As gestured towards previously, one of the main differences between *One Mississippi* and *Love* is how similar the former show’s premise is to events that occurred in Notaro’s own life. This is made clear in the first season’s second episode, ‘Effects’, which includes a scene where Tig reads a questionnaire from her mother’s hospital asking about her time staying there. The letter is addressed to Caroline but is opened by Tig who is sorting through her mother’s mail following the funeral. Tig’s reaction as she reads through the questions from the letter is absolute puzzlement; some of the questions posited to the now deceased Caroline are ‘How was your stay at the hospital?’, ‘Were you satisfied?’ Tig, speaking aloud with a deadpan intonation replies, ‘Or did things not go so well? Because you died.’ As Tig reads out the rest of the questions and ironic responses, she is shown recording her voice into her phone for her radio show. Just like the comedian has adapted this moment into a scripted comedic sequence for the Amazon show, the character of Tig uses this as inspiration for her radio programme within the show. More interesting is that this story is completely rooted in reality and has also been used by Tig in her stand-up comedy work, appearing as the track, ‘No Questionnaires to Dead People’ on her popular aforementioned *Live* comedy album. On this track, Tig says ‘... I was checking the mail and the hospital sent my mother a questionnaire ... to see how her stay at the hospital went.’ This is met by surprised laughter from the crowd. She continues, ‘Hmmm... not great, it did not go great. The questionnaire asked things such as: 1) During your hospital stay, did nurses explain things in a way you could understand? I mean, considering you had zero brain activity.’ This is one of the most extreme examples where the viewer is able to point to an explicit author figure in the text of *One Mississippi*, tracing the origin of the story from its original performance as a piece of stand-up comedy to a scripted sequence within the show.

Returning then, to Amazon’s 2018 decision to cancel *One Mississippi* in an attempt to shift towards broader, wider-audience types of programming, one should consider the implications of these actions and their relation to the types of programming being produced by streaming services. Alongside the cancellation of *One Mississippi*, Amazon also cancelled the shows *I Love Dick* (Prime Video, 2016 -
2017) and Jean-Claude Van Johnson (Prime Video, 2016 – 2017), both of which only ran for one season and the latter of which had only been available on the streaming service for one month before being axed. A 2018 Entertainment Weekly article noted,

All of the series were originally ordered by Roy Price … who resigned in October after a sexual harassment claim against him became public. Under the new regime, Amazon is looking to attract a broader audience, which paved the way for its upcoming The Lord of the Rings series.31

Three years later, Amazon’s adaptation of Tolkien’s classic fantasy work still has not materialised and despite the relative increased output of their original programming, Amazon’s ongoing or renewed original comedy material is sorely lacking. Some of the aforementioned programmes like Transparent, Red Oaks, and others mentioned in this section have all either concluded or been cancelled. Amazon’s habit of cancelling comedy programmes following just one season has also continued since One Mississippi ended; both Forever (Prime Video, 2018) and Truth Seekers (Prime Video, 2020) were cancelled almost as quickly as they were released.

This trend is not unique to Amazon either; Netflix have recently cancelled a large number of their shows following either one or two seasons. Writing for Insider, Kim Renfro writes,

In the seven years that Netflix has produced original content, the world of TV streaming has dramatically changed. Now Netflix is getting left behind in the race it started. Many of its unique and ambitious shows have been cancelled before they could reach their full potential.32

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Just like Amazon, Netflix have also decided in recent years to attempt an increase in quantity, and to shift towards shows with wider appeal. Renfro lists a number of Netflix original comedy shows and gestures towards some of the wider issues behind these cancellations stating,

> It’s also worth noting how many of the cancellations have been shows with women and people of color prominently behind the scenes or starring. “One Day at a Time”, “Tuca and Bertie”, “Glow” ... and “Everything Sucks” are just a few examples of cancelled shows with both diverse characters and representation behind the lens.\(^{33}\)

The increasing unwillingness of streaming services to produce shows which cater to niche audiences in the long-term, seems to be a negation of the ethos a company like Netflix exhibited when choosing to revive a programme like *Arrested Development* in 2013. Shows with a strong authorial voice which sometimes deal with personal and complex issues such as *Love* and *One Mississippi* may still get made but are often in danger of being cancelled before finding an audience, suggesting that after just several years, certain types of comedy are already in a precarious position in the post-broadcast streaming world.

**Conclusion**

In spite of some of the differences I have noted between *Love* and *One Mississippi*, it is clear that Apatow as writer-director and Notaro as successful stand-up comedian are both being used by their respective companies to provide a sense of legitimacy and cultural capital for this platform. This allows both programmes to be viewed as examples of high concept comedy, using established names to provide both a sense of legitimacy and a reassurance of style and tone to the viewer. It is also similar to the way auteur-imports were used in the 1980s for television specials, in an attempt to offer a credible opposition to the cinematic experience.\(^{34}\) Both shows retain much of their associated authors’ signature style whilst also ultimately displaying some of the defining trends that are present in post-broadcast

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\(^{33}\) Ibid.

\(^{34}\) As I will explain in relation to *BoJack Horseman’s* creator, Raphael Bob-Waksberg, in the next chapter, many contemporary television showrunners now move from television into film also.
comedy television. Love serves as an example of how the auteur attached to the project changed elements of their established style for the medium. In Apatow’s case, this meant toning down some of the comic improvisation and rigid editing to lend the programme a more varied visual style, whilst retaining the naturalistic tone which is present in his cinematic comedy work. For Notaro, this involved adapting her comedy work into a scripted comedy-drama series and writing a continuing narrative around what was previously a selection of stand-up anecdotes. Despite this, certain elements of the authors’ recognisable style have remained and been translated effectively for post-broadcast television, such as Apatow’s mixture of edgy comedy with heartfelt moments and Notaro’s highly personal, deadpan material. Furthermore, the diversions from Apatow and Notaro’s respective styles surprisingly share many similarities and are helpful in defining the aesthetics of post-broadcast comedy shows.

Firstly, the comedy in Love is extremely self-reflexive and raises issues regarding the consumption of content in physical or digital forms. Arguably the self-reflexivity here isn’t solely utilised as a comedic device, but also serves to further illuminate the thoughts and personalities of the programme’s protagonists. Gus seems out of touch with modern times and exhibits a preference for what is perceived to be unnecessary physical copies of films. In addition to its self-reflexivity, Love also deals with narrative in a way that is different to the other work by its creators and which once again shares much in common with other post-broadcast comedy television. The show spends a large amount of time detailing the early stages of its central couple’s relationship in an almost clinical fashion, taking ten episodes and over five hours of screen time to reach a stage where they begin properly dating. In contrast, Girls, one of Apatow’s other television successes, introduces its characters in the midst of their relationships; relationships which change frequently and sometimes end off-screen between episodes. Love instead depicts almost every key moment of Gus and Mickey’s courtship (and many moments in-between), from their first meeting to their eventual marriage. The programme’s utilisation of time and narrative is uncommon in broadcast television comedies but has become more prominent in post-broadcast comedy programmes,
notably in *Wet Hot American Summer: First Day of Camp* and the second season of *Flaked*. These shows also employ a unique use of time within their episodes. In *Wet Hot American Summer: First Day of Camp*, it becomes a running joke that so much has happened in a 24-hour period, as characters comically appear in multiple scenes set at the same time and make geographically impossible trips within the time covered by the show. The second season of *Flaked* features six episodes which occur on consecutive days of the week, each titled ‘Day One’, ‘Day Two’, etc. The unusual use of time in relation to narrative is a result of the option and encouragement provided by the streaming services to watch episodes more frequently than a traditional weekly broadcast. In the case of *Flaked*’s second season, watching an episode per day would mean watching at the same pace the show progresses. This negotiation of time means that television programmes are arguably becoming more akin to real-time social media updates, with viewers checking in at different times to see what their favourite characters are doing.³⁵

The decision to cancel shows such as *One Mississippi* is indicative of streaming services moving away from the niche audiences they originally catered to with much of their original comedy programming. This is unfortunately leading to a range of diverse talent being shut out of what was previously an increasingly inclusive television environment. The shift in programming towards a broader audience with a wider appeal means that the existence of these types of shows may dwindle even further in future years. This relates back to Mittell’s discussion of genre cycles, where certain types of shows ‘flood television schedules for a few years before disappearing in a string of canceled shows.’³⁶ However, the cyclical nature of this process means these types of auteur-led programmes may return at some point in the future. Comedy programmes will continue to be made and certain auteurs or established names, such as Apatow or Matt Groening (to be discussed in Chapter Three), will continue to be given work based on the success of

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³⁵ This notion is explored to extreme degrees by the creators of Norwegian teen drama, *Skam* (NRK, 2015 – 2017) as new clips from the show are posted online in real-time throughout the week giving the impression of liveness, before being condensed into a full-length episode at the end of the week.

their previous shows. In addition to their continued use of auteur-imports, it is now sub-genres such as stand-up comedy which appear to be the area where streaming services are able to offer the most varied and, in many cases, undiscovered talent. My final chapter on stand-up comedy will examine a number of recurring tropes explored throughout this chapter and the wider thesis, such as exploring the ways stand-up has made use of comedic devices like self-reflexivity (evident in Hannah Gadsby’s acclaimed Nanette [Netflix, 2018]).
Chapter Three

The Post-Broadcast Adult Animated Comedy

This chapter is concerned with the adult animated comedy programme on post-broadcast television. Like almost all of the other case studies explored in this research project, this sub-genre isn’t exclusive to post-broadcast platforms. Aside from a small amount of feature length experimental releases in the 1960s and 1970s, the genre as it’s known today began in the late 1980s during prime time on channels such as MTV or programmes such as The Tracey Ullman Show (Fox, 1987 – 1990).1 In its broadcast form, the adult animated sub-genre often shared a similar animation style to children’s television, with a large part of the humour evolving from the contrast between the content and its form. This is certainly true of shows such as Family Guy, a family sitcom which mixes explicitly sexual humour with a visual style reminiscent of the more family-friendly Fox cartoon, The Simpsons.

Alternately, the animation could be crude, as evidenced in programmes like Beavis and Butt Head, and reflect a cynical attitude typical of the Gen—X society from which the programmes emerged. This cynicism was often manifested through a critique of contemporary popular culture, such as the characters of Beavis and Butt Head responding to specific music videos being played on MTV directly before the videos themselves were shown. I will begin this chapter by providing a brief overview of the adult animation sub-genre, before introducing the Netflix original programmes, BoJack Horseman and F is For Family. Following this, I will position the shows in relation to broadcast television staples such as the sitcom and the more contentious critical delineation of ‘quality’ tv, as well as other types of comedy programming on post-broadcast streaming services. The chapter will then close by exploring the ways in which Netflix’s adult animated shows exhibit recurring aesthetic tropes and styles I’ve recognised as identifying factors of post-broadcast comedy television.

1 Such films include Doggie March (Akira Daikubara, Toei Animation, Japan, 1963) and Fritz the Cat (Ralph Bakshi, Cinemation Industries, USA, 1972).
A recurring issue and focus in this chapter is the prominence of the adult animated comedy on Netflix, and its relative absence on Prime Video and Hulu, which raises interesting questions regarding the types of viewer that each service is attempting to cater to.\(^2\) This gestures towards Netflix’s programming strategy and indicates that the company wants the sub-genre to be seen as a distinctive part of their brand image. In turn, the programmes call to be analysed to assess the ways in which they consciously conform to the company’s ‘house style’.

Paul Wells has noted that ‘little [critical] attention has been given to animation on television … often casting it as merely “the Saturday morning cartoon” or The Simpsons.’\(^3\) This view is supported by Holly Randell-Moon and Arthur J. Randell, who state, ‘Despite the high level of technical and aesthetic proficiency involved in the creation of animated television, and perhaps due in part to the medium’s beginnings and concentration in children’s programming, it is generally perceived to be less ‘serious’ than its live action counterpart.’\(^4\) Narrowing the field further to focus on the contemporary adult animated comedy reveals a paucity of academic research regarding the topic. Scholarly collections where one would expect to find more on the subject, such as Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison’s edited collection, Prime Time Animation, feature relatively small amounts of work regarding the sub-genre, particularly with regards to any writing which chooses to analyse the programmes on an aesthetic level.\(^5\) One of the essays in the collection uses South Park as a case study, but applies a methodological approach that is concerned with audience responses to the programme in the digital age.\(^6\) For the purposes of this study, a more closely comparable approach can be found in a chapter by Michael V. Tueth which briefly but helpfully

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\(^2\) Amazon’s first adult animation, Undone, was released in 2019, five years after Netflix began producing their own original adult animated content. I will return to this later in the chapter.


\(^5\) Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison (eds.), Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture (Oxon: Routledge, 2003).

\(^6\) Brian L. Ott, “Oh my God, they digitized Kenny!” Travels in the South Park Cybercommunity V4.0’, in Stabile and Harrison (eds.), Prime Time Animation.
summarises some of animation’s subversive families such as the Griffins in *Family Guy* or the friendship of characters like Beavis and Butt Head. Tueth also begins to describe some of the stylistic traits of this type of animation, which I will explore later in this chapter, in relation to my post-broadcast case studies.7

Writing on animated comedy more generally, Wells helpfully identifies that ‘much work [in animation] became increasingly self-reflexive’.8 This already indicates a continuation between animated comedies and the self-reflexive humour I have located as a defining aspect of the post-broadcast auteur-import comedies in the previous chapter. Wells also writes that the animated comedies of the 80s and 90s are ‘aesthetically progressive and socially relevant, often offering incisive critique of political and arts cultures.’9 References to politics, and both artistic and popular cultures are prominent in all of the case studies explored in this chapter, which also suggests a continuation between the broadcast and post-broadcast animated comedy programmes. It is crucial to note that Wells’ work here is focused on broadcast animation and doesn’t account for the recent proliferation of streaming-only animated shows or adult animation for that matter.

Donnelly historicises the arrival of the adult animation in television, stating ‘in the 1990s there was a proliferation of successful television cartoons aimed more at adults, or at least aimed less specifically at children.’10 This distinction is important in relation to the shows I’ll be examining in this chapter. Unlike *The Simpsons* which, nowadays, seems suitable for both adults and children, and a show where certain jokes cater to each demographic, the majority of the post-broadcast adult animated programmes are suitable for adults only, either as a consequence of what they choose to visually depict or because of their thematic focus. Wells comments that ‘children are far more tele-literate and discriminating about the intended effects of cartoons than they have often been given credit for’.11 However, a child’s exposure to many of the post-broadcast adult animated

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9 Ibid., p. 180.
programmes could be problematic due to their inappropriate content. A show like *The Simpsons* is able to evade such problems through its use of implicit jokes and innuendoes rather than explicitly depicting more adult content. Donnelly goes on to define some of the recurring characteristics and tropes of the adult animation, noting how ‘sex and violence were often on the agenda’ in these types of programmes and that these particular factors ‘[appeal] to the juvenile in adults.’

This chapter proposes that there is an obvious continuity between the humour found in the broadcast animated comedies referred to by Wells and the post-broadcast adult animated comedies available for streaming on Netflix. As previously stated, this self-reflexive style of comedy, which often uses contemporary political and artistic culture as its target, is also evidently a continuation of the comedic style identified in the post-broadcast auteur-import comedy programmes in my previous chapter. However, I wish to extend Donnelly’s assertions regarding the types of humour that are present in adult animation. Sex and violence are indeed still on the agenda in some of these programmes. However, rather than attempting to appeal solely to the juvenile in adults, in the same way as programmes like *Family Guy* and *South Park* do, post-broadcast adult animated shows attempt to cater to an adult, mature sensibility which can be equated with the way ‘quality’ television appealed to viewers in the 90s and 00s in series like *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007 – 2015). In a 2018 article for *The Guardian*, Arielle Bernstein writes ‘For years now, the antihero saga has been the mainstay in prestige TV and dramas and there has been an overwhelming assumption that shows centres on the lives of good, earnest people are simply not as sexy.’ This trend is continued by *BoJack Horseman*, whose titular character is often positioned by the show as an antihero in the same vein as Don Draper or Tony Soprano. In the introduction to their 2003 book, *Quality Popular Television*, Mark Jancovich and James Lyons discuss the networks’ diminishing interests in

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attracting a mass audience from the 1980s onwards, and instead underline their increasing concern with,

retaining the most valuable audiences: affluent viewers that advertisers were prepared to pay the highest rate to address. In other words, the compulsiveness of “must see” television is designed to appeal to affluent, highly educated consumers who value the literary qualities of these programmes.\textsuperscript{14}

This recalls Caldwell’s work from the mid-90s discussing event programming and auteur-imports, where the show’s creators ‘presupposed a certain minimal level of educational ... and cultural capital.’\textsuperscript{15} With this logic, the networks want to attract viewers by producing the type of television programmes that will meet and satisfy them on an intellectual level. This means including engaging stories that the viewer will want to return to on a regular basis which now increasingly takes the form of long-running dramatic narratives. The antihero character is a mainstay from this type of genre and as a result, \textit{BoJack Horseman} can be seen to be more closely following the tradition of prestige network drama as opposed to the inconsequential narratives of sitcoms and the reset that occurs at the start of each episode.

My approach to these post-broadcast adult animated programmes is from a television comedy perspective but one of the primary concerns of this chapter is how different animation styles are able to achieve their comedic ends. Therefore, any discussion of animation style will be to support arguments related to the programmes’ status as an object of study in the field of television comedy. Moreover, in keeping with the broader methodological design of this study, and its focus on intention and critical reception, this chapter will also analyse paratextual materials related to these shows, such as official marketing materials, as well as online fan discourse from social media sites like reddit and twitter, and journalistic

\textsuperscript{14} ‘Introduction’ in \textit{Quality Popular Television}, Mark Jancovich and James Lyons (eds.) [London: British Film Institute, 2003], p. 3

reviews from sites such as The AV Club and Vulture, who write extended episode-by-episode reviews of many of the shows used in this chapter.

‘BoJack Horseman’

BoJack Horseman was the first of many Netflix original adult animations, premiering in August 2014. Its status as the first adult animation on Netflix, particularly one which has become so successful, has most likely led to the proliferation of the sub-genre on the platform, with three new shows debuting in both 2017 and 2018 compared to the two shows that premiered between 2014 and 2016. This steady growth in adult animated content may be partially related to the relatively extended amount of time it takes to produce an animated show when compared with production of other types of television programming such as the sitcom. Nevertheless, the multiple season renewals of successful adult animation programmes on the platform like Big Mouth (Netflix, 2017 - ) and Disenchantment (Netflix, 2018 - ) indicates an ongoing interest in the sub-genre by both the company and their audience.

BoJack Horseman concerns an alcoholic washed-up 90s sitcom actor who, throughout the show’s six seasons, makes numerous attempts to re-enter the limelight and prevent his life from spiralling further downward. The setting is present-day Hollywood, but its inhabitants are an inexplicable mixture of humans and anthropomorphistic animals who co-exist peacefully and rarely comment on the absurdity of this mixed-species situation. The show often relies on this mix of humans and animals in its version of Hollywood to generate comedy. This most frequently takes the form of visual puns and witty wordplay, such as filmmaker Cameron Crowe being depicted as an actual crow, or Quentin Tarantino becoming Quentin Tarantulino, an enthusiastic eight-legged arachnid director. There are also more subtle moments where the distinction between the different species comes into play, such as the cow waitress throwing a disapproving glance at a human customer for ordering a steak in the first season episode, ‘Zoës and Zeldas’.

The programme is created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg who, until the arrival of BoJack Horseman, was relatively unknown with only one writing credit to his
name. He serves as the showrunner for the programme as well as a voice actor for several minor characters on the show. Importantly, the success of the show has allowed Bob-Waksberg to develop an authorial voice within the medium, similar to television showrunners like Mitch Hurwitz or Matt Groening. Following *BoJack Horseman*, he served as the executive producer for the short-lived Netflix adult animated show, *Tuca and Bertie* (Netflix, 2019), and as the co-creator of an adult animated comedy-drama for Prime Video, titled *Undone* (Prime Video, 2019). The latter programme was to be Amazon’s first foray into the adult animation genre on their streaming service, and the involvement of Bob-Waksberg in this project serves as an indicator of *BoJack Horseman*’s success as a show in and of itself as well as one which is representative of the achievements of Netflix as a producer of original content. Bob-Waksberg’s authorial status has also led to his role as one of the screenwriters for the *The Lego Movie 2: The Second Part* (Mike Mitchell, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA/Denmark/Australia, 2019). This shift to film reflects current debates regarding television being viewed as critically equivalent to cinema, whilst further reinforcing the strong critical adoration which *BoJack Horseman* receives upon the release of each new season. Two of its six seasons possess a perfect 100% rating on the review aggregate site Rotten Tomatoes and it has received multiple nominations and wins at awards shows such as the Primetime Emmys and the Writers Guild of America. Critics have consistently referred to it as ‘one of the best shows on television’ and are often keen to note how the story of a depressed, alcoholic horse is actually ‘one of the most human shows on TV’.

In many ways, this is a complication of Caldwell’s idea regarding the auteur-import. Rather than being a figure who moves from cinema to television in an attempt to provide an aura of ‘legitimation’ to the latter medium, Bob-Waksberg’s shift to cinema seems

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to be a further legitimation of ‘quality’ television and his work within the television medium.

The show, illustrated by Lisa Hanawalt, features the idiosyncratic anthropomorphistic animal designs which she is known for in her artwork outside of Bojack Horseman (Figs. 27 – 28). Hanawalt often uses the logic of this half-human, half-animal world to create the main source of visual humour in the show, as multiple shots are littered with blink-and-you’ll-miss-it sight-gags which either relate to the unique diegesis she has created or wider contemporary cultural moments. In many ways, her work could be viewed as a more contemporaneous version of the type of cartoons drawn throughout the 80s by American artist, Gary Larson, whose work also heavily featured anthropomorphised animals.

