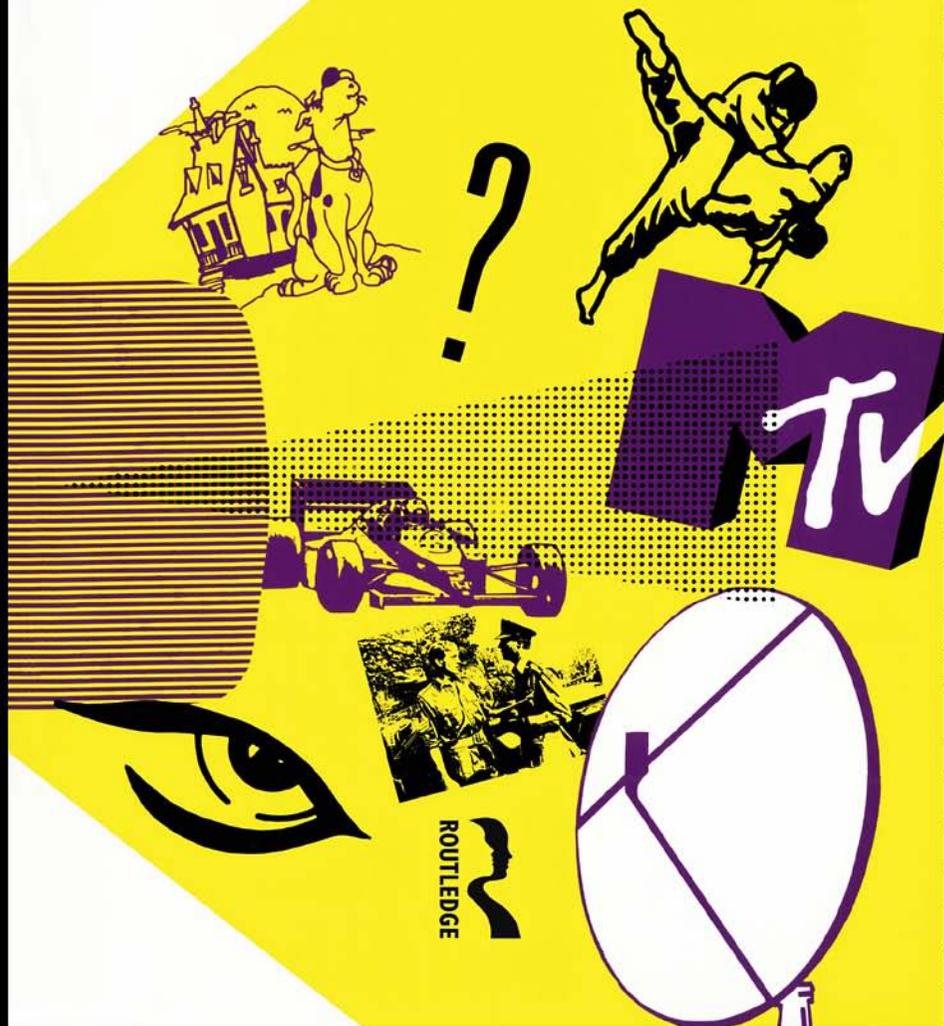


UNDERSTANDING TELEVISION

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ONLY WHEN I LAUGH

Mick Bowes

In an episode from the second series of the BBC situation comedy *The Young Ones* we find references being made to the very nature of sit-com itself:

Vyvyan (referring to *The Good Life*): 'It's so bloody nice.... Felicity treacle Kendal and Richard sugar-flavoured snot Briars.... They're nothing but a couple of reactionary stereotypes confirming a myth that everyone in Britain is a loveable middle-class eccentric and I hate them.'¹

It is of course unlikely that many viewers of sit-com would react in quite the same way as Vyvyan. What it does highlight, however, is the way in which a critical awareness of television programmes such as sit-coms is actually creeping into some of the programmes themselves! *The Young Ones* is of course not typical of situation comedy on television and the programme it refers to, *The Good Life*, is a more typical example of the situation comedy format.

Unlike the anarchic parody of *The Young Ones*, which frequently breaks and plays with the conventions of the form, most situation comedy is realist in characters, settings, stories, and language. By looking at the ways in which sit-com presents us with 'real' people in 'real' situations we can begin to see how they fit into our picture of the society we live in.

Television situation comedies usually last for half an hour, are on at the same time, on the same evening each week, and each series lasts for a fixed number of episodes (usually between six and thirteen). Programmes contain the same main characters and usually the same locations each week, and each episode is a self-contained narrative which is resolved at the end of the programme.

