

# The Fourth Wall: Viewing an American Sitcom <sup>1</sup>

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According to Kammen (1999, p. 4), the term “mass culture” refers to products such as comic books, cartoons, sitcoms, films, and advertisements. These products have as their base American culture, and in the globalized world in which we now live at least most members of the middle-class are exposed in some degree to these products. As a teacher of American literature at a Brazilian university, I was aware that my students were consumers of mass culture. I noticed that the students at times used references to mass culture to try to understand the texts we were reading in class. For example, when we were working on the poem *The Farm on the Great Plain* by William Stafford, one of the students stated that the imagery reminded him of the Marlboro advertisements.

To determine how much my students were exposed to the various products of mass culture, I designed a simple questionnaire in which I asked them about their leisure activities, specifically those related to the use of the English language. Of the seventeen students, all stated that they went to the movies regularly and watched American films. They also watched American films dubbed into Portuguese on television as well as via video rentals. They listened to international pop music, though four stated that they only listened to it on the radio, and would not consider buying CDs of this kind of music. Only four students had cable TV and were able to watch American sitcoms in English. As far as the internet was concerned, six had access to the internet in their homes. The other students said they used the university’s terminals or they used other means of getting on the internet. In other words, to a greater or lesser degree all were exposed to globalized mass culture. On the other hand, direct contact with English speaking people of any nationality was very rare.

These students were in their last year of the five-year “Letras” program at the Universidade Federal de Goiás, Brazil. At the end of the program of studies, the students graduate as accredited teachers of Portuguese, their mother tongue, and of one foreign language. The students can choose from among English, French or Spanish. The seventeen students in my class were those who had chosen English as their foreign language. In terms of language level, they were a mixed group ranging from intermediate to advanced. The students were adults ranging in age from twenty-one to thirty-five years of age. Most were already working as English language teachers in schools throughout the city of Goiânia, which is where the university is situated. Some were already married and had children. Two of the students had been on an exchange program in high school and had spent a year in the United States. One other student had been on a vacation trip to Disneyland. Another student’s husband was an undocumented alien living and working in New England. She was planning on joining him there after graduation. The others had never left Brazil.

I decided to dedicate one class hour a week of the four we had available to discuss their understanding of mass culture and their understanding of themselves and American culture. We did this by watching American sitcoms and having an ensuing discussion, by reading texts about American culture written by Americans as well as by Brazilians, and by watching documentaries about topics ranging from

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black – white race relations in the U.S.A. to biographies of American authors. My general purpose was to find out how my students were understanding and interpreting what they saw and heard. This study was a part of a larger research project which focused on the intercultural strategies used in the students' readings of American literature texts (Rees, 2003). To accomplish the goals of the research project, I observed and wrote up field notes and audio-taped my four-hour-a-week American literature class for a period of one school year. While doing this, I also analyzed the field notes and the audio-tapes using the concept of cultural domain. This is defined by the ethnographer Spradley (1980, p. 88) as "...a category of cultural meaning that includes other smaller categories". In the following year, I analyzed the field notes and the audio-tapes using the works of Gadamer (2000) and Iser (1978) as the theoretical basis. I also conducted and recorded interviews with volunteers from the class. These were also analyzed.

At the beginning of the school year, the students, who already knew me from previous years, were asked if they would be willing to participate in this research project. All seventeen agreed to participate and, in fact, were very eager to do so. As one student stated in an interview, "É bom ser ouvido" ("It's nice to be listened to").

In this article, I will present how my students constructed their interpretation of an episode of the American sitcom *Frasier*. This was just one of the many classes observed, audio-taped, and analyzed for the larger research project. I hope to show one way in which a product of mass culture is transformed in the process of understanding. Since students' understanding is "a shifting and emerging third place" (Kramsch, 1995, p. 90), it can serve as a rich basis for a discussion about intercultural comprehension. To this end, I will first present some basic notions about what sitcoms are and how they are organized, as well as ideas about how comprehension of these visual texts takes place. I will then present the episode that my students watched and interpreted.