(Figs. 27 – 28 - Lisa Hanawalt Artwork)

The animation style of the show isn’t particularly detailed in its first season but it is never crude to the extent of a programme like South Park, which appears as if it could have been hand-drawn by the foul-mouthed children it depicts on-screen. In an interview with GQ, Hanawalt admitted that the backgrounds for the first season of the show had to be collected from material she had drawn previously, due to the speed with which the first season was put together. Because of this, she believes that ‘the overall design of the backgrounds ... [is] a lot more realistic world than I
The style is two-dimensional, in the sense that the characters in the foreground and the locations in the background appear on separate planes as if they have been laid on top of each other. As the show progresses, its style becomes more detailed, but never to the extent that the viewer would realise major discrepancies between episodes from the first season and those from its last. This can be viewed in direct contrast to programmes such as *The Simpsons*, where the introduction of HD technology and computer animation over a 30-year period has created a stark disparity between animated styles when recent episodes are viewed alongside the show’s hand-drawn episodes from the early 90s. The two-dimensional, relatively basic nature of the animation style in the show’s early seasons is echoed in comments by James Bowman, one of the show’s assistant directors, who states ‘Visually, it’s come a long way since season one, when … the executive producers had in their minds what they wanted the show to look like: staged like a sitcom, a multi-camera sitcom.’ The comparison to a sitcom implicitly suggests a mundane, restricted visual style, which I will return to later in the chapter when analysing how the show often self-reflexively uses tropes associated with the sitcom sub-genre. Moreover, Bowman’s comment is useful in establishing how the show’s style has developed over the past half-decade from being ‘just kind

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of flat-looking in the early episodes’\textsuperscript{20} (Fig. 29) to the point where ‘More and more, as each season goes, it’s looking less and less flat’ (Fig. 30).\textsuperscript{21}

The show has also increasingly started changing animation styles between episodes which reflects the various mental states of its leading characters. Towards the end of the first season, in the episode, ‘Downer Ending’, BoJack decides to go on a drugs binge with the former child-star from his cancelled sitcom, who is now in her late-20s and represents a Lindsay Lohan-type celebrity, not least of all through her looks and character’s career trajectory. During one of BoJack’s hallucinations, figures from his life become transformed and disfigured through the expressive use of animation, which is much more detailed here than it has been previously

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
throughout the first season (Fig. 31). It amplifies the sense of horror which the show is hoping to convey and also creates a greater contrast with the rest of the season’s more simplistic uses of animation.

The very subject of animation and its style later become crucial in underlining one of the key themes of this episode. At a later point in his episode-long bad trip, BoJack changes animation style and verbally acknowledges this change in his appearance stating, ‘I don’t have outlines anymore.’ (Fig. 32) His entire body then proceeds to become deconstructed bit by bit until all that’s left is a stick figure on a scrap of paper. This serves to symbolise how BoJack’s celebrity persona, the washed-up, alcoholic, former sitcom star, is a construct created by forces outside of his control; he is often followed by two flying paparazzi birds who document both his embarrassing public and private moments and sell them to the press. On a secondary level, it highlights the purpose of this episode as one which attempts to deconstruct BoJack by giving the viewer access to his fragile mental state through the use of flashbacks and hallucinations, but also through the animation style which literally reduces the character to his most basic form - a stick figure on a piece of paper.
Continuities with Broadcast Adult Animated Comedies

Having positioned the show within its post-broadcast context and introduced some of the discussion surrounding its creator, illustrator and visual style, this analysis now turns to the similarities BoJack Horseman shares with broadcast adult animated comedies. Analysing moments from the show, this chapter will also argue that the programme is striving for something which more closely resembles prestige drama television. This is evident not only in its tone and narrativization but also in the marketing materials surrounding the show and its reception by critics and substantial following by fan communities.

Something the post-broadcast adult animation programmes share in common with broadcast shows such as South Park and Family Guy is their penchant for violence. In broadcast television, this is evident in shows that are suitable for family viewing such as Homer Simpson’s physically aggressive throttling of his son, Bart, in The Simpsons. Here, the repetition of the action along with some variation on ‘Why, you little...!’ has turned a potentially troubling domestic situation into a source of comedy, often through the excessiveness of Homer’s response. Excess is also evident in the extremely violent ‘Itchy and Scratchy’ television cartoons which Lisa and Bart Simpson repeatedly obsess over throughout the show. The children’s response to cartoon violence - uncontrollable laughter - validates it as something which is acceptable to laugh at and therefore makes the violence between father
and son in the diegesis of *The Simpsons* seem less concerning to the viewer than it might be if the show were made in live action. This example seems to suggest that animation allows certain things to be rendered humorously that otherwise wouldn’t be and consequently eases the pressure of certain situations or issues that are far from a laughing matter in the real world. The ante of these violent scenarios is upped considerably in programmes aimed at older audiences such as *South Park* and *Family Guy*. The gags are still repetitive, such as the constant death of Kenny in the former or Stewie Griffin’s incessant attempts to kill his mother, Lois, in the latter, but it is through the repetition and the excessive animation style that the comedy of the respective programmes emerges. It is amusing to see a young child with an unexplainable British accent concoct endless schemes to end his mother’s life, and the knowledge that he will never succeed is as inevitable as Kenny’s perpetual resurrection at the beginning of every *South Park* episode.\(^{22}\)

In *BoJack Horseman*, there are also moments of violence which, if not animated, would appear far more disturbing and substantially less comical or acceptable than they ultimately are. This is relevant to Neale and Krutnik’s aforementioned notion that the comedy genre is the place for the indecorum and the unexpected. In the first season episode, ‘Our A-Story is a “D” Story’, BoJack’s naïve and well-meaning housemate, Todd (voiced by Aaron Paul), finds himself in a threatening prison environment. Whilst queuing for his dinner in the canteen, Todd is acknowledged by another inmate who, rather jovially suggests that Todd will be ‘just fine’ if he sticks with him. Before this inmate has the chance to even finish his sentence, a tattooed, long-haired prisoner swiftly enters from the right of the frame, brandishing small knives in each hand and proceeds to stab the friendly inmate several times in the space of around five seconds. The multiple perforations from the inmate’s chest and back splash blood over Todd’s horrified face and prison uniform as he helplessly crouches on the floor. The main element of comedy in this moment can be found in the irony of the inmate’s comment and its timing, coming

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\(^{22}\) Stewie actually achieved his goal of killing Lois in *Family Guy*’s sixth season, only to find out she had survived the attack and for her to return in the following episode. This serves as an example of broadcast adult animation’s constant reversion to familiar sitcom tropes such as the narrative ‘reset’.
just moments before his unexpected death. This darkly ironic humour isn’t necessarily restricted to adult animation and could be applied as successfully to a live-action show. However, as far as the visual style of the show is concerned, the contrast between the brutality of the scene and the colourful animation style through which it is conveyed does enough to potentially elicit a sharp laugh. This relates back to Carroll’s definition of the sight gag, in which a juxtaposition of potentially incongruous elements is presented to the viewer with the intention of achieving laughter. Moreover, decisions regarding the shot types and editing contribute to the comedy in the moment. This decision to present the brutal murder from afar, with a certain matter-of-factness, is another contributing factor to the idiosyncratic sense of humour which the show has fostered throughout its six-season run. The moment could be considered cruel and detached if depicted this way in a live-action programme, but once again, the contrasts which the show creates between the content and its form are where its offbeat source of humour is located.

Another recurring adult topic which BoJack Horseman deals with is drug use. The depiction of drug use in adult animated comedies isn’t uncharted territory – ‘The Thin White Line’ and ‘Brian Does Hollywood’, the two-part opening episodes of Family Guy’s third season, revolve around the Griffin family’s dog, Brian (Seth MacFarlane), becoming dependent on cocaine after trying it as a sniffer dog in an airport. The story takes a surprising turn as he moves to Hollywood and becomes a semi-successful screenwriter and director, in a story which pays tribute to Brian De Palma’s remake of Scarface (Brian De Palma, Universal Pictures, USA, 1983) and Paul Thomas Anderson’s Boogie Nights (Paul Thomas Anderson, New Line Cinema, USA, 1997). Despite the ambitious nature of such a story, and one which alludes to dramatic rags-to-riches narratives, Family Guy’s comedic tone and referential humour is maintained throughout. Moreover, the story is concluded and forgotten about entirely once the two episodes end, leaving no unresolved threads or consequences which have the potential change the dynamics of the relationships between characters on the show in the future. On the other hand, BoJack Horseman, isn’t just concerned with depicting drug use for potential comedic
material, or for inconsequential narrative digressions, or even for its ability to experiment with the visual style of the show itself (as evidenced in the aforementioned ‘Downer Ending’). Whilst enabling all of the above, the adult topic allows the show to become a meditation on the driving forces behind addiction, such as fame and childhood trauma. BoJack and Sarah Lynn’s (Kristen Schaal) persistent drug and alcohol abuse isn’t merely an identifiable character trait with no deep-rooted cause. The show goes to great lengths to explain its characters’ addictions and, unlike the majority of comedic programmes, refuses to let them suffer no consequences for their actions by ‘resetting’ at the start of each episode. In this respect, the programme deviates from the typically low stake narratives of broadcast adult animation and shares more in common with the character-focused prestige dramas associated with HBO and AMC.\textsuperscript{23} I will return to these issues in the following section which focuses on BoJack Horseman’s deviations from the traditional broadcast adult animation genre.

The final and arguably most noticeable similarity identifiable between BoJack Horseman and other broadcast adult animated comedies is its excessively referential humour. The most recognisable type of reference is to various facets of popular culture and the entertainment industry. The presence of this type of humour is well suited to the world of BoJack Horseman, as the show revolves around an actor working in contemporary Hollywood. As previously stated, many of the programme’s characters are animal-hybrid versions of real-life Hollywood actors, actresses, television personalities, or directors, ranging from Cameron Crowe (depicted as a talking crow) to Matthew Fox (who, in a sublime example of the show’s perverse humour, is depicted as a wolf). Other celebrities, such as Paul McCartney and Margo Martindale, appear as themselves, sometimes for moments of fleeting humour in the case of McCartney, or having recurring roles which inform the narrative in the case of Martindale. This type of reference is almost always used to achieve an instant laugh, as the viewer recognises either the star or the writing wit behind the joke of the human-animal hybrid. In this regard, the show is no

\textsuperscript{23} For example, outside of the opening episodes of Family Guy’s third season, Brian’s drug addiction and move to Hollywood are never referred to again, continuing the familiar narrative structure that frequent viewers of the show will take as standard.
different from the endless stream of celebrity cameos and references from *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy*. *BoJack Horseman* is also able to poke fun at particular time periods in a similar way to these broadcast shows. During the first season episode, ‘The Telescope’, the show uses flashbacks to 1985 when BoJack is an up-and-coming stand-up comedian. As he drives down a Hollywood street singing to the radio (‘generic 80s new wave ... the decade which it currently is’), the mise-en-scène is cluttered with purposefully clichéd 80s references such as a man dressed up as a Rubik’s Cube and shops advertising synthesisers and ‘fanny packs’. When a later scene in the same episode depicts the 1990s, the show repeats the gag except BoJack is now singing along to a grunge song on the radio (‘generic 90s grunge song, everyone in flannel ... something from Seattle’).

An increasingly self-referential type of humour used by the show focuses on the tropes of the television comedy genre and aligns the programme closely with *Love*, the live-action post-broadcast comedy discussed in the previous chapter. *Love* is also set in the world of television and often uses jokes about the production process of broadcast shows in a rather pointed way to imply a level of superiority and authenticity regarding its own context as an auteur-driven programme on post-broadcast platform, as discussed above. The references in *BoJack Horseman* suggest a superiority to broadcast television through the amount of cultural capital required to understand many of the programme’s jokes. The opening moments of the show’s first episode underline its self-referential focus on television, particularly the sitcom sub-genre, as a target for comedy as well as a topic which is closely tied to the narrative. The show depicts a large detached house on a sunny suburban street, reminiscent of the Tanner family home from *Full House*, as an offscreen voice announces that the show is filmed ‘in front of a live studio audience’. This establishing shot of the family home coupled with the reference to a live studio audience is an explicit gesture towards traditional sitcom aesthetics from the network era. This is further supported by the bright colour palette and incidental music which accompanies the opening image. This animated recreation of the sitcom style is soon interrupted by the arrival of the *Charlie Rose* (PBS, 1991 – 2017) logo in the bottom right-hand corner of the screen. An animated rendering of the
eponymous talk show host is then superimposed over the image as Rose contextualises ‘Horsin’ Around’, BoJack’s faux sitcom, in his recognisable voice. The episode then assumes the visual style of a late-night talk show, as a bar appears along the bottom of the screen introducing BoJack as an interviewee within the diegesis of the Charlie Rose episode, as well as to the viewers of BoJack Horseman. ‘Zoës and Zeldas’, another episode from the show’s first season, begins by referring to Seinfeld, another classic sitcom from the same era as Full House. This moment arrives replete with musical accompaniment from a funky synthesised bass and a stand-up monologue from a young BoJack, who is standing against the recognisable iconography of a brick wall, resembling the New York City comedy clubs one might associate with the Seinfeld character.24

These explicit references to Full House and Seinfeld are amusing in the faithfulness and specificity of their call backs, demonstrating a reverence for broadcast television comedy, whilst also indicating that those shows are something other than what BoJack Horseman is attempting to do as a post-broadcast programme. When we are finally shown BoJack’s house after the lengthy introduction of the first episode, it is a drab grey colour, in direct contrast to the picturesque, homely suburbia of the house from ‘Horsin’ Around’. In this regard, BoJack Horseman’s tone and style of humour can be regarded as a postmodern one, using multiple references from popular television culture to reflect on the world depicted in the diegesis of this show. Moreover, through these references, the viewer can understand more or less about the characters depending on how much or how little they know about the popular culture cited by the show. Jim Collins writing on postmodernism provides a helpful way of understanding BoJack’s referentiality. Collins writes,

The effort to reconnect with an audience outside galleries and scholarly journals involved a number of different strategies. One of the most common

24 Seinfeld performs in this environment in his Netflix special, Jerry Before Seinfeld (Netflix, 2017), to be discussed in the final chapter.
was to destabilize the relationship between high art and mass culture, primarily through the appropriation of signs drawn from mass media.\textsuperscript{25}

These signs are present in \textit{BoJack Horseman}'s varied use of references from late-night talk shows such as \textit{Charlie Rose} which, when placed alongside ‘Horsin’ Around’, is presented as somewhat more mature than the prime-time sitcom genre. However, \textit{BoJack Horseman} also refers to these examples of mass media alongside references to high culture such as variations on Henri Matisse's ‘Dance’, which replaces the paintings nude dancing male bodies with horses, and David Hockney's 1972 painting, ‘Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)’, the latter hanging behind BoJack's office desk (Figs. 33 - 34). In the show's version of the painting, the swimming Hockney is replaced by BoJack who also appears to be stood at the edge of the pool staring down at himself. Much like BoJack, Hockney himself moved to California, fascinated by the idea of celebrity and stardom. The painting creates a sense of isolation and ennui which also applies to a character like BoJack and can be used as an instant signifier regarding BoJack's personality and backstory for the viewer with the cultural capital to understand the reference. The use of such a range of references are 'emblematic of the \textit{hyperconsciousness} of postmodern popular culture: a hyperawareness on the part of the text itself of its cultural status, function, and history, as well as the conditions of its circulation and reception.'\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 335.
Soprano, Draper, Underwood ... Horseman

BoJack Horseman’s emphasis on character and its divergence from the zero-consequence narrative of many other adult animated programmes such as The Simpsons and Family Guy doesn’t automatically place it within the realm of the prestige cable drama. However, the show is ultimately able to support these comparisons through its handling of multiple plot threads and in its tonal seesawing between absurd comedy and extreme tragedy. In an in-depth review of the episode for The AV Club, Les Chappell writes, ‘For all its bright colors, absurd images and plethora of puns, it’s a show whose path is littered with broken things,
a dark and uncompromising world more on par with prestige cable dramas. Moreover, the paratextual marketing material created for the show by Netflix proudly places it within this category of television (Fig. 35). The inclusion of the name ‘Underwood’ on the list of character names from the show’s third season poster also serves to further promote the Netflix brand, simultaneously advertising their immensely popular _House of Cards_ series whilst providing _BoJack Horseman_ with critical legitimation through association. One doesn’t have to search online for too long to also be provided with multiple examples of _BoJack Horseman_ fan art which draws comparisons between the programme and numerous aforementioned prestige drama shows such as _Breaking Bad_ (Fig. 36) and _Mad Men_ (Fig. 37). My point here is illustrated by an analysis of the third season episode, ‘That’s Too Much, Man!’, detailing its handling of issues such as substance abuse, Hollywood stardom, and mental health and examining how they are used to position the show as dramatic television, before returning to the online fan discussion surrounding that particular episode towards the end of this section.

(Figs. 35 – 37 - _BoJack Horseman_ and the Antihero)

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It is worth noting that there are multiple episodes preceding the third season’s ‘That’s Too Much, Man!’ that deal explicitly with the show’s recurring themes of isolation and depression, often in ways which challenge conventional television storytelling. For example, the third season episode ‘Fish Out of Water’ revolves around BoJack’s attendance at an underwater film festival which requires him to wear a spherical oxygen-filled glass bubble around his head in order to breathe. This episode is notable for its lack of dialogue, less than three minutes worth, and uses its premise as a metaphor for BoJack’s sense of isolation in Hollywood and his inability to properly communicate with those around him. However, such episodes (the first season’s aforementioned ‘Downer Ending’ can also be included in this list) are anomalies when viewed in the context of the rest of the show. These instances aren’t necessarily examples of bottle episodes, a term used to describe unconventional episodes of television that are usually produced as a result of a restricted budget and feature minimal sets or action. If anything, the animation used in both ‘Downer Ending’ and ‘Fish Out of Water’ is far more expressive and inventive than the style which is employed in the majority of the other episodes. Instead, they can both be viewed as episodes which temporarily halt the narrative to provide room for experimentation within the show’s sitcom-length animated format. By contrast, ‘That’s Too Much, Man!’ continues the narrative trajectory of the show’s third season whilst also allowing room for further character examination and development. The show’s trademark blend of dark comedy and self-reflexivity are also present throughout, making it a more typical example of a BoJack Horseman episode and thus a reliable case study for my argument regarding the show’s narrative similarities with prestige drama programmes.28

‘That’s Too Much, Man!’ begins with a tongue-in-cheek cold open involving Sarah Lynn waking up and singing a musical number reminiscent of the ‘A Smile and a Song’ number from Disney’s Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (David Hand, Walt

28 It should be noted that one of the programmes I’ve cited alongside BoJack Horseman, Breaking Bad, has its own bottle episode in the form of the season three episode ‘Fly’. The decision to include episodes in BoJack Horseman that are reminiscent of drama television’s bottle episodes may be a conscious one.
Disney Productions, USA, 1937). Just like the character of Snow White (Adriana Caselotti), Sarah Lynn sings back-and-forth with the animals in her garden in a nursery-rhyme style. The rhyming words of the song add to its playful nature and position the show as something more closely resembling a family cartoon. Sarah Lynn sings ‘Good morning sun, good morning trees, good morning busy buzzy bees’ before proceeding to address the animals working in her garden with ‘Good morning handsome garden ants, I like the way you plant my plants, your flowers make my feelings dance, I like your handsome planter pants’. The tone and characterisation of this opening minute is at odds with the show’s more pessimistic outlook, as well as our understanding of Sarah Lynn’s character as viewers. She has been depicted as a troubled celebrity since her first appearance in the show, revealing in ‘Old Acquaintance’, an earlier third season episode, that she was currently sober. However, this is only because she heard that ‘if you stop doing drugs for a while, the first time you do them again, it’s amazing’. She tells BoJack to call her when he’s ready to party and he ends the phone conversation by saying ‘That’s troubling’ before instantly moving on to deal with what he clearly perceives to be more pressing issues. Returning to Sarah Lynn three episodes later, it is apparent that she has maintained her sober lifestyle, but the excessively child-like and naïve tone of this opening sequence is consistently undercut by the viewer’s knowledge of the show and its characters’ histories.

There are also several breaks in the tonal consistency of this opening sequence, all which suggest that the cheerful, healthy Sarah Lynn is merely a façade. Firstly, the opening shot of the episode is a close-up of a painting from Sarah Lynn’s bedroom, enveloped in pink curtains and presented with a sense of theatrical importance to the viewer (Fig. 38). The painting closely resembles John Everett Millais’ mid-19th century work, ‘Ophelia’, which depicts a scene described by Queen Gertrude in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*\(^\text{29}\) in which the tragic character of Ophelia sings before drowning in a river (Fig. 39). Like many of the references to artwork in *BoJack Horseman*, the show replaces the figures from the paintings with

those we recognise from the show. In this instance, Sarah Lynn is the character in the painting, singing before her untimely and unfortunate demise.