Because the episodes are meant to link together and are shown in a particular sequence they can refer to events or characters in previous episodes. This is very different from other forms of

comedy on television which are usually made up of a series of unrelated sketches or 'turns' by comedians.

Sit-coms have always used established comic performers already well known to audiences but they now also often use 'straight' actors and actresses in the roles of the main characters. The ways in which characters represent, often in stereotypical fashion, recognizable social types, provide a base for both the humour and the underlying ideology of the form.

The most characteristic feature of the 'classic' situation comedy is narrative closure. In other words, each story is resolved within the 30 minutes of the programme. In addition this closure is generally circular—it returns the characters to the positions they occupied at the start, thus allowing the next week's programme to start afresh. This circular narrative closure allows little room for progression, making situation comedy radically distinct from soap opera as a form, and prompting some to label it a conservative form.

It is certainly true that many sit-coms appear to be about entrapment—characters unable to escape the constraints of their class, their social position, their gender, their marital status, or simply themselves. Hancock can never transcend railway cuttings, Harold Steptoe can never escape from his father, Mildred's upwardly mobile desires are forever frustrated by George's dogged and defensive working-class manner, the housewife in *Butterflies* can never quite bring herself to have an affair with her prospective lover, the father in *Home to Roost* will never quite be able to throw his teenage son out.

At the same time the history of situation comedy clearly shows that the genre is constantly having to handle areas of social unease. Many of the best sit-coms of the 1960s—*Hancock*, *Steptoe and Son*, *The Likely Lads*—were in part about class and social mobility or the lack of it. In the wake of the rise of the women's movement in the 1970s, heightened debate about gender roles, and the supposed threat to traditional family structures, came the appearance of new sit-coms focusing on gender relations and the nature of the family—such as *Butterflies*, *Solo*, *Agony*. More recent foregrounding of the politics of race in the wake of heightened inner-city tensions is also echoed in programmes such as *Empire Road* and *No Problem*. This is not to say that any of these are either progressive or reactionary, but rather to suggest that, just as humour is often a way of handling unease, so sit-com is often a way in which social unease is re-presented—often in a less threatening manner.

Situation comedy in Britain evolved from radio comedy which in turn had its roots in music hall and variety. American sit-com developed from radio 'soap operas', weekly drama series which were devised to attract audiences in order to sell products. The domestic setting predominated in both variations of the form. Many early American sit-coms were transferred from radio to television, but the most successful one was *I Love Lucy*, created in the 1950s especially for television.

The first major success for British television sit-com came in the late 1950s when *Hancock's Half Hour* was transferred from radio. When Hancock parted with his writers, Galton and Simpson, in the early 1960s the BBC offered them the chance to write six one-off situation comedies in a series, *Comedy Playhouse*. Out of this came another great success, *Steptoe and Son*, the first sit-com to use straight actors (Harry H. Corbett and Wilfred Brambell) rather than comic performers. This was to be the first of a series of successes, such as *The Likely Lads* and *Till Death Us Do Part* that enabled the BBC to dominate the early development of the form in Britain. Apart from a few early successes, such as *The Army Game*, it was not until the end of the 1960s that ITV began to compete more successfully.²

While the most common situation has continued to be a domestic one, many of the popular hits of the 1970s and 1980s, such as *Are You Being Served?*, *Dad's Army*, *Hi-De-Hi*, and 'Allo 'Allo, were based around a work setting, allowing a greater range of regular character types. Struggling against the formal limitations of the genre, many writers began pushing towards the serial, introducing narrative lines that continued from one episode to the next, sometimes across a whole series. *The Rise and Fall of Reginald Perrin*, *Butterflies*, *Agony*, and the American soap opera parody, *Soap*, all had a degree of seriality in their form, and in this sense the question as to whether they really are situation comedies in the traditional sense has to be considered.

Similarly, programmes in other genres sometimes introduce forms of comic exchange and characterization that clearly owe much to sit-com. The interplay between Terry and Arthur in *Minder*, Rita and Mavis in *Coronation Street*, and even Saint and Greavesie, because they play on our familiarity with regular characters and their habits, would appear to have elements derived from the sit-com.