To discuss how my students understood this sitcom, I will use the concept of the polarity of the "familiar" and the "strange". I have taken this concept from philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer, 2000). In this view, the "strange" is that which causes feelings of loss and disorientation, and the "familiar" is that which causes feelings of comfort and security. In this way, the concept refers to how events are experienced (Kerdeman, 1998). The two terms are linked to the concept of "horizon" which, according to Gadamer (2000, p. 302), is "...the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point". Thus events are experienced as "familiar" or "strange" within the limitations of a certain horizon. It is necessary to remember that the horizon is constantly in movement and forever changing because of the input from daily life. In this way, the experience of the "familiar" or "strange" can also change.

According to Gadamer (2000), we are hermeneutical beings, that is, at all times we are interpreting the sensory data that comes to us. This interpretation takes place within the hermeneutical conversation in which we question the data and based on the answers we receive, we ask more questions and so on. For example we can ask, "Is this pot too hot for me to touch?" We can answer, "Well, my hand's near it and feels heat, so yes, it probably is." Or in a conversation with someone, we can ask ourselves, "Why is this person talking to me in this tone? Did I say something wrong?" This aspect of the hermeneutical conversation occurs in an almost unconscious way. However, the hermeneutical conversation also takes place

outwardly in the back and forth of dialogue with others where we can question, argue and demonstrate our point of view and be exposed to other points of view. It also takes place as we read texts or watch movies or television. In sum, we are hermeneutical or interpretive beings at all times.

For Gadamer (2000) when comprehension takes place, there is a "fusion of horizons". This is a self-transcendent moment when the "I" experiences the "other" as the "you" of the dialogue. This means the "I" listens to the other member of the dialogue and hears what this person or text is saying. In other words, the "other" is not treated as an object about which all can be previously known. Here we can see that to Gadamer (2000) stereotypes result when the "I" (the reader, the speaker) treats the "other" not as a "you" (a full-fledged participant in the dialogue), but as an "object" to be talked about.

When there is comprehension, that is, when there is a dialogue between the "I" and the "you", there is a movement in the horizons which leads to a change in perceptions about the world and the "other". In other words, preconceptions are questioned, new opinions are heard and not just rejected outright, and as a result, new interpretations of life are arrived at. Philosophical hermeneutics deals with how life is lived and interpreted, though Gadamer (2000) and Iser (1978), also apply hermeneutics to the reading and interpretation of texts.

### **The sitcom and its interpretation**

Situation comedies or sitcoms are usually about families or groups of people that act as a family. Their plots and themes come from the idealized American middle-class family which consists of a mother and father with two children, preferably a boy and a girl. This idealized family lives in a very nice house surrounded by a white picket fence on a shaded street somewhere in middle America. The sitcom works with this theme either by agreeing with it, in which case it can be played out in many variations, or by disagreeing with it and making it a target of criticism and satire (Taflinger, 1996).

The sitcom's plot is a vehicle for conflict and resolution. A problem is initially presented and is then resolved in the thirty minutes of the show. The action is presented along the fourth wall of the set which is never seen, yet is understood to exist. This fourth wall is invisible. Through it we see to what the members of the sitcom family are doing in their stage home. Even though this wall is invisible, it is my opinion that it exists symbolically for it is along this wall that the connection between the fictitious world and the real world takes place. It is here that the television family meets the real family. It is at this juncture, this plane that cleaves the vicarious from the real, that the viewer positions himself in relation to the visual narrative that is the sitcom. The position of the viewer is Janus-like for at one and the same time there is a look into the fictive world and a look into the real world (Taflinger, 1996). In other words, one moment we are laughing at Frasier Crane, a character in the sitcom under study. We are emotionally involved, chuckling at the exaggerations of his personality. The next moment, we are talking to our daughter, telling her not to forget to walk the dog. There is a constant movement of our attention that takes place along the fourth wall which, in turn, becomes a symbolic place where the fictitious world and the real world intermingle. We turn, still laughing, from Frasier Crane and tell our daughter not to be late, the laughter colouring the tone in which we speak to her. So as we watch, we are not necessarily questioning the sitcom or our lives, but we are caught up in the experience of interpretation

from which we can turn, at a moment's notice, to re-enter the real world, still touched by the fictitious world on the TV screen.

