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Sitcom within British Studies

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The last two decades have witnessed the introduction and extensive use of media and media texts in most, if not all, academic spheres. For the users – researchers, teachers, and students – the mass media and their texts have changed their status from being only the supplementary source of knowledge and practice into being an essential one. The aim of this paper is to show that the contribution of British situation comedy to the contemporary British culture deserves to be taken seriously. It also intends to provide reasons why the sitcom can be exploited by teachers and students in the area of British civilization studies.

Introduction and methodological framework

Situation comedy belongs to the genres of popular television. The television is empowered to play a central role in conveying the social aspects of public sphere into private one. Scannell claims that

broadcasting, because its service was addressed to the whole society, gradually came to represent the whole society in its programmes [...] Broadcasting, then, brings public life into private life, and private life into public life, for pleasure and enjoyment as much as for information and education (Scannell 1989: 142-143).

Probably none of mass mediators seems to be such an important element of everyday reality for individuals and groups as the television is. The number of existing channels, the constant formation of new advanced satellite and digital technology networks imply that television represents the medium that is deeply implanted in the consciousness of both producers and consumers. Messages of television dominate people's lives on day-to-day basis, they shape their concepts of reality, create meaning and opinions and they transform experience into knowledge.

The reasons why television products, the sitcom being one of them, can be used in British studies may, among others, include the fact that the television always carries messages about the condition and changes of a society. In their content the programmes reflect its history, politics, culture and various other aspects that are relevant to the subject of British studies. Besides, the material that is used for analyses is accessible and re-accessible, which is attributed to the development of electronic technologies. Geographic boundaries have been extended and the television contributes to the mobility in acquiring knowledge, which means that it allows acquiring knowledge about the British society without the physical presence of teachers and students in the British geographical context.

The above-described arguments suggest that the methodological framework of the use of television products in British studies focuses on the content of the material. Meyrowitz (1998) provides the definition of three types of media literacy. He explains that the students who want to develop their analytical skills should be led to approach, explore, interpret and understand media, to uncover the cultural patterns, institutions, and powers. It involves the study of text, medium, institution, programme, genre, language, etc.

The relevance of the media content literacy for the students of British civilization incorporates the necessity of their awareness of how to read the message, how to unwrap latent intended or unintended messages, how to define various content genres and the cultural, institutional and commercial forces involved in the process of their production (Meyrowitz 1998: 425-433).

Table 1 below illustrates the framework of media content literacy adopted from Meyrowitz's text when applied to British studies.

ideas
themes
topics
information
values
ideologies
persuasive appeals
settings
objects
characters and roles
actions and behaviours
narratives
genres

The typical questions about media-content elements explore:

structure/pattern of above content elements
motivations of producers of content
influence of media industry structure on content
economic and political influences on content
variations in individual and group perception of content
correlations between media content and reality
the effects of content
the types of messages that rarely if ever appear in mainstream media

Table 1 Media content elements (cf. Meyrowitz 1998: 426)

The individual elements and the questions asked about them represent the priorities of the study of the British society. Accordingly, the use and analysis of the material of British sitcoms enable the students to reveal how the British society presents itself, its own culture and some social aspects; how it provides space for the representation of its individuals and groups; how it identifies abroad; how it communicates with other cultures, etc.

Three primary functions of television, the informative, educational and entertaining ones, can be combined with McQuail's (1987) functions of television for individual that are grouped under four headings, i.e. the information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment. Taking into consideration the individual sub-categories of the four main groups of functions, the audiences of British sitcoms, in this particular case the students of British studies, may, firstly, find out about relevant events and conditions in their immediate surroundings, society and the world. Secondly, they may also find reinforcement for personal values and the models of behaviour together with gaining insight into one's self. Thirdly, as the part of the integration and social interaction, they also gain insight into the circumstances of others, they identify with others. Watching of the programs may help them to carry out their social roles. Finally, they may relax and get intrinsic cultural enjoyment (McQuail 1987: 73).

The possibility to identify the workings of some social aspects through watching various sitcoms is also supported by Guy Fielding, a social psychologist at Oxford University who argues that the individual types of a British family are identical with the families in television sitcoms (Hartley-Brewer 2000: 17). Although the individual television families do not represent individual social classes, the research suggests that the sitcom is able to reflect certain social patterns.

Social class system appears to be a frequently occurring issue in British television situation comedies. One finds many examples where the class aspirations and pretensions of the central characters represent the central point of a narrative. Thus the sitcom delivers many examples of characters and their ideas that portray certain social types, social categories, and social order. Besides, there are many other characteristics of the quality of lifestyle that the students can link with the particular social class. This is the area where the British sitcom might be able to deliver its message, show models, and provide typified examples. Although the sitcom is found under the category of light entertainment with its main intention to produce laughter as a reaction to gags, verbal wit and performance skills, it, nevertheless, can be enriching by presenting recognisable social situations, the regular social interactions of characters in common situations of their home, family, or work.