Situation comedy is classified by the television companies as a form of light entertainment, and as such it is something that they think need not be taken too seriously. This has led some writers of situation comedy to feel that their programmes are not given

the status they deserve considering how popular they are. This is partially to do with the history of sit-com and its development as a peculiar hybrid of popular drama and variety. Its classification by the television companies as light entertainment rather than drama is indicative of its status. Comic drama has a long tradition and carries with it the status of 'great literature', whereas situation comedy is very much a new form of entertainment and is therefore more difficult to categorize. The main function of TV sit-com according to the television companies is to make people laugh or offer a temporary escape from the worry of everyday life.³

In contrast, a report produced by the Department of Education and Science in 1983, *Popular Television and Schoolchildren*, concludes:

It is important, particularly for teachers, to avoid falling into the trap of conferring greater value per se on programmes which set out to educate and inform them on those whose primary aim is to entertain.... For a minority of children the products of television may be the main source of significant influence on the way in which their images of certain groups develop.⁴

In other words, entertainment such as sit-com cannot be discussed as mere escapism, as though its actual content were of no relevance.

Although the television companies themselves do not seem to take sit com that seriously, it is valuable to them as a means of attracting large audiences. Because of their popularity, the television companies often show them in the early part of the evening in the hope that they will attract large numbers of viewers who will continue to watch the channel for the rest of the evening.

This positioning of programmes in the television company's schedule is important as the number of viewers is reflected in the weekly audience ratings, and the popularity of programmes is important in relation to funding (either from advertisers or justifying increases in the licence fee).

Early evening tends to be a time when 'families' watch programmes together. This notion of the family as a socially cohesive unit is something that is used within the framework of many situation comedy programmes, whether showing the model couple, such as *Terry and June*, or more usually a family situation which is undergoing some form of disruption, such as *Agony* or *No Problem*.

Very few sit-coms present us with the 'perfect' family, but there is often a clear underlying assumption that the perfect family model is a desirable one to aspire towards. Sit-coms usually present us with a 'problematic' family situation which is either resolved through the comedy or is used as a source of humour, with 'normality' seen as the ultimate goal.

As sit-com is so popular it tends to be caught in a trap of repeating previously pleasurable experiences rather than breaking out into something completely different:

Because of the difficulties of sustaining a comedy series, most of the pressure for satisfying TV's insatiable appetite falls on a small group of experienced writers. Established formats, often based on familiar situations and using well known actors with which the viewers can identify, are among the most popular comedies.⁵

This safe approach to sit-com on the part of the television companies means that it is difficult to present a radically different sit-com. Occasionally, however, new writers are given a chance and programmes such as *The Young Ones* appear which break new ground.

Realism and location

Mick Eaton outlines three possible locations in which situation comedy can take place. The first is the home and is generally based around a family situation. The second is the workplace and the situations that occur as a result of interaction between characters in the work situation. The third area is less clearly definable, but 'betrays structural elements of both the home and the work paradigms and usually concerns a group of diverse people somehow connected in a situation outside that of their workplace. It usually concerns the home but not the family except tangentially.'⁶ Eaton cites as examples *Man About the House*, *Rising Damp*, and *Come Back Mrs Noah*.

The family and work have traditionally been seen as 'normal' in our society. Marriage, children, and living together as a 'nuclear' family are accepted social norms, which although challenged by many people are still the kinds of situations that the majority of people aspire towards.

Sit-com sometimes presents us with a variety of 'families' which are deficient in some way and this lack of wholeness is used as a source of humour. In *No Problem* for example the children are left

to run the home after the parents return to the West Indies; *Me and My Girl* is about a single-parent father bringing up his daughter, and *Relative Strangers* is about a father who has just discovered he has a teenage son. Although they present alternatives to the 'normal' family, they do not really challenge it as an institution. Television has simply drawn upon the tensions inherent in the 'abnormality' of these situations as a source for comedy. The increasing appearance of sit-coms that deal with 'non-typical' family groups can, however, be seen as suggesting that social tensions around the concept of the nuclear family are being addressed, and handled in various ways, by sit-coms, from the upholding of a 'single' way of life in *Solo*, to the matriarchal attempts to hold a family together in *Bread*.

Other sit-coms, such as *Agony*, present a whole range of 'problems' within one series. We might find humour in the situations because we identify with the liberal attitudes expressed in the programme, but we might also be opposed to them and find the characters laughable. Much sit-com works across the boundary between normality and deviance. *Agony* does so in a complex manner, by attempting to position the audience so that deviance becomes acceptable, and normality comic. The extent to which it succeeds in this has been the subject of some discussion.⁷

Work is also still considered as something that it is desirable to have, both socially and as a source of income. However, increasing levels of unemployment and changes in the kinds of jobs that need to be done are leading to shifts in attitudes towards work. Sit-coms which use the workplace as their location introduce all kinds of opportunities for exploring relationships between characters. The hierarchical structure of the work environment allow challenges to power, authority, and class position between workers and management and occasionally the customers (such as in *Are You Being Served?*).