(Fig. 38 - Sarah Lynn and Millais’ *Ophelia*)

(Fig. 39 - Sarah Lynn and Millais’ *Ophelia*)

The fact that she then begins the episode by uncharacteristically singing darkly foreshadows that her fate will be the same as in her painting. This example is evidence of *Bojack Horseman* utilising ‘traditional art forms carrying high cultural kudos’ in the same way that Janet McCabe and Kim Akass argue HBO did through commissioning Annie Liebovitz’s photoshoot of *The Sopranos* cast members in the mid-2000s. Moreover, the decision to open this particular episode, one which will roughly follow the narrative trajectory of the character depicted in the painting, with a close-up of the artwork demonstrates the ‘high level of synthesis and

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30 McCabe and Akass, ‘It’s not TV, it’s HBO’s original programming: Producing quality TV’, in Leverette, Ott, and Buckley (ed.), *It’s Not TV*, p. 87.
cohesion between stylistic choices and the programmes’ “meanings” that Sarah Cardwell believes to be inherent characteristics of ‘quality’ American television. 

During this brief opening sequence, Sarah Lynn is also interrupted by the emergence of two paparazzi birds from the tree outside her bedroom window, whose bright flashing camera lightbulbs cause her to stop singing and scream before retreating back into her house. In these opening moments alone, the breaks in tone signify the fragility of her sober, happy, and healthy living situation.

In its opening sequence, the episode also deals with the importance of the celebrity image, conveying how Sarah Lynn’s happiness is predicated on what Hollywood perceives to be a positive image. Whilst she hides indoors from the paparazzi birds, she reassures herself by saying in a lower register, ‘Sarah Lynn, you are calm, you are thin, your skin is so soft, it’s like you murdered a baby and stole its skin, your skin is murdered baby soft.’ Here the show demonstrates the effects of a career spent in the public eye and grants the viewer access to the character’s private mantra, focused on weight and skin texture. The perverse joke about murdered baby skin seems absurd to the viewer, but is uttered with complete sincerity by Sarah Lynn, who also appears oblivious to other societal taboos where her health and public image is concerned. As she later creates a blended smoothie for herself in the kitchen, she is shown to use blueberry, flax, chia, shark fin, and grated white rhino horn, listing each one out loud in a matter-of-fact manner. The show creates the impression that Sarah Lynn’s wellness and ability to appear publicly as a successful Hollywood celebrity takes precedence over anything else including the exploitation of endangered species for healthy smoothies. This darker humour returns further as she is crossing off the ‘9 months sober!’ square on her calendar, when BoJack interrupts her by calling to ask if she’ll make good on her prior offer of hard partying. Sarah Lynn’s attempt at sobriety is revealed here as nothing more than an empty promise as she instantly tears down the calendar to reveal a cabinet filled with several different types of vodka. She has admitted in an aforementioned episode that the only reason she quit drink and drugs was to feel

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an intense high upon returning to them, so this moment should come as no surprise to a long-time viewer with a good understanding of her disposition.\textsuperscript{32}

The decision to begin the episode with an extended introductory sequence featuring Sarah Lynn, a character who long-time viewers will be familiar with but who has had minimal screen time in this season, is also crucial to understanding the role that the show wants BoJack to play within this particular episode. By emphasising the importance of Sarah Lynn’s sobriety and her character arc within the wider story, the show is positioning BoJack as an outside complicating force entering this narrative. In the previous episode, ‘It’s You’, BoJack didn't secure the Oscar nomination that the whole season had appeared to be moving towards. Instead, he’s left alone in his trashed house after all his friends have justifiably deserted him as a result of his destructive and selfish behaviour. When he calls Sarah Lynn, he is briefly shown standing in front of the smashed windows of his once-pristine home, with empty beer-bottles and shards of glass surrounding his feet. BoJack’s decision to call Sarah Lynn could be read in a positive light as his attempt to find solace in an old acquaintance. However, the character has a long history of selfish behaviour where he compulsively manipulates people and circumstances for his own personal gain. One such example can be found in ‘Zoës and Zeldas’, where BoJack purposefully thwarts his roommate, Todd’s, chances of success by distracting him from writing a rock opera. This chip on BoJack’s shoulder regarding success and likability is reiterated numerous times throughout the show’s six seasons, most memorably when he desperately crashes the Q&A session for his autobiography at the end of ‘Downer Ending’ and repeatedly asks Diane (Alison Brie) to tell him that he’s a good person. These events, amongst many others, gesture towards the implication that he’s calling up Sarah Lynn because he knows not only that she will indulge in his excessive and dangerous behaviour, but also because the dynamic of their working relationship from ‘Horsin’ Around’ will be reinstated, where BoJack can play the role of the mentor and Sarah Lynn will look

\textsuperscript{32} Despite the increased sense of control given to users of streaming platforms, the irony is that it is less likely that viewers will encounter episodes out of order or in an order different to that desired. Producers are, therefore, more able to count on the viewers’ knowledge of recurring characters such as Sarah Lynn.
up to him. One can imagine a scenario where the episode began by focusing on BoJack and worked to create a sense of empathy for his current situation. By depicting BoJack as an intruder into Sarah Lynn’s attempt, however false, at a life of sobriety, he is being introduced as the antihero of this particular episode.

Mittell describes the antihero as ‘a character who is our primary point of ongoing narrative alignment but whose behaviour and beliefs provoke ambiguous, conflicted, or negative moral allegiance.’ This is certainly the case with BoJack in *BoJack Horseman* but it should be noted that the antihero is most commonly depicted in the television drama genre. Amanda Lotz, gendering the antihero figure, defines these types of men as ‘protagonists in various stages of being undone. They are not necessarily bad men, or at least none start out that way, but a series of choices … lead [them] … outside the moral bounds of society.’ Lotz is writing here specifically about characters who have broken the law in some way, but her comments resonate with BoJack insofar as he consistently fails on a moral level that the wider society would deem inappropriate and unacceptable.

Aforementioned shows such as *Mad Men*, *The Sopranos*, and *Breaking Bad* all feature prominently in Lotz’ *Cable Guys* as well as in Mittell’s discussion of the antihero in his 2015 book, *Complex TV*. Helpfully, there is a single paragraph devoted to how the figure of the antihero may be used in the comedy genre, where Mittell refers to unlikable protagonists from shows such as *The Office* and *Seinfeld.* Mittell writes, ‘In nearly all of these comedic instances, we are positioned as rooting against the unsympathetic heroes, watching them fail for our amusement as well as laughing at their boundary-pushing behavioural extremes.’ In *BoJack Horseman*, there are moments of humour when characters unwillingly find themselves in problematic situations, such as when Todd is incarcerated in the first season. However, these problems, and the pleasures we derive from them, are almost always resolved within the episode and don’t have extensive narrative

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35 Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Storytelling*, p. 143.
repercussions further down the line. The same can be said of *The Office* when Michael Scott (Steve Carell) burns his foot on a George Forman grill or *Curb Your Enthusiasm* when Larry (Larry David) mistakenly cuts the hair off of a little girl’s doll. However, we ultimately still root for BoJack and the question Mittell is left with resonates far more with *BoJack Horseman* than these aforementioned comedy shows: ‘how do we account for the pleasures of watching a highly unpleasant protagonist at the center of a dramatic narrative that asks us to truly care about his actions and potentially encourages our allegiance?’

This figure, of the ‘misanthropic, selfish, but ultimately redeemable [hero]’ is a type of antihero that Mittell identifies in dramatic television, but one which shares far more in common with the figure of BoJack Horseman than any of the unsympathetic heroes Mittell believes inhabit the world of television comedy.

Considering the opening moments of ‘That’s Too Much, Man!’, take Mittell’s comments on the characterisation of Walter White from *Breaking Bad* and replace the figure of White with that of Horseman. He writes, ‘Walt’s complex characterization invites me to examine what makes him tick, how he is put together, and where he might be going, while at the same time emotionally sweeping me up into his life and string of questionable decisions.’

The correlation between the characterisation of BoJack and Mittell’s definition of complex television drama’s antihero are evidence of the show’s attempts to cater to a mature sensibility and be viewed within the context of prestige dramatic television as opposed to adult animated comedies such as *Family Guy* or *South Park*.

This episode also uses the show’s title sequence to provide character information about BoJack. Throughout the first three seasons, there have been both subtle and obvious changes to the title sequence, in which BoJack moves through a series of familiar environments ranging from his bedroom and front room, to a grocery store, film premieres, and parties. The cast of characters in the background of these shots expands and changes as necessary depending on the focus of the show at that particular moment. When the ‘D’ is stolen from the

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36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., p. 163.
Hollywood sign in ‘Our A-Story is a “D” Story’, the following episode (and all subsequent episodes) depict the letter as missing (Fig. 40). This joke is extended through the show’s dialogue, as characters casually begin referring to Hollywood as ‘Hollywoo’ with no signs of hesitation or confusion. Likewise, when BoJack gets a job filming *Secretariat* during the show’s second season, the background changes accordingly to depict a film soundstage (Fig. 41). In ‘That’s Too Much, Man!’, the viewer is shown the wreckage of BoJack’s house from the previous episode, which serves as a reminder of his current state. Also, this is the final title sequence to feature Sarah Lynn as a party-goer, following her unexpected death. Alterations to the title sequences of other adult animated comedies is common. *The Simpsons* features the long-running ‘couch gag’ in its title sequence, where the family members encounter a different comedic scenario in their attempts to get to the couch at the start of each episode. *Family Guy* also occasionally offers some variation for purely comedic purposes, such as Peter Griffin (Seth MacFarlane) falling over while performing the opening number. Both of these examples display the potential versatility of a recurring title sequence but they rarely bear any relationship to the events of that particular episode’s narrative. Some of the changing details in *BoJack Horseman* are small and are by no means a replacement for the types of character development which the show engages in elsewhere. However, when compared with *Family Guy’s* minor variations or *The Simpsons’* couch gag, the changes in the title sequence of *BoJack Horseman* are evidence of an adult animation which is more concerned with using the opportunity to reflect character changes and a continuing narrative.
In the first sequence featuring BoJack and Sarah Lynn together in her mansion, the extent of BoJack’s selfishness and self-centred perspective becomes clear through his dialogue, all of which either complains about his own predicament or convinces Sarah Lynn to break her sobriety by taking part in his planned drug and alcohol binge. He says, ‘I’ve never felt so alone in my whole life’ and adds ‘I got royally screwed, and you know who was there for me? No one’, referring to him unexpectedly not receiving an Oscar nomination for his role as Secretariat. It would be hard to feel any sympathy for the character at all if it wasn’t for the fact that Sarah Lynn also ignores almost everything he says, instead using her fruit blender at top volume and obliviously drowning out BoJack’s cries for help. Rather than
pressing BoJack further on his feelings surrounding his lack of an Oscar nomination, Sarah Lynn simply agrees with his summation that ‘Everyone’s an asshole and the whole world sucks balls.’ For Sarah Lynn, BoJack’s current state of mind is an excuse for her to break her sobriety with someone who is also willing to recklessly indulge in her addictions. Instead of depicting two friends reconnecting and listening to each other’s issues in an attempt to solve their respective problems, the dialogue in this scene reads more like two characters who are using each other’s problems to justify their own self-destructive actions. This is most telling when focusing on the ways in which issues are raised and then responded to by the characters. For example, as the pair drunkenly reminisce about their time working on the ‘Horsin’ Around’ sitcom, Sarah Lynn recalls the time when an actress named Joelle was made to dress up as a pumpkin and all the jokes in that episode were about the character’s weight. She concludes her story by remembering that the jokes gave Joelle an eating disorder and made the actress miss five episodes. This memory clearly troubles Sarah Lynn who proceeds to sit back down on her sofa and stops smiling. However, BoJack’s response to this story is ‘Everything was so much simpler back then. We didn’t know how good we had it. We got to come to work and have fun everyday and we weren’t worried about our legacy or awards…’ BoJack’s lack of acknowledgment towards Joelle and her situation reinforces the trait of selfishness which long-time viewers will have come to associate with his character. He then begins to reflect nostalgically about his time on ‘Horsin’ Around’, which is the only wholesome common bond that he and Sarah Lynn share. It becomes very clear that there is nothing connecting these characters in the present-day other than their desire to drink and take drugs to excess. Chappell notes how the ‘embrace of the sitcom by both BoJack and BoJack is nothing but a misdirect, a flimsy backdrop thrown up to mask all the demons hiding behind it.’

This toxic relationship, between both BoJack and his past and BoJack and Sarah Lynn could be depicted exclusively through visual gags which show the pair indulging in their addictions. This is something the show often does, such as earlier

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in the episode when it is comically revealed that Sarah Lynn hides cocaine in the walls of her house. However, the way in which the characters interact with each other, selecting some things but not others to respond to, and always managing to shift the focus back towards their own problems, is evidence of the show’s deeply complex characterisation, reminiscent of the type found in long-form drama content as opposed to typical adult animated comedy.

The episode also employs some of the more complex structural techniques associated with narrative-driven drama television. Immediately following BoJack’s reminiscences of his time spent making ‘Horsin’ Around’, the animated image becomes briefly fuzzy and over-saturated before cutting to a black screen. After a beat, the episode continues in medias res as BoJack is half-way through a rant about how buildings are supposed to be shaped like rectangles. Rather than sitting on the floor like he was a few moments ago, he is now standing and Sarah Lynn is laid on a sofa that is inexplicably draped in toilet paper. This intermittent blackout structure continues for some time, providing the basis for many visual jokes (such as the appearance of several crates of ‘Jack Spaniel’s Whisky’) as well as being able to provide a loose time reference for the viewer, as details such as Sarah Lynn’s purple bowl of Vicodin pills becomes increasingly depleted. The blackout structure also allows for unexpected changes in location, as the pair initially begin moving around the house (from the living room to the kitchen), to Diane and Mr. Peanut Butter’s (Paul F. Tompkins) house, and to behind the wheel of a moving car. This allows for a number of comedic situations to ensue, such as BoJack snapping out of his inebriated stupor to realise he’s at an AA meeting.

The episode also utilises narrative techniques identified by Mittell in Complex TV. Mittell believes ‘individual episodes need to manage our short-term memory of events that roll out over the course of the episode along with the longer-term serialized recall from weeks, months, or even years beforehand.’\textsuperscript{40} The prime-time serials which are the focus of Mittell’s chapter feature characters who,

\textsuperscript{40} Mittell, Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Storytelling, p. 181.
call each other by name and reference their relationships more frequently than people do in everyday life, using dialogue as a way to keep crucial character information active in our minds. Often past events are retold to new characters to update them on the status of the situation and to remind us of what we have already seen.\textsuperscript{41}

This is certainly the case in ‘That’s Too Much, Man!’, as Sarah Lynn mentions BoJack’s Oscar nomination disappointment near the start of the episode to remind viewers of the previous episode’s plot developments. Additionally, the appearance at an AA meeting allows BoJack to divulge the story of the time he nearly had sex with his friend’s young daughter at the end of the previous season. Despite episodes of \textit{BoJack Horseman} being released simultaneously, there would have been one year of time between the premiere of that particular episode, ‘Escape from L.A.’ and this one. The reintroduction of this story should also signal to viewers that it may become relevant at a later point within this particular episode. Although this technique of narrative storytelling and recapping is standard within the serial drama genre, it is not so common for adult animation which, as stated earlier, is often restricted to the short-term reset model offered by the sitcom subgenre.

The ending of the episode offers a final way to read the show as one indebted to narrative focused serial drama, particularly those focused on antiheroes, as opposed to one which shares more in common with other broadcast adult animated comedies. Following Sarah Lynn’s request from earlier in the episode, she and BoJack travel to the iconic Griffith observatory in Los Feliz, Los Angeles. It is here that Sarah Lynn dies, or rather her death is heavily implied by the end of the show. The characters are shown as silhouettes watching the informational video (featuring voiceover from famous astrophysicist, Neil DeGrasse Tyson) at the planetarium. BoJack, responding to the video, speaks at length about the inconsequentiality of their lives when compared to the vast expanses of the solar system. Sarah Lynn rests her head on his shoulder as BoJack concludes, ‘It

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
doesn’t matter what we did in the past or how we’ll be remembered. The only thing that matters is right now, this moment, this one spectacular moment we are sharing together.’ Following a period of silence from Sarah Lynn, BoJack seeks confirmation, asking ‘Right, Sarah Lynn? Sarah Lynn?’ The episode then cuts to black and BoJack’s voice, lacking the enthusiasm that coloured it moments earlier, calls Sarah Lynn’s name once more into the ceaseless silence.

During an earlier sequence in a grimy motel room, the two characters lay sprawled on a bed with vacant expressions on their faces. Sarah Lynn doesn’t speak or even move during the lengthy birds-eye view shot of the bed, implying a potential overdose. It is the night of the Oscars and, considering the episode began the day after the nominations were announced, it can be estimated that the pair have been on a bender for roughly 6-8 weeks. The characters’ frequent blackouts and jumbled narrative structure haven’t allowed the viewer to create a consistent or reliable time frame up until this point. However, this relatively large amount of diegetic time covered by the 25-minute episode means it wouldn’t be out of the question for a fatal overdose to occur in relation to either of the two characters. Discussing the tone of the show by this point in the episode, Chappell writes, ‘Whatever sense of fun existed is gone, and the trip has shifted gears to the hellish introspection stage. It’s almost unbearably bleak, even before the split-second fakeout of a Sarah Lynn overdose’. Regardless, the ‘fakeout’ of Sarah Lynn’s overdose proves to be a joke, albeit a dark one, and one which later reveals the show to be immensely cold and unforgiving when BoJack calls Sarah Lynn’s name in the darkness of the Griffith observatory and her lifeless silhouette doesn’t respond.

The death of either a major or long-time supporting character is a recurring trait of the serial drama programme, particularly as the show gets closer to its season finale. Examples include Jimmy Darmody (Michael Pitt) in the second season finale of HBO’s Boardwalk Empire (HBO, 2010 – 2014), Jane Margolis (Krysten Ritter), Gale Boetticher (David Costabile), and Gustavo Fring (Giancarlo Esposito) in

the second, third, and fourth respective season finales of *Breaking Bad*, and Charlie Pace (Dominic Monaghan) in the season three finale of *Lost* (ABC, 2004 – 2010). In the cases of *Boardwalk Empire* and *Breaking Bad*, the deaths of these characters are often directly at the hands of the main protagonist, or occur as a result of the main protagonist’s actions (such as Walter [Bryan Cranston] ordering Jesse [Aaron Paul] to kill Gale or his reluctance to save a strung-out Jane from choking on her own vomit). These deaths also often say less about the character who dies than the character who is responsible. Their occurrence towards the end of a season allow the viewer to consider how the main protagonist will respond to the situation and how it has changed or will change them. In *BoJack Horseman*, it is BoJack’s selfishness and inability to understand Sarah Lynn’s struggles as an addict which lead to her untimely death. Choosing this death to occur at the end of the penultimate episode will arguably encourage bingeing amongst the majority of Netflix viewers who can easily let the final episode begin automatically following this finale. In this respect, the power of the death and the amount of time one has to sit with the event and its implications following the initial airing are shortened. However, when viewed in isolation there is less of an opportunity for a comedic alleviation of the episode’s sombre mood. The Netflix platform thus allows the show to apply the same narrative techniques as a serialised drama show without having to commit wholeheartedly to the dramatic implications of such an intensely dark tonal shift as the next episode (replete with jokes) is already available to relieve the viewer’s sense of melancholy.

Having explored the season three episode, ‘That’s Too Much, Man!’, one final point worth noting is the way in which fan communities engage with the show and the events of that particular episode on forums and social media. In the absence of any official viewing figures or streaming data from Netflix themselves, these online comments and interactions is some evidence, however inconsequential, of the show’s dedicated fanbase. Like *Arrested Development*, the show has a collaborative fan-edited wiki page (not to be confused with a Wikipedia page) which includes detailed posts about each character and each episode, as well as videos which track the changes in the show’s title sequence from seasons one
through to six.\textsuperscript{43} The episode page for ‘That’s Too Much, Man!’ includes a full plot synopsis, memorable quotes from the episode, and pieces of trivia. Alongside this encyclopaedic hub of \textit{BoJack Horseman} information is the \textit{BoJack Horseman} reddit page, a forum where fans can casually discuss topics related to show as broadly or specifically as they’d like.\textsuperscript{44} Some of the posts are pieces of fan art related specifically to this particular episode, such as the following piece by Peruvian independent animation company, Studio Uku (Fig. 42). The forum also provides space for a type of collective amateur fan sleuthing and allows for moments of joint realisation as fans discuss jokes that they remember from throughout the first three seasons relating to Sarah Lynn’s dream of being an architect (Figs. 43 – 45).\textsuperscript{45} This adds a poignancy to her final words and explains her obsession with the dome-shaped roof of the Griffith observatory. These types of online discussions exist in relation to numerous television programmes, many of them comedies. However, the dissection of \textit{BoJack Horseman} and the willingness of fans to pore over every frame looking for hidden jokes or moments of foreshadowing is reminiscent of the fan communities surrounding serial drama programmes like \textit{Lost} (which had its own magazine in the mid-2000s) or \textit{Buffy the Vampire Slayer’s} (The WB/UPN, 1997 – 2003) ‘Buffistas’, and more recently the ‘Thronies’ for HBO’s \textit{Game of Thrones} (HBO, 2011 – 2019).

\textsuperscript{44} https://www.reddit.com/r/BoJackHorseman/, accessed April 18 2019.
\textsuperscript{45} Permission has been given by the original posters for these quotes to be used in this context. One user asked to be anonymised and I have cropped their name from the image.
(Fig. 42 - BoJack Horseman Fan Art)

Her last words: "I wanna be an architect".