Analysis of social categories and class stereotypes in selected sitcoms

Different ways in which sitcom may relate to a social reality include the notions of what is typical or what is extraordinary in the social actuality. In both cases the notions find their basis in common experience. The sitcoms that carry the examples of significant social class differences and, at the same time, belong to those reappearing in the programmes include *Fawlty Towers*, *Keeping up Appearances*, *Absolutely Fabulous*, *Porridge*, *Till Death us Do Part*, *Only Fools and Horses*, and many others. The characters in these sitcoms want to escape from their family class roots and they want to become the members of higher class, by the intentional changes in some aspects of their lifestyle. Their goal is always unattainable and they remain trapped in their class, because the aspects that they try to change do not represent the significant class indicators, those of an income and material wealth, the ownership of the means of production, education and a professional status or a family

background. The audiences may decode that it is not the hobbies, car or friends but the complex quality of life one has to change to move upwards in the social hierarchy.

Sitcom is about decorum, i.e. what is appropriate or fitting, in other words, the social norms and the manners that are also class-based. The characters, very often stereotyped ones, by their efforts to move upwards breach this decorum by behaving inappropriately. Once the students recognize the transgression of the decorum, and they identify the class differences, they laugh.

The episodes of *Fawlty Towers* and *Keeping up Appearances* provide the inexhaustible amount of material on social class differences. The episode “Gourmet Night” (1975) of the *Fawlty Towers* combines the setting of a home and a small family business, both typical settings for British sitcoms. The narrative is centred on the main character, Basil Fawlty, whose main aim in the episode is to improve the clientele of his hotel, by attracting the “right sort of persons” into the “gourmet night” event and providing them with the best quality food in the town.

The opening shot allows the audiences to define the category of the hotel by comparing the name of the hotel and the real appearance of the building. Immediately the difference between what it really is and what Basil Fawlty would like it to be by giving it the pretentious name of “Towers” is obvious.

Watching the first minutes of the episode creates an opportunity for the audiences to develop the more complex understanding of elements characterising the position of the hotel owners in the social hierarchy. The links between category of the car Basil Fawlty owns, and the quality of the hotel marked by the quality of eating, the eating habits of the owners, the quality of equipment and the basic (and in some cases kitsch looking and old-fashioned) interior of the hotel are further enhanced by rather limited use of services, e.g. Basil repairs his car instead of taking it to a garage and having it mended. The lack of professional training in case of Fawlty Towers’ staff and the ineffective and posh Basil Fawlty, and his inadequate behaviour, the ways he approaches and punishes the staff, all these are underlined several times in the episode.

Significant differences may be also found in the ways characters, both the owners and employees but also local elderly guests, dress. The audience is provided with the examples of middle class dresses, suits and jackets but these are not of the real middle class quality. Inadequate accessories or a strange hairstyle spoils them. The dress codes of the guests invited to the gourmet night event are used to show the difference between the attempts of Basil and Sybil and the real middle class dresses of Colonel and Mrs. Hall, and the Twithens. Also the differences in the behaviour of the representatives of the two different social classes are clearly marked in the part of the episode when the guests meet the owners. Differences in the level of formality of their behaviour, the appropriate versus inappropriate topics for conversation, the level of formality of speech, i.e. a register, they all supplement the most visible differences in social manners.

Inappropriate behaviour, e.g. Sybil Fawlty sitting on the table or drinking in the presence of guests, the forms of entertainments inappropriate for the middle class that are produced and performed by the hotel staff, and Basil’s lack of the knowledge of any foreign language later in the episode finalize the portrait of social class differences.

The three episodes of *Keeping up Appearances* entitled “How to Enhance Your Husband’s Retirement” portrait the home setting of Mrs. Bucket and her recently retired husband Richard. The importance of etiquette, manners, appearances, and form is stressed by the opening of the episode.

Mrs. Hyacinth Bucket insists on her surname to be pronounced in the French manner of a “bouquet”, as the English form with the meaning of a very simple object does not fit her effort to cut herself from her ordinary working class roots. Everything in her life is supposed

to coincide with her struggle for perfection and gaining the enviable reputation for “keeping up appearances”. Her pretentious dress and behaviour are accompanied by rather formal character of her speech, exemplified by the constant use of the vocabulary of formal style, formal expressions and a very careful, often unnatural or even theatrical pronunciation. The artificiality of the exploited language is even more stressed in the situations in which she mixes the registers, e.g. the telephone conversation with the member of staff in Lord Chamberlain’s office. Changing the levels of formality is significant for pointing out the differences in the characteristic features of language usage by middle class and working class persons.

Features of a house interior and exterior, furniture, dressing, behaviour, and interests, they all differ in the two households, that of Mrs Bucket and her sister’s. Watching television and drinking beer are the simplified and stereotyped examples of the main interests of a working class.

The hobbies of a middle class are placed into the contrast to the above-mentioned interests of the working class. Mrs. Bucket’s attempt to become an expert in a local history and antiquities coincides with her goal of becoming the member of a middle class. This attempt is constantly interrupted by the existence of her family, the two sisters. Instead of being allowed to meet only the persons of the “right kind”, she is forced, by several circumstances, to meet her family.

Other attempts to get involved in middle class hobbies, e.g. yachting, or to follow the trends of middle class holidays end up in a catastrophe or they remain at the level of talking about and showing attractive tourist brochures to the neighbours.

Finally, it should be stressed that the British sitcoms neither provide sociological definitions, nor facilitate the students with facts. But the range of the images of different classes could broaden the two-class stratification into the rich and the poor. It could also provide the mechanism or strategy for further differentiation. The aspects depicted in the sitcoms could build the more colourful awareness of individual class differences and their markers.

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