### **Frasier – The Wedding**

Frasier is a sitcom that focuses on the Crane family that lives in the city of Seattle. The two brothers, Frasier and Niles, are psychiatrists and their father, Marty, is a retired police officer. The brothers are sophisticated, and love opera, classical music, wine, and fancy restaurants. The father, on the other hand, loves sports, beer, and hotdogs.

The episode of the sitcom under study, entitled *The Wedding*, involves a conflict within the wider Crane family. In the past, Frasier Crane gave advice to a young cousin which resulted in the cousin giving up higher education and becoming a street performer. Because of this there has been no contact between the two Crane families for five years. Frasier's aunt by marriage is Greek and has never forgiven Frasier for his advice to her son. The problem arises because the young cousin is getting married and Frasier and family have not been invited to the wedding. Frasier manages to patch things up with his aunt, but in doing so finds out that his cousin is not marrying for love. Thus the conflict that needs to be resolved within the thirty-minute show is whether Frasier will offer some more advice and alienate his aunt once again, or whether he will keep quiet in favour of family peace.

The episode is full of physical comedy. When Frasier visits his aunt in the kitchen of her Greek restaurant in order to apologize for his previous behaviour, she is busy cutting up meat with a huge cleaver which she waves around enthusiastically. Frasier ducks and bobs getting out of her way, looking nervously at the cleaver and swallowing with great difficulty as he talks to her. At the rehearsal dinner, Niles Crane, Frasier's brother, spends the evening running away from a very bosomy relative. He and she go repeatedly through the swinging doors of the kitchen while she pursues him with her bosoms and cleavage. He then hides behind the wine bottles to be later revealed by Frasier who is examining the vintage of the wines. And so it continues throughout the dinner scene.

The sitcom also has a more sophisticated aspect as it openly plays with stereotypes of all kinds for a humorous purpose. Frasier's Greek aunt, for example, is a composite of stereotypes about the Greek nationality. She is impulsive, loud, bordering on the ferocious, and given to suddenly smashing dishes on the floor. The Cranes, on the other hand, are contained and soft-spoken. From the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics, to rely on stereotypes for understanding is to refuse to dialogue with the "other" as a "you", but rather to act as if the "other" is already known. Ottati and Lee (1996, p. 47) argue, from the point of view of psychologists, for the "kernel-of-truth" hypothesis by saying that stereotypes are not always negative and inaccurate. Rather, they are a quick means of processing information for action. The authors distinguish between two classes of stereotypes: heterostereotypes which are about other social groups; and autostereotypes which are about one's own social group. Thus stereotypes "...provide a starting point from which we can proceed toward understanding real cultural differences" (p. 51).

### **The analysis of the students' discussion**

In this section I will present my analysis of how the students reacted and of what they stated about the characters in the sitcom. I will not quote from each student, but will choose quotes that illustrate the general reaction of the group to the sitcom. Thus the quotes are illustrative of how the group interpreted the sitcom.

Using the polarity of the "strange" and the "familiar" as a basis for analysis, it is possible to say that the students reacted to the physical comedy of the episode as something familiar to their cultural horizon. Physical comedy, with its element of play that uses the exaggeration of gestures and facial expressions, seem to transcend cultures. The sitcom, as such, and the fourth wall along which it was viewed became a space marked by laughter and enjoyment; a space outside of ordinary life in which it was possible to enjoy the ritual of play and of comedy. As Huizinga (1955, p. 1) points out, play is older than culture and human society. Thus when Frasier and his Greek aunt go through their physical ritual, in which they spar with each other as in a dance, the students participated, in this moment of play, through their laughter.