(Figs. 43 – 45 - BoJack Horseman and Online Forums)
‘F is For Family’ and Recurring Tropes of Post-Broadcast Adult Animated Comedy

Based on its critical reception, marketing, and online fan discourse, *BoJack Horseman* can be viewed as the most heavily promoted and widely discussed adult animated series on Netflix. However, it should be noted that the programme is an outlier in terms of both animation style and comedic tone. Because of this, it is useful to examine another case study which is more emblematic of the other adult animated comedies on the streaming platform. *F is For Family* offers a more traditional example of some of the other components of post-broadcast adult animated comedy on Netflix. It also links with several other recurring characteristics of original comedy shows which I’ve noted elsewhere in this thesis regarding seriality, reflexivity and engagement with existing broadcast genres. In this way, it acts as a useful case study which can be used to highlight the traits of other post-broadcast adult animated shows.

Both *BoJack Horseman* and *F is For Family* use generic conventions from broadcast television, but when compared to *BoJack’s* relatively dramatic content and tone, the latter offers somewhat lower stakes through its engagement with sitcom tropes. *F is For Family* is released exclusively on Netflix and marketed as a Netflix original production despite being produced in partnership with the animation division of the French Gaumont Television company. Its critical success and presumably substantial viewership have allowed the show to be renewed four times, with an upcoming fifth season due in 2021. The show takes place in the early 1970s and revolves around a dysfunctional Irish-American suburban family. Broadcast adult animations such as *Family Guy* and *King of the Hill* (Fox, 1997 – 2010) have taken the suburban family as their subject and the tropes of the sitcom sub-genre as the way to tell their story. Other adult animated shows such as *Archer* (FX, 2009 – 2016/ FXX, 2017 - ) have also used existing genres as their primary inspiration. The show’s animation style also immediately marks it as distinct from *BoJack Horseman* on a purely visual level. Rather than feature the idiosyncratic and occasionally rough-looking sketches of an artist like Lisa Hanawalt, the animation often appears smoother, sharing more in common with popular broadcast
animations such as *The Simpsons* or *Family Guy* (Fig. 46). This type of animation style is also more frequently visible in other Netflix original adult animations such as *Paradise PD* (Netflix, 2018 - ) (Fig. 47).

(Fig. 46 - *F is For Family*)

(Fig. 47 – *Paradise PD*)

The absence of a laugh-track and a live studio audience (a somewhat difficult proposition for an animated show) makes the show distinct from some of the most popular sitcom conventions, but it still adheres to many others. For example, it fluctuates between what John Hartley has described as the workplace sitcom and the domestic sitcom with regards to its setting. In his discussion of the family sitcom, Hartley notes that it could be ‘distinguished from serials and drama series by their focus on internal family roles: usually parents, children and siblings’.

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episode. The couple’s inability to connect with their teenage son, Kevin (Justin Long) also provides many comedic moments. The setting will often depend on the focus of a particular episode’s plot, which range from the excitement of the family purchasing a new television (typical of the domestic sitcom) to Frank’s attempts to quash a strike at work (an example of a workplace sitcom). This hybridisation of sitcom setting and focus isn’t a new development in post-broadcast television, as Hartley notes that some sitcoms ‘seem to be hybrids, joining family comportment (living together, couch-centric) and workplace (sexual exploitation, flirt-centric). 

*Friends* was classic here, as was *Seinfeld*.47

Diversions from the sitcom sub-genre become apparent when focusing on the show’s narrative structure, however. Like *BoJack Horseman*, *F is For Family* has a continuing serial narrative, although one which is less concerned with the type of character exploration found in the former programme. Each episode will have a focus such as Kevin spending the day at his dad’s job or younger sibling, Bill (Haley Reinhart), building up the courage to go trick-or-treating on Halloween. However, these episodic and self-contained narratives are placed alongside several larger narratives which are spread across multiple episodes and seasons regarding Frank’s employment or Sue becoming pregnant in a later season.

With regards to the style of comedy, much of it is self-reflexive in the way that it deals with the domestic and working lives that were depicted in early broadcast sitcoms. For example, the show uses archaic gender norms such as the working husband and the stay-at-home wife to the extent that it could be considered to be reinforcing such roles, if it weren’t for the way in which it occasionally undercuts them or provides moments of characterisation that traditional sitcoms would ignore. During a family dinner in the show’s first episode, ‘The Bleedin’ in Sweden’, Frank becomes enraged when the kitchen telephone persistently rings whilst the family are eating. Up until this point, the episode has painted an idyllic portrait of mid-70s suburbia, with establishing shots showing small children riding bicycles on the pavement or playing frisbee in their front

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47 Ibid., p. 98.
gardens. The use of gentle incidental music during this opening scene creates a relaxed, comfortable, and family-friendly atmosphere. Even the initial conversation between Frank and his family at the dinner table suggests a peaceful and content household, as his children ask questions about school work and proudly tell Frank about their spelling test score. The interruption of the telephone call reveals Frank’s anger issues, initially by pointing his knife at Kevin and then in his threat to the salesman on the other end of the phone when he shouts ‘I’m gonna pull your tongue out through your goddamned neck!’. This tension between the idyllic surface of suburban life and the anxieties threatening to emerge from beneath that surface are a recurring theme within the show. When one looks back at the opening scene, there are a number of small details in the animation which hint at this tension. For example, the Murphy family live at the end of a cul-de-sac, and the small ‘Dead End’ sign Frank drives past as he enters the street allows for more than one meaning. His car has flecks of rust around the bottom of the driver’s door and during the wide shot at the dinner table, his big toe can be seen poking out of his worn socks. These details may lead the viewer to infer that the Murphy residence most likely isn’t the house with the large back garden pool that was shown in the episode’s establishing shot. Frank’s concern with technology interrupting long-standing traditions is offset in this particular episode by his obsession with buying a new television set to watch a boxing match. The character’s contradictory impulses of both embracing and shunning technology depending on how it can either reinforce or diminish his masculinity presents Frank as a comically unsympathetic figure for viewers in the mid-2010s.

Another example of the show undercutting traditional gender roles comes in the episode, ‘Saturday Bloody Saturday’. Whilst Frank takes Kevin to work with him, Sue stays in the house doing mundane jobs. Throughout the episode, we periodically and very briefly return to her in the kitchen sorting out Tupperware boxes, contrasted with Frank’s troubles in his job as the potential for strike action is increasing. Once Sue has finished her jobs, she gets to the final box on her to-do-list which reads ‘Enjoy Rest of the Day’. As she ticks it off her list and sits alone in the kitchen, the sounds of the dripping tap and ticking clock increase in volume, for
both the viewer and presumably Sue. The show then uses a number of close-ups showing the clock on the kitchen wall, the dripping tap, and Sue, with a bored and uncertain look on her face. These shots all feature a slow tilting effect where the camera steadily moves anticlockwise to add to Sue’s feeling of disorientation now that she has finished her daily tasks. Sue suddenly erupts into loud crying and tears stream down her face as the family dog watches with a blank expression. The way the show critiques the idea of women being linked to domesticity creates an atmosphere that is reflective and devoid of comedy. The ambivalent stare of the dog further conveys Sue’s isolation and sense that no one can understand her troubles. However, where a show like *BoJack* might end a scene here and leave the viewer to contemplate what has happened, this programme ends on a joke as the dog, blank expression intact, begins humping Sue’s leg under the kitchen table.\(^{48}\) These examples highlight the reflexive nature of the show, willing to comment on and undercut traditional sitcom conventions, whilst also demonstrating the programme’s reliance on crudity and tradition that can be found in other broadcast adult animated sitcoms such as *Family Guy*.

Whilst there are continuities between the broadcast and post-broadcast adult animated comedies I’ve examined, there are also recurring trends between the adult animated shows used as case studies in this chapter and the other post-broadcast comedy shows that are discussed elsewhere in this thesis. The first of these would be the foregrounding of the auteur figure. With regards to both *Love* and *F is For Family*, Netflix have prominently promoted Judd Apatow and Bill Burr as the creators of the respective shows. Bob-Waksberg was an unknown when *BoJack Horseman* first launched, but is now a respected voice within animation and comedy communities. In another instance, Netflix has produced a show from one of the most recognisable names in television animation – Matt Groening – for the project, *Disenchantment*. The promotion or creation of these auteur figures can therefore be understood as a key part of the platform’s marketing strategy and one

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\(^{48}\) *BoJack Horseman*’s engagement with a traditionally masculine type of ‘quality’ tv affords the show a higher cultural value, allowing it to successful execute a number of overtly serious moments, whereas the female-focus of this particular scene in *F is For Family*, notably in a domestic space, necessitates any potential drama to be undercut by a joke.
which parallels similar techniques used by cable channels such as HBO in the mid-90s. As well as importing auteur figures that are known for their distinctive work and style within the television or film industry, Netflix has also allowed musical artists to produce content for their platform. Outside of the post-broadcast comedy genre, this has manifested in concert films and documentaries about figures such as Lady Gaga in *Gaga: Five Foot Two* (Chris Moukarbel, Netflix, USA, 2017) or Beyoncé in *Homecoming: A Film by Beyoncé* (Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, Netflix, USA, 2019). However, within the specific niche of post-broadcast adult animated comedy, Ezra Koenig, lead singer and songwriter for the band Vampire Weekend, has created a Netflix show called *Neo Yokio*. Whilst Koenig is predominantly known from his work in the music industry, the show still captures the type of elitist, educated, and self-aware tone that is predominantly featured in and associated with the music of Vampire Weekend. In this regard, the show serves as an extension of the public perception of its creator, in much the same way that the comedy in *Love* reflects the other work of its co-creator, Judd Apatow.

*F is For Family*’s creator, Bill Burr, has appeared as an actor in other television shows, most notably in *Breaking Bad*, but is most known for his stand-up comedy work. Netflix have released three of Burr’s stand-up specials as Netflix originals on their platform. If one were to view *F is For Family* as another example of high concept comedy, it could be pitched as Bill Burr meets *Family Guy*. When *F is For Family* was announced, it was described as being ‘based on the stand-up of Bill Burr’.⁴⁹ This recalls the credit which appeared in every episode of the popular sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond*, stating that the show was ‘Based on the Comedy of Ray Romano’. The persona of a stand-up comic being conveyed in post-broadcast comedy television is something I will return to in the final chapter on stand-up comedy. However, it is worth briefly exploring the recurring trend surrounding the way certain comic performers or stars are used across the Netflix platform. In the animated shows discussed throughout this chapter, stars and comic performers repeatedly appear in various Netflix original shows, often in the same genre. For

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example, Will Arnett, voice of BoJack Horseman, originally appeared on the platform as G.O.B. Bluth in the company’s 2013 revival of Arrested Development. Here it is useful to briefly consider the work of Richard Dyer and his seminal work, Stars. Dyer writes, ‘"[b]ecause stars are always appearing in different stories and settings, they must stay broadly the same in order to permit recognition and identification."’\(^{50}\) For his work in comedy, Arnett frequently plays a selfish, unaware, but ultimately loveable type, evident in characters such as G.O.B. Bluth and BoJack Horseman. This attitude is also manifested off-screen in a playfully self-aware manner during his promotional, late-night talk show interviews, where he frequently pokes fun at and jokingly insults his Arrested Development co-star, Jason Bateman. Whilst continuing to appear in Arrested Development’s multiple Netflix-produced seasons, Arnett has provided his voice talents to BoJack Horseman as well as creating, directing, and starring in the short-lived semiautobiographical comedy-drama, Flaked. His starring role in Flaked also links to Dyer’s assertion that ‘"[t]he “truth” about a character’s personality and the feelings which it evokes may be determined by what the reader takes to be the truth about the person of the star playing the part."’\(^{51}\) In this instance, the public knowledge of Arnett’s struggles with sobriety could account for his shift into a dramatic role and allow viewers to more comfortably accept him in that role. These lead or ensemble roles also don’t take into account Arnett’s smaller cameo appearances in A Series of Unfortunate Events (Netflix, 2017 – 2019) and The Magic School Bus Rides Again (Netflix, 2017 - 2021). These latter programmes are outside of the comedy genre most typically associated with Arnett, being in the long-form serial drama and children’s television genre respectively. However, Arnett’s appearances in numerous shows across a broad range of genres strengthens the idea of Netflix as an existing space where certain performers exist, potentially (and I assume intentionally) creating an association between star and platform.

Further examples of comedy performers appearing in multiple Netflix programmes can be seen in the work of Nick Kroll and John Mulaney, whose

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\(^{50}\) Richard Dyer, Stars (London: British Film Institute, 1979), p. 98.  
\(^{51}\) Ibid., p. 125.
comedy stage performance, _Oh, Hello on Broadway_ (Netflix, 2017) appears alongside their voice work as the two lead characters of adult animation, _Big Mouth_. Likewise, Nat Faxon has an ensemble role in the live-action comedy show, _Friends from College_ (Netflix, 2017 – 2019), as well as voicing Elfo in _Disenchantment_, the latest adult animation from Matt Groening. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the brand recognised and seemed to acknowledge this trend when partnering with Seth Rogen in 2018 for _Hilarity for Charity_, releasing a video titled ‘Netflix Acquires Seth Rogen’ which played into the idea of a star persona being acquired and utilised like intellectual property. Burr’s prominence in the stand-up comedy area of Netflix and his involvement in one of their original programmes can therefore be viewed as indicative of a wider trend on the platform. This trend also extends to Netflix original films; discounting voice work on _Hotel Transylvania 3_ (Genndy Tartakovsky, Columbia Pictures/索尼 Pictures Animation, USA, 2018), Adam Sandler hasn’t starred in a theatrically released film since 2015 but has enjoyed continued success with eight films and a stand-up special being released on Netflix over the past six years. It is within the sub-genre of adult animation that many of these actors appear (or reappear), most likely due to the relatively short time commitments on their part. Because of this, a show like _F is For Family_ is able to boast a varied and prestigious supporting voice cast which includes Laura Dern, Justin Long, Sam Rockwell, Alison Janney, Carol Kane (another ‘Netflix regular’), and Vince Vaughn.

**Conclusion**

The adult animation sub-genre is a relatively small, but important part of Netflix’s attempts to create post-broadcast original comedy programmes. A show like _BoJack Horseman_ has allowed the company to achieve a type of critical legitimation and awards success that other animated comedy shows, particularly on post-broadcast platforms, are rarely able to enjoy. The fact that this has been achieved as a result of the show’s similarities to serial television drama, with regards to both tone and narrativization, are telling in what they reveal about hierarchies of genre,

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**Sandler’s Uncut Gems** (Josh and Benny Safdie, A24/Elara Pictures, USA, 2019) was distributed by Netflix in the UK so has been included in this count.
specifically the way comedy is perceived as a genre by viewers. Certain aspects of *BoJack Horseman* also fit into wider emerging trends I’ve identified regarding other post-broadcast comedy programmes. Most notable is the show’s hyper-reflexive comedic style, where the excessive use of allusions and references to popular culture allow the viewer to not only understand the characters and their situations but also how the show is positioning itself in relation to the other content it frequently alludes to.

This type of referential and hyper-reflexive comedy is a prominent feature of *Love* and its style is a signature of the show’s co-creator and writer, Judd Apatow, as I explored in the previous chapter. In the same way broadcast television imported auteurs from the film industry to create an aura of legitimation around their shows, companies like Netflix and Amazon Video have imported both film directors and prominent broadcast television creators to post-broadcast platforms. As far as adult animated comedy is concerned, a prominent broadcast television figure like Matt Groening has been imported to create the post-broadcast show, *Disenchantment*. Currently, the next step in this evolution of the television auteur is taking place. As mentioned, Raphael Bob-Waksberg and Lisa Hanawalt, the respective creator and illustrator of *BoJack Horseman*, are now creating shows based on the success of their work on *BoJack*. The fact that Amazon’s first foray into the popular adult animation sub-genre was with Bob-Waksberg as creator suggests that he was being used to gain a type of legitimation that used to come exclusively from auteurs outside of television. Hanawalt’s illustrations being used for a second Netflix show also seem to suggest that her animation style could become synonymous with the company’s animated productions and eventually come to be recognised as part of their ‘house style’.

Authorship is also present in my second case study, *F is For Family*, but this time is related to the stand-up comedy of its creator, Bill Burr. The idea of the comedy auteur as a presence which exists elsewhere on the platform is relevant to *F is For Family* as well as several other stand-up comedians and performers mentioned elsewhere in this thesis. This allows the company to measure the popularity of certain performers and create shows which are specifically tailored to
certain types of viewer, relating once more to the idea of post-broadcast comedies often being high concept comedy programmes. It also means that viewers may come to perceive Netflix as a place where certain comedians exist, with the most famous comedy example being the recent work of Adam Sandler on the platform. However, Burr also fits into this emerging trend, as do aforementioned comedy names such as Will Arnett, Seth Rogen, and John Mulaney.

*F is For Family* is also emblematic of the other Netflix original adult animation shows in the way it engages with genre traditions, namely that of the sitcom. Where *BoJack Horseman* stands alongside serial drama through its tone and narrative structure, *F is For Family* fits neatly into John Hartley’s description of the domestic and workplace sitcom. However, the show chooses to subvert many of the traditional tropes associated with gender roles and suburban life. Whilst never becoming as tonally dark as *BoJack Horseman*, the show is built around the tensions of working-class life and tells its story, like the majority of other Netflix original adult animations (Paradise PD and Neo Yokio included), with an ongoing serial narrative. This marks these post-broadcast shows as distinct from similar programmes on broadcast television such as *The Simpsons* or *South Park*, which do include minor progressions over time but generally return to a state of equilibrium by the end of each episode.

Whilst adult animation may not appear to be the genre of post-broadcast television where Netflix focus their most attention, the small number of programmes that are available to stream and the way they have been marketed by the company and subsequently received by viewers suggests the genre will continue to thrive on the platform for the foreseeable future. The similarities between the animated shows and other Netflix comedy projects create a greater and more unified impression of the aesthetic style employed in their original comedy projects and links to a variety of other issues discussed throughout this project including authorship and stand-up comedy.
Chapter Four

The Post-Broadcast Stand-Up Special

This thesis has explored post-broadcast programmes situated within a variety of different comedy sub-genres, such as the sitcom, adult animation, and comedy-drama. However, it’s the stand-up comedy special which has, without a doubt, the largest presence on Netflix based on the number of shows available. Up until very recently the amount of stand-up comedy specials being released by Netflix was growing at an exponential rate. 2012 saw the release of just one stand-up special, You People Are All the Same (Netflix, 2012), by established comedian Bill Burr. Between 2013 and 2015, there were between six and twelve specials released each year, showing a steady increase in production. Then at a rate of more than one per week, 54 specials were released in 2017 - the most since Netflix began streaming content online. 2019 was the first time the number of stand-up specials dropped since Netflix began producing them but the service still released over 40 throughout the year. The genre’s prevalence on Netflix can be explained by both the longevity of the form on television and other media, the relative cheapness of production, and the reverence held for stand-up by audiences, critics, and scholars. Ian Wilkie has described stand-up comedy as ‘arguably, one of the most fundamental forms of performed comedy.’ As a practice, it predates all other forms of televised comedy emerging from music hall and vaudeville acts in the UK and US respectively. However, writing in 2015, Wilkie comments, ‘How [stand-up comics and TV] ... can work together in the future to best mutual maximum advantage within the medium is an issue that is, perhaps, still unresolved.’ In this chapter, I will explore the various types of stand-up comedy specials available on Netflix and attempt to understand whether streaming platforms as both a production studio and a method of delivery are able to resolve some of the long-standing tensions Wilkie identifies between television and the art of stand-up comedy. The prevalence of stand-up comedy on Netflix ostensibly appears to make

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2 Ibid., p. 96.
this topic an obvious choice to begin this thesis. However, I’d argue that it is also perfectly suited to its position as a closing chapter: the topic brings together multiple threads of analysis explored in this thesis and exemplifies recurring trends that have been identified over the course of my research, whilst gesturing more broadly towards the potential futures of comedy in the age of streaming television.

Despite writing from a UK background, the majority of case studies in this chapter feature US comedians. This is in part due to their prevalence on Netflix’s streaming platform and also due to the alternative release strategies that are adopted by many UK comedians, which I will return to briefly. The history of US stand-up is worth succinctly exploring in order to understand how Netflix and the stand-up comedy material on the platform positions itself in relation to its past. In the US, stand-up originated in vaudeville and minstrel shows. Bethany Parker notes, ‘With the invention of the microphone, records, and radio, many vaudevillians transitioned into broadcast comedy during the pre-World War II years.’ A number of US performers such as Jack Benny, George Burns and Gracie Allen started in vaudeville before transitioning to radio. Burns and Allen even starred in one of the earliest televised situation comedies, The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show (CBS, 1950 – 1958), using the dynamics of their relationship which had been previously established on stage and on radio for the basis of the sitcom. The rise of the folk club and bohemian scene in the 1950s and 60s, particularly on the East and West Coasts of North America, led to the increased visibility of up-and-coming stand-up comics such as Mort Sahl and Shelley Berman. Both these comics performed regularly at the ‘hungry i’ club in San Francisco, which notably was ‘the first to have that brick wall behind the stage,’ now a design trait of innumerable stand-up clubs and parodied in more recent comedy television such as BoJack Horseman. One performer from the hungry i club was the renowned controversial comedian, Lenny Bruce, known for his vulgar act which eventually led to an obscenity trial. A number

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of similarly controversial comedians, such as George Carlin, rose to prominence during this era. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, stand-up comedy became increasingly popular and expanded out of the club and resort scene in the US to arenas and theatres, as evidenced in popular stand-up performances by Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy. Representative of the excess of stand-up in the 80s, Murphy’s *Raw* (Robert Townsend, Paramount Pictures, USA, 1987) was filmed at the Madison Square Garden complex in New York City and was given a wide theatrical release which surpassed the gross of Pryor’s own stand-up film, *Live on the Sunset Strip* (Joe Layton, Columbia Pictures, USA, 1982), from five years earlier. On television during this time, NBC’s *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975 - ) showcased new comic talent by using a sketch comedy format. Despite this, a number of the performers featured on the programme, such as John Belushi and Chevy Chase, emerged from stand-up backgrounds. Many of the more recent cast members have gone on to record stand-up comedy specials; some of these performers, Pete Davidson and Norm Macdonald among others, have original comedy specials on Netflix.\(^5\) Other popular comedians from the 80s and 90s, such as Jerry Seinfeld and Ray Romano, were known for their observational style of humour which was evident in their stand-up work as well as the television sitcoms in which they starred. Both of these comedians also star in Netflix stand-up comedy specials, that are examined later in this chapter.