Although many of these sit-coms are about the reversal of power relationships and the notion of the underdog triumphing over authority, the locations are usually confined to small and often badly run organizations. Questions of power reversals in larger organizations such as multinational companies are rarely addressed.

Of the sit-coms that centre around some form of workplace (*Are You Being Served?*, *Dad's Army*, *Hi-De-Hi*, *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*, *'Allo 'Allo*, for instance) two points should be made. First many of them are the work of the writers David Croft and Jimmy Perry, and, second, they are almost all set in the past. The workplace location provides for a wider range of interactions between

characters while the use of the past addresses the audience through nostalgia and for the older members of the audience it also mobilizes popular memory.

It could be argued that, viewed nostalgically, the world seems safe, funny, or even innocent. But, as always, we read the past through the assumptions of the present. The question then is whether we laugh at the way in which, for example, the workforce in *Brass* are exploited by the evil capitalist Bradley Hardacre only because we think social conditions have changed, or because we recognize a parody of worker—management relations of continuing relevance.

There are several sit-coms which are set in the home but are not centred around a family. These usually involve people who through their circumstances are forced to share their living environment, such as the prisoners in *Porridge* or the students in *The Young Ones*. Here the comedy is often derived from the problems associated with communal living, and even when there is no traditional family structure certain characters may take on specific roles. In *The Young Ones*, for example, much of the humour revolves around domestic issues such as cooking and cleaning. Neil, the hippy, takes on the role of ‘mother’ in the house by taking responsibility for cooking and shopping, and in return he is not only taken for granted, but is often the focal point of abuse from the others.

How realistic a sit-com can be depends very much on how we perceive the realism of the life it is attempting to portray. If the characters and locations are recognizable then it is easier to accept the situations as they develop. By using ‘real’ domestic or work situations, sit-coms can often lure us into an acceptance of some of the things contained within the narrative and the humour. If sit-coms stray from these accepted rules and conventions they begin to disturb their audiences. *The Young Ones* was an interesting example of a sit-com that deliberately set out to question a realistic form of narrative. It used the characters and locations from sit com, but disrupted the narrative flow through absurd or unusual divisions such as talking rats or bands playing in the living room. It could of course be argued that this is not really sit-com as it does not adhere strictly to the conventions of the genre.

Characters, stereotypes, and politics

Because television situation comedies are fairly short, the identities of characters need to be established as quickly as

possible. Although writers may argue that their characters are based on real people, it is often necessary for them to use stereotypes—that is, characters who conform to patterns of behaviour that are easily recognized and understood.

The danger of using stereotypes is that they often present a one-sided viewpoint (generally that of the dominant culture), which fails to challenge the way in which we perceive groups and individuals.⁸ We carry around in our heads images of types of people which have been formed by what we have seen and experienced. Some of these images may have been formed through direct first-hand experience, others may have been drawn from secondary sources such as television.

Sit-com draws upon these images in order to present us with easily recognizable characters and also uses these character traits as a source of humour. It is therefore possible to find humour in groups as diverse as mothers-in-law, feminists, gays, and bank managers. The main difference is that although all of these groups may be seen in a negative way in sit-com, in real life some of them have more power than others. Stereotyping is therefore not quite as simple as it first appears. Some groups will always be presented in a negative way, others who portray more socially acceptable forms of behaviour will be seen in a more positive light. People do not necessarily have to conform to stereotypes, but it clearly helps an audience to relate to them quickly if they do. Some of the main characters may have individual characteristics, but other characters fall into more easily recognizable character types.

In a form which attempts to establish character and narrative and produce humour all in a half-hour it is inevitable that characterization will tend towards the stereotypical. In many senses stereotypes are both simple and complex—they are simplified ways of conveying distinct cultural images. In many senses what is important is to examine the place of the stereotype in the structure of the programme—is the stereotype the target of humour or the producer of it? Are we laughing at the stereotyped group or with it? In this sense there is a considerable difference between the crude racist stereotypes of Asian characters in *Ain't Half Hot Mum*, who we are invited to laugh at, and the gay stereotypes of *Agony* who often function as a means of making the prejudices of 'straight' people seem odd and laughable.

