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The Dangerous Assumptions of Modern Sitcoms

Constructing a video essay around the hyper hetero-masculinity of modern sitcoms was a challenging and enlightening experience. As I began watching a new Canadian sitcom, Workin’ Moms, I was surprised by how progressive it seemed to be – the main characters clearly mothers, often breastfeeding and void of makeup, serving as the breadwinners of the family at respected corporate positions. The plot captured the struggles of early stages of motherhood in a humorous yet raw, unflattering light. It was only then that I realized, there is something significant in how I was surprised by this – the show is merely illustrating reality. Women make up 47% of the workforce in the U.S., yet sitcoms rarely portray the female counterpart as the breadwinner of the family. Further, they position women as earning significantly less, or even none, of the income, and often miserable at their jobs. I know this because I am an avid fan of many sitcoms, such as How I Met Your Mother, Modern Family, Straight off the Boat, Two Broke Girls, which all fit this description. All of the above represent women as having the lesser profession, and mothers are rarely depicted as whole people with jobs and hobbies. I chose this topic because as someone who loves these shows, I find it critical to analyze the forces at play that inherently shape my beliefs and my culture.

As I dove deeper, I had the realization that even Workin’ Moms represents women through a particular ideology. By highlighting mothers that make significant income with a nanny or husband at home to take care of the newborn child, Workin’ Moms simultaneously marginalizes less privileged moms – those who are single, cannot afford a babysitter, struggling with health, or perhaps aren’t lucky enough to live in a nice home. Ultimately, while Workin Moms’ goes beyond other modern sitcoms to represent women in a more realistic light, it still fails to account for all demographics as it only highlights a myopic view of privileged bourgeoise mothers. Thus, it not only serves as another example of media that shapes our cultural expectations of certain demographics, it also neglects a large majority of society. My explicit argument is that modern sitcoms perpetuate sexist stereotypes, and even those that attempt to break barriers inevitably idealize the human experience and neglect reality.

My three keywords were representation, stereotype, and power. Rather than try and find a piece that fit these keywords, juxtaposing Workin’ Moms with other modern sitcoms enabled me to naturally see the keywords that were perpetuated within. After realizing how much of a problem it was that I was surprised by how realistic Workin’ Moms seemed, I identified the core of the issue was how sitcoms represent women; compelling me to grapple with the keyword of representation. Further, these representations of women are repeated throughout so many television programs that they lead society to make prevailing consistent assumptions about women as a demographic, consequently leading me to apply stereotype. Further, I realized the power that these shows have to shape stereotypes and ideologies for society – especially when they are critically acclaimed and air for years on end, and cater to a wide range of age groups, such as How I Met Your Mother and Modern Family. While I cannot stand for the opinions of mothers, I believe stereotypes must partly shape any mothers’ identity as well, as they are positively framed as normal and accepted roles and behavior. While gender as a keyword seemed too simple because of its innate presence in the topic, the overlapping of keywords demonstrates the complexity of our culture. Further, the chain of meaning that these shows illustrate – that women work mediocre professions, especially when becoming a mother – is an example of an ideology perpetuated by media that inevitably influence our culture. Gender and ideology are certainly applicable to my video essay; however, representation, power and stereotype are more central to my argument.

Forming an argument through media was not as easy at first seemed. The examples Dr. Tilton showed the class were so insightful yet they seemed so naturally constructed. But for me, it was difficult to convey my argument soundly with the content in which I had access. The technical construction of the media and editing the frames was much more meticulous and required lots more patience than simply imagining my persuasive argument in my head. I ended up playing around with sound, transitions, and text countless times to ensure it was conveying the right message. I realized the day before submission I had an excessive amount of text on the screen – preventing the audience from comprehending my argument on their own through the actual media. Further, I was fascinated with voiceover but had to re-do my intended phrasing several times and shift it from scene to scene to make it pop at the right moment. First, I showed sexist tweets by President Trump to establish the theme of my video. I made the decision to use pieces of media that depicted women in sitcoms during moments of the program focusing on their professions. For videos, I chose the main two females struggling to work at a coffee shop for Two Broke Girls, Lily being insulted by kindergarteners and Robin debasing herself on an illegitimate news channel for How I Met Your Mother, and Wikipedia pages stating the two mothers of Modern Family placed in roles as housewives. These clips were directly juxtaposed with the male counterparts in each program (besides Two Broke Girls) who enjoyed high-income, respected professions. I added a clip of Michelle Obama fighting for change at a Hillary Clinton rally in 2016 to convey society’s attempt to embrace equal rights and equal pay. The purpose of this was to show chronologically how sitcoms may have progressed over the years, especially after these monumental movements. A clip of Workin’ Moms is thus shown after to contrast the ways in which women in their thirties are represented in sitcoms in 2019. After more research, I realized Workin Moms’ also marginalizes other classes of women, compelling me to end the video essay posing the question of if 2019 sitcoms are actually reflecting progress if it still is neglecting to convey reality. This was paired with abrupt dramatic techno music against a plain black background, a notable atmospheric change from the relaxing music played prior, in order to alert the audience to read and ponder this question.

The process of making the video-essay made it blatantly clear how fragile each piece of media is when it comes to how it will be received Any small change I make could completely alter the meaning that resonates with the viewer. I honestly felt the keyword of power, as I realized the structure of my video and each small edit could change the way it was perceived and thus every action had meaning. I knew this to some degree already from class, but physically constructing my own video opened my eyes to the power each producer’s decision has on our perception of the world around us. Just as I was attempting to convey the power these sitcoms have on our cultural assumptions, I simultaneously had the power to shape the exact meaning of an argument to my audience.