The method for distributing stand-up comedy specials is now predominantly focused on a digital streaming release, almost always through Netflix which is the leading digital platform for stand-up comedy material, in comparison to its competitors. Amazon’s Prime Video only started releasing original stand-up specials in 2019 and have just over 20 specials available at the time of writing. This pales in comparison to Netflix’s selection which currently stands at an impressive 225 stand-up comedy specials, without taking into account upcoming programming or stand-up ‘collections.’ Netflix also offer a larger selection of popular comedians to choose from, many of whom appear tied to the company through appearances in other

programmes or stand-up specials. On the other hand, Amazon’s roster is mainly comprised of lesser-known comedians, a number of whom, such as Chris Ramsey and Ed Gamble, are from the UK. As previously mentioned, the majority of stand-up content available on Netflix is American; however, Netflix has recently started releasing stand-up specials by a variety of international comedians from countries such as France, Spain, Sweden, and Italy. It could be argued that the distribution of US stand-up on Netflix is a continuation of the way specials debuted on the paid cable service, HBO, from the mid-70s onwards, in the sense that the material is exclusive to paying subscribers.

Writing for The Guardian in 2016, Elise Czajkowski refers to the prestige that accompanies certain types of stand-up specials. She notes that in the early 1990s, ‘many blamed the proliferation of free stand-up on television for diluting the product and discouraging people from going out to live shows.’ In contrast to the watered-down free stand-up on broadcast television, Czajkowski mentions the legitimacy offered by cable company HBO where doing regular comedy specials was for the privileged few – George Carlin’s annual HBO specials were a sign of his exalted status. For a rising comic, doing a special is a sign of arriving; “getting an hour” signals that you have some degree of talent, fame and bankability.

As evidenced in my previous chapters, Netflix has employed a number strategies similar to HBO’s in an attempt to present their service as something other than traditional broadcast television. It is therefore unsurprising that the company follows a similar, albeit accelerated, model when it comes to producing stand-up specials. In fact, many performers who had once written and performed specials for HBO, such as Norm Macdonald and Ellen DeGeneres, have now done the same for Netflix.

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7 Ibid.
8 One Night Stand (HBO, 1991).
9 Ellen DeGeneres: Here and Now (HBO, 2003).
Netflix, imbuing the platform with a further sense of legitimation through association.

Before exploring the post-broadcast stand-up special further, it is necessary to properly define what we mean by stand-up and to explore some of the relevant existing critical literature on the topic. This will extend and expand on the discussion of critical literature on television stand-up comedy in my review of literature in this thesis. In his book, *Comic Visions*, David Marc attempts to establish an authoritative definition of the term ‘stand-up comedy’. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers no definition of the term at all and Marc finds that the *Oxford American Dictionary*’s description of a comedian ‘performing (often while standing) alone on stage’ to be misleading and inadequate.\(^{10}\) He notes, ‘mimes, magicians, mind readers, and other assorted specialty acts do perform certain types of comedy while standing alone on a stage, [but] they are not performing stand-up comedy.’\(^{11}\) Citing Lawrence Mintz, Marc ultimately argues that the ‘absolute “directness of artist/audience communication” is the definitive feature of the art and that its primary structural element is the comic monologue, a collection of verbal jokes that may be augmented by physical gags.’\(^{12}\) Brett Mills also supports Mintz’s idea of direct artist/audience communication as the defining characteristic of stand-up comedy, writing ‘humour can be seen as a communicative act whose context is vital to its success. Stand-up comedians know this, and ... might change their routines in response to the specifics of the place of performance’.\(^{13}\) As Marc outlines in his definition, the directness of communication between artist and audience in stand-up comedy is best encapsulated by the monologue. The stand-up monologue is a collection of jokes and gags which are ‘tied together either by a common textual theme or, more often, by a series of tangential connectors called segues.’\(^{14}\) This trope will be evident in the programmes examined throughout this chapter and have remained a key feature of the stand-up comedy performance.

\(^{11}\) Ibid.
\(^{12}\) Ibid.
\(^{14}\) Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*, pp. 15 – 16.
If one of the definitive features of stand-up comedy is the directness of communication between artist and audience, then we must also consider the role of the audience within the stand-up routine. Sophie Quirk underlines some key features of a stand-up performance which also take into account the idea of direct communication between artist and audience. She writes, ‘All comedians make decisions about how to situate their work: the decision to ignore conceptual, artistic or political preferences itself reflects an ideological position. This means that the individual performer’s work cannot be understood without reference to their personal priorities and preferences.’\textsuperscript{15} This conveys the idea that to understand a performer’s work, the audience must have some understanding of their priorities and ideological position. This doesn’t necessarily have to be the ‘authentic’ personality of the performer and can very much be an understanding of the performative persona they are presenting in the stand-up act. Foregrounding the importance of the audience once more, this time specifically the diegetic audience, Quirk goes on to note how cult comedian, Josie Long, will often speak in dialogue with the audience … mirroring the procedures of everyday conversation … This overt emphasis on dialogue with events within and beyond the gig emphasizes the immediacy and novelty of the encounter: this conversation has never happened before and can never happen again.\textsuperscript{16}

Despite Quirk’s engagement with a specific comedian, Josie Long, the idea of mirroring a day-to-day conversation with the audience is evident in many of the case studies which will be discussed in this chapter and is something which creates a greater sense of intimacy and relatability between audience and performer, emphasising the necessity of a live diegetic crowd.

This becomes complicated somewhat by Ian Wilkie’s understanding of the relationship that the stand-up comedian has with their audience. Wilkie is keen to note that, ‘the concept of the dual audience pervades in televised stand-up. To try

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 225.}
to recreate the atmosphere of a live, communal experience there will usually be a studio or theatre audience present during the recording of a stand-up’s routine’ (my emphasis).\textsuperscript{17} A studio audience is traditionally used during the taping of sitcoms to respond to the actions on set. In the case of the stand-up specials discussed as case studies in this chapter, the audience are often paying theatre goers who have come out to see a stand-up comedian as part of their tour. They may have not even been aware that this particular performance was going to be filmed for a streaming release when they purchased their tickets. Wilkie also discusses the dual audience which the comedian addresses during a filmed stand up set. He states, ‘Operating in tandem with the in-situ audience, the viewer or viewers at home also watch the stand-up act but consume the comic message once removed. They are detached from the ‘live’ ‘communal’ experience’.\textsuperscript{18} The in-situ audience operates in a similar way to the sitcom audience, creating an environment in which the home audience is encouraged to laugh. Their laughter even gestures to which jokes are funnier than others and in the case of some controversial comedians, which jokes are acceptable to laugh at. Therefore, in much the same way that Quirk believes the diegetic audience are often necessary for the stand-up performer, they are also necessary for those at home, acting as a type of diegetic stand-in for those not present during the live taping.

For Marc, there is also a vulgarity inherent in stand-up; as he notes ‘the bald-faced telling of jokes in public ... has, like most mass-culture phenomena, generally been considered a vulgarity not even worthy of back-row admission to the hierarchy of forms.’\textsuperscript{19} Stand-up then, can be considered inherently subversive in the way it confronts expected taste codes and conventions of a traditional stage performance. When comedy is included in more traditional forms of expression such as the novel or the stage drama it has ‘certainly been valued and admired by critics ... [for being] “properly” presented’.\textsuperscript{20} However, in stand-up comedy, one finds a ‘refusal to respect sharp distinctions between the play world and the real

\textsuperscript{17} Wilkie, ‘Stand-Up Comedy’ in Creeber (ed.), \textit{The Television Genre Book – 3\textsuperscript{rd} Edition}, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Marc, \textit{Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture}, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 16.
world [which] results in the violation of a primary convention of Western theatre.’

I believe this perceived inherent vulgarity of the form has, over time, resulted in increased efforts to make the content being delivered more extreme, provocative, and ultimately vulgar in nature. In a 2016 Vice article, titled ‘Paul Rust took a dump on stage and I was there to see it’, writer Rick Paulas describes the witnessing a series of midnight LA comedy shows in 2006 called the ‘Dirtiest Sketch in LA Contest’. Comedians were required to perform a number of improvised dirty comedy sketches, where each comedian attempted to one-up the previous sketch, eventually resulting in Paul Rust pulling down his trousers and defecating onstage during his set. Paulas writes, ‘These were dangerous, weird, gross, disturbing, and brilliant shows ... It was offensive and dirty and disgusting, but they performed it with such dexterity and skill, it elevated it to the magic we saw that night.’

Admittedly, Rust’s onstage defecation may be one of the most extreme examples of vulgarity in performed comedy, to the extent that it may no longer classify as a stand-up performance (despite fitting Marc’s criteria of containing a physical gag).

A final key feature of stand-up comedy stems from Marc’s previously established idea of the stand-up’s refusal to respect traditional theatrical distinctions between the real world and the world of the play. Unlike their engagement with theatre or with a film and television text, during the stand-up performance ‘the audience is explicitly asked not to suspend its disbelief.’ The distinction between the persona being performed during the stand-up act and the genuine personality of the performer (which itself may incorporate elements of performance) is hazy. Marc writes,

As is the case with professional wrestlers, the mask cannot be pried loose from the face of the performer. There are no perceptible differences in the personae of any of these stand-ups when they are “speaking candidly” in interview situations, as opposed to when they are “performing.”

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21 Ibid., p. 17.
23 Marc, Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture, p. 17.
24 Ibid.
This is certainly exemplified in cases such as *Seinfeld* (explored in the first chapter), where the character of Jerry on the show reflects the stand-up career of Jerry Seinfeld in real life. *Seinfeld*'s writer, Larry David, also created *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, where David plays a grouchier version of himself which has since become associated with the real life performer. Because of this close association between the stand-up act and the performer delivering the work, there is an understanding of the stand-up comedian as inherently funny. Marc believes the stand-up comedian

addresses an audience as a naked self, eschewing the luxury of a clear-cut distinction between art and life. Good actors can be singled out of bad plays; good singers can put over bad songs. But in the case of the stand-up comedian, there is no dividing medium from message.\(^{25}\)

This chapter will explore this idea in relation to certain stand-up performers in the analysis that follows.

The aforementioned key features of stand-up comedy outlined by Marc and Quirk provide a number of useful ways to examine the post-broadcast texts explored throughout this chapter. However, they don’t account for the complete televised stand-up experience, excluding any analysis of how the stand-up set is filmed for viewers at home and how they are asked to engage with it. Marc’s discussion of the stand-up monologue and the inherent vulgarity of the form doesn’t engage specifically with a discussion of televised stand-up. In fact, the above points could be made in a more general examination of a live stand-up show or even a radio broadcast of one. However, as Wilkie has noted in his discussion of the dual audience, the way in which the material is conveyed to the television stand-up viewer actually is two-fold. By making the decision to film a stand-up performance for home viewing, the comedy is communicated by the performer but also visually by the cameras capturing the act. The way in which the stand-up act is filmed and edited, and the decisions which are made in the process, such as how long to hold a shot, how often to show the audience, and how to position the

\(^{25}\) Ibid., p. 13.
performer within the frame are made both during and after the performance. The involvement of the stand-up performer in this post-production process will most likely vary on a case-by-case basis. Perhaps unsurprisingly, critical work on the visual style of stand-up comedy specials is scarce. The sub-genre itself is rarely written about and, as evidenced in brief sections in books such as Marc’s *Comic Visions*, work on stand-up focuses on defining the genre and engaging with the history of the form and its performance. This almost always comes at the expense of a formal aesthetic analysis of the stand-up performance as a filmed text. It is the intention of this chapter to begin to rectify this gap.

However, Wilkie makes a number of excellent points which focus on the question of medium specificity, relating to the filmed stand-up special in his analysis of television stand-up comedy. As well as discussing the strange relationship between the comedian and their dual audience, Wilkie goes some way to explaining the potential proliferation of stand-up comedy specials on television. He writes, ‘For TV’s purposes … stand-ups, as solo performers, represent production costs and values that are, potentially minimal. TV commissions and churns out comedy.’26 This might also explain the large amount of stand-up comedy content that is produced by Netflix for streaming. The specials are often performances that were taking place regardless of their filming, usually filmed in a city on a single stop of a comedian’s much larger stand-up tour. Moreover, Wilkie also discusses the impact of distribution on the longevity of a stand-up show writing,

Nowadays, big-scale, terrestrially produced stand-up shows … are … made with a view to repeats on digital channels, while the commercially filmed on-tour, arena-show DVDs that feature acclaimed, big-selling stand-ups … are also subsequently shown (often repeatedly) on digital TV channels. The limited currency of jokes and the viewer’s potential over-familiarity with

routines, however, does tend to mean that a stand-up’s act, as a TV product, is not something that can necessarily bear repeated viewings.\footnote{Ibid., p. 96.}

This is one of a number of tensions that Wilkie identifies in the television stand-up text. His work emphasises the fact that a stand-up performance is a written piece of comedy, regardless of how spontaneous it may appear to be when viewing for the first time. Marc believes that watching stand-up comedy is a disarming experience because it requires the audience to suspend disbelief that what they are watching isn’t being repeated verbatim night after night. Wilkie’s comment about the limited currency of jokes and the potential over-familiarity with a comic’s routine gestures towards the idea that many viewers are in fact suspending disbelief under the pretence that what they are watching is occurring for the first time. This is supported, as Marc noted, by the ways in which the comic often specifically tailors some of their material to the cities in which they are performing. Quirk also engages with this idea and believes that one of the most important characteristics of stand-up comedy is ‘the necessity of acknowledging and responding to the performance’s context.’\footnote{Quirk, ‘What’s Special about Stand-Up Comedy? Josie Long’s Lost Treasures of the Black Heart’ in Ainsworth, Double, and Peacock (eds.), Popular Performance, p. 224.} Quirk uses the example of a comedian responding to the 2015 UK general election but this practice is also evident in many of the post-broadcast specials used throughout this chapter. Furthermore, Wilkie’s writing refers to repeats of stand-up specials on digital television channels as opposed to the ways in which they are released and engaged with on post-broadcast streaming platforms. In the UK, aforementioned broadcast channels such as Dave and Comedy Central will acquire the rights for certain specials and repeat them numerous times throughout the year to the point where they are no longer enjoyable or refreshing to watch. I believe Netflix try to counter this effect in some ways by releasing such a large amount of stand-up content that their subscribers never have to repeat watching the same specials. Megh Wright reported for Vulture that the streaming service would release 47 stand-up specials on New Year’s Day in 2019, writing ‘Netflix is kicking off 2019 by giving stand-up viewers way too many specials to handle… The specials were taped all over the world — including at the
2018 Just for Laughs comedy festival in Montreal, as well as at venues in São Paulo, Mexico City, Mumbai, Berlin, and Amsterdam — and result in a wide-ranging mix of international specials in French, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, Dutch, German, and English. As well as underlining the vast amounts of stand-up content released by the company, the fact Netflix was also releasing titles in a number of different languages from international comedians shows the company’s desire to have the stand-up comedy genre become a defining part of their worldwide image. Arguably, the lack of frequent exposure to these comedy texts keeps their enjoyability intact and they may age better in the mind of the viewer.

For the remainder of this chapter, I will explore various types of Netflix original stand-up comedy specials which are available for streaming on the platform. Some of these specials can be seen as working in a mode traditional to broadcast television, both in terms of visual style and form, and also in terms of the comedic content being delivered by the performer. Others represent a shift towards self-reflexivity and play with the form of the stand-up comedy special in similar ways to the other Netflix original comedy programming I have explored throughout this thesis. I will begin by engaging with the formal characteristics of the stand-up specials, focusing on the ways in which certain specials are filmed and how this intersects with the comedy being performed. Specifically, I will initially focus on the stand-up documentary special as an example of a formal experimentation within the stand-up comedy sub-genre. A number of stand-up specials on Netflix deviate from being merely a filmed document of a live performance and have instead started incorporating documentary footage of the performer off-stage into the special: the two key examples here are Stage Fright (Netflix, 2019) by Jenny Slate and Jerry Before Seinfeld (Netflix, 2017). It is worth noting that many of the techniques used in these specials could have been used on broadcast stand-up specials and haven’t been made possible solely as a result of Netflix or the existence of streaming services on a wider level. Instead, they offer

alternative methods of presentation which aren’t as prevalent in earlier broadcast television stand-up performances. These shifts in the style of television stand-up are indicative of Netflix’s positioning as a site of formal experimentation; on Netflix, innovative and self-reflexive ways of presenting stand-up exist in dialogue in with the form of earlier stand-up shows.

As intimated above, the addition of documentary-type material in a stand-up show isn’t completely new. Eddie Murphy’s iconic special, Eddie Murphy: Delirious (HBO, 1983) begins with a montage of fly-on-the-wall footage showing Murphy travelling with his crew on flights and preparing to perform backstage. One would assume that the moments shown to the viewer in montages such as this are unscripted. They may also be trying to compensate for the viewer at home not being physically present at the show. The viewer hasn’t had to travel anywhere in order to watch this special other than sit in front of the television. By being shown this footage, which is crucially only available to the viewer at home and not those watching in the audience at the time of recording, a sense of excitement is being created as compensation for not being present in the crowd during the taping of the show. It is also worth briefly mentioned the long history of the on-stage/off-stage dynamic in other forms of visual media such as the music documentary. Keith Beattie’s work on the rockumentary notes that ‘a master trope of the rockumentary is the distinction between onstage performers and so-called “backstage”, an area which supposedly offers unmediated glimpses of the “real” person behind the performance.’ This backstage footage, as will be discussed in relation to Jenny Slate, provides a sense of truth and authenticity that is missing from the filmed stand-up performance, offering the viewers something more than those seated in the theatre during the actual taping.

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30 There is a longer tradition of mixing the onstage space with the offstage space in UK stand-up comedy specials, particularly the work of performers such as Steve Coogan and Peter Kay. Unlike US performances, these specials are often released straight-to-DVD (or previously VHS) such as Peter Kay: Live at the Top of the Tower (UK, 2000).
In the post-broadcast stand-up special, often there will be a skit including the stand-up comedian shown before the live performance actually begins. Frequently, these will be scripted and work as a type of introduction to the television special. Once again, this skit is being filmed for the benefit of the viewer at home as, more often than not, the live audience wouldn’t be able to see it. A recent example of this is John Mulaney’s *Kid Gorgeous at Radio City* (Netflix, 2018). The special itself is a routine filmed performance with none of the documentary cutaways or voiceover work highlighted later in this section. However, the show is preceded by a very brief and obscure scripted one-minute skit. The viewer is first shown a series of establishing shots including the Empire State Building and Radio City Music Hall to create a contextual sense of place. In addition to a sense of place, the opening also provides a time frame as it is snowing and the sign outside the venue advertises that these shows were taking place during February. Actress Carole Shelley playing a character called ‘Mystery Chaperone’ interrupts Mulaney as he is getting ready in a dressing room, informing him that it’s time to start the show and the two walk through the backstage area of the venue. Mulaney stands tall over Shelley and also looks uncomfortable and out of place in the ornate setting. This is alluded to in one of his opening jokes where he tells the crowd, ‘I love to play venues where if the guy who built the venue could see me on the stage, he’d be a little bit bummed about it … This is so much nicer than what I’m about to do, it’s really tragic.’ Ostensibly, this brief scripted prologue doesn’t add anything crucial to the stand-up routine. However, for the viewer at home or the viewer who may be unfamiliar with Mulaney as a comic figure, it provides the context of a place and time, as well as gesturing towards his comic persona which sits somewhere between a social awkwardness and camp bombast.

Jen Kirkman’s *I’m Gonna Die Alone (And I Feel Fine)* (Netflix, 2015) also shows the performer preparing to go on stage and establishes this particular comedian’s persona in a similar way to Mulaney’s brief skit. Kirkman’s special is unique in what it reveals about authenticity and the role it plays in the filmed stand-up performance. The special depicts a number of comedic post-show interactions with audience members discussing the jokes she has just told onstage.
Watching the special shift in these moments from the stand-up performance back into the mode of a scripted conversation is revealing for a number of reasons; primarily, these bookending sequences highlight the unconscious assumption that parts of this special are scripted and others aren’t. This is despite the fact that almost everything in a stand-up monologue is scripted, unless the performer/s engage with improvisation as a comedic practice.\(^{32}\) The divide between these moments raises the question of how authenticity might be conveyed and/or performed in a stand-up special. There seems to be an implicit suggestion of authenticity when a comedian performs stand-up comedy; an agreement between the performer and audience members that the material they are delivering is not only reflective of their personality but also their ideology and worldview. There are obviously exceptions to this rule which can be found throughout the history of the form – Brandon Evans’ \textit{Vulture} article titled ‘Stand-Up Comedians and Their Alternate On-Stage Personas’ refers to stand-up Anthony Jeselnik who ‘is almost playing a fictional character onstage, that’s how far removed his material is from his real life’ as well as Larry the Cable Guy, the creation of comedian Daniel Lawrence Whitney, who performs stand-up in character.\(^{33}\) It should also be acknowledged that a public display of authenticity itself can be a type of performance, where one is only appearing to ‘act natural’. Comedian Nick Thune believes, ‘They refer to it as an “act” for a reason ... When I’m on stage I’m fighting to keep tens maybe hundreds of people’s attention. It’s rehearsed.’\(^{34}\) However, in the same article, comedian, actor, and popular podcaster, Marc Maron, supports these assumptions surrounding authenticity stating,

The one thing I’ve realised over the years is that I don’t really have a stage persona. I have a way of behaving onstage, but I require a sort of emotional

\(^{32}\) A recent Netflix release, \textit{Middleditch & Schwartz} (Netflix, 2020), is an example of a completely improvised comedy routine and the first of its kind on the platform.