Clearly, images of men and women in television situation comedies are meant to present viewers with types of characters that they can easily recognize and relate to. What they also do however is to retain traditional images of men and women in

gender-related roles. Sit-com rarely challenges any of these traditions through the characters and situations it uses. Even more 'progressive' sit-coms such as *Girls on Top*, where all of the main characters are women, fail to present a challenge to traditional role models. The one character who presents a feminist viewpoint is inevitably seen as a 'loony' who no one wants to take seriously.

Part of the problem may be that most writers of sit-com are men, and even when they aim to avoid sexism in their humour they still find it easier to write for male characters.⁹ Women rarely get strong roles in sit-coms compared to soaps where there are many powerful women characters.

It could be argued that sit-com is not the right vehicle for challenging such representations and stereotyping. It could, however, also be argued that humour is used as an 'excuse' for perpetuating certain myths about the ways in which men and women are expected to behave in our society.¹⁰

Although we live in a society made up of different ethnic groups and different cultures, there is one particular group which tends to dominate television. This imbalance may have appeared to change over the years with the appearance of black newsreaders, presenters, and programmes aimed specifically at a black audience, but British television still finds it very difficult to present a realistic and sympathetic image of other cultures and other races. This is perhaps because audiences have been conditioned into accepting the view that we are one nation and one culture and that this culture is a western one. We therefore find it difficult to accept or understand cultures alien to our own.

Sit-com tends to look at other races and cultures from the viewpoint of the dominant white culture. We therefore get characters such as Alf Garnett in *Till Death Us Do Part* expressing what we are told are the fears and worries of the majority of the population and at the same time being a racist bigot who we are meant to despise. The fact that these negative characteristics were understood as real fears, and he was treated sympathetically by many people who actually agreed with his views, shows how important a vehicle sit-com is for the re-presentation of attitudes and beliefs.

Other programmes from the past which attempted to introduce issues around race, such as *Love Thy Neighbour* or *Mixed Blessings*, also saw these issues from the viewpoint of the dominant white culture. The closer the black families in these sit-coms came to fitting into that culture and society the less of a threat they appeared to present.

More recent sit-coms such as *No Problem* have attempted to present a black 'family' from a black viewpoint, using black writers and a black theatre group to construct the series. The series was aimed predominantly at a black audience, but commercial considerations made it necessary for it to have a broader appeal. It therefore never really managed to present a 'real' picture of black culture to either audience. Black audiences may have enjoyed it because they knew it was not a typical black family. White audiences however may have seen it as a typical black family, thereby confirming their already established ideas and prejudices. (If, for example, viewers of Russian television were to only see programmes such as *Are You Being Served?*, *Hi-De-Hi*, and *The Young Ones* they would get a very odd picture of British society and culture.) What we see as a spoof or joke based around a particular aspect of our culture may be seen by others as typical or normal.¹¹

Narrative and humour

It must be remembered that sit-coms are meant to be funny, and humour is the one thing that separates sit-com from other forms of drama on television, particularly soaps. Sit-com relies on a combination of verbal and visual humour. Verbal humour, being based around the use of language to create jokes or comic situations, allows writers to construct interesting dialogue between characters. Visual humour is particularly appropriate to television because it can select certain images and draw the viewer's attention to them (they include events going on in the scene which the main characters may not see, or going in for a close up of a particular reaction to a joke or event).

In order for sit-com or any other form of comedy to work there must be some kind of 'common experience' to draw upon. A joke about something really obscure would only make a small number of people laugh. In order to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, comedy must draw upon common areas of social and cultural experience which the majority of people are likely to recognize. By doing so it must also exclude large numbers of people whose experiences and perspectives differ from the social and cultural experiences and perspectives of the general majority. Such marginalized groups of people are used as a source of humour, and therefore they do not conform to the majority model. By asserting and assuming a common area of experience and perspective—that of the dominant culture—the diversity of individuals, groups, cultures, beliefs, and attitudes that make up

society is rendered invisible. In mirroring the dominance of its ideology in the world outside, sit-com affirms its supremacy and the irrelevance of the offence it may cause. It tends to derive its humour from either our own cultural habits or from those of minority groups. So on the one hand we can find our own eccentricities amusing and on the other we feel safe laughing at people and situations that we choose to define as outside our 'common area of experience'.

But what purpose is the humour actually serving? Clearly one purpose is to make us feel part of a cohesive social group, where we can 'share' a joke. We can also find ourselves laughing at jokes about minority groups whilst recognizing that the joke is actually demeaning to that group. This is partially due to our own social conditioning, and even if we are aware that a joke is racist or sexist we may still respond to it with laughter. The association of people, groups, and cultures with certain characteristics presents us with opinions and stereotypes that, although often false, have been established and absorbed into the consciousness of all cultures.