The stereotypes that are used in the sitcom are set within the cultural code of the United States and are a result of the immigrant experience of that country. That is, the United States initial cultural bearings were Anglo or Northern European. Immigrants from other settings were at best stereotyped, and at worst ostracized. The stereotypes of the Greeks as loud, emotional, passionate, and slightly irrational refer to an experience of Greek immigration in an Anglo setting. Frasier's aunt, in my opinion, becomes an embodiment of these stereotypes, and no doubt this is one of the causes of the humour in the scenes in which the aunt appears. However, the Brazilian students who watched this sitcom had no such stereotypes about Greeks. Their knowledge of modern day Greeks was nil and they therefore had no established stereotypes about them. Thus, the stereotypes presented in the sitcom were strange to the students' cultural horizon.

To deal with this strange element, some students attempted to make the stereotypes more familiar. As an example of this strategy, Marli (all students' names have been changed) states that the Greek aunt's actions "*remind me of Italian people*". The Italians are a large well-known community in Brazil. In this way, Marli connects her understanding of the group with which she is unfamiliar with the stereotypes about a group with which she is familiar.

Ester for her part identifies the aunt with "the Mediterranean". She says, "*The way Mediterranean people act is different from Americans. They are more noisy, warm, and sincere than Americans*". In this way, Ester also makes unfamiliar stereotypes about the Greeks more familiar by subsuming them in a larger group that is known to her, "*the Mediterranean people*". This group is in opposition to the Americans who act in a different way. In addition, by listing the descriptive words "*noisy*", "*warm*" and "*sincere*" together on the same axis of interpretation, it is possible to catch a glimpse of her conclusion about Americans. Americans are less noisy, less warm, and less sincere. Noisiness and warmth accompany sincerity. In this way, as far as the sitcom is concerned, the Crane family members would be considered less noisy, warm, and sincere than the Greek aunt because they are physically and verbally contained.

Other students, though not associating the Greek aunt with familiar groups nevertheless, described her in a positive way. Rúbia said, "*She was a very natural person. She hugged people a lot*". The word "*natural*" is on a par with the word "*sincere*". To be natural is to show who you are without subterfuge. The way the Greek aunt does this is by physical means – by hugs. Hence in this view, the physical outward actions show the internal state of the person. They are a window to what is happening within. Once again the Crane family members, by implication, are

seen as not natural for they do not show clearly what is happening inside them. They are too contained, and for this reason they become opaque.

Miriam described the Greek aunt as “energetic” whereas Mara saw her as strong, “*Even though she is living in America which is a big killer of culture, she keeps all her cultural aspects because they are inside her*”. In this statement, by referring to the United States as “*a big killer of culture*”, there is a sense that the American culture is dominant, and in this position does not respect other cultures. Yet, the Greek aunt is totally herself whether it fits in with the American ethos or not. Once again a reference to outward actions reflecting inner emotional and psychological states is made, “*because they are inside her*”. The Greek aunt is to be admired because she stays true to who she is within.

The Greek aunt in all the above descriptions is recognized as having many positive characteristics. The fact that she hugs and kisses a lot, uses grandiose gestures, and is loud is not interpreted in a negative way. Rather these elements are interpreted as familiar and seen in a positive light. They are presented in the sitcom as humorous, but for the students they are good qualities of the character, and in and of themselves not funny. Instead they show her as a person who is honest and true to her innermost self.