\(^{34}\) Ibid.
engagement with my audience. There’s a liability to that in the sense that I have a certain amount of heart invested in it.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}}

It could be argued that such comments contribute even further to Maron’s construction of an authentic persona. This sense of authenticity is offset somewhat by moments from skits which, whilst undoubtedly authentic and sincere in what they convey, are coded as more performative through the recognisable acting taking place when two people are reciting lines to each other. These bookending skits also share stylistic similarities with scenes from comedy television and seem separated from the stand-up performance itself. The questions surrounding authenticity and performance which are raised by the Kirkman special and questioned by Evans’ article provide a lens through which to view Jenny Slate’s \textit{Stage Fright} and its combination of documentary footage with personal onstage revelations.

\textit{Jenny Slate, Jerry Seinfeld and the Stand-up Documentary}

Jenny Slate is an American actress and comedian, best known for her recurring role as the idiosyncratic Mona-Lisa Saperstein in the long-running sitcom, \textit{Parks and Recreation}. She has also appeared in both supporting and leading roles in a number of feature films throughout the 2010s, most notably as the main protagonist in the critically acclaimed independent comedy, \textit{Obvious Child} (Gillian Robespierre, A24, USA, 2014). \textit{Stage Fright} is her first stand-up special and was released by Netflix in October 2019 to generally positive reviews, many of which mention the special’s hybrid of live stand-up and documentary material. Rachel Syme stresses the unconventionality of the special in her piece for \textit{The New Yorker}, writing ‘\textit{Stage Fright} is not so much an hour of punch lines (though it has plenty) as it is a daffy window into Slate’s influences and anxieties and appetites, a way to show viewers exactly where she came from.’\footnote{Rachel Syme, ‘Jenny Slate’s Netflix Special is All About the Joy of Getting Dressed’, \textit{The New Yorker} (29 October 2019), https://www.newyorker.com/culture/on-and-off-the-avenue/jenny-slates-netflix-special-is-all-about-the-joy-of-getting-dressed, accessed 12 March 2020.} Writing for \textit{Vulture} Kathryn VanArendonk believes it’s ‘a kind of comedy special that … has become increasingly visible lately [and}
Stage Fright] ... define[s] what the “stand-up with some documentary insertions” genre tends to look like.37 VanArendonk gestures towards the type of framing material which is usually offered by a stand-up special, describing them as the ‘moment where the camera is with the comedian backstage right before they go on, or the bit where the camera follows them offstage at the end of the set. It’s a device that creates distance between the person and the performance.’38 In John Mulaney’s case, the framing material seems to reinforce the idea of a comedian who is uncomfortable or seems out-of-place in their surroundings. In the case of Stage Fright, the use of documentary material is crucial to understanding the performative and constructed aspects of Slate’s stand-up performance. Where the documentary footage aims to create an atmosphere of authenticity, the stand-up footage crucially demonstrates that Slate’s onstage persona is an exaggeration. This is supported by VanArendonk’s assertion that ‘Offstage material emphasizes the authenticity of the comedian ... and it underlines the fact that the act is a constructed piece of stagecraft, that there is a distinction between the onstage and offstage self.’39

Slate’s stand-up special has a variety of framing material, all of which informs the comedic material delivered during the stand-up set. The special begins with home video footage of a young Slate at a violin recital performing in front of an off-screen audience. This is then immediately contrasted with contemporary footage of Slate’s onstage entrance in front of her stand-up audience. Following a short introductory monologue, the special shifts from being merely a filmed record of a live performance to documentary footage which was also filmed around the time of the performance to integrate into the special. Slate allows cameras into her family home to record a number of interactions between herself and her immediate family. In these segments, Slate and her family often refer to the cameras being present and often address them when speaking by looking down the

38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
lens. We are shown microphones being placed on her parents’ clothes, as well as Slate introducing her two sisters to the camera. This all emphasises the constructed nature of the documentary filming. Despite this, the sense of awkwardness and artificiality surrounding the context of these family ‘interviews’ ultimately provides a sense of authenticity. In many ways, it would be strange if the family acted as if it were completely normal for them to be recorded having conversations in their childhood home.

The authenticity displayed in the documentary sequences is offset by the extremely high energy performance delivered by Slate on stage. Her comedic style is sometimes confessional, beginning jokes with phrases such as ‘I wasn’t going to say this, but…’, which adds to the sense of intimacy created between performer and audience. Despite this, the joke which follows is often bizarre and unconventional, such as Slate’s observation that she’s performing in a room full of skin-covered skeletons, followed by her impression of what it would look like when skeletons laugh. In a number of cases, Slate’s energetic recounting of stories from her childhood are placed alongside documentary style footage which deals with the same story or subject matter in a more serious fashion. One such moment occurs when Slate announces her childhood home was haunted. On stage, she does this by saying, ‘Well, I don’t know if you can tell by the fact that my entire personality is basically like… [screaming and startled noises] … uhm, I was raised in a haunted house.’ This is met with laughter from the audience, which begins when Slate starts to jump around the stage pretending to be scared. This part of the routine involves her comical recounting of walking into the laundry room in the middle of the day and finding a young boy in short pants with blood on his stomach asking ‘Did I miss the picnic, Nanny? Have they served the ice cream?’ Slate lowers her head and purses her lips to impersonate the child’s expressions as well as mimicking his voice during this segment which generates substantial amounts of laughter from the audience. Directly following this moment, the special shifts to documentary footage of a camera gliding through Slate’s empty childhood home as an echo effect reverberates on the soundtrack. The house is lit solely by a natural grey, winter light seeping in through the windows which, when combined with the desolate
space and the soundtrack, creates an eerie atmosphere completely at odds with the stand-up comedy which preceded it. We then hear the voice of Slate’s father placed over the footage, recounting the first time he saw the ‘a shape, floating up the stairs’ in the house. It then becomes apparent that this is part of an interview between Slate and her father and the special assumes a talking head documentary aesthetic. The discussion is serious and contemplative with Slate ruminating on the effect the house had on her as a child. This approach to a stand-up special adds a greater sense of self-reflexivity and explores the psychology of the comedian, allowing the excessive performativity of the stand-up act to be complemented by the very raw and intimate documentary footage.

Jerry Before Seinfeld is another example of the stand-up special and documentary hybrid which has become increasingly popular in recent years. The special was released the same year that Netflix acquired the streaming rights to Seinfeld’s popular web series, Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee. As mentioned in my first chapter on revived programming, the streaming service released all existing episodes of Comedians in Cars simultaneously on their platform before beginning production on new episodes from 2018 onwards. Therefore, the release of Jerry Before Seinfeld in the midst of the company’s acquisition of Comedians in Cars can be seen as an example of Netflix creating what I have described as high concept comedy programming and attempting to establish Seinfeld as a ‘Netflix star’. This isn’t to say Seinfeld wasn’t a star before his arrival on Netflix; on the contrary, his success in both the stand-up comedy and the sitcom world from the 1990s onwards is the primary reason for Netflix to commission new material featuring the star. Rather, now he is appearing in multiple types of content available exclusively on Netflix, the company are able to create an association between Seinfeld and the streaming platform in the minds of the viewer. As previously mentioned, this trend is evident in comedy films and television with actors such as Adam Sandler and Will Arnett. For example, Arnett has starred in a number of shows which are either Netflix originals such as BoJack Horseman and Flaked, or which have been acquired and subsequently revived by the company, such as Arrested Development. In addition to actors, there are now a number of stand-up comedians who could be
described as ‘Netflix stars’, such as Seinfeld and Aziz Ansari, who appear in a variety of stand-up material on the platform, as well as sometimes moving towards scripted narrative material.

Interestingly, when Seinfeld began starring in material for Netflix in 2017, the star’s most popular and recognisable show, *Seinfeld*, was not available to stream on the platform. Throughout the latter half of the 2010s, the show has been available to stream on Amazon Prime and All4 as well as being available to buy digitally and physically in a traditional DVD format. In September 2019, Stephen Battaglio, writing for the *LA Times*, reported that Netflix had acquired the global streaming rights for *Seinfeld*, to take effect from 2021 for a five-year period. Battaglio frames this acquisition by Netflix as the company firing ‘back in the battle for popular network sitcoms’ in reference to the millions of dollars spent by Warner and NBC to win the streaming rights to sitcoms such as *Friends* and *The Office* for their respective forthcoming streaming platforms. Battaglio also notes the significance of a number of Seinfeld’s projects also being available through the streaming platform, writing, ‘Netflix is already the streaming home for Seinfeld’s current series, “Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee,” and his stand-up comedy specials. The relationship was not a determining factor in “Seinfeld” going to the service, sources said.’ In spite of this, Seinfeld will undoubtedly have a large presence on Netflix from 2021 onwards, especially if they continue to produce new episodes of *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee* alongside the addition of *Seinfeld* and his existing stand-up specials and documentaries. The company are undoubtedly aware of the legitimisation a comedian like Seinfeld brings to the Netflix name and are said to have been ‘particularly aggressive in pursuing [the property].’ Since the release of *Jerry Before Seinfeld*, Netflix have since released another stand-up special from the comedian, *23 Hours to Kill* (Netflix, 2020), in May of 2020.

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41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
Jerry Before Seinfeld is introduced as a comedy special in the same way as Jenny Slate’s special, but it is apparent from the outset that it will also be incorporating documentary and archive material. This makes it distinct from other aforementioned specials like John Mulaney’s Kid Gorgeous at Radio City, which includes an opening scripted skit but is otherwise simply a filmed document of Mulaney’s show at New York’s Radio City Music Hall. Both Slate and Seinfeld’s specials include documentary footage periodically throughout the show whereas Mulaney’s introductory moment (or the footage at the start of Eddie Murphy: Delirious) is a one-off and is merely used to introduce the show. Seinfeld’s special begins with the date ‘May 6th, 1981 – 12:10am’ written over a black background, followed by Seinfeld being introduced for his first stand-up television appearance by Johnny Carson. The viewer is then shown a series of archival photographs and video footage from this era accompanied by a present-day Seinfeld narrating and informing the viewer about his decision to become a stand-up comedian. Within the archival video material is a piece of footage showing the famous New York City comedy club, ‘The Comic Strip’ (or ‘Comic Strip Live’). This is followed by a dissolve transition which then shows the club in the present day with a number of guests waiting outside including famous comedian and actor, George Wallace. We have now been moved from the early 80s to what we understand as the night of the show which will go on to form the rest of the stand-up special. Similar to both Mulaney and Slate’s specials, the viewer is given access to the comedian moments before they go on stage. In this case, Seinfeld has to walk from the back of the room through the crowd to get onstage, most likely as a result of the small venue size meaning there is no dressing room.

Seinfeld makes a point of stressing that ‘The Comic Strip’ is the club where he started his comedy career and uses the following hour to tell a roughly chronological story of his childhood through to his starring role on one of most popular sitcoms of the 80s and 90s. For the people in the room, this is certainly a stand-up performance, as they have no access to the documentary footage or voiceover which the viewer at home is privy to and which will often interrupt the stand-up show throughout the special. When discussing his childhood move from
New York City to Long Island during the opening of the show, he uses his trademark observational humour to comment on the absurdity of how one lives in a city but on an island. This is then extended to trains which aren’t gotten in but gotten on, and then shifted to a present-day context when he notes that a person takes an Uber rather than getting in one or on one. Writing for The Hollywood Reporter, Keith Uhlich notes how ‘It makes sense that a comic best known for starring on a television series about "nothing" would begin his set with a semantic argument about the proper usages of "in" and "on."’ This type of comedy is Seinfeld’s stock-in-trade in much the same way that Norm Macdonald is known for his frequent use of non-sequiturs or Jon Stewart for his political satire. What is particularly interesting in this special is how he is able to use this observational comedy to tell his story from childhood onwards. One could imagine a typical Seinfeld joke of this nature beginning with ‘What’s the deal with Ubers?’ but it is instead woven into a much larger story beginning with his childhood move to Long Island.

Seinfeld’s voiceover throughout some of the documentary portions makes the special distinct from Slate’s. Both include documentary and archival footage but their approach and style are very different. Seinfeld’s special maintains a consistent, easy-going tone throughout but Slate’s shifts in mood between the stand-up and documentary segments. Whereas Slate’s feels spontaneous and intimate, capturing interactions between family members in the old family home, Seinfeld’s is more orchestrated. One moment features the comedian sat on an empty street surrounded by hundreds of written pages of his old jokes. The show is in fact so preoccupied with the past that a number of Seinfeld’s jokes from the special are ones which he has told earlier in his career. Seinfeld makes a point of informing the audience about some of these old jokes, letting them know in advance that he’s going to tell the first joke he ever performed in front of an audience. After the audience laughter subsides following a joke about a rollercoaster being installed in the Bronx, Seinfeld proclaims, ‘And that was my second joke that I ever thought of.’ In some cases, they are jokes which you can

find in the opening season of *Seinfeld*, during the stand-up segments of the sitcom’s episodes. One such ‘bit’ is a joke about a lost sock in the laundry which Dennis Perkins of *The AV Club* refers to in an article titled ‘The greatest hits collection: *Jerry Before Seinfeld* gives the people what they want.’\(^{45}\) Perkins writes,

> [He] does the lost sock bit ... the parakeet flying into his own reflection bit, the “dogs are always glad to see you” bit, and any number of the routines viewers will recognize from the comedy veteran’s long career (or the stand-up bits from ever-rerunning *Seinfeld* episodes).\(^{46}\)

This joke, where Seinfeld suggests our items of clothing are sentient (not unlike the toys from *Toy Story* [John Lasseter, Walt Disney Pictures/Pixar Animation Studios, USA, 1995]) and purposefully choose to hide from us in an attempt to escape, has been a part of his routine for over two decades and can also be found in the first episode of *Seinfeld*’s first season, ‘The Seinfeld Chronicles’. Seinfeld’s telling of the joke, both in his mannerisms and vocal inflections, as well as in the type of venue it’s being told in, is strikingly similar to its delivery in the episode of *Seinfeld*. For example, when Jerry suggests that socks hide on the side walls of washing machines in order to escape, he stands straight with his side to the audience and begins conspicuously peering to his left, mimicking the actions of the sock being caught (Fig. 48). Seinfeld can be seen performing the same action in the episode of his sitcom, emphasising the rehearsed nature of the joke and also gesturing towards its longevity (Fig. 49).

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\(^{46}\) Ibid.
The repetition of jokes might be tiresome for some long-term Seinfeld fans. Despite this, Perkins writes ‘...hearing Jerry Seinfeld crank out stream-worn, meticulously fashioned bits about NYC street sweepers, sports fandom as “rooting for laundry,” or being bored into catatonia as a child at the bank, while not revelatory, is undeniably fun.’\textsuperscript{47} Moreover, when they are placed within the context of this special alongside the documentary material, they become revived and recontextualised within the larger story of the comedian’s formative years. The arrival of \textit{Seinfeld} in 2021 will also arguably strengthen the content in this special in the same way that paratextual materials such as DVD special features often serve to enhance the viewing experience of the main feature. Whilst the content

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
delivered by Seinfeld in this special is purposefully playing on a nostalgia for the fans of his sitcom, the documentary portions of the special demonstrate Seinfeld’s reflective attitude at this stage of his career, as well as Netflix’s self-reflexivity when engaging with established forms such as the stand-up special.

Alternative Experiments: Ray Romano and Demetri Martin

If the documentary portions of the aforementioned Netflix original titles seem relatively removed from the actual stand-up performance within the special, Ray Romano’s *Right Here, Around the Corner* (Netflix, 2019) provides an alternative approach to the format. Romano’s special also shows the performer experimenting with and exploring the possibilities of the stage space. *Right Here, Around the Corner* (Netflix, 2019) is bookended by brief documentary footage as well as containing a short break between the two sets performed in the special. The show also explores the possibility of how a performer might utilise two stage spaces in a single location: New York City. Romano performs his first set in the Comedy Cellar before walking around the corner to perform at the former Village Underground, which he explains is now owned by the Comedy Cellar. The special is directed by comic actor and director, Michael Showalter, who also directed Romano in the 2017 comedy-drama *The Big Sick* (Ray Romano, Amazon Studios/Lionsgate, USA, 2017). Showalter himself also stars in one of Netflix’s revived comedy series, *Wet Hot American Summer: First Day of Camp*, and has more recently directed the action comedy, *The Lovebirds* (Michael Showalter, Netflix, USA, 2020), which was sold to and released by Netflix as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic. This continues the tradition of Netflix having a revolving-door of comedy content creators on their payroll, of which Showalter is now a part. In a similar way to the documentary material which complements Jenny Slate’s stand-up comedy, the moments between Romano’s sets are filmed for the benefit of the Netflix viewer rather than the crowd huddled in the Comedy Cellar watching the show live. Moreover, the two different crowds which Romano performs to in this special are most likely unaware that the comedian is about to go to, or has just come from, another stand-up club to perform a different set.
The special is consistently keen to stress the pressure of Romano successfully performing two unannounced back-to-back shows, constructing the sense of this being an unusual and innovative experimental type of comedy performance, in the same way the documentary footage and the show’s use of real time underlines Netflix as a platform committed to taking unique approaches to established forms of comedy. The opening shot of Romano walking along a bustling New York City street includes the information, ‘Greenwich Village, NYC – Friday 8pm’. Romano, speaking to the camera whilst walking on foot to the venue, mentions that it has been 23 years since his last stand-up comedy special and 32 years since he first performed at the Comedy Cellar. Time is then frequently referred to throughout the rest of the special. Upon arriving at the Comedy Cellar Romano asks an employee how much time he has before going onstage, eventually sitting and waiting for his turn at a table reserved for comic performers. He then checks his watch again after leaving the venue and points out that he has 8 minutes to make it to the Village Underground for his next slot. Whilst his journey between venues isn’t filmed in a single unbroken take which would have certainly stressed the real-time nature of the performance, it cuts back-and-forth between angles from two cameras and doesn’t appear to be breaking from the special’s established use of real time. The frenetic jazz music used in the special as Romano walks from one venue to the other also adds to the sense of this being a fast-paced, risky stand-up performance in terms of its design. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Romano’s comedy material isn’t particularly risqué, revolving around a number of topics and themes such as marriage, ageing, and family life, which were explored on his long-running sitcom, *Everybody Loves Raymond*.

Despite the element of risk being missing from his stand-up material, it is sustained throughout the special by the fact that these are unannounced, drop-in sets. This means that, rather than performing to paying customers or fans, Romano is telling jokes to an audience that may dislike him or be unfamiliar with his work. This, along with the unusual format of the performance, is underlined in a number of articles written about the special. John-Michael Bond, in a review for *Paste Magazine*, writes ‘Forgoing an hour in a massive theater, *Right Here* finds Romano
doing two drop-in sets at New York’s Comedy Cellar and Village Underground. Rather than fans, each audience is made up of whoever was at the shows that night. Romano discusses the difference between his own fans and a regular crowd in an interview he gave to Entertainment Weekly whilst promoting the special, commenting,

There’s something about doing a show when you’re announcing it and you’re in a theater, so everybody coming is a Ray Romano fan. I’m not taking anything away from that, but it just didn’t appeal to me to have tried-and-true Romano fans hooting and hollering at everything you say. I love those fans, but there’s something about going on unannounced.

In choosing to acknowledge this, Romano shines a light on the fact that a lot of the ways we interact with stand-up is through celebrity. Certain things will be funny simply because they come from people who the audience assume to have some knowledge of. This returns to the idea of an authentic self being portrayed on stage by the comedian, linking with my observations regarding Kirkman and Slate’s specials. In a different interview for Vanity Fair, Romano also expands on the process of filming the special and being able to maintain a sense of risk and excitement - "The audience, 100 percent, did not know I was going on. We set a time for me to come in, so it wasn’t like I just walked in off the street ... We had cameras set up and everything, but the audience was told that the Cellar was just filming a promo." Derek Lawrence, the interviewer for Entertainment Weekly, even mentions the experimental nature of the stand-up special in one of his questions, stating, ‘You bring up the structure of the special, there’s so much comedy out there right now — a lot of it thanks to Netflix — but this is something

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I’ve never seen in a special.’51 Romano doesn’t acknowledge the reference to Netflix in the interview and as I stated earlier, this type of experiment could have been executed without the existence of streaming services. However, there is a continuing sense that the sheer amount of stand-up comedy commissioned and produced by companies like Netflix necessitates a wider variety of these stand-up experiments to take place.