Sit-coms are not just a collection of unrelated sketches, they follow a narrative structure which has a beginning, middle, and end which follow a logical temporal sequence. The 'story' usually involves some kind of problem or disruption which has to be resolved within the half-hour episode. Some sit-coms may be more fluid or open-ended, and themes may recur throughout the series. Programmes such as *Porridge* or *Hi-De-Hi* may have different incidents in each episode which are sources of humour in the narrative, but overall themes keep recurring. These usually involve the main characters in trying to beat or at least come to terms with the circumstances they find themselves in. We know however that the characters have a set of 'rules' that they follow and these set out certain limits which cannot be crossed. We know for example that Fletcher in *Porridge* and Ted Bovis in *Hi-De-Hi* are 'shady characters', but we also know that they are basically 'good'. This means that they can be relied upon to use humour to assert themselves, but at the same time because they are 'good' we know that situations will eventually be resolved to everyone's advantage.

This link between the main characters and the way in which stories are resolved is very important in sit-com. Because audiences know the characters and the genre, they can predict certain outcomes. We know for example that programmes like *Fawlty Towers* are based around the hopelessness of Basil Fawlty trying to resolve an impossible situation, and a number of

episodes end in chaos with the situation not really being effectively resolved.

The narrative structure of sit-com therefore follows a fairly predictable pattern which viewers can relate to and understand. This pattern conforms to certain acceptable definitions of 'realism' which have to be maintained. Sit-coms which step outside these boundaries run the risk of alienating their audience (or in some cases, such as *The Young Ones*, they may attract a particular 'cult' status).

Conclusion

In popular television drama it is possible to raise issues and explore them through the characters and the situations they find themselves in. However, because sit-com is seen by the television companies as a form of escapist entertainment it becomes more difficult to see the ways in which it may influence its audience. The notion of something that is pleasurable also being of any real importance or value is one that many people may find difficult to accept. If a programme is made purely to entertain without any kind of message for its audience then why shouldn't we just get on and enjoy it? I would argue that if we are prepared to question things that television tells us about the world which are classified as information or news, then why shouldn't we apply the same kind of questioning to entertainment? Television situation comedy, like many other forms of 'popular' television, is far more complex than it first appears, and like any other area of television it is worthy of analysis and critical evaluation.

Note: One of the problems of writing about situation comedy is that many comedy series are only broadcast once and unless recorded are unavailable for further study. However, many of the 'classic' sit-coms are now available on video and it seems likely that more will follow. Selected episodes from a number of sit-coms are available for hire from the BFI library (see also note 2 below).

Notes

- 1 *The Young Ones*, BBC television: director, Paul Jackson; writers, Ben Elton, Rik Mayall, and Lise Meyer.
- 2 Cook and North, op. cit. in Further reading.
- 3 E.Croston (ed.), *Television and Radio 1979—A Guide to Independent Television and Local Radio*, London: Independent Broadcasting Authority, 1978.

- 4 Department of Education and Science, *Popular TV and Schoolchildren* London: HMSO, 1983.
- 5 E.Croston (ed.), *Television and Radio 1982*, London: Independent Broadcasting Authority, 1981.
- 6 Eaton, op. cit. in Further reading.
- 7 Andy Medhurst and Lucy Tuck, 'The gender game', in Cook, op. cit. in Further reading. (This is a collection of seven essays about various aspects of sit-com which developed from a BFI summer school on Television Fictions in 1981.)
- 8 Susan Boyd-Bowman, 'Back to camp', in *ibid*, and Cary Bazelgetce, *Selling Pictures*, London: British Film Institute, 1983.
- 9 Ben Elton interviewed on *Open to Question*, BBC 2, October 1987.
- 10 Medhurst and Tuck, op. cit.
- 11 Paul Gilroy, 'C4—bridgehead or bantustan?', *Screen*, vol. 24, nos. 4–5 (July–October 1983).

Further reading

- Cook, Jim (ed.), *Television Situation Comedy* , BFI Dossier no. 17, London: British Film Institute, 1982.
- Cook, Jim and North, Nicky (eds), *Teaching TV Sitcom*, BFI Education, London: British Film Institute, 1985.
- Eaton, Mick, 'Television situation comedy', *Screen*, vol. 19, no. 4 (Winter 1978–9).
- Nathan, David, *The Laughtermakers*, London: Peter Owen, 1971.