In the above situations the students found the stereotypes used in the sitcom strange to their cultural horizons and thus not very humorous. On the other hand in the following examples, they considered the situations to be familiar, yet at the same time not humorous. For example, Frasier’s father, Marty, sees his brother, Walt, after five years of separation. He has been looking forward to this reunion, and has been actively looking for his brother at the rehearsal dinner. When the two brothers meet, an expected emotional scene does not take place. Instead the two shake hands smiling , and then have the following brief dialogue:

Walt: *Marty!*

Marty: *Walt!*

Walt: *What’s new?*

Marty: *Oh, same old, same old. How’s tricks?*

Walt: *Can’t complain. They keeping you busy?*

Marty: *Oh, better believe it.*

Walt: *Well, what’re you going to do.*

Marty: *Tell me about it.*

Frasier: *It’s amazing how you two can pick up right where you left off.*

This scene is humorous exactly because of the restraint that the two older men show. They obviously are fond of each other, but they do not show it physically or verbally. The scene is a parody of the self- controlled Anglo, and because of this, funny. Frasier’s line, “*It’s amazing how you two can pick up right where you left off*”, emphasizes the type of understated relationship the two brothers have because when your communication is so concise, it is easy to start up again even after a long separation.

To my students, however, this scene was not amusing. To them the scene was not an exaggeration or a parody, but rather it showed precisely how Americans would act. It became the expected action within their stereotype of “cold” American behaviour, in which Americans are “less noisy”, “less warm” and thus “less sincere and natural”. They made the behaviour fit into their own cultural horizon. Hence along the fourth wall through which the sitcom was being viewed, the fictive world

became a confirmation of the opinions the students held in the real world, that is, Americans are cold and do not show their true selves.

## Conclusion

Sitcoms can be used in many kinds of classes. As I showed in this article, I used them as a part of a literature class because I knew my students had contact with globalized mass culture that is American based. However, this type of sitcom can be used in a four-skills language class at the intermediate level and upward. The sitcom can be used to teach listening skills, to teach pragmatic language (see Washburn, 2001) and to initiate a discussion on intercultural comprehension.

I became aware as I used sitcoms in class that merely being exposed to mass culture does not lead automatically to a perception of the culture of either the sitcom or of the viewer. In the above situation, in which the students viewed an episode of *Frasier*, it became apparent that the stereotypes the students already had continued intact and helped create their interpretations of the scene. First, their sympathy and identification with Mediterranean/Italian/Greek behaviour was apparent. Physical and verbal gestures were interpreted as showing inner feelings and as being a sign of transparency and sincerity. On the other hand, more restrained behaviour was not seen as very favourable but rather interpreted as cold, and consequently as insincere. In this way, the stereotypes continued in place inasmuch as the viewing of the sitcom confirmed, in a fictitious setting, the opinions the students held of the real world.

Within philosophical hermeneutics, a stereotypical perception changes when a horizon moves, that is when the "I" dialogues with the "other" as a "you". For this to occur, a hermeneutical conversation needs to take place. However, watching a sitcom is not enough to initiate this conversation. For this reason, I suggest, based on my observation of the students in the class, that the classroom be used specifically as a place in which an understanding of the "other" be fostered. The students will not only grow in their understanding of another culture, but also grow in understanding themselves and their own culture. Applying this philosophical view to the class in which the above sitcom was seen, a discussion could be initiated on how different cultures link emotional and psychological states with outward manifestations. In other words, the discussion could consider when, how, and in what situations cultures permit outer manifestations of emotions, and to what point sincerity can be deduced from these outward manifestations. The stereotypes accepted by the students can be used as the basis of this discussion.

In conclusion, my students came to their understanding of the sitcom episode by using elements from their cultural horizons which led to an interpretation that was marked by their preconceptions. This interpretation is not "wrong", but can be used as a basis for a discussion that could lead to a movement of horizons. This discussion, initiated by the teacher, can help the students ask questions of themselves and their presuppositions and can aid them in seeing in a critical way their own judgements and preconceptions. It is what Erickson (1986, p. 121) calls, "making strange the familiar". In addition, the discussion can help the students ask questions and seek answers for the behaviour of the "other". Through this type of conversation the students go beyond seeing other cultures as reduced to a list of facts about food, folklore, and festivals. In this way, a class is not just a place in which facts are taught, but a place in which the students are enabled to become active participants in an intercultural dialogue.

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