In addition to its documentary footage, Romano’s special is experimental in that the diegetic audience of each show would be oblivious to the show’s central ‘gimmick’ during the performance. He thanks the crowd after the first set for being ‘one half’ of his Netflix special but they still most likely would have been unaware of his plan to film two different sets on the same night at venues within walking distance of each other. Demetri Martin is another example of a stand-up comedian whose Netflix special incorporates a type of idiosyncratic experimentation that the diegetic audience would have definitely been unaware of during filming. However, rather than this coming from documentary footage filmed around the time of the show’s release, or in the case of Romano, directly before and after the set, Martin’s comedic experiment comes in the form of a non-diegetic neurotic voiceover monologue delivered by the performer. This monologue constantly reflects on his set in real time, hence the special’s title: The Overthinker (Netflix, 2018). The self-aware promotional trailer Netflix released for the special can be viewed as a teaser for Martin’s comedic style and rather than including any moments from the actual stand-up special, could be viewed as an experiment in itself. An establishing shot depicts a Netflix office building before cutting to Martin in an empty conference room on the phone to his partner. He tells her ‘I just pitched them all my ideas for the promo’ and complains that they may not be fully understanding his concepts. Martin suggests he might draw a bunch of diagrams to better explain some of his concepts for the trailer. A series of rough, quirky, and idiosyncratic drawings are then used to convey his numerous promotional ideas. For example, one sketch depicts Martin floating on a raft down a physical stream to promote the show in

an attempt to emphasise the fact that his special will be a streaming exclusive. Following these elaborate cartoons, his partner tells him ‘If you don’t decide on something, you’re going to run out of time.’ Martin begins to respond, saying, ‘Ok, first of all…’ before all image and audio abruptly disappears and the trailer cuts to black before ending. For those watching the trailer who are unfamiliar with Martin’s style of humour, The Overthinker proves to be a particularly apt title. In addition to the diagrams used in the trailer, Martin also uses a number of comical pictures and diagrams he has drawn during his stage performances, which are presented on an easel for the audience to see. The concept of using diagrams and graphs as props during a stand-up performance may seem idiosyncratic and reflects Martin’s neurotic comedic style.

As well as using drawings as a physical comedic prop during Martin’s stand-up show, a number of formal experiments are still evident in the special, providing further examples of the types of ways comedians are able to experiment with the textual qualities of the stand-up special format. The special begins in medias res with the sound of Martin concluding a joke and the audience laughing over a black screen. After telling his first proper joke, the diegetic sound of the room lowers in the mix and a voiceover by Martin introduces the show. Even though the audio was almost certainly recorded after the show, the voiceover is meant to reflect his inner thoughts whilst onstage. For example, after telling a joke about a cupcake, Martin’s inner monologue says ‘Y’know what? I’m gonna have a cupcake after the show, definitely.’ Obviously, these moments of voiceover only benefit the viewer at home, similar to the way documentary footage is incorporated into Stage Fright and Jerry Before Seinfeld. A similar type of experiment can be found when, during Martin’s telling of certain jokes, the frame will become a split screen, featuring Martin on one side of the frame and one of his drawings on the other. For example, after telling a joke about bird-watching, the frame splits into two and a surreal drawing of Martin with his head attached to a bird’s body is briefly presented. These drawings are clearly meant to act as supplementary to the jokes being told, but are crucially not visible to the audience watching his performance in the theatre. For these particular moments, Martin is filmed at one side of the frame
with a large amount of negative space on the opposite side of the screen. This demonstrates that these supplementary pictures were planned to be included in the special and the shooting process had to be altered in order to accommodate it. It doesn’t represent an onstage experiment from the perspective of the audience, but requires a different style of shooting for the production team during the filming of the show.

During another joke, the words ‘(Based on a true story)’ appear at the bottom of the screen for a brief moment, drawing attention to the fact that a large number of anecdotal stories told by stand-up comedians are fabricated or exaggerated for the benefit of the audience. The most elaborate type of formal experiment to occur during the special is the moment when three boxes appear on the right side of the frame as Martin finishes a joke, with each box featuring a clip the viewer hasn’t yet seen from the special. In one box, Martin is shown playing guitar on stage and in another he is jumping around the stage humping the microphone stand (Fig. 50).

The monologue asks, ‘Which bit should I do next?’ before choosing the clip of Martin playing guitar. The voiceover says ‘that one’ and the box expands and shows the bit. These are all moments of formal experimentation based on the way they change the visual style of the special by repeatedly framing Martin off-centre and are not evident to the audience watching the show in the theatre. They are formally distinct amidst the typical visual aesthetic of a stand-up comedy special,
but their proximity to the stand-up performance, occurring in the midst of the performance and in the same space, mean they can be considered a slight variation on the somewhat disconnected documentary-style footage employed in specials like *Stage Fright*. It is also worth noting the similarity of this image to a DVD menu or a streaming interface. Once more, the layout suggests a scenario in which the viewer has more control than they would have during a broadcast programme. It also harkens back to the way in which the fourth season of *Arrested Development* mirrored the platform’s interface by using a then-and-now timeline at the bottom of the screen when skipping between past and present events.

Shifting even further away from this non-diegetic experimentation, Martin is known to use a number of drawings and graphs during his performance which can qualify as a type of onstage experiment. Following a round of applause at the end of a joke, his inner monologue says, ‘Maybe I’ll do the drawings now’ before a wipe edit cuts to a moment, presumably later in the performance, where an easel has been brought on stage to display a number of large papers. One of the drawings is of a ‘P-shirt’, which Martin has decided is the perfect type of shirt fit for someone who likes standing with one hand on their hip. When this picture is shown to the audience, writing appears at the bottom of the screen stating, ‘Patent Pending’, once again using non-diegetic jokes to augment the comedy occurring within the performance. As Martin continues showing various drawings to the audience, the voiceover reappears and asks ‘I wonder what the drawings look like from the balcony?’ At this moment, the camera cuts from a medium close-up of Martin performing to a high-angle wide shot filmed from the balcony which shows the stage from afar. From such a distance, Martin’s drawings aren’t properly visible, meaning only those sat nearer the front of the theatre would be able to benefit from his jokes. The use of voiceover asking this question draws attention to the dual spectatorship which occurs when watching a stand-up special. The audience in the theatre are not aware that they are part of a formally experimental non-diegetic joke. Moreover, Martin’s voiceover in this moment makes the viewers at home aware that they are in a somewhat privileged position to appreciate the gag. The self-aware style on display here is endemic of Netflix’s original comedy output.
on a whole. However, the ways in which the aforementioned specials prompt the viewer to consider their role in relation to this material makes the stand-up sub-genre perhaps the most explicit example of reflexivity on the entire platform.

It is important to stress that Martin’s on-stage experimentation is not the most unusual case of this in a Netflix stand-up special. In 2018, Fred Armisen, best known for his work as a long-standing cast member on Saturday Night Live, released Stand-up For Drummers (Netflix, 2018). This stand-up special is uncharacteristically rated a certificate U, meaning suitable for all, and features a set consisting of incredibly niche drummer-specific jokes which are performed behind a series of drum kits assembled in a row on the stage and throughout the centre of the venue’s stalls. Once again, the use of music in a comedy act is by no means an innovative experiment. In the UK, popular comedian Lee Evans often ended his sets with an extravagant musical number performed on piano. Decades earlier, abstract US comedian and performance artist, Andy Kaufman, would appear onstage in character as ‘Foreign Man’ and proceed to play a recording of the theme from the Mighty Mouse (CBS, 1955 – 1967) cartoon on a gramophone. Kaufman would stand still and silent for the majority of the song, before becoming suddenly animated when lip-syncing the single line, ‘Here I come to save the day!’ This musical sketch was featured in the first ever episode of Saturday Night Live. Armisen’s special is wholly focused on music, similar to comic sets by UK comedian Bill Bailey, but to the extent where the layout of the stage and the physical distance between performer and audience are affected as a result (Fig. 51). However, this type of
special is an outlier and is not representative of more traditional forms of stand-up comedy.

(Fig. 51 - Fred Armisen: Stand-up For Drummers)

**Hannah Gadsby, Dave Chappelle, and the Future of Stand-Up Comedy**

The final part of this chapter will be concerned with two comedy performances which received a considerable amount of critical and journalistic interest upon their respective releases: Hannah Gadsby’s *Nanette* and Dave Chappelle’s *8:46* (Netflix, 2020). Both shows can be considered examples of stand-up comedy lacking in comedy. It should be noted that this isn’t a failure on the part of the comedian; the performances are able to successfully achieve their intended tone and convey their message. Furthermore, this type of comedy shouldn’t be confused with anti-humour, where the comedic material is often intentionally unfunny and absurdly anticlimactic, to the point where it becomes ironically humorous. Instead, both shows involve comedy in some way, but ultimately serve a greater purpose in the minds of their writers/performers. This often comes at the expense of laughter from their audience. This concluding section also provides the opportunity to discuss one of Netflix’s most celebrated stand-up shows in *Nanette*, and to consider

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52 It is worth noting that since this chapter was written, Chappelle has become an increasingly controversial figure due to his comments regarding the transgender community in the comedy special, *The Closer* (Netflix, 2021). Hannah Gadsby responded negatively to Netflix’s continued support for Chappelle following its release. Their pairing here is coincidental and their respective comedic approaches outlined in this chapter are not meant to be read in opposition to each other. The reasons for the continued success of notably male comedians (Ricky Gervais is another) including transphobic material in their Netflix stand-up sets is an area which requires further consideration and academic study outside this thesis.
the future of stand-up by focusing on Chapelle’s 8:46. Both shows are concerned with the nature of stand-up comedy to some degree and demonstrate the self-reflexive qualities which I’ve recognised in numerous Netflix stand-up specials and, on a wider level, the service’s original comedy television.

Gadsby’s Nanette was the first stand-up special from the comedian to be released on Netflix. The show had been toured across Australia as well as being performed at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2017 but it is the filmed version of her performance which brought the comedian international recognition and acclaim. As well a winning a Peabody award and an Emmy for ‘Outstanding Writing for a Variety Special’, the special was discussed in both popular periodicals and academic journals. What is most striking about the special, and what has been noted by a number of pieces written about the show, as well as Gadsby herself, is the way it reflects on the art of stand-up and the mechanisms of comedy, before ultimately moving away from a comedic register altogether. According to Sarah Balkin, Nanette is ‘a comedy show that refuses, for long stretches, to be funny.’ In her follow-up to Nanette, Douglas (Netflix, 2020), Gadsby asks the audience members why they would even come to see her new comedy show having seen her previous special, stating she’s ‘fresh out of trauma’. All of which isn’t to say that Nanette fails at being funny. On the contrary, throughout the first half of the special, Gadsby makes frequent use of what she identifies as the ‘two parts’ to a joke – first, a building of tension, followed by a punchline which diffuses it. One example of this is when Gadsby says, ‘I wouldn’t want to be a straight white man. Not if you paid me.’ Following a beat, she adds, ‘Although the pay would be substantially better,’ which is met by laughter and applause by the audience. This is a verbal joke of the type outlined by Carroll earlier in this thesis where the audience has to make the punchline comprehensible following its delivery. In this instance, by understanding Gadsby’s observation and critique of the gender pay gap. The first part of the joke is

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53 Rebecca Krefting (2019), Yue Wang (2020), and Mary Luckhurst (2020) are just a few of the names to have published academic journal articles on Nanette. Melena Ryzik’s (2018) New York Times article further demonstrates the show’s cultural impact.

delivered seriously and even following the punchline, there’s no doubt that she remains serious in her assertions. Gadsby’s material is very personal and the special begins with a series of anecdotes regarding her sexuality, her hometown, and her family which all include this build-up and subsequent release of tension through the use of deadpan remarks, witty observations and occasional puns.

There is a shift around 15 minutes into the special when Gadsby talks about how she believes any woman not laughing at a man is assumed to be a lesbian. During this bit, Gadsby assumes a mock male voice and rhetorically asks in a condescending tone, ‘Why aren’t you laughing? What are you, a lesbian?’ before uttering a deadpan ‘Classic’ with raised eyebrows. As the audience laugh, she continues her impersonation saying ‘You gotta lighten up, learn to take a joke’ before taking it to the extreme and stating ‘I’ll tell you what you need, a good dicking.’ As Gadsby continues with this impression, each comment gets fewer laughs as it becomes increasingly evident that the same type of self-deprecating humour which was framed as amusing beforehand is ultimately problematic and unfunny. This section concludes with Gadsby changing the tone of her voice (and the tone of the performance) by stating ‘I do think I have to quit comedy though.’ This assertion is met with total silence from the crowd and is repeated throughout the rest of the show. However, in this instance its seriousness is undercut somewhat by Gadsby’s acknowledgement that the stand-up stage probably isn’t the best forum to make this type of declaration.

Following this, Gadsby declares that she has built a career out of self-deprecating comedy and feels like she can no longer continue doing it. Rebecca Krefting also notes Gadsby’s use of self-deprecation in her article, ‘Hannah Gadsby: On the Limits of Satire’ writing, ‘Her satiric critique of representations of gay culture and expectations within the lesbian community as well as much of her satire throughout her career has been couched in self-deprecatory humor.’ Rather than elicit any laughter, her show now generates applause from the audience. She articulates her belief that stories have three parts: a beginning, middle, and end.

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However, for Gadsby, jokes only have two parts: a beginning and a middle. Throughout her comedy career, Gadsby has frozen painful and traumatic experiences (such as her coming-out story) at their trauma point and through repetition, she has been stuck at the punchline moment for years and now needs to tell her story properly. Gadsby’s comments regarding the structure of jokes as well as her reflections on the insincerity and potential harmful effects of the stand-up comedy form demonstrates a self-reflexivity which Netflix appears keen to foreground in their original comedy programming on a wider level. The majority of their original comedy content exists in dialogue with previously established broadcast forms of comedy television, often commenting on or subverting these known forms, through their aesthetics. In the case of Gadsby’s work, she is literally deconstructing and critiquing the stand-up process and the construction of a joke within the special. Gadsby takes this further in Douglas, which not only uses its opening section to comment on the reception of Nanette, but then continues to outline the structure of the show in quite specific detail so the audience can ‘adjust their expectations’. Gadsby begins by saying she’ll kick things off with some observational comedy, and reveals a number of punchlines for forthcoming jokes (such as the mention that disgraced comedian Louis C.K. will feature as a punchline). When these punchlines are then repeated later in the show, their comedic value is compounded by the knowledge that this was set up by Gadsby earlier in the show. This meta joke-telling technique isn’t entirely new in comedy and is present in a number of other Netflix original stand-up specials. However, Gadsby takes the self-reflexivity of her comedy further here and goes on to explain that the set-up of C.K.’s name in this introductory section will ultimately increase the audience’s laughter later on in the set when it is eventually deployed (as the final joke, no less).

56 In his Netflix special, Equanimity (Netflix, 2017), Dave Chappelle tells the audience that he’s set himself the challenge of ending a joke from the set with the seemingly impossible punchline, ‘Then I kicked her in the pussy’, which is then used twice in the special. The first use of the punchline is somewhat expected but the second, occurring during the final gag, generates genuine surprise as the audience and viewer naturally assume that the joke is finished.
During Gadsby’s monologue discussing her issues with stand-up comedy, the long shots from the back of the venue show the audience sitting in complete stillness and silence. It is worth noting the visual style of the special in these moments. Rather than frame the comedian from the waist up for a large portion of the show (with a number of cutaway shots to the crowd), as is typical of all of my aforementioned case studies, this special often frames Gadsby in medium close-ups or close-ups while she speaks. Part of this may be related to the fact that she doesn’t move around the stage as frequently as Demetri Martin or employ bodily gestures as wildly and unpredictably as Jenny Slate. There are also no props or on-stage experiments which would require large amounts of movement, unlike Fred Armisen’s *Stand-up For Drummers*. Instead, Gadsby stands still for the most part, in the centre of the stage behind a microphone, leading to an increase in medium-close ups. The closeness to Gadsby’s face also makes the serious parts of the show resonate more effectively. Sometimes, when Gadsby reaches a poignant moment in her monologue, the camera slowly zooms in until the framing shifts from a medium-close up to a close-up. The close-up framing of Gadsby’s face is also particularly suited to her comedic style which often deploys irony, deadpan humour, and sarcasm. As well as being conveyed by the inflection and tone of her voice, these modes of address are also captured through subtle facial expressions which the camera wouldn’t necessarily capture to an adequate level if the special filmed Gadsby from a greater distance.

As the set continues, Gadsby’s intensity and anger increases. She holds comedians to account for making Monica Lewinsky the punchline of the Bill Clinton scandal, and goes on to suggest that this sort of behaviour enables a continued misogyny which led in part to the election of Donald Trump as US President. In response to the sustained silence in the room at this point, Gadsby laughs, saying ‘Look, I am angry, I apologise’, which diffuses the tension somewhat. However, this comment isn’t in the same vein as her earlier joke about the gender pay gap, but instead serves as an affirmation of her anger. Demonstrating her self-reflexive mode once more, Gadsby comments that she may have lost control of the tension generated thus far by breaking from her monologue with this aside. The set
culminates with Gadsby returning to a story she told earlier in the show about a man who threatened her with homophobic language. Whilst the situation isn’t amusing in the slightest, Gadsby took a somewhat comedic approach to the telling of the story earlier in the show. However, when returning to this story at the end of the special, Gadsby confesses that she didn’t initially recount the full story because in reality it ended with her getting beaten up. She then goes on to reveal that she was abused as a child and raped in her early 20s, all of which is met with complete silence from the audience. Gadsby stresses her refusal to diffuse the tension she has created at this point in the show and instead wants to let the audience live with it. On this latter portion of the show, Krefting notes, ‘Gadsby is angry and not performing in the service of comedy. She intentionally illustrates the power of this emotion by introducing tension in the form of anger and then refusing to assuage it so as not to render sexism or homophobia laughable.’

Reflecting on Nanette in 2020, Balkin states, ‘Gadsby’s show contributed to and benefited from a moment of special cultural attunement to the relationship between a performer’s actions and their work, and our responsibilities as audiences to that work.’ Balkin is referring to the traction of the international #MeToo movement which started with the sexual assault allegations against film producer Harvey Weinstein. Dave Chapelle’s 8:46 is part of a similar cultural moment, combining personal material with the discourse surrounding one of the year’s biggest news stories: the murder of George Floyd. On June 12th 2020, Netflix published 8:46 on their YouTube channel, Netflix Is a Joke, with no prior announcement. The YouTube channel usually features an assortment of trailers, behind-the-scenes footage, and clips from Netflix original comedy films, television shows, and stand-up specials. Its purpose is to promote comedy content available to stream for users with a paid Netflix subscription. The paratextual content available on YouTube is available to view for free but this is the first time a complete special had been made available to view exclusively on YouTube without requiring a Netflix subscription. Writing in 2018, Mareike Jenner notes that

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YouTube is ‘set apart from television in a number of ways, largely linked to its discursive positioning closer to social media’ and that it ‘may not be television, but it foreshadows streaming platforms’ in the ways viewers can access and have increased control over its content.\textsuperscript{59} It is particularly interesting then that 8:46 is not available to stream on the Netflix platform alongside Chappelle’s other work, despite being a Netflix original production, but has been uploaded on a platform which preceded and foreshadowed the arrival of streaming platforms. One potential reason for this may be the nature of the event being discussed. Footage of Floyd’s death, as well as the subsequent protests, were widely circulated on YouTube, making the platform a key space where debate around the incident was occurring. Hosting the video on YouTube allows both Netflix and Chappelle to be part of the debate more directly than they would be if the video was placed behind a paywall on the streaming platform. Arguably more unique is the timing of the release, arriving in the midst of the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic which affected all aspects of everyday life, but notably in this case, the ability to traditionally perform stand-up in front of a live audience. In spite of this, 8:46 was inconceivably filmed on June 6\textsuperscript{th} 2020 in Yellow Springs, Ohio, a mere six days before the online release of the special. Much is made of this in the special’s opening moments, which features the recognisable documentary-style pre-show footage which is present in a number of the aforementioned case studies from this chapter.

The viewer is first shown a number of mask-wearing attendees having their temperatures taken upon arrival and being seated in pairs at a distance from each other. Chapelle appears onstage at the outdoor Wirrig pavilion as night falls and delivers a 25-minute set to the 100 or so invite-only audience members. This type of special doesn’t possess the production value of the majority of Netflix stand-up specials and the only evident set dressing is a row of candles placed along the hearth of the fireplace behind Chappelle. Chappelle acknowledges this to some extent in the caption of the video writing, ‘Normally I wouldn’t show you something

so unrefined, I hope you understand.' As well as referring to the special’s production value, this statement also gestures towards the unrefined stand-up material, which is at times emotionally raw and reactionary. In terms of its visual style, the performance captured by a minimal number of cameras. In fact, when Chappelle delivers his stand-up, it is mostly presented as one static unbroken long take with very few of the typical cutaways to show the audiences response. This is most likely a consequence of the restrictions social distancing places on filming these types of events but the limited camera coverage and long takes of Chappelle’s monologue also serve to reflect the powerful and sombre tone evoked by the comedian’s set. The title, 8:46, refers to the length of time which a white police officer, Derek Chauvin, knelt on the neck of George Floyd, a 46-year old black man, during an arrest in Minneapolis. Floyd was handcuffed face down on the ground and repeatedly told the officer ‘I can’t breathe’ before dying as a result of asphyxiation. His murder triggered a number of protests which began in the US but have since expanded worldwide, protesting Floyd’s death and long history of police brutality against minorities (particularly in the United States). Perhaps unsurprisingly, due to the serious subject matter, many critics have noted the absence of comedy in the special. Randall Colburn of The AV Club stresses this point, believing the special to be ‘more of a conversation than a comedy special, touching as it does on the deaths of George Floyd and Kobe Bryant, as well as … [Chappelle’s] issues with liberal and conservative media.’

Chapelle also addresses the set’s lack of comedy whilst onstage. At one point during the performance, he apologises to the crowd saying ‘This is not funny at all.’ This moment recalls Gadsby’s comment from Nanette, where she apologises for the anger and solemnity of her performance. Like Gadsby, Chappelle appears angry a number of times throughout 8:46 and undercuts the tension in a similar way to Gadsby early jokes from Nanette. After a few titters from the crowd

60 Dave Chappelle, 8:46, YouTube (12 June 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tR6mKcBbT4, accessed 3 July 2020.
following his lamentation that the set isn’t funny, Chappelle quickly notes, ‘I got some pussy jokes too that I could do …’ which momentarily breaks the tension before he continues on. Chappelle ends his set by announcing ‘We’ll keep this space open. This is the last stronghold for civil discourse.’ He is presumably referring to the outdoor venue of the Wirrig pavilion where he continued to perform throughout the summer, but the space could just as easily be understood as the online space in which his comedy is disseminated, or YouTube as a free, accessible space.

In my earlier description of 8:46, I omitted an important detail found in the video’s description on YouTube. Chappelle doesn’t see 8:46 as a ‘special’, and is instead referred to as ‘an impromptu purging of feelings and thoughts delivered by Dave during his show in Ohio on June 6, 2020.’ Given its home on YouTube, a site filled with videos of people responding to songs, film trailers, and news, a response or reaction video might initially seem like an apt label for the work. Jenner states,

Technologically speaking, YouTube may be Netflix’ closest relative in contemporary media. When Reed Hastings positioned Netflix in relation to HBO in 2013, he not only aligned it with a heritage of “quality” TV, he also rejected the allegiance with YouTube, its reliance on videos created by "amateurs" ... and its associations with a participatory version of online culture. However, contrary to Hastings’ rejection of this particular strand of online culture, it appears that the YouTube platform is well-suited to the reactionary nature of Chappelle’s video. The immediacy of the gut-reactions associated with labels such as ‘response video’ may appear to undermine the qualities of Chappelle’s performance and make it appear as if it wasn’t considered or thoughtful. It also isn’t entirely clear whether it’s the video’s length or its serious subject matter which prevents it from being what Chapelle and Netflix would define as a special. Comedy specials have always had varying lengths, increasingly so on Netflix where they

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63 Jenner, Netflix and the Re-invention of Television, p. 95.
don’t have to fit within a specific broadcast time slot. Moreover, the streaming platform hasn’t shied away from presenting more overtly serious work as comedy - see: *Nanette*. Instead, the idiosyncratic elements of this performance – its seriousness, its timeliness, and its existence amidst a worldwide pandemic – can be viewed as another example of Netflix experimenting with known forms and asking its audience to reflect on the nature and purpose of the stand-up comedy special as a sub-genre. Stand-up comedy has always had the potential to respond to cultural moments quicker than a scripted film or television show. Where the latter examples would take months and potentially years to write, film, and eventually release, the stand-up comedy show typically requires less turnaround time in the postproduction process. The ability to utilise digital resources such as streaming platforms means that this content can now be delivered from the stage to the screen as quickly as possible. This, combined with the overall self-reflexive nature of a large number of Netflix’s specials, indicates that post-broadcast stand-up comedy may be at the forefront of post-broadcast comedy television content.
Conclusion

When I began writing this thesis, my intuition was that the original comedy programming made by/for streaming services represented a shift in the types of television comedy aesthetics viewers had become accustomed to since the earliest televised sitcoms of the 1950s. In many ways, this intuition proved correct. This may not be surprising insofar as it would be expected that almost anything would change to some degree over the course of several decades. However, the extent to which online streaming services can be seen to have invented a new visual language and style of television comedy is less clear or concrete than I might have initially assumed. The differences between comedy from a half century ago and contemporary television are consistently underlined in the original programming. In spite of this, there is also a deep reverence held in many of my case studies for the comedy television that has come before. The post-broadcast programmes’ referentiality to previous iterations of similar material from the same sub-genre is also exaggerated to postmodern levels of self-referentiality. This style breaks even further from similar techniques established throughout the 90s and 00s in meta and self-aware programmes from cable channels such as The Larry Sanders Show and Curb Your Enthusiasm. Ultimately, the originality of the post-broadcast comedy programming I have examined throughout the previous four chapters has had to be consistently scrutinised and often labelled on my part as something belonging to a long tradition of comedy aesthetics rather than bringing something completely unique and original to the table.

Over the course of writing this project, I have been able to catalogue a series of recurring aesthetic qualities and characteristics across several sub-genres of post-broadcast comedy television. ‘Catalogue’ may initially seem like an inappropriate term to use here, perhaps belonging more comfortably to a scientific research project than one rooted in arts and humanities methodologies. Nevertheless, the frequency with which some of these characteristics reappear in multiple programmes, often from different sub-genres, occasionally leads the research process to feel like some form of quantitative, rather than qualitative, data collection. Methods such as measuring the average shot length of specific
episodes or tracking moments of key narrative progression over multiple television seasons are valid quantitative approaches to television research. Whilst I haven’t been counting things in this particular way during this research project, at times I suspect that this approach would have produced similar findings. Furthermore, the ways in which these programmes’ aesthetic choices are reliably deployed makes them sometimes feel as if they are scientifically engineered – something which Netflix are keenly aware of through the references to their own algorithm in multiple pieces of paratextual and promotional material, as explored in the analysis of the comedy short that opened this thesis. Some of these traits have been identified in the academic and journalistic writing I’ve engaged with in this study. When gathered together in this thesis, my hope is that the traits I have identified as endemic to comedy on these platforms create a detailed overall portrait of the aesthetics of post-broadcast comedy television. Whilst my findings don’t suggest a dramatic shift in television comedy aesthetics from broadcast to post-broadcast programmes, the thesis is able to chart some of the continuities and differences between the two, as well as providing an overview of the current streaming television comedy landscape as of Winter 2020.

It feels important to put a date on this piece of writing because the nature of most research, including contemporary television research, is that the topic is perpetually moving forwards. In the case of streaming television, the subject is moving at a relentless pace, even if the writer must eventually stop. The number of post-broadcast comedy television programmes has increased exponentially year on year. When undertaking a project of this length, it seemed entirely predictable that online streaming would continue for the foreseeable future as an alternative to scheduled broadcast television. Many of the aesthetic qualities I’ve identified and explored throughout this thesis have also since recurred in these more recent programmes. The decision to focus on contemporary television naturally means that one has to draw the line somewhere with regards to what case studies to use and what streaming services to draw them from. In the introduction to this thesis, as well as occasionally throughout its chapters, I have referred to a number of newer streaming services which have debuted in the past 12 months. One of these
new services, Apple TV+, was launched towards the end of 2019 and produced a variety of original post-broadcast comedy television programmes. The platform would have perhaps seemed unremarkable as far as this thesis was concerned if it wasn’t for another unexpected turn of events which came in the form of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent worldwide ‘lockdowns’ throughout the majority of 2020. Notably, production was initially halted on almost all film and television productions during the first half of 2020 as the coronavirus infection rate reached the height of what has since become a number of peaks and troughs.¹ Post-broadcast shows such as Stranger Things were in the midst of production while others, like Apple TV+’s Mythic Quest: Raven’s Banquet were in the late stages of pre-production – scripts were written, table reads had occurred, sets were built, etc. At the time of writing this conclusion, in November 2020, many shows have since begun or resumed filming by following strict ‘Covid-secure’ guidelines such as employing social distancing on sets, frequent testing, and in some instances, allowing cast members to mix in social bubbles.² What some of these shows will eventually look like is yet to be seen, and there may be no visible evidence of the conditions under which they were filmed. This is certainly the case in a number of the following productions, whilst the impact of Covid-19 is prominently on display in a number of other programmes.

A number of late-night talk shows such as Jimmy Kimmel Live! (ABC, 2003 - ) and The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon (NBC, 2014 - ) have resumed filming in their respective Los Angeles and New York City studios following a period of ‘at home’ shows over the summer. Members of the The Tonight Show’s house band, The Roots, wear masks when possible and the crew working behind the camera are also often shown wearing PPE. These crew members were seldom shown on camera prior to the pandemic and their appearances with gloves and visors is a

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continuing reminder of the changes which have been made behind the scenes to late-night television production. One of the longest-running comedy shows on US television, *Saturday Night Live*, resumed filming with a live studio audience in the Autumn. Interestingly, the New York State guidelines for media production stated that live audiences were prohibited unless they were viewed as paid employees. According to an *Insider* article about the production of the first post-lockdown *Saturday Night Live* episode with a live audience, ‘The guidelines said that should employees, cast, and crew stand in for a live audience, there could be no more than 100 people or 25% of audience capacity, requiring them to abide by whichever number was lower. Guests also had [to] be 6 feet apart in all directions.’³ To ensure the production was stating within the NYC production guidelines, each member of the audience bubbles were compensated with a $150 cheque following filming.⁴

Outside of the comedy genre, long-running drama programme, *The Blacklist* (NBC, 2013 - ), concluded its seventh season by cutting their 22 episodes to 19 as a consequence of the filming process being cut short. Rather controversially, the final episode became a hybrid of live action and animation, filling in the gaps where certain scenes were never filmed. Writing for *IndieWire*, Bill Desowitz believed it to be ‘a good stylistic choice, given the fact that the pulpy American crime thriller … [has] already spawned a series of Titan comic books’.⁵ Conversely, its solution to the overcoming the impact of Covid-19 was derided by others. Discussing the way in which the animated segments were integrated with live action footage, Kristen Parisi notes how

The episode began with a live-action scene that's abruptly cut short as viewers were taken on-location in New York City to when production was called off. Producers and writers shared video messages with viewers about

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⁴ Ibid.

how the final episode was put together ... [before offering] viewers the first
glimpse of the animation they’ll see throughout the rest of the episode. The
setup for the animation felt disjointed, as the producer messages would
have made more sense before the beginning of the episode.  

The decisions made by the showrunners of *The Blacklist* contrasts with those made
for a show such as *Fargo* (FX, 2014 - ), which was originally scheduled to be
broadcast in April 2020 but couldn’t resume filming until late August and
consequently received a delayed broadcast, five months later, in September. Post-
broadcast drama programmes such as *Carnival Row* (Prime Video, 2019 - ) had to
relocate to the Czech Republic in order to film their second season in a safe
environment.  

As far as comedy programmes are concerned, the timeliness of one
particular release highlights the ways in which the online space of post-broadcast
television complements the ways in which many of our daily interactions have
moved to online spaces in 2020.

Apple’s *Mythic Quest: Raven’s Banquet* surprisingly released an episode in
the midst of the pandemic on May 22nd 2020. The episode was named ‘Quarantine’
and can be viewed as either a coda to the first season or a prelude to the as-yet
unreleased second season, currently scheduled for 2021. Discussing the episode in
an interview with Jackson McHenry for *Vulture*, writer/creator and star of the show,
Rob McElhenney stated, ‘We wanted to tell a story that was authentic to the
experiences that people are going through right now’.  

Moreover, offering a more practical perspective, he noted, ‘Most people in the industry are working-class
craftspeople who are living month to month, if not paycheck to paycheck ...  

Shutting down for an indefinite amount of time, when there are options out there

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6 Kristen Parisi, ‘Why Blacklist Season 7’s Cartoon Ending Didn’t Work’, *Screen Rant* (May 16 2020),
https://screenrant.com/blacklist-season-7-ending-cartoon-ending-not-work/, accessed 7 December
2020.

7 Christopher Rosen, ‘Which TV Shows Have Resumed Production During the Coronavirus
Pandemic?’, *Vanity Fair* (August 12 2020), https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2020/08/what-

8 Jackson McHenry, ‘How Mythic Quest Wrote, Filmed, and Edited Its Quarantine Episode in 3
Weeks’, *Vulture* (May 26 2020), https://www.vulture.com/2020/05/mythic-quest-quarantine-
for us, did not seem ethically appropriate.’ As might be expected, the episode was wholly conceived, written, filmed, edited, and released in lockdown via Apple’s streaming service, taking only three weeks from conception to delivery of the episode. This was made possible by Apple shipping props, professional lighting, costumes, and products on which each actor could film their segments. McHenry’s article acknowledges that ‘if you’re making a show for Apple TV+, there’s the added benefit of getting all the Apple tech you want’ whilst also outlining several of the logistical challenges facing the production of the episode. He explains how ‘each member of the cast would need three iPhones each to film their scenes. They’d shoot with one phone, then sterilize it and put it in a secure area outside their apartment or home, where it’d be picked up by a courier, brought to an editor, sterilized again, uploaded to Avid editing software, and then sent back to the actor.’ Some processes which would normally occur in the pre-production of many television projects, such as location scouting, still took place, albeit in more modest surroundings. McElhenney discusses the ways in which actors were consulted ‘over FaceTime or Zoom to location scout within their own houses’ as the production team would try to ‘figure out where’s the best place to set the cameras, where’s the best place for sound, and what’s the best time of day, because we’re using natural light.’

It should be noted that Apple TV+ and Mythic Quest aren’t unique in creating a quarantine-themed episode of television during 2020. In the UK, the BBC produced a comedy series called Staged (BBC, 2020 - ), starring Michael Sheen and David Tennant playing fictionalised, somewhat exaggerated versions of themselves during lockdown. Like the quarantine episode of Mythic Quest, Staged often involves the actors communicating with each other over their laptops. Because of its original broadcast context on BBC One, Staged can’t be considered an example of post-broadcast comedy television in the same way as Mythic Quest. However, in the US, the show was released via the Hulu streaming service. In the UK, it is

9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
currently available to watch on the BBC iPlayer, but has also since been added to Netflix, meaning there are multiple platforms where the show can be watched on demand. The immediacy of the show’s presence on streaming platforms following its BBC broadcast, as well as its exclusivity on Hulu in the US, may lead many viewers to assume *Staged* is an example of post-broadcast comedy television. Additionally, the Netflix thumbnail for the programme doesn’t include the BBC logo, breaking from a tradition established with other BBC shows which are currently available to watch on the streaming platform, such as *Doctor Foster* (BBC, 2015 – 2017) and *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC, 1994 – 2020) to name a few.

I’d argue that one further aesthetic decision may also complicate the broadcast categorisation of *Staged* in the minds of viewers. In the introduction to this thesis, I commented on the increasingly fragmented nature of the contemporary television viewing experience. Broadcast television remains hugely popular but the adherence to a traditional schedule as well as the environments in which we engage with television has changed dramatically. In addition to the original television set (now most likely a flatscreen), it is also possible to watch television on laptops, phones, and tablets. Anecdotally, in my household, despite routine communal viewing on a nightly basis, it’s also not uncommon for the television set to be watched by one person, while another sits on a laptop watching something different. The ability to watch television on different, smaller screens, particularly those which we also communicate with others on via video messenger apps, means that television now appears to be entering even more intimate spaces than the front room. The FaceTime (or Zoom) aesthetic employed by these shows produced during lockdown seems properly suited to being watched on the devices they were originally filmed on. One British lockdown horror film, *Host* (Rob Savage, Shudder, UK, 2020), about a zoom chat séance gone wrong, is undeniably more effective when watched on the same devices as its characters in a similar domestic setting. Therefore, television shows which utilise this online aesthetic appear more reactive, self-aware, and more closely aligned with the current moment in a way which much recent post-broadcast comedy, such as Dave Chappelle’s 2020 stand-up performance, also is. The broadcast equivalents of such shows are often viewed
in a type of vacuum, with the viewer aware that a particular episode they’re watching was most likely filmed months ago. As a result, shows such as *Staged* and the quarantine episode of *Mythic Quest*, as well as using the pandemic lockdown as a narrative device, also deploy an aesthetic style which viewers will recognise as endemic of the current moment. This aesthetic decision also closes the distance viewers may feel between their own lives and those being depicted on television and is another example of the ever-increasing sense of intimacy that television brings to those watching on their television set, on their laptops, and also on their phones.

The pandemic may initially have caused shows to be created in restricted, ostensibly limiting ways, out of necessity. However, this may have ultimately led to a further recognisable shift in the aesthetics of television and one which may continue for the foreseeable future. When asked about the possibility of producing another remote episode of *Mythic Quest*, McElhenney responds, ‘If we knew that it was just going to be a month or two, I think we could wait,” he said. “But if we really are talking about a scenario where we can’t get back onto the stages for six more months, then I think we have to figure out a way to do it.’ Since the article/interview was published, the long-term effects of Covid-19 are still being felt on the industry, and while production has resumed, it is occurring at slower rate, having delayed a number of shows scheduled for release in the latter quarter of 2020. Apple TV+ recently extended their one-year free trial period to February 2021 for users who had joined during its initial launch in Autumn 2019. Julia Alexander states, ‘The streamer kicked off with a rocky launch … [but] since then … Apple has added a number of shows and films to the service that have garnered critical acclaim.’ Many of the release dates for new shows on the service, such as the M. Night Shayamalan produced, *Servant* (Apple TV+, 2019 - ), and *Dickinson* (Apple TV+, 2019 - ) are now in January 2021. As well as the changes made to free trial

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33 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
periods and other aspects of production and distribution, time will tell whether the
effects of the pandemic on the aesthetics of the shows themselves may ultimately
result in viewers being able to differentiate shows made pre and post pandemic.

The work in this thesis is some of the first long-form close analysis of post-
broadcast comedy texts and has highlighted a range of recurring aesthetic choices
across the programmes produced by Netflix and other streaming platforms. A
number of points become clear as I come to the end of this exploration of post-
broadcast comedy television. Firstly, there is still a deep reverence held for
broadcast television comedy which is evident in the overt references to the sitcom
subgenre in many post-broadcast comedy originals (such as in *BoJack Horseman’s*
“Horsin’ Around”). Many of the shows also closely engage with the aesthetics of
broadcast comedy television. *F is For Family* succeeds as a sitcom on its own terms,
dealing with the types of family and workplace sub-plots which are typical of
innumerable broadcast sitcoms. However, it also includes a subversive edge in its
criticism of suburban values and archaic gender roles. It should also be noted that
the first Netflix original comedy programme, *Arrested Development*, (or ‘semi-
original’, as it is described in the opening credits) is itself a revival of a short-lived
but critically successful broadcast sitcom.

Secondly, streaming platforms are also keen to repeat some of the
techniques that have worked in broadcast television. Some of these, such as the
idea of the ‘auteur import’ have been acknowledged as trends by academics such
as John T. Caldwell and have been repeated since the 1980s onwards by television
networks in an attempt to lend an air of legitimacy to many of their programmes; I
identified and explored this trend of producing what might be understood as ‘high
concept comedy’ throughout this thesis. This approach has been taken by Netflix in
the way it positions comedy directors such as Judd Apatow at the forefront of the
marketing for the company’s original series, *Love*. The emergence of the show
runner as a popular and recognisable figure from broadcast television has also
continued in the world of streaming television, where names such as The Duffer
Brothers are as recognisable to today’s viewers as David Chase or Vince Gilligan
were in the 2000s and 2010s. A number of names, such as *BoJack Horseman’s*
creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg, have now been granted a level of respectability that they are able to continue working (in Bob-Waksberg’s case, with Amazon) on other streaming projects. Furthermore, within the post-broadcast comedy genre, a number of established comedy show runners such as Matt Groening, Greg Daniels and Bill Lawrence have moved to streaming with shows such as Disenchantment, Space Force (Netflix, 2020 - ) and Ted Lasso respectively.

There has, however, been a shift and subversion from the previously established broadcast norms. It is evident in the aforementioned self-reflexivity of F is For Family; in the unconventional narrative structure of Arrested Development; in the way BoJack Horseman addresses topics such as addiction; in the content of Hannah Gadsby and Dave Chappelle’s stand-up comedy specials. It would be reductive to simply suggest that some of these changes are stylistic ones, and can be pointed to when watching (e.g. drawing attention to this camera movement or the use of colour in that particular moment), even though some are evident in this way. Additionally, it would simplify the significance of the shift by stating that there have been changes in the types of topics that are addressed in these shows. A 1950s sitcom wouldn’t have had its main character come out as gay in the way Ellen (ABC, 1994 - 1998) did in the 1990s, in much the same way that 90s sitcoms wouldn’t deal with issues of addiction and mental health quite as acutely as many post-broadcast comedy programmes are able to now. The progressive nature of many comedy shows is undoubtedly related to some extent with the values of an increasingly progressive (but in many places, sorely lacking) society. It is in the way these changing topics and themes are articulated by and through a shifting visual and narrative style which ultimately combines to create a coherent representation of the aesthetics of post-broadcast comedy television. The antecedents of these streamed programmes have not been shunned, but rather acknowledged and built upon.

There hasn’t been the seismic shift here which some might have initially supposed and which many felt eager to recognise when the emergence and rise of streaming services led to the closure of brick-and-mortar video rental stores. The decision made by Netflix, Amazon Video, Hulu, and other streaming services to
create their own programming also appeared to suggest new ways in which television stories might be conceived and told. This also created opportunities for programmes which might not have been green-lit and made for broadcast television to instead be found by smaller, niche audiences on streaming platforms. Interestingly, the most significant shift might be occurring right now, or in the very near future, as the Covid-19 pandemic continues spreading across the globe, and we are reminded once more of the crucial role television plays in everyone’s lives. Sometimes, its role is that of a communicative device for news updates, but other times it can be viewed as an artistic medium used to tell stories which, if we’re lucky, might provide us with a few laughs every now and then. The ways in which these laughs are elicited may have changed to some extent over the past several decades and the outlets which we search for in order to procure them have changed over time. But in the best post-broadcast programmes (and I believe many of the shows named throughout this thesis are examples of the very best contemporary comedy work) their effect is as comforting, reassuring, and reliable as a prime-time sitcom.
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**BoJack Horseman**


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**Love**


*Mythic Quest: Raven’s Banquet*


*One Mississippi*


*Seinfeld*


**Wet Hot American Summer: First Day of Camp**


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